



[I never understood what a volcano was until that Saturday.]

Karl, our guide, gathers us around some rocks before our journey begins. Without saying a word, everybody puts on his or her helmet. I'm not quite aware of the group's social cues. They seem to understand one another non-verbally, and I film them enthusiastically. I'm already short of breath and we haven't even started our trek. I put on my helmet, stop filming, and see what lies ahead. "There's no trail?" I exclaim. No one replies.

Karl is excited about the challenge. I am hesitant. I spot a plaque affixed to a rock that says, "Here died so-and-so."

We set off.

There are four of us: Karl, Chichi, a Swiss woman of about 45 years, and me. Chichi studies environmental engineering, is about 20 to 25 years old, and makes deadpan jokes. I feel at ease when he smiles at me without saying anything. The Swiss woman only mumbles. Karl, all of a sudden, speaks perfect German.

As we start walking down the crater, I'm blissful. The volcano is no longer a postcard, a YouTube video, or a googled picture—the volcano is now a reality.

The ground is rocky and the slope quite steep. Everything is much more dangerous than I thought it would be. I decide to stop and firmly tie the laces of my brand new shoes. If I fall down, I most likely will die. I am swarmed by comic and tragicomic images. Fear provokes humor in me.

TWO HOURS LATER

I've forgotten the googled pictures that were stuck in my head. The road overwhelms me and I'm alienated by a rapid succession of thoughts. I embark on a conversation with myself that soon becomes incoherent. The trek is all downhill. I dread the thought that the return will be uphill. My knees creak. The ghostly fog makes it impossible to see anything more than 30 meters ahead. Neither my eyes nor my camera can focus. We have been swallowed by a white wall. We are 4800 meters above sea level. I try not to think—my thoughts grow heavy, condensing and taking up energy. I have to control my breathing—I fail. We continue our descent. But for how much longer? For a moment, I lag behind the group and panic. I catch up with them after walking alone for ten minutes. They had stopped to grab a bite, drink water and get some rest. Why would they think that I could do this alone? I am at a disadvantage when I meet up with them; they have already rested for a while and decide to keep

going. Karl speaks to us. I nod without really making out what he is saying. I listen, but I'm unable to take in the words. I hold a banana in one hand, and a few seconds later I can only see the peel. I'm losing frames per second. Karl shares some technical details with us. I visualize him climbing on the moon. My whole body aches. Karl says, "We're almost there. Let's keep going." We're climbing down an imaginary landscape in a lucid dream. We're touring Jules Verne-style, living out a book. Down we go into the throat of the volcano.

As we continue our trek, the fog gets denser and denser; it feels solid, like a curtain. The air is moist and we start smelling the sulfur. Strange water moistens my beard; it condenses everywhere. Three hours later, we finally arrive at the crater. After crossing a ravine with a flowing stream, the descent is finally over. We have come to an open, almost flat terrain. The ground is sandy. There are rocks that have shattered from within, which I've never seen in my life. The landscape seems abandoned by nature. Still, carbonized tree trunks cling to the soil beneath them. They have lost their tops and seem fossilized. We are in another world now, one bereft of life.

We walk in a single-file line through this lunar landscape. I keep filming while I try to regulate my breathing. The physical challenge has given way to an internalized silence. I listen to the wind for the first time. I take a 360-degree look, engrossed in the dimensions of the space.

There is a clear view down below. I can see the walls of the crater we have been descending. The scale is unfamiliar, as is the soil on the ground. It looks like Mars in black and white. The volcano has the demeanor of a dormant being. I must be silent. We are inside, but there is yet another inside we need to reach, as the base of the crater shelters several other craters. We've passed the plains and we start climbing a gray-soiled hill. Then we walk across two rusty-green ponds. The clouds form a ceiling above us. Everything is majestic and monochrome. This interior world moves by its own rules, its own inner rhythms. I feel tiny. The inside of the crater is oblivious to time. I see some cobwebs and bugs on the ground. The silence and indifference they exude is supernatural. The volcano follows our tracks with its gaze. Karl tells us, "We're inside now." It is a mystical, unfamiliar experience—to reach the core of the pictured pictures.

We stop for lunch at the edge of the main crater, right where the Guagua Pichincha erupted in 1999. I am in a trance, immensely tired. Karl goes on telling us things. I can see him moving his lips, but cannot focus on anything beyond the drumming of my heartbeat.

My ears are ringing. The crater is deep and funnel-shaped. It is not what I had pictured. The mouth is 300 meters in diameter and there is a small lake in the middle. The water is completely still. There is a steep slope down to the lake. Karl offers to climb down and get a sulfur sample. He has brought enough rope. We see fumaroles on the walls emitting a smoke-like steam. We can also smell the puffs of sulfur.

The volcano is a living animal: it breathes; it has its own odor, temperature, and mood swings; it destroys, grows in size, and dies. At the same time, it has a maternal quality. I never thought it would strike me as maternal, but rather quite the opposite. The huge rocks scattered along the rim of the crater give out a constant, uniform heat. I feel calmed. I feel like not going back.

The crater of the volcano is, without a doubt, a time capsule. It sways between eternal silence and absolute destruction.

The Guagua Pichincha is an active volcano. At any minute, we could be hit by a flow of magma coming from the center of the earth, and be evaporated like a grain of salt. It feels so strange to sit at the rim of the crater, eating a banana, knowing that could happen. The physics of a volcano are those of an inverted hourglass, working upside down. Energy beats gravity. Maybe Einstein was inspired by volcanoes. We finish our lunch and keep on walking along the rim of the crater. Chichi spots some fumaroles high up on one side of the crater. It was about time I learned what a fumarole is: a pressure valve made of rock, a hole through which gases such as sulfur are let off by a volcano. The sulfur tints these cracks with a greenish-yellow color. Karl moves away from the group and climbs up a rock leading to some kind of cliff. Slowly, I begin moving closer. We notice that the most interesting fumarole is at the top of a crag. Once again, Karl readily offers to go and get some sulfur samples. He seems to be fearless. I take him up on his offer. I see him squatting closer to the edge of the cliff. The walls burn his hands. He has to cover his face from the sulfur. The slope he climbs down is almost 70 degrees steep. Holding on with his bare hands, he steps on the hot white stones. Some fall apart; he tests his next move by first stomping his feet. A 60-meter fall threatens him from behind. I see a bunch of stones crumble and roll into the void, and then disappear.

I am at a loss for words. We are all absolutely silent watching Karl's careful moves. I stop filming and put my camera away. I want to respect his life. He carries a small plastic container in his jacket pocket, which he uses to get a sample of pure sulfur. He cries, "Damn, sulfur burns!" He keeps collect-

ing samples. He closes the container's lid with one hand and throws the container over to us. Then he scans the soil for his footprints and starts moving back to firmer ground. He says, "We all stopped talking for a while there, huh?" I breathe again in relief. Good God.

GOING BACK

Climbing without thinking. Self-betterment? "The mountain is all about the mind," Karl says. I am short of breath, feel dizzy, can barely walk, and have blisters on my feet. My hands are dead cold and hurt from clinging on to the rocks, and my pants are soaking wet. In a moment of rest, I take a muffin from my lunch pack and eat it. I accidentally eat part of the wrapping too. According to Karl, the muffin should restore my strength and balance. I'm staggering on the inside, but say nothing. Karl says, "You look pale. Let's keep moving. Hang on to my backpack. We'll be there in a little while." I am almost in a trance. Now and again I see some flashes of light to my right; my lungs are falling out of my chest. I feel scared. I miss everybody.

"We've made it," Karl says.

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