

Juanita

by Alison Earls

She was called Juanita by the people who found her, but that was not her name.

But names were not what mattered. Not now. Not then. Who she was had nothing to do with names. It was *what* she was and *where* she was — and mostly that she would *'be'* no longer — that made her. And she *was* *'made'*. Made by the highest and the best to be even greater than they could ever be.

And she was honoured.

Even in early thoughts, she had known that she was different. Her father had told her that she was lucky to be chosen, that she brought honour to her family. Once she had seen her mother crying in the night — just before she had begun her thirteenth year — but in the sunlight, her mother had held her and told her she would be hers forever. But Juanita, as she was to be called much later, knew that she belonged to more than just her mother or even her town. She belonged to all the people and with that came responsibility. And a time when she would undertake the ultimate task.

She did not know what it would feel like, how it would happen ... but she knew it would be done. She knew that it would be magical, like nothing she could see or hear through the cornfields or around the markets. It would be ...

She would look up at the sky and wonder but still not know. But one day would be the day that she would be carried to the gods and be with them forever.

It began as a mist — some whispers, mutterings, some half-thoughts and clouded dreams. But one day, it was clearer. It was real. So close that she could touch it.

She could count the days, see the bright colours of her woven aksu (the tapestry that she would wear), she could sense the path to the beginning of her journey. But she was still beset with clouds and coiling questions.

"Will I still see you?" she had asked her mother.

"I will be with you, and you with me, but we shall not see each other the way that we do now," her mother had replied.

"Will I live on a mountain top?" she had asked her father the next day.

"You will go to the mountains, little one, but you will live in a better place, even better than the mountains," he had said.

The mountains were the most sacred places. They stretched and grew forever and were the gateway to the world of Inti, God of the Sun. They were the heart of the revered Pachamama, mighty Mother Earth. Juanita could not imagine somewhere better than the mountains.

From that day she asked no more questions. She knew what could be known and she knew nothing. Except that she was chosen.

And so the day came that she would walk.

She had heard that there would be others like her walking from their homes to meet the mountain gods, each with their own priests and porters, llamas and protectors. But she didn't know if this was true. She only knew that she would walk. That she was chosen to be one that would appease the gods in darkly troubled times.

There had been others before her. When the earth had rumbled and split open, when the gods of rain and wind had sent such storms that left barely anyone to describe their devastation and destruction. And when these gods had forsaken her people to leave the land cracking with arid pain. But these were long ago. Long before her first year. She had never known them, never known this kind of capacocha. The gods had been happy with alpaca, pigs or chicha. But wine and animals did not please them now. They roared their deep displeasure louder and longer. And so it had begun. Juanita's journey. The journey that would find her a new name that she would never know.

Leaving town was like a festival. Everyone sang and called to her. They held out tools and symbols of the harvest to be blessed with the spirit of the chosen. They played music and gave chicha to the

gods and to themselves. But no one said goodbye. Not to a girl. They held their hands out to one who would save them from the anger of the mighty.

At first she looked for friends, for neighbours whose eyes would know her and see the end of games along the street, remember days of festival and celebration that she would never dance inside again. But the eyes that looked at her saw only this day's rejoicing. Not a girl, but the beginning of the capacocha.

Her mother walked beside her for a time, her father in front. His shoulders were square with pride. Then her mother fell behind. Sometimes Juanita thought she saw her father's head but she could not be sure. There were so many all around her. When dark began to creep down from the mountains, she turned to look behind her and her mother had gone.

And so now she was no longer a girl. She was the capacocha.

For days they walked. For days that bled into nights and then found sunrises and more sunsets and flowed on and on. The roads were long, the pathways rocky and steep, the landscape rough and furious. But they moved forward. Holy men, builders to prepare the campsites and the sanctuary, porters and llamas with their loads of blankets, wooden posts and stones to make the tents and resting places that they needed along the way. All looked ahead in their minds and did what they had to do to move closer.

There was much to carry. Cloth bundles of offerings — pottery, figurines of gold, silver and tumbaga, shells carved and shaped, tools for weaving and for cooking — all decorated for the Apu, for the mountain gods. There were llamas that carried only water, others with food for the days ahead, porters who walked with the weight of ceremonial clothes and implements. So much was needed for this journey.

And there were others, others chosen who would guard her in her flight to the place better than the mountains. A boy and a girl. Their spirits were to fly below her for she was to be the one. The true capacocha. The boy cried. He was too little to understand. Too little to move from boy to chosen and know that it was The Way. He cried

for his mother, and the little girl — who was not much older — patted his hand and made the soothing noises that her mother must have made not long before.

They climbed and descended. They passed nights on cold peaks and empty valleys. They walked. On and on.

Each step took Juanita closer. Closer to her new beginning.

She walked in silence. She thought of wings and rays of sun. Of shining gold and colours. Of faces that would smile and greet her. She tried not to think of faces that she knew — that she had left behind — but sometimes in the nights, in her dreams, they would visit and she would wake with aching in her heart.

When they reached Ampato, they began the climb. Juanita could not see the top. She took off her sandals and brought her tattered feet to meet the earth. Pachamama would be with her as she made her way to the towering summit.

The porters scaled the slopes with seeming ease, though their loads were heavy and precarious. And Juanita climbed behind them. She was chosen and she would not fail. She had not eaten for some days — as was the way at this stage of the journey — but she knew she would climb on.

Below her the little boy had stopped whimpering. The chicha and the potion had lulled him to a kind of sleep and his body slumped over the llama that carried him. The little girl too. Her consoling coos had stopped and she hung gracelessly over the back of the climbing animal. But Juanita lifted herself towards the Apu gods. She felt the warmth of Pachamama flowing over her feet and the arms of Inti pulling her towards the sky. And she climbed on.

At the campsite, she took the potion that was given. She drank the chicha and smelt spices and magic in the air. She felt warmth and cold at the same time, tired and alive. And she felt fear. A quiet fear that had no reason but refused to leave.

She was adorned with feathers and with decoration, and sleep called to her to slip away from the activity of preparation and disappear for a while.

Juanita tried to see the sky but it was nowhere. *She* was nowhere but still moving to where the air would finally fade to perfect emptiness.

There was music. Close and far away. Voices — calling to the mountains, the gods. To Inti and to Pachamama and all the condors that swirled in the space without sky, without air.

There were feathers and colours. Smoke and rhythms. And there was sleep calling again to spirit her to its gentle oblivion.

She was high, high in the hidden sky, surrounded by a cold that could not touch her. And the voices drifted to a distant mountaintop and took with them the colours and the swirling haze of shapes. Then there was earth. Earth and hollow softness. Beloved Pachamama and her soothing arms of welcome.

And it was dark. And for one last moment Juanita held a fragment of fear. But not because of death. For death did not wait for her, but divinity. She knew that. Now that was the only thing she knew.

Then ... no more waiting.

For centuries, her aksu swathed her body in that place. In the ice of the Andes, at the summit of Ampata. Her hair was hard and crisp around the wound on her head that had barely bled, her body frozen in its foetal crouch encased in the finest textiles and reverent decoration.

The stone platform was there too, the sanctuary they had built for her to galvanize her flight. And below, the two who were her guards, her following companions. Their gifts were frozen all around them. Tiny figures in copper and gold, llamas shaped from spondylus shell and delicately woven sandals — all wrapped in offering bundles and surrounded by clay bowls and wooden tools.

And there were remnants of the campsite — timber pillars and stones, dried grass brought to line tent floors and keep the harshness of the bitter cold from the temporary inhabitants.

But all these remains were anything but temporary. The ice held them at the summit of the mountain. The sun came and went. There was cold and freezing winter. There was darkness and silence. But

there was no time because there was forever. Days and nights.
Weeks and months. Years and centuries.

And melting ice. And falling. And an ice field somewhere below.

And then, there were people. People who breached the timeless
cold and found a girl. A girl they would call Juanita.

Who would begin another phase of her momentous journey.

A journey that death could not end.

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