

Excerpt from "The Inca Boys," a work in progress.

By Arielle Emmett

He is almost fifteen years old and 5'10," blond and sunny with curlicue smiles and enormous feet. Overnight he sprouts the legs of a vicuna. I watch him gambol through the cloud forest, disappearing behind eucalyptus and lavender-petaled *moco moco*, up through the barren puna and blue-granite ledges of *Warmihuanuscca*, "Dead Woman's Pass" at 14,000 feet, on the way to the legendary Machu Picchu.

We are making a six hour straight up climb – me, 51 years old, 2<sup>nd</sup> degree blackbelt, arthritic knees, blown out vertebrae. He, wunderkind with breath like bellows, devil may care, flirts in Spanish, wouldn't be caught dead or alive with his Mom except for the fact that buddy Kevin and *his* Mom are also hiking beside us here, on the Inca Trail. We are gringos of the Western world, testing ourselves for five days in the mud and sleet of pup tents and terraces of heaven, drawn to that lost city of 99 Virgins of the Sun – or so the legend of Machu Picchu goes. Scrambling up and down thousands of man-made stone steps, making the 26 mile circuit of the Inca Trail along one Andean mountain pass after another, south through Chilca, East to Mount Salcantay, North to Intipunku, the Sun Gate, we follow the runners of ancient King Pachacuti, the great builder of Machu Picchu. The runners were said to have bounded non-stop from the Pacific coast at sunrise to serve the Incan monarch fresh fish for his supper. They could make the 26 mile trail to the winter Palace of Machu Picchu in just six hours. The average hikers today take 4 ½ to 5 days.

I see nothing but gray scuds of a storm and one stone ledge after another. My bamboo walking sticks are crutches I use to vault my body one step higher. I tell myself, chanting a mantra, *this is the journey we're meant to take*, he and I, mother and son, each at a fork in the trail. For me, it's middle age, but going down fighting. For him, it's life without me. He speeds past me, dragging his sticks behind him, springing up the stone steps, disappearing over the ledge of his manhood– and I can't catch up. *Pause. Halt. Breathe. Pause. Halt. Regret. Correct.* Move on and up as a vicious wind whips from Dead Woman's stony face at the summit and drives little daggers of sleet into every corner of our consciousness.

"*Bully!*" I grumble. "*Isn't this fun?*" to no one in particular. Kevin is 10 steps behind me, strangling with asthma and drenched to the skin. I take off my gloves to retie the shreds of his rain parka – he's ripped off the hood a few moments before desperation. "Hey, it's not a race," I squawk. "Just take a few breaths, then a step or two, then breathe again."

This works. Kev and I keep lumbering along, inch by inch, settling into the rhythm of Hannibal's elephants. Meanwhile, my boy is out of sight; it gives me chills just thinking about him. After all, if a man can climb the Vilcabamba mountains with his son, if he can enjoy one last hellish bonding adventure before the boy of the vicuna legs escapes and gambols away forever, why not a mother? Why not share the wonders of pink moss and altitude sickness, foaming rivers, leaky latrines, and nights under the Southern Cross?

I ponder this. For 12 years the boy and I have lived together, two-thirds of a family unit consisting of Mom, son, and daughter (who opts out of this trip) living a pretty conventional life in Philadelphia suburbs. We fight a lot. He spent a year with his father in California, then came back, ostensibly because I was the "easy" parent. Two weeks ago he stepped off the plane from San Diego, half a foot bigger than he was in a year ago. Now he steps onto the plane to Lima and cheerfully ignores me. My friend Christiana Jacobsen and her son Kevin, likewise, are single Mom and son, squabbling about that underlying thing: independence. She and I realize that time is running out. Our choirboys' sopranos are deepening into baritones. Nights spent skidding and slamming end over end on skateboards are now spent cruising for girls. Kevin, who once bawled his eyes out at the sound of thunderstorms, now pushes past me and his asthma attack to catch my son at Dead Woman's summit. I see them, the Incas boys, drenched and giggling,

disappearing in a cloud of snow and wind down the other side of the pass to a destination that leaves me tingling and alone. There's not enough of a moment even to take a photograph of them. We're freezing, they race ahead, arriving at the muddy campsite of Pacamayo an hour before I do. Meanwhile, I take one step among thousands of downward slippery steps that are painful to me and that I must take one by one, with joints grating, like steel pins. The time for going to Picchu is now, I tell myself. The time for going is just about over –I'm getting too old for this! But I want to hold out.

[End of Part One]