

The Iguana, the Scientist and the Hamburger

I used to have a colleague, a fellow scientist, who was so clever that no-one could understand him. His name was Damien Jones. When he was seconded to work in Ecuador, the local scientists called him Queco behind his back.

“Why Queco?” I asked. “*Que co-jones!*” was the reply, accompanied by much hilarity. “What balls!” Unless they knew something I didn’t, they were referring to the quality of his scientific lectures. They didn’t understand a word he said, although his Spanish was excellent.

This was their way of getting back at him for making them feel stupid. But he had the last laugh, he married the sexiest girl in the Institute, Mercedes Pantalones, whose flashing eyes and seductive walk turned every male head. When the weather in Guayaquil was cool, which was rare, she would come to the Institute in leather trousers. “Ay, ay, ay!” She drove the men mad with lust.

No-one could understand: why had she chosen Queco? We discussed it over lunch-break one day in my colleagues’ favourite café, a scruffy dive off Letamendi.

“Maybe it is his *cojones*.” Adolfo joked through his droopy moustache, his bony hands held in front of him as if each held a large melon.

“Or his *chorizo*,” suggested Jesus, the plankton expert, making an unfeasibly wide space between his palms.

“No, no, I have a better hypothesis,” said Humberto, who was as round as he was tall and sweating profusely in the noonday heat. “It must be the leather. They’re both leather *fetishistas*. Haven’t you noticed how Queco often comes to work in a leather coat?”

“You mean that long black one that almost touches the ground? Makes him look like one of Hitler’s side-kicks, if you ask me!” said Adolfo.

“That’s rich coming from someone with a name like yours,” said Jesus, grinning slyly.

“How can *you* talk to *me* about silly names?” Adolfo replied sharply. Then, stroking his moustache, he turned to me. “What do you think, Bill, you’re a fellow *Gringo*, maybe you have the answer?”

I reflected for a moment, trying to ignore the rank smell wafting up from the river. I was no different from them, I too had lusted after Mercedes, was jealous and perplexed at Damien’s success. “Well,” I said, “He’s not as smart as Victor!”

They looked at me, and then at each other, their Amerindian features puzzled. “Victor? But there is no-one in the *Instituto* by that name!” I grinned. “I know, I’m talking about Victor the iguana. He lives in the Parque Bolivar. His name is painted along his side in big white letters.”

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After a pause, Humberto, deliberate as ever, said, “Yes I have seen that iguana. Sometimes an old man, a *loco*, comes to feed it on old lettuces. He coaxes it down from the trees then talks to it like an old friend.”

“Only Gringos and locos go to that park,” said Adolfo.

“Well, this *Gringo* here,” I jerked my thumb towards my chest, “was in that very park yesterday with Damien. We were sitting on a bench under a tree...”

“Sitting under a tree? *Coño*, what kind of fools are they sending us from Britain? Have you never seen an iguana crap? I’m telling you, you don’t want to be there!”

“Dolfo, why not let our friend finish his story?”

“We were talking science,” I resumed. “Damien was trying to explain some new variant of Virtual Population Analysis.” I made a gesture of incomprehension.

“Ah, you see,” Adolfo was triumphant, “not even the other *gringos* understand Queco!”

“Damien kept waving his hamburger in the air as he explained the finer points of VPA to me. That’s when I noticed Victor up a nearby tree. He was watching us, apparently listening to the lecture in rapt attention. I tried to point him out to Damien, but he was in full flow.”

My friends began to laugh; they could already see the *dénouement*.

“I never realized how fast they can run!” I continued. “I swear Victor, all half-metre of him, was down the tree, across the ground, up Damien’s leg and back triumphantly in his tree, the hamburger securely locked in his jaws, before you could say...”

“Mercedes Pantalones!” Jesus interjected decisively.

As we walked back to the Institute, Humberto said gravely, “Queco may be a smart-ass but even a smart-ass can be outwitted by an iguana.”

Martin Walsh