

Andes Trek

There was nothing any of us could do for Peter anymore. We scooped a shallow grave out of the dark, loamy soil and buried him there, on that narrow strip of land halfway up the cliff, overlooking Inaccessible Valley. There was nothing for it but to continue. As Dave said, rightly, Peter would've hated us if we'd given up. So we continued down the cliffs, sometimes sliding and scrambling down steep slopes of scree, sometimes dangling hundreds of feet above the ground as we lowered each other down the sheer precipices.

By the time night fell with its usual tropical swiftness, we were perhaps two thirds of the way to valley floor. We pitched our tents on a shelf of granite, barely five feet wide, and sat in their facing entrances.

'Is there any point in radioing?' I asked, turning the flame on our gas fire.

'Even if there was, we couldn't,' he replied. 'These cliffs block out all the radio waves, and we're pretty deep in it now.'

'So it's business as usual?' I asked. Dave looked up sharply. There was a strange note in my voice, I knew. 'It seems crazy that we just forget him, just pretend he never happened. He was our friend, for Christ's sake!'

I could see the cogs turning behind Dave's eyes.

'Chris. Peter lived and breathed this trip for the past seven years. He would rather die like he did, instantly, and in pursuit of his dream, than alone in a hospital bed, full of tubes and needles, in forty years' time. We'll all die sometime. Hope I go like he did'.

I've often wondered, in the years since, what would've happened if David hadn't given me that help, that new perspective, that way of coping. Would I have made it? I don't think so. I think I would've broken down just a couple of days after that conversation. Because that was when the second tragedy occurred.

We were very near the valley floor when we started out that day. The scree and bare rock had given way to tall deciduous trees, with thick underbrush of brambles and creepers, and all kinds of plants that neither of us had ever seen. The ground was as steep as ever though, so we were all still going slowly, and sometimes using ropes. Abruptly the land fell away in front of us, a sheer fall of a hundred feet or more. A stream could be faintly heard babbling at its foot.

'Can we abseil down?' I asked, doubtfully.

Dave went to the brink, testing the ground with his boots before peering over. I joined him, and it was in that moment, just as we were a bit near to the edge, a bit closer together, about off-balance, that the edge decided to give way. As soon as I felt the ground shift, I instinctively launched into a twisting leap like a cat, sensing the earth falling away as I pushed off. For a split second I thought I was done for, as I knew I was going to miss the new edge, but I hit the rock a couple of feet below it and, miraculously, stopped. My fingers had found a thick root snaking over the stone and my feet scrabbled on the smooth rock. Pulling myself over that edge was something seventeen weeks' training hadn't prepared me for. But after several horrible seconds I

managed to make it. I lay like the first fish to venture onto land, breathing fast and deep, my breath blowing the soil particles beneath my face.

It was several minutes before I crawled to safer ground and looked over the edge. There was nothing at all to be seen. The stream ran as it had before, unstained, unlettered. It took several hours to find a way around the cliff and down into the thick jungle of the valley floor. I was torn by brambles and stung by insects as I wandered, the dark soil now marshy beneath my feet. Strange noises echoed through the massive trees, a weird cacophony of sound. Cluckings, raspings, hoots, screams and whirrings made me turn, to find the emerald green of sun shining through trees looking back innocently. The ground became more and more boggy as I neared the river. It was clogged with branches, logs, leaves and other less identifiable objects and wreathed in a thin, swirling mist. The sky showed clear blue through the hole above the water, the mountainous valley walls black and menacing against it.

Walking was hard in the marshy ground. It sucked at my heels and often, with an almost animal gulp, would seize a boot and hold it until it could be released by minutes of pulling, jiggling and excavating. So I travelled on the harder soil nearer the sides of the valley, always going downstream. It was nearing the time for the rendezvous, but still had ten miles to travel. My eyes searched the forest canopy uselessly for the sight of an aircraft, my ears strained to hear the beat of an engine above the racket of the jungle. I didn't reach the meeting place until two hours after the arranged time. It was getting dark, so searching the ground for clues as to whether anybody had been there was hard.

However, I found a letter under a rock. My Spanish isn't good at all, but I managed to get the gist of it; they'd come back in the morning. I pitched the tent as best I could in the gathering dark, and tried to sleep. A thousand images of Dave and Peter leered at me from the swirling pattern of my half-sleep. But somehow they had no power, no potency.

It was several hours after sunrise that they came, a Peruvian army helicopter appearing suddenly overhead and sinking to the clearing in a blast of wind. I made them understand as best I could that I was the only one, and with a roar we ascended, the green carpet of vegetation falling away as we headed back to civilisation.