

What Can Belong to Patagonia Climbing

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PATAGONIAN WINTER SKI-MOUNTAINEERING has its difficulties and its charms. Now winter is ending and the first spring storms are wafting into the lonely valleys. We are descending from the summits towards the sunny pampas. While I muse over what we have experienced and fight fatigue, walking thirty kilometers to the head of the paved road, don Servando, our packhorse driver, catches up to me on his riding horse, leading the packhorse laden with skis and sacks. He does not push on by, as I suspected he might, but rides alongside. I hope he won't complain that the skis are galling the horse.

"You must help me."

I look over at him. "I'll be glad to. You have been so hospitable and helpful."

"You're Lucia's mother, aren't you?"

"I'm old enough to be, but no. Lucia is just my friend."

He looked crest-fallen. While I wonder if I have treated my young friend in such a motherly way, he murmurs, "Oh, just a friend."

"Yes, a friend, but a very good friend, almost like a sister."

"Ah, a sister! Then you can help me. He leaps from his horse, holds the reins in his hand and says, "I have decided to marry Lucia and you must help me."

Puzzled, I stared at the usually taciturn *peón*. He has certainly misfired about Lucia. I feel sorry for him. Why land hard on one who has already such a tough life? But I must nip this in the bud. He'll quickly feel how impossible this is.

"Don't we fit?" he continued.

I quickly decide to slip into a mother role. "How old are you anyhow, don Servando?"

"Forty, more or less."

"What do you mean, more or less?"

"I came into the world in a *campo*, in a field. That doesn't get recorded."

"But maybe your mother remembers."

"No, she died giving birth."

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Lucia is thirty, not an impossible age difference. I reflect for a moment. "And so, agreed?" he queried.

"Absolutely not. Listen! Lucia is not the wife for you."

Puzzled, he asks, "Why not?"

I had imagined the solution would be simpler, but I still held a trump. "Look, don Servando. Lucia is already married."

"What difference does that make? That's not important."

"But haven't you seen that her husband is with us? That tanned young climber is her husband."

Her husband? I thought he was her brother. He let her go ahead all alone last night. A husband wouldn't do that."

Of course! Late yesterday afternoon, in her old but skin-tight ski outfit, Lucia headed off down the valley to summon the truck to come to the roadhead.

"Don Servando, her husband is used to that. She often goes off training alone." I try to explain Lucia's world to him: Sports training school, pedagogic academy, instruction, mountains, climbing, races—a world where a husband is superfluous. It is useless. The *peón* pours his heart out. Always alone, no one after a hard day of driving animals to cook a hot meal, no one to light the fire in the hut in the morning. Solitude has its limits. The nearest other *peón* lived alone ten kilometers away and he went crazy, so the police shot him. The coffin lay for days in the village because no one knew what to do with the corpse or who he really was.

"Don Servando, don't you have a wife? Don't you know some nice girl? You told us that you live only three days' ride from Cochrane, across the border. Aren't there any women there?"

"There are, but they don't want to marry a simple *peón*."

"And why do you believe that Lucia would want to marry you?"

"Because she has such loving eyes."

I am beside myself. Yes, Lucia has loving eyes, but don Servando doesn't know the fire in those eyes when she is in a ski race. And if Lucia just knew what I had got into out of sympathy for him, she would burn me up with one of those lightning bolts. "Don Servando, if those other women don't want to live out here in the *campo*, what makes you think that Lucia would like to?"

"She is strong. She helped to pull the ambulance out of the river when it got stuck. She loves the mountains around here. She even bathed herself in the trough in cold water in icy cold winter weather."

Aha! If a sporty young lady dared to bare herself at the trough, that was naturally a hearty recommendation, especially here in this icy solitude. "Lucia is used to that. And besides—what were you doing looking at her?" He blushed despite his weathered tanned face. "Tell me, has Lucia caught your eye so much that you have taken it into your head to marry her?"

"Yes. And why not?"

Yes, why not? With the logic of our way of life, of our hopes, what can I say. "Don Servando, what would Lucia do here? You know we love these mountains, this land. But we can't always live here. We have to go back to our

normal life, where we are at home.” I know I’m saying something that doesn’t quite measure up. We aren’t ever completely at home. Patagonia is a passion—but for a woman to get used to living here, let alone be married to a *peón*! But how often have we thought secretly of getting a one-way ticket . . . Don Servando must have caught the insincerity of what I said.

“Lucia can break wild horses.”

“She is more like a wild horse herself. Or like a wild mare,” I corrected myself.

“In the winter she can hunt foxes and pumas, even if it is illegal. Can Lucia shoot?”

“No, I don’t think so. And I’m sure she wouldn’t want to shoot animals.”

“She’ll learn quickly. She’ll love it. I have only one gun, but I’d lend it to her. And I’ve got four dogs. That makes hunting easier. Lucia must stay. She can bring her kids here.”

I overreact violently. “Lucia hasn’t any children. At home, in a 40-kilometer-long valley, like this one but with hundreds of people, there isn’t room for any children. There isn’t any space for children to play in the meadows, in fact there are hardly any meadows left, and when there are, the kids aren’t allowed to set foot on them.”

“But here, look, there’s much space, a lot of space for children. The kids can do what they want; they don’t need to go to school. They can ride and tend the sheep.”

Why did I ever get into this discussion? I try to cut it short. “Don Servando, Lucia is married and that is that.”

“What is that? My boss got married twice. And for his wife, it was the third time.”

I grasp at a way to end this. “You told me how it was with your boss when he sent the tax collector away. Is it correct that he threatened him with a gun?”

“Yes, that’s right. Three of them came and he welcomed them. We even slaughtered two young lambs for them. But then they wanted him to sign something. He didn’t want to. They got angry. Then my boss said that he had to have a pen to sign with. He returned with his gun and said, ‘This is my pen and if you don’t know how I sign with it, I’ll show you.’ The tax people rode away in a hurry, and we laughed.”

“But, don Servando, you must see that Lucia wouldn’t be happy here. She needs money and you are lucky to earn \$100 per month. That’s not enough for a woman like Lucia.” Money! I feel ashamed using such an excuse. Don Servando doesn’t answer. How can he run away from this primitive life. But I have to find a way out of this crazy discussion. “What good would it be for you to have a wife who runs up and down mountains and even jumps off them with a red parachute? Or flits over a stormy sea on a board and a sail? What would such a wife do for you?”

He looks around hopelessly. But—children would straighten everything out.

“But you told me that your mother died in childbirth.”

“That was fate. I can help with childbirth. I’m used to that. The lambs usually came into this world without problems, but the colts and especially the calves, when they come out wrong end to. Then you have to grab inside and give a big yank. A calf is a lot harder than a child. Sometimes I can’t do it all alone, but I’ve never had a calf die on me. A child is more like a lamb. That’s easy.”

I can imagine Lucia’s face if she overheard this. “Don Servando, is this in earnest?”

“Of course. But if Lucia wants, she can ride over to Cochrane to the new hospital to have the children. But, you know, in the hospital the kids get all yellow. Outside it is much healthier.”

A light came over me. “But you must understand. Lucia doesn’t want any children.”

“Whaaaat? No children???” Don Servando shakes his head unbelieving. “No children?”

“No,” I declaimed. “Lucia wants to climb mountains, compete in ski races, study, travel, be independent. No children!”

“Then . . . then . . . but you always have to have someone to hang onto.”

“Dear don Servando. You are so right. But this wild mare doesn’t suit you. You’ve got to let her run free. Look for a tamer one with whom you’ll be happy.”

Without a word, he swung into the saddle, but then reined in. “Do you think that Lucia will wait for us?”

“Naturally. She only ran ahead to arrange for the truck.”

“Then . . . you must take a photo of me with her and send it to me.”

“Yes, of course I’d be happy to do that,” I said relieved.

Lucia was waiting for us at the gate of the suspension bridge. She had arranged for the truck, which was standing there. “Lucia, you have a new admirer. Can you stand beside don Servando for a quick photo?”

“If it’s only for a photo,” said Lucia and stood cheerfully beside him. I smiled. “Actually, Lucia, he did want more from you.”