

## Dangerous Duckling

Roberto Espinoza scrutinized me with mouth agape, head tilted. He wore that quizzical expression from time to time when he pretended he thought I was crazy. I ignored it as usual, though he held this pose longer than customary, possibly on account of my unusual request. I had just asked him to strip naked and jump into a freezing lake.

"Do you realize," he said, "that we are at 12,000 feet and this water is nearly ice!?" I put on my most reasonable ministerial tone with a slight inflection of pleading and replied, "But Roberto! It's my first duck! I wouldn't have shot it if I meant to leave it out there!"

He muttered a half-audible comment about bird dogs and started to turn away. "Look, Roberto," I pleaded, "why not swim out a few feet, and if you can't make it, just come back. I'd sure appreciate it if you would give it a try."

Roberto removed his clothes, mumbling incoherencies the entire time, and entered the water. But two strokes out, his nerve failed. He emerged soaked and shivering. We exchanged disgusted expressions for a brief moment while I considered my options.

It had been a good day of hunting. We four men had gone after game birds in the highlands of the Andes outside the provincial town of Cuenca, Ecuador, where my wife and I served as missionaries. The only hitch in the day so far was that I had pulled a hamstring muscle in my right leg because of uneven ground and was limping severely.

These three Ecuadorians knew the territory, and decided to stop by lake San Francisco on the way back to see if any ducks had come in.

Roberto and I had gone around the east side of the lake to check out a patch of reeds where ducks might be hiding. The sun was descending, crimson rays touching the sparse grass that waved in the cold evening breeze on the surrounding hilltops.

That's when I saw the duck paddling across the lake about thirty yards off, heading for the reeds where we had taken cover. It was hard to see due to the sun directly behind it. But it cast a fine shadow as it approached. Too far

for a shot. We waited until it was about ten years away, and I let him have it. Blam! My first duck! First ever!

I was ecstatic...at least until Roberto started his irrelevant remarks. Roberto is a nice guy but is capable of a veritable killjoy attitude. "How do you plan on retrieving that duck?" he asked.

It annoys me to explain the obvious. Since my right leg was injured, clearly the retrieval of the duck was his responsibility. We were partners in hunting, and I had done my share in stalking and shooting it. He would have to swim out and retrieve it.

Roberto is usually reasonable. But he has his days, like us all. He can become stubborn at the most inconvenient moments. That may explain why he made it only a couple of yards into the lake before turning back.

The options were clear. Either I give up the duck or go and get it myself. I'm a pretty good swimmer, I reasoned, and rely more on my arms than my legs anyway. Maybe I could make it. It was my first duck, and a profound loathing to abandon it gripped me. I decided to give it a try. I recalled reading somewhere that a person can survive freezing water for about 90 seconds before hypothermia sets in. I could do 10 yards and back in half that time. So I stripped down to my underwear and stepped in.

Roberto was right. Water gets a bit chilly at 12000 feet. But resolve and greed inspired my forward plunge. My swimming style felt right, and I was confident.

What did not feel right was my underwear, now waterlogged and slipping down. I reached back with my left hand to pull them up and promptly sank. Now I was swimming with only two limbs. The dilemma? I could not continue after the duck and hold up my underwear at the same time. Something had to go.

Logic prevailed. "I have plenty of underwear at home," I reasoned, "but no ducks." So the underwear slid to a new home at the bottom of the lake as I pursued my query, teeth clenched. Four more strokes and I was there.

To my horror, the glorious prize, which I envisioned broiling in the oven and feeding all the hunters, was no more than four inches long...a mere duckling. Somehow the light had amplified its size, with the sun shining behind it. I decided to abandon it, ashamed of my error in killing it. But on second thought, I had risked my health for it and decided to retrieve it anyway.

Not only was my heart sinking with disappointment, but my whole body was sinking as well. The instant I grabbed the duckling, I faced the same dilemma as before...only two limbs for swimming, my right arm and left leg. I thrashed around for a second or two trying to figure out a way to save both myself and the trophy. So I stuck its foot in my mouth and headed for shore.

This novel solution was short-lived. My teeth began to chatter, and the foot was quickly bitten clear through. This introduced a new dynamic. Not only was the duckling again floating around me, but I had its severed foot in my mouth and could not extract it because of my chattering teeth. As though drowning and hypothermia were not enough, I was now in danger of being choked to death by a duckling foot.

Desperate measures for desperate times! I grabbed the duckling, forced my teeth apart, and jammed the whole thing into my mouth. Only the head dangled out as I headed for shore.

My swimming style was not Olympic quality, but I emerged victorious, proud, and quite naked.

Oddly, Roberto seemed to feel the sight of a naked preacher with a duckling in his mouth was cause for amusement. I detected this attitude because he was rolling around on the ground, holding his stomach and screaming with laughter. This seemed unkind, since I considered my recovery of the prey to be a brave accomplishment. So I spit the duckling into my hand, severed foot and all, and exclaimed, "Look, Roberto. I don't care how small it is. It's mine, all mine." At this he sat up, considered my comment and person, and renewed his hysterics.

Later on, back at the car, fully dressed and still amused, Roberto recounted the incident to the other hunters, between spasms of laughter. They told it to their wives and friends when we returned to town.

Before coming to Ecuador, I had envisioned notoriety for worthier accomplishments. Nevertheless, a tone of respect still remained in their spreading of this episode, for which I was grateful. Even their comments about gringo bird dogs were tolerable. But I still feel a twinge of chagrin when I recall an insufferable moment during a church business meeting. One of the ladies owned a pet duck, and she sent it into the meeting, waddling uncomfortably, wearing a pair of men's underpants. "Brother Roger," she exclaimed, "we found your underwear!"

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