

## Running With the Bulls

The colorful bus rattled along the dirt road, winding through immense Andes foothills. Rhythmic *cumbia* music, lively with trumpets, accordions and *maracas*, blared from raspy speakers duct-taped to the dashboard. A dozen local *campesinos*, their faces deeply lined by sun and wind, lurched in splintery seats amid squawking chickens, sacks of potatoes, and a goat. Wrapped in wool ponchos, the rugged farmers curiously eyed the two shaggy, bearded *gringos* who clutched aluminum-framed backpacks topped with coiled climbing ropes.

The youthful North Americans, wearing loose painter's pants, CPO jackets and scuffed-up hiking boots, seemed friendly enough, as they inquired, in struggling Spanish, about the regularity of buses on this lonesome road. One yelled over the music, "*Aqui, por favor!*" The bus ground to a stop. About two miles away, rising sharply above the undulating grassy landscape, stood towering cliffs of slate-gray granite. Those blue-eyed *gringos* aimed to climb them. This was the mid-1970s, several hours north of Bogota, Colombia.

Mick and Jimmy both needed foreign language credits to graduate from mid-west colleges. On week days, they studied Spanish grammar and vocabulary at the Universidad de Los Andes. They had bonded easily upon discovery that both had brought along mountain climbing gear. Mick was compact and solid, built to do chin-ups. Jimmy was taller and thinner with a long iron reach. They laughed easily as they traded stories about scaling peaks in the Tetons of Wyoming.

Neither of them fit into the trendy youth culture they had found in the raucous city of Bogota. Colombian guys their age wore tailored shiny shirts, pointy zippered ankle boots, and flared polyester pants that seemed to be painted onto their butt cheeks. Coiffed wavy hair flowed with every turn of their heads. The girls bulged out of tight shimmering dresses, faces gaudily layered with lipstick and rouge. Their jet black curls seemed to be cemented in place, refusing to bounce as they clacked about in five-inch stilettos. On weekends, hip young *Bogotanos* crowded into pounding, flashing discotheques where they gyrated all night to mind-numbing *syntho-salsa*.

Mick and Jimmy escaped to the outlying villages and mountains whenever they could. Their idea for this weekend adventure was to hike across the rolling grasslands, then climb up the lofty cliffs as high as they could go. From the road, it looked like the vertical rocks were occasionally broken up by grassy ledges that might be wide enough to *bivouac* for the night. If there was any kind of actual summit, it was probably twenty miles away, capped in ice and thin Andes air. There were no maps to guide them to climbing routes. It was likely that no one had ever climbed straight up those rocks before. They were on their own, with enough food for two days. Water was likely to be found trickling from springs among the rocks.

Mick and Jimmy clambered across the rusty barbed wire fence that stretched for miles along the dirt road. The hiking was easy, as the equatorial sun blazed onto the sprawling high plateau. Purple and yellow wildflowers scented the air. They soon began a carefree day of climbing up rocks that felt endless. Mick worked his way up a rope-length; Jimmy would follow while yanking out all the protective *chocks* and *carabiners* left behind. Repeating this choreography over and over led them to dizzying heights. The rutted road where the bus had left them became a distant twisting thread. Late in the afternoon, they found a narrow strip of lush grass, squeezed between intervals of sheer rock walls, just flat enough to pitch a tent.

The exhilarating day of ascending toward the sky left them ravenous. They devoured their *arepas*, course pastries stuffed with fried eggs, purchased through the bus window from a barking ten-year-old street vendor with grimy hands. He had out-manuevered the rest of the clattering mob that hawked all sorts of local food fare.

Mick and Jimmy reveled in the fading panoramic view as darkness slowly swept across the vast landscape. The expansive night sky pulsed with stars more brilliant than they'd ever seen. They never imagined that stars could seem to be so crowded, forced to compete for their attention in the domed blackness. They smugly lamented that most people they knew would never glimpse such a dazzling civilization-defiant sky, nor would they ever be aware that such a stirring sight existed somewhere in the world.

Awakening at dawn, Mick noticed an unnerving change in the rolling hills far below.

“Jimmy...see all those dark specks? Maybe forty or so...?”

“Cows...probably...”

“Uh-oh...”

“What?”

“Don’t they raise bulls for the bullfights somewhere out here?”

“Oh, shit...”

They now reluctantly recalled that they had noticed a small herd of athletic-looking black... conceivably bulls...grazing along the road several miles before they had scrambled out of the bus. Being laid-back college kids, they were not about to start worrying. But they worried...

“Just for argument’s sake...let’s say those black cows are actually bulls. They breed them to be mean, right?”

“Probably...”

“So...how are we going to get back to the road?”

“Well...they moved to here, right?”

“Yeah...so?”

“So maybe they’ll move to somewhere else...”

But every time Mick sat on a ledge holding the belay rope as Jimmy spidered up behind him, he could watch those black specks sauntering around far below. Whatever they were, they seemed to like that particular stretch of grass.

THEN...Mick felt a primal rumble in the rocks under the turf he was sitting on. Earth quake? Avalanche? Both were plausible. What he saw next was NOT plausible: A grunting, hot-breathing black bull wielding shiny curved horns lumbered toward him along the grassy

ledge that was clearly not wide enough for both of them! He desperately wished for a “pause” button to enable him to ponder about what to do. But the immanent prospect of being gored or trampled causes one to do instant things:

“Jimmy! There’s a fucking BULL...I’m coming down!”

“What?”

Mick snapped free of his harness, looping the rope in his hand through the metal anchor already wedged in the rock behind him. Wrapping the rope around his shoulder, he leaped off the ledge. Mick and Jimmy wound up dangling below the ledge almost side by side, counterbalancing each other on opposite ends of the climbing rope. Meanwhile, the snorting black bull nonchalantly trotted by overhead.

Jimmy had no clue about what had just happened. The way he would later tell the story, what he could hear from Mick on the ledge above him sounded like:

“I’m fucking a BULL! I’ve got him down!”

When Jimmy saw Mick plunging toward him as if bungee jumping, he tried to wedge himself between rocks, thinking he was about to be yanked into a death dive. Jimmy didn’t entirely believe Mick’s claim that there had been a real live bull on the ledge until they both climbed back up there and got a potent whiff of fresh bull droppings.

How could that bull even get up there? They surmised that some of those grassy ledges like they’d camped on and belayed from must be connected to each other somewhere beyond their range of vision. Then a disconcerting thought:

“What if he comes back?”

“I don’t think the ledge is wide enough for him to turn around...”

“Well then, what if another one followed him up here?”

“Oh, shit...let’s start down...”

Mick and Jimmy paused to calm their nerves on another grassy ledge several hundred feet below. They now knew to scout the turf for tell-tale dung pies. Gazing down at the black specks still wandering far below them, they came to terms with the fact that those specks were definitely bulls, just like the one that had commandeered the ledge above them. They debated various approaches to navigating the two miles of occupied territory between the rocks and the road, where they hoped to flag down the next passing bus.

Should they stick together or split up? Quiet or make lots of noise? Follow gullies or high ground? Their last deliberation was whether bulls are actually color blind as they'd heard. Mick suspected it was true, but he still got a small amount of comfort from the fact that Jimmy's pack was vivid red while his was forest green. In his mind, there must to be a practical reason that bull fighters wear red capes.

The long rappelling descent seemed to take no time at all. Mick and Jimmy hid behind a large boulder at the perimeter of the rolling grassy expanse. The bulls grazed peacefully. Hopefully, they would stay that way.

Consensus was reached to go together, quietly, high, and close to the occasional tree, if possible. Mick and Jimmy exchanged squinting respectful nods, maybe their last, just like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid might do before an impending gunfight. Then they boldly stepped into the open, trying to feel brave.

Mick always claimed that their exploit through that scattered herd of fighting bulls would make a riveting and climactic movie scene. An engaging musical soundtrack would highlight the action, opening with the solo trumpet fanfare played at the start of a bull fight. As an ornery bull glares at them suspiciously, the heroes stalk nervously along the first ridge. A second trumpet joins in tight harmony. They approach a stout tree. Several bulls sniffle and paw in their direction. Trombones answer the trumpets. Drums kick in. Another bull pounds the earth, then raises his head. A cluster of annoyed bulls bellow as they waggle their horns. The beat picks up. Mick and Jimmy quicken their pace. As throbbing bass fills out the soundtrack, they start to believe they might make it. Their strides become more confident. To

the now-jaunty rhythm, Mick and Jimmy half-gallop the last steps toward the barbed wire fence next to the road. They lunge to safety.

Well...the movie offer never came. But if that should happen, the end credits will scroll to the up-tempo of a spirited mariachi band, as the camera pans Mick and Jimmy triumphantly running with the bulls.