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TEARS OF THE SUN

The gold rush at the top of the world.

BY WILLIAM FINNEGAN

The mines at La Rinconada, a bitter-cold, mercury-contaminated pueblo dinging to the glaciered mountainside, are ™artisanal": small, unregulated, and grossly unsafe. To stave off disaster, the miners propitiate the mountain deities with tiny liquor bottles.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MOISES SAMAN / MAGNUM

From almost anywhere in La Rinconada, you look up and you see her: La Bella Durmiente, Sleeping Beauty, an enormous glacier beetling above the town. "Look, there are her eyes, her face, her arm, her hip, there," Josmell Ilasaca said, his hand drawing and caressing the glacier's snowy features against a deep-blue sky. We were standing at the precipice of a trail, known as the Second Compuerta, that tumbles into a narrow valley north of town. Yes, now I could see the feminine outline, a mile long, possibly two. It was magnificent. And when the snow melts, exposing more rock, I said, the glacier turns into a skinny old hag called Awicha.

Ilasaca gave me a look, slightly surprised, unimpressed. He grunted something that I took to be Quechua, or Aymara, for "Where the hell did you hear that?"

I'd heard it from a sociologist in Puno, down on the Peruvian altiplano. Really, I was just trying to buy time. I was out of breath, and the steep trail below us was full of miners, descending and ascending. I doubted my ability to join the traffic flow and keep up—down slippery rocks, through icy mud, between frozen piles of garbage. But the gold mines I had said I wanted to see were all down this trail, in the valley between town and glacier.

"Vamos," Ilasaca said. He set off, hands in pockets.

La Rinconada, population roughly fifty thousand, is a ramshackle pueblo clinging to a mountainside at the end of a long, bad road in southeastern Peru. The town is seventeen thousand feet above sea level—the highest-elevation human settlement in the world. (The next highest is in Tibet.) Above it rises the Cordillera Apolobamba, an ice-capped Andean range that runs southeast into Bolivia. The Incas mined gold in these mountains, as did many people before them, and the Spanish after them. Gold-bearing quartz veins—*quijo*, in Quechua—were first exposed by Pleistocene glaciation, and signs of ancient hard-rock gold mining have been revealed by the retreat of the glaciers.

"When I first came to work here, this was all ice and snow," Ilasaca said. We had reached the bottom of the Compuerta, I was sucking wind, and he was indicating the south wall of the upper valley, which is now bare rock pierced by mine shafts and pocked by slopes of scree. "In fifty years, all this may be gone, too." He meant La Bella Durmiente, and the whole network of tropical glaciers above it.

Ilasaca, who is thirty, was twelve when he began working in the mines, alongside his father. Like almost everyone in La Rinconada, they came from somewhere else—in their case, Azángaro, an altiplano farm town to the southwest. When the price of gold is high, people flock to La Rinconada from every corner of Peru and beyond. Between 2001 and 2012, the world gold price increased sixfold, and the town's population boomed with it. Both have dropped slightly in the past two or three years, but the town still fizzes with gold fever and the constant churn of new arrivals determined to try their luck—if not in the mines, then in the gaudy constellation of businesses that service the tens of thousands of miners.

Many mining towns are company towns. La Rinconada is the opposite. Nearly all the mines and miners here are "informal," a term that critics consider a euphemism for illegal. Ilasaca prefers "artisanal." The mines, whatever you call them, are small, numerous, unregulated, and, as a rule, grossly unsafe. Most don't pay salaries, let alone benefits, but run on an ancient labor system called *cachorreo*. This system is usually described as thirty days of unpaid work followed by a single frantic day in which workers get to keep whatever gold they can haul out for themselves. I found so many variants of the scheme, however—and so many miners passionately attached to their

variant—that the traditional description of *cachorreo* seems to me inadequate. It’s a lottery, but, because of pilfering, it runs every day, not once a month.

“This way.” I followed Ilasaca past many tiny huts of shiny corrugated tin—dirt-floored worker housing in a bare-bones encampment known as Barrio Rit’ipata. The dark mouths of mines now hove into view, in all sizes and states of dilapidation. Some were big enough to drive a truck into, with guard shacks and fat electrical cables and compressed-air hoses. Others were smaller than I am, crumbling, trash-strewn. All looked forbidding. One had a few multicolored balloons strung across it. “Carnaval,” Ilasaca said. He pointed out, above us, the blue mouth of a shaft in the lowest wall of the glacier. “They dug through fifty metres of ice before they hit rock,” he said.

Clouds and mist had swallowed La Bella Durmiente. The sky began to spit little snow pellets. From where we stood, thick black hoses ran like wiring up across a snowfield, snaking in the distance over makeshift supports. The hoses carried water from the glacier down to La Rinconada. Like nearly everything here, they were a private, unregulated business. Some, Ilasaca said, went to wells high enough on the glacier that the water they carried was clean. Others didn’t go high enough, and their water was contaminated with mercury. Mercury is the main element used to process gold in La Rinconada. The ground, air, water, and snow in town, along with pretty much anything immediately downstream, are all said to be contaminated. Mercury poisoning can affect the central nervous system, causing tremors, excitability, insomnia, and a grim range of psychotic reactions. Crime and violence in La Rinconada are often attributed, on no medical basis, to mercury poisoning.

“You still want to go inside a mine?”

I did.

“Just once I’d like to be accepted for who I’m not.”

Ilasaca studied the possibilities. His face was boyish, small-featured, serious. Given the weather, he was lightly dressed—sweatpants, sneakers, a toffee-colored sweater, a blue Nike watch cap. The miners

trudging past us all wore mamelucos (black thermal coveralls with reflective stripes); many had on ski masks. One group greeted Ilasaca. They called him Chino—Chinaman. It's a common nickname in Peru, given to practically anyone with an epicanthic fold to his eyes. Ilasaca and I had met in a gold buyer's shop. He had brought in a nugget the size of a thumbnail. We watched the shop owner burn off the mercury in a gas-fired oven, the toxic vapors running up a chimney and into a busy lane outside the shop. We joked about politics—Peru has elections in 2016, and the parties are already campaigning. I liked the way Ilasaca's face changed when he was amused. His jaw seemed to widen in a big sneaky smile. If circumstances warranted, he had a great bark of a laugh. I was full of questions about how one came to own a gold nugget in La Rinconada, and so Ilasaca, having pocketed forty-odd dollars for his, had led me out to the Second Compuerta.

We made our way downslope, to an abandoned mine. The tunnel entrance was twenty feet wide, maybe ten feet high. Ilasaca produced two hard hats and a miner's lamp from a backpack, and we headed in. "I used to work in here," he said. "There's enough oxygen, from old shafts that go to the surface." He gestured toward the depths of the mountain. As the tunnel narrowed, the air got musty and the darkness, within fifty yards of the entrance, was absolute. Ilasaca was careful to light my way. He showed me mineralized veins in the walls, glittering between rough slabs of black Ordovician slate. When the quijo angled upward, he said, so would the tunnel, and it did. This had all been dug with hand tools and dynamite, he said. "Maybe two metres a day." Back then, the lamps had been carbide, he said, burning acetylene gas. These nice bright electric headlamps we had, with battery packs that attached to your belt, were relatively new. He stopped to listen to my breathing, which was getting ragged. The tunnel ceiling had been dropping, obliging me to crouch. My thighs were burning from the effort. I was O.K., I said, just altitude weary. More coca, Ilasaca said. I had bought coca leaves that morning, from an old woman on the street in La Rinconada. Everybody here chewed them, I was told, to stave off exhaustion and hunger. I stuffed a wad in my cheek. The leaves were stiff and bitter. Ilasaca also took a wad. The quartz vein in the tunnel wall turned downward, the tunnel followed it, and at a certain depth we found our progress halted by an icy-looking pond. Ilasaca studied the vein, tapping it with his fingertips. I wondered what he saw in its fissures and glints.

On the hike back to the surface, he pointed out a little shrine I had missed. Tucked under an overhang were two upright black rocks—they looked like primitive tombstones, and they were wreathed with frayed rope, dead flowers, rotting fabric. “Awicha,” Ilasaca said, pointing to one. The other: “Chinchilico.” Mountain deities. These were gods who could keep a miner safe—from cave-ins, from asphyxiation. Gods who could lead a true believer to gold. Piled around the stones were liquor bottles, old candles, a dusty Carnival mask, a dank mound of unreadable pleas and offerings. La Rinconada had many brujos, soothsayers who advised miners on what prayers and payments they could make to the mountain gods to help them find gold and come home alive. The desperation of the miners felt suffocatingly close in here.

The Peruvian government has been trying to “formalize” small-scale mining for at least a decade. In La Rinconada, I met old-timers who remember the Army, sent in by the authoritarian government of Alberto Fujimori, coming to rout the miners in the early nineteen-nineties. That obviously didn’t work. Fujimori, who is now in prison, was primarily interested in attracting foreign investment for large-scale mining. Minerals are Peru’s leading export, mining its main source of foreign exchange. Most of the big multinationals, including Rio Tinto, Anglo American, Glencore, and Barrick Gold, have operations in Peru, extracting copper, gold, silver, zinc. Nobody knows the true size of the illegal-mining sector, but the Peruvian mining researcher Miguel Santillana calculates that there are roughly four hundred thousand informal gold miners today. Although Peru is among the world’s leading producers of cocaine, black-market gold has reportedly surpassed it as the country’s biggest illegal export.

Recently, with new laws and a wave of raids, the government has been cracking down on informal gold mining. The raids have been concentrated not on hard-rock mines in the mountains, however, but on alluvial operations in the rivers and rain forest of the Amazon Basin—only a hundred miles north of La Rinconada, but another universe. The river mining in the lowlands has escalated from low-impact panning to extraction by large machinery, including dredges, pumps, and bulldozers, and it is devastating tens of thousands of acres, attracting the attention of national and international environmentalists. There is little evidence that the raids are

discouraging illegal mining. In La Rinconada, I found tepid support for *la formalización,* or, at least, for some of its features, such as improved mine safety, but a general view that its implementation is unlikely. The Peruvian state has almost no presence in the town. A shopkeeper near the Compuerta told me, with a shrug, "If government inspectors came up here and ordered a mine closed, the inspectors would leave by nightfall, and the next day the mine would be open again."

La Rinconada residents deplore the state's absence. They've protested en masse, blocking highways in the altiplano, and demanded that the government start providing basic services. Electricity came, finally, in 2002. They're still waiting for clean water, a sewage system, garbage collection, a hospital. But their political leverage is limited. Most residents, if they're registered to vote, are registered in their home towns, not in La Rinconada. Besides that, hardly anyone seems to pay taxes. Most of the gold that comes out of the mountain goes straight onto the black market. Nobody knows how many mines there are, or what they produce, or how many people really live in La Rinconada. Politically, then, it's a standoff—leaving intact an operatically harsh, hard-to-measure, oxygen-deprived experiment in frontier capitalism, social dislocation, raw exploitation, and millenarian endurance.

Certainly almost none of the money being made shows up in the town's housing stock. I kept expecting to stumble on a successful miner's new house or a night-club owner's comfortable, heated apartment. That would not happen, I kept hearing, and indeed it didn't. Every penny goes back either into mining, people said, or down the mountain to more livable towns and cities. Juliaca, a busy commercial center on the altiplano, is the nearest big city to La Rinconada, and it owes much of its prosperity, from all accounts, to the gold mines. Successful miners have nice houses there. I saw a street-dance troupe in Juliaca celebrating the relationship. The dancers were dressed as miners, in coveralls and hard hats and steel-toed boots, and they were rhythmically swinging small sledgehammers—*martillos*—against chisels known in the mines as *cuñas*, while a brass orchestra rocked the *avenida*. My unheated hotel room in La Rinconada overlooked a muddy corner where long-distance minibuses arrived and departed, and all night long the touts shouted, "Juliaca! Juliaca! Juliaca!"

Josmell Ilasaca began mining at twelve. "The mine is a killer," he said. "A doctor told me I've spent too many years here already."

Miners send money to their families. That's the primary cash flow. It's the reason Josmell Ilasaca, like many thousands of others, is in La Rinconada—because there is more to be made here, they believe, than elsewhere in Peru, which has seen economic growth in recent years but still has a rural poverty rate close to fifty per cent. La Rinconada has no bank, but it has many storefront fund-transfer agencies, which Ilasaca uses to send money to his mother, in Azángaro, and to his daughter, who is three and lives with her mother in a town, farther west, called Abancay. "What is hard about the *cachorreo* is its uncertainty," he told me. "It's not like a salary. You don't know what you're going to make, or when. You need luck. *La suerte* is everything here."

We were eating dinner in a tiny, freezing second-floor restaurant in La Rinconada. I was having the Cuban plate—rice and a hot dog and a fried banana—and hot, sweet yerba-maté tea. Ilasaca, just off work, was eating more heartily, but I, after a sobering encounter with alpaca-tripe soup, had stopped simply following the dining lead of whomever I was with in La Rinconada.

I asked about his best day in the mines.

Eight thousand dollars in a month, he told me, proudly but quietly.

His best day?

He calculated a moment. About three thousand, he said. "The price was high then."

So had he found a single great chunk of gold, or a rare mass of flakes, on his one day a month of working for himself?

Ilasaca shook his head. No. It was an ordinary day. He had pocketed a likely-looking rock, taken it to a traditional mill known as a *quimbalete*, and come away with a nugget that turned out to contain nearly a hundred grams of gold—more than three ounces.

Did the mineowner not claim the gold as his own?

Ilasaca shook his head. The owner didn't know about it. He probably heard about it later, but he could hardly begrudge one of his best workers his stroke of luck. "*Es mi suerte.*"

I had heard similar things from other miners, and from a gold-shop owner who seemed nonplussed that I assumed he saw his customers only once a month. No, they came in when they found something, he said, which was often several times a week. Miners put good-looking rocks in their pockets every day. That was a part of the *cachorreo* that you didn't read about. Some people called it *huachaca*—it was simply understood, among indigenous Andean miners, as a type of natural right. If you found it in the mountain, particularly after payments to Awicha or Chinchilico or a Quechua spirit called Apu, it was yours.

On the payment day of your *cachorreo*—under Ilasaca's present contract, this comes once every twenty-five days—you were allowed to haul fifty-kilogram sacks of rock out of the mine on your back, as many as you could carry. These were the same yellow sacks that miners carried out of the earth every day, all day, except on payment day the rock didn't go onto the contractor's lode but straight to a mill, as the property of the miner. The rest of the month, the miner could discreetly carry out a sack, perhaps, at the end of a shift. Certainly a promising rock or two. That was it—but it was not unimportant. When *cachorreo* was threatened as part of the government's formalization proposals, miners poured into the streets in the thousands. This reform was out of the question. Mining for a miserable Peruvian salary was unthinkable. Without *la suerte* in the equation, the job was not worth doing.

I asked Ilasaca if he made payments to Awicha.

"Of course," he said. Nothing extravagant. Just *tragos* of liquor—he meant little airline bottles of booze that are sold from stands along the paths to the mines. Without paying something, Ilasaca said, you could expect nothing. I had heard of miners making extravagant offerings to

the mountain gods—blood sacrifices—but Ilasaca said he knew nothing about that. Maybe it happened in the old days. A lot had changed even since he first came to La Rinconada. Electricity, high-pressure power tools. You rarely, if ever, saw children in the mines now. "We were little goblins," he said, his wide grin sneaking across his face. "Little Chinchilicos." He laughed. Chinchilico is usually depicted as a short, grouchy fellow who accosts miners deep in the earth, demanding liquor and cigarettes. People call him "the owner of the gold." He likes to punch terrified miners in the face.

At times, Ilasaca sounded nostalgic for the days of child labor. He worked during his school vacations, three months a year, until he finished high school and moved full time to La Rinconada. He remembers watching outdoor screenings of "Rambo" with his dad. "Now everybody has their own TV," he said.

A TV on the wall in the restaurant was playing a game show. Every TV in town seemed to play this same game show at all hours. Ripped young men in wifebeaters and equally buff young women in bikinis grappled with softball questions ("What is the capital of Russia?") and physical challenges and celebrated their triumphs with high fives and passionate kisses among puffs of bright-pink smoke. Miners in the ice-cold, no-frills eateries of La Rinconada would look up from steaming bowls of goat soup to watch the revelry. I wondered what they saw. The young people on TV were nearly all white. I had yet to see a white person in La Rinconada.

Ilasaca's father left La Rinconada eight years ago. "But he worked too long," Ilasaca said. "His health was destroyed." He looked at me evenly. "The mine is a killer."

Where the rough dirt road from the lowlands enters La Rinconada, a rudimentary health clinic—one of the government's very few local outposts—sits between a graveyard and a row of undertakers. A ponytailed young doctor named Fredy Rios was running the clinic when I stopped by. He didn't have a working X-ray machine, which was bad, he said, because he saw a lot of broken arms from accidents in the mines. It was bad, too, because X-rays help diagnose lung diseases, such as silicosis, which is associated with gold mining. (Quartz veins are rich with silica.)

According to Rios, mine accidents—caused by explosives, ceiling collapses, asphyxiation—kill about thirty people a year in La Rinconada. (Three had died in a collapse a few weeks before I got to town.) Seventy more die from shootings, stabbings, stranglings—the results of bar fights and robberies, mainly. Martín Ccari, an undertaker from across the street, told me that some mine deaths could be blamed on slow response to cave-ins and other accidents. There were no emergency services in La Rinconada, and injured miners often died en route to help. Ccari could bury people locally—not in the cemetery behind the clinic, which was now full, but in a new field, outside town. He could also arrange the transfer of bodies to the miners' home towns.

"I have more underneath."

The mine kills both quickly and slowly. There was one working X-ray machine in town. It was in a private clinic, attached to a well-stocked pharmacy. The doctor there, Nestor Condori, told me that he sees plenty of silicosis, which grows both more readily and faster at high altitude than elsewhere. Living at very high altitude raises one's hemoglobin level, and many residents of La Rinconada develop polycythemia—elevated red-blood-cell production, described by Condori as "dense blood"—which interacts badly with silicosis, frequently causing, for instance, pulmonary fibrosis, a potentially fatal condition. Silicosis is also associated with tuberculosis. The only real treatment for polycythemia, Condori said, involves moving to sea level, which he often recommends, to little effect, to his patients in La Rinconada.

Rios, at the public clinic, said that he saw an unusual number of urinary infections in women, which he attributed to the absence of a sewage system. At home, people improvise chamber pots, and the town has an abundance of public lavatories, but these are actually private, charging customers a small fee, and they're never pleasant to enter. (They empty directly into simple pits or seemingly, in some cases, into the next alley.) Men routinely relieve themselves in the streets. Women who are out working or running errands, and not near home, also try to avoid the public lavatories but are more modest. According to Rios, they often pee only once a day, which accounts, he

thought, for the high rate of infections. The only reason that the town's appalling sanitary situation doesn't cause an epidemic of gastrointestinal infections and parasites is the brutal year-round cold, he said. (In the summer month of February, when I visited, it snowed nine days in a row.) Frozen bacteria is harmless. Contaminated drinking water, either piped down from a lower part of the glacier or trucked in from polluted local lakes, causes a raft of intestinal and other problems, but nothing, apparently, like the public-health catastrophe that warmer weather would wreak.

Rios gave me the first persuasive explanation I heard for why no buildings in La Rinconada (except certain night clubs) are heated. It would require too much energy, he said. The local electricity supply is limited, and the mines and the new generation of machine-powered gold mills need most of the available energy. The town's residents, he said, are happy to splice into any passing cable—the rat's nest of wiring above every alley illustrates how it is that everyone has cable TV even though virtually nobody pays for it. But the industrial consumers of electricity construct their lines of sterner stuff, and no one tampers with them. This made far more sense than arguments I had heard that passing too often from cold to warm environments causes arthritis. I still thought propane space heaters or charcoal-fired braziers should be a priority in any household that could afford them. But I am a wimp compared with any man, woman, or child living in La Rinconada.

Professionally, Rios struck me as frustrated by his posting. Not only was he underequipped but, despite all the violence and workplace toxicity of the mines, there was, for a fully trained physician, not much interesting medicine to practice. A few explosives injuries, perhaps, or collapsed-ceiling injuries. The truth was, most people in La Rinconada were fiercely healthy. Nobody with heart problems moved here. When miners' respiratory problems surfaced, they could no longer work and left town. There was one fascinating aspect of the populace, medically speaking: the extremely high hemoglobin levels of all full-time residents. Rios wanted to do an epidemiological study of this phenomenon and its implications. There was no comparable community, no other place on Earth where such a study could be done. But he could not interest potential funders. All the well-known high-altitude "experts," he noted, with some bitterness, live at

elevations below four thousand metres. La Rinconada is above five thousand. Rios was at the clinic on a one-year contract, which was nearly up. His eagerness to move on was palpable.

The national police have a small post in La Rinconada. It's another sign, besides the clinic, that the Peruvian government knows the town exists. Its officers all seem to be, like Rios, on short-term postings from faraway homes. They have four-wheel-drive trucks, automatic rifles, smart uniforms. I went on foot patrol, on a frigid evening, with a group of eight or ten officers. The commander pointed out the sprawling, packed-full cemetery behind the clinic. That, he told me, was where they buried the corpses that no one claimed, their names unknown. This was patently false. I had seen the cemetery in daylight—it was crammed with headstones bearing the usual inscriptions and information. I had even passed by with a former miner whose grandfather was buried there. Why would the police commander subscribe to this Dodge City factoid that one glance at the graveyard in daytime would disprove?

There was more. A young officer from a lowland city told me, half an hour later, that the muddy alleys we were patrolling were so dangerous that nobody dared walk there except in large groups like ours. The next person we met was a woman of about thirty, carrying luggage in the opposite direction. We squeezed past her, exchanging good evenings. Yes, her suitcase was heavy, she said ruefully. I asked the young officer why she was alone on this perilous pathway. He said that she obviously had deep Christian faith. "They put all their trust in God," he said. He was not joking.

The most dangerous places in La Rinconada, the commander told me, were the night clubs. That seemed likely true. They were dens of prostitution, human trafficking, robbery, and murder, he said, and many of the prostitutes were minors. I had read several reports making the same points about the town's night clubs and brothels, and had seen Peruvian TV-news shows that investigated the local sex trade with hidden cameras. The police commander did not mention any efforts to combat the crimes he described, and our patrol route gave an exceptionally wide berth to the couple of blocks where La Rinconada's notorious cantinas are concentrated.

I tried to check out the clubs myself. They were very dark, very loud, and full of drunken miners blowing hard-earned money, with feral bouncers and d.j.s and, clustered around gas heaters, groups of bare-limbed, miserable-looking young women. Nobody would talk to me. I had read that a Rabelaisian writer from Juliaca, known as R. Abelardo Checca, had holed up happily in the night clubs and brothels of La Rinconada, and was planning to write a book of short stories in the style of Charles Bukowski about the degradation and vitality he found there. I decided to wait for the book.

"I'm getting subtle hints of what the Fed might do."

Women are barred from the mines in La Rinconada. The reason normally given is that men are stronger, and the work does require incredible physical strength, but there is a long history of gender discrimination both in mining and in Peru, and a wealth of related superstition about bad luck and women and mines. Women mine gold in La Rinconada, but they do it as *pallaqueras,* combing through discarded scrap rock for gold flakes outside the mines proper. The *pallaqueras* find far less gold, generally, than the miners inside at the rockface, but I saw them on the mountain, sometimes with small children, every day. They wore hard hats, knee-high rubber boots, and huge amounts of clothing against the cold and snow and wind—not the store-bought *mamelucos* that the men wear but great jumbles of skirts, vests, sweaters, trousers, improvised balaclavas, striped traditional blankets known as *lliclias,* dust masks, aprons, work gloves. The harshness of the weather they work in—the bitter glacial wind and high-mountain sun—was inscribed on the cheeks of many of the women, and some of the children, in the dark blooms of frostbite scars.

I asked a *pallaquera* of indeterminate age about her family. We were on the mountain, and she never stopped smashing small rocks with a *martillo*, sorting chips and pebbles into piles, and tossing an occasional shard into a big yellow sack. Four kids, she said, seven grandkids, a husband retired with bad lungs—that was why she was out here! He was sitting at home! She laughed lightly. Did she make payments to Awicha? Of course! Only a fool would be out here doing nothing to

increase one's chances of good luck. She gave a splash of rum to Awicha, then drank the rest of the bottle herself, for warmth. In Quechua, gold is sometimes called "tears of the sun."

Josmell Ilasaca has a serious girlfriend, Veronica, who lives in Azángaro, but, he told me, she was thinking about moving to La Rinconada to work as a *pallaquera.* I was amazed. Veronica was twenty-two. She had been raised in Cuzco. She had finished high school. She had a decent job in a casino in Juliaca. I had seen her in a photograph—she looked nice, and frostbite would not become her. Ilasaca said I didn't understand. Yes, they wanted to live together, and that was part of why she wanted to come. But she also wanted to try her luck. Gold fever could strike anybody, and you shouldn't begrudge someone a fling with her *suerte*.

Even as Ilasaca insisted on the primacy of luck, he didn't strike me as a gambler. Luck just didn't seem to be his personal guiding light. He was more hardheaded than that. Had he always wanted to be a gold miner?

No way, he said. He started only because his father was mining. "When I was sixteen, I didn't want to go back to the mine," he said. "I had been going since I was twelve. It was so sad. There was so much suffering. It was so cold. I did a police course instead that year. I passed the course. I wanted to be a policeman. But then they tested my eyes, and I was nearsighted, so the police wouldn't take me. So I went back to the mine."

At eighteen, he began working full time for his uncle Hugo, who was a contractor in La Rinconada. "I worked for my uncle for three and a half years," he said. "I did almost every job. Mechanic, perforator, cleanup. We never found any gold. It was a crew of thirty. It was very difficult. We had no luck. My uncle paid me just enough to live. I finally had to leave."

And yet Ilasaca had a hero, a model: a miner named Percy Torres, who was also from Azángaro. Percy Torres was an orphan, just a poor Quechua boy, when he first came to La Rinconada—displaced, like many people at the time, by violence in the countryside. But Percy Torres was unusually intelligent, patient, hardworking. He studied the mountain until he knew it better than any geologist, any mining

engineer. People said that he had too much luck, that he found too much gold, that he must have made a pact with the Devil. There were many stories about Percy Torres. His wife, people said, woke up one night and saw his horns and tail. But Percy Torres, Ilasaca told me, reinvested every cent he made. He put it all back into the mountain, and when the price of gold fell he was in trouble. Still, he kept going, kept exploring the mountain, kept digging, and eventually he went over the ridge, into the next valley to the east, and the price of gold rose again.

Ilasaca took me on a hike, over the ridge above La Rinconada. In the next valley, under the first glacier east of La Bella Durmiente, was a large modern mine. It had big sheds, parking lots full of trucks and heavy equipment, its own mill, its own access road. On one of the roofs, painted in huge white letters, was written "TITAN"—the name of Percy Torres's company.

Percy Torres died in 2011. He was forty-six. Not everyone believed he was dead. Was it really cancer? At least half a dozen people in La Rinconada joked to me that Percy Torres was now in hell, making good on his part of his deal with Satan. In any event, his eldest son, Iván, took over Titán. Then, in late 2012, Iván Torres was killed, in a robbery on the road just a few miles down the mountain from La Rinconada. He was twenty-eight. His driver and his bodyguard were also murdered. The police later said that three hundred kilograms of gold was stolen in the robbery—more than ten million dollars' worth. Iván Torres, they suggested, had been killed, in effect, by *la informalidad.* Even though he was the head of one of Peru's larger corporations, he was still doing business outlaw-style—personally carrying millions in gold rather than paying taxes. The crime had clearly been an inside job: somebody at Titán alerting some real outlaws.

The next heir, or heiress, to the fortune was Iván's younger sister, Rocío, who quickly bought a large ranch in Spain, known for its fighting bulls, and is said to have left the family business to professional managers.

"O.K., class, next we'll pound out the dough until that ungrateful, self-centered son of

Some of the Percy Torres saga is public record, but most of it, including his formative years in La

a bitch realizes he's not the center of the world, and maybe, just maybe, he doesn't deserve an attractive, well-educated woman with a wonderful sense of humor."

Rinconada, is oral history. One sunny afternoon, I got a phone call from Ilasaca. He sounded excited. He insisted that I come and meet him right away, in a barrio up the hill from my hotel. I found him sitting with an older man, known as Cariño, on plastic chairs in the middle of a muddy track. They were sharing a large bottle of something called Inca Kola. Cariño, Ilasaca said, was a contractor who had been working in La Rinconada since 1970. He pronounced the date wonderingly, as if it were 1870—an impossibly long career. Cariño's longevity in the mines was, in fact, a rarity. Certainly nobody working underground, which contractors try to avoid, could last so long. But Cariño seemed unimpressed with himself, and with pretty much everything else. He was taciturn and dismissive, and seemed to speak at all only because Ilasaca kept peppering him with questions about long-closed local mines and concessions and partnerships. His memory was impeccable. Yes, he recalled exactly when Percy Torres showed up, a green kid from Azángaro, and where he worked, and who financed what, and who burned his partners with a fake geological report on which mineral deposit when.

"I need paper," Ilasaca said. "These are *facts,* not myths."

I loaned him a pen and a notebook, and he filled pages with obscure information. I understood none of it.

The sunshine—and a temperature now well above freezing—was rousing a mighty stench from the mud. I tried holding Inca Kola in my mouth to neutralize visions of bacterial apocalypse. Even its disinfectant flavor was no help. Until that afternoon, I had found it funny that La Rinconada residents (male) often seemed to make a point of urinating where someone dared to post a sign forbidding it. The same thing happened with garbage. A warning spray-painted on a building near my hotel threatened rubbish-dumpers with "massacre," and the trash heap rising beneath it was at least ten feet high. I thought these rude communal gestures expressed the anarchic solidarity of the town. But none of it seemed amusing now.

Cariño ended his conversation with Ilasaca with an oath that echoed my thoughts: "Chino, I hope the gold price falls and the mines close and we all move to towns where we don't have to live like animals!"

Ilasaca and I repaired to a tiny storefront bar to drink beer. He was thrilled with all he had learned about the early business dealings of his hero. It wasn't that he dreamed of being the next Percy Torres. He didn't have that sort of talent—or luck. He just admired Percy's canniness and persistence, his great rise in the world, his courage and independence.

"But I have to get out of the mine," Ilasaca said. "A doctor told me I've spent too many years here already. The altitude changes your blood. It damages your brain. The dust and smoke in the mine destroy your lungs. Living up here is bad for relationships. Four or five more years, that's all I need. The mine I work in now is good. There's gold. I just need to save enough to capitalize a business."

Ilasaca had tried to live with his former girlfriend in her home town, Abancay, after their daughter was born. It didn't work, he said, on any level. He found jobs—in construction, as a driver—but the pay was hopelessly low. "In Peru, you have to own something," he said. "That's why we risk our lives in the mine. So we can help our families and then have decent lives after we finish with the mine."

I got permission, not through Ilasaca, to enter the mine where he works. Mario Ayamamani, the owner of the concession, escorted me to the rockface. The day's dynamiting and high-pressure drilling had been completed hours before, so the air inside the mine was relatively free of smoke and dust. Still, I gladly used a half-mask respirator someone handed me, and took hits of medical oxygen from a cannister I had brought from Juliaca, and chewed coca.

At the rockface, miners were pounding away at walls loosened by drilling and blasting, using long sharpened steel rods in a vicious upward-jabbing motion. When chunks of rock fell off the face, the miners attacked them with *martillos.* Then they studied the smaller chunks in the light from their headlamps, quickly grading them into ore that would go to the mill—those chunks went into a filthy yellow sack—and dross that went on piles that were being shovelled, by other miners, into wheelbarrows bound for the tailings pile outside. The

pace was frightening. The sheer fitness of these men digging for gold by hand three miles above sea level was remarkable. When one of the yellow sacks was full, it weighed more than a hundred pounds, and a miner carried it out to the mill on his back.

We were not particularly deep inside the mountain—I had heard that some mines at La Rinconada were three miles deep, with innumerable branches in every direction. This was probably only a few hundred yards, but I found the trip back and forth torturous. The ceiling got so low that I nearly had to crawl at one stage, and it kept knocking off my hard hat. And I wasn't carrying a hundred pounds of rock on my back. During one of these difficult passages, I heard a familiar voice. "*Hola*, William." It was Ilasaca. He must have come from one of the branches I was trying not to blunder into. He was working *vigilancia*, he said, which involved patrolling. His manner with me was cool, strange, watchful. Perhaps he didn't like seeing me in his workplace, in the party of his employer, although I had heard him speak highly of Ayamamani. He disappeared almost as suddenly as he had appeared.

Ayamamani comes from a prominent local mining family. He owns other mines, in other parts of Peru, and lives in Juliaca. He gave me a detailed description, in his office in La Rinconada, of some of the mountain's mineralogical features—its two long, erratic, gold-bearing bands, its gold-rich vertical faults. We washed our hands together in ice-cold water after our visit to the rockface. He kept his coca, I noticed, in a lovely leather purse, which he unfolded ceremonially before he offered leaves to visitors. He didn't seem to have a trace of the desperation that makes La Rinconada run so hot.

Gold fever makes more sense after a visit to an artisanal gold mine. Poverty remains the first and fundamental goad. But the raw investment of time, effort, heart's blood, and personal risk poured into a search through mountains of useless, infuriating rock for tiny flecks of precious metal might leave anyone obsessed. The swagger of miners, in their hard hats and work boots and bulked-out, narrow-waisted *mamelucos*, through the streets of La Rinconada makes more sense, too, after you see the work they do.

The demand side of gold fever is almost the opposite story. The enormous new Chinese middle class drives much of the growing world market for gold jewelry. Indians are also buying significantly more gold each year. Jewelry accounts, altogether, for three-quarters of the global market for newly mined gold. The remainder goes to industry and to investors in bars and coins.

"I put in a skylight and it's made a world of difference."

OCTOBER 17, 2010

In La Rinconada, dozens of gold-buying shops connect small producers with these faraway consumers. I asked a young gold buyer about his business, and he was so forthcoming that I shouldn't mention his real name. Call him Jhonny. He's had his shop for ten years. Jhonny buys gold according to a price set twice a day in London and New York—he has an app on his phone to help him stay current. His primary buyers, who are in Bolivia (he also has clients, he says, in Brazil), want all the gold he can deliver. They pay Jhonny ten per cent more than he pays the miners who bring him flakes and nuggets, and they insist that he make his deliveries by hand on Mondays.

And so he closes the shop most Sundays at 3 P.M. He melts all the gold he has bought that week into cup-shaped cakes of doré—nearly pure gold. A week's take can range from half a kilogram to fourteen. Then he catches a minibus down to Juliaca, where, in a house quietly fitted out as a factory, he combines all the gold cakes into one-kilogram or half-kilogram bullion bars. He sleeps for a few hours and then, at dawn, packs the bullion into long, purpose-built vertical pockets in a bulbous down-filled coat.

Jhonny showed me the coat. It was cleverly designed.

He catches an early-morning bus to La Paz, a few hours' ride. The tricky part is the border crossing, of course. He has had many nervous moments, he said, but the border there is lightly controlled, and he has never been searched. His clients prefer Peruvian gold, which, according to Jhonny, is known for its high quality. For two kilos, he receives, at current prices, about seven thousand dollars more than he's laid out for it. He covers his costs—his shop, his equipment, his little factory in Juliaca—and usually makes a good profit. He is home

by evening. His wife, whom I met, sells homemade corn cakes—all organic, Jhonny told me enthusiastically—in the lane outside his shop. She sits on a stoop in the snow next to her pot of cakes, wearing traditional Quechua clothing, including the bowler hat and a bright *lliclla*, in which their infant son, on the day I met her, was wrapped and sleeping.

Jhonny was warm and polite to the miners who brought him their gold. He gave them lime-flavored cupcakes to pass the time while he processed and weighed the gold. Two miners started swilling beer, drinking up their payday before they had even received it, and Jhonny kept them supplied and happy—he even drank with them—while he worked. There are at least fifty shops like his in La Rinconada. Local officials must find a way to take a bite out of them, but the only tax Jhonny would admit to paying was a small annual fee for his business license.

According to a British group called the Fairtrade Foundation, there are sixteen million artisanal and small-scale gold miners working today. A hundred million people worldwide rely on some form of small-scale mining. These numbers have been rising rapidly in recent years. Artisanal gold miners are in a strange position. They account for ten per cent of annual world gold production but ninety per cent of jobs in the gold industry. Large-scale, mechanized, modern gold mines are vastly more efficient. They are also safer for workers. They just don't provide many jobs.

Nearly everyone I asked in La Rinconada believes that the government's formalization program is ultimately intended to clear the way for multinationals and other big mining companies to replace informal miners. The big miners pay taxes, for a start. Whether any multinational would actually want to build a large-scale operation in La Rinconada seems to me an open question, though. It's remote. The mountain's mineralogy is complex and uncertain. Tens of thousands of tough and stubborn miners are already dug in there, pursuing their Percy Torres dreams.

An assumption that large-scale mechanized mining is less environmentally destructive than unregulated small-scale mining, incidentally, would be unfounded. Around the world, big mining

companies, including multinationals, have been responsible for some of the worst environmental disasters associated with extraction. Open-pit gold mining, as performed by some of the biggest mining companies, can require the removal of two hundred and fifty tons of rock and ore—that's five hundred thousand pounds—to find a single ounce of gold.

I lost track of Ilasaca. He got paid on *cachorreo* day and seemed to go on a bender. His phone was turned off. When I saw him in town, he was not sober. His face had a woeful, befuddled look. He still sauntered down steep, icy paths with his hands in his pockets, not missing a step. But his incisiveness, his sneaky smile, were absent. Then, one morning, I saw him climbing into a minibus outside my hotel. I asked where he was going. "Azángaro," he muttered. His mother was ill.

While he was away, I went to see a *brujo* who billed himself as La Maravilla—the Marvel. He had slicked-back hair and a blanket safety-pinned around his considerable waist. He lived in a tiny room on a busy, very muddy track. On the wall above his table were a crucifix and an old-fashioned naked-lady calendar. He threw the coca leaves for me. Oh, he said. *Ai-yi-yi*. The first thing he saw in the leaves was doubt. I should banish doubt. He threw more leaves. Ah. I had an interest in the mountain, he saw, a connection, a future with the mountain. (He may have thought I was a potential investor.) He saw success. Yes, success. He directed my attention to a leaf pointing upward. That was success. But I would have to work, and I would have to pay. Apu needed to be paid. Chinchilico needed to be paid. I should prepare a ceremony.

A ceremony?

Yes. I should find a young vicuña (a relative of the llama), and slit its throat, and pull out its heart, and offer it to Apu. I must have looked doubtful, or as if I didn't have the stones to kill a vicuña and pull out its heart. Yes, we should meet at midnight, La Maravilla and I, on the new moon, which happened to be this week, on the hill behind La Rinconada. To make sure I understood, he pointed through his doorway at a hill. It was bristling with cell-phone towers. Yes, that one. We would throw the vicuña's blood toward the mountain. That would do the trick. We should find a mutually convenient night.

He threw the leaves again. Oh, look at that. He pointed to a mass of leaves, then scared me by bellowing, "*Hay oro!*" ("There's gold!") Plenty of gold, plenty of money. It would be right in front of me wherever I started working. I just needed to dig. I would be able to follow the vein of gold, the *quijo*, wherever it went, through the mountain. I just needed to have faith.

I had to leave. We agreed to stay in touch about a good night to do the ceremony.

"I'm sorry, ladies, was this man bothering you?"
JANUARY 19, 2009

Ilasaca had said that blood sacrifices, if they ever happened, were a thing of the past. But La Maravilla's prescription made me wonder. I had interviewed a barrio police chief—an unarmed constable and ex-miner who seemed to know more than the national police about La Rinconada. He had talked about specific troublemakers. "They wear miners' clothes to confuse the population." But the constable had also startled me by confirming a lurid, much repeated rumor—that children had been kidnapped and offered as blood sacrifices to the mountain gods. "Yes, it happens," he said.

Had they ever found a body?

No, he admitted. But that was only because the offerings were made deep in the mountain, in a branch of the mine where the person making the payment worked, and where no one else ever went. Did I have any idea how deep some of the mines went?

I left La Rinconada at dawn, squeezed in the back row of a crowded minibus, bumping down the mountain. The trashed, poisoned mine country gave way slowly to hills with actual grass on them. Then there were small farms, cattle, trees. Sunshine with some warmth to it. People not bundled against the cold. The world was flooding with color. And oxygen. I found it a bit overwhelming. We drove alongside a river. There were trout in this river, the man next to me said. I felt like screaming with joy. Everybody in the van seemed giddy. There was chattering, laughter. Political symbols and slogans were on every barn wall. "SOMOS KEIKO." ("We are Keiko.") Keiko is Fujimori's daughter, who is now

a contender for President. Somebody made a joke about El Chino—that's Alberto Fujimori's nickname—rising from the dead, and the van rippled with laughter. Keiko once said that if she became President she would not hesitate to release her father from jail. Near Azángaro, the man next to me pointed out a splendid hacienda set between green hills. That belonged to Percy Torres, he said. And these—he pointed to some huge black bulls—were Percy's *toros bravos*.

Ilasaca picked me up in the plaza. He looked younger, smaller, more relaxed. His mother was fine, he said. We ate lunch at his place—a comfortable, working-class row house—with Veronica, his girlfriend. Then we sat under an umbrella in his back yard. Veronica said that she had reconsidered the idea of becoming a *pallaquera*. It just sounded too physically punishing. We toasted her good sense. Veronica seemed lively, worldly. She had a great sleepy smile. She clipped Ilasaca's fingernails while we talked. I said that Azángaro looked delightful, which was an understatement. Ilasaca gave a little grin of home-town pride. He actually owned a lot in another town, he said, where he planned to build a house when he had the money. "I just want to live someplace healthy," he said quietly. "Either there or here."

"Or Cuzco," Veronica said. That was her home town.

"Or Cuzco."

We watched a video: Veronica, Ilasaca, and his mother dancing at a New Year's party in Azángaro, with a troupe from his barrio. They looked incredible. In the video, Ilasaca was wearing a brilliant full-length yellow poncho, swinging a silver baton, dancing in a deep, ecstatic rhythm.

We took a walk through town. Fruit-sellers in the market greeted Ilasaca: "Chino!" He and Veronica were discussing their evening plans intently. Every hour was important. In the morning, he had to catch a minibus to La Rinconada. ♦

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