

A Sunday in 1769

TODAY THE ECUADORIAN VILLAGE of Cajabamba, which is about 110 miles south of Quito, is a place of little note. The Andean town stretches for a mile or so along the Pan American Highway, and most of the activity in the village centers on the bus stop, where vendors are lined up selling a mix of fruit, corn-on-the-cob, soup, and roasted meats. Tourists passing this way, if armed with a particularly good guidebook, might pause just long enough to scan a hillside on the north side of town, searching for a scar left by the great earthquake of 1797, which sent a flow of mud down upon the adobe homes below and killed thousands. At that time, this was a very different place. More than 16,000 people lived here, and Riobamba—as it was then called—was one of the most graceful cities in colonial Peru, home to musicians, artists, and wealthy landowners. But after the earthquake, the survivors picked up and rebuilt their town thirteen miles to the northeast, and old Riobamba gradually faded from memory. All that physically remains of the prosperous colonial city are a few ruins on the west side of Cajabamba.

However, there is one other faint echo of the past that can be found in Cajabamba. From the center of town, next to where the buses idle and the vendors linger, one can look up a long street heading east up a hill and spot a small statue. It sits in front of a school, a gold-painted bust of a rather stern-looking woman. The monument is in disrepair—the stone base is marred by graffiti, the gold paint is chipped and flaked, and the inscription is not quite readable—and few people in Cajabamba can say who the lady looking out over their town is or why she might have deserved a statue. However, in the late eighteenth century, the story of Isabel Godin became so well known that it left all of Europe spellbound. The statue was erected at the site of her colonial home, and thus it would have been from here, on the morning of October 1, 1769, that she began her most remarkable journey.

On that day, which was a Sunday, the dusty streets of Riobamba began to stir at an unusually early hour. Most mornings the town awoke slowly, the villagers waiting for the equatorial sun to chase away the nighttime chill. But this day was different. From the moment that dawn broke, people began coming out of their adobe homes, and soon many were lining up along the street that led north out of town. The wealthier women had even dressed up for the occasion, picking out their finest silk clothing to wear, and were gathered in small groups, whispering in disbelief at what was about to pass.

Isabel Godin was heading off into the Amazon.

Everyone understood her reason for going. She hoped to rejoin her husband, Jean, who was living on the northern coast of South America, in French Guiana. He had been a member of a French scientific expedition that had come to the Viceroyalty of Peru in 1736, Jean and the others hiking up and down the Andes for nearly eight years in search of an answer to a question so abstruse that few of the local people could grasp why they had come. Even so, the villagers of Riobamba had welcomed the French scientists into their midst, more so than any other community in the viceroyalty, and after the expedition had come to an end, Isabel and Jean had lived

for a time—and happily so—in Riobamba. But then, through the twists and turns of fate and the cruel politics of the time, they had become separated, Jean stranded in French Guiana and unable to return to the Spanish colony. They had now been apart for twenty years. But travel from the Andes across the Amazon? No woman had ever dared to make such a trek.

Indeed, this was a journey that only a few men had ever made. When the most famous son of the town, Pedro Maldonado, had contemplated such a journey twenty-five years earlier, his family—as a friend of his later wrote—“had sought to detain him by any means.” Maldonado’s colleagues warned him that traveling this “unknown and dangerous route” was “imprudent and reckless,” and that they personally viewed such a journey with “panicked terror.” Missionaries who traveled through the upper Amazon helped fuel such fear, for inevitably they returned with tales of how hard and perilous such travel could be.

The trip that lay ahead of Isabel stretched more than 3,000 miles. Even if all went well, it would take her six months. The route that she would follow east out of Riobamba would skirt around towering Mount Tungurahua, a volcano known to spit fire and rocks into the sky. The path would then disappear into a deep canyon and tumble quickly out of the Andes into a gloomy rain forest filled with the nerve-wracking cries of howler monkeys. From there, she would have to travel by dugout canoe down the turbulent headwaters of the Amazon, passing through a jungle that was home to clouds of insects and populated by any number of poisonous snakes and wild beasts, including the much feared American “tiger,” which was believed to have quite an appetite for human flesh. Other hazards, wrote one eighteenth-century explorer who had gone this route, included “naked savages” who “eat their prisoners.”

In the center of town, the scene was growing ever more chaotic. Isabel had hired thirty-one Indian porters to transport her goods on the first leg of the journey, overland to the Rio Bobonaza, and they were busy packing a long line of mules. Isabel’s traveling party had

