

# The Fall



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by Pedro Meyer

You must have thought that we closed for the summer or for the World Cup Football matches, as neither our cover or the editorial page have changed in quite some time now. I only wish we had those good reasons to absent ourselves from you during this period.

We did watch some football matches however, that is, when I was not being operated on. At times when I was drugged to the eyeballs to avoid the pains from the two operations I had, I did manage to watch some games, for instance, between, Senegal and France, Brazil and England among others. The players were like flying instead of running. When looking at a TV, those painkillers at the hospital play some strange tricks on one's visuals. Were it not for the fact that I broke my spine in a fall, the whole thing would have been quite hilarious.

While visiting one of my favorite countries, Ecuador (it still is!), I had an accident and in that fall I broke a disc in my back. You want all the details? Well, that will appear here in ZoneZero, very soon, in a digital diary I kept during this entire period. It will even contain among others, a video of the operation on my back that probably most of you do not really want to see.

But let me not digress. This is in essence about photography, and in particular about an area of digital photography that possibly you have not stopped to consider much before when traveling.

After my accident, and a long winding adventure from Quito to the Galapagos Islands, and back to a hospital in Quito, Ecuador; I had at long last a diagnosis after being the better part of a week in the hospital. An MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) allowed me to understand what was the origin of all my pains. Pains that not even the morphine I was being administered at the hospital would reduce. The broken disc which was pressing on my nerves in the lumbar region of my back, in addition to the inflammation, had caused considerable nerve damage.

I called a cousin of mine who is the head of the Pain Institute at USC in Los Angeles, to consult what to do. He requested to see the MRI before giving me an answer. I asked the doctors at the hospital to send him the MRI to Los Angeles. Sadly they informed me they could not do so, as they lacked the equipment and know how to do this from the hospital.

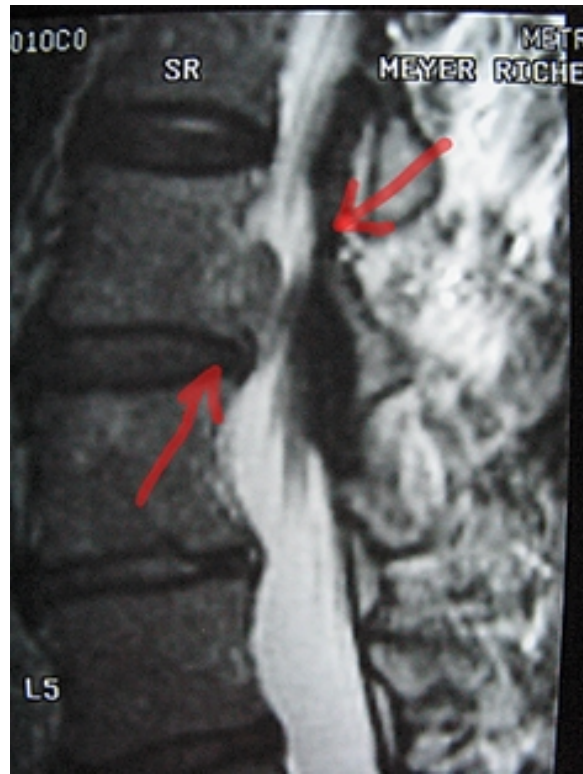


Hospital in Quito, Ecuador  
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Although the pain killers managed to make my brain half functional, I was still able to ask a dear friend of mine (the photographer, Judy de Bustamante) to take my Canon G2 digital camera with her to the room where they stored the MRIs, take a photograph of the plate and bring it back to me. (It helped that she was the wife of the internist, Dr. F. Bustamante, who was looking after me, otherwise she would not have had access to the MRI either. They had refused to let me have the plate earlier).

She brought the camera loaded with the pictures she had taken, apologizing that they were not all very good. Under the circumstances: being a hand held picture; the rush to do it; illumination from an X-ray light box, and a close up, I believe she did admirably. It did help that this was a digital camera, and she could somehow see on the camera's monitor what she was doing.

Because most of what I was about to do, was to some degree a routine activity for me, I managed to download the pictures to my Apple Power Book, and then select, with the help of my wife and the photographer, what appeared to be the most informative picture. I needed their confirmation that what I was looking at was actually the right choice, visually impaired as I was at the time. I then attached the image file to an e-mail and gave the Power Book to my wife to send over the Internet to the doctor in Los Angeles.



MRI, red arrows indicate broken disc obstructing nerves  
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The telephone system at the hospital certainly did not stand up to the rest of this hospital's other facilities. It would be safe to say that it belonged to a network designed in hell, and unfit for such an institution. You would have to provide the number you were calling to an operator and then wait about 30 minutes when she would call you back with the person you were calling on the other end of the line, or not. Try logging onto the Internet that way! Well you can't. So my wife had to take the PowerBook back to the Hotel, and from there send the e-mail with the attached picture.

This turned out to be essential in resolving what was going to happen at that very crucial moment in time, as the doctor in Los Angeles, who was not a neurosurgeon by the way, determined, looking at the MRI, that I needed to be operated on right away when he confirmed that my left leg had already begun to lose sensibility due to the damaged nerves.

If you ask a surgeon for their opinion, it is quite possible they will recommend an operation. As they saying goes, "if you have a hammer in your hand, everything looks like a nail", the same most likely happens with surgeons. I think, they will go for surgery if given half a chance. However in this instance, the doctor, aside from being my cousin, was not a surgeon. His opinion meant a great deal to us and we followed his advice: "get on the next airplane you can, and come to Los Angeles to be operated on", he said.



Trisha  
Pedro Meyer © 2002

My wife Trisha then had to make all the needed arrangements. If you want to know what she went through, start thinking what it meant to organize for an ambulance jet to come and pick us up (like, right now!) to fly us to Los Angeles. In addition to all of this, it was about to be a long holiday weekend both in Ecuador, and Memorial Day in the United States. She needed to make the arrangements to have a specialist on back surgery available to operate on me upon arrival, and a hospital bed of course, together with that, an ambulance at both ends. Even as an emergency this does not just happen so easily, now place that in the context of a long holiday weekend, while being 7000 miles away, and you get the picture; now if that were not enough, she also had to take care of our seven year old son, with all his own particular needs, without causing him undue alarm about what was going on. The story however does not stop there. Planes don't just come and pick you up, unless you own the damn thing, which unfortunately was not our case. You have to pay in advance if you plan to have them take you anywhere.

Needless to say, the cash needed to pay for such a plane ride is not something you would find everyday in someone's wallet when traveling abroad, at least it wasn't in ours. But that is what credits cards are for, right? Well not when you try to go over your already approved credit limit. This was the case with our VISA card, they gave Trisha the run around without resolving anything, just passing the call from one person to the next. When you are calling long distance from afar in an emergency, such an unpleasant response doesn't go down very well at all!

She hung up and decided to call American Express. Remember their slogan: "Never leave home with out one"? I don't think any one has ever lived up to their advertising with more rectitude than American Express did that day. In five minutes they had approved the cost of the flight and we could go ahead with the arrangements to have the plane fly in from Fort Lauderdale in Florida, to pick us up in Quito and leave for Los Angeles. However, that was not yet the end either, the expense also had to be approved by the Insurance Company before we departed if we expected to be reimbursed (some good and dear colleagues of mine have just discovered that they don't have any insurance at all, just because they had not given this topic much thought before, they are now seriously thinking about it).



Being lifted onto the plane  
Pedro Meyer © 2002

The ambulance that would take me to the airport, and right up to the airplane's door, probably had a red cross painted on the outside, but from the inside where I was lying, it looked like a stark black cross, it reminded me of something I would see on a hearse, not an ambulance. It was a strange feeling finding myself lying there conscious, in considerable pain, and in what felt like a hearse, going over every pothole they could find on the way to the airport.



In the ambulance in Quito  
Pedro Meyer © 2002

That same experience, would meet me at the other end. The streets of Los Angeles competed quite favorably in the number of potholes the ambulance went through on the way to the hospital. When every little jolt goes through your body like an electric shock, you do tend to be sensitive to how the suspension system on the ambulance works: it didn't. So much for the "first world", L.A. would be no different to Quito.



In the ambulance towards the hospital in Los Angeles.  
Pedro Meyer © 2002

It took 13 hours to reach Los Angeles, and a few hours after our arrival I had the first of what would be two operations.



X-ray machine.  
Pedro Meyer © 2002

Having had the digital camera and the laptop with me, turned out to be one more example of the importance that digital technology brings to our present day lives. I find this as yet another example of the crossroads where photography ends up going in directions we have never experienced before. At least for me, the logo, "never leave home with out one", now extends in addition to the credit card, to my Apple PowerBook and a digital camera. By the way, the output of those X-rays, were now of course digital, something I have written about previously.

**Pedro Meyer**  
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Self portrait, at the airport before departure  
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