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Tiny Revolutions:
Lessons From a Marriage, a Funeral, and a Trip Around the World

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing
and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Margaret Downs

June 2014

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Dedication

For Misty. Because I promised my first book would be for you.

For my hygges. Because your friendship inspires me and motivates me.

For Jason. Because every day you give me the world.

For Everest. Because.

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SECTION 1: MOVEMENT

My plane lands in Cairo. I've had the window shade down the whole 12 hours, all the way from the United States to Egypt. I didn't even look at the ocean. The only words I spoke were to the flight attendant, when I declined beverage service.

I shuffle off the plane in navy flip-flops and hiking pants that upzip just above the knee to turn into shorts at a moment's notice. The hood of my sweatshirt is pulled up over my head, my long, unruly curls tucked inside the fabric. I know I look antisocial, maybe even like someone up to no good, and I don't care. If anyone bothered to look, they'd see red eyes and a clenched jaw, not the kind of person you'd want to make conversation with anyway.

The last time I landed in Cairo, it was a different story. I had the window seat then too. I pressed my face to the smudgy plastic, watched the green band of Nile slice through the billowy, beige fabric of land. As the aircraft descended, all of it appeared to breathe -- the mountains, the dunes, the shifting sands. It was like a golden exhale. Even closer to the ground, the light of the city shifted with glass and metal, glowing like a tiger's eye stone. My cheeks flushed with warmth, my eyes felt clear and open. I chattered with the people at baggage claim. I made conversation with the taxi driver. I was anxious to absorb the color, sound, history of this place, excited to see how this country could change me.

But that was almost a month ago. That was before my mother died of Alzheimer's Disease. Before I traveled home to Ohio for a funeral, buried my mom in the snow and flew back to a desert, shrouded in grief and fleece.

This time Egypt is the place where I have come to get lost, not the place where I have gone to find myself. This trip I have checked no bags. I carry only a small duffle with a change of clothes, a passport and my toothbrush.

In the airline terminal, I walk past a bank of payphones, all of them unused. Before I departed Ohio, my dad had asked me to phone him from Cairo.

"Just a quick phone call," he said and handed me a folded \$20 to purchase an international calling card. His forehead was streaked with worry, his wispy hair grayer than it had ever been before. "Just to let me know you're safe."

I stuff my hand in my pocket and feel for the plastic card. With that in hand, I stop at one of the phones. The line is dead.

I shift to the next phone and pick up the receiver. That one is dead too. Same with the next. And the one after that. All the phones, dead.

I know there's an internet cafe in the airport, so I head there instead. If I can't call, at least I can send my dad an email. I just need to let my family know I'm safe. Suddenly this feels very important. I know my dad is at home alone with a weak and sad heart, still lopsided from mourning. I don't want him to worry about me. Clusters of people push past, a collection of black and grey hijabs, swishy kaftans, sandals that whisper "ship-ship-ship" with each step. Nobody seems to understand the gravity of this; all of them look beyond me.

The internet cafe is closed, a handwritten Arabic note on the locked door. I can't read it, but I assume it's a routine, down-for-maintenance kind of message.

At the information desk in the airport's main lobby, I ask if there's another place to access the internet.

The woman working at the desk sets her mouth into a straight line. "No," she says. "Bad day for internet."

"So all the internet is down?"

"Yes," she says. "Bad day."

When I turn away from the desk, it's the first time I notice the men standing in the windows. The entrance of the Cairo airport is all light and glass, like facets on a pale topaz, with windows that begin halfway up the wall and reach all the way to the soaring ceiling. The guys are in uniform, long-sleeve black shirts and pants, perched on the windowsills, holding automatic weapons. The way they are positioned -- arms locked, legs wide, weapons at the ready -- they look like toys, like plastic army men arranged in a row. There are more uniformed men on the ground. These guys wear crisp white outfits, like sea captains.

I pivot toward the information desk and ask the woman, "What's happening?" She shrugs. Bad day for information.

My eyes are wild now, scanning the crowd. There are business people in suits, women in headscarves, men in gellabiya that drag along the ground. Children and teenagers, suitcases and strollers. But now I pick out more soldiers,

armed and walking among the travelers. They carry themselves with the unmistakable air of authority, their footfalls purposeful and strong. Though the security is impressively tight at the Cairo airport, I don't remember seeing such a strong military presence before. Nobody else seems panicked.

My eye finally lands on a TV, where a crowd is gathering, all watching the BBC news. The footage shows tanks and rioters, piles of people throwing stones, wrestling each other to the ground. The background of the footage begins to take shape and look familiar. It's Tahrir Square, just a block from the hostel where I stayed before in Cairo and where I intended to stay again.

A red graphic with bold letters flashes across the screen: "EGYPT IN CRISIS!" My stomach drops and I begin to sweat. My face is hot. My eyes water. My pulse erupts into a full-body tremor.

A revolution has begun.

LESSON: You are braver than you think

Seven months before the revolution begins in Egypt, I was on the other side of the globe and in love.

Jason wraps his lean body around me and squeezes me tightly. It is the first night of our honeymoon, so some might mistake the embrace for passion. But mostly we are just very cold on the floor of the Lima International Airport.

“Great honeymoon, sweetie,” Jason says though clenched teeth. His dark hair is rumpled, and his jawline is rough with stubble. Black-framed glasses sit askew on his face, one side of which rests against a sweatshirt-turned-pillow.

Technically this trip to Peru is our first romantic getaway as a married couple, but it is also the launch of my year-round trip around the world. The plan is for Jason to spend three weeks with me in Peru, then return to California. After he is gone, I will continue on my own through South America, then Africa and Asia.

I’ve never heard of anyone else leaving a marriage before. Not like this. Not on purpose, while it is still new and good and fresh. I am grateful that Jason loves and trusts me enough to let me leave, but I know it’s a risk. This year of monogamous separation will either make us stronger or wrench us apart for good. It will prove that I can make one revolution of the world and manage to find my way home again.

This part about sleeping at the airport was my stupid idea to maximize time and money. We have been in motion all day long, driving from my friend’s

house in Moreno Valley to the Los Angeles airport, then flying from Los Angeles to Panama City, and Panama City to Lima. Our flight arrived past midnight, and our next flight -- a quick one-hour hop to Cusco, Peru -- is scheduled to board at 4 a.m. Since there are few budget accommodations within 40 miles of the Lima airport, it only made sense to sleep in the airport for a few hours.

“So when I vowed to be with you for better or worse ...?” Jason says.

“Yeah, this is the ‘worse’ part.”

Our sleeping situation appears to be common at this airport, where many international flights arrive late and the domestic flights begin incredibly early. The floor smells septic and is littered with the bodies of fallen travelers. The tired and weary are flopped across every possible surface, from the nicotine-stained couches in the smoking lounge to the air-conditioned corners of the food court. My attempt to find a quiet hallway is foiled by a few dozen snoring missionaries in matching red T-shirts.

Jason and I finally find a spot on the floor near the glass wall of an internet cafe, a place remote enough to not have heavy airport traffic but not remote enough to put us at risk for a mugging.

It turns out that crashing on the floor of an airport is one of those things that seems reasonable until you actually do it. It’s not so great when your cheek is pressed against the tile, watching tumbleweeds of hair and trash roll toward your face.

The floor is as frigid and hard as a slab at the morgue. As people walk past with rolling luggage, I can feel their footsteps in my bones. Every time my eyes close, a scratchy voice comes over the PA system to announce the next flight or beckon late travelers.

Jason and I attempt to sleep, but between us, we have just one sleeping bag. (He planned to rent a sleeping bag in Cusco for our Inca Trail excursion, so he didn't bother to bring one along.) We unzip my one-person bag and curl together underneath it. I am also clinging to my 50-pound blue backpack, which is packed with all my clothes, supplies and gear for the next year. I am literally sandwiched in between what I love and what I need.

"You know, other couples stay in four-star hotels for their honeymoons," Jason says. But we aren't like other couples, something made clear by the story of how we met.

That day I was strung up five feet off the ground. A strange contraption held me in place -- thick straps encircled my shoulders, two straps wrapped around each thigh and one fat seatbelt-like band was secured across my chest, crushing my lungs. This was the hanging harness -- an old skydiving rig nailed to a splintery wooden frame. To some, it probably resembled an adult version of a baby swing. To me, it looked like a medieval torture device.

I still remember exactly what it felt like to hang there: I wondered if anybody would ever hear me scream from inside a steel airplane hangar at a rural Indiana military base, a place that was abandoned by the government

before it had ever been used. It had been transformed into a skydiving dropzone, filled with rickety aircraft, adrenaline junkies and techno music.

Two cushioned handles rested above my ribcage. Grab the handle on the right, and you cut away a bad parachute. Grab the one on the left, and you release the back-up reserve parachute. Grab them in the wrong order, and you have one hell of a mess, entangling a good parachute with a bad one.

My task was to practice this emergency procedure before my first skydive. I had to pull the handles in the correct sequence over and over until I got to a point where it felt like second nature. But would tossing myself out of an airplane ever feel like second nature?

Bud, my instructor and a man I'd just met, stood below me on the ground. He poked me in the leg to let me know I should be practicing the safety sequence.

"Go!" he shouted.

I thought about reaching for the handles, but then I didn't. I didn't do anything except dangle.

"Okay, go!" Bud said.

Again. nothing. I was just hanging out.

"Alright, what's wrong?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know if I can do it."

"Well, what will you do when you're 5,000 feet above the earth and your parachute fails?"

Good question, Bud. A fat pearl of sweat rolled down my face and landed on the old rig. My lip quivered. My helmet suddenly felt far too tight and hot. Why was I doing this? It was true that I was purposely trying to live my life in a different, more spontaneous manner, but did I really have to jump out of an airplane?

“Panic,” I said. “I will panic. And probably pee my pants.”

Bud sighed. He unhooked the chest strap, tugged at the metal hardware on the leg straps and helped me step down out of the harness. It might have felt unbelievably intimate if his face wasn’t so stern.

“Okay, let’s have a talk,” he said.

We sat on a couple of faded beach chairs. They were positioned to look out the door of the hangar, where Cessnas circled the air above the dropzone and unloaded humans. Vivid blue, yellow, neon green and magenta parachutes looked like tropical flowers bursting open against the clouds.

“Are you scared because you don’t want to skydive?” Bud asked.

“No.”

“OK. Are you scared of the equipment? Because we can pack it together, and you can see how everything works.”

“No,” I said and sighed. “The equipment is fine.”

“So what is it about the skydive that scares you the most?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Honestly, it’s not any one thing.”

Most people plan for their first skydive. They research the dropzone, ask a lot of questions, weigh the risks, and then they decide to go for it.

Me? My decision to skydive was made only the night before at a schmoozy cocktail party. The restaurant was fancy, located in an upscale suburb of Cincinnati. That's where I was introduced to Michael, a slick businessman in an expensive suit. He loved fast cars, adventure sports and young women.

"Do you know what you're doing tomorrow?" Michael asked, swirling his glass of cabernet.

"Uh, no. Probably eating some delicious food and watching shitty TV."

"You're going skydiving with me," Michael said and grinned, flashing perfectly white teeth. He had a half-off skydiving coupon and was gathering a group of people to go. He was confident I should join them.

I do believe there are certain things that shouldn't be purchased with coupons. Nose jobs, for instance. Or LASIK at the mall. Skydiving is in that category.

There was a time when I wouldn't have taken the discount skydive bait. But just three years earlier, my mother had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease, and her slow journey toward death made me want to change my life. It made me want to make my days count, to stop putting things off, to collect memories while I still could. It's why I shed old habits and pursued more adventure. I tried rock climbing, started hiking, developed a passion for spin

class. I took more trips, determined to see more of the country. I moved to a bigger city and let myself dream bigger things.

It's like Jack London wrote in his credo: "I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The function of man is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them." I had come to adopt that motto as my own. I wanted to live, not merely exist.

The grief also tapped into a wildness I didn't know I had. I wasn't looking to die, of course, but I also wasn't so afraid of it anymore. As a witness to my mom's disease, I watched as she was fossilized, preserved into a human that I didn't recognize, still living but not really alive. Dying young now seemed like the preferable alternative to disappearing while my loved ones looked on -- I'd simply be taking a shortcut home instead of the scenic route.

"Half-off skydives?" I joked to Michael. "Who could possibly resist?" After a couple more cocktails, I was convinced. Even though I wasn't an adrenaline junkie by any stretch of the imagination, for one brief skydive, I could pretend.

The prospect was terrifying to my family.

"I don't know how you can take the risk of skydiving when mom is dying," said my sister, when I called her and told her what I planned to do.

"I don't know how you can watch mom die and *not* take more risks," I said. We had the luxury of taking risks, after all. Our mom no longer did.

Now Bud looked me in the eye. I had already been through four hours of instruction in the classroom. I inundated the staff with stupid questions. “If I fall through a cloud, will I suffocate? What happens if I hit a bird during freefall?” I practiced my arch, the proper belly-to-earth falling position. I had been strung up in the hanging harness. If I needed to back out, now was the time to do it.

“Are you afraid of dying?” Bud said.

No, I told him, and I wasn’t lying.

There are studies that suggest Alzheimer’s is inherited through the mother, and that terrified me far more than any skydive. The woman I love most in this world, the mom who nurtured me for so long, might have already handed off the genetic mutation that would someday kill me. I had to carve out a path faster and fiercer than the one my mother lived, because who knew how long my own mind would last?

I didn’t know how to summarize all this to Bud.

“So what is it?” he said. “What’s the problem?”

“It’s me,” I said. “I ... well, I don’t trust myself.” Those words were as much as surprise to me as they were to Bud.

My entire adult life was a series of things happening to me; I never made my own choices. I went to college because that’s what you do after high school. I studied journalism because everybody said I was good at it and I couldn’t come up with anything better. After graduation I got a job at a newspaper, because that

was the natural next step. An editor plucked me away from that job and promoted me to another newspaper. I simply followed the road that was laid out before me.

But here, at the dropzone, I was making choices. Was I going to fall? Or was I going to fly? Was I going to plunge to the earth? Or was I going to deploy a parachute and save my own life? For the first time, the decision was mine. The thought of all that responsibility made me hot and flushed, like I'd just downed a few fingers of whiskey.

"You're just going to have to learn to trust yourself," Bud said. "That's why we do the exercises. That's why we train you. We give you the foundation, but the self-confidence has to come from you. You are the only person who can make this jump. And you are the only person who can save yourself.

"Now let's get back in that harness."

That afternoon, it was time for my skydive. Since it was my first accelerated freefall jump, two instructors would jump with me, one on each side of my body. Their job was to act as human training wheels, literally hanging onto me, to keep me from cartwheeling across the sky. And then, at 5,000 feet, I would deploy my own parachute and pilot it to the ground. Hopefully.

I requested Bud and "anyone but That Guy," I said. I pointed to a shaggy-haired skydiver dude, his rosy body spring-loaded with energy. His face was rubbery, and it stretched into exaggerated shapes whenever he said, "Woo!" which he did often. He wore mirrored sunglasses, a grass-stained jumpsuit, and

had a dented helmet, which didn't inspire a lot of confidence. The overall effect was that of someone who'd just filmed a Mountain Dew commercial.

"That Guy looks crazy," I said. As I gestured to him, That Guy made eye contact. He stuck out his tongue and made what was either the hand gesture for "Hang loose!" or "Hail Satan." I wasn't sure.

As the plane load was manifested, I was assigned my two instructors -- Bud and That Guy, whose real name was Jason. My stomach lurched, knowing that my life would be in the hands of this walking-talking sugar high. I didn't want to go anywhere with him, least of all tumbling through the sky at 120 miles per hour.

Jason high-fived me and said, "Woo! Looks like you're doin' the Dew!"

I crossed my arms and put on a brave face. Fine, I said. I'm ready to jump out of a perfectly good airplane.

"No worries," Jason said. "The plane's not that good."

Jason had been telling the truth -- the plane didn't look that good. There are no seats inside a skydiving aircraft. Seats waste space and weight, plus pose a safety risk with all the handles and cords that hang from the rigs. About 15 of us crammed together on the floor, leaned back with legs splayed. I was positioned in Jason's lap, with his arms around me. Bud sat on my feet, which quickly grew numb.

The interior of the plane had been gutted, revealing patches of rust and exposed wires. This Caravan could no longer fly regular passengers -- it only met

FAA regulations for flying cargo, which technically included skydivers. *People* cargo.

It was so cold on the way to altitude that my fingers turned a blue-grey and my lips were numb. After practicing a round of hand signals, Jason leaned forward and whispered in my ear.

“Are you OK?” he said.

“Fine.”

As the small aircraft approached jump run at 13,000 feet, one of the skydivers opened the door and stuck his head out. He caught the wind in his mouth, which made his lips flare open and expose his teeth and gums, like something out of a horror movie. When he parted his teeth, his fat tongue flew out and went thwack against his cheek.

The air that rushed into the plane sucked my breath away. My palms wouldn't stop sweating. My eyes were dry with panic.

“You're actually looking a little ... uh, not good,” Jason said. “This is your skydive, and it's all about what you're comfortable with. If you don't want to do this ...”

“I do.”

The more experienced skydivers joyfully launched into the Johnny Cash classic, “Ring of Fire” -- “I went down, down, down and the flames went higher!” Each time they sang the word “down,” my heart lurched a little more. I was so

afraid, I leaned back on Jason for support. I trembled in his arms, which were steady.

“Hey, if you don’t want to jump, I’ll ride the plane down with you,” he said. “You don’t have to do this. But if you do, I’ll go with you. Either way, it’s OK. Just relax.”

He held his right arm in front of my face and made the skydiving hand signal for “relax.” It was a loose, shaking motion, as if he’d just washed his hands and couldn’t find a paper towel.

The plane circled above the dropzone, where the overlapping runways carved a large, definitive X into the landscape. One by one, the other jumpers waddled to the plane’s Narnia door and abruptly vanished, spirited away into another world. The suddenness and completeness of each disappearance made me gasp out loud. All these people -- they were there. And then they were gone. So very, very gone. I looked out the window and couldn’t see anything but a few scattered, puffy clouds.

I thought about my mom and how she would never see the world from a plane window again. I thought about her goals and dreams, the things that she didn’t get a chance to accomplish. She wanted to travel, to see the pyramids in Egypt, to visit the ruins of Machu Picchu, to see an elephant in the wild. She wanted to wander the great museums, churches and temples of the world. She wanted to help abused animals, to share her big heart with innocent creatures. That woman has disappeared too, just like all those skydivers in the door.

I looked over my shoulder at Jason and yelled to be heard over the gale-force winds rushing into the plane. "Actually, I don't know about this," I said, and then I began to babble. "I kind of like the road that is more traveled, you know? I'm really more of a beaten path kind of person."

"Where you're going, there is no path!" he replied with a wink.

The plane was almost empty. Only the pilot and my group remained. Bud had already made his way to the door and was crouched in the exit position, just like we rehearsed. He motioned to me.

"You have to make a choice," Jason said. "Now."

He was right. It was up to me. Maybe I wasn't the kind of audacious woman who filled her weekends with skydiving and other adrenaline-soaked adventures. Maybe I never would be. But maybe -- just for one day -- I could *choose* to be her.

I swallowed the fear that tickled the inside of my throat. I took a deep breath and toddled over toward Bud. There was only one real way out of this plane, and the door was already open.

"Let's do this," I screamed with more certainty than I felt.

On the count of three, we were out. My spine instantly stiffened and my mind focused on all the wrong things. My shoelace came untied -- I could feel the plastic tab on one of the laces slapping against my ankle -- and I wondered if my shoe would fly away. My goggles cut into my face. The ground looked very big, like a green maw waiting to swallow me whole.

Then I looked to my right, where Jason was holding on to my harness, helping me to fall steady. He cut a handsome figure, hovering there in the pale blue sky, holding steady by my side. He thrust his hand in front of my face and shook it.

“Relax,” he mouthed. And I did.

Then I kept right on jumping. That same day I did another skydive with Jason. I jumped again the week after that and the following week, until I accumulated hundreds of skydives and a new boyfriend. And now, a husband.

The first few years of my relationship with Jason involved many months apart, because skydiving isn't a year-round activity in the Midwest. Every year when the winter set in, ushering in low cloud coverage and cold temperatures, Jason headed for a dropzone in Florida. I stayed behind, working for the Cincinnati Enquirer, covering local government, writing a column about young professionals and working the night cops beat. While he packed parachutes for extra cash, I raced to crime scenes and saw bloated bodies dredged from the Ohio River.

Jason and I were comfortable with the time apart. Though we were partners -- we enjoyed cooking classes and wine tastings, we traveled to other dropzones around the country, we adopted a cat -- we were also actively independent. We never clung to each other like barnacles.

In 2005, we moved across the country and began a new life together in California. Jason left his skydiving career behind and became an algebra teacher. I got a different newspaper job, this time covering celebrities, film festivals, cocktails and music. Even though neither one of us continued to skydive, we remained adventurous, sampling everything from ziplining to trapeze school.

Now we had come to Peru, about to begin the biggest adventure of all -- spending a year apart while I traveled the world.

When I first told Jason about my idea to backpack the globe, he put his hands on my shoulders and looked me directly in the eye.

“No,” he said. “You are not leaving me with this dog for a year.”

He pointed to our dachshund puppy, Lemon. Because she was born blind and deaf, Lemon had lingered at the animal shelter for months. I thought her disabilities only made her more endearing, but it definitely made her much more of a challenge as well. Jason, however, wasn't a dog lover, so I had to campaign hard to win him over. Like a 10-year-old kid, I begged to have Lemon, I promised to take very good care of her, and I swore that Jason would never have to clean up after her. Now I was planning to abandon them for one full year, both him and the dog he never wanted in the first place.

Like the campaign to adopt a dog, I argued my case for backpacking the globe: I always wanted to travel around the world. I should get it out of my system now, before we really settle down. I was unhappy with my job and

unmoored. I needed a means to expand and enrich my life. Something dramatic needed to happen.

“Fine,” Jason said. “But you should have a ring on your finger.”

Jason and I had been engaged for a solid five years, but every time we tried to pull together a wedding, it never went anywhere. The whole process had become stressful, uncomfortable and overwhelming. I was a newspaper columnist, and I knew a lot of people. My guest list overflowed with people I *should* invite, instead of people I actually wanted to attend. Local venues offered me ridiculous deals, knowing I would probably write about the event in my column. Even when I refused, wedding vendors continued to offer me things with a wink and a nudge. I felt like I was sinking in unethical quicksand.

Then I was a bridesmaid at the wedding of my best friend from college. Our relationship had been strained for a couple years already, and the demands of the wedding only intensified that. Leading up to her nuptials, we had several fights: She said my dress wasn’t “champagne”-colored enough; I couldn’t find the right shoes. In the end, the whole affair felt like a lot of unnecessary energy and expense for what should have been a happy celebration. It made me realize how little I wanted a big, formal event.

“I don’t even like weddings,” I told Jason. “We need to figure out a different way.”

Our solution was to throw a wedding without ever calling it a wedding. Instead, we asked our friends and family to meet us for an easy hike in the

nearby mountains. “It’s wildflower season, so be sure to bring your cameras!” I wrote in the invitations.

We scheduled it for a weekend when our families were already in town. Then we invited everyone on my list, including the folks who were only on there out of obligation. I suspected only our closest friends would show up to hike with us, and I was right.

When our friends arrived, Jason and I were all dressed up for a wedding. Surprise! We exchanged our vows in my friend’s backyard, surrounded by all the people we really loved -- and all the people who loved us in return. Then I pulled on boots with my wedding dress, and everybody went for a short hike in the canyons. We celebrated with champagne and homemade chocolate cherry cake.

The only person who wasn’t there was my mom, who was too weak to travel across the country from her nursing home in Ohio. Instead I placed a sprig of lily-of-the-valley, her favorite flower, on an empty chair. I knew she would sit there if she could.

Later that day, I overheard Jason whisper to the flower: “Thank you for giving me your daughter.”

Within a month of the wedding, I had quit my 13-year journalism career and announced that I would be embarking on a year-long backpacking trip around the world without my new husband. My brother said I was selfish, while my sister humored me, certain I would give up on the trip like it was a passing

fad. I'm sure my friends thought I was crazy. My father would barely even discuss it. And my mom? She was unresponsive and unable to communicate, descending into the final stages of her disease.

The last time I went home, several months prior, I sat with my mom in the dining room of her nursing home while she ignored a cup of chocolate pudding. Her once-blonde hair hung limp and grey. Her head lolled against her chest, and her eyes were downcast. A nursing aide tuned a radio to a station playing swing music and pranced around the room, encouraging the residents to dance. Nobody did.

"Mom, I think I'm going to do something really big," I whispered, as I held a spoonful of pudding to her mouth.

She didn't look up. She didn't even move.

"Mom, I'm going to travel around the world," I said. When she still didn't move, I put the spoon back into the pudding cup and scooted my chair closer to her wheelchair. I put my hand on her shoulder. "If you're in there, you should know I'm doing this for you, okay? If you can't remember anything else, please remember that."

My decision to travel was complicated, so much more than wanderlust and desire. It was a savage call. I needed to make this journey before it was too late.

This seed was planted by my mom, who always wanted to travel. She had the soul of an adventurer mixed with the pragmatism of a parent -- which meant

that she had a mental list of places she wanted to see and things she wanted to do, but she pushed her own desires aside.

She made excuses. "I'll do it after you move out of the house," she said. "After you graduate college. After your father retires. There'll be plenty of time to travel later."

She was wrong. Alzheimer's began gnawing at her before she could ever pack her suitcase and step out into the world. She ended up in that nursing home, not a single passport stamp closer to her dream.

Her unfulfilled list was my call to action. It also happened to coincide with a particularly restless patch at my job.

My work at the newspaper was no longer interesting or exciting. My colleagues were getting laid off and furloughed, and I felt like I was barely hanging on. Those of us who remained struggled to balance additional workloads, cover more beats and fill the paper each day. This left less time for investigations, thorough reporting, solid writing. All that mattered was sticking something, anything, in the newshole -- preferably something that would generate revenue for the company.

One of the things I had always loved about reporting was that every day was different, that I never knew what to expect. But after five years of working the same festivals, parties, galas and events, it had become routine. I no longer felt like I was doing important work -- I was simply slapping a new lede on the same piece I had written a year earlier. At my fourth celebrity dog fashion show, I

seriously began to question my life choices. This wasn't why I went to journalism school.

Every time I wrote an article about someone else doing something remarkable, I felt waves of regret and contempt. Why was that person doing what I wanted to do? When will it be my turn? When would I do something different and daring? Why isn't it me?

One day a little voice inside me answered back. "You haven't tried."

It was the truth. If I wanted to see the world, why wasn't I doing something about it?

I turned in my resignation letter in early 2010, a horrible time to make a drastic career change. The U.S. economy was in bad shape and the entire country was in a recession. It felt incredibly stupid to walk away from any job, even an unfulfilling one, and turn my back on a reliable paycheck, but that's exactly what I needed to do. Each day in my cubicle felt like another step closer to my mother's reality. I didn't want to end up like her, forgetting the destination before I ever had a chance to take the journey.

So I traded in my briefcase for a 50-pound backpack and crafted a loose itinerary of continents -- three months in South America, five months in Africa, four months in Asia. I didn't include Europe since my mom had grown up in Germany, and my priority was seeing the things she desired, not revisiting places she'd already been. I sold the bulk of my belongings and put \$10,000 in my bank account.

It was time to wander, to get lost and find myself again. I had to make the trip my mother never could.

Now my decisions have brought me here, to the dirty floor of an airport, muddy hiking boots and suitcase wheels near my face. Once Jason leaves, I will be roaming this world alone.

I know the person I want to be is out there. But I don't know if it's a matter of discovering her -- or if I need to un-discover all the things that I'm not, shaking free from what keeps me from being the best possible version of myself.

I hug my backpack and wonder if I will be safe, if I will find friends, if I will ever discover what has made my heart so restless. I wonder if this trip will honor my dying mother, or if I am going to tear my family apart. I wonder if I will scurry back to California in just a few weeks or if I have the resilience to push through when things get tough.

I close my eyes and remember the words my mother said each day before she sent me off to elementary school: "You are braver than you think."

Back then I was just a girl with long pigtails and a small backpack, nervous about walking two miles to school on my own. But I wonder if my mom could already look into my brown eyes and see the grown woman who would set off into the world.

Above me, a speaker crackles and the PA system comes to life. Our plane to Cusco is ready to board.

LESSON: When you feel defeated, stop to catch your breath

Cusco feels like a punch in the chest. It could be that the reality of my jobless, newly homeless, nearly husbandless situation is finally hitting me. Or it could be the altitude.

The air in this former Incan capital, perched high in the Andes, is thin and miserly. I have barely stepped off the plane before my asthma kicks in, and my lungs begin to tighten. I anticipated altitude issues until I acclimated to the mountains, but I didn't think they would hit with such force and immediacy. Every inhalation is labored and requires an incredible amount of effort, like trying to push air into a balloon with a hole.

After a few puffs on my inhaler, I can breathe easily enough to focus on other things -- like the wave of tour guides, taxi drivers, hotel operators and vendors that pushes close as Jason and I make our way through the airport. Sweaty bodies press against us. People tug at our sleeves. Brochures are thrust in our faces. Each person promises a very, very special deal, just for us.

Jason, who has never traveled internationally, looks to me for direction. I don't know what to do. Prior to this, I've only traveled outside the U.S. on short, easy trips where someone was waiting for me on the other side, so I'm hardly a seasoned traveler. But I want to reassure my husband that I am a confident and able globetrotter, a woman who can take care of myself once I am traveling alone.

"Follow me," I say.

Lacking actual experience, I read books instead. I practically memorized the entire “Dangers and Annoyances” section in the Lonely Planet guidebook to Peru. As we navigate the airport, I hiss nuggets of advice to Jason. “Ruthless robberies have been on the rise! Use only official taxis! Hang on to your bag! And remember, do not let anybody share a taxi with us.”

Long rows of vendors line the airport hallways. In the middle of one row is a small desk with a wooden sign that says, “Official taxi.” The fact that the word “official” is spelled “offecial” barely even registers.

“Are you the official taxi?” I ask.

“Si, we are official taxi,” a man behind the desk replies. He motions to the sign and cocks his head, as if to say, “Do you not see this sign? We are clearly offecial.”

“How much?”

“Peruvian?” he says. “Thirty soles.”

This is my first time haggling. I don’t know how to counter this, other than to say, “Nuh-uh. My guidebook says 15 soles.”

“Ah, but there is an airport tax,” he says.

That makes sense. I shrug and hand over the money, the equivalent of \$12.

The man scrawls a handwritten ticket and ushers us outside, directly into another wall of people. He gives our ticket to a different man, who hands it off like

a track baton to yet one more. It's confusing, and I don't know where to go or who to follow.

"Wait!" I yell.

"This way!" the original vendor points to a car before he is absorbed by the crowd of tourists and taxi drivers.

I walk to a vehicle that barely qualifies as a car, let alone an official taxi. The driver hoists the backpack off my shoulders and tosses it into the trunk, which is secured shut with a piece of dirty rope. He pushes me toward the open car door, the palm of his hand against my forehead as he shoves me inside. On the other side of the car, the same thing happens to Jason, except with some other Peruvian man we haven't seen before. When Jason sits down, the stranger slides into the seat next to us.

"No," I say. "No strangers in the car."

"Is fine," he says. "I am official taxi."

I whisper, "Stranger danger," under my breath, and Jason nods. The driver has already eased the car out of the parking lot and is merging onto a highway. Frequent clicks and pops sound from beneath the taxi. I eye every door -- all locked. The back of my neck begins to sweat.

The stranger opens a briefcase on his lap, and I fear we are about to be abducted. Instead, the stranger hands us photographs. The lamination peels from the corners of each yellowed image.

“How would you like to see Machu Picchu?” he says with all the enthusiasm of a used car salesman.

I fumble for words and excuses. “Um, not right now? We already have a trek?”

“What about market tour? We take you to alpaca farm, then alpaca shop ...”

“No,” Jason says.

We have reached the hostel -- I recognize the building from the photos online -- but the driver continues to circle the block as the salesman piles more photographs into our laps and makes one pitch after another.

“You like party party?” he says.

“No! No party. Please,” I beg. “Let us go.”

“Ah, you want ancient temple.”

Finally, the driver stops the car. In a last-ditch sales effort, the stranger claims he is from the very hostel where we were staying.

“Oh, you stay El Tuco?” he said. “I work for El Tuco. I give you special price. Special deal just for you.”

Maybe it is the fact that we had been awake for 36 hours straight, or maybe the stranger is finally wearing us down. Whatever the cause, Jason and I agree to let him follow us into the hostel while we check in.

I recognize Coco, the owner of El Tuco, also from the photos online. Coco uses his substantial body to fill the front door frame and shouts in Spanish. The

stranger mumbles something back. Coco erupts. He screams and takes a step forward, close enough for his breath to make steam on the salesman's face. I anticipate this will come to blows. Instead, the stranger pats his sweaty comb-over and adjusts his shirt, then turns on his heel and marches out the door.

The room is awkwardly still for a long beat before I break the silence.

"May we check in?" I say. "We're exhausted."

"Check-in is not for three hours," Coco says. "Please sit in the lobby and relax. And welcome to Cusco."

The next three nights of our honeymoon are spent in a sparsely furnished, \$8 room at El Tuco. We sleep on separate foam mattresses, wool hats pulled low over our ears to fight off the chill.

"I love you, baby," Jason says from the across the room.

My lips are chattering too much to reply.

The windows, lined with iron bars, look out over a highway, a school and a tightly crammed neighborhood. The room is freezing, but the mold-encrusted shower is excruciatingly hot. I jump in only long enough to boil the germs off my flesh, though I know this will be one of my last hot showers in South America -- I should be grateful for water that turns my skin the same color red as a ripening tomato.

When I call my dad to say I've safely settled in Cusco, I have to reach him on his cell. He's at the nursing home where my mom lives now, the last place she

will ever live, a special facility for Alzheimer's patients about 30 miles from the house where I grew up. My dad spends hours a day there, every day. Since my mom can no longer walk, he pushes her around the nursing home, from the cage full of parakeets in the foyer to the art room where she cannot grasp a fat crayon. He spoons pureed food into her mouth at every meal, because he's convinced the nurses and aides don't do it properly. He knows the other patients who live in the same wing, people who confuse him for their son, their husband or their brother. He just waves to them and pretends.

When I call now, my dad holds the phone up to my mom's ear. I must speak clearly and loudly -- her hearing has gone bad -- but she doesn't recognize my voice.

"Mom, you would love Cusco. The mountains are so big and green," I say. "Maybe someday I'll bring you here."

She mumbles. My dad grabs the phone.

"Well, kiddo, have a good time. Be safe. You know your mom is very proud of you and loves you."

"Yep. I know," but I don't.

If this were fiction, this would be the part of the story where the courageous heroine is rewarded for her journey with affection. But this is real, and my mom hasn't known me for years. When I hang up the phone, the call leaves me with nothing but a hollow space. Unrequited love is always the

saddest kind, but it's even lonelier when the person who doesn't love you back is your parent.

Outside the building, I hear cries from where a market is assembled on the long, slim concrete berm in between lanes of highway traffic, and Jason and I walk outside to investigate. There are cages of squirming puppies and wooden boxes of desiccated fruit. Bags of grain, boxes of eggs, blankets piled with wild greens. In the midst of it all, the tiny squeals from a mobile guinea pig slaughterhouse.

Guinea pigs -- rodents that are neither pig nor from Guinea -- are a popular source of protein in Peru, since the animals can be raised quickly in confined spaces. Also, guinea pigs will eat just about anything, making them a cheaper form of livestock than cows or pigs.

I'm a vegetarian, so I give grilled guinea pig a pass. Instead I delight in Peru's substantial veggie-based options -- bowls of buttery quinoa soup, skewers of grilled potato, creamy broad bean stew and slices of crusty brown bread, pale green pepino melons that fit in the palm of my hand.

At purple dusk Jason and I sit at a restaurant that looks over the historic buildings of the Plaza de Armas and tuck into lomo soytado, a tofu twist on the classic Peruvian lomo saltado, in which slivers of beef are stir-fried with peppers, tomatoes and french fries, all served over rice.

I pretend the rich food and crisp air are making me hardier and stronger. But the truth is that I feel more brittle and unsteady than ever. Each day in Cusco

means we are closer to our Inca Trail trek. It's the sensation of standing in the door before my first skydive all over again -- slightly sick to my stomach, terrified I won't be able to complete this task, curious if I have enough courage.

"Is everything alright?" Jason asks.

I nod, afraid to tell him the truth.

Back home in Palm Springs, hiking is one of my favorite activities. I've spent many weekends scrambling over rocks and ambling down dusty desert trails. But that's just something I do for an hour or two before brunch. My hiking doesn't require any real commitment.

In Peru, I realize I've never tackled anything of such a grand scope. These mountains are the stuff of hiking nightmares. They are the high school jocks of mountains -- massively and beautifully built, but towering, intimidating and mean. Just one look, and you know they are going to hurt you. By comparison, the mountains that encircle my California desert are downright delicate.

"I don't know if I can do this," I finally admit to Jason.

It didn't look so intimidating in the photos, in all the travel books I kept on my coffee table. Now, standing in Cusco, just looking at the peaks and spires of granite makes me want to cry. I can't imagine four straight days of navigating their peaks with my own two feet. I feel like I've just shown up at the start line for a marathon after only watching the Olympics on TV. What was I thinking?

Beyond that, I am ill. I feel like I should have acclimated already, but after three days in Cusco I am still beset with altitude sickness. Even after short

distances I clutch my chest, fumbling for my inhaler on Cusco's fierce, sloped streets. When I'm not wheezing, I am trying to locate the nearest toilet for my upset stomach.

"Of course you can do this," Jason says and hands over my extra inhaler, which he has tucked away in his pocket. "You've jumped out of airplanes, right? You can handle a little walk."

The Inca Trail is hardly a little walk, but I don't want to dwell on that. Jason has been looking forward to the trek more than any other part of our honeymoon. I can't disappoint him, especially when I'm about to leave him for a year.

"Of course I can handle a little walk," I say. "What's a little mountain, right?"

The evening before the hike, we make final preparations. We separate our belongings into what is absolutely necessary and what we can leave behind.

My backpack is a hefty, 50-pound clown car of everything I anticipate needing for my entire trip -- paperback novels, a laptop, sleeping bag, first aid kit, electrical outlet adapter, vitamins, a flashlight, whistle, water sterilizer, tofu jerky, shampoo, duct tape, t-shirts, tights, dresses, jeans, two fleece jackets, one iPod, a slim towel and four pairs of shoes. For four days on the Inca Trail, however, only a few things qualify as necessities. Everything else can be stored in a locker at El Tuco while we are away.

Our necessities include a toothbrush, designer wool socks, several layers of fancy, sweat-wicking clothing and ridiculous hiking poles that cost as much as a car payment. This was wishful thinking on my part -- I decided the more expensive the equipment, the easier it would make the trek.

Since our arrival, we have already gone through most of our clean socks and underwear. El Tuco doesn't have any laundry facilities and we haven't found a laundromat nearby, so I use a hard-bristled brush and hand soap to scrub our dirty clothes in the bathroom sink. Jason stretches a portable clothesline from one corner of the room diagonally to the other side. There aren't any nails or hooks in the wall, so he cracks the window enough to tie the line around the iron bars. I shiver from the wind as he does this. It's July, the start of winter in South America. The snappy mountain air has sharp teeth, especially at night.

Jason and I pack and repack, adding and subtracting items, trying to achieve the perfect equation -- all the things we absolutely want to carry on our backs for 26 miles, still keeping it light enough that we won't be tempted to toss anything off the side of a mountain. I am mad with sleep deprivation and altitude sickness; I decide to bring eyeliner but leave behind toothpaste.

I rub my eyes. Our bus is scheduled to pick us up at 5 a.m., and it is already midnight. I flop on the hard bed and cover myself with a thin blanket.

"I'm done. I can't pack any more. Whatever we have now, that's what we're bringing," I say. "I need sleep."

"Yeah, I'm wiped out," Jason agrees. "And we have mountains to climb."

He reaches for the socks and underwear, still hanging on the clothesline, the final addition to our packs before we could go to bed.

“Uh oh,” he says.

“What oh? Don’t uh oh.”

I stand and touch the clothes on the sagging line. The socks are still wet and cold, the underwear frozen stiff.

Coils of frustration began to wind through my limbs, and I kick my bag, spilling all the things I had so carefully packed.

“What the hell? We can’t hike the Inca Trail in wet socks and frozen panties.”

“Maybe they’ll dry by the time the bus gets here ...?”

The laundry had been there for hours. If they aren’t dry by now, they will never be dry. That’s it. Our hike is ruined before it even began. The failure was inevitable.

Jason runs downstairs to ask the front desk if there is a 24-hour laundromat anywhere in the Cusco region. He returns several minutes later with one of his hands hidden behind his back.

“OK, the bad news is that there’s no 24-hour laundromat. In fact, they didn’t even know what I was talking about,” he says. “But the good news is that someone loaned me this!”

With a magician’s flourish, he holds his right hand out and presents me with a miniature travel hairdryer. “I borrowed it from an Irish couple down the

hall,” he says. “They said we can just leave it outside their door when we’re done.”

Two hours later, the underwear is dry, but I am still blowing a weak shaft of hot air into woolen toes. Each time the hairdryer overheats, we have to wait a few minutes for it to start again. I teeter on the edge of hysteria and lash out at my husband.

“Why did I buy such nice socks? This never would have happened with my normal, shitty socks. Some of my old socks even have holes. I bet they would have dried real quick. But these things?” I say, getting louder and more forceful with every sentence. “Fuck these wet socks! Fuck the socks! Fuck the Inca Trail ...”

“Shhh,” Jason eases an arm around me and pries the hair dryer away with the other. “Let me dry these for a while. You rest.”

The action is small but tender and represents everything I love most about him. Where I gripe and complain, Jason is thoughtful, nurturing, supportive. I always thought marriage was incompatible to the life I wanted to lead, unbound and free, but here is my husband, comforting me in an \$8 a night hostel, proving otherwise. What the hell am I doing leaving him on purpose? Leaving my career and my home and my dying mother? And for what? Wet socks and impossible mountains.

I can't even manage to breathe here. While I felt like I was suffocating in my cubicle at the newspaper, that was just a metaphor. Now I am actually fighting for every very real breath. What made me think I could travel around the world?

It's one of those moments that makes a person long for mommy. Mine was always so protective. I remember how my elementary school gym teacher never let me visit the school nurse for a puff of my inhaler before gym class -- until the day I collapsed on a dry, weed-strewn field. I awoke on a couch in the nurse's office, my mom holding my hand and smoothing the hair from my forehead. She slid one hand behind my head and helped me tilt forward to take a puff from the emergency inhaler she kept tucked in her purse. Then my mom whispered, "Shhhh," until my pulse slowed and the glass slivers in my lungs disappeared. When it was clear that I'd recovered, my mother tracked down the gym teacher and unleashed her rage on the man, hissing, "How dare you make little girls suffer? What kind of man are you?"

I can't recall exactly how the situation was resolved -- whether I was pulled from that teacher's class or if he was ever punished. The implication, though, has stayed with me. My husband has done his share of time comforting me, but it is my mom who always soothed my body when I could not breathe.

As a child I was a sickly thing, hospitalized more than once for asthma attacks and vicious bouts of pneumonia and bronchitis. My mom always stayed by my side, even when nurses tried to shoo her away. She was there to hold my

hand, her strong fingers wrapped around my tiny ones, through the night and until things were right again. I wish she could do that now.

Nobody warned me about this part. When I envisioned my trip, I imagined exciting adventures, exotic locales, a jet-set lifestyle. I never thought heavy sadness and doubt would climb into my backpack and come with me. I pictured standing at the top of the Sun Gate, looking down at Machu Picchu, without ever thinking about the steps it would take to get there. This is the curse of wanderlust -- when the postcard image becomes a brutal reality.

All the exhaustion, sickness and worry that had been tipping me for days finally knocks me over. I collapse in quiet sobs on the bed, swallowing deep gulps of air, an act that finally soothes and calms me. Jason holds me until I fall asleep.

Our wake-up alarm sounds after just two hours. Soon the sun will take rise over the Andes. My socks are dry, and a mountain invites me to climb it.

LESSON: Push yourself until you can't turn back

Our first hiking day on the Inca Trail trek is supposed to be the easiest of the trek. But my group's guide, Juan, jokingly calls it "Inca flat" -- meaning it is not flat at all.

Among the group are two other honeymooning couples, an older outdoorsman from Oregon, and a grandmotherly type.

For several miles we walk undulating, roller coaster hills that never seem to flatten out. Occasionally I see people from other groups turn around and head back to the station in the Sacred Valley, at the base of the mountain. Some are visibly sick, their heads lolling and sleepy-eyed, their bodies draped over donkeys and led away. Groups of traditionally dressed Peruvian woman sit by the side of the trail, selling cans of beer and bottles of energy drinks. In a moment of weakness my husband pays Disneyland prices for a small bottle of Gatorade. It is delicious.

My group makes it to the first night's campsite intact, though my skin is salty and the layer of skin on my heel has already sloughed off in my hiking shoes.

The porters have prepared a feast of brown bread, quinoa stew, fresh salad, and for those who eat meat, grilled alpaca steaks, which we eat in a large dining tent, lit by small lanterns. We warm our hands around metal cups of hot chocolate. After a day of sweat and effort, our bodies are now sore and cold.

After dinner, Juan ushers us to a nearby campsite. “You’ve been to a four-star hotel, eh?” he asks. “Well, welcome to your thousand-star hotel.”

Our campsite is nestled in a green valley deep in the Andes Mountains. The tents have already been erected by the porters, a guilty relief. A zillion stars drip down in strands that nearly touch the tops of our tents. It is more magnificent than a Ritz, more dazzling than a fancy Hilton. Inside, the sleeping bags are fat and red, almost plushy. My muscles relax slightly at just the sight of this.

When I pause outside my tent and take a deep breath, I am surprised to get a lung full of air, crisp as green apples. We are still miles from where we need to go. But for now, I can breathe.

At 5 a.m., my tent is unzipped and the small face of the assistant guide, Pedro, peeks through the flap.

“Cafe or te?”

“Both. Either. Whatever.”

When he pushes a hot tin cup my way, I am groggy enough that I don’t know what I’m drinking until I’m almost finished. That’s when I realize I’m drinking my first coca tea, which is made using the raw leaves of the coca plant. Though the plant is the source of cocaine, the coca leaves themselves are only a mild stimulant and are often use to soothe altitude sickness. The taste is grassy and herbal, but slightly sweeter than green tea.

“Jason, I feel like my cells are dancing,” I say. My eyes widen and there’s a new zing in my movements. I quickly dress and am ready for what promises to be the roughest day of hiking, the day we will tackle Dead Woman’s Pass. At almost 14,000 feet and sucking in at least 30 percent less oxygen at this altitude, it feels like I’m inflating balloons while climbing a never-ending staircase.

The undulating hills are long gone. This morning’s hike is all about gaining altitude. The steep path is set with wide, heavy slabs of stone, and there are no flat points to offer relief. Every step takes excruciating effort, and I often have to squat to catch my breath. Before long, I am passed by every member of my group, then hikers from other groups. Even llamas go waltzing by.

“This is dumb,” I say to my husband. “There are buses that go up to Machu Picchu.”

“But there are things we can only see from the trail,” Jason says. “And we wanted to see Machu Picchu the same way the Incas did, remember?”

“I am not an Inca,” I mutter.

He’s right, though. The trail has magnificent views, especially today, as we climb from the valley floor through the moist forest and into the greenest mountains I have ever seen. On this highway that was constructed more than 500 years ago, orchids and other flowers burst through cracks in the stone. Their roots go deep, their blooms shoot high. Wisps of cloud float overhead, just passing by.

All day long I can see Dead Woman's Pass -- so called because the mountain ridge resembles the silhouette of a supine woman -- but the pass never seems to get any closer. Jason takes my backpack and murmurs words of encouragement.

"You're a superstar. You're the best hiker in the world," he says, but I can barely hear him. My pulse is throbbing in my ears, and I am panting.

"I don't know if I'll make it," I say.

I remember the night we decided to make Peru our honeymoon destination. I brought home "Where to Go When," a coffee table book filled with glossy, vibrant photos of far-flung places. The book is divided into months, listing the best places to visit and the best things to do during that period of time. Jason and I knew we wanted to honeymoon in summer, so we separately flipped through the June, July and August sections and made a list of our top five places. When we traded our lists, both of us had the same thing written in the number-one slot: Machu Picchu.

After planning, dreaming and saving, we are finally here. I am ascending a mountain with the man I love, and I can see the peak from here. I'm crazy even to think about turning back.

The final push to Dead Woman's Pass is a 3,000-foot elevation gain over the course of three hours. It feels like an exercise machine set for the highest level, like one of those stair-climbers that never take you anywhere at all. My joints ache from the force of being yanked uphill and into motion, while the

altitude tries to smash me down. I look to my feet for several minutes, then I focus on the hairy calves of the man in front of me, then I stare at the sky, then back to the ground. My lungs feel like fire.

After about an hour, I enter a Zen-like meditation, in which I count my steps and allow the numbers to fill my head. "One, two, three ... ugh, four, five, six ..." Every time I get to 250, I start over. I don't know why I decided to focus on numbers -- I've never meditated by counting before -- but it helps. It gives me a focus beyond the struggle to breathe and walk; it takes me beyond the trail. It's kind of like having an out-of-body experience, except if I were out of my body then my thighs wouldn't burn so much.

Eventually, there is a moment when my feet are moving but I no longer have to force myself to climb. I just am.

When I reach the top of the pass, I stop staring at my shoes, at the ground, at the unyielding sky. From this vantage point, the highest point of this hike, I see snow-capped peaks. Miles of mountains, embroidered with grey trails. And my hiking group, waiting for me. All I hear is applause.

I've made it.

By the end of the day, after a descent into a new campsite, we are closer to the end of the trail than the beginning. We've gone too far to turn back.

Day three promises to be long -- nearly 10 miles total -- but we are given motivation for hiking faster and harder than ever. Showers wait for us at the

campsite, the first on this whole trek. Also, Juan says the first group to the campsite will have a better position on the trail tomorrow morning, the day we will finally see Machu Picchu.

Along the way, we walk the same path the Inca paved, with many of the original stones still in place. We pause for breakfast at Runkuracay, small, circular ruins made of stone, which overlook the Pacamayo valley. We hike along steep rock embankments, skirting deep precipices.

Another set of ruins is called Sayacmarca, “inaccessible town,” protected by sheer cliffs on three sides. The structures remain secretive -- nobody knows exactly why they were built and how they were used -- and suddenly I am overwhelmed. There are stories here, fossilized in the buildings; we just can’t read them yet. It makes me sad.

I wonder what will happen to my own narrative. Will my own story become that of half a life, paused somewhere between life and death, like my mom? It would be so nice if this all happened backward instead -- if all the joy and vigor and potential unraveled for us like a red carpet, only after years of sickness and pain.

I have these wispy memories of mom when she was slender and tall, swishing into the house after attending grown-up parties. I purposely stayed awake long after the babysitter put me to bed, just to receive my mom’s gentle kiss on my forehead. I relished the vision of her draped in sparkly jewelry and dressed elegantly, illuminated by a shaft of moonlight, the sweet smell of daiquiri

mixed with perfume. Why should that vibrant version of my mom only exist in the past? If she was here, where did she go?

When I sniffle, Jason stops. "What's wrong?" he says, and he pushes a lock of sweaty hair from my forehead.

We're so close to the finish line of this spectacular place, the end of the goal we set for our honeymoon hike. Soon he'll return to California, and I'll continue wandering, with no clear-cut path at all. It's hard enough for me to keep going when there's a trail pointing the way. How am I supposed to keep going when there was nobody to guide me? Who will be there to hold my backpack? Will I be strong enough to carry myself?

"Nothing's wrong," I say. "I just don't want this trail to come to an end."

We're at a place where the path is broken and uneven, with many of the original stones coming undone. Some of the stairs crumble beneath our feet. The air is moist, and most steps are covered with slippery, wet leaves, so every movement requires vigilance. This feels like the most treacherous ground of all.

After a few more hours of hiking through the cloud forest, we finally reach our campsite for the night, Winay Wayna, named for a pink orchid that grows here. In Quechua, the indigenous language, it means "forever young." I wonder if the person who named it is dead.

Our tents are erected near an extensive set of Incan ruins -- agricultural terraces, house-like structures, walkways with long staircases and large baths.

This is where I take my first shower in three days. I pay \$1.50 for three minutes of hot water, and the effect is glorious. It's as if I've been baptized, reborn through this ancient ritual of walking, sweating, scrubbing the dirt from my feet.

Pedro wakes the group at 4 a.m.

"Let's go, let's go. Arriba!"

We are given coffee and thin, rolled crepes for breakfast, which we eat in silence. This is going to be the easiest day of hiking, only about three hours until we reach the Sun Gate, but the sense of ending is palpable. Today we will see Machu Picchu, and splinter off on our own ways.

It is dark outside, the kind of dark when dawn seems impossibly far away. With flashlights in hand, we take to the trail. The goal is to get to the ruins before sunrise, but Juan warns that we must be careful. At this point the path is a delicate contour that winds a thin line around the mountains, with sheer drop-offs to the side. Juan says some hikers have tumbled from the trail and were only discovered weeks later.

"Mountainside!" he hisses when any of us stray too far to the edge.

When I look backward, I see scores of other hikers and their flashlights, like an endless string of Christmas lights draped along the Andes.

Before long we hit an official checkpoint, where a guard must check our Inca Trail hiking permits (the trail is limited to 500 hikers and porters per day, and

this is strictly regulated) and stamp our passports. However, the office doesn't open until 5:30 a.m. -- we still have more than an hour to wait. Juan didn't tell us about this part.

It is cold, and Jason and I huddle together for body warmth. We try to pass the time with games, but even the woman in my group who was once a cruise ship entertainer -- a bubbly, chatty blonde -- has lost her natural enthusiasm.

"I spy something with my little eye," she mutters. Her scarf is bundled around her face. She sits on a bench near the guard's office and looks more like a heap of blankets than a person.

"Is it black?" I say.

"Yes."

"Is it darkness?"

"Yes. You win. Game over."

It feels like hours before the guard arrives and checks our documents. As soon as he gives us the proper stamps, we sprint. The last hour is all running. I take puffs from my emergency inhaler as we jog higher and higher.

Finally, as dawn breaks, we reach the final ascent -- 50 steps, nearly vertical. The angle is so dramatic, I'm forced to approach it like a child and climb on my hands and feet.

Then there it is. Machu Picchu, all spread out below me.

There are places that never live up to the hype. There are places that will never look as good as the postcards. Machu Picchu is not one of those places.

It's more like a pop-up book come to life -- a dazzling display of careful stone structures and terraces that leap from the asparagus green land. I audibly gasp when I see it.

This is where the Andes Mountains meets the Amazon Basin in a tropical mountain forest. The velvety Andes mountaintops look like rococo sculptures, draped with valances of mosses, dotted with ferns, decorated by canopies of trees. It is an embarrassment of green. Wispy fog forms gauzy rings around each peak.

About 200 structures form the sanctuary of Machu Picchu, set on steep ridges of granite and laced with white rock terraces. The walls of each building are formed so perfectly that a knife can't be wedged in between the stones. A flock of neon green parakeets swoop overhead. Llamas graze nearby. Jason and I sit and watch the sun move across the mountains, our eyes clouded with tears.

I wonder if the wounds we carry inside us are like the wounds we show on the outside. I remember falling often as a clumsy, little girl, all scabbed knees and elbows. My mother told me to give my cuts sunshine and air, the necessary ingredients to heal, and I think I unconsciously did that here.

I think of my mom now, as I sit in this place I didn't know I was strong enough to reach. She would be so proud of the four days I spent breathing in sun, the nights spent sleeping among stars. Somehow I left a lot of fear behind as I pushed myself forward.

I know my mom's death is coming, but it doesn't seem quite so scary to live without her anymore. Machu Picchu is a reminder of timelessness, that some things never really disappear.

The pilgrimage to this place was once considered holy. Maybe it still is.

For me, it certainly was.

LESSON: You're not lost. The trail is.

Our guide to the rainforest, Jesus, deftly ties the boat to an old stump near the edge of the Amazon River. We are several miles from Iquitos, the world's largest city that cannot be accessed by roads. Jason and I arrived on a small aircraft for the second part of our honeymoon.

Looking around the jungle that now surrounds us, Jason whispers, "What is this world?" He's staring at a tree that appears to be filled with flowers until the blooms move and shake. Parakeets. They seem to take flight simultaneously, one enormous, fluttery cloud blotting out the sky above.

"It's magic," I whisper back.

We walk up a small slope into a thick ribbon of trees. I'm just about 10 steps under the rainforest canopy when Jesus, says, "Stop and back away slowly."

My right foot, which had been poised to step, now hangs mid-air. This is our first afternoon in the Amazon, but I already know enough to treat the word of Jesus like the word of God. I awkwardly shuffle to my left foot. My hiking boots make a soggy, suction-cup sound as I retreat in the mud.

"You see that snake?" Jesus says.

"No."

"Look carefully." He points. "Very dangerous."

I squint to see the area in front of my boot prints. Under the thick canopy of trees, the forest is almost completely dark. I see mud, and I see rotting brown leaves. No snake.

“You still don’t see? The snake that was going to bite you?” When I shake my head no, Jesus sighs.

He waits for the snake to move, and that’s when I finally see his firm, oval head. It startles me, even though I already know he’s there. We continue into the forest. This time, though, I eye the trail nervously, skeptically. There are things here that could kill me. Things that probably really want to kill me. I feel vulnerable in a way I’ve never felt before, back in California among the desert housing developments and finely landscaped golf courses.

I don’t have high hopes for my survival in this topsy-turvy place, where trees blot out the sky, and the roads are made of rivers. I don’t know how to find my way out of the forest, back to the boat and down the river to the lodge where Jason and I are staying. If I’m being honest, I don’t even know how to pronounce the name of the lodge where we are staying.

I remember joining some kind of save-the-rainforest initiative when I was in the sixth grade. I threw myself wholeheartedly into the effort. I stopped eating meat, because I read cattle farms were a major cause of deforestation. I signed petitions. I wrote letters to President Reagan. I rattled off facts about logging, wrote reports about it for school. And I frequently wore cute pink “Save the Rainforest” T-shirts emblazoned with tree frogs.

And yet, if I know about the dangers facing the rainforest, I don't know very much about the rainforest itself. I certainly didn't expect the funhouse mirror where I am standing now, a place where everything is distorted, lovely and strange. Pink river dolphins leap through the water. Snakes grow as thick as tree trunks, and lily pads are as large and round as Volkswagen Beetles. Lizards and frogs flicker with neon color. Tiny, shrunken monkeys slingshot through the treetops. The moist air feels like light rain.

It is a magnificent but intimidating landscape. My heart pounds as the three of us -- Jesus, Jason and I -- make our way deeper into the forest. It is warm, dark and slippery, like stepping into a massive mouth.

"Hey Jesus, did I tell you about the rainforest club I was in when I was a little girl?" I say. "We wrote petitions and recycled cans and raised money to save the rainforest."

"Looks like it worked," he says. "Good job."

This is his land, where he was born and raised. His body is lean, brown and agile. His eyes are rainforest-trained. He knows every tree like it's his neighbor. He can see poisonous snakes when I can't. He even finds a path where there is seemingly none.

I examine the ground beneath my feet. There really isn't a path below us.

"Uh, Jesus. Did you notice there's no trail anymore?"

"Mmm-hmm."

I tug on Jesus' shirt sleeve, pulling him to a stop.

“Are we lost?”

Jesus turns, looks me in the eye.

“No, we’re not lost. We’re right here,” he says. “The trail is lost.”

Then he continues walking, no trail necessary, leaving his own tracks in the inch-deep mud. I follow him and trust that the trail will come to us.

After an hour of silent walking, we come to a clearing where a series of stout wooden poles, ropes and ladders lead into the air. Jesus urges me to climb one of the ladders. Jason follows behind me.

The ladder leads to a rope bridge, strung high above the treetops. We emerge from the crinoline band of mist into limitless clear blue air. From this vantage point, I look down on blooming orchids curling through tree branches, colorful birds in flight against towers of clouds. From here I can see no path at all. Just the wide, open world, waiting for me to explore it. I think about that old quote, “Not all who wander are lost,” and suddenly it feels true.

I’m not lost. I’m right here. The path might disappear every once in a while, but I’m still right where I belong.

That night Jason and I sleep in the thatched hut of an eco-lodge. Fear wakes me in the blankest part of the night, when evening has long passed and morning is still far away. At first I’m unclear on what has gripped me, why I am no longer asleep, and then I realize the gauzy mosquito net has fallen across my face and into my mouth.

Too shaken to rest, I curl into a corner and read a couple chapters from a book before I head back to bed. After I climb inside, I tuck the edge of the mosquito net under the mattress and settle back against Jason. His body rises and falls with every breath. He didn't even notice I was gone, and this comforts me. Maybe it's possible to stray and still find my way back home again.

LESSON: Eventually sleep will come

Several days later, Jason and I are back in Lima.

It is Fiestas Patrias, when Peruvians celebrate independence day. There are revelers on the street, and the discos are open until dawn. Jason and I stay out well into the evening, then retreat to our hotel. It is our last night together,

We stay in a place that looks like a dollhouse, a tiny wooden structure painted in vivid green, red and yellow. It's perched on the roof of an apartment building in Barranco, a section of downtown Lima. The rooftop is crowded with wooden awnings and climbing vines, potted palms, a cage full of finches, wind chimes made of sea shells. Jason and I warm our hands at the fire pit and drink dark Peruvian beer from the bottle. From the rooftop, it's easy to feel removed from the rest of this world, as if the thing I've been dreading will never happen.

"I don't want you to go," I say.

"I know. I don't want to go either, but we knew this was part of it," Jason says. "I have to go away in order to get you back home again."

I have a hat woven from alpaca wool, a gift Jason bought from one of the vendors at the independence day festival. I pull it down over my icy ears. I am cold, cold all over, like my blood has stopped moving.

We could go out and dance our fears away at the disco. We could get completely smashed and forget that we won't be able to hold each other again for one year. Instead, we step inside our dollhouse, this perfectly constructed toy

version of a home, and burrow into bed. We cling to each other, making love on itchy blankets, and when I cry, my tears roll down his bare shoulders.

Jason decides we should pretend he's not leaving in the morning, so we try to create some sense of normalcy. There's a small TV near the bed, and we wiggle the knobs until we find something that reminds us of home: "Los Simpsons." We split another beer and laugh at the show, even though we have no idea what the characters are saying. All of this feels false. I know what's coming -- I can't turn off the knowledge that I'm going to spend tomorrow and 364 more tomorrows without him.

Jason holds me until I fall asleep, but I never quite make it to a dream state, and the night feels half-lived. My eyes are closed, but I hear the throbbing bass of the music at the discotheque. I wish I could run downstairs and lose myself in the noisy ocean of people, so I wouldn't have to live through this quiet loss I created for myself.

In the morning, the cab arrives right on schedule. Jason gives me a kiss and walks out the door, as if he's leaving for work. I punch the pillow and shove my face in the divot I've created. I hear Keki, the Peruvian woman who owns the bed and breakfast, creep up the stairs and leave a tray of food. I don't want it. I don't want anything but a flight back home with Jason.

I regret this trip. I regret all my decisions. I regret being here alone, in this dollhouse that was built for two. I should try to sleep, but I can't even close my eyes for all the tears.

Keki grows concerned when I don't leave the dollhouse for a full day. Again she tries to bring me breakfast. Today it's coffee and a dry pastry. I can't imagine trying to choke it down my sad, raw throat.

"He's gone," she says. "Now you must continue. The year will pass very quick. Come on, you are stronger than this."

Her words remind me of how I've already accomplished things on this trip I never thought I could do. I made it to Dead Woman's Pass. I've crept past snakes in the Amazon. Surely I can get dressed and go outside. Keki gives me directions to a vegetarian restaurant inside an old train car, a place known be lively with young people.

"Will make you happy," she says.

The restaurant doesn't make me happy at all. There are couples at every table, sometimes couples upon couples, and I feel woefully alone. I know the idea of this trip was to assert my independence, to blaze my own path while honoring the one my mother couldn't take, but now it feels stupid and simple. But am I even allowed to feel this sad when this was a decision I made?

When the waiter comes to my table, I order quinoa soup, and then I begin to cry. I remember the quinoa soup Jason and I ate on the Inca Trail, the way the rich broth warmed me, the way we delighted over the simple flavors together.

The waiter leans over me and looks puzzled, which only makes me cry harder.

“My husband left me,” I say. I consider trying to explain further. I could tell him that this was all part of a plan. That I am not getting a divorce. That this is me, staking my independence and trying to figure out who I really am. But those words won’t make any sense, and they don’t matter anyway. The only thing I feel right now is that my husband left me. I am in Peru, and his is on his way back to California. I am alone. That is the truth.

“What can I do?” the helpless waiter asks. Nothing. He can’t do anything for me.

That night I carefully pack my backpack. Peru is like an amber stone, suspending all the beautiful memories of my honeymoon with Jason, and I can’t look at it any longer. It’s time to head to Bolivia.

I board a bus in the morning, unsure of what awaits me. I just know I’m already on the road -- I might as well travel it.

Before I cross into Bolivia, I pause in the border town of Puno. The long, dry plains and pale grasses stop short at the shore of Lake Titicaca.

The lake is magnificent, expansive and dramatic, like looking out over a still ocean. The water is the color of the sky of home, a fierce, ferocious blue. Unapologetic. At once I am reminded of home and entranced at the purity of this place. I want to grab fistfuls of water, carry it around in my pocket, save it.

Of course, I can’t. But I can stay here for a few days.

At a nearby hostel, I ask about the islands of the lake. The most popular destination for tourists is Los Uros, floating islands constructed from totora reeds. The residents here are the Uros, the pre-Incan people -- some legends even claim they are older than the sun. Nobody knows exactly when the Uros moved into the middle of the lake, just that they have lived there for centuries on land they created with cattail-type reeds, which rots and must be replaced regularly with more reeds. Now only a few hundred Uros remain full-time on the islands, where they live in thatched houses, also made from totora. The majority of the Uros have moved to the mainland.

I'm more interested in some of the more populated islands in Lake Titicaca, each of which functions like an autonomous country with their own rules, governing body and culture. I decide to take a boat to Isla Taquile, about a 4-hour boat ride from the shore, because their culture sounds the most intriguing to me.

Isla Taquile, once seized by the Incan empire in the 15th Century, is a small island now populated with about 2,000 Taquileños, who speak Quechua and Spanish. In an interesting twist, most of the men speak Quechua, and most of the women speak Spanish. I've always marveled at how some relationships work, especially when the individuals combine like oil and water. My mom and my dad, for instance, are such different people -- he's hard-nosed and military, she's soft and quick with a golden laugh. If you saw them in a room full of people, you'd never match them up. This place is an island full of those confounding

relationships -- couples who make it work even when they don't inhabit the same language.

The hilly island, roped with grey paths, is distinctive for a few reasons: It has no police, no prison and no dogs, (which are viewed as a sign of security). The island also does not have cars or electricity. Running water is rare. The people follow just three laws: *Ama sua, ama llulla, ama qhilla*. Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not be lazy.

Even more appealing to me is that the people of Taquile eat a plant-based diet. I've had some terrific meals in Peru, but so many of the vegetarian dishes are exactly the same: French fries, omelets, quinoa soup, brown bread. Though the Taquile people supplement their diet with trout from the lake, they are mostly vegetarian. I expect their food to be inventive and delicious, using the agricultural gifts of the island -- something beyond eggs, fried potatoes and bread.

My intention is to do a homestay for at least one night on the island. There are companies that put together cultural homestay tours, promising an authentic taste of life on Taquile, but they are too expensive for my budget. I'm also unsure if the extra money actually goes to the residents who open their homes to tourists.

So I decide to do the trip my way. I find a boat headed from Puno to Taquile, with a quick stop at a floating Uros island. It is a queasy, four-hour ride with more passengers than life jackets. When the boat finally docks, the entire island seems to be uphill. The land is lush and green, threaded with stone paths.

About half of the people from the boat are day visitors, and we struggle to hike up the demanding hills to the town square. The other boat passengers are Taquileños, who chew the hills and run ahead.

Though the island has tried to keep their traditional ways, there are immediately definite signs that tourism has affected the tiny community. Some of the markets sell expensive Snickers bars and bottles of Coca-Cola, imported from Puno for the tourists. A small restaurant advertises “American food” along with traditional dishes. Then a small boy follows me, chanting, “Photo, photo.” I assume he simply wants to see his image on the digital display, the reason many children along the Inca Trail and in the Amazon approached me, so I stop and take a quick snap. The boy shoves his hand at me.

“Five dollars,” he says. I am shocked, but a little impressed that he knows American currency so well.

It’s tough to shake that moment, though. This is a strange ethical situation I’ve never considered before. Is it possible to visit a unique place, learn about the culture and support the economy without changing what makes the place special? I hope so. Because there’s a lot that makes this place special.

Among them, the island is home to the most delicate, beautiful handicrafts, recognized by UNESCO has the best in all of South America.

The women of Taquile make wool, which is dyed vivid primary colors using local materials. The men are knitters. Boys learn to knit at a very young age, around 6 or 7, and their skill eventually becomes a sign of masculinity. For

instance, when a couple intends to marry, the woman takes her love interest's hat and fills it with water. The longer it takes for the water to leak through, the tighter the knit and the better the man.

Once a couple agrees to marry, the woman then cuts off most of her long hair. The hair is woven with heavy wool into a thick belt, about 8 to 10 inches high. It is long enough to wrap around the man's waist a couple of times.

The wide, thick belt serves two purposes: It is a sign to others that the man is betrothed and is now off the market, kind of like an engagement ring. On a more practical note, the belt also works as a lower back brace -- the assumption is that married men carry more burdens than single ones, and they can use the extra support.

Tourists mostly come for the knitted goods, which are displayed around the main plaza. The hats are strung up from ropes, like colorful prayer flags. Scarves and sweaters are folded into neat piles. There is no haggling at this market -- everything is a fixed price -- and each piece has a tag that says the name of the family that made it, so the money goes directly to them.

I inquire about a homestay inside the craft market, and one man immediately nods, then hands me off to a thin man who doesn't even glance in my direction. He wordlessly leads me through a zigzag of alleyways and streets to another friend. The men here all dress the same -- black trousers, white shirt, cropped black vest, wide woven belt -- and this begins to feel like a blur of the same people. Finally, that man, or a friend of yet another friend?, brings me to a

guy named Thomas. His face is umber with ruddy spots on his cheeks, and he does not smile. I'm nervous, but I also feel that I'm living under new rules now. I have to squash that part of myself in order to continue moving forward.

When I ask Thomas if I can stay with him for the night, he nods. In exchange for about \$17, he says he will provide me with a room for the night, a home-cooked dinner and breakfast the next day. I follow him about a mile, maybe more, until we reach a property tucked against the edge of an agricultural terrace.

"Casa de Thomas," he says and motions for me to follow him through a low-slung wooden gate.

The house is about the size of a 700-square-foot apartment, built on a plot of gravel and straw. Chickens wobble and cluck, both inside the building and outside.

My room is located in a structure built on stilts adjacent to Thomas' main home. The walls are roughly-hewn wood. The ceiling is a blue tarp, pulled tightly and stapled down. There are two simple beds, each topped by five wool blankets. For light, Thomas hands me a small candle in a wooden holder and a box of matches.

There are three other people staying with Thomas that night, in a different part of his house. I expected this, knowing that most of the islanders now make a living through such homestays. In the evening, we gather in another room of tarp and wood, where we eat together. Thomas' two children are also there, but they

do not eat -- they just laugh and play with sticks on the dirt floor. The sun sinks quickly, and though it's only 5 or 6 p.m., it feels like midnight.

Thomas' apple-cheeked wife Inez has cooked the food, and I almost laugh when I see what she brings to the table: Omelets and french fries, quinoa soup, bread. It's the same fare I've had almost every day since I arrived in South America. But the meal is rich and hearty and good, and I can't complain. While the wind whips furious outside, I am grateful for my seat at this table and the hot food before me.

The moment feels like one from my youth. The sober-faced Thomas, a determined family provider, vaguely resembles my dad. Inez's warmth and willingness to please recalls my mom, almost painfully. Whenever I had friends over for dinner as a kid, my mom would trot out pizza and soda and anything to please, as if she could buy my friends' affection with grease and caffeine. I long to call home now, simply for a moment of contact in the middle of this vast night, if only this island had telephones. And if only someone was there to answer. I know my dad is at the nursing home tonight, the way he is every night.

After I finish dinner at Casa de Thomas, I retire to the simple bedroom. It's cold and there's no heat, so I crawl under the five wool blankets. I feel almost like the princess and the pea, if the princess had slept with the mattresses on top of her, instead of the other way around.

Almost as soon as I blow out the candle, I hear noise from a fiesta outside, a loud, raucous party with dancing and singing. The Taquileños must be drunk to be having such fun on a night that is so punishingly cold.

The last time I tried to sleep through a festival, it was the other night in Lima, my last moment's in Jason's arms. That sleep was fitful and achy, soaked with tears. Tonight, however, I am lulled by the sound of pan flutes and drums as villagers march around the island's winding paths, the slap of sandals against stone.

I still miss Jason -- it's the hollow situated just under my ribcage, a place of echoes and rustling leaves -- but I'm starting to see how I can live with that feeling there.

It's amazing how everything can change in just a couple days. Yesterday I didn't even know Taquile existed, and tonight I am staying in the house of Thomas and Inez, people who used to be strangers.

I have no idea what tomorrow might bring, but tonight the world seems a little less intimidating. Finally I can rest.

LESSON: Don't let the monkeys get you down.

Online I find the perfect job for me, volunteering at a primate sanctuary in Bolivia. It's so many things I love, all combined into one grand experience: Sunshine, an exotic jungle locale, as many bananas as I can eat, and monkeys everywhere.

The gig is with a non-profit organization that runs a wildlife sanctuary in a remote village, Villa Tunari, surrounded by jungle and overgrown coca fields.

The people who run the organization are laid-back and noncommittal. When I send an email to ask if I needed to commit to a volunteer date, they respond with a quick message: No. When I press them for more details, they reply with a sheet of frequently asked questions, including a warning about the village's only cash machine. If it is broken, and it often is, the closest ATM is eight hours away. They also recommend bringing enough packaged snacks, medicine and hygiene products to last the entirety of my stay, since the village markets don't sell much beyond fresh produce and watery beer. I am required to stay a minimum of 14 days.

I arrive by minibus, a 12-hour journey from La Paz, crammed between a bulky man and an old woman who occasionally fondles my nose piercing and laughs. When we get to Villa Tunari, the driver pauses on a bridge with no shoulder, lets me out of the bus and points up the road to a series of small, flat buildings.

When I reach the buildings, I'm sweaty and red-faced but relieved to find it's the correct place. The volunteer coordinator, an Aussie named Noel, takes my passport and ATM cards to store them in a safe.

"You won't need those for a while," she says with a wink.

Noel then takes me to the sanctuary's thrift store, where volunteers like me rent old clothes so our own gear won't be ruined by the work. For just a few dollars, I pick up long-sleeve, button-down shirts to keep me covered from the sun; khakis durable enough to resist jungle thorns; knee-high galoshes for hiking through mud and monkey feces.

Wearing somebody else's clothes is instantly transformational, and I wish my mom could see me now. I am no longer the delicate flower who drank martinis and wore impossibly high heels at fancy press events. In these scrappy, borrowed clothes, I am a new Maggie -- a wilder, fiercer version of myself, a rugged me I've never met before. This must be how drag queens feel slipping on gowns and silky wigs.

With my new duds, I walk among the wildlife with a new sense of confidence. I am hardcore. These galoshes were made for trekking, and that's just what they'll do.

There are no mirrors in the volunteer living quarters, so my curly hair quickly gets tangled and scraggly. There's barely any running water either -- the town has been suffering from a drought, so the rare and wonderful shower days are something to be celebrated.

My room is narrow and made of concrete bricks, painted a peculiar pink of cat vomit, topped by a roof ringed with moisture stains and mildew. There is only one door, and it is attached by just one hinge at the bottom. It has rotted away, leaving a hole shaped like an upside-down U. When I close my door each night, I have to reach through the hole and pull an old tire close to block it, so wild animals won't wander inside. Still, I wake up some mornings and find stray kittens with weepy eyes snuggled up in my clean clothes. The window has a curtain made of shredded black plastic garbage bags.

My bed has a frame, but the mattress is hard and dusty, stuffed full with some kind of grain. It is filthy enough that I roll out my sleeping bag on top and sleep inside. The combination, however, is surprisingly comfortable.

Noel tells me the area surrounding the animal sanctuary is steeped in the narcotics trade, home to large, illegal fields of coca plants. Army helicopters, looking for crops, often circle overhead. It doesn't feel dangerous, though. This is a battle waged on someone else's land, something that I will never have to worry about.

I am assigned to work in Monkey Park, an area where about 400 abused and mistreated monkeys, most of them seized from the illegal exotic pet trade, are being reintroduced into the wild. They live in the jungle without cages, but they stick around because the sanctuary provides fresh produce and vitamin-laced porridge twice a day.

My job includes washing fruit and chopping melons for the three daily feedings, filling buckets with bananas, shoveling enormous piles of monkey waste, and cleaning the cages of 40 spider monkeys. (Those monkeys are particularly valuable to poachers and traders, so they are the only ones caged and locked away each night.)

Every other day I am also on blanket duty, which means I have to clean the 4- by 5-foot pieces of wool that line the cages of the quarantined monkeys. One by one, I scrape feces off each thick blanket and use a bar of lye and a brush to scrub away the stink and disease. Then I dunk the sudsy blanket in a bucket of hot water before hanging it on a clothesline in the trees. It is hard work, but I find it satisfying. Sometimes I don't even sing or think. I just appreciate the way a pile of dirty fabric transforms into 200 clean blankets, dripping and drying on the lines. The skin on my hands peel raw and red, and I don't mind at all.

Up until this point, my entire life has been separated from any kind of physical labor. My adult years have been spent in classrooms, newsrooms or the mall, shelving books at a library, making espresso at a coffee shop, or writing at a computer. This work, however, is a revelation -- my muscles are sore from shoveling and scrubbing, I pant and wheeze while carrying buckets into the jungle, and I grit my teeth as I chop and prepare food. It reminds me of my mother's stories about growing up in Germany. She worked in the fields to provide for her family, planting seeds, picking potatoes, plucking chickens. I feel like I finally understand the pleasure of stepping back and thinking, "Look at what

my hands can do.” It makes me feel more connected to my mom, appreciating her hard work on a level I never experienced before.

When I finish each shift, I am covered in sweat, mud and mosquito bites. My fingernails are broken. My cuticles are encrusted with too much dirt to fully wash away, even when I use a pocketknife to scrape around each crescent. Dinner feels earned.

I have been here for one week, and a good portion of every glorious day is spent playing with monkeys. Romeo, a tiny capuchin, often curls around my neck like a living, breathing fur stole. Around 10-inches tall, he is smaller than most of the other monkeys, so he fears them. When bigger capuchins come near, Romeo clings to me even tighter. He chirps in my ear and tugs at my hair to groom me.

Martina, a barrel-shaped monkey with tufts of dark hair around her jaw like an Amish beard, brings me gifts of rocks. One day when I am sitting, Martina scrambles onto my lap and tugs on my fingers until my hand rests against her belly. I leave it there. A few seconds later, I’m surprised to feel a baby stirring inside her womb. I don’t know if this behavior is typical for monkeys, but it feels special.

Anita, a fat capuchin, likes to munch her food and stare at me with hypnotic eyes until I look at her. As soon as I return her gaze, she sticks a finger up my nose, then scurries away.

Monkey Park is one small sliver of the sprawling property, which houses more than 700 creatures of all shapes and sizes. Because it is Bolivia’s only

animal sanctuary, nearly every abused, mistreated or illegally traded exotic animal in the country is sent here, creating a Noah's Ark-esque collection of pumas, leopards, coatis, bears, birds and monkeys.

The situation for the already crowded sanctuary is poised to grow even more strained. In July 2009, Bolivia passed a law that said the use of animals in circuses constituted an act of cruelty, and they passed a ban throughout the country -- the first ban on circus animals in the world. It seems especially surprising in a country where I saw animals abused on a regular basis, like people who openly kicked cats and beat dogs without any shame or fear of punishment.

Circus operators were given a year to comply with the law, which meant that they had to get rid of their animals by July 2010. I volunteered at the sanctuary in August 2010. Dozens of animals arrived every day, either turned over by owners or the police.

One monkey, brought in on my second day in the park, had been raised to be a performer. His owner dressed him up in tiny clothes and forced the animal to dance on an electric hotplate. Another monkey had been nearly starved to death by owners who didn't know how to care for him. They kept him in a small box until his howls for help grew too loud and irritating. One of the park's pumas was nearly crippled after jumping through hoops of fire at an illegal circus. His paws were still crispy when he arrived.

Today the sun is brilliant and only slightly filtered by the trees. Green branches and knobby vines weave cathedral-like arches above my head. Tropical birds sing and monkeys somersault through the air. Then the people with machetes arrive.

The campesinos, or farmers, number more than 125 men, women, even children, all wielding blades. They have been hired by the village government to build a road through the sanctuary, even though the animal refuge has been a part of the local community since 1996. They position themselves along the trail and begin to chop rapidly and haphazardly.

It seems like only seconds before the trees tumble. Every horrifying crackle creates a wide hole in the jungle skyline. It doesn't take long before the tree-lined trails look more like mulch.

An Australian volunteer and I push our way through the campesinos, grabbing monkeys from falling trees. The animals' cries sound similar to colicky babies.

The workers laugh like classic movie villains and swing their blades toward the monkeys, taunting them. When a mother and baby monkey become trapped in a cage of downed branches, one man steps toward them and brings his machete down like a guillotine, catching the baby on the foot. The older monkey howls as the baby screeches in pain. Another group of men shove a spider monkey into a metal garbage can, then spit on the animal while he

cowers. I fight for the animals the best way I know how -- by shepherding them to safety -- but I sure wish I had a machete of my own right now.

This new road is supposed to slice directly through the center of the park, displacing hundreds of animals, damaging the delicate jungle ecosystem and destroying the “monkey mirador” area, where particularly violent monkeys are rehabilitated. An official from the village says heavy equipment will show up within a few days to flatten the lush area.

The goal for this road is to create quick, easy access for the local coca farmers to bring their products to bigger communities. Part of this is good. Coca is an important crop in this region of South America, and there are many legitimate uses for it. People dry the leaves and brew it in tea to add a jolt to the day, the way one might take a shot of espresso. Others chew the leaves, the way I did on my hike up the Inca Trail, to combat altitude sickness or digestive woes. It’s such an important crop that in the 1990s, one out of every eight Bolivians were *cocaleros*, making their living from coca cultivation.

Of course, there are illegal uses for the plant as well. When the leaves are steeped in kerosene and processed with sulphuric acid, the natural crop is turned into cocaine. The government is looking to eradicate the larger farms that exceed what is needed for traditional uses of coca, the places where a plant becomes an illegal drug.

The Bolivians who run the sanctuary gather all the volunteers in the food warehouse to give us an update. They explain the farmers need the road for an

easy route to the highway. Trafficking cocaine and making money is the priority to the local village. Not the animals.

Romeo clings to my neck as I pluck another spider monkey baby from a trash bin. More trees fall around around us. I have never seen the monkeys so terrified.

A previous attempt was made by the village government to construct a road through the park, but it washed out during a landslide in the rainy season. Managers at the sanctuary expect something similar to happen this time around. No plans have been made for better construction. There is nothing long-sighted about the people here now, chopping down trees.

I think about the friends back in California who lock themselves into bathrooms at glamorous parties, snorting lines of coke, the times I've joined them. I think of the monkeys howling while their babies were battered and a jungle that has been sacrificed for the drug trade.

The distance between home and where I'm standing has never seemed greater. No one tells you this at the start of a journey -- that the gap between places can widen so far, it's possible you'll never go back to the place you were.

Three days after the campesinos ravage the jungle, the monkeys are still anxious and unsettled. I don't blame them. The tree line now looks like a smile with several teeth knocked out. Large swaths are missing, and it's more difficult

for the monkeys to leap from bough to bough. The trails are obscured by broken branches.

“I don’t even know where to begin,” says an Australian volunteer.

A woman named Megan, a former police officer from England, sits on the ground, hugs her knees to her chest and cries.

“This is the worst thing I’ve ever seen,” she says.

Though the volunteers expected the bulldozers to show up already, they have not. We try to maintain our routine as best as possible, but it’s difficult with everybody feeling powerless and on edge. Every morning we expect to find another piece of jungle absent. We barely talk anymore during the daily chores.

I am just about to leave for my own lunch after the mid-morning feeding when a stocky monkey named Reno jumps onto my lap. Reno is the approximate size and shape of a basketball. He’s all muscle, but his fur is as soft as a plush toy.

When I stroke his back, he snuggles deep into the crease between my legs and hips. He’s not typically a cuddler, so this is a treat. I decide lunch can wait. The sun is shining, and the air smells like fresh rain and papaya. I am content here.

Without warning, Reno hops up and pisses all over my thighs. Before I can even think about what just happened, Reno leaps to the ground, grabs my arms and sinks his teeth into the flesh of my left hand. It is sudden and shocking, and I inhale sharply but don’t make a sound. This isn’t like Reno.

The bites become vicious and quick, aggressive enough to make an audible sound as fang hits bone, and pain dawns on me. I yawp with fear, but I don't know how to defend myself against the unpredictability of a creature I thought I knew. Reno's eyes are wild as he looks up at me, and my thoughts are equally wild. I'm suddenly afraid that he might leap onto my face, claw my eyes, rip the hair from my head.

My long shirtsleeve falls down my arm and covers my skin, and Reno lifts the fabric away, exposing me again. When I try to pull away, he yanks my hand closer, biting down again, gnawing further up my arm. When blood flows, Reno laps it up like melted ice cream on the side of a cone.

My face is red and hot, and I can't stop myself from screaming. "The fuck?" I yell. Just as he eyes my neck, another volunteer walks into Monkey Park. The sound scares Reno away. I am shaky, and the volunteer puts an arm around my waist and helps me walk down the rocky path toward the main road. He brings me a bottle of water, and then he must get back to work.

I walk by myself from the sanctuary into the small town, about two miles away, the closest place to find help. My wounds are still open and bleeding. I am still too stunned to panic.

My first stop is the hospital, but I leave when a doctor says they cannot promise me clean needles. "Is that OK?" he asks, but I am already walking away. I decide antibiotics are more important than stitches.

On the main street I approach strangers for help, sounding out the word for “pharmacy” in hesitant Spanish.

“Far-mah-SEE-yah?” The blood runs down my hand in hot, slender rivers.

One by one, each person casts a downward glance. Some shrug and walk away. They want nothing to do with the crazy, bleeding lady. Can’t say I blame them. The more people reject me, the more agitated I become. Finding a pharmacy is now my mission in life, and I pace the street, stopping everybody I see. I am like the loud and unrelenting beggar on a city sidewalk that can’t be avoided.

“Far-mah-SEE-yah?” I say to an old man, who is sweeping the dirt from his dirt patio onto a dirt road. He shakes his head no.

Sobbing, I shake my fist at the sky and cry out, “Far-mah-SEE-yah!”

“Ah,” the old man says, then changes the emphasis on the syllables ever-so-slightly. “Far-MAH-see-yah. Why not say so?”

He ushers me into his unmarked store. It is the farmacia.

A long glass counter runs the length of the room, crowded with untidy stacks of boxes. The shelves along the wall sag under heavy glass bottles and a rainbow assortment of pills. Near the window, several fat mason jars hold urine-colored fluids and pale spirals of snake bodies.

The old man tosses a stained white coat over his clothes and looks at me expectantly over his half-rimmed spectacles. I hold out my hand, clearly swiss-cheesed with fang holes.

“Mono es loco!” I say in my best Spanish, which is very poor Spanish. “Mono ... uh, el bite-o my mano.” I bare my teeth, let out a monkey howl and pantomime the tearing of flesh.

“Si,” the man agrees, looking me in the eye. “Loco.”

His coat swirls as he turns, shimmying around the shelves, grabbing a wide variety of pharmaceuticals. He fans them out on the counter in front of me.

“Which one?” he says.

“No se. Which one for monkey bite?”

He shrugs. I shrug back and point to something with a lot of Zs in the name. It sounds important.

“Antibiotico?” I say.

He shrugs again, then pushes a long package of orange and red-striped pills across the counter. The foil is old, peeling from the back of the blister strip.

“Good enough,” he says.

It is everything my travel doctor has warned me about -- medicine that looks like candy; an open package of pills; a pharmacist in a sketchy store who doesn't speak the same language -- so I am skeptical, but I don't have much choice.

This village has five internet cafes and several bars, but only one pharmacy. It would take many hours by bus on dirt roads to reach the next town of any size. In addition, labor protests have shut down the major roads and it is uncertain if anyone can get through. I am stranded in this one-pharmacy town.

The drugs in my pocket still don't change the fact that I need stitches, and the hospital is sketchy. I hurry back to the animal sanctuary and find the staff veterinarian.

The vet is a small, sweaty man with a mild command of English. He tugs a black thread in a zig-zag pattern through my skin, ties a knot and trims the excess. Then he dabs purple fluid on the wound. It looks terrible.

"Better," he says. "Come back if hand becomes pus."

I consider never returning to Monkey Park. My hand still aches from the attack -- it might even become pus! -- and I am still shaky when I think about having monkeys climb on me again. Only a little more than a month has passed since I left home, but it might as already be one year. I feel isolated in this village, too far from my husband and family for comfort.

I suppose there's a wildness to everything in our lives, we just don't realize it. I think about how Reno's behavior shifted so suddenly, how even the mighty tree line changed in a matter of minutes. It's the same way my mother's disease seemed to strike from nowhere and caught my family by surprise. One day you're surrounded by jungle bliss, the next day the trees fall.

True, I have volunteer friends at the sanctuary. But It's frustrating to stay and work when I feel threatened and unsafe. I am hot and hungry and tired of eating bananas every day. I even smell terrible. My body is caked with three days' worth of sweat, dirt, monkey piss and now blood. Even the monkeys are turning against me. If I hadn't given up so much to be in this place right now, I

would think about going home. But what kind of person would I be if I gave up now? The whole reason I wanted to travel was to see what I was made of, to discover how strong I could really be, to live out the dreams of my mother.

I decide to stay for a few more days before I return to La Paz -- cutting short my volunteer stint by just two days -- and continue from there. I'll stay long enough to do some more of the work I have loved, long enough to test myself, long enough to prove that I'm not running away from anything.

Before I fall asleep, I make this resolution: Don't let the monkeys get you down. It's a lesson I'll tuck away in my backback and use again all over the world.

LESSON: Ordeals shape us.

I am dirty. I am worn. I am cold. My hand still throbs from a monkey bite. And my backpack is wet with another woman's urine.

A few days after Reno's attack, I take a minibus to a bigger city and purchase a another bus ticket there. it is dark when my bus finally crawls out of La Paz, a city shaped like a soup bowl full of smog and pollution.

I shove the broken window as far shut as it will go. When it won't budge the final inch, I plug my socks into the gaping hole. Even with all that insulation from size 10 wool hiking socks, the air is still frigid enough to make my teeth chatter. I stuff the earbuds of my iPod into my ears and crank up George Harrison, my go-to source of comfort.

I'm wearing my thickest fleece jacket and use the other one like a blanket, pulled tight over my body like a mummy wrap. I stretch my hat down over my ears as far as it would go, then wedge a couple T-shirts between the side of my head and the window.

I scrunch my eyes shut and try to sleep, but the vehicle has different plans.

The bus groans up each hill with high-pitched, metallic shrieks, then moans when it reaches the top. This happens often. Bolivia is a hilly country. Once in a while the weak headlights illuminate the landscape, showcasing a world of sheer drop-offs and streets that crumble down the sides of mountains.

Occasionally the driver pulls over to the general vicinity of the side of the road, where he opens the wheezy doors to let more people board the vehicle in exchange for a palm full of coins. Every time I think we can't possibly squeeze another passenger on the bus, we add 10 more. The passengers carry burlap sacks -- some grain, some potatoes -- and pile them high in between the seats. They perch on top of the mountainous lumps like possessive hens.

After an hour, the bus feels like a hostage situation. I no longer remember what it feels like to sleep without my head smacking a window every 10 minutes. I can't recall a life without hairy arms on my neck, bags of bananas on my lap, chaotic bus noise and strange, fermented smells. Is it possible that I ever felt warm? Content? Comfortable? Of course, comfort is one of those things that you don't fully appreciate until it's gone.

Then there are the potholes. Nearly every rotation of the tires means another hard thunk of the bus and another thwack of my head against the window.

This reminds me of the time I dropped too much acid, and I spent hours thinking, "What if I'm never normal again? What if the world is always melty and orange and filled with vacuum cleaners that transform into Queen Elizabeths?" And so it is with this ride. What if my head hitting a window is my new reality? What if I never know a smooth surface again?

The truth is I feel incredibly stupid. I knew that backpacking wouldn't be a string of stays at fancy hotels, but somehow I didn't think about this part -- the

hours of numb thighs and teeth-rattling rides along treacherous roads and the feeling that what I was doing was utterly pointless. At home I had a hypoallergenic mattress with a two-inch Tempur-Pedic foam top. I had a husband who fit the shape of my body exactly inside his long, warm arms. I had a pillow. I didn't have a hairy stranger in the seat behind me, trying to cop a feel under the guise of dropping his bag of bananas.

This is all part of the adventurous, round-the-world experience, Maggie, I tell myself. This isn't about staying comfortable. One person's bone-jarring bus seat is someone else's vibrating massage chair, after all. Then I open my eyes.

There, in the seat in front of me, a hefty Bolivian woman hoists her skirt to her waist as she squats to the floor.

I rub my eyes, the way cartoon animals do when they first wake up. Yep. The woman is still there. Still squatting. How peculiar.

Then, over the roar of the bus squeaking, the metal heaving, the people snoring, I hear an unmistakable hiss.

"Oh no," I say.

I try to wake the people around me.

"Oh no."

I point to the woman for anyone who will bother to look.

"She's ... oh no," I say. The bus begins its ascent up another hill.

That's when I remember my backpack. I refused to stash my valuables in an overhead bin or in the luggage compartment under the bus. I've met too many

other travelers who had their bags swiped while they dozed off nearby. Instead, I keep my small, personal bag at my feet with the straps wrapped around my ankles, a method that I considered sheer genius. Until now.

I reach under the seat for my black bag.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no.”

It is slick with wetness and stinks of fresh urine.

Thankfully, my backpack has a waterproof lining, so my passport, laptop and other electronics remain unscathed. But the backpack itself is soppy with fluid. I have just a few possessions left in the whole world, and they have become biohazards. None of it makes sense. The bus stopped a few times during the 11-hour ride, and everybody disembarked to use the facilities -- the facilities being shaggy bushes along an otherwise empty stretch of road.

After a total of 12 hours, the bus comes to a stop in Sucre. My muscles ache, and pins and needles shoot up my legs. My backpack is still wet, and I hold it at an arm's length. I would be incredibly grouchy if the town wasn't so gorgeous. The buildings here look sculpted and buttery, like gingerbread slathered in white frosting, which is probably why the historic center is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It reminds me of the village miniatures my mom used to display on the fireplace mantle at Christmastime.

The morning light is soft and lemony, and the delicate blue of the sky is upholstered by clouds. The lack of congestion and pulsing music makes the town feel sensual, slow-paced.

I know I'm supposed to be on a journey for adventure, but I just don't want to seek it out today. So I opt to check in to a hotel instead a hostel, even though it's going to cost me more money. I just want to unpack, unwind.

Travel has stripped me to my elemental self. While my husband once called me high-maintenance, it turns out my needs are actually quite simple: A clean bed, a long, deep bathtub and a laundromat down the road.

LESSON: Life is worth celebrating

There's a TV show I watched in preparation for my trip, a documentary series called "I Shouldn't Be Alive" that features death-defying ordeals and stories of survival.

"Why are you watching that show again?" Jason would ask. "It's creepy."

"It could save my life," I'd say. "I'm learning what not to do."

I was joking, of course. I heard about backpackers getting mugged or having their ATM cards stolen, but I didn't really think backpacking would be a risky endeavor. My incident with the snake in the rainforest taught me better, and then I was attacked by a monkey in Bolivia. But it's not until I get to Tupiza that I realized just how easily I could have my very own episode of "I Shouldn't Be Alive."

Tupiza is Bolivia's version of the wild west, a small town of red dirt and tumbleweeds, horses and broken liquor bottles. I arrive just a few days after leaving the animal sanctuary, the stitches from the monkey bite still violet and throbbing.

I book a four-day tour of Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia's great salt flats, with the tour agency that has the highest ranking and the best online reviews. The tour, which includes four other tourists, a driver and cook, leaves from this spot and will take me through some of the most remote spots of Bolivia before bringing me back to Tupiza.

Right away, the tour goes wrong.

Though I paid extra for an English-speaking guide, the driver and cook speak only a few words of English. Luckily, one of the tourists is Argentinian, and she offers to translate the driver's words for the rest of us. Then I discover the cook brought only meat-based foods, even though the tour office said it would be no problem that I'm a vegetarian. I guess by "no problem," they meant, "it doesn't make a difference to us."

Our mode of transportation is a Land Cruiser that has logged well over 250,000 miles. As it climbs craggy mountain roads, we have one flat tire and some engine problems. We wander the mountain road on foot taking photos while Carlos, our driver, changes the tire and tinkers under the hood. I don't have a lot of faith in this vehicle.

We arrive in the rural town of San Antonio de Lipez just as a grey dusk settles. The arid landscape seems barely fit for humans, and there are supposedly 250 inhabitants, but I see no farms, no livestock, no people. The mountains are dotted with scrub bushes and crumbling walls.

Our home for the night is a low-slung structure made of stone and brown clay. The roof is a patchy tarp, and snow falls at some spots inside the room. There is no heater or running water. I can see my breath when I exhale. Another tour group joins us -- this one with three British men and one beautiful British woman, all doing a gap year of travel between high school and college.

I wrap myself in wool blankets, then wiggle into my sleeping bag, cursing the fact that it was made for summer camping. Ali, one of the youngest Brits,

dons the sleeping bag he rented from his tour company. The bag is shaped vaguely like a human but comes to a point at each end. He looks rather like a giant orange starfish.

“Do you guys think I’m sexy?” he says, posing for us.

“Unbelievably,” says Gemma, the beautiful Brit woman. “I can hardly resist you.”

We were supposed to make it farther along the trail by now, but the bad tire and engine problems delayed us a few hours. Also snow is on the horizon, and Carlos didn’t want to push the vehicle through a bad storm at night. Unfortunately, this means we didn’t make it to a stop where we could get the necessary supplies for the night. Instead the cook makes bologna sandwiches and gives us packages of crackers. Gemma, the British woman, pulls a huge bottle of Bolivian whiskey from her backpack.

The British group’s guide says the storm is expected to be the worst they’ve ever seen. With grim faces, the guides give us two options:

1. Ride out the storm in San Antonio de Lipez. The risk, however, is that the storm will linger too long, and we will either freeze to death or run out of food.

2. Find an alternate route through the mountains on rugged, abandoned roads in a vehicle that could potentially break down, far beyond cell phone range or emergency service. We still run the risk of getting stranded in the

storm, but at least we'll have a chance of making it to our next stop along the way.

Carlos leaves the decision to us. He disappears with the cook and the other guides outside, where they smoke cigarettes and sip from flasks.

The whiskey bottle is passed around the table, and each of us takes a hefty nip to stay warm. We breathe on our mittened hands and discuss the pros and cons of each option. Ride out the snowstorm in an uninhabited place with no access to food or heat? Or find an alternate route through the mountains on abandoned roads during a storm in an unreliable vehicle? Either one sounds terrible.

The worry gnaws at me. I came here looking for something beautiful. Now the bleakness of snow seems grimmer than ever before. Will these brown walls be the last thing I see? The frigidness of the air makes me nervous. My bones ache from cold.

Eventually the discussion takes an even grimmer turn: With very little food left, which one of us should be eaten first?

"I'm out, you guys," I say. "I'm a vegetarian."

"That just means your flesh will be the most tender," says Ali. "Like grass-fed beef."

"Maggie it is!" cheers Gemma. "Let's eat Maggie!"

"No!" I laugh as I cry out, but the truth is that I'm scared. We could actually die here. As a tourist, you like to think you're immune to the trouble of the real

world, separated from actual hardship and turmoil. But not everything is as pleasant and happy as the picture on a postcard. Sometimes journeys take a bad turn, just like real life.

Both groups decide to see what the weather is like in the morning before we make a final decision. We all sleep, uneasy and cold on thin mattresses in small rooms.

At 5 a.m., there is a significant layer of snow on the ground. The group gathers at the table and takes a vote. I don't participate -- I don't want to be responsible for what happens to us. The remainder unanimously decide the better option is to press on, even if it's the last choice they ever make.

All of us huddle together for a picture inside the shelter. "This will be the photo they'll run on the BBC after our bodies are discovered," Gemma says. It makes me think of those photos of doomed explorers in the early 1900s -- our faces frozen permanently frozen in smiles, oblivious to what happens next.

My group piles into the tour vehicle, wearing every layer from our backpacks, spreading layers of sleeping bags and blankets over ourselves. My teeth chatter uncontrollably, and my limbs are too stiff to move.

"Vamos," Carlos says, and we set off into the snowy white morning.

The Land Cruiser slides around the road, up and down mountain paths, and everybody in the vehicle is silent. The Argentinian sleeps, while her boyfriend looks worried. I chew my fingernails, a nervous habit I thought I'd long given up. I've never felt this kind of uncertainty about the future -- that is, the idea that I

might not have a future at all. Then again, my mom never had uncertainty about the future, and she waited her entire life for dreams that would never be realized.

I always thought a death-defying moment would involve a lot more activity, like ice-picking my way up a particularly treacherous part of Mount Everest or BASE jumping off a rocky cliff in Norway. But this situation couldn't be more passive -- I am letting someone drive me directly into the throes of a storm.

That's what I never realized when I was safe at home watching "I Shouldn't Be Alive." Anything could happen at anytime. The featured stories weren't about daredevils or extreme risk-takers. These were just normal people who go for a hike and don't bring enough water. People who went for a weekend yachting trip and misread their maps. People just like me.

In that way, the power of chance is like my mom's disease. There is no reason for the Alzheimer's, and there is nothing to blame. She didn't do anything risky or dangerous, she didn't go looking for a disease. It just happened -- before my family knew what was happening to her, she was already headed downhill into the storm.

I wasn't around when my mom was first diagnosed with her disease; I was working at my first newspaper job after college and living a few hours away from my parents. My dad said he was watching the news one night while my mom prepared dinner. She had always been a bad cook, but her meals had become consistently terrible. She made strange stews and pots of spaghetti soup. She used sugar when the dish called for salt. Sometimes she added cracked pepper

three, four, maybe even five times. But my dad is a man who doesn't complain about food.

"The craziest thing happened to me today," she said to my father. "Today I forgot how to start the car. Luckily, this nice young man offered to help."

My dad was alarmed. Forgot how to start the car?

She elaborated. After she left the hospital for her weekly allergy shot, she sat in the parking lot for several minutes, puzzled, the car's ignition suddenly a riddle she couldn't solve. She asked a passer-by for help. He turned the key, started the engine, and she drove home.

"Is that just the funniest thing?" she said.

The next day my father scheduled an appointment with a doctor. He was shocked when the doctor asked her the simplest questions -- What time is it on this clock? What year is it? Who is the president of the United States? -- and she couldn't find the answers. How could someone navigate daily life and still be so lost? The worst-case scenario, he figured, was a brain tumor.

It took more visits to the hospital and more specialists to receive the Alzheimer's diagnosis. For a while my dad didn't want to tell anyone. Why announce something when there is no answer, no solution -- only stigma?

My brother-in-law finally called and gave me the grim news. "Something is going on with your mother," he said.

I remember sitting on the edge of my futon, twisting the phone cord around my finger, trying to find the words to respond. I remember driving to a bar

and getting hammered, because it was the only way out of a world where my mom had a diagnosis attached to her. And then I didn't remember anything for a long, long time.

In the Bolivian desert, the snow grows so thick, we can no longer see the Toyota ahead of us. Through it all, Carlos and Cook play the same folk album on repeat. After a while, the rest of us begin to sing along, even though we don't know the words, we're just mimicking the sounds. Even though I hate the music, I sing along too. It keeps me from imagining the truck falling end over end off the side of the mountain, landing upside down in a snowbank, freezing to death.

If I die, I wonder how long it will take for Jason to find out that I'm gone. There is no cell phone service or internet in this part of Bolivia, so I sent him several emails before I began this tour with instructions in each message's subject line: "Open this on Day 1," "Open on Day 2" and so forth. He has at least a week of those love letters waiting. I wonder what will happen after that last one, when there are no more messages to open.

Every slide down a hill turns my stomach. The path threatens to crumble every time we slide toward the edge of the mountain. When we can't see a path for all the snow, I wonder how Carlos knows there is actually terra firma beneath us?

The next ten hours are white knuckles and sweaty feet, my nerves tangling into knots. The mountains are snow-covered, and our vehicles chew up the gravel. My teeth knock together with cold and fear. When the mountain

flattens into an icy desert, our vehicle skates wildly back and forth. It is bleak. The road looks like a Fudgsicle.

At last we arrive at our next stop. Carlos parks in front of a small hostel, similar to the place we just left. This time, however, we have small space heaters. My fingers and toes regain warmth so quickly it hurts. I realize I haven't fully exhaled in hours. Taking the alternate route meant we missed most of the sights on our itinerary -- but we are alive, and the snowstorm is behind us.

Our treat for the night is a dip in the nearby natural hot springs. I submerge myself up to my chin, and my body loosens from the stress disappearing into the gurgling blue. The marrow of my chilled bones thaws, a slow and liquid unburdening. I let my neck relax, the back of my head floating on the surface, and I breathe easy and deep. It is almost an hour before I step out of the springs. As soon as I dry off, the tundra air freezes my towel into sculptural shapes, a hardness that reminds me of the journey we have taken to get here.

The next two days feel like we are traveling across the moon. In Desierto de Siloli, the lagoons glow with red and green algae, and the bizarre lava formations look like they were stolen from the set of a science fiction movie. Flocks of flamingos turn the sky pink each time they take flight. The ground is white with fields of salt and borax.

On our last night, we stay at hotel entirely made of salt. Even the beds are made of rectangular salt blocks, draped with red wool blankets. My friends lick the walls.

In that hotel I remove the stitches of the monkey bite. I have no scissors, so I snip the top of each black loop with my fingernail clippers, then slide each thread out with tweezers. The skin around the raw wounds has pulled together and now looks newborn pink. My hand has healed when I wasn't even paying attention. It's one of those developments that happens when you're not looking, like when your parents grow old overnight.

Our final destination is Salar de Uyuni, the largest salt flat on earth, an expanse of 4,6086 square miles, stretching down 11 deep layers. The crust also holds about half of the world's lithium reserves.

The desolate landscape deceives the eye. What appears to be one endless field of snow is actually hard and crunchy salt. You can walk here, but you won't leave any footsteps behind.

Because there is only flat salt and a band of blue sky as far as the eye can see, nothing looks relative in photographs. No mountains to make people seem diminutive, no trees or structures to place anything in perspective. We take photos in which everything is out of proportion -- holding hands with dinosaur toys, dancing atop whiskey bottles. At one point the English blokes strip down naked and exuberantly leap across the flats -- only long enough for some hilarious pictures before they bundle up again in sweaters, scarves and hats. This is the best day we've had on the trip so far. I'm especially happy knowing the tour will take us through Uyuni, then back to Tupiza, where I can stay in a

warm hostel with a hot shower. I long for this so much, I can already feel the heat encircling my skin.

It takes many more hours of driving to reach Uyuni, a broken and brown high-altitude town, where the only real attraction is Cementerio de Trenes, a graveyard of abandoned trains. Carlos asks if we want to go there, and all of us say no. It sounds like nothing more than a celebration of the dilapidated and sad. We just want to move through Uyuni as quickly as possible.

Ever since the mining industry failed here, Uyuni has primarily served as a quick bathroom and meal stop for salt flat tourists like us. It's the gateway of "The Gringo Trail," as the townspeople call it.

It is here, on a dusty and desolate street, that Carlos pulls over to the side of the road. He asks for tips, because the tour is coming to an end. We dutifully hand over a small stack of Bolivianos. He did get us through a terrible snowstorm, after all.

After he receives the money, Carlos gets out of the vehicle and climbs on top of the Land Cruiser. He unleashes the bungees that secured our bags to the roof, and he drops each piece of luggage, one by one, into the dirt.

"No, no, no," I say. I try to toss my bag on top of the vehicle again.

Carlos swats my bag away and points a gnarled finger at me.

"No," he says.

"But you're supposed to take us to Tupiza," I say. "That was the deal."

I don't know if he understands my English. The other tourists plead with him as well.

He shakes his head firmly and leaps down from the roof. A cloud of dust rises from the force of his boots on the ground.

When he reaches for the door handle to climb into the driver's seat, the Argentinian tugs on his arm. She stops him long enough to get into a heated argument in rapid Spanish. She points to our bags, then points to the car. After several minutes of fighting, Carlos shrugs his shoulders, hops back into the Land Cruiser and drives away. He doesn't even look back.

Something about the situation -- the cold, the exhaustion, the fact that I am stranded on an anonymous road with nowhere to go -- evokes an epiphany from me: At least I am alive. It sounds incredibly cheesy, but I have never been so grateful. I have seen the place where mountains crumble under tires, where rugged vehicles could get abandoned in the snow, where tourists could freeze, and I have made it out of there. Though getting stranded in Uyuni is a setback, it's one I am happy to deal with.

"What are we going to do now?" Gemma says.

"Leave," Ali says, simply.

My tour group friends and I find a bus station and purchase tickets for later that night -- some are headed north, some of us will continue south to Argentina, most of us will never cross paths again. But tonight we still have one last evening as a group.

We spend our last few hours together at the Cementerio de Trenes, exploring the disrepair. We run on the tracks, and shaggy street dogs run and bark and want to play. The land around the rotted trains is flat and empty, and the birds overhead make lazy circles. We climb all over the rusted locomotives and bang on the engines, and yawping dogs leap into the trains with us. Then we are listening to the howls, both human and canine, echo through the rusted metal. Our reverberating laughter sounds vaguely like the chuga-chug of a steam train, and this place of disintegration is once again filled with life. I was wrong when I didn't want to come here earlier. Brokenness creates cracks that can be filled again.

I don't know where I'll be tomorrow, and I don't much care. Today I am still here, and that's what matters. Instead of a disappointment, this graveyard feels like a promise, like potential.

LESSON: Your path might be the opposite of where others are going

The sky is dark, without even a whisper of dawn. The cold is relentless enough to make me dig through my backpack, find my bag of socks (at the bottom, of course), and put a thick sock on each hand like mittens. I quiver each time the wind smacks my cheeks.

The only thing that separates me from Argentina is a bridge. Well, and an office, which is closed. And 27 people standing before me in line, all of whom appear equally anxious to get the hell out of Villazon, Bolivia. But Argentina is close. I know it. And if it wasn't 4 a.m., I could even see it.

A couple dozen Bolivian women, also waiting to cross the border, squat on the sidewalk beneath timid streetlights. Their wool skirts puddle around them on the ground. Each woman is wrapped with several rough, woven blankets, creating the overall shape of a haystack. Black bowler hats are perched on top of their heads. Shiny black braids hang to their knees.

Across the street is a man, asleep while propped against his wooden fruit cart, his snores echoing on the narrow street. Low-hanging telephone wire crisscross overhead. A pack of wild dogs amble past.

"Why would the bus drop us off two hours before the border office opens?" says a German traveler, speaking English to his Australian travel companion.

"Because it's Bolivia," his friend replies. "Nothing here makes sense."

After one frustrating month in Bolivia, complete with monkey bites, ice-cold showers and getting stranded on the salt flats, I have to agree. This morning I am getting out, and I vow to never look back.

At 6 a.m., a man in a uniform unlocks the door of the border office, which is approximately the same size as an office cubicle. Small. About 50 people shove inside at once. The uniformed man is the only person working, and he runs from one window to another -- one for Bolivians needing an exit stamp, the other for non-Bolivians needing an exit stamp. Three men in uniforms lean against the wall behind him, drinking steaming cups of tea.

An hour later, when I finally make it to the window, the three men are still standing there. "You like Bolivia?" the man says, nonchalantly, as he flips through my passport and looks over my visa.

"Uh, no. Not really."

"Very good," he says. He slams a rubber stamp against my passport with a loud "Thwack!"

I am ecstatic as I walk toward the simple concrete bridge that forms the border of the two nations. "Argentina, here I come!" I say out loud.

But not so fast. First there is another line for another border office, this time for an Argentinian entry stamp. The line moves quickly, however. There are several men working, all clad in crisp, tidy uniforms. There are distinct lines, with signs explaining entry to Argentina in several languages. The process is very straightforward, even when I am pulled aside for a random bag check.

Finally. Argentina. A blazing blue highway sign overhead welcomes:
“Bienvenido a la republica Argentina.”

As I make my way across the bridge and peer over the side, differences between the two countries are already apparent. On the Bolivian side there is disarray, a field of stray beer bottles sliding toward the trickling river. Graffiti climbs the sides of structures. Grocery bags flutter against scrub brush, like strange plastic blossoms. The Argentine side has none of that. No litter. No trash. No spray paint.

At the end of the bridge, a small white sign says, “Argentina” in a delicate font -- the kind of sign you might find proclaiming “The Smith Family” on the side of a picket fence. It’s adorable and strange enough that I snap a photo.

It is an easy walk to La Quiaca, Argentina. I make my way around town on foot in search of two simple things: Breakfast and a bank where I can exchange my Bolivianos for Argentinian pesos. I walk past an empty park and many closed buildings with shuttered doors. It’s rare to see a car drive past. An hour later, my stomach rumbles, I still have no pesos in my purse, and I’ve walked nearly every street of the small town without finding any food.

An Argentine man tries to help. He says his country enjoys breakfast much later in the day, since they don’t eat dinner until 9 or 10 p.m.

“So nobody in this whole town is eating breakfast?”

“Not now,” he confirms. “Later.”

The same man says the open bank was in Bolivia.

“Not possible,” I say. “That would make this the only border town in the whole world without a currency exchange.”

“Si!” the man nods with pride.

I don’t believe him, so I walk the streets so more and ask several other residents about the banks. Each person says the same thing: Bolivia.

“ATM?” I am grasping for anything. Any money. Anywhere. Any method.

Again, I receive the same word of advice: Bolivia.

I trudge back to the border, back across the bridge, back through the lines of people with sacks of grain. Along the way I pass a white sign that says “Bolivia.” It’s the same size and shape as the Argentinian sign, but this one is weathered with chipped paint. I don’t take a photo.

I find a bus out of town.

When I envisioned Argentina, I saw tango dancers and crowded Buenos Aires streets and steaks as big as platters. I never imagined the landscape of the north, where I am right now: Teal skies that heave with puffy clouds. Arid desert that suddenly buckles and gives way to dramatic expanses of green. Sunlight that dapples the cliffs with pure gold.

I am headed toward Salta, the capital city of this province. For this 7-hour journey, I am pleased to discover Argentinian buses are the exact opposite of Bolivian buses. The vehicle is well-maintained and comfortable, with squishy leather seats, drink holders and spacious compartments at my feet. The seat

reclines so far back, it nearly becomes bed. Not only was it nicer than business class on a domestic airline, it was nicer than most hostels.

Outside the window, the mountain ranges are wind-sculpted, the rock as red as roses, softly folding against each other like ribbon candy. The entire region looks like Sedona, Arizona, with a steroid injection. The roads are smooth, dotted with speed limit signs and painted lane lines. At home this is standard, but here it feels new and fresh.

For the first time since I started this trip, I have an actual seat belt, and it makes me feel incredibly spoiled. Who knew a sash of nylon across my lap would bring me such delight? It is a small touch that reminds me of home, security and protection. I remember the way my mother drove, how her arm instinctively snapped across my chest to squeeze me against the passenger seat every time she was forced to come to a quick stop.

“I have never been so happy for laws,” I write in my journal.

I follow a trail of wineries from Salta to Cafayate, where the sandy soil and mountain air work together to create torrontes, a magical white wine varietal that doesn't exist anywhere else in the world.

I am traveling now with Barbara, a friend from home also doing her own year-long journey around the world. Though we're the same age, we're at very different places in our lives. The same month I got married, Barbara divorced a man with whom she spent 11 years, a man who also happens to be a good friend

of mine. While I am hoping to do some soul-searching on this trip and making some connections within myself, Barbara seems more focused on connecting with other people. Specifically, men.

I don't fully realize this until we begin traveling together. She is more carefree but also reckless. One night she follows a German backpacker across a seedy part of town, just to flirt with him and score a free meal. She wants to hitchhike and collect wild stories -- she has sex with a Kiwi on the floor of our hostel bathroom one drunk and desperate night. She even looks different than I remember, letting her blonde hair grow long and unruly.

But she is my friend, and I cling to her. Part of it is that she can speak a meager amount of Spanish, which is helpful. Part of it is that I have called home again, and my mother is more lost and confused than ever. Her body has developed infections, but she no longer has the ability to communicate her pain. The nurses discover her urinary tract problems and her earaches only after they've been blazing for weeks. Her body is breaking down piece by piece.

I ache for the comfort of the known, even if it's the remains of a friendship.

Together Barbara and I decide to head to Argentina's wine country, a place that appears to offer both tranquility and a party scene.

After the harsh conditions of Bolivia, even the simplest pleasures in Argentina feel downright indulgent. In Cafayate, Barbara and I leisurely bike to local bodegas and stuffed ourselves silly on pumpkin empanadas, creamy leek stews and wine gelato. We walk a town square where women smile and old men

tip their hats. After a few days of bliss, I am relaxed and ready for my first Couchsurfing experience.

Couchsurfing is a website that began in 2002 as a way to connect travelers all over the world with hosts, who volunteer lodging in their own home. Hosts cannot charge for their services, which means Couchsurfing is friendly to my meager backpacking budget -- but it's also part of a bigger, more lovey-dovey concept. The idea is to find new friends, personalize your travel experience and learn about a culture from the people who live it. It's about making connections worldwide.

To ensure that nobody is a serial killer, both the host and the traveler create profiles and leave public feedback about each other after a meet-up occurs. So a traveler can peruse host reviews, just like they would with a restaurant or hotel. Likewise, the host knows that they're not opening their door for an ax murderer. Both parties agree to the meet-up before any detailed information is exchanged.

Barbara spends a week corresponding with one particular Couchsurfing host, a young American who schlepped her husband and three children through South America before settling in Argentina.

"Her name is Willow, and she is super awesome," Barbara says. "She's a writer, her husband is film director, and they met when they were doing movie stunts in California. She's into gymnastics, hula hooping and fire dancing, and

loves red wine, dark chocolate and books by the Bronte sisters. And they're both trapeze artists and vegetarians."

"Wow. This chick sounds really cool."

"It gets better," Barbara says. "They live in a huge, three-bedroom farmhouse that they renovated. And they have dogs and a pool. And bathtubs. The kicker is that they're just outside of Mendoza, which is prime Argentinian wine country.

"And bonus -- they said we can stay as long as we want. Who knows? This might actually be a vacation."

Willow sends directions to her house, but she also asks for a few host gifts -- chocolate, a bottle of wine, plus books and toys for her kids -- in exchange for providing shelter. Barbara agrees and confirms our arrival date and time.

We arrive in Mendoza by bus several hours later, bags of gifts in tow, but there is no sign of Willow at the station.

"Weird," Barbara says, re-reading her email from Willow. "I didn't notice this until now, but this says we need to get on another bus."

"I thought you said she lives in Mendoza."

"Well, outskirts of Mendoza. Same thing."

I'm frustrated, but there's no reason to vent right now. It's not Barbara's fault we're zig-zagging all over Argentina. We buy tickets for San Rafael, as instructed.

Three hours later, we are still on a bus, far outside of wine country. This ride is quiet. I just want to reach our destination, and I have nothing to say to Barbara.

From San Rafael, we catch another bus.

Since Willow isn't around for me to blame, now my annoyance is unleashed on Barbara. "Where the hell does she live? Chile?" I snap.

"Next time you find the Couchsurfer!" she yells back.

"I will," I say. "If I'd found the Couchsurfer, we'd be in Mendoza drinking wine right now."

The bus driver looks in the rear-view mirror and smiles. He must used to taking foreigners to this place, because he doesn't even ask for our destination. He simply pulls to a stop in front of a ramshackle wooden building, then points to Barbara and me.

"Us?" I point to my chest.

"Si," he nods.

Barbara and I reluctantly step off the bus. The building looks less like a farmhouse than a crime scene. It is encircled by mud, withered crops and rotting fenceposts. And the bus that's driving away is the last of the day.

"Well, it's not exactly wine country ..." Barbara says, letting her sentence trail off into the wasteland that surrounds us.

"More like swine country."

Just then a pack of dogs jump out the front window of the house, tear through the mud and into the gravel road. Their fur is thin, showing raw patches of pink skin. They surround our feet and nip at the air around us.

“Oh good,” I say. “I haven’t had mange yet.”

Barbara grimaces and pulls away from the dogs. She has been battling ringworm, picked up a couple countries ago from a stray kitten.

We walk to the house, because there is nowhere else to go. Along the way, we approach a scrap of brown grass where a woman is facedown on a towel. Barbara clears her throat, but the woman doesn’t move.

“Is she dead?” I nudge her with my foot.

The woman turns over, props herself on one elbow and squints at us.

“Oh hey,” she says, then turns back to her towel. Her bikini top slides off. She is facedown again.

“Wait! Are you Willow?”

At this, she sits up and blinks. She’s not self-conscious about her toplessness at all. “No. Duh. I’m Ashley,” she says.

“Ashley? Who’s Ashley?” I ask.

“I’m ... you know,” she sighs. This clearly requires a lot of effort. She sighs one more time for good measure. “The babysitter.”

Ashley the Babysitter sits all the way up and spreads her legs, then rubs at the spot where her bikini bottom meets her crotch.

“Look,” she says, tugging the bikini fabric from her skin. “I had a big cyst removed from my labia yesterday. And now it’s not lookin’ too good ... Geez, what’s wrong with me?” Ashley abruptly jumps off the towel. “I’m so freaking rude!”

With that, she runs into the house. A few seconds later she returns.

“Here,” she says and shoves her fist toward me. “A joint.”

The children arrive with as much subtlety as a gunshot. Evie, Reese and Liam are a tiny barbaric threesome, like the lost boys in “Peter Pan.” I have no idea where they’ve been, but once they enter the property they tumble, pinch, punch, yell and yawp, kicking up dust, tufts of grass and stray gum wrappers.

“I’m Reese!” shouts the middle child, who has branches sticking out of her blonde hair like antlers. She is nine years old. “But I demand you call me Saffron Moonblood!”

“I’d really rather not,” I say, and she kicks me in the knee.

Evie, age 12, points to the living room drapes. Five-year-old Liam is already tangled in the fabric near the curtain rod.

“Are you allowed to be doing that?” I say.

All three children reply in unison, “Yes!”

Of course they are. They are allowed to do anything they want, because Willow isn’t there. Her husband isn’t there either. And we have no idea when either of them will return. Whenever Barbara and I asked Ashley about it, she just

waves her hand around and says, "Oh, you know." Turns out she isn't so much of a babysitter as a friend of a friend who showed up one day with a bag of weed.

Two hours later Barbara finds a note, written by Willow on a piece of cardboard. It says that she and her husband heard about a film shoot -- the landscape surrounding Mendoza is often used as a low-budget Grand Canyon for movies and TV shows -- and they will be gone for several days. But they have left us a couple of rules for running the household: Feed the kids. If they want to go to school, they can. If not, hey, don't force them.

Feeding the children is a challenge. The house has little food, the propane tank for the stove is empty, we are many miles from town and the final bus for the day has long gone. Plus Ashley the Babysitter is stoned and staring at her labia.

"It's fine," says Liam. "I know how to make a fire."

"Seriously, kid? Because I don't," I say.

The boy has clearly done this before. He heaves logs into a squat little stove in the living room. He plucks a match from a tattered cardboard book and gets the fire going. I set a pot of water on the surface. While we wait for it to boil, Liam uses a tiny ax and some fallen branches to build a small bonfire in the front yard. He surrounds it with a ring of stones.

"Hey Liam, do you usually have more food around here?" I ask, while I help the boy pull together the pile of wood.

“Nah. Not really. Only when my mom asks Couchsurfers to bring some stuff,” he says. “Sometimes I go to the next farm over there and I ask them for food, and they give us stuff from their gardens. They’re real nice.”

My mind wanders back to my elementary school years in Ohio, when my parents struggled to put food on the table. My dad was too proud to let us accept any assistance, like food stamps or the free school lunch program, so it was a burden to feed three kids. Meat was novelty, and we didn’t always have bread. But my dad planted a garden in our backyard, which gave us an abundance of vegetables. My mom bulked up our meals using this fresh produce, so our spaghetti was fat with zucchini and cauliflower, casseroles were layered with carrots and squash, and our massive salads overflowed with radishes, sugar snap peas and tomatoes. In the winter we ate all the same things -- just canned versions of them. It took many years for me to discover how poor we were back then, because I never went to bed hungry. My mom made sure of it.

Water comes to a boil on the stove. Barbara stirs a package of dry pasta into the pot, and I scrounge up a tin of tomatoes and enough condiments to combine for a decent sauce. I plop the pasta onto plates, and the kids tear into their food like lions descending on a fresh hyena carcass.

“Look at my full belly!” Liam says, pulling up his shirt and pushing his stomach out as far as it will stretch.

“When you are in America, do you eat peanut butter?” Saffron Moonblood says.

“Of course! I love peanut butter,” I say.

“That’s what I miss the most.”

Evie nods.

“You know what I miss?” Liam says. “Toothbrushes.”

“Yeah, remember how in California we would brush our teeth? Every night?” says Saffron Moonblood, almost as if she didn’t believe it herself.

All of the children nod.

After dinner, we gather around the bonfire outside and look at the stars. Barbara shows the kids how to find the Southern Cross. When I shiver from the cold air, Liam uses a metal shovel to scoop hot embers and make a pile of them under my plastic lawn chair.

“Now you’re toasty warm,” he says. He scrunches his nose and gives me a crooked smile. It is sweet, if unsettling, to see such a young child playing with fire. I also feel slightly askew, then realize my seat is melting. I scootch the chair back until the plastic cools and becomes solid again.

“RAH! Now let’s go on the roof and throw stuff!” Liam says.

Later Barbara and I sit on the couch in the living room with Evie and Liam in a pile on top of us. Ashley the Babysitter is passed out in the master bedroom, snoring loudly.

Saffron Moonblood pulls boxes from the closet and finally emerges with a few pieces of old newspaper -- a couple of advertisements and the obituary section.

“Can you read to us?” she says, climbing on top of my lap.

“Of course, sweetheart,” I say, using my hand to brush the leaves and sticks from her hair. Again, I feel like something is melting.

Back in California, my husband and I have often talked about having children in abstract terms. “I want kids ... but someday,” I always say. I am the one who wants to wait, thinking a baby will chain me to a life of peanut butter sandwiches and diaper duty. But in this living room, where the wallpaper peels and the roof sags with mold, I wonder what I am waiting for. I realize here how much I wanted to create a safe home and fill it with little ones, how much I want to be a loving but firm parent, how much I want to raise children who didn’t have to set their own fires.

After years of rebelling against my parents, I didn’t know this is something I ever wanted. Now I can’t think of anyone I’d rather emulate than my mom.

“Barbara, if we don’t leave tomorrow, we can’t get out until Monday because the bus doesn’t run on the weekend. So I think we should --”

“Why would we leave?” she interrupts.

“Uh, because this place is filthy. The toilet isn’t working. There’s no food. We are far from civilization. And we’re stuck with one weirdo stoned girl. This is like the beginning of a very scary movie.”

“It’s fun. Relax. You’re too high maintenance.”

“I don’t think food is high maintenance.”

“Our hosts have been kind enough to open their house to us --”

“What hosts? They didn’t even bother to stick around. Oh, and they left three kids for us,” I say. “I am not a parent, Barbara. I have no idea what I’m doing, except trying to keep three kids fed and making sure the house doesn’t burn down.”

“We’re Couchsurfers. We can’t be so picky.”

“Exactly. We’re Couchsurfers. Not babysitters.”

My heart breaks for the children. They need discipline, structure, parental role models. They need books and toys. They need to go to school. At the very least, they need to have a responsible adult around to make sure Liam doesn’t fall off the roof.

Barbara, on the other hand, admires their carefree lifestyle. She believes important skills are learned outside of the classroom, and these kids are picking up things that will prove valuable later in life. They know how to create their own fun without relying on TV, video games or other manufactured forms of entertainment. They know how to fearlessly climb trees, fend for themselves, and they are quick to pick up Spanish. And they are practically welded to each other, so tight is their bond, since they have no one else.

“At least we’re learning about the culture,” Barbara shrugs.

“How are we doing that when we’re in a farmhouse, babysitting three American children?”

A voice from the bedroom interrupts us.

“You guys,” Ashley the Babysitter yells. “I think my cyst is coming back. Could one of you come look?”

Barbara finally agrees that our time in Argentina might be better spent elsewhere. She and I leave the next morning, headed for the city, Mendoza.

When I walk toward the dirt road, Liam clings to my leg.

I shake him free, then crouch down to look at him face to face. I swipe a lock of blonde hair from his eyes. “I’ll miss you, buddy.”

“Not as much as I’ll miss you,” he says.

If you taste something good in Argentina -- earthy olive gelato, crackly pan de campo country bread, vibrant popsicles infused with lemon verbena -- chances are it has emerged from Mendoza’s rich food culture. The region is the nation’s leading producer of garlic and tomatoes, which grow as plump as red delicious apples. The empanadas are the plumpest and flakiest in the whole country, and the olive oil tastes just like fatty sunshine. Orchards line the rolling hillsides.

Of course, there’s also the wine. It has made Mendoza famous, and deservedly so. My first glass of malbec is richly colored, like crushed velvet in a glass. The taste is jubilantly spicy and snappy -- ripe berries with a twist of black pepper.

Although this is an extremely dry desert region, Mendoza has an elaborate artificial irrigation system, diverting melted snow from the nearby Andes into

reservoirs, which allows for extensive greenery. That includes the tree-lined city avenues, as well as the more than 800 bodegas that produce most of Argentina's wines.

Barbara wants to get some exercise, and I want to sample some of Mendoza's famous Malbecs, a thin-skinned grape that needs a lot of sun and heat to mature. She and I compromise with a bodega bike ride, which pairs cycling, a typically healthy activity, with binge drinking.

We find a rental place, where we get one map and two wobbly red bikes. Mine doesn't have brakes, but it does have a bell, so I can make the international ring-ring-ring sound of "Hey! I don't have any brakes!"

The owner, Mr. Hugo, also promises us unlimited free wine when we return. This is a backpacker's dream come true.

Our plan is to ride to the farthest bodega on our map, then work our way back toward Mr. Hugo's, hitting several more bodegas along the way. That way, we will only have a short distance to ride when we are most intoxicated.

It is a good plan, but it is quickly derailed.

Barbara and I pedal past a winery that we can easily see from the gravel road. It looks deliciously inviting -- a sunny patio, an arch of flowering purple vines and a big, whitewashed sign that says, "Sip back and relax."

"Should we stop here before we go on?" I say.

"Might as well," Barbara agrees. "We're here anyway."

In exchange for a few pesos, the winemaker himself bends toward us, showcasing one aromatic wine after another.

“To backpacking!” Barbara says.

“To Mendoza!” I say.

Just then, a cute boy walks toward us, a girl on each arm.

“Ari?” Barbara says.

Ah, yes. The 19-year-old she screwed in a salt hotel in Bolivia. He doesn’t look at Barbara, but his features suddenly twist into an uneasy expression.

“Ari. Over here!” Barbara waves her hands in the air.

Ari suddenly pulls away from his female companions and turns the other direction.

“I forgot something,” I hear him say. “Come on, let’s go.”

He jumps onto his bicycle, which is parked on the bike rack next to ours.

“Wait!” Barbara runs to her bike too.

“Where are you going?” I yell. We still have two almost-full glasses of wine. Delicious wine. Why should we have to sacrifice those?

Barbara is already on the street, pumping the pedals hard to catch up with Ari. She doesn’t seem to care that he’s accompanied by other women -- and he seemed happy about it too. I toss my wine back like a shot, then do the same with Barbara’s glass. I’m so happy to be married.

“Wait up!” I straddle the wobbly bike and start after her. I pedal until my feet are as dizzy as my brain. Are my legs always this drunk?

“Heeeey! Don’t leave without me!” I holler again at Barbara, who is now a half-mile ahead of me. Her blonde head looks blurry.

Ari gains some distance on her and maneuvers a quick turn. Barbara stops at an intersection, unsure of which way she has turned. I catch up a few minutes later and slow my bike down by crashing into a tree.

We stand on the shoulder of a gravel road, which stretches so far into the distance it looks like it’s headed nowhere at all. Barbara straddles her bike. Mine is a heap of bent metal at my feet.

“I know that was him,” she says.

“Fuck him,” I say. “He’s just some lame 19-year-old.”

“But I really liked him.”

“I know. But he’s a boy. He’s not mature enough to handle you. Who cares?”

“You know what I’m going to do?” Barbara says. “I’m going to go back to the hostel tonight and send him a really bitchy e-mail.”

“Great idea. Because it looks like he really wants to hear from you,” I say, before I can stop the sarcasm. “Come on. Just let it go. It was a fling. He doesn’t want a relationship.”

“I don’t want a relationship either,” she says. She pauses, then sniffs. “It’s just ... well, I guess I just wanted him to like me back.”

I step over my bike and hug my friend.

“He did,” I say. “He just has short-term memory.”

That evening we decide to split up for a while, and we chalk it up to our dramatically different to-do lists. I've heard about a Hare Krishna eco-park outside of Buenos Aires, where I can volunteer for a couple of weeks and hopefully have a meaningful spiritual experience. Meanwhile, Barbara has her eye on the ski resorts of Bariloche, which happens to parallel the trail of her 19-year-old flame. We agree to stay in touch over Facebook and meet up again before the end of the month in the capital city.

Our final meal together is a shared platter of pasta in the town square, Plaza Independencia. We each lift a wine glass, and we toast to our shared independence and our separate roads.

Lesson: Don't force the moments that are meaningful

People tell me I will die in Buenos Aires. It begins at the job I've left behind, where my co-workers start a death pool, placing bets on where I will meet my demise. The number-one choice is Buenos Aires, though they can't give me a specific reason why.

Then I meet other backpackers who scare me with tales of bag slashings, purse snatchings, brutal rape and muggings gone wrong. One of them always seems to have a friend of a friend who was kidnapped.

The hysteria makes me paranoid. As soon as my bus hits the city limits, I am on guard, darting my eyes this way, that way, up, down and sideways, observing every potential thief and murderer. It is exhausting. My eyes haven't rolled that much since I was a teenager.

I check into a hostel on Avenida de Mayo, the leafy, elegant heart of Buenos Aires' financial district. The owner gives me a map of local neighborhoods, a list of things to do and some suggested attractions. Then he turns serious, his thin lips set in a long dash across his face.

"Be careful out there," he says. "Not safe for a girl alone."

With that warning clanging around in my head, the streets seem to transform as I walk them. I stand and watch a cook through the window of the pasta restaurant on the corner. As he slaps a sheet of pasta on a table and attacks it with a knife, I audibly gasp. Every alley looks more scary and shadowy than the last. Dramatic architecture appears to lean menacingly over the

sidewalks. A lecherous man on a crowded sidewalk grabs a fist full of my ass when I pass by.

I don't like eyeing every stranger as a potential attacker, but I'm alone and the city is bigger than anything I've encountered on my own before. I am smart about how I travel through it, but I look like a tourist -- my face betrays me with that telling, wide-eyed look of half-confusion, half-discovery -- and I am treated as such. On the cramped subway, commuters packed hipbone to hipbone, I feel someone unzip the pocket on my hiking pants and shove a hand inside. There are limbs everywhere -- this is like riding the train with the multi-armed Hindu goddess Kali -- and I can't determine where the hand is attached. I clutch my small bag with my passport and wallet close to my chest and silently applaud myself for not keeping anything in my pockets.

The city makes me feel brand-new to the world, and it takes too long to do even the simplest tasks. When I try to mail a package home to my husband, I am at the post office for six hours before the box is finally stamped and thrown into a pile with other international mail. It takes another hour to find a laundromat. When I do, I hand over all my clothes, forgetting that I will still need something to wear later that night and the next day too. I go shopping and I don't know how to say no when a slim saleswoman joins me in the dressing room and squeezes me into the wrong size jeans. The button sinks into my skin, and the waist leaves an angry, red ring around my middle. I can't breathe, and I point to my rear and explain, "Grande." The saleslady pulls another pair from the rack, this one

equally tight but with more rhinestones around the pocket. She shoehorns me into them, wedging my thighs into the denim, and when she bends close to me, her elaborately teased hair smells like cigarettes and powder. When she looks at me and nods with satisfaction, I give up and buy the jeans. Maybe this is who I am in Argentina, the kind of person who wears painted-on jeans covered in cheap bling. Maybe they will help me slip through the streets unnoticed.

Walking past a gun store downtown, I step inside without even making the conscious decision to do so. I don't want a gun, of course. That would make for some completely irresponsible and impractical backpacking gear. But I do want the feeling of added protection; something small that I can keep close at hand.

The walls of the shop are lined with glass cases that run ceiling to floor. They contain enough firearms to supply every actor in a Rambo movie. Including extras. Several weapons under the front counter look suspiciously like grenades.

It is a small, cramped shop, so I don't get far before a few employees descend and ask if I need help.

At least, I think that's what they've said. My Spanish language guide only includes basic sentences like, "Where is the bathroom?" "Do you take travelers checks?" and "Those drugs aren't mine." I am far from possessing any real Spanish comprehension skills.

"Hola! No hablo mucho Espanol," I apologize. I furiously flip through a purse-sized English-to-Spanish dictionary. Unfortunately, none of the words I need are listed.

“Donde puedo comprar ... pepper spray, por favor?”

The employees stare at me. They are still now, and nobody breathes a word.

“Er, spray de pimienta?” I try again.

Nothing.

It is time to pull out all the stops. It’s time for charades.

I give an Oscar-worthy performance: First I play the role of an innocent woman walking down the street. Then I hop a few steps to my right and act out the character of a brutal attacker who punches the woman in the face. Just as the attacker is about to make off with her valuables, our heroine pulls pepper spray from her pocket and shoots him in the eye, sending him kicking and screaming to the floor.

I look up from where I am now crumpled on the dirty, stained tile. My wild charade has drawn a crowd of customers. I try again, “Spray de pimienta?” I’m out of breath and slick with sweat. I mime spray in my eyes.

“Ah,” finally a people nod with recognition and exchange quick words in Spanish. A man tugs on the sleeve of an employee, says a few sentences and motions to me.

One of the gun shop employees ducks behind a curtain. When she returns, she hands over a plastic-wrapped package of pepper spray.

“Mace,” she says.

I get my mace just in time to set off for some rural farmland, where I will be living with Hare Krishnas for a week. I take a bus as far as it will go, then find a bizarre roadside zoo that calls a taxi to take me the rest of the way.

The taxi driver pulls to a stop on the side of a muddy, pocked road. Outside the vehicle are a few oddly-shaped buildings in the distance and a handful of cows. There has been nothing else for miles.

“You okay?” the driver says.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I smile and hoist my hefty backpack onto my shoulders. It’s a show of bravery, as if to say “Look at how strong I am!” while my insides flutter. Actually, I am a little concerned.

We are only two hours outside of Buenos Aires, but it feels much farther. The landscape is flat and bleak, open fields decorated with unruly scrub brushes and rotting fence posts. The oddest of all the oddly-shaped buildings is a tall, white cone in the center of the plowed farmland, which adds to the alien feel of the scene. There’s no sound of traffic or people. I don’t even hear any birds chirping.

A new friend climbs out of the taxi after me. Jeff is a cute, laid-back dude from San Francisco. We met the night before, during a raucous party held on the roof of our hostel. I had been immersed in conversation with travelers from South Africa and Australia, but as soon as Jeff walked up to the table, I knew he was American before he even spoke. He had a certain swagger and a bigness of movement that I didn’t often see in backpackers from other countries.

“So you just got to Argentina?” I asked him.

“How did you know? Am I that obvious?”

I pulled a luggage sticker from the airport off his sweater. “This was my first clue.”

That night we ended up splitting beers and talking long after the party ended. I attracted to Jeff in a romantic way -- but spending time with him made me realize how much I missed spending time with men my age. There’s a certain natural, innocent rapport that takes hold when I’m with funny, likable men like Jeff, and it adds to the sparkle and zest of the conversation, makes me feel like the best-possible version of myself. It also felt liberating to develop a relationship with someone because I wanted his friendship, not because I wanted him to want me.

Jeff was disappointed to hear my plans to leave in the morning to volunteer at the Hare Krishna eco-park.

“Do you really have to go in the morning?”

“I’m afraid so,” I said. “The Hare Krishnas need me.”

“But we’ve just started to have fun,” he said.

I lightly punched him in the arm. “You could always come too.”

I must have done a good job talking up the place, because Jeff agreed.

Now that we’re here, Jeff smiles and gives the taxi driver a tip. “We’re fine, my friend. This is gonna be awesome,” he says.

His optimism makes me feel slightly better -- it would be kind to call this place modest, but Jeff seems content with the decision to come here.

When I corresponded with the eco-park director, he gave me the impression of a farm filled with volunteers, a serene getaway from the chaos and noise of the city. But this place looks nothing like the blissful reprieve I was promised. Wind hisses across the vast fields, broken only by old and faded cornstalks. It wasn't unlike the Couchsurfing debacle, and the isolation makes me uneasy. Empty buildings are fashioned from mud, hay and cow dung. I wonder if this is where the Children of the Corn have settled.

Jeff and I wander for several minutes before we finally spot a man in an orange sweatshirt with the hood pulled up over his shaved head. His face is wan, his body lean. His nose is long and hooked, giving him a slightly hawkish appearance.

The man introduces himself as Rodriguez and gives us a quick tour of the property. He tells us the rules: No drinking, drugs or tobacco allowed. Jeff and I are asked to pay \$15 per day, which covers accommodations and three vegetarian meals daily. In addition, we are also required to work five hours each morning in the garden. In exchange, our afternoons will be free for yoga classes, group meditation and hiking nearby trails. I'm excited to get my hands dirty. It reminds me of the satisfaction I felt in the physical labor working at Monkey Park in Bolivia. I know it will feel good to do some hard work here, planting, harvesting and preparing the food for this spiritual community.

Rodriguez leaves Jeff and me in the dining cabin, and one by one, three eco-park residents join us. They are modern Hare Krishnas, who eschew traditional robes in favor of orange hooded sweatshirts and long, cotton pants. Their heads are covered by thick, woolen hats pulled low over their ears. They are mostly silent.

One man hands me a platter of food and a metal fork with bent tines, then walks away without saying a word. He walks back in the room and hands Jeff a matching plate, then disappears again. On the plate there's a lump of white rice, some boiled peas and a tangled warzone of bitter, wilted greens that conceal rocks and dirt like embedded journalists.

"So I guess we eat?" I say.

"Guess so."

I want to like this meal, but every time I try to focus on the energy of the greens, all the vitamins and minerals I must be consuming, a rock strikes my teeth. To wash it all down, another Hare Krishna brings a chunky, fermented drink made of blended sunflower seeds.

That afternoon Jeff and I are sent to work in the garden, yanking leeks from the soil. The roots are difficult to pull. It is still winter in Argentina, and the ground is cold and hard. When we have built a little stack of leeks, we load them into a wheelbarrow and roll them to an outdoor faucet, where we have to wash away the soil. The water is so cold it makes my hands burn, and I can barely rub any of the dirt from the vegetables before I have to stop and breathe on my

numb, red fingers. This explains all the rocks in our food. As soon as we finish with the pile, Jeff and I are sent back to pull more vegetables.

Maria, the woman who runs the garden, follows Jeff and me, row by row, and laughs at our work while doing no work of her own. At the end of our shift, she says the fresh vegetables will be sold at the market; the community actually needs very little of what we harvest.

I know the ground has the potential to nourish us. My wanders to the snap peas, tomatoes and squash that my father planted and that my mom lovingly plucked from the garden, back when I was a little girl. The soil provided for us, and it gave my family a very real connection to sunlight and dirt. It showed me the possibility that exists within each and every seed.

But here I'm beginning to feel swindled. This doesn't feel meaningful at all.

When I inquire about hiking trails, I am taken to a small room and shown Hare Krishna videos instead. The yoga classes are nonexistent. I ask to send a quick e-mail to my husband, just to let him know I have arrived safely, and Rodriguez says I am not allowed to use the internet. Same with the phone. "Not yet," he says. "Maybe in a week."

The isolation and the overall sense of disregard makes me angry with the Hare Krishnas. Aren't they supposed to be warm and kind? Don't they want to win me over? I really expected to be embraced and smothered with love here. Instead I'm crushed by the mighty ambivalence.

I wander the property as a purple twilight washes over the farm, clamber over splintered fences and walk the rows of squash plants. The cows in a nearby field are turned around, facing away from the eco-park.

A meditation class is about to start, so I enter the white dome and lay down in the center of the room. Round, colored windows, like the sawed-off bottoms of glass bottles, dot the walls, climbing up to the top of the cone, which is about two stories high. I watch the last of the day's light filter through the colored glass, like plastic-wrapped hard candy. The floor is lined with lime green yoga mats and it smells musty, like old sweat. I close my eyes, breathe deeply and beg for some kind of epiphany, something to explain what I'm doing here.

By here, I don't necessarily mean the eco-park. I just want to know where I should be headed with my life. What is the reason for all this travel if I don't find more clarity for my future? I have open-ended plane tickets to take me around the world, and three months into this trip I still haven't discovered a purpose for being in any one place. What if I never find any reason to be anywhere?

So far on this trip, I've tried to make a priority of the quiet moments, searching for a voice that is willing to speak to me. I don't even care what it says. In Peru, I spent a day at the Santa Catalina Monastery in Arequipa, meditating in the quiet corners, letting the sacred air of the space flow over me. I prayed in small churches all over Bolivia. I tried to find my god in the monkeys of the jungle, in the stones of Machu Picchu, and now, in the dirt of Argentina. I wished

on the falling stars in the South American skies. But what if a voice never calls to me? What happens if there are no answers to be had?

For years I have prayed for my mother to be healed. I made bargains with deities I barely even believed in. I burnt candles until they were cold, hard puddles of wax.

Inside the Hare Krishna dome, I pray fiercely and with all the faith I can muster -- I pray for comfort, and I pray for my mother's peace. This is what you're supposed to do, according to all the scripture I've ever read. You go on a pilgrimage, you uproot yourself, you persevere like the tiny mustard seed. Now I wait for answers, for some divine hand to guide me through the darkness, for some great force to help me grow. I wait, and all I hear is the sound of my own breath.

That night, Jeff and I sleep in adjoining rooms in a wooden house with doors that don't lock. There is no heat, so I place my sleeping bag on top of the bed and layer wool blankets on top. I wear two sweaters while I sleep, uncomfortably but through the night, and tuck my can of mace beneath my pillow.

Nightmares come. Dark shadows and sulking strangers. When someone moves toward me, I feel as though I am pinned to the bed, unable to move. I can't even scream. I wake up out of breath and clammy. When I peel my sweaters off, my skin is flushed, and my muscles feel ropery and sore.

Before breakfast, Jeff pulls me aside and says had the strangest feeling all night -- as if someone entered our rooms and watched us sleep. He says he had

nightmares too, faceless men in fog, violent scenes, dreams in which the Hare Krishnas instructed him to kill me. He is shaken and disturbed.

“This place feels like something I’m not,” Jeff says. “This little voice keeps telling me that something isn’t right.”

That’s good enough for me. Maybe it isn’t a voice speaking to me exactly, but it’s a voice. And this voice is saying where I don’t belong, which is almost as good as telling me where I do.

I know I can stay at the eco-park and probably find some semblance of satisfaction in the work. I might even find serenity there. Or I can return to Buenos Aires and turn myself over to the exuberant and wild city. I can spend time getting to know it, walking each grand and beautiful street, locating the pulse of every neighborhood. I can maybe learn to love it. I can take some tango lessons, visit the opera, go to my first professional soccer game, take a real yoga class and relax into my life as a backpacker. I can finally allow myself the time and opportunity to blossom in a place that both intimidates and attracts me, instead of trying so hard to craft a spiritual epiphany.

I decide that if a higher power is going to reach me, it can find me in a city just as easily as on a farm, hunched over leeks. I skip the morning garden duty, and I have Rodriguez call a taxi instead.

LESSON: Home is where the Buenos Aires is.

I fall in love with Buenos Aires.

My room at the hostel is lavender, and the window opens to a side street off Avenida de Mayo. Where the buildings looked hard and intimidating prior to my trip to the Hare Krishna eco-farm, now they appear whimsical and inviting. They are stately and gray, a fusion of Baroque, Beaux Arts and Art Nouveau styles. The cool stone is detailed with elaborate carved flowers and vines, gargoyles and fantastical creatures, an architectural landscape to rival nature.

Across the street is Palacio Barolo, once the tallest buildings in all of South America, now home to some Spanish language schools, a dry cleaner and some attorneys. The architect was inspired by Dante's "Divine Comedy," and integrates artwork, tile and other design elements to reflect the distinct layers of the building -- hell, purgatory and paradise. The building is 100 meters high, one for each of the poem's cantos, and the 22 floors represents 22 stanzas. On a clear day, they say you can see all the way to Uruguay from one of the tiny cupola windows, though when I climb to the top, I never see beyond the wide, sparkling expanse of the city.

I take the English language tour of Palacio Barolo twice. Then I return a few more times just to sit in hell, where all the attorney offices are, and read books. It's quieter than my hostel, and I am comfortable among the Latin inscriptions, a smattering of dragon sculptures and the fire-patterned floor.

Argentina is largely a country of immigrants, and the European influence is evident throughout the capital city, not just in Palacio Barolo.

Many afternoons I sit at a cafe, drinking fizzy mineral water with an espresso or enjoying a cup of gelato, and everything about it reminds me of my mom, her European elegance. Her face was chiseled and fine, like the stone of the Italianate architecture, and she had grand taste. She preferred sparkling water to still, cashmere to cotton. Her thick German accent confused my friends and prompted laughter. She was a woman out of place, not suited for our small town in Ohio. Even though I was part of her world, she often seemed an oddity to me, a mother who packed liverwurst and toast in my lunchbox instead of peanut butter sandwiches. Now she would probably just seem cool. Maybe she'd have a popular blog, *The Hausfrau in Ohio*.

At night I stroll through the Palermo neighborhood, a trendy barrio with cobblestone streets, tiny cafes, art galleries and fashion boutiques. There is energy here, and it's palpable, even from my outsider's perspective. Every street feels like it unravels just for me, and I marvel at the throngs of people, the restaurants that don't fill until midnight, the clubs that pulse until 6 a.m.

I try on lacy dresses and find the European candies of my childhood. I settle onto a concrete bench in the park and watch young couples in love holding hands and old couples still in love, sharing hot mate in dried gourds.

I marvel at the people who pass by me -- the people who didn't exist in my world until that shared moment on the sidewalk. High-heeled women with swishy,

camel-colored hair, old ladies with bright lipstick, elderly men who meet my gaze and wink. A man plays the accordion on the street, and the wheezy song sounds like something I might have once known. A woman walks past and compliments me on my jeans, the tight-fitted denim with rhinestoned designs on the pockets.

I feel like a true Argentine, and that's what keeps me up at night.

Whenever I think about leaving this city, I am filled with a desperate sense of longing, a desire to cancel the remainder of my trip and stay in Buenos Aires. I don't know if this is where I could really stay or if this is just a passing moment of feeling as though I belong. Either way, I wish I could sustain it. This is as satisfied as I've felt in a long time.

It makes me wonder about the nature of home, what it means to feel so comfortable in a place where I have no roots, no right to stay and no reason to belong.

They say home is where the heart is. But there's no easy idiom to apply to my situation: I am leaving tiny pieces of my heart all over the globe, wherever I go. My heart is in a condo in California, nuzzling the warm crook of my husband's neck. My heart is in a nursing home in Ohio, tucked inside my mom's yellow bed. Now my heart is here, in a city that is bright and complex and sweet, a city that I love possibly because I first feared it.

Jeff and I sign up to attend a Boca Junior game along with a group from our hostel. This is one of the last outings I will have in Argentina -- in just two

days I am scheduled to fly from Buenos Aires to Johannesburg, South Africa, a ticket I reserved three months ago. I thought buying a flight so far in advance would propel me forward. Instead, it paints my final days in the city with regret.

The reputation of Argentine football games is that they are rowdy and wild, and it can be dangerous for people unfamiliar with the stadium, the environment and etiquette of the fans. This is why tourists are told that the safest way to experience the games is with an escorted group. Jeff and I book a tour through our hostel.

The stadium, La Bombonera, is located in La Boca, a working class barrio with a colorful history. La Boca, ("the mouth" in English), is located at the mouth of the Riachuelo river that forms the southern border of Buenos Aires. The river is also the reason the neighborhood was formed -- La Boca was settled by people who worked the shipyards that dot the banks. The houses are crafted from shipping materials, like grainy, cast-off planks and corrugated metal and painted with leftover supplies, so each facade is a different color, creating a wild patchwork display.

The neighborhood is rough, which is why we are under the watchful eye of a guide. She is there to sweep us past the police barricades and through a funnel of people into the stadium. We are told repeatedly that foreigners should not be alone in this neighborhood after dark -- under no circumstances are we to come here by ourselves.

The bus drops us off on the Caminito, a cobblestoned street full of souvenir shops, artists and Italian restaurants. Our escort gives us strict instructions to stick to the lit and well-traveled Caminito while we find food and restrooms, then meet back at the bus in a half-hour.

The buildings along the walkway are primary colors, so garish that they are beautiful. The colors are stacked like Legos, one block against the next. A blue wall leans into a yellow building, while red shutters sag along a green windowsill. Life-sized mannequins lean from the balconies, depicting the seedy history of this neighborhood in a jovial manner. Laughing prostitute mannequins are fondled by leering sailor dolls. Mafia mannequins look on.

On the corner, a real couple dances the tango. At the end of each song, the woman poses dramatically while her partner passes a black fedora and asks for tips. Painters display their art on chain-link fences, and the work is textured and bright, matching the buildings that form a real-life backdrop. They look more like postcards than paintings.

Each restaurant has a patio and the scent of food is overwhelming. Waiters carry sizzling steaks as round as a cocktail waitress's tray. Volcanos of pasta erupt with oil and marinara sauce. The pizzas are tall, piled with shredded cheese and grilled vegetables. My stomach growls, and Jeff's stomach responds with a similar noise.

We can't possibly resist the call of the restaurants -- especially not when waiters tug on our arms, shove menus in our faces, promise us the most wonderful food in all of Argentina.

We sit at a table topped with a red and white tablecloth and are given bottled beers and a basket of fresh-baked bread. I end up with a platter of fresh ravioli, and the pasta is toothy enough to hold the cheese inside but soft enough to melt with each bite. It is slathered in a sage and butter sauce, salty and slippery and fatty. Jeff doesn't speak, only moans, as he lingers over his own meal, a plate of gnocchi. Red sauce clings to the grooves of each potato dumpling.

Between the beers and the carbs, we lose track of time. By the time we pay for our meals and make it back to the spot where we were dropped off, the bus is gone.

"Shit," Jeff says. "What do we do now?"

We decide to find the street where La Bombonera is located -- our tour group will have to pass by eventually. We can reconnect with them there, collect our tickets and still have an escort to our seats. Problem solved.

Except, we realize after we find La Bombonera, our group might have already passed by. Also, the street is gritty and run-down. Dusk is quickly disappearing, shifting firmly into night, and I can't help but think that this might be a very bad place to be waiting on a street corner in the dark.

Passersby walk in clusters, everybody wearing blue and gold clothes, scarves and hats from head to toe. One chucks an empty can at me with impeccable aim, hitting me square in the chest. That's when I realize I am inadvertently wearing black and red, the colors of the rival team playing in tonight's game.

Instead of the street corner, Jeff and I retreat to the steps of a nearby bank. Even though it's closed, I figure banks have security cameras, and I feel slightly safer until a watchful electronic gaze.

"I don't feel so good about this," I say.

Jeff turns to me and hisses through clenched teeth. "Don't ... speak ... English," he says. "Not now."

So I am silent, and the time passes slowly. The chill of the concrete steps tears right through the denim of my rhinestoned jeans. I pull my black jacket tighter around my chest, try to cover the red shirt underneath. The sky is now navy, and street lamps flicker on. In my peripheral vision, I see my reflection in a long, glass door that leads to the bank's ATM. I eye myself as if I'm a stranger, and I try to assess if I could pass for Argentinian. I wonder if I look like I belong.

The pasta sits heavy in my stomach. I am no longer hungry, just full of regret. I wish I had never seen the adorable table, the convincing waiter, the dumb ravioli that got us into this fine mess. Fireworks sizzle upwards from the stadium and break into a zillion sparkles in the night sky. I hear the crowd chant and sing. The game is going to begin soon.

I almost don't believe my eyes when our tour escort crosses the street, the rest of our group in tow.

"It's them!" I say.

"Shhhh," Jeff warns.

"No, look." I'm so excited, I can't contain my volume. I leap to my feet. "It's them! Our group is here."

"I knew it!" Jeff says and gives me a high five.

We run to catch up with them, and our escort is visibly relieved. And angry. Mostly angry. The rest of the group seems annoyed.

"We've been all over La Boca looking for you," she says. "When you were not at the bus, we turned circles around the neighborhood." She slips into some Spanish, some words I recognize as curses.

She reluctantly hands over our tickets for the game.

"Stay by my side the rest of the night, both of you," she says, pointing her finger and waving it in the air as if it were a weapon. "Or else."

At the stadium, the stairs are sodden with liquid, and the concrete hallways smell of stale beer and even staler urine. Our guide ushers us to our bleacher seats, which are tucked underneath an overhang filled with rowdy Boca Junior supporters.

"Stay underneath here," the tour guide says, then points to the shouting, cheering, singing men above. "The fans like to pee on the tourists."

“Although you two,” she points at Jeff and me. “I should let you get pissed on.”

The football game is secondary to the action from the crowd. In front of me, a slurring man climbs rafters and, with a wobbly grip, hoists a Boca Junior banner in the air. Everybody cheers, even when he nearly stumbles and falls. Everybody seems to know the same songs, which are repeated throughout the match, and every chant booms like thunder beneath our seats. The effect is celebratory and colorful, and the festivities leave me unbelievably exhilarated. I don't even care who wins. I try to sing along, but I only catch every fourth word.

“I can't believe you're going to be in Africa, like, the day after tomorrow,” Jeff says.

I suck in my breath. Even my lungs want to pause this moment and prolong my stay in Buenos Aires.

“I don't want to think about it,” I say. “I mean, I'm excited to see Africa, but -- I'm really going to miss this place.”

At that, the couple sitting in front of us turns and introduces themselves. Erin and Pete. They are a married couple from America.

“We're headed to South Africa in a few days too --” Erin says.

Pete finishes her sentence, “And we're looking for someone to travel with us.”

I like them right away. Pete is a teacher, with rumpled red hair and a nose dotted with freckles. Erin a lobbyist and lawyer, has a sleek brown bob and a

friendly face, and she has been working for the same kind of liberal causes I support. We discover we share the home state of Ohio. Erin is also a vegetarian, and Pete adores coffee every bit as much as I do.

Navigating South Africa with a couple of nice Ohioans might not be the worst idea. Erin, Pete and I agree to meet the next day to chat, discuss our traveling styles, see if we might make a good backpacking fit, though I already have a feeling this is going to work.

Finally, the match is over -- a Boca Junior win -- and masses of people swarm the pitch. Flares send scarlet smoke into the sky, the color of autumn leaves. The guide tells us to wait under the overhang until security can assist us. Fights break out in the stairwells. Men pee all over their feet, all over each other. It's a glorious, slovenly, drunken scene.

Even when the tour guide says it is time to go, I am reluctant to leave.

This place is piss-soaked and littered, and the crowd is still noisy. I have no roots here. There are no ancestral springs in this land for me. Still, I feel like my notion of home has already changed and stretched to include this part of the world, this city, this stadium, this night. Maybe I don't need to stay, but I will carry some of it with me.

LESSON: One straw can be broken, but together they are strong

I'm in a rented Nissan, headed to the Wild Coast of South Africa. My friends from the Argentine football game are in the front -- Erin is driving, Pete is in the passenger seat. I'm in the backseat with Barbara, who grew tired of chasing teenagers and decided to travel with us for the next month.

The driving is slow. The road is made of rocky, caramel-colored dirt, slicing through mossy green hills. There are potholes on top of potholes, and Erin navigates the car carefully, but every once in a while a tire still sinks into the road with a jarring thunk.

Every hillside is dotted with pastel-colored huts, round with pointy, thatched roofs, like something that would house a village full of charming gnomes. Animals graze in the pasture. Occasionally we pass a group of children playing in the nearby fields, and they run after our car, dancing in the dust kicked up by the tires. Their smiles are so wide, it makes me smile with them.

Suddenly Erin hits the brakes and we screech to a halt, barely missing a thin and energetic goat that has run into the road.

"Whew," I say. "That was a close one."

Erin begins to drive again, but within seconds, she slams on the brakes once more. This time, the car stops just before we run over a fat log. It's as wide as a stump and is attached to about 10 feet of rope that encircles the tiny goat's neck. He is trotting along the road, dragging the log behind him.

I love that spunky goat -- the little guy who so desperately wants to run free, he has yanked out the log that was supposed to restrain him. I love the fierce beauty of the scenery, the wild blue ocean that breaks just beyond the hills. I am the annoying tourist in the backseat, singing a 1980s Toto classic at the top of my lungs, "I bless the raaaaains down in Africa!"

I am joyful to be here. I am grateful for this country, this continent.

I lean my head against the seat, and remember how I relaxed into this big love. It began on my second day in South Africa, a few days before I was supposed to meet up with Erin and Pete.

That day I visited the Cradle of Humankind, a UNESCO World Heritage site, about 50 kilometers northwest of Johannesburg. The area has produced some of the oldest pre-human remnants ever found, including the 2.3-million-year-old Mrs. Ples fossil, which was excavated from a nearby cave in 1947. She is that link between primate and homo sapiens, believed to be a distant relative to all of humankind.

There are many fossils similar to Mrs. Ples, all packaged in tidy boxes with thick glass, where visitors can look at them from every angle. Mrs. Ples herself isn't on display, but there are photos, drawings and reconstructions of her skull. The entire effect is something cartoonish, her forehead slightly flattened, with a jutting bone beneath her nose, the way a chimpanzee's face presses out. Her eye sockets are perfectly oval, as if widened with surprise.

Somewhere along the way, Mrs. Ples became a mother to someone who became a mother to someone who became a mother. Then eventually, after many thousands of years, came my grandmother, and then my mother, and then me. I know humankind isn't that simple -- but, then again, it is. One thing begets another.

I feel whole here, in a way that makes me want to sing out and embrace the people around me. The isolation, the outsider-ness that I've felt elsewhere has disappeared. Now I am engaged with something bigger than I ever knew existed, linked to a family so sprawling I don't even know how to map it. I am part of a much larger whole.

It is late afternoon when I leave the Cradle of Humankind museum. The vast savannah that surrounds the site glows gold, nearly the same gold as my mother's hair. The dirt is a strong red-brown, as if rich with the bones and blood of generations. The trees are wispy and wide, and their branches stretch open like patio umbrellas. I see a thin snake in the long grass.

The air is warm and dry, and it reminds me of the desert I call home. I finally shed the fleece jacket I've worn for three months straight in South America.

When I call my dad that night, I am just about to hang up when he says, "Wait!"

"Yes?"

"Africa," he asks. "Is it pretty?"

The question brings tears to my eyes. Even after just two days, I know that South Africa is gorgeous, but it transcends its appearance. Africa is a feeling, something that has clawed its way into the architecture of my soul. It is a blessing so large, I don't even know if my heart can contain it. And I have no words for that.

"Yes," I say. "It's very pretty."

Erin, Pete, Barbara and I share a hut on the Wild Coast at an eco-lodge called Bulungula, located in one of the most remote villages in South Africa, Nqileni.

This is truly getting away from it all. Bulungula has minimal electricity, and there is no cell phone service or internet. There are showers, but they remain hot for approximately 5 minutes -- about as long as the small paraffin furnace at the base of the shower remains lit. Bread is baked the traditional way, inside a dirt pit.

A coastal forest sprawls all the way to the sand of the estuary and kisses the edge. The water is a heart-stopping blue, true and bright and clear. At night, the sky is generously sprinkled with stars I've never seen before.

On our first full morning, an acrid scent hits my nose and at first I think there must be a landfill nearby. But when I walk the beach, a man from the nearby Xhosa village shows me the source of the odor.

"Dead whale," he says with a shrug, as if it happens all the time.

“Of course,” I say. I nod and shrug in return, as if I should have known better.

The massive beast no longer looks like a whale. It is more like a smudge on the shore, its skin melting into the sand. The smell is briny and musky, like fish and rot and sex and earth, all tinged with the sweetness of decay and the sourness of time.

The mammal washed ashore about three weeks prior to my arrival, but I didn’t smell it right off. This morning the wind shifted, carrying the smell right up to the door of my hut.

The nearby villagers have already extracted much of the carcass, sawing off layers of fat, meat, organs. The remnants remain on the surf, discarded blubber and bone, bleached by the sun, washed by the waves. The beast is slowly returning to the sea, piece by piece.

I take photos, crouching close enough to the whale that it looks like rock strata through my lens -- layers of blue, white and brown folded onto one another. The villager on the beach watches me and erupts into laughter.

“I can show you more dead animals,” he says with a smile.

I remind myself this is not a snapshot for a photo album for him, this is not something to be framed and shared. This whale body is a moment of life, this is survival. I’m just a voyeur here.

This use of the whale flesh makes me think about my mom’s family in Europe during World War II, scavenging potatoes from already picked over fields,

sucking the juice from bones that had already been boiled. They ate whatever they could, anything to cobble together an existence. I wonder what my mom would have done if some stranger had snapped photos of the experience.

The thought makes me uncomfortable, and for the first time on this trip, I put my camera away. I simply stand on the beach with the man, and I watch the water crash over the whale's broken and exposed body.

There are many activities to do in the village, and I choose to spend a day with Abalene, a woman from Nqileni. She brings me to the hut, where she and her sister live.

Abalene pours water into a bowl of dry clay and stirs it gently with her fingers. Then she spreads it on my face, smoothing the brown mud over my cheeks, forehead, nose and chin. It's been so long since I've had someone else's hands on me. It feels both intimate and strange, like the first tentative touch of a new lover. I close my eyes and take it in. The longer she strokes my face, the more maternal it feels.

I have a sudden memory of my mom, an incident that took place about a year before my mom entered the nursing home. My dad was away for a work trip, so I was mom's caregiver for the weekend. I had to give her a bath, because she could no longer take showers on her own. There was the fear that she could slip and fall, of course, but more importantly, on a couple of occasions my mom had

tried to bring a plugged-in hairdryer into the running shower. “My hair was getting wet,” she explained.

At this point, Mom was still in one of the earlier stages of the disease -- too far gone to know my name but cognizant enough to know I was someone trying to help. She was also stubborn enough to fight.

It’s difficult enough to give your own mother a bath -- I hated to see the this once-strong woman so vulnerable and helpless -- but it’s even harder when she doesn’t want to do it. She thrashed, spilling bathwater on the floor, and she cried, spilling tears everywhere. I sat on the tile with my back against the door until she calmed enough to stay in the tub. I bribed her with lovely, lilac-scented soap, then whispered, “Shhh,” as I wiped down her skin with a washcloth. She felt smaller than I had ever seen her.

Abalene’s sister picks up another bowl -- this one smaller than the first -- and holds a matchstick between her thumb and index finger. She dips the end of the matchstick in reddish clay, drawing a line of dots around my forehead, then another line across my cheekbones and the bridge of my nose. On each cheek she makes small, swishy lines, fashioning simple daisies. She is the artist and I am her canvas.

The clay face paint is part decorative, like local cosmetics, but it’s also practical. We’re going to be spending most of the day in the sun. The clay will act as a natural sunblock for my fair skin.

Abalene also grabs a red scarf and wraps it around my hair, tugging the curls into the fabric, then drawing both ends of the scarf into a knot, which she situates near the top of my head.

I hold my camera in front of my face and shoot a self-portrait, then examine the image on the digital screen. I don't recognize the face staring back at me. The first layer of clay has dried mint green, while the design is a ruddy red. I look beautiful but different, as if the Wild Coast has ripped away my skin and given me something new to wear instead.

"Nice," Abalene says and smiles. With her approval, we head outside.

She teaches me to scavenge from the nearby forest, gathering firm sticks for firewood. This will be our kindling when we prepare lunch later. We secure the bundles with strips of fabric. Abalene places a bundle on top of my head, and I lean and sway from the sudden weight and strange pressure.

"Stand up tall," she says. "Hold head high."

I feel a knot of gnarled wood knuckling into my head, and I also feel the place where wood splinters catch on my red headscarf. All the sticks are long and hard, and when I walk, they threaten to topple. As I become more surefooted, however, the branches also grow more confident. The wood perches as if it was meant to be there, like the branches are sprouting from my head.

I slowly, slowly make my way back up the hill and into Abalene's hut. I don't drop the wood, not even a single stick. She smiles and claps.

"Now let us try a bucket of water on your head," she says.

The bucket ends up at my feet, my right shoulder baptized. A group of village children hoot, and I can't help but giggle with them. Water drips down my side, clay runs along the side of my face. Abalene and I wipe tears from our eyes, we are laughing so hard.

"This is why you have the small bucket," she says.

Abalene's home becomes my home for the day. I kneel on the compacted dirt floor, where I use a flat stone to grind corn into coarse pieces, like dry grits. Abalene has already cooked a pot of beans, which she sets aside while she boils water. We talk and she cooks the cornmeal until it becomes a thick porridge called ugali.

"You cook?" Abalene says, and I nod.

"Yes, but never ugali."

"Then what do you eat?" she asks, incredulously.

The ugali is stiffer than day-old mashed potatoes. We roll it into balls with our fingers, then use the balls to sop up the bean stew. Until now, Abalene's son, a child about four years old, has been playing in a neighbor's hut. Now he sits close to me on the floor, his legs slung over mine.

While we eat, Abalene tells me about her family. Her husband works in the mineral mines near Johannesburg, several hours away. Like most of the men in this village, he leaves for months at a time. This leaves the women to run the town. They raise and educate the children. They care for each other's farms.

They tend to the sick and the elderly together. When one person's cow wanders from the field, every woman sets off to search for it.

There's an old saying in South Africa that a single straw from a broom can be broken, but together they are strong. That concept is known as ubuntu, the philosophy that we are all part of an interconnected web, rooted in acts of kindness and generosity. It means the way we treat others is more important than our individual accomplishments. Basically, you can't be human all by yourself.

I think about ubuntu a lot in this village, because I see it in action. Abalene breaks off a piece of bread to share with her young son. He toddles to the door, where he has three friends waiting. There he tears the bread and gives a piece to each of his friends.

Alabene pokes her head out the door and calls to a handful of women washing clothes in buckets outside a nearby hut. They saunter over and share some of the bean stew and ugali. As they leave, Abalene hands them a small stack of her laundry, which they will wash with their own.

We clean the dishes by hand, and I stack the bowls on a small table. That's when I notice a framed photo on the wall, a black-and-white image of a finely dressed woman, head held high like royalty, eyes small and firm. I look to Abalene, and she answers before I ever ask the question.

"Mother," she says.

I pull my iPhone from my bag. It doesn't receive any service out here, but I can still access the photo library. I scroll through the photos, showing Abalene my best friend, my husband, my brother, my sister.

I stop when I get to a blonde woman, her head raised high just like Abalene's mother, curls framing her face like a halo. She is sitting on a park bench in France, slim legs crossed at the knees, the hem of her checkered dress flared out around her calves. Her lips are slightly pouty, frozen mid-word.

This woman looks past the camera, far beyond the photographer. Sometimes I wonder what she is thinking in that long-distance gaze, if she can somehow see beyond that moment. Imaginary loves, future sorrows, a home across the ocean.

"Mother?" Abalene says.

I nod.

"Beautiful," Abalene says. "Like you."

In the late afternoon, the sun grows heavy and violet. Abalene walks me over to the local shebeen. It is small bar situated inside of a sea-green hut, three hills over from Abalene's home.

Though shebeens are where people drink alcohol, they also serve as community spaces -- meeting places where people share conversation and dance. During the Apartheid era, activists gathered in shebeens to share news and make plans with the community.

Abalene does not enter the shebeen. She says she has a lot of things to do this evening. Instead, she hugs me and wishes me well. This is where we will part ways for the evening.

Inside, the walls are empty. The hut feels much bigger than Abalene's home even though it is filled with people. Most everyone sits on the floor, legs stuck out in front of them, feet bare and brown. The patrons are divided into two groups, just like a junior high school dance -- men on one side of the room, women on the other.

It takes a few minutes before I notice that the men are of varying ages, from teenagers to withered old men. However, there are no young women in the shebeen, only older ladies. This, I will later learn, is because many women of child-bearing age refrain from alcohol, in case they might be pregnant.

One woman hikes up her skirt and dances wildly in the middle of the room. Her face is crackly and dry, the texture of course sandpaper, with firm lines like parentheses on each side of her mouth. She spins like a top, never losing balance, but never remaining fully upright either. Then she stops and abruptly focuses her yellowed eyes on my face, as if she has just noticed me for the first time. She motions to me, and her friend slings a paint can full of *umqombothi*, sorghum beer, my way.

I lift the can but pause before I take a sip. The smell is overpowering, like rotted fruit and pork. I peer down into the can and examine the thick, brownish-pink liquid. The old dancing lady cackles. Her friends join in, laughing until the

room is wheezy. Then the men encourage me to drink with their clapping and hollering.

I tip the can toward my face. The frothy liquid is viscous, thick, the same way diner ketchup crawls slowly through a glass bottle. Just when I think I'll never get a taste, the beer suddenly rushes at me at once, staining my lips, dribbling down my chin, even smearing my cheeks. Only a little umqombothi makes it into my mouth, just barely enough to swallow, and I am thankful for that. It is a bitter porridge and tastes of vomit, both sour and sweet. The shebeen erupts into cheers as I wipe the remnants of the drink from my face. I receive hugs and slaps on the back, and I'm amazed that I can be congratulated for simply accepting something to drink. My stomach gurgles with discomfort.

There are many types of drinking, and I've tried most of them over the years. There's the kind of drinking that's done to forget pain and heartbreak. There's the kind of drinking that's done out of boredom, a way to live through one hour and then the next hour and eventually into the next day. There's drinking to be social and drinking to be snobby and drinking to be joyfully drunk and drinking to wrestle with an inner beast.

But this kind -- slugging back umqombothi in a shebeen -- is a particular type of drinking I have never experienced. It is drinking that exists beyond explanation, the consumption of a cultural drink that tastes bitter and terrible and staggeringly complex, this warm welcome into a community at the very edge of an unknown country. I don't get drunk here, but I do feel flushed and warm.

I leave the shebeen close to dark, when the silver moon is swollen over the estuary, lighting the bloated carcass of the whale. The beer in my stomach is heavy and clanging. It feels like the evening has been a contract, an understanding, a shared experience between strangers.

I haven't spent much time here, but I already feel like one among many. Is this what my mother longed to feel? Her childhood was spent displaced by war, moving from East Prussia to what eventually became West Germany. Her life with my father was spent hopscotching around the United States, moving from military base to military base. Is this feeling what inspired her wanderlust? Did she just want to belong?

That night I write a love letter to Jason, and I include a photo of my pink hut.

"Pack your bags," I write, "You can find me right here."

LESSON: We are just animals.

So far in South Africa, I have hiked up Table Mountain, sampled the hottest curries in Durban, found sisterhood in the huts of the Wild Coast, and stood on the farthest tip of Africa while the sturdy winds whipped my hair across my face. Now I'm ready for a safari.

After leaving the Wild Coast, Erin, Pete and Barbara head to Kruger National Park for five days of camping, after which we will drive to Johannesburg together and part ways.

Kruger is remarkable, a sprawling park larger than Israel, making it one of the largest game reserves in all of Africa. It's impossible to navigate in just a few days, so we have reserved campsites at three different locations in the park.

We have two tents -- Erin and Pete share one, Barbara and I take the other. The tents are shaped like frisbees. Unzip one side, toss the whole thing on the ground, and the tent pops up like magic. They are small and leaky -- Barbara and I have lined ours with duct tape -- and they barely shield us from the icy nighttime wind. But since all of us are on tight budgets, we have used them at several cheap campsites throughout South Africa.

The roads in the park are high quality, so our days are spent in the rented Nissan, looping through Kruger's 14 different ecozones on self-drive safaris. We see the Big Five of game animals -- lion, African elephant, Cape buffalo, leopard and rhinoceros -- several times over, in addition to other wildlife. On a densely wooded roadside, I observe the slit mouth of a cheetah as it dozes beneath a

tree. Erin stops the car for a hippopotamus, who is almost as wide as the road. We see crocodiles and warthogs, leaping herds of kudu and zeals of zebras, a volt of vultures feasting on a giraffe carcass.

At night, I am the cook for our group, making one-pot meals in the campsite kitchens. Packages of dried ramen noodles mixed with canned vegetables. Boiled pasta with a tin of spaghetti sauce. Rice and beans. This is the food I ate in college, when I couldn't afford anything fresh.

Every morning, Pete and I stir crystals of instant coffee into hot water and curl our frigid fingers around the warm mugs. His is a takeout cup, saved from a fast food joint where we stopped at earlier in the month. Mine is a travel mug from Addo Elephant Park that has held everything from hot coffee to cold beer. Sometimes I get sad when I think of the lazy mornings I spent at home with Jason, sprawled out in bed, reading the Sunday New York Times and drinking black coffee. So I push through those memories. I focus on the animals around me instead.

Some of the other campers tease my friends and I. The other groups are well-equipped with elaborate tents, rented RVs, lounge chairs, inflatable mattresses, coolers full of beer, gas grills, tiny refrigerators that plug into the cigarette lighter of a Land Cruiser.

But I like the way I'm experiencing this country. My blood tolerates coldness better, and my skin is slightly harder. I have not looked in a mirror for

weeks. Every night I feel the rocks of Africa beneath my back. The ground is so firm, so complete, sometimes I think it's cradling me.

Two days later, we have made it halfway through the park.

I sit in a wildlife blind, a tiger stripe of light across my face. Surrounding me are animals I've only read about before. A group of elephants coat themselves in mud by a waterhole. They fling dirt at each other playfully, stir the earth with their trunks.

My ears are filled with birdsong, and I smell sweet grass, sun-warmed leaves, the musk of large animals. The land is so expansive, I've never seen anything so great or so wide before. There is a raincloud in the distance, but I know it might never reach me here.

All the unkempt feelings I had in South America, all the times I felt I didn't belong, I don't have here. This country is giving me something I didn't know how to ask for. Though I'm here with three friends, it's rare to be in a place where animals outnumber people, and I like being in this minority. The isolation is seductive and comforting.

I watch herds of animals come and go to the waterhole, and I think about home. It's impossible to reach my family from the bushveld, with no phone or internet service for many miles. But even if I could call my family right now, what would I say?

Each call home from this trip has been progressively more difficult. The farther I travel, the further I feel. My dad holds his cell phone so close to my mom's ear that I hear the dull thud of the phone making contact with her hearing aid. I tell her where I am. I tell her what I'm seeing, the things I'm doing, how I'm feeling. I tell her that I miss her. But the one-sidedness of the conversation makes me ache. Even though I know it's futile, I always end up asking her questions: How are you doing? Are you ok? Do you miss me?

While I used to receive some response -- sometimes a mumble, more often a groan -- now she doesn't answer at all. I strain for something between the hum of the phone line and the scritch of her hearing aid. But even connected, there is disconnect. She gives me no words, only her silence. I feel as if she has erased me.

I wonder if I still linger in her mind or if I have completely ceased to exist for her. Does her brain cling to any of my clarinet recitals? Does she remember the yellow rocking chair from our living room, the place where she smoothed my hair and soothed my tears? Does she know we had a fight when she found a pack of cigarettes in my purse?

Am I situated at all within the folds of her brain? Does she ever have visions of a wild-haired little girl, round-bellied and pink from the sun, and wonder why she's there? Does she see ghosts of me, the same way my mind conjures visions of her, ghosts of how things used to be?

From the wildlife blind, I watch an adult giraffe stretch for leaves on a tree. A baby giraffe trots out from behind a tree and runs to this mother. He nudges beneath her knobby legs and stands in her shadow. Although baby giraffes hit the ground feet first and walk almost immediately, I know mama giraffes care for their young as long as necessary -- sometimes as long as 16 months -- to teach them survival skills.

Now the top of the young one's head grazes the pale, fine fur of his mother's belly. Together the giraffes almost seem to be an 8-legged figure, two shapes combined into one. I yearn for that. I am just an animal, after all. I want to run to my mom, seek the protection of her body. But I am motherless now, even while she still breathes.

What would the baby giraffe do if his mother's mind turned into a fist? If her belly stiffened and became unwelcoming? If she turned away from his embrace?

I wonder if the baby would feel fear, if he would crumble from grief. Or would he start on a journey that takes him around the world, searching for something he can't yet name?

Our final night in Kruger, the wind has teeth.

We pitch our tents under the shelter of a few trees, near a chain-link fence with a sign that warns against feeding the hyenas.

The spotted animals patrol the length of the fence anyway. Though they are still wild, these hyenas have grown accustomed to humans here and seem unafraid.

Our neighbors are boisterous and drunk Afrikaners. They set up a pop-up tent on top of a hulking Land Rover. They drag patio furniture onto the grass, pull out a grill, light the charcoal. They cook *boerewors* spiral sausage coils and thick steaks, foil-wrapped potatoes and a pot of soupy beans, then toss their meat scraps over the fence. The hyenas fight for the grizzle and skin.

My friends and I want to celebrate Halloween, even though we have no costumes and the holiday isn't celebrated here.

I learned this earlier in the day, when my friends and I checked into the campsite area. I asked the ranger if there are any Halloween activities for the park's international guests. He said he has never heard of Halloween before.

"It's a holiday," I said. "In America, we celebrate it by dressing up in costumes, knocking on neighbors' doors and asking for candy."

"And they give it to you?"

"Yes. Because if they don't, you can play a mean trick on them."

"I don't understand," he said. "Why would you do that?"

I had never thought about it much before, and I didn't know what to say. I finally explained, "Because Halloween is all about being scary. A lot of people dress up like vampires, witches, zombies, mummies -- anything dead. And then they frighten other people."

“Dead things?”

He doesn't really get it, and my explanation wasn't adequate. We both dropped the Halloween talk and focused on the registration process instead. When that was finished, I turned to walk away. The ranger yelled cheerfully after me.

“Have a nice Halloween! I hope you drown in a swimming pool tonight!”

For our own personal festivities, Pete and I decide to be our Afrikaner neighbors, quietly and out of earshot. We hike our pants up to our ribs, hoist our beers in the air and try on South African accents, bragging about our fat boerewors and how we're going to cook it on the braai. Then Barbara pretends to be a lion and chases us around our tents.

I miss having a real Halloween. There are the superficial things I love about the holiday, of course. The costumes and masks, candy and caramel apples, fairy wings and cat ears. But it's also a night of haunting. A night for ghosts. It is the transition between seasons, the harvest and the reckoning, the slim, silken veil between our world and what comes next.

As my mom straddles this life and her inevitable death, I am more drawn to Halloween than ever before. Sometimes I think I'm ready to let her go into the wild realm of ghosts, whatever that might be, even while I want to cling to the husk of her. Keeping her here, on this side of reality, feels selfish. Like hoarding. I think she would want to move on.

“Happy Halloween!” Pete interrupts my silence and hands me a piece of candy from our food supplies.

It’s hard to believe this is our final night together. Barbara is headed to Madagascar, where she’ll be working on some kind of lemur census. Erin and Pete are on a fast track through East Africa, zipping through Uganda and Rwanda before heading to Egypt. And I’m also going to Uganda, but I am in for a longer stay -- I’m still making plans, but I’ll likely volunteer on a farm during the rice harvest in exchange for a place to stay.

After dinner, we are too cold to stay outside, even though we want to prolong our time together. We crawl into our tents, and the drunk neighbors wander into our campsite and jeer. “It’s too cold for your tents!” they yell, as if we have a choice of accommodations for the night. “You need a strong one like ours.”

The wind howls through the duct-taped seams of the tent, and my summer sleeping bag does little to keep me warm. I pull on a hat and some gloves. The frame of our tent buckles and sways with every gust.

“I feel like the wind is talking to us,” Barbara says. I strain to listen to what it’s saying but I can’t make out the words. Eventually I fall into the kind of unsettled sleep that feels like slipping on cobblestones; I wake each time I’m about to tumble.

I don't know what time it is when I hear the crack. It shatters the blackness of night. Then a boom. A crash. I have no idea what's happening. Uncertainty grips me.

I hear Barbara's breath quicken. We are both still with fear. My eyes water as they always do when my body is tight with terror, and I wipe the tears away.

"Should we go outside?" Barbara says.

"I don't know," I say. The wind still moans, but now animal sounds have joined in. From my tent, I see a flashlight. The light is yellow, but the canvas walls filter it into a delicate green. I hear another tent unzip. Erin and Pete.

A moment later, our tent shakes. "Guys," Pete says. "Come out and see."

I strap my headlamp around my forehead, and flick on the light before I crawl out of the tent. Outside everything looks different than it did earlier, and I am floundering to make sense of the scene.

The campground now looks like a dense jungle. Leaves rattle. The sky is streaked with the very first bluish lines of morning light, and wind rushes across my face. There are fallen branches everywhere. Where the neighbors' grill and patio furniture used to be, there is now a tree.

On closer inspection with our flashlight beams, my friends and I see that an entire tree didn't fall against the Land Rover. However, a sizable portion of it did, as though the wind cracked the tree right in half.

The neighbors carefully step out of their pop-up tent on the Land Rover roof and climb down the ladder attached to the vehicle's side, the metal now

tangled with branches. The Afrikaners are dazed, but safe. We help them find a place to sit, away from the mess of sticks and leaves. Erin brings them water.

The fallen tree only narrowly missed crashing through their tent. After it hit the roof, the thick limbs rolled off the vehicle and onto the patio furniture, shattering it all. The tree came close to crushing the chain-link fence -- the one thing that separates us from the scavengers.

The animals are here now, summoned by the clatter and the light. The hyenas stand in a line, watching us beasts with unblinking, round eyes. I stare back, and I wonder if I am as strange to them as they are to me. The fence looks more delicate than it ever did before, almost like filigree.

This world is so fragile, I realize, and the line that separates us from wildness is so thin. It's almost not there at all.

LESSON: Honor your tribe

It's late afternoon in Kampala, Uganda, when I call my dad's cell phone. It is 8 a.m. in Ohio, and my mom is being fed powdered eggs.

"I'm trying to decide where to go next," I tell my dad.

"That's nice," he says.

My laptop is perched on top of my knees while I sit cross-legged on a hostel's red-painted porch, which opens out into a large plot of land. From here I see a pig almost as big as a loveseat, groups of cartwheeling monkeys, and lines of laundry strung up but sagging from the humidity.

"I want to do something that helps people," I say to my dad. "I found this farm ..."

"That sounds like a good idea," he says.

Some of the travelers camp here on the scraggly lawn, but I've been sleeping on a bunk bed in a sweaty room. A three-legged, black and white kitten has befriended me and clambers into my bed every night. I think he knows I'm lonely.

My dad is obviously distracted with caring for my mom, so I sign off.

"Well, I'm probably headed to this place called Freddie's Farm. I'll call when I get there," I say. "Tell mom I love her, okay?"

I found Freddie on the internet when I searched for non-profits in East Africa that need volunteers -- his farm was described as a social development project, ensuring food security for people in Eastern Uganda. Though his

organization had good reviews from former workers, it was the photos of people laughing in rice fields that really attracted me.

This volunteer gig also requires almost no investment other than time. Freddie asks for just \$25 a week to pay for lodging, which is less expensive than staying in a guest house. Not only will I be saving money, I'm looking forward to camaraderie and of feeling like part of a community again. While it was terrific to zip through South Africa in just one month, I want to slow down now, make friends and get to know a place for longer than just a few days.

Freddie and I trade several emails before I arrive. I tell him I've never worked a field before, and Freddie reassures me. You don't need to be the best farmer or the quickest one, he writes. You just need to be present.

"Anything you can do will help," he insists. "We just need you."

He says if I don't like the field work, I can always teach children a new, sustainable method of planting banana trees.

"But I don't know how to plant banana trees," I write.

"You will learn," he responds. "Please come."

I feel important and wanted in a way I haven't for months, which is enough to get me on the next bus, from the capital city of Kampala to rural Mbale, located on the eastern side of the country, near the border of Kenya.

This is my first real excursion in Africa alone and though I think I know what awaits me on the other end, I wonder how much surprise awaits. Is it crazy

to take a bus across the country to stay with someone I've only met on the internet?

A man sits next to me on the bus, and he verbalizes some of my lingering doubts. "Why are you going to Mbale? There's nothing there. Who are you staying with? Do you even know what you're doing?"

My response sounds like an entry in Lonely Planet. "Well, it's the agricultural hub of Uganda, so I hear the markets are big and nice," I say. "It's a thriving provincial city with a superb setting at the bottom of Mt. Elgon. And the terrain is beautiful. There are waterfalls and coffee plantations ..."

"Sure?" the man says. It's a Ugandan vocal tick, administered in the same tone that an incredulous Californian might say, "Seriously?"

The man says if it wasn't for his family, he would never visit Mbale again.

I try to change the subject.

"What's the best restaurant in town?" I ask.

"There is food."

"No, best," I say. "What restaurant has the *best* meal?"

"The restaurants have food," he says. "There is no best."

Maybe we have a failure to communicate. Or maybe this man is telling me the truth. Maybe I'm in store for a a very bleak place. I rest my head on the scratched glass of the bus window and watch Kampala's smog and congestion slither away, replaced by the swaying grasses and red clay of the countryside.

The trees are tall enough to form a canopy over the road, their trunks hairy with vines. It reminds me of one particular gravel road that leads to my aunt's farm in southern Indiana, even though I'm sure the species of trees differ.

My husband once told me that the brain is always seeking patterns, because it doesn't like what it doesn't already know. That's why people see faces and animals and shapes in clouds -- because our brains are trying to create something familiar out of something that is senseless and unknown. This is what I'm doing through the smeary bus window, imprinting a road I've traveled many times onto a foreign landscape. It's beautiful enough that I should be at ease, but my stomach clenches anyway. What's going to happen to me in this place?

I talk myself down by reminding myself of all the people I love back home -- the reason why I'm taking this journey in the first place.

Hours later we reach the bus depot, a small stop on a dirt street. The structures vary in size, constructed of brick and bright paint. A few of them just look like skeletons, skinny boards and beams, the bones of a building. Motorcycles scream down the street, and cars kick up red dust. Vendors sell bottles of soda and a lean man on the corner slices long stalks of sugarcane into bite-sized pieces to bag and sell. Children huddle at his feet, waiting for cast-offs.

While I wait for my backpack to be unloaded from the undercarriage of the bus, my seatmate stands next to me, even though he isn't waiting for any luggage. He offers a final piece of unsolicited advice.

“You should know the bus leaves for Kampala many times a day,” he says.
“This afternoon, in fact.”

“Thank you, but I don’t think I’ll be going so soon,” I say. “I’m here for a purpose.”

“Sure?”

To get to Freddie’s house, I take a short ride in a *matatu* minivan taxi, followed by a motorcycle taxi called a *boda-boda*, then walk a mile down a dirt road cluttered with goats and women balancing sacks of grain on their heads. His house is at the end of the road, a simple stone and brick, ranch-style structure.

I knock, and Freddie comes to the screen door. He looks exactly like the photos online, tall and skinny, about 30 years old, skin as smooth and shiny as a coffee bean. His hair is closely cropped, and he wears crisp black pants and a long shirt even though the weather is steamy.

He’s so warm and welcoming, I don’t hesitate to walk inside his house when he opens the door.

The living room is painted bright green. On one side of the room is a floral-pattered couch and a small TV, propped up on a plastic stool. On the other side of the room are rain barrels filled with rice.

Down the hallway, two bedrooms are lined with bunk beds and mosquito nets for volunteers. Freddie sleeps in the back of the house, a third bedroom. The kitchen is small and holds sacks of grain, a small, campfire-sized paraffin

stove, and a mini dorm room refrigerator. The bathroom has a toilet, but it doesn't flush, and there's a cold water faucet for taking bucket showers.

I ask about the farm. Freddie says it's somewhere off-site. I guzzle purified water from my bottle while we talk, and I feel sweat beading on my upper back and rolling down my spine.

"We can go there another day," he says.

Only one other volunteer is staying with Freddie at the moment. Katie is a Canadian woman who has been living in Rwanda for six months, building websites for small businesses to fund travels throughout Africa. She says she's here for research -- she's writing a guide to volunteer opportunities in East Africa.

I ask when I can start picking rice. It's so hot, and I'm already tired from the long day of travel, I secretly hope Freddie won't say my volunteer work begins today.

"No, no rice," he says. "Harvest is done."

"No rice?"

"Next year," he says. "We'll have more."

"Oh. So I'll be teaching kids about planting banana trees then?" I say. "I know it's late today, so I'm not sure if they're still in school ..."

"The kids are on holiday," he interrupts. "They have time away to help parents with the harvests."

"No students?"

"No students," he confirms.

Suddenly I'm a volunteer with no job. If there's no rice to harvest and no students to teach, why am I even here? I told the man on the bus that I have a purpose, and now that's a lie.

Freddie uses a paraffin stove on the floor to heat a pot of milk tea. He pours some into a chipped blue mug and hands it to me. It's too hot to drink, so I just hold it while I pace the floor.

"Relax," he says. "What else can you do?"

"I have no idea."

When it comes right down to it, what *can* I do? The skills that look so impressive on a journalism resume are about as useless here as a screen door on a submarine. I can't build a house or tend the sick. I can't help anyone with their crops or teach a new skill. All I can do is research stories and write articles for daily deadlines -- which doesn't seem very exciting or useful when I say it to Freddie in his living room.

"You are journalist?" he says. "Have you been on radio?"

I have. But only as a guest for local talk shows.

"Can you speak like a Southerner?" he says.

"Like, Southern Ugandan?"

"No," he says. "Like Garth Brooks."

"Um," I pause. "I guess so."

When I pepper my speech with “y’all”s and a “bless yer heart,” Freddie asks me to exaggerate my words and make the Southern twang more pronounced.

It turns out that in addition to running an organic farm, Freddie is also a popular radio DJ and controls afternoon programming at the biggest FM station in this region. I didn’t realize country music was so hot in Uganda, but Freddie quickly ticks off a list of performers: “Kenny Chesney, Shania Twain, Tim McGraw, Willie Nelson, Garth Brooks,” he says. “We love them all. Especially the Garth Brooks.”

The fact that many people in Mbale don’t speak English is not a problem, Freddie says. “The people very much enjoy the soft sounds of Southern talking.”

And so he asks me to take on a different kind of volunteer task here -- that of a country-western DJ at the radio station where he works.

The next day I get a tour of the radio station.

Freddie’s co-workers walk me through the job. I record promotional spots for the station -- “Y’all have been listening to STEP-FM, where country music matters” -- and introduce new songs from Nashville. I don’t know if anyone understands the words I am putting out into the air, but it doesn’t matter. I imagine my voice filling strangers’ homes, and I like it. I picture the words as blue and silky, threading into someone else’s ear, weaving us together. My mother is squelched and silenced by a disease, but my community grows with each word I send out over the airwaves.

As one of my first assignments, I interview a man who won a motorbike in a soda company's national contest. It sounds like a fluff story, something light that pads the real news. Then I meet the man.

He is young but unemployed and not by choice. When he does find work, it is poorly-paid casual labor, never anything long term. Now, with a motorbike, this man can start his own business by turning it into a boda-boda. Drivers are self-employed and usually make between \$7-20 per day. This isn't just a simple win for him -- it is the opportunity to change his life.

As a woman who has been spoiled by taxis, buses, cars and traffic laws, bodas are terrifying. Nobody wears a helmet in Uganda, and a 10-minute ride through the city makes for many close calls as the boda pushes through tangles of traffic, tears over potholed dirt roads and weaves through unruly farm animals.

When I arrived in Uganda, I was told that most people in the hospital are there as a result of boda-boda accidents. I promise myself that I will never take a boda. No way. It's too unsafe, too unpredictable..

I will not take a boda.

Except I have to go to town to get a new electrical converter for my plugs. And no other vehicles go to that section of town.

OK, just this one time. But definitely not again.

But bodas are faster, cheaper and more convenient than *matatus*, which are minivan taxis. Not to mention, they're a whole lot more comfortable. The matatus are licensed to carry 14 people at a time, but they often squeeze in

many more -- some of my rides have been uncomfortably hot and sticky, with 26 people and some fat goats.

Fine. I'll take bodas, but not at night.

There is no other way to get where I'm going.

Bodas it is.

Covering the story of this man's motorbike win gives me a new appreciation for the workers who drive through the congested city, out to the overgrown coffee fields and back again, circling the entire region many times a day to support their families.

There are certain places that consume the memory of bad things, and that's what Mbale does for me. Concerns about my mother, questions about my future, longing for my husband, all seem to disappear into grassy fields and brick-colored streets. I find the city to be walkable and friendly, and the days are filled with buttery sunshine. The people I meet are kind and inquisitive, curious how I ended up in Mbale.

One afternoon, on my walk to the radio station, I take an alternate path, cutting between two houses instead of walking around the entire block.

A woman, squatting next to her house and washing a pan in a bucket, watches me until I am almost past, then she shouts, "Stop!"

I stop, even though I am afraid I'm going to get in trouble for trespassing.

"What is your name, woman?" she says.

“Maggie.”

“Maggie.” She repeats my name slowly, letting it roll around on her tongue like warm gravy. “Maggie. Is that a shortcut for Margaret?”

I’m surprised she knows this, and I smile. “It is.”

“What a coincidence,” she says. Her face breaks into a grin too. “I could use a friend named Margaret.”

The woman yells for her family, all of whom come outside and collect in a line by the side of the house. She introduces me as her new friend, and everybody reaches out a hand to shake mine.

I am invited inside for soupy beans and *posho*, cornmeal cooked until it is thick and stiff. I can’t stay long -- I am expected to be back at the radio station within an hour -- but I also don’t want to be rude. It is so touching to be asked into someone’s home, I can’t possibly turn down the generous invitation.

The woman’s house looks nothing like my aunt’s farmhouse in Indiana, but it smells just the same. Salt and broth and yeast and warm spices. The floor is cool, just compacted earth, and someone gives me a small, mustard-yellow mat to sit on.

When the woman hands me a plate of food, I understand that I am supposed to eat the posho with my hands and use it to sop up the beans. While my left hand balances the plate on my knees and my right hand sloppy with food, a lock of my hair falls into my face. A young girl, maybe 10 years old, leans close to me. She brushes the hair from my forehead and tucks the curl behind my ear.

The tenderness of it all makes me want to cry. I could lay down here and fall asleep, so happy and safe. I feel like a member of a family again. Is this what I've been looking for?

For the first time I realize that with my mother's impending death, I will be losing the family unit as I've always known it. Though we will continue to be a unit after she's gone, our family will always be the remains of something that once was -- our Istanbul, yearning for Constantinople.

Before I leave, the woman rubs my cheek and gives me a kiss on the forehead. What a coincidence, I think as I leave -- I had been looking for a new friend too.

Over the next week, I stop by the house twice more and knock on the door, though nobody is ever home. I'll wonder if my afternoon inside was as meaningful for the family as it was for me, or if taking in strangers for a meal is a common occurrence at their house, something they just do. I'll wonder if they ever think of me, or if I was just the American lady who cut through their property one day and then walked away forever.

I never see the woman again, the woman who treated me like a daughter, but I know I'll always remember her name: Hope.

Just one week into my new job at the radio station, I'm given my biggest interview yet.

Freddie has arranged for me to interview Umukuka Wilson Wamimbi, the newly elected king of Masaaba. It is a win-win situation for both of us: Freddie's station is proud to boast an American journalist. And I am on a king's porch, notebook in hand, just a couple days before his official coronation.

The porch, as well as the home attached to it, are modest but well-crafted. A rosy assistant pours hot tea into squat mugs, then steps away to wait under the shade of a tree.

While Uganda is primarily led by a president, there are kings who preside over each cultural region and preserve the traditions of the tribes. I have been staying in the Bamasaaba territory, which includes more than 5.5 million people in an area that extends from Eastern Uganda into Western Kenya.

We settle back onto a bench on the patio of his country home, located among the sprawling coffee plantations on the outskirts of Mbale. He is dressed in a marine blue button-down shirt and a pair of khakis that looks freshly laundered and pressed. His face is friendly, pleated with deep lines across his forehead. He folds his hands and waits for me to speak.

"OK," I say, taking a deep breath before I launch into my first question.

"Have you always wanted to be king?"

Wamimbi is reserved and insists that I call him a "traditional leader" rather than "king."

“No. I never expected anything like this,” he says. “To be given the responsibility of leading people is a great honor. It is like becoming the mother of a large family.”

The job of a cultural king is an important one that carries a hefty amount of responsibility. Uganda is a country that desperately clings to the past while trudging into the future, a place where witchdoctors have offices next to medical clinics. Wamimbi’s task is to find the delicate balance between those worlds, moving both of them forward together.

"Will you wear a crown?" I ask.

"Only for very special occasions," he laughs.

A few days later, he does indeed don a crown, a tall cone stitched in leather and covered in pale cowry shells. Police in olive-colored uniforms patrol the gate of the wooden fence that line the perimeter of the grounds of the celebration area. Those with invitations, including me, are welcomed inside to sit on plastic chairs under fabric circus tents. Those without invitations wedge themselves along the fence.

Wamimbi's plain gray suit is covered by a shield made of animal skin to symbolize that he is the protector of his people. He also carries a spear to demonstrate his power. The crowd is silent as he makes vows of unity and promises to be a fair and kind leader.

During his speech, which is given in both English and Swahili, the two official languages of Uganda, Wamimbi stresses the importance of preserving cultural heritage.

"We've already lost too much of our traditions over time, so I will focus on restoring and preserving those," he says. "Without our culture, we are nothing."

This celebratory site is also home to another traditional Bamasaaba event -- the male circumcision ritual, called imbalu, which takes place every other year during a three-day festival. As many as 40,000 teenage boys, smeared in a yeast-like porridge, receive their initiation into manhood from a traditional healer while the villagers dance and cheer.

That is acknowledged by one of the clan elders as he glances around the throng of thousands at the king's coronation.

"Many people," I say.

He leans over and whispers, "The circumcisions draw a bigger crowd."

Now a tide of clan elders and dancers ebb and flow around Wamimbi as he circles the cultural grounds. Feet and homemade drums thunder like thousands of hooves pounding across the red dirt. Whooping noises shatter the thick, humid air.

I feel like part of a blended tribe myself, and the cultural display in front of me forces me to think about my own heritage.

My father is a small-town Indiana farm boy, who grew up among alfalfa fields and corn, a jock who entered the U.S. Air Force just out of high school. He learned about the world through military deployments.

My mother grew up in a place that is no longer a country. Her family left their home in East Prussia during World War II, then worked their way down toward what was then known as West Germany, where they finally settled. As a child, she picked potatoes to sustain her family.

My dad met my mom in Germany, where she worked as a civilian secretary at Sembach Air Force Base, the same base where he was stationed. With their marriage, two cultures intertwined.

Sometimes I try to imagine what it must have been like for my mother then, the leap she made for love. She barely spoke English when she married my dad, and she had never traveled beyond Europe. As soon as they were wed, my dad was deployed to New Mexico. Such a stark difference from the place where she grew up.

My mom quickly became pregnant with my older sister, but my dad's work kept him busy, leaving her alone in a place she didn't understand. It was a sparse landscape populated by dust storms and scrub brush. The open sky must have felt so lonely. She once told me she cried after every appointment with her obstetrician, because so much was happening with her body and she didn't know how to communicate.

My sister, Monica, was born in 1963. My brother, Mark, came along two years later. Then my dad was deployed to Vietnam for a year. He wrote letters to my mother every single day, an extended, one-sided conversation about sticky jungles and mess hall spaghetti. It's hard for me to imagine how alone she must have felt, stuck in this arid land with two children, unable to drive, barely able to communicate even on a basic level.

I was born many years later, when my family was stationed in Georgia. There are 13 years between my sister and me, 11 years difference with my brother. By that time, my mother's English was impeccable. Other people claimed she had a German accent, but I never heard it myself. She just sounded like mom.

Now I watch a group of younger dancers swirl into the mass of drummers and warriors. Their skirts are long and indigo, their white shirts untucked. Their belts and headbands look like strips of bark. They chant and holler, calling out the new king's full title.

I let my mind wander back to when I was in my early 20s and learned about the other sibling. The one without a name.

It happened soon after I graduated college, working my first job at a small newspaper in Appalachia. My dad asked me to come home for the weekend to take care of mom while he spent the weekend at his high school reunion.

Though she was still in the early stages of Alzheimer's, the disease was pronounced enough that she couldn't be left alone. She could still eat, dress

herself and use the toilet without any assistance, but she had to be told to do those things. A bold, red stop sign posted on the inside of the front door reminded her that she shouldn't leave the house. Her wrist was outfitted with an electronic bracelet that could be tracked by the sheriff's department, in case she decided to wander anyway.

I didn't want to go home that weekend, even though my dad needed my help. I was 23 and bitter. The part of me where compassion should reside had been scooped away, heaped with anger instead. I resented this disease that had replaced my mom with somebody foreign, abandoning me with the memory of a woman. Her new body sickened me, so pudgy and pale and unfamiliar. She began to smell acrid and old, like stale flowers and ammonia and lemon drops. I missed the perfume she used to wear, the sour one I once hated. I couldn't bear to be around her.

My life in those days was one poor choice after another. I drank too much, to the point where I thought vomiting each morning was normal. I was dating a local city councilman and spent my weekends screwing him in the back of the minivan he shared with his recently-separated wife. I just wanted to do shots and see my boyfriend and fall asleep to a dizzy ceiling. The last place I wanted to go was home.

I reluctantly agreed to take care of my mom anyway. So that weekend, looking for some way to eat up time, I brought her along to a bookstore.

She was excruciatingly slow getting out of the car. I unbuckled her seatbelt and helped her up. She took the tiniest steps across the parking lot, and it felt like ages before we reached the bookstore. Then, in front of the door, she snapped to a halt. People pushed by, grumbled. My mom turned to me and her eyes searched mine. It had been months since she had looked at my face like this, with some kind of recognition. It made me want to cry.

“There’s something you should know,” she said. She rocked her weight to her right foot, which meant she was completely blocking the door now. I yanked on her arm and pulled her to the side. I think I pinched her skin, because she winced.

“There’s something you should know.” She said it again, but this time with greater urgency.

I sighed. “What is it, mom?” I was irritated. I just wanted to get inside this bookstore, where people wouldn’t stare at us.

She furrowed her brow. “You have another brother,” she said.

I sighed. How many other things had she created in her mind? Ever since the Alzheimer’s started eating away at her brain, she had crafted some mighty fantasies. She thought there was a pattern in the red cars that passed by the house. She thought the planes overhead, landing at the nearby Air Force base, were sending signals to my father. The rooftops of her neighbors’ houses were used to communicate a secret code that somehow was being used by my father to get away with an elaborate affair.

Now I had another brother. Yeah, right.

I held my mother's hand and walked her inside the bookstore. I sat her down in the section closest to the door -- Humor. I did my best to collect myself, to be patient. This disease wasn't her fault.

"Mom, I know you think I have another brother," I said. "But you have a disease called Alzheimer's."

She looked at me with pity then, as if I were a some kind of rube. She reached for her purse but couldn't unzip it. I helped her open the bag. She retrieved her wallet, which she also couldn't open. Again, I helped. The wallet was a mess of faded receipts, phone numbers, expired credit cards. She hadn't used it in at least a couple years.

Behind all the pockets and clear sleeves of photos, there was a secret compartment, where she used to hide layaway receipts for the designer clothes and purses she bought without telling my dad. From there, she pulled out a tiny, black and white photo.

It was a boy. Light hair and light eyes, just like my mom. Her distinctive, sloping nose. Same face shape. So familiar, and yet it was a boy I had never seen before.

"This is your other brother," she said.

It made no sense. How could this boy look so much like my mom?

"I was raped. I got pregnant. I gave the boy away, and he was adopted by an American family. This is the only photo I have. This is all I have. This is my boy."

"That is not your boy," I said. My brother Mark was her boy, not that light-haired kid. We weren't a family with dark, unexplored closets and things left unsaid. My mother and I didn't keep secrets.

"This is my boy," she murmured again.

The people around us didn't seem to notice my family just splintered. Shoppers plucked books from the shelves. A teenage girl gestured dramatically to her friend with a grande cup of Starbucks. "He's, like, so lame," the girl said and rolled her eyes.

Then my mom was gone again, like someone snuffed out a candle. Her eyes dimmed. Her shoulders slumped. She looked down at her wallet like it was a rotting carcass someone had just dropped into her lap. This happened sometimes to her -- a snap of clarity before she drooped back into the depths of the disease -- though these moments had become more rare lately. I barely got to see my real mom anymore.

I folded up the wallet and snapped it shut, put it back in the purse. I couldn't accept this -- that the woman I thought I knew so well was never known to me at all; that her secret compartments held much more than a receipt for an expensive skirt. I have always been one of three children. Now I am one of four? I never considered this piece of my identity to be malleable.

I looked around at the books on the shelves, all the covers that obscured the stories within the pages. I wondered what else my mom kept tucked away, what other secrets might remain untold. I didn't even know if these tales were truth or fiction.

"Let's go," I said and held her arm as I guided her away from the store.

Later that night at my parents' home, I repeated everything to my dad while I made a pot of decaf coffee in the kitchen.

"It was so crazy," I said. "She said I had another brother. Can you believe that?"

"Well, you do," he said. "You have another brother." His tone was straightforward. Terse.

She never revealed the story to my siblings or me, not until the flashback at the bookstore, when that ancient, hungry pain cracked her open and broke through.

"Your mother never wanted you to think she was tainted goods," my dad explained. "She never wanted you to know she suffered. She was too strong for that."

I always knew she was strong. I just never imagined how resilient.

In Uganda, on a crushing hot day, I watch the warriors dance around Umukhukha Wilson Weasa Wamimbi. Their feathers tremble with their movements as they dance a story about the clan's history. Their cries sound

deep and familiar, the sound of longing, the sound of loss, the sound of unity, the sound of a clan.

I understand that sound. My mother is a warrior too.

LESSON: When you see a toilet, pee in it.

My decision to leave Mbale is motivated by the unwelcome attention of a man named Big John.

Big John is the best friend of Freddie, my volunteer host, though they don't appear to have much in common. Where Freddie wears modest buttoned-down shirts and polishes his one pair of black shoes with pride, Big John wears flashy rings and a watch that sparkles with rhinestones. He carries two flip phones and an iPhone, and whenever he sits, he pulls all three from his pockets and fans them out. He is square-faced, with a stout and hard body, at least a foot bigger than my own tall frame.

He has never been unkind, but his presence always feels like a dark shadow. I've tried to minimize the amount of contact I have with this guy, but I can't stop it. Freddie is a busy man, hosting his radio show each day and supervising the nonprofit organization that benefits from his farm. I often find myself alone, and when I do, Big John finds me.

I don't even understand how this is possible. Big John is supposedly a club promoter in Kampala, though he never seems to leave Mbale and or do anything for his work. Perhaps he has done such a good job that the clubs no longer need promotion.

I try to tell Freddie that Big John's overbearing presence is unwelcome and uncomfortable, but he waves away my concerns.

“Sure?” he says. “Women love Big John. You are lucky to have his attention.”

“But I don’t love Big John,” I explain.

“He can help you produce,” he says, teasing me because I don’t have any children. He has seen me play with the kids on his street, the ones who wait for me on the porch every morning. They call me *muzungu*, foreigner, and they climb on my legs and tug on my curly hair. Freddie knows that I’d like to have a child of my own someday.

“If I produce, it will be with my husband.”

Katie, the other volunteer at Freddie’s farm, isn’t a reliable diversion from Big John. She holes up by herself in Mbale’s only Internet cafe (which doubles as a car rental shop), where she works on the website for Freddie’s nonprofit. Big John never bothers her, never follows her, never even asks casual questions, like “How are you?”

Once I asked Big John why he doesn’t want to befriend Katie. “She’s a very nice woman,” I say. “And she’s single.”

His answer is typical Big John: “She’s very ugly in the face.”

Today I’m hunkered down at a streetside cafe, working on a story for the radio station about an upcoming music festival and writing a letter home to Jason. The humidity is oppressive, and my favorite way to cut through the dense heat is a bitter lemon soda called Krest. I’m hungry, but if I eat now, I won’t be

able to afford dinner later. The soda is already an indulgence in my meager budget.

Nearby a vendor hawks sachets of water. Salespeople squat near sacks of potatoes. The air trembles from the sound of voices, feet and traffic. I've been in Mbale almost two weeks, long enough to feel like I can disappear into this scene. Nobody even looks at me as I write. Most of the people at this cafe have their attention turned toward a small TV mounted on the wall anyway. It's showing "*Pasion de Gavilanes*," or "Hidden Passions," a Colombian telenovela that has been dubbed into English for an East African audience. Ever since I saw one episode at a hostel in Kampala, it has been my new favorite show. Best I can tell, it's about a family of handsome, shirtless ranchers who sleep with leggy models while dramatic music soars.

"Hidden Passions" is on a commercial break, so I'm hunched over my notebook when Big John grabs a chair, flips it around and straddles it. He pops the cap off a glass bottle of Coke with his teeth.

The table between Big John and me is flimsy red plastic, bleached pink by the sun. With his bulk now leaning across the top of it, the table suddenly feels far too small.

"Do you want to know why they call me Big John?" Big John says. His voice is as thick and dark as blackstrap molasses.

"Big John, please," I say. "I need to get this piece done for tomorrow's radio show."

“Answer my question,” he says. “Then I will go.”

“Fine,” I sigh and put my pen down, then take a gulp of Krest.

“Again. Do you know why they call me Big John?”

“Because you are big and your name is John?”

“No,” he says. “It is because I have a big penis.”

I sigh and pick up my pen again. “I don’t have time to talk about your penis,” I say, and he laughs before his face turns serious. He reaches one hand across the table and places it on top of mine.

“Your husband will never know,” he says.

It’s funny. Big John is certainly an attractive man, but I am not attracted to him in the least. So I squint, trying to see him with a different lens than the one I wear now. If I were younger or unattached, would I be flattered to have captured his gaze? Am I squelching any “Hidden Passions” of my own?

No, I decide. Even under different circumstances, the pairing is impossible -- there is no part of my body that warms to him at all. In fact, I feel the opposite of desire.

It reminds me of the greatest romantic advice my mom ever offered, something my body still knows to be true: “Nice is better than handsome.” Big John is not nice. He is a brute who treats me more like a conquest than a person.

I shake my head no and cross my legs. He’s right, my husband would never know. But he’s wrong to think that I have any appetite for him at all. Desire cannot be calculated. It is not based on face shape or body structure or standard

ideas of beauty. It is born of something untouchable, unnamable. It is something I simply don't have the ability to feel with this hulking, beady-eyed man.

Big John catches me looking at him and uses that moment to extend the conversation.

"One more question," he says. "Where else have you traveled?"

I answer in the hope that I'll placate him enough to leave. I rattle off a few countries, and he interrupts, "Which places have the biggest penises?"

"Um, I don't know. I haven't been looking," I say. "I'm happily married."

"It is Africa," he says, matter-of-fact. "Africa has the biggest penises."

"Like I said, I really don't know."

"In Rwanda, no good. The penises are very thin. The penises in Kenya are fine and long, but they do not work. Very small erections. South Africa, all the penises have AIDS," he says. "But do not worry. My Uganda penis will take care of you."

I lean across the table, solidly in Big John's territory, and look him in the eye.

"How do you know so much about these penises?" I ask.

"I don't," he shifts his eyes downward. I have unnerved him. "This is what I have heard."

At that, Big John snaps and hollers at a nearby produce vendor and demands a bag of freshly cut jackfruit. The vendor scurries to the table and hands it over in exchange for a handful of Ugandan shillings.

The bag contains fat sheathes of jackfruit, like round rumps of yellow flesh arranged around a singular plump pit. Big John uses his wide thumbs to pull the fruit apart, juicy and overripe, and he feeds it to me piece by piece as flies swirl around our heads.

My stomach growls at the goodness of the fruit, but the act of receiving food from this man's hands feels inappropriately intimate. Each time I try to take a piece with my own hand, Big John presses his sticky fingers to my mouth and feeds me another bite. I am uncertain if this was the way Ugandans traditionally share food, or if this is one more overbearing action from Big John. I lean toward the latter, especially since I haven't seen any Ugandans feed each other. The fruit begins to taste more sour than sugary.

Big John holds another piece to my mouth, and I tighten my lips. I shake my head no, like a toddler refusing a spoonful of peas, but he tries to hold my head steady, his hot paws against my chin. Finally he shrugs, takes the jackfruit and pops it into his own mouth.

Around us, the concrete paths are packed so thick with orange dust, you'd think the sidewalks are actually dirt. A constant stream of scooters flow down the street. I could easily catch a boda and disappear in the radio station, where I would find some peace in an empty office. As I gather my things to go, Big John changes the topic from something decidedly less sexy than penises -- politics.

"Your George Bush had it right," he says.

"Whoa," I say. "He's not my George Bush."

“I mean to say, the George Bush of your country. He knows how to be a leader.”

“Oh?” I can’t help but pause. This is the exact opposite of everything I’ve heard so far on this trip. I am regularly stopped on the street by strangers who hear my accent and want to complain about George W. Bush, to ask why he has not gone to jail for war crimes, to ask why Americans elected him twice. Along the same lines, I’ve had strangers high-five me and exclaim, “Obama!” They say President Barack Obama will finally restore the United States to a respectable place in the world, and they praise me for electing him, as if I were the only person to have anything to do with it.

“Yes,” Big John says. “George W. Bush knows the quickest way to make people happy and safe is to take away freedom. He gives the people no choices.”

“I like having choices.”

As soon as I say it, I recognize the truth that resonates in those words. I have so many choices -- why am I still in the same town with Big John?

“You Americans,” he shakes his head, like he’s exasperated. “The problem is that you have too much freedom.”

Big John tilts his chair back until it is balanced on the two back legs. He lifts a glass bottle to his mouth and takes a mighty swig of Coca-Cola. He swallows audibly, then lets out a long, “Ahhhh ...” almost as if he’s in a Coke commercial. I want to laugh, but Big John won’t get the joke.

Finally he speaks. "Nothing good comes from America," he says, then promises to send me some articles that will prove his point. "I know you do not believe me now, but you will see. I will find you and friend you on Facebook."

Good luck finding me, I think. The only thing I lust for right now is this world, and I need to be more of an active participant exploring it -- not just moving around the same town, merely putting distance between myself and someone else.

The next morning I'm at the Mbale bus station, ready to find a new volunteer job somewhere else. My plan is to return to Kampala, back to the hostel where I stayed before and figure out my next destination. My goal is to find volunteer work that feels purposeful, something that would make my mom proud.

The bus station is a simple wooden building with a few benches and a public restroom, which I see because the door is open. The toilet is a squat pot -- that is, it's designed for squatting, not sitting. It is essentially a hole in the ground. But it is a hole made of shiny porcelain, with two foot pads on either side of the hole. The floor is clean. There is a bucket of water nearby to flush any waste down the hole.

Even though this is a perfectly nice bathroom -- actually, it's one of the nicest I've seen in the three weeks I've been in Uganda -- I don't really have to use it right now. The bus ride is only four to five hours long. I'm positive I can wait a couple hours, at which point the driver will probably make a comfort stop.

So I board the bus, crack open a book and settle in for a comfortable and scenic ride through the green Ugandan countryside, witnessing the rocks go from red to tan and yellow.

Four hours into the bus ride, the driver still hasn't stopped. By now I really have to pee. My legs are crossed. I am daydreaming of anything dry. Deserts and toast and chapped lips.

I should have known better, but I'm still learning that Ugandan buses don't really adhere to a time schedule. A five-hour bus ride might very well be eight hours, 10 hours, who knows?

Finally, five hours into this supposedly five-hour ride, we are not anywhere close to our destination. With every passenger grumbling, the driver pulls over for the much-needed comfort stop. He positions the bus next to a grassy field. No bushes in sight, and it reminds me of the "restroom" stops in Bolivia that had no actual restroom.

There is only one small shack in the middle of the field -- a few bent pieces of corrugated tin slapped together like a vague parallelogram -- and this is the building that houses the toilet. Singular.

All the male passengers stand in a row behind the shack and commence peeing, which they do directly on the building. The sound of urine on tin is like a fat raincloud cracking open above an old roof. The smell is sour, a million cats pissing.

Meanwhile, the women line up for the one toilet. Unfortunately, I am one of the last people off the bus, so I am among the last in line.

Finally it is my turn, and I pry back the tin wall to enter the bathroom shack. I see the toilet is actually a hole. A hole the size of a chili pot dug into a sloppy dirt floor. It is filthy and rank. The smell is worse than the monkey feces at the primate sanctuary in Bolivia. It is worse than the rotting whale corpse that washed ashore in South Africa. It is something feline and sour, a punch to my nose.

I wind my scarf around my nose and mouth and try to breathe through it but without success. The scent is too pointed. I bite the fabric to choke back my dry heaves. While I squat there, I can't stop thinking about that beautiful bathroom specimen back at the bus station, that gorgeous, shiny squat pot. It was so lovely, so clean.

When I climb back on the bus, I think about how this whole situation is a vivid reminder that I shouldn't let opportunity pass me by. I haven't always been good about this, whether it's a new experience, a writing gig, even a random party invitation. Some things sound too small to bother or too daunting to try, so I remain stagnant in the very same place, moving neither forward nor backward. The lovely squat pot is a symbol of everything I haven't tried.

The whole purpose of this trip was to get out of my own way -- to push myself beyond my comfort zone, discover new ways of doing things, to take more chances and seize every moment. I realize now I still have a lot of work to do.

LESSON: Look at the hills ahead

It takes about two hours by bus to get from where I've been staying in Kampala to Jinja, Uganda, a small town that has become East Africa's hub for adventure sports. Many people go for the world-class kayaking or picturesque bungee jumping. I show up to go white water rafting, which takes place on the source of the Nile River. This is a small diversion before I head to Rwanda for my next volunteer job.

I've never been white water rafting before. The only thing that comes even remotely close is an amusement park ride called White Water Canyon at King's Island in Mason, Ohio, which I rode many times. The six-seat boat provided thrilling hills, excitement and a good drench with no real risk of danger, and it was over in less than five minutes flat.

It was a ride I mostly experienced with other families, when I accompanied friends or my church youth group to the park. My mom hated all roller coasters, but especially those water-themed rides that seemed so splashy and fun to me as a kid. In part it was a matter of propriety -- she was too well-groomed to get wet and walk around in public while her clothes air-dried. But it also spoke to who she was.

It took years for me to notice that my mom particularly loathed rides where she couldn't sit in the back and cover her eyes. Of course she hated White Water Canyon, the boats spinning and twirling like unbalanced tops. My mom could see every bump and hill as it approached, her anxiety building as she witnessed the

other boats get snagged by dizzying whirlpools, then shoved down channels of water, waves crashing over the passengers. She knew exactly what to expect, and that was worse than facing the unknown. She preferred to never see what was coming, the screams only catching up when she was already halfway to the bottom.

Once I asked my mom what she had against these rides. What was so wrong with letting that kind of excitement percolate? I rather liked that tickling, slippery feeling of anticipation, allowing it to brew deep inside my stomach. For me the budding suspense was almost as much as the sudden dropping sensation of the unexpected. There is something fundamentally alluring about it.

“Better to be surprised,” my mom said. “You will learn this.” Then she set her jaw into a firm line. That conversation was over.

Years later I will think about how that philosophy relates to her condition -- the only blessing of Alzheimer’s is that by the time we discovered my mom had a disease, she was too far gone to know it was happening. There was no time to scream.

Better to be surprised, I think as I arrive in Jinja for my white water rafting adventure. And I most certainly am in for a surprise.

While Kampala was frenetic, crowded and wild, Jinja is the laid-back hippie counterpart of the capital city. The streets are red clay, lined with thatched roof buildings. Vendors in small tin structures sell warm chapatti bread rolled

around thin omelets or sliced bananas. Men zip through the streets on motorbikes, bare-chested, not slowed at all by the long yellow kayaks that balance horizontally on the backs of their bikes.

My backpacker hostel is perched on a hill that overlooks the sinuous curves of the Nile. I'm staying in a dorm room with several other kayakers, all more experienced than I am.

I crack open a cold beer and carefully read the waiver I have to sign for the next day's rafting trip. The rapids in Jinja are Grade 5 on a scale that runs from one to six. Grade One means mild rocking and rolling, suitable for beginners. Grade Six means, "Holy mother of God! You must be nuts," presenting extreme danger and barely navigable rapids, even for professionals.

So Grade Five? Those require skillful maneuvering of choppy water, huge hazards, steep drops and crashing waves. It also means that as a first-timer, I am suddenly terrified. I knew the rapids were a Grade Five before signed up -- I just thought it was on a scale of 1 to 10.

I also discover that crocodiles live in the river. Hungry, hungry crocodiles.

I call my husband on Skype. The chipatti bread I ate on my arrival now churns uncomfortably in my stomach. My throat feels acidic.

When my husband answers the call, I tell him what I'm about to do. "So this might be goodbye," I say.

“Then why are you doing this?” he snaps. He suddenly sounds angry, so different from the man who once told me to relax during a skydive. “You know, nobody is forcing you to go rafting.”

“I don’t know why I’m doing this,” I admit. I think of the lesson learned at the lovely squat toilet -- that I shouldn’t let opportunities pass me by. When else will I have a chance to raft the Nile?

“Maybe I’ll surprise myself,” I say.

“Well, I just don’t want to get a call that says my wife is dead,” he says.

He tries to pretend he’s joking, but the rest of the conversation is strained. I wish I knew how to comfort him -- to let him know that I love him and I’m not taking unnecessary risks -- but it’s so hard to do that over a jumpy phone connection. I know this a journey for me, but I don’t always think about how this is a journey for him as well.

The next morning I hand over my waiver to the rafting company, my heart thrumming so hard into my eardrum that I can barely hear the employee who asks for my payment. In return for \$50, I am handed a long paddle. I have no idea how to hold it, even on steady ground. It feels awkward and cumbersome in my hands, like being given a third arm.

Our group is taken by bus to the launch point. As the boats are set off, one by one into the river, they look shockingly small in the wide maw of the river. Poppy seeds in an Olympic-sized pool.

My group is among the last. Once we are on the water, our instructor Jane asks, "Wild or mild?" Jane is a long-limbed, muscular blonde, her hair pulled into taut cornrows that reveal tanned lengths of scalp. Her accent is Australian, which gives her the effect of someone who guzzles cans of Foster's beer and wrestles crocodiles. This is somewhat soothing, since there are, in fact, crocodiles that live in the river.

In answer to her question, our group is divided. Half want the more aggressive experience, while the others want something more subdued. Jane scrunches her eyes and looks at us with disapproval. She was hoping for 100 percent wild.

"Humph," she mutters. "We'll see about that."

After about 10 minutes of calm, placid rafting, Jane suddenly and purposely tips the boat, forcing all of us to swim through a set of small rapids.

Had Jane asked me to swim through the rapids, I don't think I would have willingly done it. But this is baptism by boulders. I emerge on the other side, wet, slightly bruised and with a stomach full of Nile water. As my life jacket helps me bob to the surface, I think, maybe mom was right. Maybe it *is* better to be surprised.

After our raft is righted and all of us hoist ourselves into it again, Jane gives us the option to bail out and float down the river in a safety boat instead. Though a part of my brain says, "Go, fool, go!" I can't do it. I have to see this

rafting thing through. If I turned back now, I would always wonder about my ability to do it.

The first few rapids are actually fun. As we approach, Jane cries "Paddle-paddle-paddle!" followed by "Get down!" and we obey her commands. Our raft successfully skims rapids and slides down waterfalls. We even make it through the treacherous spot called *Itanda*, which means "the bad place."

Then our boat approaches the rapid called Silverback, a name Jane speaks with reverence. The green water churns and crashes against pointed rocks, like a terrible, bubbling stew. I close my eyes, I don't want to see what's coming. Almost the instant I do, the waves swallow us whole, then spit the boat back out. I am airborne for a brief moment before I am submerged, then chewed by the rushing water.

Gulp.

My head barely breaks the surface before green waves crash over me again. When I open my mouth, it is part underwater, part above. I inhale a mixture of sweet air and frothy, murky foam.

Blink.

Above me, muck and dirt and a kaleidoscope-like shimmer of waves.

Cough.

The sourness of river water slides through my nose, cutting a raw path into my throat.

My shoulder feels hot and heavy as it hangs on to the boat's rope. Suddenly my arm is yanked one way, while my body is pulled another. More rapids. When my other hand shoots out to grab the rope, my paddle is ripped away. In the chaos of rocks and waves, the boat is also torn from my grasp.

I curl into a ball, some instinct I didn't know I had, and then I am rolling, tumbling downstream, whisked through a slick channel of noise and turbulence. I feel like the container inside a pneumatic tube that shoots money in the bank drive-through.

When my head breaks the surface again, I don't know how much time or distance has passed, but the water is now calm. The boat is gone. I am alone.

I wipe water from my eyes and float for a few minutes before a safety kayak appears and tows me to the larger safety boat. After I pull myself inside, I am coughing but not productively. I try to summon enough muscle to bark out the water in my lungs.

It doesn't take long for more heads to bob up nearby. The rest of my group safely makes it through, and they join me in the boat. I see my paddle bobbing on the surface nearby, and I pull it into the boat with me. Several minutes later, my sinuses clear. My ears pop. I catch my breath.

We leap into the water and clamber back to our raft, then we drift for a long time on a placid portion of river. Our legs are tired, and our bodies are sunburnt, but we exchange high-fives anyway. Then we paddle some more.

When I sit erect in the boat, I realize the Silverback rapids have changed something in me. My spine is straight, and I stare down the whirlpools and rocks -- this time I am approaching them, rather than the rapids forcing themselves upon me. They can't surprise me anymore. I don't want them to surprise me.

The last few rapids, I don't even need to hear Jane's instructions to know what to do. Our boat never capsizes again, and my group successfully finishes almost 20 miles from where we began.

My mom was wrong, I can admit now, even though it turns against the lesson she wanted to teach me. I made it down this part of the Nile not by shrinking in the back of the raft and covering my eyes, but by purposely putting myself into this vessel, looking ahead, holding firm to my paddle, ready for more.

LESSON: Some things can't be understood, only experienced.

I am staying at a prosthetic factory-turned-hostel, inside the kind of room that crushes dreams, brought here by a series of poor decisions.

My first mistake is that my bus pulled into Kigali, the capital city, as evening approached, and I didn't have adequate time to search for a hostel before dark.

My next mistake is that I didn't do much research prior to my arrival. Usually I make a list of possible places to stay based on internet reviews. This time I relied on my guidebook to Rwanda, where this was the only place listed, because the recommendation was resounding: "If it's the spirit of peace and harmony you are after, then this little retreat is the place for you."

The reggae-themed hostel makes prosthetic limbs on site for those who lost their limbs during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The property is a compound, surrounded by a concrete fence with a brick guard post at the entrance. The gardens are overgrown and green, populated by skinny, yellow cats. Posters of Bob Marley hang inside the office building.

Next to the guesthouse is the prosthetic workshop. The windows are tall, and I see the silhouettes of welders toiling away in the workshop even though it is late, the showers of orange sparks illuminating their shapes. Stray wooden limbs clutter the paths to the rooms, and some of them are broken. In the moonlight, the bodyless legs give the grounds a sinister feel, more like a creepy doll factory than a retreat designed in the spirit of love and harmony.

My final mistake is that I didn't exchange any money at the border -- so I had a pocket full of now-useless Ugandan shillings and some emergency American bills. The hostel clerk said he would accept the U.S. money, but only if I paid for a three-night stay at a higher-than-usual exchange rate. I was tired and desperate. I forked over the money. I didn't even ask to see the room.

So now I'm paying \$35 a night for what feels like a tall jail cell. Though Rwanda is known as "the land of one thousand hills," I won't be able to see any of them from here, even when it is light outside -- the cinder-block walls of my room loom cold and hard, about 15 feet high and with just one small window near the ceiling. The room is not much more than a square of grey with a bed and one chair.

A low stone wall partitions off a private bathroom that consists of a shower head, a clogged drain and a toilet that doesn't flush. The water in the pipes runs cold and only cold. For an extra \$10 a night, I could have received an "upgrade" -- that is, the owner would turn on the hot water. I couldn't afford that kind of luxury. Or food, for that matter.

I scrounge around in my "snack bag," a red nylon bag that I keep packed with assorted food inside my backpack. My dinner choices include a box of pasta, a packet of powdered pumpkin soup, two packets of maple syrup-flavored instant oatmeal, a bag of peppermint tea, and a smashed granola bar from Bolivia.

Since everything else requires hot water, I go with the Bolivian granola. It is not good, unless you enjoy sawdust with raisins, but it quiets my growling stomach.

Mosquitos swarm the room, and I huddle under the net that hangs over my bed. It is dusty pink and it looks like it has been belched out from the ceiling, all chunky, saggy and full of knots. It has big rips that I try to fix with duct tape. Some of the bugs still manage to find a way in -- I hear them buzzing around my head, echoing in my ears.

I'm not even sure what I'm doing in Rwanda, except that I was starting to feel restless in Uganda and was seeking a new place to volunteer. Rwanda seemed as good a place as any. It was nearby and seemed manageable, since the whole country is just slightly smaller than the state of Maryland. It helped that it was an incredibly easy border jump from Kampala to Kigali. The bus journey took just 8 hours -- lightning speed in African bus time -- and cost the equivalent of \$10.

Only now that I'm here, I'm not sure what to do next. This night seems darker than most, and I hunker down on the bed with a book. I long for my husband's voice, but I have no cell service or internet access, and he has no way of knowing where in the world I am. I'm like a Waldo that is impossible to find.

The room's one light dangles from the ceiling with exposed wires. I'm not even surprised when it extinguishes itself, as if it has committed suicide. I'm with you, light. I give up too.

So I cry. I cry as the room remains frustratingly dark. I cry as mosquitos zoom into my ears. I cry as the toilet spontaneously hiccups fetid water onto the floor of the bathroom. And then I cry deeper now, a heavy sob of guilt, knowing that I'm in a land that has faced genocide and unspeakable horror. I cry for the people I've never known and the people I never will know and the ache of things I cannot possibly understand. I cry for a mom who is dying while I am unable to stop it.

That night I dream of malaria and detached body parts. Though I sleep, it feels more like a pause than a rest.

When morning finally comes, I am thankful to open up the door and see that the sun is out there, that it has, indeed, come up. Legs still litter the ground, but now I won't trip over them.

By the end of my first full day in Rwanda, I have Rwandan francs in my pocket and a belly full of sweet potatoes, beans and cassava from a local *melange* buffet. Still I feel aimless and lonely. I am traveling, yes, but it doesn't seem to be for any purpose anymore.

I settle into an internet cafe and spend a couple hours searching for a place to volunteer. My one lead -- at a shelter for abused women, with whom I had traded emails about teaching -- ends when they clarify what they need: "Can you teach aerobics? In French?" I thought they had wanted a writing instructor.

Before heading back to the dreaded hostel, I take a walk through downtown Kigali. It's more residential than I imagined it would be. The houses are big and stately, made of solid brick, the windows lined with flower boxes. The streets are leafy and clean, the lawns trim and decisively green. It's just as hard to imagine a genocide taking place here as on my street of palm trees and bougainvillea in Palm Springs. But I continue walking, knowing that people died on the ground where my feet are now.

The genocide began after years of tension between Hutus and Tutsis. The fire ignited on April 6, 1994, when the plane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana was shot down as it prepared to land in Kigali.

Violence moved swiftly throughout the tiny country. The quickness and efficiency of it was astonishing -- one person killed every seven seconds. Print and radio media added more fuel to the fire with violent propaganda, encouraging war rape and urging the Hutu people to exterminate their "cockroach" Tutsi neighbors.

Roads were closed, trapping people inside their towns and villages. Those who sought refuge in churches were betrayed and slaughtered there instead. Family members turned on their loved ones with machetes. There are stories of those who attempted to flee had their achilles tendons sliced, so they were forced to witness the bloodbath that surrounded them before they were bludgeoned to death.

By the time the massacre ended in mid-July 1994, just 100 days later, every tenth person was dead -- a significant chunk of a country with a population equivalent to that of Chicago. More than 500,000 others were mutilated. Many had been raped and infected with HIV.

The more I try to make sense of the genocide, the more it slips away from me. It reminds me of the desperation I felt as a child, many years ago at a summer party in my community pool. Thousands of goldfish were released into the water, and us kids were told we could keep any fish we caught. It was the first time the pool employees ever played this game -- they had no idea all the goldfish would choke on the chlorine.

I swam through the clouds of goldfish, their wriggling bodies slapping against my skin, as I frantically tried to save them. The more I reached to catch them, the faster they slipped through my fingers. There was nothing I could do but hold the sadness and let it burrow inside me. What else can be done when surrounded by so many ghosts?

Days pass. I move out of the prosthetic limb factory and into a youth hostel that is closer to downtown Kigali. The building is spacious and lemon yellow, full of long-term backpackers, graduate students who are living in Rwanda to study the genocide and ex-patriates who work for non-government organizations. At night we sit on the patio and drink big, cold bottles of Primus beer and rarely discuss the tragedy that happened in this place.

My new neighborhood is where the president lives, a posh section of the city filled with wide streets, flowerbeds and embassies. Snipers line the nearby rooftops -- it becomes such a commonplace sight that I don't even notice them after my first day at the hostel.

In addition to a place to live, I also find a reason to be in Rwanda, as a volunteer in a trade school for adult women. All of them had either lost their families or encountered other troubles after the genocide, which then led them to prostitution.

Now they come to this school to learn skills like jewelry making, weaving and sewing. My job is to teach them practical English, just enough phrases to help them tell their stories and sell their homemade goods to tourists.

To get to the school, I take a moto taxi (what Ugandans called a boda-boda), showing up the same time every weekday afternoon. About 75 percent of the time, Andre the guard opens the metal gate to let me inside. The other 25 percent of the time, Andre is huddled in his room with Francois the cook, watching soap operas on a tiny black and white TV. On those days I holler until a student hears me and unlocks the maroon metal door.

My class consists of 25 students, give or take. Mostly take. They are not required to be there, so I end up with about 12 people. Even the students who say they are excited to learn English look reluctant and defiant, slouching in their metal chairs and rolling their eyes.

I start by teaching general phrases and introductions. “Hello” and “good morning.” “How are you?” and “What is your name?”

Evoking classroom participation is practically impossible -- I beg the students to answer my questions or repeat after me. I have never been a teacher before, but this is what I imagine herding a group of angst-ridden high schoolers must be like. Filling up an hour of instruction every afternoon is excruciating.

When I remind myself that I’m not certified for this, it makes me feel more selfish than kind-hearted. I have no background in education -- I’m just trying to pass along some of my own knowledge about the English language. But I wonder how much good I’m really doing. Why should I ask these students to call me “teacher” when I am not one? What if my volunteer work actually harms these women? What if I’m taking a position away from someone more qualified to help?

After a few days I talk to Tom, the administrator who interviewed me, about my concerns, and I ask him if I should abandon the volunteer post. He is a British man who has been helping to run this school and non-profit for more than a dozen years. During that time, he has seen many volunteers come and go, and he has seen how the school prepares the women for practical jobs in modern Rwanda.

“Listen, you are important,” he says. “If they didn’t care about your lessons, they wouldn’t come to your class.”

But the next day, toward the end of my fifth class, I wonder again. Libere, the slouchiest one of them all, swipes chalkdust off the board and pats my back,

leaving stark white handprints on my black tee-shirt. The other students hoot and cackle at me, while they applaud Libere. It's just a silly joke, probably made with no malicious intent at all, but it makes me feel unliked, unwanted, literally marked. I see who has the power here in this room, and it's not the teacher. My face grows hot and red, and I leave quickly, before I break down in front of everybody.

Back at the hostel, my roommates are already pumping reggaeton music and getting ready for a weekend full of dancing and parties. But they won't see me at the clubs; I'm going to find a way to win over my classroom.

I spend hours researching how to teach English as a second language, how to capture a classroom's attention, and how to make this a useful and practical learning experience for them. But selfishly, what I really want is for my class to like me. I want them to accept me.

The next Monday, I try out a trick I remember from my own teachers -- I bribe the class with candy. One wrapped caramel for each answer. Suddenly I can barely keep up with the enthusiasm of my students.

By the time we reach direction words, when I ask "Which direction am I pointing?" a dozen hands shoot up in the air, each arm scootching to be higher than the next. I shuffle the tables and chairs around the room until I have created a labyrinth that leads to the front of the room. Then I blindfold myself. I ask the students to guide me through the complicated maze by using their new English direction words. When someone says "left" instead of "right," I let myself walk into

walls or stumble into a desk -- I already feel stupid enough in front of my class, I might as well look like it too. At this point I have nothing left to lose. In response, the students laugh and scream with delight. A few of them yell, "No!" and try to stop me from tumbling over a chair. With my blindfold on, the giggles sound like they are bubbling out of kids, not jaded adults.

That day everybody gets candy. And I get my first invitation to hang out with a couple of students outside of the classroom -- Rose and Claudine ask me to go for a walk in their neighborhood. I am elated as they steer me down the brown path to their homes.

I walk a lot in Rwanda, including daily treks around the neighborhood by my hostel.

Today I'm somewhere near the hospital when two boys catch up to me, and they keep my pace as I power walk through unmarked streets and winding alleys. I'm not concerned about my two new shadows -- they are just boys who look more curious than threatening.

"Where are you going?" one of the boys says.

"Just walking."

"You have no destination?"

"Nope."

"So you are walking for sport?" he says.

"Yes," I laugh. "I'm walking for sport."

I pause, and the boys introduce themselves. John Bosco is the taller and stockier of the two, a shy 17-year-old. Nicholas is skinny and spunky, 15 years old. His glasses are slim wire frames that slide down to rest on the tip of his nose. They join me for the rest of that afternoon's walk.

When they see that I am, indeed, just making big circles around the area, not walking for any particular purpose, they laugh so hard they clutch their stomachs and wheeze.

We're back at the big yellow gate for my hostel when the two leave my side. "You are very funny," Nicholas says, then shakes his head. "Walking for sport."

After that, the boys show up at my hostel every day for an afternoon walk. They're smart -- Nicholas is a physics whiz, while John Bosco is the chemistry man. They have endless questions about the places I've seen around the world and the people I've met along the way.

"Tell me about Argentina," Nicholas says. He walks with a gangly energy, as if his body hasn't quite caught up with his long limbs. "They have one of my favorite flags. Blue stripe, white stripe, blue stripe, with a sun in the middle, yes?"

"Wow, that's very good," I say.

I am stunned by the encyclopedic knowledge of these two. Whenever I mention a country, they'll fight to call out the capital city, the country's main export and any other random factoid about the nation. Their brains fascinate me, the way they can soak up all this knowledge. Their minds seem limitless, like entire

libraries could be stuffed inside their heads. I think about my mother's brain and wonder at what point it began rejecting new information, when it retreated into the past.

Nicholas and John Bosco tell me that normally they would attend school, but they couldn't afford the tuition and supply fees this session -- about \$200 each. They spend their mornings running errands to help their families instead. When they are done hauling water, gathering firewood or recycling cans, their afternoons are free to visit with me. They live on the other side of Kigali and can't afford the 25-cent bus fare, so they walk to meet up with me. I tell them they don't need to bother -- I can walk alone, I say -- but they both show up each day at 4 p.m., right on the dot.

After a few days of this, the boys become more than my exercise partners; they are my protectors. Scooters skid down the dirt roads, kicking up clouds, and John Bosco's strong arm pulls me closer to the curb. A man on the street heckles me, points to his crotch and spits out the word *muzungu*, foreigner. I've been called muzungu a lot in Africa, but this time it is said in a way that makes my spine stiffen. The boys respond in Kinyarwanda, but they refuse to tell me what they said, only that the man wouldn't bother me again.

Whenever I tread too close to city lawns, the boys remind me that walking on landscaped grass is against the law, while using a plastic bag could cost me anywhere from \$25-\$125 in fines. Bags have been prohibited in Rwanda since 2007, when the government determined that plastic bags had a negative impact

on the environment. I notice now how scrubbed clean the streets are, how orderly Rwanda is compared with other places I've been in Africa.

They teach me the things I wouldn't otherwise learn as a visitor this country, such as that the words of the ethnic tribes "Hutu" and "Tutsi" are banned. Now everyone is considered "Rwandan" instead.

"But some people speak in code," Nicholas whispers.

"Code?"

"Yes, code," he says. "You can use 'ham' for Hutu or 'tomato' for Tutsi."

"Are you sure you didn't just make that up?" I say.

"No way, José," he says, using a phrase I taught him days earlier. "This is most serious."

One afternoon, we rest on the porch of my hostel after the walk. A brackish mist shrouds the hillside in front of us, the trees hanging shaggy and unkempt in the heavy moisture. The air is smoky and herbal, like a burning smudge stick of sage or potpourri made of eucalyptus. I've been here long enough that this mossy smell has become familiar, the scent of Rwanda at twilight.

"Isn't that smell the best?" I say. "I don't know what it is, but every evening Rwanda has such a pleasant smell. It's something very nice and green."

"That's garbage," John Bosco says. "Your neighbors are burning garbage."

He points to a thin sliver of smoke nearby. Through the low-creeping fog, I can just barely make out the smallest lick of orange flame. "See?"

“That’s garbage?”

“Yes, they burn it with pieces of trees,” John Bosco says.

“Oh. I didn’t know.”

Nicholas shrugs, “It does smell nice.”

The moment serves as another reminder -- as connected as I might feel, Rwanda is not my home. It’s the place that has temporarily taken me in. I still have so much to learn from this country.

Nicholas and John Bosco walk with me each day for one week before the big rain comes. The dark clouds roll in and appear to billow around the hostel patio, all thick and pregnant, their stomachs resting on the roof. Plastic tablecloths flap in the wind. Laundry is pulled from the line. Hostel employees carry the wicker furniture out of the yard, stacking everything on the covered porch. For once, I don’t see any ants. When the rain begins, it makes wide, wet sheets in the sky. It hammers the metal roof for more than an hour, makes enormous puddles out of dirt road.

I’m surprised when George, the night guard, tells me that two young men are waiting for me outside. Nicholas and John Bosco. Their skinny bodies huddle together for warmth, their clothes wet. Knowing where they live, I’m sure they must have been walking in the rain for more than an hour.

“You guys are crazy!” I have to shout to be heard over the pounding on the tin porch overhang. Nicholas smiles.

“We were running through the rain and I fell and I almost threw my glasses right off!” he laughs, almost out of breath. His knee is scraped and bloody.

I’m no fan of walking in the rain -- I happily live in a desert, for goodness’ sake -- but I can’t possibly turn them away. Not now. So I say I’ll be right back, I just have to run back into the dorm to grab a few supplies.

First I slip on my navy blue flip-flops, then I slide on my blue plastic poncho, which covers me from head to toe like a water repellant burqa. Once I am back outside, I try to open my tiny traveler’s umbrella, but the boys just giggle and point at my outfit.

“Bluezungu,” John Bosco says.

“What?” I say.

“*Bluezungu*,” he says again, creating a portmanteau from the words “blue” and “muzungu.”

I’m laughing so hard, the umbrella slides from my wet hand and bashes Nicholas on the head, which only makes all of us laugh harder. Above us, even more clouds roll in, piling another shade of gray onto an already slate-colored sky. The rain grows even stronger. My clothes are already soaked through, even under my poncho.

I tell the boys about some of my rainy memories of growing up in Dayton, Ohio. I had a rainbow-colored raincoat that I loved, and I remember zipping it up and tying the hood tight enough to clench the skin around my face. I’d go outside

with my brother, who was 11 years older. Me in red galoshes, him in an old, scuffed pair of sneakers.

In the front yard, my brother pried up the sewer grate and lowered me into the tunnel below. The pipes spewed rushing water deep enough for me to play in, like my own front-yard pool. I don't remember if my brother kept a close eye on me or not; I just recall the giddiness of floating, kicking, somersaulting through this space of my yard that wasn't there before. The sewer itself was small, opening into dark tunnels that I didn't dare explore, but to my little child body it felt enormous, limitless. Definitely something bigger than my little world in that Ohio neighborhood. For all I knew, that sewer led directly into the ocean.

My brother once sat on the edge of the grate, his legs swinging. He tied a piece of yarn to a stick and let it dangle into the water, where the end quivered in the waves. From down below I pretended to be a fish, grabbing at the yarn as my brother yanked it away. He was too fast for me, and I could never quite catch it. Still, I shrieked with delight.

What if I had known what a sewer was? There must have been a part of me that knew better, that was aware little girls shouldn't be placed in the dark, wet caverns beneath the cement streets. Was it possible that I did know and deliberately ignored convention? At that age, did I already know that the experience of wonder and delight far outweighed practicality and common sense? Was this a lesson I once knew and had already forgotten.

I'm not sure anymore. What I know is that those rainy days remain some of my favorite childhood memories -- even though my horrified parents put a stop to the practice as soon as they found out.

"Your brother put you in the sewer?" Nicholas asks.

"Yes."

"He doesn't like you?" John Bosco says.

"I mean, it sounds worse than it really was ..." I say, letting the sentence trail off. "We were just playing. It was fun."

At that, Nicholas flicks some water at my face, and it first makes me gasp, then laugh. From that point on, the three of us splash in the puddles, jumping and splattering each other with mud. I had forgotten how fun it could be to get wet and dirty on purpose. The sound of our feet smacking in the water is every bit as satisfying to me now as it was when I was a kid.

We walk in the direction of the boys' neighborhood, a little more than a half hour, farther into this part of Kigali than I've ever walked before. Gone are all the stately, modern homes that surround my hostel, the multi-level houses that remind me of the suburban McMansions back in California. The buildings here are squatter, shaped like plain rectangles, topped with flat, orange roofs. They are densely packed, one right next to the other, like shoeboxes stacked on a stockroom shelf. No flower boxes are planted, no shutters hang by the windows. Nothing extraneous separates one from the next.

December in Rwanda is hot, but the rain tonight makes the air cold, and I shiver. When I notice how the grey sky has blackened, Nicholas takes notice too. “It will be very dark soon, Miss Maggie,” he says. “You should go back.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say.

“Please,” says John Bosco. “If you do not go, we will have to put you in a sewer.”

I laugh and hand John Bosco my umbrella. He’s right. I should head back to the hostel before the unfamiliar streets become impossible to navigate.

“Promise me you’ll use that umbrella,” I say. “Maybe not today. But someday.”

“Sure!” he yells. He and Nicholas begin running, their feet smacking and splashing each puddle. He holds the umbrella low to the ground as they zoom like rockets down the street, and the nylon fabric catches air, a blue pilot chute trailing behind them.

Nicholas turns and yells. “We’ll see you tomorrow!”

Two weeks into teaching, and I’ve learned that everything in Rwanda requires a follow-up question.

I discover this during my lesson about families, as I teach vocabulary words like “sister,” “father,” “husband.” When I pose the question, “Do you have brothers and sisters?” to my students, I am met with stares until I follow that with, “*Did* you have brothers and sisters?” Time is separated into pre- and post-genocide, and so are the tenses in which I have to speak.

I don't even know how to cope with this. I spent each day surrounded by women my age who have fought to survive. They outlasted a genocide while I was selecting dyed-to-match shoes for prom. They saw hatred and destruction firsthand. Me, I watched danger on TV. They watched loved ones die from machete blows. I'm already grieving a mother who rests in a clean nursing home bed.

The genocide feels like a man lurking in the shadows, a faceless stranger who feels there even when he's not. This presence affects every conversation, every interaction. It changes how people look at each other, how they appraise strangers, how guarded they remain.

Claudine and I walk the neighborhood after class one day, and she tells me her genocide story. When her Hutu neighbors came for her Tutsi family, she hid underneath her bed while they beat her father until he was broken and unable to move. A neighbor dragged Claudine into the room and handed her the machete. Only 16 years old, she was forced to make the final blow that killed her own dad.

When Claudine tried to run, the same machete was used to slice her legs, and some of the men beat her with sticks. They laughed as she crawled for help. That's when she blacked out. She doesn't remember what happened next or how she survived. But she does know that when the genocide began, she was an HIV-free teenager with a family. By the time it ended, she was an HIV-positive woman, alone.

I still struggle to understand the genocide, which breaks the brittle bones of what I believe. What I once believed to be true -- what I thought was so firm and unshakable -- was that people are inherently good; sometimes the world just makes them do bad things. Now I don't know what is true. The reality in Rwanda is that evil exists, and my students have seen it.

Beyond that, I wonder if this is even my tragedy to understand. The struggle of my own moral code feels stupid and selfish in the face of those trying to reconcile their humanity, and I have no right to stake a claim in their personal suffering. This genocide isn't mine. This is theirs, they own it. I can't escape the fact that I am a foreigner here, and I always will be. What right do I have to feel so sad?

I remember what Jason said about how the brain tries to compartmentalize anything it doesn't already understand, how our minds try to find patterns in clouds. I think about the genocide, but it floats away from me. My head tries to make sense of the senseless, and I see nothing familiar there at all.

LESSON: You never know what your gifts are until someone receives them.

It is Dec. 6, St. Nicholas Day.

I love St. Nicholas Day because it always feels like an extra holiday surprise, a way to get warmed up and ready for the upcoming Christmas season. Celebrating this often-overlooked holiday is a longtime family tradition, carried over the ocean by my German mom -- along with her homemade Advent calendars and embroidered ornaments -- and it's something I look forward to every December.

If I were still in Palm Springs, I would have made a big deal of today. I would have placed my husband's shoes by the front door and filled them to overflowing with sweets and small presents. I would have woken him with homemade pancakes and gingerbread coffee, then watched him feign surprise when he discovered shoes full of goodies.

This year, however, I'm far from anything that resembles a familiar Christmas. Unlike stores in the U.S., which fill their storefronts with fake Christmas trees and images of Santa as early as October, I don't see any sign of the holiday.

And then I go shopping at Nakumatt, an East African supermarket chain with an oversized store in the center of downtown Kigali. I'm there to buy small prizes and more candy for my students, who have really started responding to my English lessons.

At the entrance of the store is an animatronic Santa Claus, and he's big, almost as tall as I am. His mechanical arms are outstretched, and his hips jerk from side to side in an awkward dance. Christmas carols play over the store's PA system, and Santa vaguely keeps a beat to the music.

The dancing Santa proves to be too much for the shoppers with kids. Parents try to restrain their children, but they are all drawn to this jolly ol' robotic elf. They march right up to Santa, their eyes wide, their arms outstretched. They dance with him. One girl even sways in his arms, her own hips trying to match Santa's lurching moves.

As I watch, "Jingle Bell Rock" ends and another song begins. It's "Do They Know It's Christmas?", the Band Aid song recorded in 1984 to raise awareness of hunger issues in Africa. It's strange to hear the song in this context. The lyrics say, "And there won't be snow in Africa this Christmastime. The greatest gift they'll get this year is life. Where nothing ever grows, no rain or rivers flow. Do they know it's Christmastime at all?"

Yet around me is the bounty of a supermarket. The shoppers leaving the store have overflowing carts, filled with foods for a traditional holiday feast -- green cabbage, pinto beans, rice, plantains, goat meat, and plastic sachets full of banana liquor. Boxes of chocolate truffles are on sale. Beyond the supermarket is an entire mall filled with people shopping for presents. Beyond that is lush and humid Kigali, the ground still moist from yesterday's big rain.

Do they know it's Christmas here? I assume so. There's a constant soundtrack of Yuletide cheer. Silver garland hangs in front of the store. A robot Santa Claus hypnotizes small children. Maybe there aren't stockings for every fireplace or bell-ringers standing by Salvation Army kettles, but to answer Bono's question, yes. Somebody definitely knows it's Christmas.

Just to be sure, I ask Nicholas and John Bosco that afternoon.

"What's your favorite thing about Christmas?" I say.

Nicholas replies immediately, "Oh, it is most special day because we have a meal with meat."

"I like it because it such a happy day," John Bosco says. "It is a day with family."

"What kind of presents do you receive?"

"You mean gifts?" Nicholas says. "I have heard of such a thing, but we do not participate in my family. We cannot afford such traditions."

"So you've never received a present?"

"No."

"What about you, John Bosco?"

He shakes his head no.

"Not even a pair of socks from Santa Claus?"

"Is that the fat man?" Nicholas asks.

"Yes, the fat man," I laugh. "He's supposed to travel around the world in one night and bring gifts to people everywhere."

“Oh,” John Bosco sighs. “He has never found my house.”

I realize I might not have the ability to celebrate Christmas like usual this year. I’m too far from my husband’s shoes to fill them with St. Nicholas Day gifts. I can’t count down the holidays with my family by opening tiny, glitter-encrusted windows on our Advent calendar. I have no oven to bake gingerbread houses for my friends. But I can still do something to make this holiday special.

Like many mothers, mine always said that giving is just as important as receiving. “You never know what your true gifts are until someone receives them,” she told me. If I could still talk to her, I think she’d approve of what I’m about to do.

The next day I return to Nakumatt, where I walk past the robot Santa and down the store’s long, cluttered aisles until I find exactly what I’m looking for. I leave with a handful of foil-wrapped chocolates and brand-new soccer balls for two Rwandan boys who have never received Christmas presents before. At the hostel, I wrap the gifts in old newspapers and make a homemade card. Inside I write, “Merry Christmas. Love, Santa Claus.”

I’m not sure if it’s my place to be handing out gifts to children -- I’ve been told over and over again that tourists shouldn’t do this while abroad, because it gives children an incentive to beg and stay out of school -- but Nicholas and John Bosco have never asked me for anything. Besides, even if I can’t do it, certainly Santa is allowed to hand out a couple of presents.

I don't know exactly where the boys live, so the next time they show up for a walk, I hand them the gifts.

"Here. Santa must have had a difficult time finding your homes," I say. "He left these here for you."

"Really?" Nicholas says. He eyes the bundle and is surprised when he sees his name on the attached card.

John Bosco holds the news-wrapped packages to his chest, and his eyes glitter with tears. He says he doesn't want to unwrap the presents, not yet. Not until Christmas Day. He knows the truth of where this came from, and he looks at me and mouths, "Thank you."

There's no waiting for Nicholas, who rips the paper and is already tearing the foil from a piece of chocolate. Other than his initial "Really?" he doesn't ask any more questions. He is still young and naive enough that he wants to have faith in Santa, to have faith in this gift that has unexpectedly found its way into his arms. Or maybe he knows better, like the girl that once played in a sewer that opened into an ocean.

He tosses the paper aside, stuffs the rest of the chocolate in his pocket and holds the soccer ball into the air.

"Whoa," he says.

Nicholas kicks the soccer ball against a nearby brick wall, then dribbles it in a circle around John Bosco and me, his feet flying almost too fast for me to see them.

“Can you believe it?” he says. His eyes are wide, just like the kids who danced with the robot Santa in front of Nakumatt. “All this time, he couldn’t find our house!”

LESSON: There is no right way to measure pain

I don't know why I decide to visit several genocide memorials. Maybe it's that I want to understand my students' stories better. Maybe I want to mourn for a mother other than my own.

I make the trip to Murambi alone and by bus, a quick trip that takes less than an hour. Once I arrive, it is an easy walk to the school.

The walk sounds like an autumn hike through the forest, with sticks popping and cracking on the path beneath my feet. I'm close to the school when my step slows and I look around. There aren't many trees nearby, only rolling green farmland and a flat, grassy plain. There shouldn't be sticks underfoot.

When I squat down, I see the dirt is embedded with tiny bones. I hold some of them in my hands and discover they are small and light, almost like bird skeletons. A volunteer, who had been standing on the school porch, comes to me now, crossing the grass until she is close enough that her shadow stretches over me.

"Kids," she says.

I let the bones fall, returning them to their exposed grave. I don't know what else to do with them.

The school buildings before me are plain and low-slung, like barracks. It's here that more than 44,000 Tutsis were instructed by government officials to seek sanctuary. The whole idea of a sanctuary was a ruse -- the officials deliberately gathered the Tutsi in one place, denied them water and food, then

slaughtered everyone when they were too weak to escape. Many of them are now under my sneakers.

The volunteer, a genocide survivor, opens the door of the school and ushers me inside. I've seen few dead bodies in my life -- even working the nighttime crime beat at the Cincinnati Enquirer, I only saw glimpses of death; askew limbs under white sheets, puddles of blood, the silhouette of a body as it is rolled away -- but now I am in a room with a thousand bodies at once.

There are tables in every classroom, each covered with dead children and adults preserved in powdered lime. Their shapes are contorted, twisted, frozen in the moments the victims resisted death.

Each rigid limb tells a million stories. Even though the skin of each person has long since shriveled, the slashes from machetes are still plainly visible. Some fingers still bear wedding rings.

With every inhale, my nose fills with the scent of decay, and my stomach lurches in revulsion. I am angry and sorrowful, but mostly I feel guilty. My entire life has been lived with the assumption of a future. The bodies that surround me didn't have that luxury.

I rush through the remaining halls, dozens of them, all filled with bodies, until the final room, a place of meditation and prayer. I sit on a bench for a long time -- long enough for the volunteer to peek her head into the room and make certain I'm alright. I want to be alone, so I wave her away.

I know it's better to show the bones of victims instead of hiding them, but it doesn't make it any easier to see.

The same day I'm on another bus, this time headed an hour south of Kigali to Nyamata, site of another genocide memorial. Our bus slips along the hilly highway, tires tearing across the washboard shoulders, sliding toward drop-off cliffs, then back on the asphalt again. Lucky for us the road is nearly empty.

The man sitting next to me drops his head between his knees and groans. In his right hand he clutches a lime, digging his fingernails into the puckered skin. Every few minutes he holds the lime to his nose and inhales, the punchy scent smoothing over his motion sickness.

"My stomach tumbles," he says, moaning with discomfort.

Mine does too, but not from the bus ride. I am consumed by death lately, and no amount of lime zest will fix the way I feel.

On my regular calls home, my dad hasn't said much about my mom's health, even when I ask. It makes me wonder what he's keeping from me. I know she has been in the "moderately severe" stage of Alzheimer's for months -- she has very little awareness of her surroundings, she rarely responds to her own name, she needs help eating, dressing and going to the toilet, and she no longer walks. I also know that once my mom reaches the final stage -- when she becomes completely unresponsive -- it won't be long until her body shuts down entirely.

We reach the small town of Nyamata. The moment I step off the bus, a handful of touts crowd around me, all shouting. "Miss, I take you to genocide church! Fair price!" "Lady, you want to see big grave?" I push through the crowd, the men scatter, and I am alone again.

I walk through the town and up a hillside to the place where the ghosts live -- the church.

When the genocide began, many of Nyamata's residents took refuge in the town's Catholic church. Though the Tutsis padlocked themselves inside the church's iron doors, the Hutu militia forced themselves inside. In this house of God, more than 10,000 people were slaughtered with rifles, machetes, sledgehammers and grenades. It took two days to kill everyone inside.

Now the church is no longer used as a place of worship; it is a genocide memorial. The bodies of most victims -- along with those of 35,000 others who were murdered in the area -- have since been buried in two mass graves behind the church. Above the main entrance, a banner reads in Kinyarwanda: "If you had known me, and you had really known yourself, you would not have killed me."

The building is filled with the victims' clothing and the metallic scent of blood. Each pew is piled high with tattered, red-soaked fabric, while other pieces dangle from clotheslines strung across the room. The white altar cloth is stained with blood. The ceiling is scarred from bullets. A baptismal font has been a witness to death instead of new life.

The church basement has been converted into a catacomb, lined with racks of bones. Several shelves hold skulls. There are more shelves for femurs and another one with arms.

In the room where the children hid, one brick wall is stained with blood. This is where the genocidaires tossed the tiny bodies against the wall until they broke. They didn't even bother with machetes.

Whenever there's a tragedy, people tend to speak in fragments, "I can't even imagine ..." "Such a shame ..." I don't speak here, but I feel fragmented, a Cubist painting in which a human has been dissected and reassembled. This place leaves me breathless and hollow, and I have to work to force air into my lungs again. But it's hard. It's hard to share the same air with the last breaths of the dead -- breaths that were wrested from them. It's hard to reconcile that I still share the same air with many people who extracted these lives. I feel dizzy, and I reach for a wall, my fingertips brushing against the blood shed by people I'll never know.

It is strange to feel untethered in a building where everything is so firm, where I am surrounded by solid things. Bone and stone and brick. The hard, compacted ground beneath my feet. The tin roof overhead. But I realize the things that make us human are so soft and viscous. Blood and fat and flesh. Mind and spirit. Intangible things. Things that never last anyway, no matter how the lives end.

Before I leave, I notice an ID card on the floor, stained with dried spots of brown blood. When I peek at the name and photo, I see the man had the same birthday as my brother, May 25, 1965, and I realize any of these ghosts could be mine. They could belong to any of us.

On the bus back to Kigali, I wonder what it would feel like to have a mom who died quickly, if she had been erased with the swift blade of a machete instead of seeping away over a period of 10 years. Is it better to lose someone quickly or to have someone taken slowly? Is grief like peeling off a Band-Aid -- better to get it over with?

I don't know the answer to that.

A few years ago, one of the fights I had with my college best friend was about our mothers. I don't remember how the argument started, only that it ended with us arguing about which one of us suffered more. She insisted that her mom's three-year, ultimately fatal, battle with breast cancer was worse than my mom's extended death from Alzheimer's. I, of course, thought Alzheimer's was the most cruel of all the diseases.

"My mom was in pain," she said.

"My mom doesn't know enough to know she's in pain," I retaliated.

"At least you still have a mom around," she said.

"But my mom doesn't know who I am."

“If I still had a mom, even if she didn’t know who I was, I would be grateful.”

It’s not that easy, I thought. Aloud I said, “I don’t know how to be a daughter to a woman who doesn’t know she’s a mother.”

It was a dumb fight. Of course there’s no hierarchy of suffering, no way to measure the ache that comes from loss. My friend and I both suffered. And we both continued to suffer, so blinded by our own grief that we bickered about which one of us had been hurt more, a fight that has no winner. Who wants to win that one anyway?

The road is nearly empty of vehicles now, but there are people in the fields and along the road. The driver tells me few buses are running because it is Umuganda, a mandatory community service day held on the last Saturday of every month throughout the country. Each neighborhood selects a project, like painting houses, picking up litter or preparing the fields for cassava, and everybody between the ages of 18 and 65 in that neighborhood participates.

Umuganda was created by the government with the purpose of uniting Hutu and Tutsi neighbors and fostering a sense of community. It is a reconciliation.

Rwanda is, after all, a small country that has no death penalty. When convicted genocidaires are released from prison, as more and more are every year, many of them return to the village or city where they lived prior to the

genocide. So the person who slaughtered your family might be your next-door neighbor.

My mother always told me forgiveness was one of the most important life skills a person could cultivate. I don't know if I have that much forgiveness in me.

That night the lights go out in Kigali. With nothing to do but sit under the moon, my hostel friends pull out warm Fanta soda and a large glass bottle of waragi, a homemade Ugandan gin. If it's done properly, waragi will get you drunk. Made poorly, it can cause blindness or even death.

"Nothing else to do tonight. Might as well get blasted," says one of my friends, a woman who catalogs survivor stories at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre.

By the time the lights burst on again, about an hour later, we are on our way to finishing that bottle of liquor. The Fanta is already gone. We are singing Chaka Khan and laughing and somehow I find myself wedged into the back of a cab with my friends, speeding toward an unknown bar.

We arrive at a locals' club called Pasadena, located in a part of Kigali I've never seen before. Nigerian reggaeton music thumps, the floor is packed with slick, sweaty bodies, and we dance so long that my eyes close while my body remains swaying. When I begin to nod off while standing, I realize it's time to go, even though my friends still have energy to burn.

Outside, I see that there has been a heavy rain, and the roads are covered in a pea soup of fog. With no cabs in sight, my only option to return home is by motorcycle taxi, a terrifying prospect on rugged roads anyway, now downright stupid with all the puddles and low visibility. Just then a man taps me on the shoulder and offers me a ride. He points to his posh SUV.

I'm skeptical. "How much?"

"No cost," he says and smiles.

"Why?"

"Because I own the bar and you are my customer," he says. "It is my responsibility to make sure you get home safe."

What the hell, I figure. He looks trustworthy, even through my soggy, drunken haze. I climb into the SUV.

Wending through Kigali's most twisted roads, past schools and farms and layers of trees, the man tells me about himself. He says he named the bar in memory of his beloved brother, a Tutsi who was murdered during the genocide.

"Your brother's name was Pasadena?" I say.

No, he says. Of course not. But shortly before the violence broke out in Rwanda, his brother visited California. When the brother returned to Kigali, he talked at length about the loveliness of Pasadena. The flowers. The kind people. The wide smiles. He said it was the most beautiful place on earth.

I tell the man that I live near Pasadena, which makes him very excited.

“And is it as wonderful as my brother says?” he says. We’ve reached my hostel’s front gate and have pulled to a stop. He turns to me and takes my face in his big, calloused hands. His fingers tremble and his eyes search mine. “Does the name honor his memory?”

I think about Pasadena. I remember chain restaurants and shops. Strip malls and gas stations. Cocktail glasses and the shiny mahogany of bars. Traffic and smog and a parking ticket on a crowded side street.

Have I ever really looked at Pasadena?

“Yes,” I say, nodding. “It’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen. And I’ve been all around the world.”

It’s my last full day in Rwanda. I’ve already said goodbye to Nicholas and John Bosco. My backpack is packed, crammed all the way to the top with Rwandan gifts for my family -- necklaces made with paper beads, hand-sewn dolls, a small chess set that looked so pretty in the darkness of the market but is actually just a square of floor tile and some plastic pieces.

There’s only one thing left to do: teach my final class. I’ve recently introduced them to the game of bingo -- we play using boards that I’ve made with English vocabulary words, and the students cover the squares with rusty bottle caps.

When class ends, several of my students ask to take me out for dinner and drinks. They want to show me their Rwanda at least once before I leave. We take a bus to a nearby neighborhood, then walk down a dirt lane to a small restaurant.

The building is slender, barely large enough to hold the kitchen's few burners. All of the tables are located outside, on a dirt patio surrounded by wooden fences and tarps with beer advertisements, like "Primus biere! Only the strong!"

This is not the kind of restaurant that I've seen with my ex-pat friends. I am the only non-Rwandan, and the way the other customers gape at me, I suspect I'm the only muzungu that has been here in a long time.

Libere, the student who was the least receptive to my class in the beginning, now sits across the table from me and takes my right hand in hers. She says she signed up for an email account, and she wants to know my email address.

"Please to write us," she says.

I nod, but I am too choked up to speak.

Francoise has been given a pack of Uno cards by the center administrator, which she now pulls from her pocket and asks me if I can show them how to play.

I shuffle the cards and deal seven to each woman, just as a waitress arrives.

Libere orders several large beers and plates of French fries, mizuzu (fried plantains) and goat brochettes (skewers) for the table. We play an open hand.

All the vocabulary words my class worked so hard seem to come together in this game: Color words, directions, numbers. I have to explain the concept of a “wild” card, and there’s a little bit of confusion over “skip” -- which my students only know as the physical movement of hopping. Otherwise, they’ve got this game. Libere even strategizes and beats me a couple times in a row.

Our food has arrived, and the fries still sizzle and pop with oil. I’ve asked for ketchup, which doesn’t seem to exist in Africa as I know it. Instead, the waitress hands me “tomato jam,” which is like ketchup’s third cousin, twice removed. It is sweet, runny and almost neon pink. My students laugh at the tomato jam and instead stir their frites in thick, rich mayonnaise, made from scratch in the kitchen. We keep playing Uno, laughing and discarding onto the plastic table, the cards now greasy with thumbprints of oil and salt. It’s early, but the sky above is already a steely grey.

We draw a small crowd with our game. The server looks over our shoulders and makes suggestions for what to discard. A couple other people pull

up chairs and watch, laughing whenever one of us shatters the night with a scream of “UNO!”

We’ve played maybe six or seven rounds when the rain begins. It’s only a light drizzle at first, just enough to make the table get slick, the dirt smell musky, my curly hair go boing. By the time Francoise collects all the Uno cards, stacks them together and shoves them inside her pocket, we’re sitting in a full-fledged storm.

The restaurant is already crammed with people -- there’s no way we can squeeze inside. Claudette tugs my hand and pulls me beneath a small blue awning near the building. Libere and Francoise pile around me.

“It will stop,” Claudette says.

The harder the rain falls, the more physically uncomfortable I become. I suddenly need to use the restroom in the worst way. I look at my students and shout to be heard over the pounding rain smacking the plastic awning.

“I need to use the toilet!”

Libere looks unhappy.

“Toilet is there,” she says and points to a small shelter made from scraps of metal hammered together. It has no roof. At first I think she’s joking, but the other students also cast their eyes downward and shake their heads. I look back

toward the structure. It's a flashback to the hideous toilet hole in Uganda -- except this time, there's a rainstorm on top of it all.

The sky shows no sign of clearing, and there are no other buildings nearby. And suddenly, using the toilet has become the most important thing in the world.

While I've been pondering my options, of which there appear to be no good ones, Libere has pushed her way inside the restaurant and emerged with three different umbrellas. She hands one to Claudette, one to Francoise and keeps one for herself.

She jerks her head toward the toilet. "We go," she says.

These women encircle me, forming a wall with their bodies, and we move across the muddy lot as one being. The mud squishes between my feet and my flip-flops, and I almost slip a few times. But my students squeeze me so tight, they never let me fall.

Once we get to the metal building, I use the flashlight on my purse to peer inside. There is one side completely exposed, where there should have been a door. The ground is a slurry of muck, and it's so uneven that it looks like there's been a mudslide. I still want to use the toilet, but it looks treacherous, and I don't know if I can hold myself upright, especially since I've had a few beers.

Claudette leans over the top of the structure and holds her umbrella there to form a roof. Francoise blocks part of the open door space with her body, allowing me privacy, even though there's nobody around to see me. And Libere faces me and extends her hand.

"Hold me," she says, then she smiles.

That first day I walked into a classroom and stood before a dozen resentful faces, I never imagined I'd be in a situation like this with any of my students.

It's funny how different this is from my life in Palm Springs, but also so similar. I think about my girlfriends in California, how we scurry to the bathroom in groups to gossip and touch up our makeup. We preen in front of shiny mirrors and socialize and share secrets. And occasionally, on late nights riddled with far too many tequila shots, I've been known to hold a friend's hair back as she pukes.

I hold my hand out to grasp Libere's, and she ropes her fingers tightly through mine. This is such a vulnerable position -- my khaki pants pulled down my thighs, my underwear down, perched on the edge of a sludgy slope, raindrops sliding down my arms and the side of my face where Claudette's umbrella doesn't quite cover me.

If these women ever wanted to attack me or hurt me, this is perfect opportunity. They could abandon me at this restaurant, far from the places I know. They could leave me here alone, in this dark filth. They could do anything -- steal my purse, let me get soaked, mock me.

Instead Libere gives my hand a squeeze. She's got me.

I am so humble and grateful in this moment of sisterhood with these new friends. This is what women do, I realize, here and all over the world. We help each other to squat instead of fall. We fix problems and hold each other up. We are adhesive.

LESSON: Heaven and earth can meet halfway.

It takes one full day of travel by bus, plane and finally taxi to arrive at my next destination: A hostel near Tahrir Square, the major public space in downtown Cairo.

The hostel is located five stories up in a gritty building. Inside, the ground level looks like rubble, with broken stone, brick and rubbish piled against the walls, which are decorated with spurts of graffiti. It looks like the place has been hit by artillery. The stairs are blocked by tape, so I'm forced to use the elevator, which looks to be about 150 years old. It's a cage of black wrought iron, a rickety old thing that screeches as it moves. I close my eyes as I am slowly and loudly lifted to the proper floor.

The door of the hostel looks like a prop from a film noir movie, something more suited to a hard-boiled detective's office. It's a wooden, half-light door with pebbled glass, but where it might say "Sam Spade" in gold letters, there is a sign with Arabic words. Underneath that, in black marker, is scrawled "HOTLE."

Inside the door is a tall wooden desk, like that of a bank teller, manned by a plump guy in a brown robe. When I give my name, the man raises an eyebrow. My reservation is for two people, but I'm clearly alone.

“My husband will be joining me later,” I say, and I thrill at the sound of those words. It’s been six long months since I’ve seen Jason, and I can’t remember the last time I used the phrase “my husband” to describe him. At this point, we’ve officially spent more of our marriage apart than together.

With a little financial assistance from my family, Jason gathered enough money to visit me for Christmas, and we agreed upon Cairo for our rendezvous. As a teacher, he has almost two weeks off for the winter holidays. Minus flying time and a couple days for jet lag, we have just over one week together, and I’m ecstatic.

I reserved a room with a queen-sized bed, but when I unlock the door I see two twin beds.

I return to the front desk. “There must be a mistake,” I say, and the man in the robe follows me to the room.

“No, no mistake,” he says. “Two beds make queen.”

It’s not quite the same, I explain. “I haven’t seen my husband in many months.”

“Eh, I understand,” the man laughs lasciviously, then gives me a firm slap on the back. “You want ...” he pauses, then makes a circle with the fingers of his

left hand, which he penetrates with the index finger of his other hand. "Poke poke, yes?"

My face turns red under my headscarf, which I've been wearing ever since my plane landed. I read that Egypt was very conservative, and I wanted to be respectful of the country's more modest views. Maybe I shouldn't have been so concerned.

"No problem," the man says, gesturing to the beds. "Push together."

The man gums his cigarette while he pushes the two twin beds together, and ashes sprinkle down upon the thin maroon bedspreads. This situation dashes my hopes for a romantic reunion -- cuddling in big, luxurious bed, falling asleep with our limbs tangled together, waking in each other's arms. Instead, Jason and I will be tucked in to separate spaces with separate sheets, a definitive line cutting our bed right down the middle. But it beats sleeping on the airport floor, like we did in Peru.

Once the man leaves, I have some time to look around. The walls of the room have been painted to resemble the inside of a pyramid. I suddenly remember a reoccurring nightmare from my childhood in which I'm buried alive inside of a pyramid, able to scream but unable to be heard.

From the window, I have a good view of the city, which already looks far more chaotic than when I arrived. What was once four lanes of traffic has now become seven, all trying to merge together. The streets shoot off each other at bizarre angles, and they are crowded with street carts, people, cars, donkeys and buses. It's almost 7 p.m., and it seems like everyone in Cairo suddenly has someplace to be.

That includes me. I didn't realize I was hungry until I looked down and saw a line of people purchasing freshly fried falafel from a street vendor. I rush to join them -- holding my breath as the creaky elevator lowers me back to earth.

When I take a deep breath outside, the air is clogged and dirty and smells of burning tires. It is loud and messy, but also lively and exciting, and I can't squelch the feeling that something big is going to happen here.

It is just after 4 a.m. when I wake.

The bedsheet has been pulled away from my body, and a man skims his fingertips over me. It's a light touch, like a butterfly wing or a feather, but the strangeness of it makes me stiffen.

"I've missed you," Jason says, then bends over to give me a kiss.

I don't know how to react. It's been six months since I've savored the scent of a man's neck. Six months since my lips have kissed someone back. Six months since I've been held. Jason eases himself into the twin bed next to mine.

"I'm sorry about the bed," I say. I feel nervous and shy, like we've just met.

"I tried ..."

"Shhh," Jason says. "I'm just happy to see you."

Jason looks at me and smiles.

"Hi," I say.

He tugs on a lock of my hair and curls it around his finger. I stare back at him, like I'm trying to interpret the hidden message in an abstract painting.

"Hi." I can't stop saying hi. I once heard that goldfish only have two-second memories, so they just swim around in their fishbowl, reintroducing themselves over and over again. I feel like that now. Hi ... hi ... hi.

Jason is exhausted enough that he falls asleep quickly, one arm slung around my shoulder, but I am restless. My hands are sweaty, and my heart pounds ferociously. I didn't expect a night with my husband to feel so abnormal. What happened to our seven-year history? It's like none of that ever happened, like we're starting over from scratch. I wonder if he feels it too.

I'm relieved when a sliver of light peeks over the curtain and shines on the wall. Dawn is here, and that means Jason and I have stuff to see, things to do, and a whole city of ancient artifacts to explore. My mind can be occupied with old things instead of this new, strange sensation, wondering if I created more distance between us than just miles apart.

This is another part of the journey that I didn't anticipate, and there's no map to guide me through it.

It takes a few days for my body to regain the muscle memory of Jason.

We make a small loop around the country, starting with Cairo, where we wander the long, rambling hallways of the Egyptian Museum. There are few information cards posted with the exhibitions; sometimes there's just a yellowed index card with a typewritten name or date. Some of the pieces have no display at all -- there are tables full of unidentified mummies, stone panels of hieroglyphs on the floor, broken statues shoved in the corner. A few still have their wooden cargo boxes nearby. It makes me feel like I'm an Egyptologist in the 1920s, sifting through these artifacts for the first time.

Another day is spent in Giza, a place where urban development and modern trash butt up against the ancient pyramids.

To see the Sphinx, we walk past lines of vendors shoving postcards and souvenirs in our faces. We are offered 27 camel rides. Policemen speak to us in whispers -- they can take us into the closed pyramids for a special price. Just \$5 to climb all over these priceless structures. For \$10, they will take our picture.

Jason is overwhelmed by the aggressiveness of it all, the way the touts look at us and see money, the way people follow us and beg. I try to make it easier on him, and when I see vendors approach I give them a firm, "No." Sometimes it works.

I buy our bus tickets, haggle at the market, hail taxis, navigate the Metro. I locate food, figure out directions, calculate currency conversions in my head.

Jason is amazed. "Where did you learn to do this?" he says. "I've never seen you so in control."

I shrug, but I'm secretly proud. This trip has changed me. I wonder if my family would even recognize me now. If my mom were still aware of the world around her, and if she passed me on the street, what would she think of me?

Jason and I take the night train to Luxor in a private compartment with bunk beds. When we wake up in the morning, there is a small bullet hole in our window. The cracks that radiate from it make a beautiful pattern, like an intricate spider web.

“Do you think we’re in danger?” Jason asks. He’s read too many travel books with warnings about attacks on American tourists.

I’m not worried. If there was any danger, we’ve long ago passed it in the night. “Just pretend it’s an Agatha Christie novel,” I say. I barely recognize myself and this confident voice.

Over the course of a few days, we sightsee our way down the Nile -- Luxor, Esna, Edfu, Aswan, Abu Simbel. Finally, on Christmas, we catch a short flight to Sharm el Sheikh, then take a taxi to Dahab, a sleepy village on the Red Sea.

It is only once we reach Dahab that I finally relax into Jason again, rediscovering the part of my identity that is his partner, not just a tour guide. We hold hands the way we used to, and once again it feels comfortable to have someone by my side. It’s taken a few days, but we are no longer strangers.

“I’m already happy here,” Jason says.

“Me too.” I give his hand a squeeze.

Dahab is a hippie town, located on a small crescent of Sinai Peninsula, where the desert mountains run out of momentum and give way to golden sand. The blue water is lit up with teal swaths of coral reef, and the weather is warm and sunshiny almost all year long.

Though there are some people dressed modestly, most are not. Many men are in shorts and tee-shirts, while the women wear swimsuits, sarongs or gauzy sundresses. This is the first place in Egypt where I feel comfortable removing my headscarf.

Signs on the beach prohibit camels and horses, though I see both on the boardwalk nearby. Ladies in bikinis tan themselves on sun-bleached blankets and cushions. Large groups of scuba divers trek from dive shops into the water and disappear below the surface.

Jason and I find a small cafe with a wooden patio overlooking the sea, where we prop ourselves up on fat pillows. The waiter gives us a hearty holiday welcome: "Merry Christmas! Oh oh oh!" Then he brings us pita bread, hummus, falafel, slices of cucumber, and squat mugs of coffee. A stray cat, orange and scrawny, settles at my feet. I sneak him pieces of pita bread, and he purrs so forcefully that my legs vibrate.

In the afternoon, Jason and I visit an internet cafe to call our families over Skype. Today my dad is at my sister's house, where her husband sets up the computer so the whole family can see me. My college-aged nephews wave from the background, and my brother-in-law offers a quick wave. My sister and I catch

up -- she's jealous of my Egyptian tan. Finally, my dad pulls an armchair up to the computer.

My dad doesn't know how to operate the webcam on his own computer, so this is the first time I've seen his face in months. His eyes are hooded, and his cheeks are sunken and drawn.

"Are you OK?"

He says he's alright, but even as the words come out, his tone is flat and dull. He says my mom is doing fine and that she had a nice holiday in the nursing home. He doesn't say much before he excuses himself, and my family waves goodbye. I'm left staring at a blank screen.

That night, before I fall asleep, my side feels pinched and my breath is shallow and strained. I have the nagging feeling something isn't right.

Around 11 p.m., Jason and I board a van and are driven to the foot of a dark mountain. Our trek begins at 1 a.m. with a Bedouin guide.

There are two routes to the summit. We take the camel path, a wide trail that snakes its way to the summit at a more gentle, gradual pace than the alternative, the steep 3,750 Steps of Penitence.

We walk for hours through the inky blackness of night, and it feels good. Hiking is where Jason and I are most comfortable -- our feet hitting the ground one step at a time, slowly making our way forward. When his foot slides on loose rock, my arm instinctively juts out to steady him. When my lungs feel weak, he rests with me.

Together we pass Bedouin men, sprawled out on woven rugs, selling lanterns. A chain of camels follows behind us, some of them wearing brass bells that plink, cutting through the desert silence. We stop for several minutes in a small shelter, a cave carved like a deep trough into the grey mountain, where an old woman sells hot tea. It is cold, and the woman wraps us in donkey blankets as we thaw our fingers around the hot mugs.

The final push to the summit consists of 700 stone steps. There are many other hikers and pilgrims around us now. The old and weak dismount camels then take the stairs slowly, lingering over each one. The young lean against boulders. Other than wheezy gasps for air, everyone is silent.

Jason and I make it to the top and find a flat place to sit. It has taken more than three hours to climb about three miles up this mountain -- the second highest in Egypt -- with an elevation gain of approximately 2,500 feet. The air is

frigid, and we wrap our arms around each other. The sky is navy, and my breath forms little clouds.

This is the peak of Mt. Sinai, the place where Moses is said to have received the tablets containing the Ten Commandments. If there is any place in the world where my words will reach God, this is it. I fold my hands together and I silently pray -- I ask for love and compassion, I ask for my family's good health, I ask for my mom to be at peace. And then I express my gratitude: For this sacred night on a mountain with the man I love. For the people I've met along my journey and the radical acts of kindness I've received. For this earth that makes a full rotation every day and always finds the sun again.

Dawn comes as a slash in the sky, as if a knife sliced right through a yard of dark fabric. As the rip of sky widens, revealing pastel orange, pink and finally yellow, a deep hum begins, a sound both warm and resonant.

There is a small stone mosque and a Greek Orthodox church near where Jason and I sit. The Muslim call to prayer and the Christian hymns begin simultaneously, creating a chorus of praise in an otherworldly harmony. It is an appropriate soundtrack to the morning, as the sun paints the desolate desert landscape below a dramatic pink.

I wouldn't call myself a religious person, but I do say I'm spiritual -- and watching the dark earth unfolding into rich, vibrant world is something as close to transcendent as I've ever witnessed. No wonder Moses and God used this as their meeting point. This is a place that feels like a bridge across time, a span between two worlds.

Jason and I continue to hold each other. My head rests against his chest, and he strokes my hair. I don't know why I begin to cry. I just do.

A part of me must already know that when I travel back down the mountain, I will be leaving this sacred place perched at the edge of the sky -- this pause between heaven and earth -- and will face reality once more.

By the time I reach the solid earth again, I will have just two more days with my husband, my father will have sent me terrible news, and nothing will be the same.