**The Shit That Saved My Life**

**By Darcy Thomas**

**Chapter 1: The First Innoculation**

While many folks are repulsed by shit, I developed a fond comfort around the presence of it during my early travels. While traveling around South and Central America in my late teens, conversations about stool were as common as discussions around your most recent lunch.

When I went to Ecuador, a nun residing there for the last 40 years advised me on how she prevented amoebic parasites. She always brushed her teeth with bottled water and never drank tap water in any form. She advised me to always order, “jugo puro” made only from freshly squeezed orange juice rather than the kind mixed with water.

I took what she said with absolute seriousness. About 10 days into my trip to Ecuador, I went to dinner with a peace corps volunteer named Amy and a newly found friend called Scott. I ordered orange juice with the meal of the day. A girl took our order and left. I suddenly exclaimed, “Oh, No! I forgot to ask if it was jugo puro.”

“Just drink it! You are going to get them anyways,” Amy hissed.

Being a reticent teenager just out of high school not willing to commit to my own decisions, I drank it. Within hours I developed oily egg burps, sulfur smelling farts, and a bloated belly. I was devastated to give in to her harsh commands.

**Chapter 2: A Perilous Ride**

About 1 week later, I ventured to Cuenca to spend time with my sister’s friends, Anita and Jennie. Anita was invited ice climbing with some friends who were guides. She asked if I would like to join them. This was an opportunity of a lifetime. Having never climbed a day in my life, I said, “Sure, Why Not.”

We took a night bus from Cuenca to Quito. I suffered urge incontinence just knowing I would not have access to a bathroom on a South American bus. They prioritized a television rather than a toilet. I went to the bathroom 7 times before boarding our 9 pm bus. The moment the bus started to move, my anxiety around needing to go to the bathroom triggered the urge to urinate. My bladder felt seemingly full. What would I do now? I was too uncomfortable to ask the driver to pull over.

The lights went out and all the passengers started to fall asleep. I sat there wide-eyed wondering what I would do. I had a brilliant plan. All travelers carried a roll of toilet paper knowing no establishment provided this luxury. I took mine out, rolled a wad into a ball, and stuffed it into my pants. In the dark bus, I started to relieve myself. My brilliant plan was foiled as the toilet paper saturated with urine. My underwear, pants, and the linen seat below me were instantly soaked with urine.

After sufficiently wetting everything on and around me, the bus stopped.
“Seriously?” I was surprised that it would pull over for gas this soon. I ran to the front of the bus and mustered the words, “Puedo ir al bano?’ The driver pointed to an outhouse like structure with slats for walls. I opened the door to a dark room. If there was a toilet, I could not see it. I squatted on the ground and peed. It was better than the alternative, sitting in a urine drenched linen seat or being unable to sleep all night due to an intolerable need to pee. Now I was relieved and could finally sleep.

After a reckless fear-filled ride potentially risking my life, which shall be saved for another story, we arrived in Quito. After gathering ice axes, hammers, crampons, boots, snow pants, and jackets at various rental shops around town, a group of us met south of Quito in a town called Machachi. It was the closest to Illiniza Sur, a peak reaching 17,218 feet. For experienced climbers, it was a very technical climb. For me, it was a foolish mistake.

**Chapter 3: The Excremental Ascent**

Amoebas are a parasite known as Entaomoeba histolytica. They are transmitted when one consumes contaminated food or water. Back in 1993, farming practices in South America involved human fertilizer. Many folk’s stool was contaminated with Amoebas and their cysts (eggs). When vegetables were inadequately cooked or people drank water or foods exposed to contaminated water, amoebas were easily acquired. The cysts pass through the abdominal system and end up in the intestine where they leave their cyst and become something called a trophozoite that embeds into the intestinal lining. In some cases the cysts can reach the blood stream where they migrate to the lung, liver, spleen and brain.

By the time I went climbing, I had acquired amoebic parasites. It was still the beginning of my travels in South America. I ventured to the mountain with these newfound friends. My bag also contained numerous fibrous homemade whole wheat scones and lentil soup. The 10 of us climbers shared these items for dinner before our morning ascent. We left at 3:30 am, long before dawn, to avoid the melt associated with avalanches. As an amateur, I was unsure as to whether or not to take this journey. I argued that there were no strong signs to stay at the refuge, although one might proclaim that the universe strongly discouraged me from this adventure. Instead, I ventured out in the dark with the glare of my headlight guiding the way.

My harness was linked to a rope attached to three others. The climbers on my line were Doug (an experienced guide from Montana), Anita (my sister’s friend and the only other woman), and Tom (a US doctor with prior climbing experience). I was in the middle on the line. The other 6 men were on 2 separate rope systems. We started our ascent by kicking steps into the snow. About 30 minutes into the climb, my stomach started to rumble. I experienced cramping and an intense desire to defecate. There appeared to be a ledge up above. Maybe I could pull over and take a dump. When I reached that spot, I realized it was a mere reflection. I sighed, contemplating my next move. I was barely 19 and did not want to reveal my intestinal distress to these strangers. I was not that kind of girl, at least not then. I climbed 10 more minutes but the clenching grabbing sensation pulled at my gut. I did not know if it was the amoebas, the whole wheat scones, or the altitude. Whatever it was, I did not give a shit, I just wanted to take one. I kept climbing until I realized it was “do or die”.