

The Choice

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Clare had never seen a gun this close before. You didn't really get guns in Hampshire. She was discovering that there are a lot of things you don't get in Hampshire. Despite the short, young man being filthy dirty, the gun was polished dark steel with fantastically important looking levers and switches that gleamed and glinted like shiny scales of a crocodile. She reflected on how someone, a designer or engineer, had carefully planned how to build this wonderful killing machine and how it had been made to look so natural; organic, cradled like a precious baby within the arms of this boy. She was surprised to find that she wasn't scared. She was thrilled, excited, interested and alert but not scared yet. Perhaps that would come later. It had been such an amazing holiday so far that this only seemed the next wonder to marvel at.

Clare had left Heathrow almost a week ago on the holiday of a lifetime to Peru. She had been talking about it in the office for months despite none of the other girls seeming all that interested. Carly was going to Greece with her dozy boyfriend; Tamera was staying in her mum's time share flat on the Costa del Sol with a mate of hers from school; Liz and her fella were off to some fancy resort in Turkey and Louise, Jane and Paula were on a clubbing holiday in Ibiza. They looked a bit freaked out and even a little frightened when Clare announced she was going to Peru this summer. Tamera didn't know where Peru was and Liz thought it was the name of a town in Wales but everyone said what a wonderful time she'd have. What would they say if they could see her sitting on this crowded tourist bus, stopped somewhere in the Andes, with a man pointing a gun at her head? Perhaps Clare did feel a little scared.

It was a long flight to Lima, Peru's capital, and involved a short stop in New York. Clare arrived late on Sunday night in Lima and had a five-hour wait until the first flight to Cusco, the old capital of the Incas. Compared with the mammoth jumbo jet from Heathrow, it was a toy plane that carried them over the majestic and mysterious snow-topped mountains. The earth appeared to be reaching up to the heavens, attempting to grab the little propeller plane from the sky. Like a boiling sea, Cusco appeared below like a life raft on the ocean of rock and the plane gratefully touched down on the cute little runway. Clare was delighted to find that GCSE Spanish had prepared her well for the pleasant small talk about the journey with the polite taxi driver who carried her bags. He didn't speak with the frantic lisp of the European Spanish but with a relaxed, patient tone. The hotel was near the centre and she hooked up with some Aussie girls for a few days to visit museums, Inca ruins, Machu Pichu and, of course, some of the bars around the city centre. The girls were cool but were heading south to Lake Titikaka before moving on to Bolivia. Clare wanted to explore the area around Cusco some more so they exchanged e-mails, sincerely but fictitiously promised to keep in touch, and Clare signed up to a four-day 'adventure tour' of the area.

At first light she climbed aboard the bus with her heavy rucksack, found a double seat that wasn't occupied by a bleary eyed tourist and settled to sleep. She knew they were heading northeast towards a little Inca village where the tour would properly begin but wasn't sure how long it would take to get there and couldn't remember the name of the village anyway. She was enjoying the sensation of "going with the flow": it was an adventure she was going for after all.

It was the coach stopping that woke Clare initially and it was through a sleepy daze that she saw five little indigenous men run onto the

coach. The first man turned as he leapt on and swung his gun at the driver. He was hidden from view while the other four came rushing down the central causeway on the bus and pointed their guns at anyone who looked up.

“¿Cualquier persona habla español e inglés?” questioned the gunman at the front. Nothing happened so he repeated the question louder and pointed his gun towards a couple near the front. After a moment, a nervous hand went up from a curly dark haired man in his late twenties, travelling alone, who spoke English with a slight accent and had a lazy eye. Having been ordered to stand, he then acted as interpreter for the gunman, who had now drawn himself up to his full diminutive height, and communicated the following to the bus:

“We are soldiers from Proseguir Sendero Luminoso, the Onward Shining Path. With your help, we will replace the western bourgeois institutions in this country with a true communist revolutionary democracy. We are tired of being slaves to the capitalist pigs and puppets of the United States that are in control of this country. We intend to make our struggle known to the world by taking you as our guests for a short period. If you cooperate with us, you shall not be harmed. If you resist, you shall become further casualties in the People’s War. We shall be driving to a point close by where you shall be given food. My men shall be collecting your belongings. Long Live the People's War.”

A girl sitting two rows behind Clare started sobbing and her boyfriend shushed her. Clare briefly made eye contact with the lad wearing one of those silly Inca tourist hats sitting opposite and he looked terrified. Nobody said anything. Clare stole a glimpse at the gunman standing nearest. It was difficult to tell how old the man was. Clare guessed he was young but had leathery, tanned skin. Big, dark eyes had smile creases above gorgeously high cheekbones and a wide nose. He

was wearing a dirty football shirt and a filthy baseball cap. Clare looked back down to see his scarred, rubbery feet in old flip-flops. She was definitely frightened now. She thought of her parents in Hampshire and brother at university. She thought of how there were thousands of miles between them, the towering mountains around them, the vast Amazon jungle and the deep Atlantic Ocean. She imagined all of those miles; tried to imagine crossing them. Peru was a long way from Hampshire and the man's feet unfocussed as she felt tears welling in her eyes. The familiar feeling of blinking away the stinging salt gave her some comfort but her bag had been taken and the bus was moving. Clare kept her head down and shut her eyes.

Aware of everything around her, Clare could hear the muffled conversations of nervous couples, the assertive orders from the man at the front and the bus changing gear and bumping over pot holes. They'd turned from the main road and had been travelling along the track for twenty five minutes when the gunman she had looked at sat down next to her with a sigh and started to rub his tiny feet. The smell from his body almost made Clare gag and she breathed through her mouth as she opened her eyes and turned to see him grinning at her. Clare was so surprised that she did the natural thing and grinned back. There was an oddly comfortable couple of seconds where they were just looking at each other and smiling. The man had little folds just under his eyes and the creases she'd spotted earlier were now deep crevices of crinkled mirth. He had a thin, smooth neck and a delicate yet masculine face. Clare hurriedly looked down but peeked up again when the man started fooling with the gun. He patted her shoulder and then poked the gun towards the bus window, his face still a wrinkled picture of mischief and delight, pretending to shoot at llamas on the hillside. The ridiculousness

of the situation and the infectious look of glee upon his cheeky face encouraged Clare to blushing smirk.

“¡Atención!” screamed the guard at the front. The man leaped to his feet, almost dropped his gun, and adopted an impression of sincere gravity. Grumbling, the boss turned back to babbling with the bloke now driving the bus. Clare thought it safest to just look out of the window for the rest of the journey.

It wasn't long before the fifteen tourists were shivering by a small hut that stood alone in the centre of a cavernous valley. They'd filed obediently out of the bus upon arrival and had been handed a functional mug of coca leaf tea by a stooped walnut of an old woman who was wrapped in a thick blanket that gave the appearance of colour despite being uniformly brown. A mist hung over the mountains so only the steep slopes were visible like a prison. There was a cold wet drizzle in the air that permeated the soul. Clare exchanged nervous smiles with the fellow tourists but everyone was keeping quiet apart from two blonde haired German friends who were chatting and joking as if they were on a picnic. Clare needed to wee and her feet were cold. The troop of gunmen had been inside the hut for less than ten minutes and they emerged in good spirits. The man who had sat next to Clare on the bus even gave her a sly wink that sent a warm bolt to her belly like a shot of brandy. Speaking through the curly haired interpreter, the leader proudly barked their decision:

“This is our land. We are native Quechua men from this valley and we fight for the people of this valley and for this country. You shall be hidden throughout this area in the farms and homes of my most trusted comrades. If you cooperate then no harm will come to you. We fully expect your governments to put pressure on the regime in Lima to comply with our demands for land reform. Some of the dwellings are

remote and will require several days' travel. Therefore we must not delay."

With that, the tourist group was abruptly split. Couples were kept together but those travelling alone, as Clare was, were being marched into the mist across the coarse grassy landscape to a distant and lonely mountain pass. Their pale round-eyed faces glanced back over their shoulders at the bus disappearing back down the track: the last link with the rest of the world. The protracted dread that had been sitting in Clare's throat for the past few hours was ambushed by an intense and powerful terror as she watched the rucksack she'd bought a few weeks ago in Millets being lifted high onto the strong back of a small man. She gave a high-pitched wail, sniffed loudly and moistly, and then proceeded to weep openly. The sobbing was so debilitating that her legs wouldn't support her weight, her eyes couldn't focus, her nose was running and she was struggling to suck in the thin air. The panic of suffocation was intensifying the horror of the situation. She closed her eyes and prayed vehemently to God to transfer her to her parent's front garden. She pictured the geraniums in the pots outside, the number hung slightly crooked on the wooden front door and the leaky drainpipe that her dad was always promising to replace. She fixed the image so persuasively in her mind that she could almost smell the drain. With a final appeal for divine transport, she opened her eyes to see a fuzzy outline of a hand being offered. She instinctively took it and was eased to her feet. The remarkably friendly features of the man who'd sat next to her appeared in front of her.

"Por favor, venga con mí. Mi nombre es Amaru" he said in a reassuring yet assertive tone. She kept hold of his hand as he led her shivering over the yellow grass after the rucksack. It transpired that Clare would be staying with Amaru's aunt who lived on high ground further up

the valley. Amaru and his comrade, Cusi, carried large bundles on their backs and laughed and joked in Quechua before Amaru would translate for Clare in hesitant yet articulate Spanish.

“I apologise for laughing but your name, C-hul-lur,” he pronounced it carefully and incorrectly, “It is the name of what we feed our horses. Dried corn.” He laughed sensitively and his eyes shone when Clare giggled along.

“What does your name mean?” she asked.

“Snake.”

“Oh.” responded Clare, wishing she hadn’t asked.

The conversation flowed naturally with Amaru who was eager to hear of life in England. His curious and intelligent face shone with amazement at Clare’s description of The Embassy nightclub and the fish and chip shop. Clare realised that despite the situation, she was relaxed and in high spirits. Trusting Amaru’s easy, generous smile was easy. Both Amaru and Cusi were far friendlier than the weary locals in Cusco who had tired of tourists. This was, after all, what she’d travelled to Peru for: to meet new people and gain new perspectives. Clare asked him about visiting Lima.

“I have never been.” Amaru responded quickly.

“Oh? It’s not far. Why not?” Clare responded in her rapidly improving Spanish. Amaru, with his face set forward, had started marching faster and Clare trotted to keep up with the little legs.

“The ‘Onward Shining Path’ is fighting in the cause of equality and freedom. We will stand firm and, when the world can see our situation, we shall receive the help we need in our struggle. I have family and friends who have left the mountains for Lima. They did not want to leave and, now they are there, they want to return but they cannot. Under a true democracy for the people, we will be able to move freely.”

They walked silently for five minutes or so before an unidentified animal distracted Amaru from his brooding. The rest of the long hike was spent in pleasant polite conversation and it was getting dark when they arrived at a mud-brick on a steep mountain slope. Clare was tired, her legs were aching and she felt dirty. The new boots that she'd bought for the trip were rubbing gently but persistently and Clare looked forward to releasing her feet with a mixture of relief and concern. Amaru had warned Clare that the hut was simple and remote. He'd warned her that he would be staying with his aunt in an adjoined hut and that she would be guarding her during the day while he would be shepherding the alpacas.

“She does not speak Spanish but she will have a gun.” He told her cheerfully.

Amauru's middle-aged aunt, Isla, did indeed have a gun. It looked like it had been left by the Spanish conquistadors hundreds of years before and Isla left it in the middle of her table like a museum piece. The doors were all unlocked and Clare considered making a run for it on the first day when Amaru had been gone for an hour or so. She looked out of the window at the threatening mountains, the ominous clouds, the steep and menacing rocks surrounded by scrubby disheartening vegetation and a persistent drizzle. She knew she had no choice but to stay.

She had never appreciated that being a hostage could be so utterly boring. Clare kept count of the days using stones in a corner of the hut and for the first six days she spent her time sitting, staring, dozing and dreaming. She felt a little guilty for not being frightened in this place and for not being more concerned for her friends and family. Isla was non-communicative but helpful and hardworking. Clare had a clean hut, thick blankets, a short hard bed, a stubby table and private space while Amaru and Isla shared the other hut. In the evening, Isla would prepare a small

fire and stew or roast some meat to have with some boiled potatoes. It was simple food but relished by Amaru who would appear beaming at the door shortly after dark. The hut would transform from one of idle calm to a hive of babbling and conversation. Clare would laugh at Amaru's observations and marvel at his twinkling eyes, strong arms and lilting accent. One evening, Isla caught Clare eyeing Amaru's behind as he was stooping for something on the ground and gave Clare such a knowing look that she blushed for days afterwards, recalling the incident in her mind. One day in ten, Amaru would spend the day in the hut while the animals were penned in. He took Clare for a short walk to see a waterfall where he used to play when he was a boy. He told of how his cousins and brothers had left to find work in Lima. He showed Clare the herd of a dozen alpacas; some with colourful tassels in their fur that made them look like young girls with bunches. He'd shown her how to fire the gun and they shot at bottles and rocks. They walked and talked and laughed and swam and played together. They wrestled, Amaru would let her win and they would laugh again. Clare knew that she was falling in love with this man. The men she had gone out with in Hampshire were so arrogant, selfish and boring. Her last boyfriend, Carl, had loved his crappy car too much to pay her any attention. She'd never found anyone so noble, so funny, so strong and so gentle. She felt safe when he was there. Thirty, forty, fifty days had passed and every one of those days Amaru had been bringing positive news from the other hostages and the radio reports. It was on the ninety-seventh day that he told Clare:

“Our plan has worked. We will have the right to own our land soon. It will not be long before you will be leaving us.” His eyes dropped and he turned away.

“I will come back.” Clare promised quickly. “I will see my family and then return to you.” Amaru turned back to face her and his eyes were wet. He looked up at her and then walked slowly away.

Clare could not sleep that night. Her life was so different here. Would she really come back once she was back in Hampshire? What would her friends and family think of Amaru? What would Amaru think of her family and friends? Could these two different worlds ever fit together? Did she really love Amaru? Could they have a future or was she just fooling herself? She was expecting to be cheerful upon hearing this news but, in reality, she was just anxious and uncertain. Emotions and scenarios were turning in her mind like a tissue in a washing machine.

Gunshot! Clare was awake. The nights were quiet here and the piercing noise had rudely shattered the silence and, now it was gone, it was like it had never been. Clare heard scuffling from the other hut and ran outside. There were two soldiers in full combat uniform and rifles in their hands standing alert. They were speaking in confident, quiet Spanish and the taller of the two men stepped towards her.

“We’re here to rescue you from the terrorists, miss. We captured one of the bandits and extracted your location from him. We trapped him by making him believe we were going to do a deal. Do not worry. You will be gone from here soon.”

Clare listened through a fog of terror. Isla was lying face up in the mud beside her hut. Her head was at an unnatural angle, her face frozen in a look of shock and her eyes were glazed. There was a gaping bright red hole in her front where her clothes had been shot away to leave a cavern where her heart had once been. Clare had never seen a dead body before and she froze for a moment to take it in, adrenalin soaking her brain. Amaru’s gun was perched carelessly outside the hut. Clare snatched it and ran into the hut.

“Amaru.” Clare called desperately. He was on his back, propped up on his elbows with blood round his mouth and a cut on his arm. The soldier towered above him; his shiny boots were set apart and he pointed his pistol directly at Amaru’s fearful eyes. The soldier glanced up at Clare, gave her a reassuring smile and a nod but kept the pistol on Amaru. He spoke softly and in English.

“Do not worry miss. You can put the gun down. You are safe now. Your family are waiting for you back in Lima. We are liberating the other hostages and capturing the vermin for interrogation.” He turned his attention back to Amaru.

“You will come with me, peasant!” barked the soldier in Spanish, landing a heavy boot into Amaru’s unprotected side. The two other soldiers were laughing to themselves as they strolled calmly back down the hill.

Clare felt the familiar contours of the loaded gun in her hand. There was no time to think. She had made up her mind.