

# West Of Fugitive Moon




Bradley Fink



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BRADLEY FINK

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A day will come at last when I  
Shall take the hidden paths that run  
West of the Moon, East of the Sun.

- J.R.R. TOLKIEN



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# One

It is my first day traveling. At the airport in Miami I sat beside a man named Manuel. While waiting to board he told me that he was nervous to fly, and I could see it by his fidgeting. Talking to him I learned that he is a farmer in the Dominican Republic, and he spoke to me of his family, and how he hoped that his rice fields would not be swept away by another hurricane this year. The weather, he said, is getting more unpredictable. But as long as he had his farm and his family, he felt peaceful and complete. When he asked me where I am going I only shrugged and said that "I don't know, I am just going." Manuel was a good man. When the flight was announced he prayed for me to have a safe and prosperous trip.

On the plane I sat between Cyndi and Christi. They both sell insurance, and had been at the bar while waiting to board, and not twenty minutes after takeoff they were squirming in their seats, giggling like children, and telling me that I am too tense. Christi ordered more drinks. As the plane climbed higher I told them that I am leaving Florida, where I've been all my life, because the land is too flat, the traffic is aggravating, and I am tired of wasting time. What is the purpose of working to live, I asked them, if the work makes the living dull? While

Christi and I agreed, Cyndi ordered more drinks. This went on until Phoenix (I had a layover) where the two had an insurance convention. I kept on to Vancouver, where the airline lost my pack. Now I am at a hostel on Granville Street, it is 1 a.m., and I am waiting for my clothes to be delivered from the airport. I must say that, after eleven hours of flights and layovers, this trip has not been easy. I am getting hungry, and I need some sleep. The hostel serves breakfast at seven a.m.

\*

In the morning I showered, got dressed, and went downstairs to the common room. There are sofas and tables for travellers to relax, and a shelf filled with maps and books. On a tabletop there was hot coffee and tea, with toast, cereal, oatmeal, and cake. This is a warm place with friendly guests, who are quick to say good morning. After coffee and cake, my plan was to head up Grouse Mountain. There is a poster of the mountain on the common room wall, with a beautiful view of Vancouver. As I studied the poster, I saw other guests having breakfast, chatting, and looking over travel books of Canada.

It feels strange to be in an unfamiliar place, and with nothing to do. At the airport last night I changed \$200 for about the same in Canadian dollars. The hostel is \$15 per night, and it is awkward sleeping in a room with others, but if I can make this \$200 last for a week, I can sleep like this for twenty months before needing to worry about money.

Just as I was leaving the common room, I met Brooke, a stewardess, who has come in from Japan. Over toast she told me that she is twenty-five, from somewhere in Kentucky, and that she has a soul-mate in Kyoto whom she is in love with. She is

enamored with Japan - the helpful Japanese people, the noodles, the speed trains and hot baths and slippers. She suggested that I fly over to have a look around Tokyo. I asked if she would like to have a look around Vancouver. Rather than go up the mountain, we walked together to Stanley Park, and then went to the Aquarium, and then to a Thai restaurant for lunch, where we shared chicken curry over sticky rice. As we ate Brooke spoke devotedly of her soul-mate. She said she hopes to go to Kyoto to visit him soon. After lunch we were exhausted, and now we have come back to the hostel, where I am in my room, feeling like a nap, but there is another guy in the room tuning his guitar. It is raining outside, the blankets are irresistibly warm, and I might just sleep anyways. Later I'll meet Brooke for a walk by the waterfront.

\*

Waking from my nap, I found that there was someone in the bunk bed above me. There was a shovel by the bed, a pair of muddy boots, and a rucksack that needed to be washed. Seeing me come up from below, a young man grinned down through his bushy beard, and apologized for his things. His name is Andre, and he has just come from a twelve week job planting trees in the North Shore Mountains. He looked pretty rough, having just come down this afternoon, and there was a sour, disgusting smell coming from his feet. Andre promised to wash his boots, go for a shave, and stand in a steaming hot shower, before going to the bars all night and drinking with anyone who would drink with him. He began to undress, so I left him, and went downstairs to wait for Brooke in the hostel common room.

For an hour I read a book about the planets and stars, how they spin into galaxies, and how the earth is spinning, and the clocks spin, and I was off on some theory about all of the spinning, until nine-thirty when Brooke still hadn't come, and I guessed that she wouldn't, so I went back to the room to sulk alone. Andre was not on his bed, and the place was finally quiet, so I laid back down to read my book and sleep for the rest of the evening. But just as I dozed off, Andre came in, cleanly shaved and with polished boots, insisting that I go with him to the bars, and rather than pass the night alone, we made our way to the drunken chaos of Granville Street.

In the first bar we drank large, frothy pints of beer, while a band played heavy metal on the stage. It was fun but loud, so we went down the street to a piano lounge where we could speak without raising our voices. There we drank gin and tonics, while Andre told me about his job planting trees up in the mountains.

"I don't know if you've roughed it, but it's rough up there." He showed me his calloused hands. "It breaks your back, your spirit too. I slept in a tent for eighty days. Up at dawn, in the mud and the rain..." he lifted his glass.

I asked him why he suffered it. Why not take a job in the city? He said that late last year his father passed in a hunting accident. His mother was heartbroken, and he himself had taken it rather badly.

"I was lost, man. You ever felt it? Like you're stuck in mud and there's no hope for anything? And people could see it on my face all the time. So I bought some gear, took the job and fucked off into the wilderness. Into some real mud, and the cold rain. It got lonely man, I can tell you that. You get to know yourself well when there's no one around." He sipped more gin.

“It was a shock, that’s all, to lose my father like that. I needed some time to get over it.”

We ordered more drinks. He asked me what I am planning to do. I told him I can no longer brave the risks of sitting still.

He understood. “Hawaii is a good place to escape to. Costa Rica is beautiful too.” Something came to his mind, and he smiled, but it flickered, simmered, and sputtered out in his eyes. “A cafe is all I want tomorrow,” he insisted. “Hot coffee, a warm waitress, and more girls walking by. And I’m going to sleep late. Enjoy the indoors. Next week I’ll head back up into the mountains.”

We went to a nightclub where Andre had several more drinks, we watched some girls dance, there was a fight at the bar, and at some point the lights came on. On the walk home Andre was drunk, not quite sloppy, but he’d had more than enough. Waving his arms at the empty street, he praised the radiant light of the streetlamps, and wished that he could carry one with him. Below the hostel I stood with him as he finished a cigarette. In some muddle of words he said that it’s bold for me to be wandering on my own. He said that I should get further away, maybe to Vancouver Island, that it is wild there, with wild beaches and small fishing villages. He mentioned a bus through the mountains, up the west coast of the island, to a small town called Tofino. He suggested buying a tent to live in. I thanked him for the idea.

\*

In the morning I woke up, and without bothering Andre in the bunk above me, I dressed and headed downstairs to the common room for breakfast. Then I walked to the harbor,

hopped on the ferry to cross it, and on the other side I found the bus up Grouse Mountain. The views were beautiful on the way, but the bus dropped me halfway to the mountaintop, and from there it was thirty dollars for the cable car to the summit, so I skipped the summit, took the bus back down, and again crossed the harbor on the ferry.

I walked along Granville Street. The city was busy with people shuffling in and out of buildings. Glancing into the store windows I saw some televisions on display. Standing there, watching people shop, I gave some thought to sticking around Vancouver for a while. For this I would need to rent an apartment, buy some nice clothes, and find some kind of job so that I don't run out of money. But it all seems too familiar to the life I've left behind. And so I have made up my mind. I am leaving here tomorrow on a ferry to Vancouver Island.

\*

This afternoon I arrived to the Island by ferry, and found that the bus to Tofino was full, but managed to sneak on until Port Alberni. For three hours we drove the highway toward the west-coast of the Island, through some very beautiful mountains, over rivers, past big, gray lakes. It has been raining throughout the day. On the bus I met a boy from Victoria who has just returned from a year of traveling – all throughout Africa, the United Kingdom, Greece, and Asia. He said that after seeing the world it was very strange coming home. All of the people that he left a year ago are exactly the same, doing the same things with their time. I asked him what his friends and family thought about his leaving, and he said that they didn't understand it, and I told him that most people I know back home don't understand it

either, and we understood each other perfectly. In Port Alberni I had to get off because two more travelers were picked up, and so I am stuck now in an off-ramp motel for sixty-seven dollars. Up the street I had greasy Chinese food for dinner. I feel bewildered right now, a bit discouraged, as I don't know where I am, where I am headed, or what I will do when I get there. Now I am going to read a little and fall asleep. Hopefully I will catch the next bus to Tofino in the morning.

\*

This morning I walked to the gas station where the bus picked me up. For three more hours we drove through the mountains up a steep, slippery road. It rained the whole way, and it was approaching noon when the bus turned north down some kind of empty highway. To the east the earth was dense and forested, to the west was the Pacific Ocean, and just when it seemed as though all things had come to an end, we finally arrived to Tofino.

At the town's harbor-front I have taken a bed at The Whalers' on The Point Guesthouse. This appears to be a very small fishing village, with not much to it. I've paid for a room with five other beds, though no one else is here. There is a window in the room, which looks out onto a bay, and it may as well be a photograph. The view is of two small islands just offshore, and beyond them gray waters, densely forested shores, and then the mountains we crossed coming here. There are fishing boats and float houses bobbing in the harbor, pelicans on the wooden docks, and a few wet fishermen washing their nets. This is a very lush, untouched, and secluded part of Canada, and terribly wet and rainy.

\*

Last night I slept to the patter of the rain. It was soothing to listen to, and I had a good night's rest. This morning it stopped raining, and I walked into town. For breakfast I went for ham and eggs to a small restaurant, and afterward I walked alone to the ocean where, crossing a beach, I climbed some rocks, and laid back to watch the clouds overhead. The air here is fragrant with the smell of forest pine, and it mixes pleasantly with the sea-smell. Watching the sky I fell asleep for half-an-hour. When I woke again the sun was coming to its peak, and with a sigh I sat up to look out over the Pacific. This place, this little town in it's hidden nook of the Island, is the most remote place I have ever been. Suddenly I felt unencumbered, amongst the pine trees and the birds, and I was planning to build a cabin, with lumber from the forest, fishing to live, forgetting all the troubles of the world, when at some point the tide began to rise, so I hopped up, crossed the beach and walked back into town.

The common room at the Whalers is cozy and warm, with a fireplace, sofas, hot coffee and tea, and great big windows with a view of the harbor. Sitting by the windows, I wondered what direction I should travel from here. I was considering going up to Alaska, when a young man sat down on the sofa opposite. He had a backpack full of clothes that was about the size of my own. He said that he's just come from Toronto, and that he is here for the summer to work, surf, fish when he gets the chance, and sleep cheaply here at The Whalers. I told him I plan to stay a few days, and then make my way off of the island. His name is Ian, and he said that I should stay a while longer, and maybe we can do some surfing, and that he has a jeep that he says will get us way up into the mountains.



For the rest of the afternoon, Ian and I sat there in the common room, telling stories, playing backgammon, and at sunset we ordered some dinner from the kitchen. Afterwards we smoked outside on the boat docks. The night here is crisp and I was shivering from the cold. Ian was saying how he'd left his job as a banker in Toronto.

"You know as well as I do, buddy. For five days we sit on our butts, crunching numbers on our computers. Then on Friday we get drunk, on Saturday we go dancing, and on Sunday we stare at the television. Wake up, curse the world, and do it all over, fifty weeks out of the year."

It was similar to my experience.

"Not me, though," he grinned. "I'm through with all that. And it sounds like you're through with it too."

I agreed with him. But I haven't decided what I should do, or what I am looking to find.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "You found this place. Stay for a while and let the days come. You've got no home, no job, no bills to pay. Your time is your own, now. Enjoy it."

\*

This morning Ian drove us to the Tofino Surf Shop, where we looked at some used surfboards. The ocean here is cold, so he needs a wetsuit, and he guessed it would cost about six-hundred dollars to get the things he needs. Without buying anything, we then drove in his jeep to one of the luxury lodges here by the ocean. While Ian went to see about a housekeeping job, I walked down to the beach, where the waves were rolling steadily, breaking calmly beyond the shore. There were some surfers out on the waves, waiting patiently for the swells, and

when a wave came they would paddle fast and drop onto the shoulder. Far out beyond them, in the lucid distance, I thought that I saw some whales surfacing.

On the way back to town Ian decided to detour along an old logging road. It was a very steep, narrow, rocky mountain road, winding high up over the wilderness. From up there I could see Tofino, the Pacific, and out over the harbor. Near the top of a mountain we hiked up a ravine, drank some water from a creek, and sat to rest awhile.

"I got the job," Ian said proudly. "I start tomorrow. After my shift we can do some surfing. You can rent what you need from the shop."

The ocean, far below us, was so blue at that altitude, I was anxious to get in the water.

"Are there sharks?"

"Whales, mostly. And seals. You have to watch out for the seals. One once charged me while I was paddling out, knocked me right off of my board."

Back in town we stopped at the Weigh West restaurant, where we ordered fresh oysters and beer. There were fishermen drinking at the bar, and some young surfers eating, and some folks from the whale-watching tours. There was a nice looking waitress as well, who seemed to be popular, and the place had the vibe of a small village pub where everyone knew each other. As the evening crept on, the beer flowed freely, and we made some amusing friends, with the sky above having set up perfectly for an orange and lavender sunset.

\*

Yesterday I bought a surfboard, wetsuit, and gloves to keep my

hands from freezing in the ocean. Altogether it cost me \$500, but the clerk at the surf shop said that, when I decide to leave Tofino, he can help me sell it all second-hand. This afternoon Ian and I went to Chestermans Beach, where the waves were small but good for learning, and I flopped around like a fish in the water while Ian was further out surfing. Once I did manage to catch a wave, and stand up for a few seconds, but I wobbled, fell, and tumbled over my board. I will need more time to get better at it.

Ian rides his board quite well. I have watched him. He isn't afraid of the bigger waves, and he never gets exhausted. He says that all he wants out of life is to surf, and to open his own little kayaking business. His idea is to offer harbor tours of Tofino - he will rent kayaks, paddles, and equipment to tourists for thirty dollars an hour, and have guides lead them to scenic spots, and sell them picnics with beer and sandwiches.

"It's a simple business," he shrugged. "It won't make me rich. But what else do I need? A home, some food, a surfboard and my jeep. The mountains and the waves are my riches."

We stripped from our wetsuits, put on dry clothes, loaded our boards in the jeep, and back at the guesthouse I had a hot shower, and slept better than I've slept in weeks.

\*

The morning it was raining softly. At seven a.m. I went surfing with Ian in Cox Bay. He rides a short board, and has no trouble getting out past the heavy waves. I am still learning how to duck dive properly. On some days I am exhausted by the time I paddle out. Today the water was rough, the waves closing high and hard, but we were suited up and determined. Ian went

to surf off the rocks while I paddled out to the middle of the bay. Getting out there was difficult business, with the waves closing one right after another, but I managed to get up and catch a few short rides. It is a very good feeling to be out there on a surfboard. I have bodied waves all of my life in Florida, but here off of the Island, paddling out, feeling the sea-swell beneath me, hearing the wash of the shore, the ebbs and flows of the elements fuel my body and soothe my soul. After four hours in the water we went to the Weigh West, where we had hot soup and sandwiches. Then we went back to the Whaler's, and relaxed with some of the guests. In the common room, an old Frenchman played us songs on his guitar. A girl from Nova Scotia made a salmon dip for everyone. I am having a really fine time. At midnight I walked alone on the docks to look up at the stars, and I have never seen stars like there are here in Tofino. I laid down on the planks, gazing up into space, whatever this strange space may be, and marveled as the stars swirled like ribbons in the deep spinning infinite darkness...

\*

I have been here in Tofino for more than a month now. The days have been full. On Wednesday, Ian and I rented kayaks in town and headed north from the harbor for about four hours. It was easy going, and we found nothing out there but islands, mountains, trees, and wilderness. Many times we could hear waterfalls on shore, and in several coves, tied up to the shore by very long, thick ropes, were float houses, sitting alone and isolated among the trees. It must be a very different life to live out there on a float house, with no people, nothing, no one to keep you company. A man must have his reasons for choosing

such a life.

I thought about this as we paddled; it was a cool afternoon, the wind was down, the sun was out on the forested shores, and it was all very pretty going. My mind lingered on Ian's idea of starting a business here. At the thought of making a life here on the island, I was certain I should go.

"You alright?" Ian called over to me.

"Fine," I said.

He sat there coolly, looking as though I owed him something.

"It'll be different when you go."

"I know," I answered him.

"What will you do?"

"I have enough money to go anywhere," I said.

"Where will you go?"

I said that I don't know, that I was happy to be paddling with him at the moment. We drifted awhile in the stillness, until sometime later Ian pointed us back in the direction of Tofino. Heading back to the town the tide turned suddenly, and going against it was rather difficult. At the harbor we stowed everything, and back at the Whaler's I made some tea, and in the common room we played backgammon, Ian spinning the dice, and winning my money, as I sat looking out at the harbor.

\*

This morning we took Ian's truck up into the mountains. At a waterfall, where we parked the truck and climbed a little, we talked of our newly made plans. Ian told me that he has been hired as a kayaking guide in town. Starting tomorrow he will be leading tourists through the harbor. Meanwhile I have given up my room at the Whaler's. I have purchased a one-way ticket

to Buenos Aires. I don't know anything about Argentina, but I have always wanted to see South America. A friend of mine, James, has mentioned that he might meet me down there later in the year. It is sad to be leaving the Tofino, but I am glad to be moving on. Ian has said that he will drive me to Victoria, and from there I will catch the three-hour ferry back to the Canadian mainland.

\*

The flight to Buenos Aires was long and sleepy. Arriving late, I took a taxi to a hostel in the San Telmo neighborhood. It was ten o'clock in the evening, I thought everyone would be asleep, but San Telmo was filled with people walking and talking in restaurants. There were crowded street cafes, dimly lit tango bars, and tables were covered with dishes, beer, wine, and cigarette butts.

At midnight I checked into the Hostel Carlos Gardel, on a quiet side street. On the first floor, the common room has red velvet sofas, a rug by a fire, a long dining table, and it feels like an old gloomy mansion with its mirrors and chandeliers. Up three flights of stairs are three small rooms, all empty but one, where I have met Benjamin, an Australian, who has just come down from Mexico, where he was living in Cancun as a bartender. He has come to Argentina to look for work in the vineyards of Mendoza. On the third floor we are sharing a dormitory room with six beds, and it seems we are the only guests. Benjamin had some wine to share, fresh bread and ham, and he was telling me why he left his home for the beaches of Mexico.

"I've got Huntington's Disease," he grinned. "Doctors say I

have ten years before it begins to set in. I may not be able to walk or speak, or eat without someone's assistance."

I didn't know what to say, so I said, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Not your fault." He showed no fear. "Don't be so uneasy. It gave me the strength to get off my ass and enjoy every precious moment."

"That's true," I admitted. "You're having a good time."

"Time," he assured me. "Is all we've got. And nothing in the world will buy more of it." He looked me in the eye, and I felt that he had seen some ghost or holy apparition. "Look at us," he swigged his wine. "Two souls ablaze in Argentina. We are fugitives, free spirits, the merry heathens and the Peter Pans. We don't take orders, or sit indoors, or watch the clocks as they mock us."

He raised his wine glass, I raised mine, and we drank until the bottle was empty, and by the time we fell asleep in our beds it was four o'clock in the morning.

\*

It is the middle of winter here in Argentina, and in the hostel there is no heat, no insulation for the balcony doors, and the blankets they have given us are too thin. I am falling into the habit of sleeping with my clothes on. Apart from the heating, though, the place is decent enough. There is coffee in the mornings, and the showers stay warm. Today Benjamin and I walked around the city. Buenos Aires is big. There are some very good streets, interesting buildings, quiet squares and cafes. After dinner in San Telmo we went to the cinema in Puerto Madero. Then we walked up the Avenida del Libertador to the ritzy part of town. Tomorrow we plan to visit the Recoleta

cemetery. This weekend there is a Brazilian show, *De La Guarda*, which we have bought tickets for. In today's newspaper I saw some apartments for rent. I circled one that would cost me two-hundred dollars for a small, furnished room.

\*

For two weeks I have been living at the Hostel Carlos Gardel, with Benjamin and the guests who come to eat, drink wine, sleep three or four nights, and then carry on their travels. I'm having a wonderful time here. Mostly I have been walking in Buenos Aires, brushing up on my Spanish, sitting in cafés, going out some nights in Puerto Madero, and I have seen several films. I am getting used to living a thrifty life in travelers' hostels. The kitchen is sufficient, where we cook our simple meals, and I've become accustomed to living with all kinds of interesting people. In our room Benjamin keeps busy reading, and he has given me a book of poems by a Chilean poet named Pablo Neruda. Now we are laying in our beds, reading until we sleep, and tomorrow we will wake up early and go for a run along the river.

\*

Another week has passed, and I am still here in Buenos Aires. I have spent most of today in the hostel common room. It is raining outside, there is a chill in the place, and I may have caught a cold. At a nearby shop I bought some tea, fresh ginger, a packet of biscuits, and I took a blanket from upstairs. By the fire I am reading the book of poems by Pablo Neruda. I like the simplicity in his writing:



*I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees.*

I have never been so fond of words, as I am of these lines by Neruda. I like the gentle, flowing rhythms of his writing, and how the rhythms flow with his rhymes. Maybe I'll try to write some poems myself to pass the time...

\*

It hasn't stopped raining for days. In the hostel we have met two Ecuadorian girls, one of whom, Dayana, has the most beautiful black eyes. Last night we went out (me, the girls, and Benjamin) for empanadas, and afterward to a bar in San Telmo, where we chatted and listened to flamenco music. As we drank wine, Dayana nuzzled up beside me. My Spanish is poor but she helped me along. When she asked me what I want to do in life, I told her that maybe I would like to do some writing.

"About what?" she asked me.

"Whatever I feel, I suppose."

"And what do you feel?"

"I feel like kissing you."

"*Maldito*," she said. "You have had too much wine. Dance with me to the next song."

Back at the hostel we read some poems by Neruda, and then Dayana told me of Ecuador. She said that her life there is nice, because her father is a lawyer, and that she studies most of the time. When I kissed her she laughed, and by the hand she pulled me upstairs and out onto the rooftop, where the street lamps cast a dim glow over the neighborhood. If San Telmo is not the most charming part of the city, with its filthy streets and gothic architecture, and despite the seediness of it, it certainly

is my favorite neighborhood. At night I am delighted walking beneath the dimmed windows of the tenements, with adagio strings coming from the tango bars, the street lamps glowing, and Dayana here with me, dancing to the strings, jumping over rain puddles, keeping me up on my feet...

\*

It has rained all day today. For twelve pesos Dayana and I bought two bottles of wine, and we did not leave the hostel. While she read a magazine, I went on reading the poems by Neruda. As I studied a page Dayana leaned over me.

"It's a sonnet," she said. "*En los bosques, perdido.*"

"What does it mean?"

"It means lost in the forests."

"I'm lost in the forests. The forests of San Telmo."

"Me too. En los bosques. And I found you here."

Together we napped most of the afternoon, and for dinner we had chicken and potatoes brought over from next door, and then Benjamin came with fresh baked bread. Having taken a job on a vineyard, he would leave for Mendoza on an overnight bus. Over several toasts we drank to him and to safe travels, and in the lobby we ate well together, until finally it was late and time for Benjamin to be going. When he left in a taxi with his things, Dayana and I went to the Bar El Federal, where we sat together at the window, sipped espresso, and watched the puddles dance on the San Telmo street.

"Estas cansado?" she asked me with a frown. "Are you tired?"

"Not yet," I said.

"There is a tango playing here tomorrow."

"We should come again."

"Yes," she said.

We stayed late at the cafe, and spoke of many things. She asked about my family in Florida. I told her that my parents have separated, are now living apart, and that both of them work very hard.

"Is that the way there?"

"Yes," I said.

"Will you be married someday?"

"To you?" I asked casually.

"Yes," she said, smiling. "To me. Twenty years from today. We can meet again, here at the Bar El Federal."

We walked back to the hostel huddled closely together, and at the doorstep we stood in the rain. Then there was a sober moment, when neither of us spoke, and Dayana used a word that I did not recognize. She then went upstairs to get a dictionary. In the lobby I sat by the fire, thinking how good I feel with her, and how I might write it into a few true lines. When Dayana returned she had the dictionary with her, turned to a particular page, and sitting beside me, she put the book in my lap, and I saw that the word was *Tranquility*.

\*

I went with Dayana for dinner this evening. At a restaurant in Palermo we picked miserably at our food. Over dessert she suggested that I go north in the spring, to visit her in Ecuador, and that perhaps her father will have me stay in their home. Afterward we walked together along the Avenida Santa Fe, until with a heavy sigh I put her into a taxi. At midnight she had her flight back to Quito. In parting she gave me an address in Ecuador, to which I promised to send something by post. After

she left I walked alone in Recoleta. In one dimly-lit bar I sat alone for a beer, but unable to get my mind off Dayana, I walked a bit more along the cemetery walls before taking a cab across town. Now I am at a café in San Telmo. It is 3 a.m., there is some music playing, the barman has disappeared, and I am sitting with my journal. I am beginning to see that the hard part of traveling is in missing the people that will come and go. As I write this I feel terrible, and I should try not to dwell on it, but I'm suddenly somewhat discouraged.

\*

I've spent the last few days keeping my mind off of Dayana, but without much success. She has written me by email from Ecuador, saying that she arrived safely, and that she would love for me to come north. Anyway, this morning my friend James has also written me from New York, asking how much money to bring, and if he should carry anything specific. I told him to bring a guide book of South America. I'm not sure what to expect in the northern parts of Argentina. Then I went to a bookstore where I read through some books, looked over a few maps, and made a rough plan for heading into the country.

\*

James has arrived today from New York. He is much less sun tanned than everyone else here. He is working now as a corporate lawyer in Manhattan. In the morning we checked into a hostel in Palermo, then went walking in Recoleta, and to the Bar El Federal in San Telmo for café. Tonight we have dinner reservations at La Brigada, one of the best parillas in

town. For a few days we will see the city, have drinks in Palermo, perhaps take in a football match, and discuss our plans going north. Both of us are looking forward to seeing the country.

\*

Rosario, from what I can tell, is a busy little city on the Rio Parana. Getting in we took a room at the Hotel La Paz. It was a hot day, and after walking through the monumento de la bandera, we went to a street café, where we sat in the shade and had a long, relaxed meal. While we ate James told me of his office in Manhattan. He said that he is bored with depositions and the long hours of paperwork. When I suggested he take more time to travel, he said he was lucky enough to get these three weeks off. After that I had nothing else to say about it, so we talked of friends and the movies instead. In town we visited the old home of Ernesto Guevara, which was nothing to see, really, though I have picked up some reading on his revolution.

Tonight James has gone out to a nightclub, though I am tired and don't feel much like going. Now I am at the hotel reading Guevara's diaries. Tomorrow morning we are taking a bus north to Cordoba.

\*

Argentines are different from North Americans in many senses. Now that we are in the country I see how they live and commune, work little, siesta habitually, and eat very late social meals. There is a good deal of poverty here in the campo, and the poorest of them have built shanties in the fields, though most seem to live in houses of one sort or another. They eat

and they rest and lead fairly tranquil lives.

Last night in Cordoba we checked into a hostel. For dinner there was an asado with many of the guests, and all sorts of meats and vegetables and wine. At the table we chatted with a group of girls from San Miguel de Tucuman, who are here to attend a political symposium. After dinner James disappeared into his room with one of the girls, and I went out to have a drink with Vanessa. For several hours we talked of politics, which is what she studies. When I told her that I am reading Guevara she smiled. She said that she admires a man who will fight for his convictions. I said that I hope to become such a man someday, if I can find something worth believing in. By the time we walked back to the hostel the sun was up, and without getting any sleep we took a bus out of town, to a river in the mountains, where we relaxed and swam at a shallow bend. It is quiet out here in the open country. Vanessa has been telling me of her home in San Miguel de Tucuman. She said that there are low, rolling hillsides near the city where she lives. When she asked me of my girlfriend, I thought sadly of Dayana. Vanessa said that she has a boyfriend at home, but that she has no true feelings for him, and that she won't be seeing him again.

\*

It is our third day in Cordoba, where I have been having a nice time with Vanessa. James has likewise been spending all of his time with Carolina. He is smitten, I can tell, and it's good to see him settling into this slow and seductive culture - the long meals, the coffees, the lazy midday siestas, the late nights with wine and music, and chatting with good, interesting people until the sleepy hours of the morning.

Today the girls took us to an art gallery, where we met some local artists, and then we went to rent paddle boats on the lake in Parque Sarmiento. I was on a boat with Vanessa, paddling effortlessly, and James was on a similar boat, singing a song for Carolina.

“Your friend is funny,” Vanessa said. “He told her he is a famous singer. She really likes him.”

“I’ve known him a long time,” I explained.

They floated over and we all drifted together side by side. James sang an awful rendition of *Don’t Cry For Me Argentina*. Carolina was laughing. They were intoxicated, on their island, drunk on one another, and I saw James had finally escaped the drudgery of his occupation. He was a man of flesh, in a new world, with strange lands to explore, lured on by trains, busses, young romance, good sleep and new adventures. And he was merry enough to sing aloud, to his girl and to all who would hear him. We floated awhile, returned the boats, and took a taxi back to our hostel, where the girls made fish with rice and wine, and we dined until well after midnight.

\*

The day has been long and tedious. After saying goodbye to the girls at the terminal, we boarded a twelve-hour bus to Salta. For the last seven hours we have been going north on a very uncomfortable bus. James has a stomach ache from some street food that we ate. I’ve tried to sleep but can’t seem to. In the campo we have stopped through some small towns, where the poor and dusty Argentines get on and off the bus, and children come on board to sell us empanadas and water. I have noticed that the country grows poorer the further north we go. No

longer are there signs of business and industry, but the slow, simple living of common, humble people. I wonder how they spend their days, without even grass to attend to. I see nothing here but desert, dust, and some villages in-between. Tomorrow our plan is to rent a car in Salta, and then continue toward San Salvador de Jujuy, and then all the way north to Humahuaca, where we will hike and see the pre-Inca ruins. After that it will be a long drive south through the hot, dry Monte Desert.

\*

This morning we arrived to Salta and rented a Renault five-seater. It was still early when we drove out of the city and up into the Andes Mountains, at first through some very green ranges, and then going north everything dried up and turned to a high, yellow, desert landscape, which continued all the way to San Salvador de Jujuy. From Jujuy we drove the Camino Inca as far as Humahuaca, where everything is desolate and eerily remote, and there we visited some adobe homes and walked through the ruins. It is a short, sun-scorched people who live in this part of the country. They have built little villages right up out of the desert. Many stop to watch us as we pass them on the road. From Humahuaca it was one narrow lane leading south through the highlands, which sometime toward dusk descended to an end, and then we were driving alone through the wide open desert. Aside from the llamas and the scrub and a few squat cacti there was nothing to be seen for miles. Once we talked of turning back, but then finally after sundown we arrived at a small, desolate, indigenous village built up out of the sand. There is only one road that passes through the village, along which are some empty tiendas, and at one end a painted



doorway with letters that read Hospedaje. Here we have taken a cement-block room with two mattresses and a lightbulb. It is late now, and I am writing in the light of the bulb. Never have I seen such a simple way of life as in the people that I see here. There are no buildings, no shopping malls, no television sets to tune in to. If the map reads correctly then the village is San Antonio de los Cobres. Tomorrow we will wake early and continue south toward Cafayate.

\*

This morning we drove out of the desert, heading south into the mountains, again passing many small pueblos amidst a very high, empty, and desolate landscape. Along the way we stopped several times to climb rock formations. It was a picturesque drive, and from the car we took some good photos. We were going well until the Renault stopped running six kilometers out from Cafayate. With nothing to do, we locked the doors and walked wearily into town.

Cafayate is a small mountain town, high and isolated in the northern Andes. There are gauchos on horseback trotting idly by the roadsides. It is peaceful here, as I would imagine are the monasteries in the snowy mountains of Tibet. Getting in we found a telephone booth, and for the rest of the afternoon sat calling the car company in Salta, but without any success. Finally we decided that the best thing to do is to find a guest house, get some rest, and try to start the car again in the morning.

\*

Yesterday we woke early and took a taxi back to the Renault. When we got there I tried under the hood, while James ducked underneath to check the fuel injection line. When I hit the ignition it started right up, and after getting our things in town we headed north again toward Salta.

Now we are back in Salta. We have returned the car, and bought tickets on a bus toward the border of Bolivia. From there, through La Paz, we will go into Peru, to visit Cuzco and Machu Picchu. After that we'll have to make it fast back down into Argentina. James has his flight to New York, and he wants to see Carolina before he goes. From there I have no plan, but I will see James off, and maybe spend a few days with Vanessa.

\*

At dawn we left Salta by bus, toward the Bolivian border. On the way to La Quiaca I bought a blanket from an old woman who was selling them from a bundle. I also bought some bread and empanadas, water, a new toothbrush, and some hydration tablets in case I get ill. I expect it will be much different traveling as we move up into Bolivia.

After an eight hour ride we arrived to La Quiaca, a very poor Argentine border town. The people here are even less fortunate than in the villages we have seen. At the crossing they file through in long, miserable lines, with huge sacks of grains and textiles on their backs, doubled over like overburdened mules. Upon seeing them my heart sank a little. It reminded me of Guevara, and the poverty he crusaded against. For the night we will stay over in a *Hospedaje*, and in the morning cross the border into Bolivia. At eleven a.m. there is a train that will take us north toward Uyuni.

\*

This may be the slowest, most uncomfortable train that I have ever been on. For more than eleven hours we have been moving north across the rocky desert plains. With my head wedged up against the window I managed an hour of sleep. Now a television set is playing some Bolivian music videos, which have grown annoying. I have to say that the country is strange. Out the window I am surveying the landscape. The terrain here is an arid, scrub desert, rugged at times, and not so beautiful. At one station I got down to use the restroom, where there were women wearing odd hats and old, tattered clothes, standing around chewing coca leaves, and cooking in pots. The men were selling coca and grains, as well as different household things. It is much different here, *otro mundo*, from anything else I have seen. In an hour or so we will arrive to Uyuni, where hopefully we can find a place to sleep.

\*

We woke this morning to the sound of gunfire. Bolivian guards were firing rifles in the street. Uyuni is a small, unfortunate town on the outskirts of the Solar, Bolivia's Great Salt Desert. Everything here is especially poor, and much of the business, it seems, is based on taking travelers by camioneta into the Solar. In the streets there are women selling pastries and breads, and there are little tiendas where the people buy their things. Looking down the dusty street, and at the squat, simple Bolivians, I am surprised and sorrow-stricken by the conditions here. They lack so many things, which modern people take for granted. For the day we have paid thirty-five dollars for a

camioneta to drive us into the salt flats. The driver, a kind man of about fifty, who speaks no English whatsoever, has agreed to have us back by dusk for a bus that will take us north to La Paz.

\*

We have moved very fast through Bolivia. After La Paz we stayed for two days in a village on the shore of Lake Titicaca. From there we took an overnight bus into the towering mountains of Cuzco. Peru is wonderful. For the week we have rented a room at the center of the old city, where we have been storing our things while making trips up into the mountains. Now we have just returned from three days rafting on the Apurimac River. It was a beautiful trip through some very high peaks, green valleys, and on the river there were some good, fast rapids. On the second night camping there was a clear, cool sky, and rather than in the tent, I slept on a rock alongside the river. Not since Canada have I slept beneath the open night sky. There is really nothing like it, and in fact I prefer it to the confinement of a room. Watching the moon I dozed thoughtlessly off, and sometime in the night I awoke from a dream, and without knowing where I was I sat up stiffly, gazing up at the mountains, and at the stars above them, and I was no more consequential than the fish in the river below. Dreamily I thought of all the people in this world, of what men have come to, with their complexity and their necessity, the time spent on needless things, and lying back with my head to the stone I slipped swiftly back into a dream...

\*

We have spent the last two days exploring Machu Picchu. The old city is perhaps the most incredible thing I have ever seen. Heading up from Cuzco northwest by train, into the jagged peaks of the Urubamba Valley, I sat at the window and watched quietly as the high, jagged country rolled by. It was nearing dusk when the train arrived to the town below the ruins, and there we took a clean, cheap room for the night. The next morning we woke early and hiked up into the mountains. It was a grueling climb, and the mosquitoes were horrendous, but after two-hours up a series of stone stairways we entered the old city, where there were little Inca men maintaining the grounds, and llamas feeding on the grassy paths. Immediately we walked back and up along the cultivation terraces. Where we sat to rest there was a cloud hovering, and we were disenchanted at first, until the sun broke finally and the mist cleared and the city appeared on the mountain below. Looking down over it I was overwhelmed at what extraordinary things men are capable of. At noon we ate some bread we had brought, and then climbed down and wandered through the ruins. At the very top of the highest peak, Huayna Picchu, the clouds were thick and nearly impenetrable, and there was a man up there who had passed out from altitude sickness. Some of the maintenance men were feeding him coca leaves, to wake him up. Coming down from the mountain I had a long, hot shower, and after dinner I chewed some coca leaves myself, and now I am reading, and we will plan a hike for tomorrow before falling in bed to sleep.

\*

We have returned to Bolivia from Peru. We are glad to have

come this way, but the travelling has not been easy, and the scenes here are not all worth mentioning. Much of it has been destitute, dirty, uncomfortable, poor, and many of the people here are very unfortunate. Other than that, I am completely exhausted. I have never spent so many painful hours on busses and trains. Sleepless nights over broken, dirt roads. Through deserts and winding over high mountains. Eating when I can, and carrying my backpack every step of the way.

After dinner tonight I laid in bed, while James went for a walk. He was in a mood, and I knew that it had to do with missing Carolina. He probably went to call her from a telephone booth in town. He's suddenly feeling down about how fast his trip is passing. In four days he will go home to New York, and without much time to rest, return to work in his downtown office. When he came back into the room he fell into bed and said what I had expected.

"I don't want to go," he admitted.

"Then stay," I said, and I watched him carefully. "What do you have to go back to?"

"I've got bills to pay, and a job."

I said that he could quit his job, sell his home, and eliminate most of his bills. He shook his head defiantly.

"You're lost," he said.

I asked him what he meant by that.

"Honestly, what do you plan to do? Just wander around South America? Writing poems in your journal? You can live in the desert, and start your own magazine. You're lost out here. What else would you call it? You're running from the world."

And he was right, in a way - I am lost out here. But these days I am getting the hang of moving to new and beautiful places. James is too, and he wants to keep going, but he's chosen a

different lifestyle. And I don't blame him for saying those things. But now he can see that life is not all offices and billable hours. We've had a very good time, through some rough countryside, and we still have a long road ahead of us. In two days we must get to San Miguel de Tucuman, to meet Vanessa and Carolina.

\*

Now we are in San Miguel de Tucuman, at the Hotel Impala, near the Plaza Independencia. Last night we had a big dinner with the girls, and afterwards we went to a milonga, where Vanessa's sister danced tango. There is an infectious spirit here in the campo of Argentina. It is in the food, in the music, in the people's passion for each other, and in the simple ways they choose to live. And Vanessa is beautiful. All day today we have laid in bed at the Hotel Impala, talking softly and saying many things to each other.

"Did you like Peru?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Is it pretty there?"

"I missed you."

"Me too," she said. "I thought of you always. Tell me again of Peru, and maybe someday we can go together."

Tomorrow James has his flight home to New York. Right now he is locked in his own room with Carolina. We will all be sad to see him go. After he leaves I will stay here at the Hotel Impala, and wait for Vanessa to finish her schoolwork. Next week she will take me to a place in the countryside, to relax by the River Parana.

\*

We have been here two nights, at the Hotel Petite, in a room with a verandah. I have been enjoying my days here in Parana. On the beach there has been sunny weather, and we have found a nice place for dinner near the plaza. Walking by the river, there was a little girl who approached us and begged for our change.

“I like children,” Vanessa said.

I put my arm around her and told her that she is beautiful. After a nap in the park, we have come back to the hotel. Now Vanessa is in the shower, and I am resting in bed. Sedately I lay here, wondering what to do. Vanessa has asked me to go back with her to San Miguel de Tucuman. She said that I could take an apartment there while she finishes school. She would like me to meet her family.

\*

This morning Vanessa lay sleeping as I got out of bed. While I dressed she lifted her head and asked me to come back soon. At a bakery I bought croissants, coffee, and orange juice, and I found the Hotel Petite again by the crooked yellow sign that hangs over the street. There was a gentleman sitting alone in the lobby. He was reading a newspaper and quietly sipping a steaming cup of tea.

“Buenas,” he said to me as I came in.

I absently said, “Hello.”

“An American,” said the man, and he gave me his hand. “I have been there. I like your country. I like your baseball very much.”

I shook his hand and waited, patiently, with the coffee and orange juice.



“And how do you find Argentina?”

“It’s peaceful,” I said. “I’m happy here.”

He smiled and we agreed.

“You know, here, in the campo, it is an easy place to live. If you stay here you will know it. Not like in your country, where you must work very hard. For us there are more important things, como familia. You will like it here.”

In the room Vanessa was still asleep under the blanket.

“I missed you,” she said as I slipped beneath the blanket. I kissed her and she looked at me with the sleep still in her eyes. She held herself against me. “Te extrane mucho.”

I kissed her gently.

“Come,” she whispered. “Veni. I have many wonderful things to tell you.”

\*

I am at a café now in Buenos Aires. After three weeks in San Miguel de Tucuman I found I no longer had a reason to be there. In the end I found that Vanessa had a boyfriend all along. Without explaining I told her that I had to go to the city for a few days, and then left for Buenos Aires on an overnight bus. Feeling horrible, I walked alone in the city for a few days, and from there I took a short trip north to the waterfalls at Iguazu. After that I went down to Bariloce, to hike by the mountain lakes, and after a week there, thinking and rethinking, I have returned to Buenos Aires. I have decided on going to California. My sister is there, in a cottage she bought, and she said I am welcome to stay. If nothing else I will get some rest there. My body is thin, and I am exhausted from all of the traveling. In a little while I will catch a taxi to the airport. I have three hours

until my departure, and then a ten hour flight to Los Angeles.  
Hopefully I can get some sleep on the plane.

## Two

I am at my sister's cottage in Pasadena, where I've spent three days resting. My sister is convinced that I haven't been eating properly. She wants me to see a nutritionist. At the cottage she has been feeding me pasta and tuna fish, insisting that I gain some weight. In the living room the sofa has been made for me to sleep on, which is comfortable, and I have had two baths today. There is a book by Kurt Vonnegut that I am enjoying. He wrote:

*"I tell you, we are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you different."*

I agree with him, though I'm tired of farting around on trains and long, uncomfortable busses. I can't keep going all of the time, moving from place to place, like a nomad, without a destination, or a place to call home. My sister's home is nice, and I'll stay here while I can, but it's on top of a hill, which I'd have to walk down to take several trains into Los Angeles. I feel quite isolated here, while she's at her office. But she did fill the kitchen with fruit, cookies, coffee, cashews and chocolate...

\*

Last night I dreamt of Argentina. I was sitting at a table with coffee and wine, and Vanessa was there, happily speaking Spanish, her hand resting in mine, until she walked off, and I woke up in my sister's living room. For hours afterward I stared at the television, missing Vanessa and Argentina. At five a.m. I went for a walk to clear my head, and at sunrise the sky lit up a blazing orange, but then a fog passed over, the sun disappeared, and I came back to the cottage. Now I lay here, looking over my poems from South America. Some flow well and I'm glad to have them, but I can't write another line. I do feel lost now. I have nowhere to go, and worse than that, I feel utterly alone. My sister is good company, though I find myself withdrawing from her political conversations...

"He lies," she'll complain of some senator. Or, "He slept with his aide! She's a flat out racist! How can they still be in congress?"

And her personal affairs...

"Jenny and Becca are fun, they just drink and party and dance. It's cute but gets old. I like my political friends better, but honestly, sometimes, when I'm with them, I confess that I'd rather be dancing."

I don't care about any of it, honestly. But the cottage is nice, the sofa is warm, my sister is considerate, and I'll take advantage of her hospitality, for as long as she lets me stay.

\*

Two weeks have passed at my sister's cottage in Pasadena. Most days while she is at the office, I lay around the house, or read

on the back porch, and make hourly trips to the kitchen. When she gets home we go running in Santa Monica, or to the gym downtown, and we have gone out to dinner a few nights, to see some old films, and to a Klimt exhibit at the Los Angeles Museum. One evening there was a small party in Hollywood, and afterward we went to a nightclub, where my sister met some of her friends. We had a good time, drinking and dancing, and then my sister introduced me to a guy she has been dating. His name is Louis, a tall, fatter-than-necessary, pretentious looking man, wearing red pants, a blue blazer, spanking white moccasins, and sweating like he had just jogged to meet us at the nightclub. We tried to talk, but the music was loud and we couldn't hear anything said. Later on, leaving the nightclub, we were all hungry, and Louis suggested a diner. The three of us sat in a booth in Hollywood and stared down at the menu.

"The pies here are yummy," Louis insisted. I ordered eggs. My sister ordered an omelet. Louis ordered coffee, pie, and pancakes with butter and syrup. Now, in the light of the diner, I could see him much more clearly. He had a handsome face, with boyish features, but he was notably overweight.

"I manage actors," he said. "For TV and film. Well, television, mostly, but I'm looking for film scripts. I need a Brad Pitt type. With the ab muscles and all. If you know any, you can have them call me."

"Ok," I said.

"What do you do in LA?"

"Nothing," I admitted. "I'm just passing through."

"Vacation, eh? Where are you off to?"

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't decided."

He looked at me as though I am crazy.

The food came and Louis poured more syrup on his pancakes.

He told my sister that she should let me stay a few more weeks. He would take me to parties in Beverly Hills.

“I’ve got connections,” he bragged. “I know some A-list people. Did you see *Men In Black 2*? The one with Lara Flynn Boyle? My client stood in for Will Smith.”

When Louis finished his pie, we said goodbye and he walked off on Hollywood Boulevard. On the way home, my sister asked me what I thought of him. I said that he is nice, he talks a lot, and he ought to lose some weight. My sister was silent the rest of the way to her cottage in Pasadena.

\*

I am tired of Los Angeles. There are too many cars, the people are too busy, and I don’t care what they have to say. They speak of their careers, mostly, and salaries, taxes, expenses, their properties and their investments. And I am annoyed with my sister. Today she is upset because of an argument with Louis. On the porch she has been sobbing. To be honest it is depressing. I would like to get out of the city for a while, and go somewhere closer to nature. I have suggested that we travel up the coast for a few days, to Santa Barbara, to stay by the mountains and the ocean.

\*

Santa Barbara is pretty in the winter. I like the crisp, temperate weather, and the high, rugged cliffs along the coast. For the weekend I have convinced my sister to stay at the travelers’ hostel, where we might meet some people. In our room there is a girl named Athena, who is on her way north to San Francisco.

Also there is Harry, an Englishman, from Canterbury, who is traveling across the United States. From his bunk Harry was talking about the rugby matches in England. He said that rugby players were tougher than American football players. And something about how dainty it is to play in shoulderpads.

“You should get over to London,” Harry said, as he swung down from his bunk.

“What can I do there?”

“What’ll you do anywhere?” he answered. “Get a job. Make a living. Watch footy with the mates. Find a girl, take her to town, and get properly pissed on the weekend.”

Harry went off to a bar, and I spoke briefly with Athena. She has a new job, and she’s moving to a new apartment in San Francisco. Just before going to sleep, she told me that she is heading north in the morning, and that she has a seat available in her car, which she would let me have for half the price of fuel. Tomorrow my sister wants to drive back to Pasadena, which I would rather not do.

\*

I crashed last night with Athena in a closet that she has rented in downtown San Francisco. She is a nice girl. On the ride up we had long talks about where we have been. As we drove north I told her about my traveling for the past year, backpacking down from Canada, through Argentina and Peru, and how I have come back to the United States only recently, to stay at my sister’s cottage. At this Athena sighed, as she herself has been traveling, around Europe for the past eight months, down into Morocco, over to Egypt and along the Nile, and has recently come back to the United States, where she rented the closet in

San Francisco. Now she is working as a waitress at the Green Porpoise Pub. Talking with her I admitted that I am completely lost here, that I have no idea where I am going, what I am looking for, and that really it is a horrible feeling. Mostly I feel that I have nothing to look forward to. She understood and agreed that, at times, she feels no reason for being here. Then we discussed if love is the answer, if loving someone gives life meaning. At love Athena shook her head, calling it an illusion from fairy-tales. I said that the world only has ways of making it difficult. "The world these days," she said, "is too busy consuming itself." Looking out the window, I said that was a sad way to see things, and that I wasn't yet convinced, though it certainly does seem true these days.

Anyway, last night I slept on the floor of Athena's closet in San Francisco. Today Athena has gone off to work, and left me here to rest. She told me that she will bring me food later, and that I should come and go as I please, and that I can sleep here for a few nights until I find a decent hostel.

\*

It has been three nights, and I am still sleeping on the floor of Athena's closet. There is a mattress here, a low coffee table, some shelves with clothing and books, and in the hall is a bathroom she shares with two other people in the apartment. I couldn't believe it when she told me how much she pays to live in their closet.

Anyway, this morning Athena was free, and, waking late, we walked a few blocks to a patisserie, where we ordered four mimosas, two croissants, and shared a cup of coffee, while Athena told me of her first few nights working at the pub.



"It's awful," she complained. "I feel like a slave. I don't mind serving drinks, but to come home to a closet? And spend this much money? This breakfast is going to be sixty-five dollars. These mimosas are wonderful. I'm not upset about them. But this city isn't worth my time."

"Where else would you spend it?"

"Maybe Prague," and I could see she had warm memories of the place. "Or a town I visited, south of Prague, in the hills of the Czech Republic."

After breakfast we walked across town, and up a steep road that ran along the high cliffs of the Pacific. Walking across the Golden Gate Bridge, we saw some surfers down by the rocks. I thought of Ian, and wondered if he's still surfing in Tofino. I thought of James, too, and wondered how he's doing in New York. I thought of Vanessa and Dayana, and Benjamin from the hostel in Buenos Aires. And I knew, in that moment, feeling sentimental, that I will look back many months from now on my time here with Athena.

From the Golden Gate Bridge we took a taxi to Fillmore Street, and then we walked into the St. Francis Hotel, where we had a drink at the bar, and then rode the glass elevator up to the 31st floor. Rising up we saw the hotel fall away, then the rooftops and the streets, and then we rose over the bay, everything lit up and shimmering, and there was a moment of serenity that I won't forget. Back at the bar Athena told me that she won't stay in San Francisco.

"But you just got here," I said.

"Yeah. I'm done. I see what this is all about."

"Same," I agreed. "I'm done with California."

"Will you keep traveling?"

"Yes," I said.

“And writing?”

“Hopefully.”

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know yet. What about you and your closet?”

“They can put their shoes in it,” she smiled. “I’ve got friends in Czech Republic, and I can have my own apartment there, with a bathtub for half the price. If you make it to Europe, come say hello. I’ll be in a village called Cesky Krumlov.”

\*

I have been back in Pasadena now for several days. At the cottage I am thinking about where I should go from here. My sister has a date with Louis tonight, so I am sitting in the living room, with some books, some notes I wrote down, and a steaming bowl of oatmeal. Now I lay reading Henry Thoreau, who wrote:

*“A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.”*

And in that case I am doing rather well. I have no possessions, no obligations, nor a place to call home. Maybe I will find a home, somewhere along the way, but now I am ready to move again. I have been in contact with David Shade, an old friend from Florida. He said it has been a dreadful winter in Chicago, and that the weather is depressing him. He mentioned Europe and immediately I agreed. I am going to meet him in Portugal next week.

## Three

I'm tired. I've had a long flight, and I haven't slept. Having arrived early this morning to Porto, I met David Shade at the airport, and we took the metro into the center of the city, which is elegant looking and very picturesque. Many of the buildings here are relics from the baroque, and all along the river there are high cliffs, with old fortresses built up from the water. Off of the Plaza Mayor we have found a pension called Porto Rico, where we have taken a room for forty Euros including breakfast. After leaving our things, we changed some money, and walked into the city. The people here are neatly dressed, and they seem to be in good spirits. At the Cathedral San Francisco we stopped in to see the chapel, and then had a look down in the catacombs, and then walked along the riverfront and across the Rio Douro, where we found ourselves in the cobblestone quarter of the old bodegas. At one bodega we toured the cellars, where in the damp shadows stood tremendous casks of sherry and oak, and we tasted a port that I found too metallic. There was an Englishman there at the bodega, whom at the end of the tour bought an expensive bottle of wine, and we were invited into the gardens to drink with him.

“So, what is it that you boys do?” This man asked us as we

sipped his wine.

"I'm just having a look around," I said.

Shade said that he is running from the cold Chicago winter.

"That's it," said the man. "Live life. Be free. Enjoy these moments together." He lifted his glass. "And for heaven's sake, put no faith in Isms. Capitalism. Communism. Shamanism. It's all a fraud! Believe in yourself, spend your time wisely, and go forward courageously."

We drank, thanked him, and felt drunk from the wine, so we said goodbye, and went to see about the trains going south to Lisbon.

\*

It is our third day in Porto, and I feel fine. Last night we had some sangria with our meal, and then wandered down to the riverfront, where at a little café we drank more wine and chatted about where to go from here. Shade said that if we want to see more of Portugal, the thing to do is head south, and then he mentioned the Algarve, which does sound pretty. There is also Spain and France, and Italy to travel to. Finally, without deciding anything, we wandered outside and stumbled along the dark streets until well past midnight.

This afternoon the weather is good for walking. There is a soft wind blowing, and many people are out by the riverfront. While Shade is shopping for some books I have been contemplating the days ahead. Certainly it will be good traveling, and I am looking forward to it. Tomorrow there is a train south to Coimbra, and I have been told of a castle in Lisbon, and from there it is not far east to Seville.

\*

We have taken a train to Sintra, on the coast just east of Lisbon. This is a very pretty village in the mountains, what was once a retreat for Portuguese royalty. This morning we hiked up to the Quinta de Regalaria, where we walked through the palace and the palace gardens, through the labyrinthine grotto, through the caves and the catacombs, and down into a very elaborate well. Farther up the mountain is the Castelo da Pena, and from the monastery tower we could see all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. I am enjoying these Portuguese castles in the air. Having spent most of the day walking, we were tired and famished by late afternoon, and so we came back to rest at the hotel.

Now in bed, I am writing in my journal, trying to mimic the rhythms and flows I know from poetry. Shade is in his own bed reading. It's good to have him here. We were good friends in school, and I remember when he was hit by a city bus. I visited him in the hospital while he nursed a fractured skull. And I sat with him at the courthouse when the accident went to trial. From that he's had the money to do whatever he pleases. For a long time he wandered in Asia, in Japan and Vietnam, and now he spends his days in cafes, libraries and museums.

"Listen to this," Shade was looking in his book. He was reading Edgar Allen Poe:

*"All that we see or seem, is but a dream within a dream."*

I said that it's a good line, thanked him, and put it in my journal. And Shade went on reading, while I went on writing, until we

both fell asleep with the lights on.

\*

From Sintra we hopped a train to Lisbon, where we stayed two days near Rossio Square. After that we hopped a three-hour bus south to Faro, then another three-hour bus east to Seville. For reading I have taken up Henry Miller, who writes:

*“One’s destination is never a place, but rather a new way of looking at things.”*

He writes intensely of his life in Paris, and his evenings in the Villa Borghese. The city must have been fun in those days. He calls Paris his lover, her streets seducing him into a poetic swoon. There is ecstasy in his rhythms...

In the evening Shade and I paraded through the Barrio Santa Cruz. Turning the corner of every lamp-lit street we came upon a quiet café, or a sputtering fountain, or a garden, or an open doorway through which a small crowd of Spaniards sat watching a play of fiddlers and banditos and dancing Salsaleras. Shade began to sing at some point as I wondered at life and what beautiful women might be waiting for us at every bend. There are melodies everywhere in the barrio, emanating from the lamps of the lanes, flowing from the fountains, and it permeated, even down to the blisters of my feet. I was ecstatic about the world and what places awaited us. Until the early morning hours we wandered Seville, finally finding our pension not long before sunrise, and removing our shoes we fell into bed and slept side by side in our clothes.

\*

Getting in this afternoon to Barcelona, we found a hostel in La Placida Real called The Colon. Our room is small with two small single beds, a sink, and two wicker doors that open to a balcony overlooking the square. The city is busy. Leaving our key with the senorita, we wandered downstairs and along Las Ramblas, down alleys that wind blindly through the Old Gothic Quarter. It's pretty here - low buildings, narrow streets, statues peering discreetly through the trees. Wondering up at the architecture, or at a girl passing by, we walked aimlessly and soon found ourselves in a quiet part of the old city. In a little placida with shady benches we sat to rest our feet. People were talking softly at the tables of a cafe, taking shade beneath the awnings of a facade, lingering on the steps of a cathedral. Flower vendors lurked here and there with chrysanthemums, and there was an old man with a canvas who was sketching the scene.

"What day is it?" Shade asked.

"Wednesday," I answered him. "How long should we stay here?"

"Let's stay till Sunday."

"Then what?"

He suggested Morocco. I imagined an overnight trek on a camel into the Sahara Desert. And so I agreed.

After dinner we smoked a cigar on the balcony overlooking La Placida Real. Where Las Ramblas met the harbor we found a nightclub that played the worst kind of music. Old American disco songs were run over and again. Shade was drunk enough that he started to dance while I tried my Spanish on a dark haired girl, but neither of us had any luck, and the music was so

bad that we soon left. It was a long walk back along Las Ramblas. At a rotunda there was a statue of Christopher Columbus, perched high above the boulevard, which Shade saluted while I began a rendition of America the Beautiful. It was a tremendous ceremony. Finally a cab arrived and we hopped inside and went back to our room at The Colon.

\*

Today we took a train through the mountains to Sitges, a small town on the Mediterranean Sea. Mostly it is a wealthy, narrow resort village, with a beautiful sea and white buildings. The beaches there were crowded with Spaniards, who were swimming and baking in the sun. Where we lay I met a strawberry skinned girl named Nadine, who was vacationing from Bamberg. I marvelled about the Sagrada Familia. She suggested that we see Zaragosa, where there is a big basilica. Shade and I had considered this, but our plans are to spend a few more days in Barcelona, and then head south to get the ferry to Morocco, from the port in Algeciras.

“You are enjoying your travels?” Nadine asked.

She had an adorable accent. She told me she is a biologist, and we agreed on many things. The thing to do, she said, is to live each day as it comes, and try to not let little dramas affect you. I told her how nice that sounded, that I wanted to be content in every moment always, but how difficult it can be when there is a hunger in the same moment, uncertainty in the next, an unsettled debt, a doctor’s appointment, funerals, thunderstorms, and so on. She giggled and said that I should try not to worry so much.

Nadine bade us farewell as Shade and I were getting sun-



burned. If she comes into the Old Quarter, she will find us at the Colon. We returned our mats, and took the train back into Barcelona. In the city we drank sangria and had an early meal. Later in the evening we went into a nightclub. The music was good and we danced, and afterward wandered through the city, getting lost along the seedy side streets of Las Ramblas. In an alley we found a late-night cabaret where women danced for money, while in dark corners men sat smoking cigarettes and sipping wine. In the back of the place was a small door into which these men disappeared every so often. We stayed there for a while, looking at the girls as they tried to peddle themselves, and then we stumbled back to our room above the Placida Real. All through the night the square was filled with drunken shouting, singing, glasses breaking, stray dogs barking. The room was so hot that we both woke several times, sweating in our sleep. Sometime in the early morning the trucks with the water guns arrived to wash the cobblestone, and getting out of bed, we silently dressed, and left sleepily for the train station.

*(Later)*

This morning we hopped a train into the countryside. For the first time I was seeing the mountains of Spain by daylight. It was a beautiful view, better than any painting I have seen. Near a village we rode a funicular up to the summit of Montserrat, where there is an old monastery. There are elaborate gardens up there, a tremendous square, and the monastery, which is magnificent. Apart from an ornate cathedral, there were accommodations for the pilgrims who come to pray. Outside of the monastery there was a sign:

*Estamos en un Santuario.*

*Vestid y comportaros de manera adecuada.*

*We are at a sanctuary. Behave and dress properly.*

Instead of going inside, we went back to the square, where at a store we bought some bread and sausages, two cold bottles of sangria, and we hiked a trail that took us around to a higher ridge of the mountain. Here there were cool breezes, wide views of the countryside, and removing our shoes, we sat looking down on the village below.

I uncapped a bottle of sangria.

“Good spot,” Shade said.

“Damned nice view.” I had a long, cold swallow.

“We should stay at this sanctuary.”

I looked at him, ready for it.

“It just came to me,” he said. “An epiphany. We’ll stay here and become monks. I’ll be the abbot, and you can make the wine. We’ll live our lives and not worry about a thing. Listen to this...” He opened a pamphlet that he had picked up from the monastery. On the inside was a schedule, and he read it aloud:

6:00 a.m. - beginning of day meditation

7:30 a.m. - prayer

8:00 a.m. - breakfast (in silence) in the refectory; work day begins

11:00 a.m. - mass

1:30 p.m. - lunch (held in silence) during bible reading

2:00 p.m. - free time to reflect in the garden

3:00 p.m. - prayer and work

8:15 p.m. - dinner in the refectory

8:45 p.m. - free time in the living room to talk about the day

He folded the pamphlet and put it away.

“What more is there? Only we’ll have to sneak down to that village twice a week, to have drinks with the mujeres. It’ll be a hell of a life. I’ve already decided. We’ll write home that we’ve been ordained.” He glanced at me smugly, but I had stopped listening. I was standing at the edge of the mountain, urinating over the cliff.

After our lunch and a short nap we wandered through the gardens, drunk on sangria. It was a hot day, and the shadows had disappeared from the square, and with our wine we strolled over to the monastery and crept inside. It was a beautiful big cathedral. The main hall was dimly lit by chandeliers, and there was some very pretty organ music. Seeing us, a priest came over, shaking his head apologetically. Had I been able to speak Catalan I would have told him how wonderful his little sanctuary is, and how peaceful it felt to be there. I would have at that moment confessed my sins, revealed my deepest unease, told him what a miracle the world is, yet how alone I feel at times, of my wanting something to believe in, and if he would give me an indication I would be grateful. His English was very poor, but he had a kind face, and I don’t think we misunderstood each other. Quietly Shade took me by the arm and led me drunkenly out of the cathedral, and finishing our wine we had one last look around before riding the funicular back down the mountain.

\*

At four a.m. we must catch a bus for Algeciras, so to save money we have left our room at The Colon. Our plan was to spend the night in the bus station, but now the station has closed for

maintenance, and we have six hours left to wait. At the Sans Hotel we found a small space to sleep in the lobby, until we were spotted by a janitor and asked to leave. Wearily, and with nowhere to go, we shouldered our packs and walked several blocks to a diner, where for the last two hours we have been drinking coffee. Now it is two in the morning. Shade is doing a crossword puzzle. The waitress is a sad young girl with the sweetest face I have ever seen. Every time she glances over this way my heart sinks a little. At the window she is sitting in her apron, staring silently out at the street. If she would let me, I'll buy her a ticket to come with us. We can leave here in one hour, on a bus toward the Mediterranean. There we'll get on a ferry, cross the straits of Gibraltar, dance in Tangiers, and trek into the Sahara. I am so sleepy that I must be dreaming. I haven't slept in the last few days. A big, warm bed would be so nice right now. But I feel fine. I really do...

\*

Yesterday we came by boat to Tangiers. It was an easy trip across the Mediterranean, on a slow and dingy ship, and while Shade slept I sat up on deck staring out at the Strait of Gibraltar. I was sentimental watching Spain fade into the distance, with Gibraltar high behind us to the west, but as it passed out of sight I settled back and looked toward a foreign continent. Then we were coasting on the open strait, and as we crossed it I could feel the air grow stale, and then the heat dried up and the sky turned to an ashen yellow. For another hour the ship passed slowly, until coming into the harbor I could see the old city of Tangiers, white washed and sun burnt beyond the busy port, and right away I felt the heat of North Africa. When the engines

stopped I woke Shade up and told him that we had arrived in Morocco.

Walking up from the port we entered into the medina. At first this appeared to me a big, filthy marketplace, of countless alleyways and Arabic men, men yelling heatedly and bargaining with each other. Looking for a hotel, we wandered further into the fury of it, but after an hour we had only managed to lose ourselves amongst the soukhs. Finally we were led by a Spanish speaking man to a pension, where for 80 dirham (about five dollars each) we took a room with two beds at the back of a filthy courtyard. After having cold showers (there doesn't seem to be any hot water at the pension) we went walking through the medina. It is different here in Tangiers, much more chaotic than anywhere I have been. The people speak in French and Arabic, and it appears to be mostly men everywhere, sitting and standing around, smoking cigarettes, doing all sorts of business with each other...

\*

Last night because of a mix-up with the time we went to bed early, and both of us woke up sometime before dawn. As the sun came up we walked sleepily down by the waterfront. There is a beach here that stretches a good way along the Mediterranean. I think it must be something gaseous in the air, or some strange reflection of the desert and sea, that gives the sky its yellow hue. For an hour we walked into the city. As the sun crept up the day warmed suddenly, and wanting shade, we ducked into a nearby café. Over touareg Shade mentioned a cousin in Tanzania, and briefly we discussed the possibilities of Africa, and then we made a rough plan for heading south into the desert...

\*

From Tangier yesterday we spent three hours on a suffocating bus, driving into the dusty countryside. As we drove south I watched the desert rise steadily, dead flat at first but then suddenly rugged, until finally the Rif Mountains spread high and wide against the yellow sky. The earth here reminds me of the parched, desert highlands of northern Argentina. Chefchaouen is a quaint and odd little town built high into these mountains. It rises up-ways in a labyrinth of narrow stairways and soukhs, and for some reason everything is painted blue. The people here are relentless to sell us their trinkets, carpets, spices, and hashish. As we climbed through the village one Moroccan named Abdul convinced us to come inside his shop. Inside there was a loom, and five different rooms filled with rugs piled from the floor to the ceiling. On pillows Abdul had us sit while he brought us mint tea, and then he proceeded to show us his rugs, describing the patterns as he spread them out before us. Every time we said that we would not buy Abdul yelled "But I give you good price!", and in the end we left him standing there sad and exhausted. At a restaurant in the main square we shared a meal of chicken and couscous (with garlic and ginger mixed up in a bowl) and then watched Italy vs. France in a football match on television. Now we are back at the Pension Mauritania. I am reading in the open air of the courtyard, and Shade has gone to lay down for an afternoon nap.

\*

Morocco is a strange and mysterious country. The culture here is unlike any other I have seen. Everywhere there are mosques,

and several times a day, a yodeling Muslim prayer can be heard throughout the city. Loudspeakers trumpet the prayer from every building and street corner. Even late at night, the prayer wakes me from my sleep. But I am enjoying the high, hot, airy tranquility of Chefchaouen. I feel relaxed in these mountains, and the Berbers here seem better tempered than the people of Tangier. Together they stroll easily in the village streets. They sell their rugs and medicines, teas and spices. And on the mountain they grow marijuana to make hashish.

At our hostel we have met two French girls who are on their way south to Casablanca. From there, they are planning a one month trip into the Sahara. This afternoon we all hiked up the mountain together. Near the top, we bought some marijuana from a farmer, and sat on the mountainside. One of the girls is a cosmologist, and in the desert she will film a digital hologram of the stars. She has cameras and other equipment with her. She wants to prove that galaxies form from spinning lumps of matter. I asked her what she thought of all the spinning anyway. She said everything spins, because nothing stops it - as in Newton's law of motion. But why does it spin in the first place, I asked? What was so big that banged? But she just stood up, did a handstand, fell back onto her bottom, and told us of the drums in the square at night in Marrakesh.

When dusk began to settle, and the air grew cool, we walked into the medina for tea. At a cafe the French girls rolled some hashish up into a cigarette, and then we wandered dizzily through the medina, up and down the stairways, into lamp lit soukhs, and with the moon full above us we came upon a kasbah, where there were men smoking kif against the dark facade. With a big, toothless smile, one man, Quasem, offered us his pipe. Sitting with him, Quasem told us of his country,

and while puffing his pipe I told him of mine, telling him where I have been for the past year, what I have seen, and the places that I have yet to go.

“Where is your home?” he asked.

Absently I shrugged. “I don’t have a home,” I said.

“What happened to your home?”

“I sold it.”

“And your things?”

“Gone.” I said. “All I have is in my pack.”

At this Quasem seemed to feel a vagabond kinship between us, as when I asked him of *his* home he simply motioned to the medina. Going on about his life here, he said that he is happy to live out on this mountain, with no money, no purpose, and no burdens to worry him.

“You have only so long to live in this world,” he said. “And that’s just what I do.” He said the people who are working in the city like ants would stop if they could zip up into space, look out into the blackness, and see what a gift life on Earth is. In some way I agreed, but said that if a man has a family then he must work to keep them well. Quasem said that all men are family, and should keep well together, but that too many are unwilling to agree. And from what he sees he wants no part in it. After puffing his pipe one more time, we left Quasem and found the way back to our hostel in the medina.

\*

This morning it was a long, hot bus ride into Fez, where we have taken a room at the Hotel Cascade. This is a big but inexpensive hotel with good, clean rooms, and a roof-top terrace that looks down over the entrance to the medina. The medina here is



tremendous. There are men everywhere, glaring at us, yelling and gesturing as we pass by. Some simply grin, while others call out meaningless English phrases. In one alley a young man named Rahim offered to be our guide, and finding him decent we came to an arrangement for one-hundred and twenty dirham. Taking the money, Rahim lead us away from the soukhs, through a number of low doorways, away from the busyness and into a much quieter, darker part of the medina. Here there were children playing with a football and old, bent women sitting in doorways. In one alley Rahim showed us to a tannery where they shave and dye sheep skins, and then to a spice and medicine shop, and to the back of an empty corridor, through an obscure door, to an elaborate mosque. At a shisha bar, where we smoked a hookah and chatted, Rahim told us of Morocco. He said that the cities are places of business and industry, but that away from them, with the Berbers in the mountains, and in the villages of the Sahara, that is where the true and beautiful Morocco lies.

\*

This morning we met Katherine and Rob, who are traveling on their year off from the University of Nottingham. Katherine is studying molecular physics, and Rob is in medical school. Rob said that traveling with his sister has ruined his patience. She needs a bathroom, he complained, every two hours, even in the middle of the desert.

We walked for a while with Katherine and Rob, to a marvelous mausoleum, through flowery gardens with fountains, and to a bakery where they sold warm bread made from chickpea flour and eggs. Shade was chatting up Kathrine, while

I was having laughs with Rob. He was cracking jokes about the King of Morocco, getting drunk with the Queen of England.

At some point we found Rahim in the medina, and he led us to a restaurant. In a hidden courtyard, behind a little spice shop, we sat on pillows laid out on a rug. Rahim ordered from the kitchen, and with him we enjoyed a long, social meal, with four complete courses. As we ate, Rob told Rahim that Moroccan girls are the most elegant he has seen. Then Rahim offered Rob twenty-five camels for his sister. Rob agreed, but Shade then offered twenty-eight camels, which Katherine seemed flattered by. We ate cake, and sipped mint tea, and we were all very pleased to have found each other. Now we have come back to the Hotel Cascade. I am writing in bed, Shade has gone with Rahim to a hamam, and Katherine and Rob are sleeping in the room next door.

\*

This morning we left Fez on a nine-hour train to Marrakesh. For one-hundred and thirty-five dirham, the four of us had our own little cabin. While Shade and I played cards with Rob, Katherine told us of West Africa. She said that it is pretty there on the coast, with white, sandy fishing villages, but that many of the villages are awfully poor. In Ghana, where they volunteered at an orphanage, the children had little to eat. As the train rolled on we talked of Africa, until finally we arrived in Marrakesh, a big red city in the desert.

From the train station, we took a cab to Djamaa El Fna square. It was empty in the square, and too hot for walking. A few lazy snake charmers lingered languidly in the heat. In an alley we found the Hotel Afrique, where we checked into a room with

four beds and a bathroom. Rob has lent me a book by Paul Bowles, which I read as we rested in the room.

At dusk we all dressed and went out into the square, where there were merchants and musicians, fire-eaters, and some sweet and unsettling smells. After eating eggplant at one of the food stalls, we wandered through the soukhs. While Katherine tried on a burka, one merchant told us of a nightclub hidden deep in the medina. We found it, paid to get in, sat on pillows around a small fire, and belly dancers served us drinks as they wiggled and spun amongst us. Later, in the square, as Katherine danced to drums, Shade took her in his arms and spun her like a ballerina. Then Rob spun me, I spun him back, and Katherine ran off to the bathroom. And we wandered, like lost souls, in the ancient narrow lanes, until the sun crept up and the first morning prayer yodeled hopelessly over the loudspeakers.

\*

Today I woke up late to find a note on the table:

*We've gone to get a kebab across the road. It's the one with the yellow and black tiles straight across before you turn down the main street (Tallaa Kebira). We didn't manage to find a bank open, so going to have to change money before we leave.*

*See yous later.*

*Kat and Rob*

Getting dressed, Shade and I went for breakfast, and then did a bit of sightseeing. For hours we walked all throughout the city - to the Saadian Tombs, the Bahid Palace, into some old kasbahs,

and through the gardens of the Koutoubia Tower. When it grew too hot for walking, we went back to the hotel, where we found Katherine and Rob on their beds.

"I can't stand it," said Katherine.

"Too hot," said Rob. "She nearly fainted on top of a snake charmer."

With the ceiling fan whirring, and nothing but bedsheets, we napped all afternoon, until the sun went down, and the sound of drums came faintly through the windows. Now we'll get dressed, go buy some sunscreen, and have an early meal. Tomorrow we will all leave together on a four day trip into the Sahara.

\*

The desert is unbearably hot. This morning six of us (with Mustafa, our driver, and a young man from Capetown) drove three hours out of Marrakesh in an un-airconditioned van. After stopping at an old kasbah along the way, we have now come to Ouarzazate, a town built up out of the desert. Everything here seems to be made of sand, and everything - the buildings, the roads, the air, the earth - is eerily red. Now we are having lunch at a roadside café, and soon we will continue into the mountains, through The Valley of a Thousand Kasbahs. Mustafa assures us that we will arrive at our hotel sometime before sundown. Really I wouldn't mind sitting here until then. It is only getting hotter as the day goes on.

*(Later)*

Now we have checked into the Veux Chateau, a small hotel in

the Dades Valley. After a long, cool shower, I have come to look off of the verandah, where there are some olive trees growing by a babbling creek. It is pretty here in the valley. Mustafa has gone off to have a nap by the water. As I sit here I have been reading a bit more of Paul Bowles:

*"I feel that life is very short and the world is there to see and one should know as much about it as possible. One belongs to the whole world, not just one part of it."*

And that's true - the more places I see, and people I meet, the more I want to forge ahead. I want to see Singapore, Tahiti, Romania, Holland, making notes of it as I go, staying happy, healthy, in good company, light-footed, well-rested and fed.

Soon we will have dinner with everyone on the terrace. Stephan, the young man from Capetown, wants us to join him for a bottle of wine. Mustafa has made a salad for all of us to share. Tomorrow we will drive further into the Dades Valley, through some Berber villages and the Todra Gorge, and then to a camp in the desert.

\*

This morning we woke at the Veux Chateau, had tea and bread for breakfast, and then Mustafa drove the van into the Todra Gorge. At a cascade we stopped and swam for an hour. All along the way there were small villages. In the mountains Mustafa came to a big, red Kasbah, where we were led through the entrance by a Berber guide, and we were taken to a quiet, colorful room where Fatima, a fat young Berber woman, was at her loom. On pillows she had us sit, and we were given

mint tea, and then Fatima laid her rugs out for us one by one. Stephan bought a rug, as did Katherine, and getting back in the van we drove into the desert for three more hours, until the road ended and an endless, yellow ocean of sand rose up in the distance. Finally we were amidst the dunes, and we arrived to a tent where there were six camels lined up. As dusk fell we mounted the camels and rode them up over the dunes. There in the Sahara, with the red sun setting, I felt infinitesimal - a microbe, on a wet pebble, spinning in continuum, adrift in the spacecrux timeloop of the unknown universe. As it grew dark the stars appeared, and for two hours we tramped across the sands, until finally we came to a lamp illuminating three small tents. In the middle tent there was a man sitting on pillows, playing drums, and smoking a shisha pipe. As we sat down on the pillows the man, named Aslam, poured out six steaming glasses of tea, and then he showed us to the tent where we will spend the night. On a floor of rugs there are six sleeping bags, with one lamp for everyone to share. Back in the first tent, Aslam offered us his pipe, and he asked us what we think of his country. I said that I prefer the Morocco of the mountains to the busyness of Tangier. Happily Aslam agreed, and drinking with us he told us of how here in the desert he has only to eat and sleep, and care for his family, but that even his simple life would sometimes get him down. He said that the desert helped to alleviate the things that worried him, and that sometimes for several days he would wander amongst the dunes.

Now it is late, and we are all sitting outside by a fire. Mustafa has prepared us a meal of Harira (a Moroccan soup), and Aslam's children are with us, looking up at the stars, banging on their drums. Katherine and Shade are dancing on the rugs, with Rob and Stephan clapping along, laughing and singing "Hey, hey,

hey...”

\*

Yesterday it was a long drive back to Marrakech during the hottest part of the day. On the way Shade became sick with a fever, and he was vomiting. Returning to the Hotel Afrique, I went to get him some tablets and water. Back in the room I found Shade and Katherine asleep, and rather than wake them I went to find Rob, and together we walked in the medina until evening. At sundown Stefan met us in the square, and the three of us went to sit in the lounge of the Hotel Mansour Eddahbi. Stefan ordered a round of drinks and toasted to our trip. Tomorrow he is returning to South Africa. He insisted that he also say goodbye to Shade and Katherine. But first we had another round of drinks together in the lounge.

We walked back to the hotel. In the room Shade was feeling better. Katherine gave Stefan a hug and wished him a safe trip home. With a final handshake, Stephan said that he would love for us to visit him in South Africa. If we make it there, he would let us stay in a private cottage on his family’s vineyard. Shade looked at me, and while Stephan waited, we looked online for flights. It will be a hectic trip, but in three days we can fly into Capetown through Tangier. Stephan said that he will meet us at the airport with his car.

## Four

We arrived in Cape Town this morning after twenty-six hours of traveling. At the airport Stephan picked us up in his Volkswagen, and we drove to Somerset Wes, where his family owns thirty-three hectares of vineyard. There are long, irrigated rows of grape vines, with dark African men, and strong African women, working the fields and facilities. Just east of the vineyards, Helderberg Mountain towers over the land. At the back of the farm there are four small cottages. Stephan has given us the key to one of these. Getting in we napped for a bit, showered, and then the three of us went to dinner at the winery on the estate.

“My father bought this land years ago,” Stephan explained, as he opened a bottle of Merlot. “We built this farm from the ground up. Twelve months to construct the cottages, three years to cultivate the grapes. Then a year to age the wine in barrels before we corked our very first bottle.”

“Is your father here?” I asked.

“He’s on safari in Botswana. Not hunting, though. He photographs poachers in the bush, and reports them to the police. He’s been doing it ever since they turned their machine guns on the elephants.”

Over beef and potatoes, we discussed what Shade and I should



see going east. Stephan told us of a place called Coffee Bay, with beaches perfect for surfing, and a lodge called The Coffee Shack. After dinner we took another bottle of wine to his cottage, where he showed us some photographs, his maps of the country, and a route going east to Johannesburg.

\*

Yesterday we drove into Capetown for inoculations (Typhoid, Hepatitis, and Yellow Fever). We were also given malaria pills to be taken every seven days. In the afternoon it rained heavily, so at the cottage we talked, watched a few movies, and napped in the afternoon. After another big dinner, Stephan had friends over - Lynn and Olivia, who are sisters, who live on a nearby farm, and Dennis, Stephan's classmate. While chatting we drank two bottles of wine, one bottle of champagne, and a bottle of brandy, and it was midnight when Lynn said that she had been chased by a hippopotamus.

"Camping in Zambia," she recalled dreadfully. "They are faster than you think. I was walking up to my tent from the river, and it came charging right behind me."

"In the bush," Dennis said, without being funny, "Don't stand too close to the water."

We toasted to the God of Hippopotamuses, so that none will run us down, and Stephan ran off to his father's cabin for two more bottles of wine. After that I don't remember much of anything, other than a conversation about the ivory trade. At some point before sunrise I wished everyone a good morning and crawled off to our cottage.

\*

Today we drove with Stephan into Cape Town, to the foot of Table Mountain, and around to Camp's Bay. In the city we walked down Long Street, looked in a bookstore, bought two new sleeping bags, and in the evening we drove back to the farm. On the way we passed a run-down township of tin shanties and wooden huts, where Stephan said that there are over one million African refugees. He said that they have all come to look for a better life, but instead they are living like that. There are no jobs for them here, a poor education system, mismanagement of resources and many of them are desperate. This country, he said, suffers from its enduring racial divides.

"It's not just blacks and whites," he said. "There is tension between the Zulu and the Xhosa, the Sotho and Shona. There have been tribal wars here for centuries." Stephan was quite serious. "Children taught to hate those children over there. And that is the tragedy of Africa, bru. It's the primitive truth. Since the beginning of time. Men are no better than beasts, I have seen it. We do terrible things to each other."

\*

This morning Stephan let us borrow his Volkswagen. After breakfast we drove it to the coast, and following the coastline, up into the coastal mountains. It was a beautiful drive along Camps Bay, with Cape Point across the water. As I drove Shade spotted some whales, and then we came to a town called Rooi Els, a cluster of homes built on a jetty, with some shops and a restaurant. The waiter of the restaurant recommended their calamari steaks, and we didn't know what a calamari steak would be, and it turned out to be a horrible chewy steak. As we were eating a baboon came out from the bushes, somewhat

threateningly toward our food, and a man with a leather whip came out from the restaurant to chase him off.

After lunch we looked for a car in town to drive the fifteen-hundred kilometers to Johannesburg. At a rental agency we were offered a safari jeep for 5000 Rand, plus the price of fuel, which we decided is much too expensive. Stephan says that if we keep looking we might find something cheaper around.

\*

Today I am relaxing on the farm. It's a sunny day, and I am drying my wash. Stephan is at university, and Shade walked off toward Helderberg Mountain about two hours ago. Laying here in the grass, looking up at the sky, I'm wondering whether other worlds are divided by tribes as well. Are there planets, circling far-off stars, where men are fighting wars, over land and wealth, and command over how the people should be governed? How many civilizations, spinning amongst the stars, are busily killing themselves?

Tomorrow we will pick up the car we rented, and head off into the country. Stephan has given us his roadmaps, and circled some spots along the coast. It will be a long drive to Johannesburg, on the famous Garden Route, but we can take our time to explore the wild coastline of South Africa.

\*

We have been driving for the last five days. From Cape Town we made it four-hundred kilometers to Knysa, where we did some walking along the coast, and then kept on to Port Elizabeth, which had a nice lighthouse to photograph. From there it

was a long drive in our car to the seclusion of Coffee Bay. The highway wound for hours through the green, rolling hills, passing hundreds of thatched Xhosa huts, and upon arriving to the bay we found no town, no paved roads, no office or grocery store, just a small Xhosa village with beaches backed by high cliffs. There are young Xhosa men strolling together in the village, and women grinned sweetly as we passed them on the paths.

It is late now, and we have just come to the Coffee Shack, where we have two beds in a little wooden cabin. Outside, the bathroom is shared with several other huts. The beach is only twenty meters from our door, and from our beds we can hear the ocean crash. Looking from our window, I can see the half-moon above the water, and the waves peeling beautifully in the moonlight. The lodge is having a braai for dinner, with aged, T-bone steaks, but I just want to sleep, so I can wake up early, and go for a surf in the morning.

\*

Today I woke up, checked the surf, and while Shade slept I rented a surfboard, and walked over to the ocean. On the beach there were cows and big steers feeding on the hills, and as I passed them a man came down from a path with a bundle full of crayfish, and asked if I would like to buy any. Politely I declined, and following the path I came to a much bigger beach, where there were some children chasing a football, and others playing in the whitewash of the ocean, and the women doing their wash by the shore. The surf looked clean, I paddled out and caught a few good rides, and after an hour I was hungry, so I hiked back over the sandy path and back to the Coffee Shack.

Returning the board, I ordered eggs with bacon and coffee. As I ate, Shade sat down and ordered eggs as well. He said he has fallen in love, with a Xhosa girl who works here. After the braai last night, they went down to the beach and sat together in the moonlight.

“She was born in the village,” Shade was saying. “She works here six days a week, for three dollars a day. She’s twenty-two and doesn’t know what country Chicago is in.”

“Should she?” I asked.

Just then the girl appeared, and Shade waved her over. She had beautiful brown eyes, long, braided hair, and her smile was hypnotizing. We were lifted off our seats as we leaned in to hear her speak.

“Good morning,” she smiled.

Shade introduced us. Her name was Nobomi. She asked if we are having a nice time in Coffee Bay.

“It’s heaven,” Shade said. “We’re going to build our own huts here. And stay the rest of our lives. I’ll build mine by yours, if your father won’t mind. And you can teach me how to speak Xhosa.”

Nobomi looked delighted for a moment, then confused, and then she realized he was joking.

“It’s a quiet life,” she said. “We love the ocean, and the people who come here. And their money helps with things that we need. But there is no hospital, when we get sick. Here you may die of a stomach infection, if you can’t go to the city.”

“That’s terrible,” Shade said.

Nobomi smiled coyly. “Yes, but you are young and strong. You have nothing to worry about.”

“That’s true,” Shade agreed with her.

“You can build your hut, then.”

“Yes!”

“And I will teach you to speak.”

“I am your humble student,” Shade bowed.

“Come, then,” she said. “Come and meet my father. Both of you. He needs help cutting the Gwarri tree.”

\*

Yesterday I was pleased to see a much more wild Africa. From Coffee Bay we drove into the high, misty, rolling country, and all through the hilltops were the little round huts of the Xhosa. Continuing east we came to the mouth of the Umzimvubu River. At a small village before the bridge we bought some biltong and water, and then kept on through the Eastern Cape, through some dense, wet jungle, all the way to the province of Natal.

Now we are in Durban, a big city on the coast. The traveler’s lodge here is full of people. A girl from Kenya made us both a cup of tea. And there is a grapefruit farmer from Mozambique, who told us of his country. The land is rich, he insisted, with minerals and soil, but it’s swiftly being depleted. Powerful men and corporations are mining whatever they can. Of the continent he described a wild, muddled turmoil, using the term “organized chaos.”

“The government,” he huffed. “They sell off our resources, stuff the money into their pockets, and turn a blind eye to the rest of us. And in the meantime we work and we wait. For what? So they can poison our water, and pollute our future? If we want things right, friend, I tell you what, something’s got to come together.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like us, the people,” he said with intent. “To take back

our land. And own it ourselves. From those goons and their hooligan armies.”

\*

Early this morning we left Durban, driving north and into the high, dense clouds of the Drakensberg Mountains. As we drove the road grew steep and rugged, and the earth fell away into sharp, green valleys. Turning off the highway at a small town called Himeville, we found a store where we bought some bread and peanut butter, a bunch of bananas, tea, and then continued on into the mountains. With our maps we came to the Sani Pass, which is an old mountain path that goes up and into Lesotho, a mountain kingdom that rises out of South Africa’s eastern plains. We parked the car at the bottom of the pass, and then went up on foot. The climb was a steep and rocky five kilometers, and as the elevation rose the temperature dropped steadily, and during the final two kilometers there was a hard and heavy rain. The only people we saw on the pass were two Lesothian goat herders. Marching on up, we came to a pub at the summit, where the keeper there, an old Dutchman, brought us two snifters of brandy. As the Dutchman made us a fire in the parlor he told us of Lesotho.

“I’ve been here forty years,” said the Dutchman. “I’ve seen invasions, demonstrations, rebellions, and wars.” He explained that the country’s government is ruled by chiefs, who are selected through lineage. “I won’t say it’s a great system. And it aint the safest place on Earth. But look at how those mountains crack right up to the sky. And take a deep breath. A big, deep chest full. There ain’t no air anywhere fresher than that. Dammit, I love it up here.”

\*

Today we drove into downtown Johannesburg. After stopping at the U.S. Embassy to add pages to our passports, we went to visit the Aparthide Museum, where we saw photos and films of Nelson Mandela. After that we went shopping for food and maps. From here we have decided to go up into Botswana, and from there we can go east to Victoria Falls, and then cross Malawi into Tanzania. Tonight I will begin taking my malaria pills. In the morning we travel on an eight-hour bus that will take us to Gaborone.

\*

Just before crossing into Botswana, we changed our rand for pula (the money here). On the bus I met a young girl named Dimpho, who lives in Gaborone. She is twenty-four, and studies international relations at university. As the bus drove north, Dimpho told me of the triumphs of Nelson Mandela.

“The world needs freedom fighters,” Dimpho said. “Or the strong will trample the weak. Bob Marley was a fighter. He freed our souls. But Mandela made us men again.”

In Gaborone, Shade and I wished Dimpho well, and then walked off to the train station. Now we are on an overnight train to Francistown. Apart from a missionary from Illinois (who wished us well and went off to first class), we are the only caucasians on the train. It is a slow train, and everyone is staring at us. It will be eight long hours sitting awake in these tight, uncomfortable seats.

\*



This morning we stepped down stiffly from the train. From the station we walked to the bus terminal, and took a bus going north. The landscape here is flat and desolate, mostly scrub country. In Gweta we found nothing of interest, and hopped another short bus to Maun. Now we have come to a camp for the night, just below the Okavango Delta, where we have taken a tent for 120 pula. The sun is going down, mosquitoes are biting, and I am not in the best of moods. Nothing was accomplished in the last two days, other than that we made it two-thirds of the way up through Botswana. In town we have looked into safaris for tomorrow, but they are very expensive. There are bushmen, we have heard, who will take us for less, but we don't know where we can find them.

\*

We have decided against venturing into the Okavango Delta. There will be plenty of opportunities for safari in Tanzania. Instead we chose to go east to Kasane, and make our way into Zambia from there. Leaving Maun by bus, we were lost in the countryside. Every now and then a village would appear, or a dirt path winding through the scrub to a glistening waterhole. For the first time I felt the serenity of Botswana. There is a natural aura here, in the grasslands and baobab trees, and the cumulonimbus sky that stretches for miles in every direction. Putting my head to the window, I gazed off at the plains, and I was perfectly at ease until the bus broke down in Nata. Sadly the driver apologized, and with nothing else to do we stood at a petrol station with our thumbs out. Within an hour we had hopped into the cab of a pick-up truck, which drove us as far as Pandamatenga, and from there we began to walk. I

was mesmerized walking through the badlands of Africa. At one point Shade insisted that we were in some kind of trouble, though I was too amused to care. When dusk set in we were still fifty kilometers from Kasane. Fortunately we were picked up by a white man named Hill, who has a business of running game drives from Kasane. If he had left us there to walk, Mister Hill said, we would have been eaten by the lions. With the sun down it turned dark quickly, and slowing only once for two big elephants, we drove a perfectly straight road through the dark, flat country. The stars are incredible here out on the open plains. When Mister Hill pointed out the spiral dust rings of the galaxy, Shade and I looked out the window, and sure enough they were there.

In Kasane Mister Hill drove us to a camp where we were given a tent for 140 pula. The grounds here run back to the swampy bank of the Chobe River. There is an electric fence to keep out whatever might want to come up from the water. When Mister Hill drove off we showered in the shower stalls, and now I am resting in the tent. Shade has gone off to get some wood for a fire. For dinner we will have some peanut butter and tea, and then go to sleep. Tomorrow we are going on an early game drive into the bush.

\*

Waking this morning the tent was cold. It took me an awkward moment to remember where I was. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness I saw Shade there in his sleeping bag. Quietly taking some pants from my pack, I dressed outside the tent, and when Shade woke we walked sleepily down to the jeep that was waiting for us in the drive.

From camp we drove into the bush where we saw impala, giraffe, many different birds, and hundreds of baboons. The only elephants we saw were very far off and across the Chobe River, but our driver, Godfrey, an old Botswana, assured us that we would see many later on. As he drove Godfrey told us of how he used to poach game as a young man, until the day he was mauled by a leopard. Now he doesn't agree with that sort of thing. "I was young and concerned with money," he admitted. "Now I just show them to you." He looked out across the river, to where the elephants were grazing. "The money wasn't worth the guilt from killing those magnificent animals."

After lunch we went upriver on a pontoon boat, stopping many times to get glimpses of crocodiles, hippos, and some odd looking buffalo. I was glad when we came to the herds of elephants. There were many hundreds of them, bathing and feeding on the plains, and at dusk they looked majestic with the sun setting behind them. As we cruised back to camp they walked off together into the night – as one graceful and tranquil family.

Now darkness has fallen, and we are back at camp, where a young couple from Pretoria has taken the tent beside ours. Tomorrow they plan to drive to the border with Zambia, where they will cross, and go on to Victoria Falls.

\*

This morning we drove east with Carl and Sulene to Kazangula, where we crossed into Zambia by ferry. It was an old, rusty barge that carried us across the Zambezi River. From there it was sixty kilometers to Livingstone. On the way Carl made a detour fifteen kilometers into the bush, through a small village

of palm huts, to the precipice of the Botoka Gorge. There is a lodge here with a terrace that looks down over the white water of the Zambezi. It is a long way down, and an unbelievably big gorge. I think soon we will drive into Livingstone, and find a hostel near the falls.

*(Later)*

Carl and Sulene have dropped us at a hostel near the falls. Here we have met five Brits (three girls and two boys) who are studying in Durban on an exchange program. They have come to see Victoria Falls on their week off from school. Apparently Thursday (today is Monday) is Zambia's presidential election, and we were told of a political rally here in town. This is for Hakainde Hichilema (H.H.), one of the main candidates, none of whom I know anything about. But despite our apprehensions we went to the rally where there were thousands of Zambians gathered in a field, dancing and cheering, some carrying H.H. signs, and there was a stage where supporters from the different provinces sang songs. We were the only white people, and everyone looked at us as though we were the lions on a game drive. One of the young men I spoke with kept saying "We are free people!" to assure us that we were welcome, and it was a very different feeling to be there amongst them. I don't know much about the situation here, having only arrived today, but I am under the impression that the Zambians are a happy and spirited people.

By dusk H.H. had not shown, and we left the rally without ever seeing him. Now we are at the hostel preparing some pasta. It has been a long day, I am dusty from the drive, and I hope to have a hot shower. Tomorrow we will catch a taxi to Victoria

Falls.

\*

This morning we were up early. Here on the Zambian side of the border Shade and I walked for three hours along the waterfalls. On some trails we climbed a bit, took some photos, and then followed a path that brought us to a cliff above the highest falls. There at the top we sat for a while under a tree, listening to the rush of the water, and after an hour of rest Shade and I walked towards Zimbabwe on foot. On the way we were followed by a couple of baboons. While crossing a bridge over the Zambezi, several men tried to sell us their Zimbabwean dollars. Politely we refused, and walking on to the border we came to a post where the passport control wanted thirty U.S. dollars for a visa. We didn't have the money to pay, and so we turned back and caught a cab back into Livingstone. On the way I spoke with the driver who said that he does not care about this week's elections.

"My country is dying." As he spoke I looked out the window, where caskets are sold by the roadside. "It is an evil disease," the driver lamented. "And nothing is done for the people. No doctors, no medicine, no one to take care. Not even teaching the young ones about it. The boys, to be safe. They don't know any better. So I guess we will always need more caskets."

\*

This morning we hopped on a bus to Lusaka. Also on the bus was a young Scotsman named Phillip, who is on his way to Tanzania. He seems to know a good deal about these parts

of Africa. He said that they have resources – diamonds in Botswana, copper in Zambia, tobacco in Malawi, yet there is no economic hope for the future. Again he blamed the individual politics and policies of each of these nations, the poor quality of its leaders, and the disunity of the region as a whole.

“It seems to be the situation here,” I said.

“Sure is,” said Phillip. “And you know who’s behind it all? We are, mate. We all are. The Americans and the Europeans, the Arabs and the Chinese. It’s a rich continent, all of it, and everyone wants their share.”

When I asked Phillip why it seems as though nothing is being done, he compared it to the destruction of the natives in the Americas.

“It’s a shame, mate, the way I see it. They just can’t get themselves organized. And the world wants these people to disappear. To lie down and die, from what I can tell. But what does it matter? Someday the sun will flare up and explode, and the moon will turn back into dust. And the Earth will go with them. With a supernova bang. As if none of this ever existed.”

In Lusaka, Phillip brought us to a camp, where we have taken a bungalow with bunk beds. We are all quite tired and ready for bed. Tomorrow the three of us will travel east into Malawi, where Phillip said he will meet a friend who is waiting in Lilongwe.

\*

From Lusaka this morning we took an eight hour bus to Chipata. It was a long ride east to the border with Malawi. On the way Phillip told me of the work he had been doing at an orphanage in Botswana. As the day drew on he seemed to grow nervous

of something, but I was more interested in the countryside as it passed out the window. Every so often a cluster of huts would appear in the bush, where Zambian men worked on their thatched roofs, and lay sleeping together in the shade. Arriving to Chipata after nightfall, we took a taxi to the border, and crossed into Mchinji. There we found a strange, dark town, with no apparent center, and dozens of Malawians lurking over fires by the roadside. Finding one hotel closed we headed down a dirt road to a second, where a group of men at the gate looked at us a bit too suspiciously. Rather than stay there we decided on a taxi to take us into Lilongwe.

The drive into Lilongwe was quiet, until the driver made a cell phone call in Chichewa. As we came to a stop light Phillip sat forward in his seat, so that I could feel him breathing on my neck, and as the driver finished his call Phillip yelled out “Do not stop the car!”

“What was that phone call!” he screamed, and looking back I saw Phillip, gripping a machete, with a terrified look on his face. Confusedly I told him to calm down, but again he yelled at the driver. I don’t know for certain what was said from that point, as it was all very sudden, but I remember Phillip telling us that he wanted to be driven into the city, and to go to the Lilongwe Hotel, and me thinking that he had lost his mind. When Shade asked to be let out of the car I told him to just sit still. Again Phillip brandished the machete, and he demanded the Lilongwe Hotel. When we got there the driver stopped the car, which is when we all stepped out, and I remember feeling ill as Phillip jumped into the driver’s seat, and with the rest of us looking on, he drove off down the road. Someone must have spoken at that point, but I don’t remember what was said, other than the driver yelling something in Chichewa. Up the road the taxi

made a right turn and was gone. My thoughts at that moment were of my passport in the trunk, of my money and clothes, and then the taxi came around from behind us, having done a circle somehow, and as it passed, the little taxi driver, running after it, again yelled something in Chichewa. This time up the road Phillip made a left turn, and that was the last we saw of him. Now we are at the police station. There are five police officers, two detectives, and we are sitting in a holding cell. Obviously we are in some kind of trouble. If I end up in prison here, I am sure that I will die. One of the officers has a machine-gun. Shade and I have been trying to explain ourselves, and that we only met Phillip yesterday on the bus from Lusaka.

*(Later)*

It is now after midnight. For half-an-hour we were questioned by the detectives, and I re-told the story very nervously. On paper they had me write a statement from the moment we drove east from Mchinji. As I put it all down they spoke to each other in Chichewa, and then Shade was taken from the room, so that we were questioned separately. One of the detectives, a big, powerful looking man with an automatic handgun, told me that I was an accomplice to a very serious crime. Now we are back in the holding cell, where we will have to sleep out the night. The mosquitoes in here are eating me alive. Shade has laid out on the floor in front of me and huddled up inside his t-shirt. I am sitting stiffly with my back to the wall, scared half-to-death, wondering how this will turn out. It is still another six hours until dawn...

\*



Waking up this morning in the holding cell (I managed a few hours of sleep), I found Shade was still sleeping inside his t-shirt. The sun was coming through the steel bars in the window, and I was covered with mosquito bites. In a corner of the cell, Phillip sat wide-eyed in a daze, hugging himself with the same paranoid look on his face. He had been found at the Lilongwe Hotel, thanks to the taxi parked around back, sitting in a room with two local Malawian men. I woke Shade, and for a moment the three of us sat in consternation, until the cell door opened and two detectives stepped into the room.

“You boys are in a lot of trouble,” said one of them.

We were brought to another room for interrogation, and then the big detective, with a very serious stare, asked us if we were smuggling ivory. Without saying a word Shade and I looked to each other, and then to Phillip, who was slumped down in his chair. After two more hours of questioning, and having our bags searched thoroughly, Shade and I were given our things and told that we were free to go.

Now we are at a campsite in Lilongwe. As it turns out Phillip had been smuggling elephant tusks from Botswana. The two other men were caught with a bundle of money at The Lilongwe Hotel. On the patio I have just had a long conversation with Shade. He said that he is upset from all that has happened, and exhausted of Africa, and that he wants to go home. Tomorrow he plans to catch the first flight from Lilongwe to Johannesburg. After thinking it over I have decided to keep going up through Malawi, and into Tanzania, though I am rather discouraged about going on alone.

\*

I am still dumbfounded now from all that has happened. Shade has gone and I am at the camp in Lilongwe by myself. Here there is nothing much to do. On the patio I have been putting down some thoughts on Africa, and chatting with a Frenchman from Lyon. There is also an English girl named Erin, who has been volunteering here at an orphanage. This afternoon Erin and I went to town together, to visit our embassies, and it seems that I will need a visa to go on into Tanzania. In the meantime I would like to head over to Lake Malawi. I was told of a small village on the lakeshore, called Senga Bay, which is not too difficult to get to, and where I can relax for the next few days. I can stay there to eat, sleep and swim while I consider my route going north.

\*

This morning Erin and I left Lilongwe in a small, rundown van packed with twenty Malawians. It was the most crowded vehicle that I have ever been in. On the way we stopped at some kind of dusty, smoked fish market. Ten minutes after that the van broke down, and as we waited for the next one Erin told me of her work at the orphanage. She said that most of the children's parents were victims of disease, and that there aren't enough resources to feed them what they need.

Now we are on the lake at Senga Bay, at a camp that sits just up from the water. There is a kitchen with a cook, several cabanas, and a family of caretakers on the grounds. The only other guests are two Canadian girls who are recovering from malaria. It is pretty here, and as peaceful a place as I could have hoped for. From Senga Bay there is no way north other than a passenger ferry that cruises up the lake once each week.

Anyway I will have to go back to Lilongwe for my travel visa. From there there is a bus that goes north to Tanzania.

*October 3*

This morning I woke up and went for a swim in the lake. After showering I came to lie in the hammock with my book (there is a bookshelf here). I have picked up something by T.H. White called *The Once and Future King*. It is a hot day, the sun is out, and all along the shore there are Malawians bathing and rowing out to fish. Across the lake I can see Mozambique silhouetted in the distance. Erin and the Canadian girls are twirling ribbons in the yard. I am getting very hungry now. In a little while the four of us will go into the village to try and buy some food...

*(Later)*

In the village the children stared as though we were something to see. They are beautiful children, and very intelligent. I see the way they watch us with such curiosity. In the market we bought some eggs and bananas, and then walked two kilometers to a small place that sold ice-creams, and now back at camp we are relaxing by the lake. One of the caretakers has been telling me of Senga Bay, of a rival tribe that has been causing trouble in the village, and of some kind of boundary dispute at the lake. Two men were killed with wooden clubs in a fight over the weekend. He said that the chief has called a meeting to try and calm the hostilities. It reminds me of a note that I made from T.H.White:

*"The destiny of man is to unite, not divide. If we keep on dividing*

*we will end up a collection of monkeys throwing nuts at each other out of separate trees.”*

It is quiet here, and the day has been peaceful. I have been terribly pensive this afternoon. I am thinking now of how far I have come. It has been fourteen months of travelling, and now I am feeling the toll. For fourteen months I have been wandering aimlessly, living out of my pack, wearing the same old clothes, eating cheaply, sleeping in strange beds (or not in any bed at all). Each day is a new adventure, a new unexpected chore. I'm tired of it all, here, today, on this tranquil lake in Malawi. I want to sleep in a comfortable bed. I want to cook in my own kitchen, with a refrigerator full of food. I want to see my family, to go to the gym, to sit in a restaurant, a bookstore...

And so lying here in my hammock, looking out at the lake, feeling famished and exhausted, I am thinking of Florida. I will be thinking about this for the next few days. Certainly I could travel for another six months, continue on to other countries, India perhaps, Russia and Japan, but there will be plenty of time for that. It's time to get healthy, collect my thoughts, and rest my weary soul. It's time for me to go home.

## Five

I woke up feeling fine this morning, in the warm Florida weather. My mother has a little house in a town called Coral Springs. She's let me have a bedroom, for as long as I want to stay. Getting dressed, I made the bed, and found my mother in the kitchen. She had already set fresh coffee, toast, and cereal on the table. For an hour we sat together, and I told her of Morocco, of Mustafa and his lamp-lit tents in the dunes of the Sahara. She said it sounded dangerous, to be out there all alone, and she wished I would stay closer to home, next time I go off wandering.

In the afternoon I borrowed my mother's car, and drove over to the ocean, where I sat for awhile, with my feet in the sand. A pelican landed in the sand. Some children chased it towards the water, and sat to build a castle. They laughed and screamed as the waves washed down their crumbling foundation. I walked along the water, my ankles in the waves, toward the old fishing pier looming in the distance.

Near the pier was a sandwich shop, and a little beach cafe. The cafe was full of people in their sunglasses and sandals. At the counter I ordered an iced coffee. A man in line reached for a cup and bumped me from behind.

"Sorry," he apologized.

I sat down with my coffee, and the man sat down too. He asked me where to find the boat docks with the sailboats and the yachts. I told him to head over to Fort Lauderdale Marina.

“Thanks.”

I stared out through the window at the people on the beach. The sunlight glistened warmly on the surface of the ocean. The same man waved his hand for my attention once again. He had a map of Florida. He asked me what the island was, with no name at the bottom.

“That’s Cuba,” I told him.

“Oh, right,” he said. He said he needs to buy another map of the Caribbean. He wants to sail the island seas, as a deckhand or a cook. I saw that he had his backpack and a beanbag for a pillow. I asked him where he plans to sleep. He shrugged and said he has no problem sleeping on the beach. I bought a sandwich from next door, and gave him the meatier half. We told each other of our travels in other parts of the world. He was recently in Thailand, on an island called Koh Tao, where he fished each morning, swam all day, and lived in a bungalow.

“What it comes to, for me,” said this man, “Is the people and the places that will stay with me forever. I’ve been through fifty countries. Through some gritty, far-off parts. But it’s worth it just to find those little magical mountain towns, or an undiscovered island, on a phosphorescent sea. We stay connected to those places, and the people that we meet.” He finished the sandwich, and nodded gratefully. “Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever settle down. But I’ve been lost for so long, maybe lost is just the way. I can’t sit waiting for the days to fade away forever.”

I wished him well, and he went to find the yachts at the marina. I left and walked alone on the old wooden fishing pier,

where fishermen cut up their bait and gutted their afternoon catches. Where the pier ended, I sat on a bench, and gazed out at the ocean. The sky was pink, the sun was rounding out the afternoon, and the moon appeared discreetly just above the wide horizon. It rose swiftly, with haste, like a mystic fugitive, running from the perils of space-time and slowing motion. I thought of the hot, dusty campo, deep in Argentina, where the sunburnt people eat late meals and sleep all afternoon. And I remembered the sunsets, after hours of surfing, on the beaches of Tofino. And Athena in her closet of the apartment in San Francisco. I wondered if she made it to her village in the Czech Republic. I would like to find a place like that, to stay and do some writing. I could make my way back to the sunny southern coast of Spain, find a little village, rent a simple room, write and swim and sleep and spend my nights watching the cosmos. Admiring the view, I took a breath, held up my restless head, and thought I saw a star shoot boldly west of the fugitive moon.



## About the Author

After earning his Bachelor's Degree in creative writing, Bradley Fink set off on a 15 year journey around the world. Having explored more than 50 countries, he has lived in Argentina, England, China, Colombia, Canada, and the Czech Republic. Today he lives in Medellin, where he is focused on writing and learning about decentralized software systems that can make the world more free and fair for all.