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Continents

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Continents

Submitted by: Rachel Svenson

In November, I tried to recreate Western New York snow over the phone for Amadou Bah, who had never touched it. He had seen the white stuff on postcards, or on the film sets behind Arnold Schwarzenegger on village movie nights, but the Gambia never experiences winter the way it hits New York. Listening to his voice, I could almost picture him on the campus sidewalk next to me, suffering the cold like he would biting animals, muscles pulled tight inside someone else's coat.

That afternoon the Geneseo's academic buildings towered over a row of salt-stained SUVs parked on the road, which tilted down into acres of snow-covered valley. I walked slowly from class with my cell phone, lodged halfway between seasons and continents, trying to pretend I was Amadou seeing it for the first time.

"It's like pieces of icy cotton," I explained finally into the phone, breath clouding. "It tastes like the water we drank at the marketplace this summer. Everything feels like the inside of a freezer, and the snow is everywhere, sort of like white sand on the beaches where you are. It almost blinds you when you first step outside." As I spoke the snow melting on my boots morphed into something foreign and mystical, and I held the image in my head as if to transmit it telepathically.

"Yah, okay, very nice," Amadou stammered uncertainly. In transit around me, the bundled students took on puppet-like qualities and I approached my apartment barely seeing them. There was still something painful about communicating with Amadou over the

language and distance barrier, as if we kept closing in on the cure for a disease then losing everything in the last crucial seconds. I desperately wanted to give him an image of my home, like the thousands I had taken back from his, but my serious thoughts were cut off by his sudden laughter.

"Rach," Amadou managed, and then lapsing into giggles again. I could picture him doubled over slightly on the concrete wall of his family's veranda and shaking his head against the phone, and though the joke was a mystery to me I laughed with the pleasure of hearing him. Because sometimes, it *was* funny. Laughter was our way of compromising, meeting in the middle with something we both understood. Even that summer, face to face, humor had been our best language.

By that month in Penyem, Amadou's village, the star Wadar would have been high on the horizon, a portent for the end of the rainy season. The harvest would be nearly complete, and the fields would be dotted with women bent against the weight of their babies, knocking peanuts from the roots of the plants. Aicha, the baby girl who was born on July 24 while my group of volunteers slept a few yards away, would have been learning to smile at three months old, and choking dust would have begun to plume behind bikes and cars on the roads.

August, four months before the snow hit New York, had marked the middle of West Africa's hot, rainy season. My group of volunteers, having successfully built a chain-linked garden fence in Penyem, had boarded a plane home from Dakar airport on the morning of the ninth. That afternoon I found myself in

my home city, staring through the Buffalo airport window at my father's parked grey Sonata.

Except for a few quick, static phone calls through the African Gam-Cell company, which allowed even some of the poorest families in Penyem to own a cheap cell phone, I hadn't had contact with my mom and dad in two months. Their faces behind the windshield looked unreal until my mom pointed toward me and got out of the car, leaving the passenger door wide open and power-walking over the curb, through the glass doors, across the floor. Her sneakers squeaked as she slammed me with a hug. We both laughed hysterically, swaying as my dad waited behind my mom, grinning and breathing like a wrestler in his hiking boots and a "Life is Good" t-shirt.

I don't remember crying, though I must have; I remember the relief and weightlessness as my dad hoisted the purple monster of a backpack from my shoulders into the Sonata's trunk. My mom took the African drum I'd bought for my brother from my hands, smiling at me like I was going to disappear. I grinned helplessly. My skin felt travel-thin, and I had forgotten how good it felt to have my parents lift my burdens, at least for a little while.

"Did you just get this cleaned?" I marveled, running my hand over the seats of my dad's car. The vehicle seemed an impossibly tidy after two months of crowded African bush taxis with ripped upholstery.

"Nope, but I got a new air freshener, that must be it," My dad said, still grinning as he knocked the dangling product with his finger. He looked both exhausted and relieved as he buckled into the driver's seat, his balding hair sporting a few more grays than I remembered. "Rach, I can't believe you're home. Mom and I have just been talking about this day for so long, coming to pick you up – it's kind of unreal."

My dad spills his feelings more readily when his emotions run high, but my mom, who is normally good at sharing, was silent as she got in the car. She kept glancing at me over the

seat, the corners of her mouth twitching, and then squeezing my hand and turning away in tears. I remember feeling moved but muted, unable to figure out how to convince her everything was actually alright. It was my father who slid his finger under my mother's L.L. Bean wristwatch, as if to remind her of time, and held it gently hooked there as we drove.

I thought of Amadou then, as I had every mile over the Atlantic. He had professed responsibility for everything that summer; for me not stepping in puddles on the road, for the hardest labor at the garden fence project, for his huge family's well-being. He was capable, there was no doubt about that, but as a man and first son from his culture he wore responsibility like a God-given weight. My independent feminist side balked at this self-importance, and yet I had needed his hand on my back to guide me away from scorpion grasses, and his effortless categorizing of the complex African family system, and his quiet reminders *not* to use my left hand for eating. It was the way things were. When on hot nights his mother and father curled up outside on their concrete veranda with the younger children, Amadou would sit up late like a watchdog, guarding them from something I didn't understand and calculating his life, as he put it once, like math.

Part of me wanted to be guarded by *my* parents back in the States, to curl up in their familiar asparagus and rice dinners and doze on the front porch for hours while they held up my life for me. Coming home from Africa seemed strangely like a version of coming home from college – just spiced up with a sense of danger, and condensed into a summer of seismic intensity. I felt both carried by my parents and responsible for protecting them somehow from the temporary loss of a daughter to a dangerous country.

Perhaps partly for this reason, the one burden I couldn't unload to them that day was that of missing Amadou, and the apocalyptic nature of our love affair. I had told my mother about Amadou over the phone one night the Gambia, shaking with nerves as I tried to

explain our friendship, his overtures, my uncertainty and growing trust. After a silence that had nothing to do with the phone connection, my mom had taken a deep breath.

“The best love can be the kind that you never expected,” she had said. It *had* surprised me, this weird new love – to the extent of an electric shock. On the phone I had latched on to my mother’s words like a prayer, but in the car with her I could barely think of Amadou, as out of place as he felt in my father’s American car. I focused instead on the concrete things around me, on telling my parents about the spicy food, the women who lifted their arms like aggressive birds when they danced in circles in between chores. I talked about the fence, a definable project. A large part of me was desperate for my trip not to become a silent stereotype or boxed-up love story, as people crave it, or perhaps as I craved it.

My dad’s car passed McDonalds and semi trucks, and I witnessed them with the kind of mystical familiarity I could now associate with returning to the States, to automatic soap dispensers, airplane food, Buffalo accents. Even New York’s summer trees; they were gorgeous, manicured, and I’d never noticed how many of them lined the highways, or how smoothly the pavement hummed under the car. I could slur my English here and still be understood; I could look men in the eye without being brash. When I got home, I took a real shower with heat, and tried to stop comparing everything around me its equivalent in the Gambia. I didn’t want to be obnoxious about the contrast, even though I felt it acutely and was already hoarding memories as if preparing for a hellish, mind-erasing blizzard.

A week after I got back, I got a call from Marissa in Michigan. Of our set of eight volunteers she had been the first to split off during that exhausting return trip from Dakar. She disappeared down the gangway that day to her connecting flight in Atlanta, Georgia, and the rest of us had stood awkwardly in our African garb, amidst the business-suited airport rush, for a long time. “And then there were seven,” murmured Will. We’d all been thinking

the same thing. Now that we were splitting up, I wasn’t positive anymore if I’d ever see them again.

It was Marissa who had seemed to organize and epitomize the oddities of our group, with her high-pitched laugh, springy dark hair and collection of hemp and glass necklaces. When I picked up the phone from home, I leaped up at the sound of her voice, squealing my African name.

“Jainabaaaaa!”

“Manga – kasumai! Benu kine?” I reverted to Jolla automatically. How are you? How are your people?”

“Sumai-kep! Kokubo!” Manga shrieked. I’m fine! My family is there!

I knelt, shivering with nostalgia, on my bed, clutching the phone in a tangle of African fabric. The African sounds solidified all the communal dinners, the card games under mango trees instantly, in a way conversations with my parents couldn’t. I had been practicing not to lose those patterns; *Abaraka* was “thank you,” and *Kara-je bu?* was, “What is your name?” The Gambians had named Marissa *Manga*, the Jolla word for the ubiquitous mango trees. Marissa took this as an extreme compliment, and the pungent name suited her.

“I miss African fruit,” she groaned after we’d caught up breathlessly. “And bush taxis, those god-awful things, and the kids, and building the fence.” She paused. “You must miss Amadou a lot.”

I was quiet. It was both mortifying and thrilling to remember that she already knew about our romantic relationship, and that I didn’t have to start from scratch to tell the story, but it was painful to picture Amadou waiting for me halfway across the world. I was heavy under his expectations, my expectations, and those of my family and friends.

When I applied for the Operation Crossroads Africa program, I had longed to seek out these strong connections, challenge myself

with cross-cultural relationships, do something that scared me. I had pictured running with local kids in the rain, holding their hands, forging close friendships over cultural barriers; but I hadn't planned for what would happen after I left. Amadou had dreaded that separation visibly, and expressed it often. I hated to hear the listlessness and lack of hope in his voice because it mirrored mine. I remember insisting almost angrily that new adventures were a certainty, that of course he wouldn't be bored out of his mind forever. That day in July we sat on our bench outside the day-care center, my group's makeshift compound, trailing our sandaled feet in the dust while kids thudded past. My group's approaching departure filled the hot air.

"Everything changes," I said, groping for some big-picture concepts. With two weeks left I could still talk about leaving in the abstract. "You'll grow peanuts and get a new radio and see your friends and I'll see my family and go to school and learn some amazing things..."

Amadou interrupted me. "Fuck-shit," he said softly, more like a reaction than an insult, and I stopped, realizing how stupid I sounded. Amadou's elbows were propped on the knees of his favorite jeans, his eyes on the running kids. The jeans, embroidered with the name of a rapper I didn't know, he wore even in the heat. His toes poked out of ripping Adidas sandals, rough and cracked just like his hands. The marks on them were from accidents with the machetes he used to clear brush in the fields. On his family's cattle and peanut farm, he had told me, there was no shortage of work to build hard hands. He had stopped school after sixth grade because of his family's money issues.

I picked at the hem of my wrap skirt, throat closing. "I know it's strange, Ams," I managed. "I can't imagine not being here, not waking up to cows and goats and the call to prayer, visiting your compound every day. Your family is like family to me."

Amadou nodded. "They *are* your family now, you know. You are very close to me now

and they know this, they are very happy." He chuckled a little. When he laughed his cheeks made smooth, nut-colored hills and his eyes softened from their normal reserve.

"I will miss everyone," he said, biting his bottom lip and looked at me. "It will be a long time missing, Rach."

My heart kicked like a donkey, like a girl's heart, as it always did when he said my name. He'd always called me by my true name, and was the only person in Penyem to ask for it. When we met at the fence, I introduced himself as Jainaba, the name I'd adopted on the first day, but Amadou shook his head. "No, your American name," he said. My name had sounded strange on his tongue, sharpened into a hard *Rruh-chel*, but I craved to hear it, to be reminded daily of who I really was under the African clothes, the stumbling local languages and plaited, sun-baked hair.

He shortened it to Rach later. It was these small things that I fought for so hard when I came home, battling the bad phone connection, time difference and culture shift to get in a five-minute phone call to Amadou's cell phone. When the connection went through we reminisced almost desperately, about our group members and their absence in our lives, about fresh, dense cow's milk, which he had presented to me sometimes in a plastic bag. We talked about the weekend trip to the beach at Gunjur where the two of us walked for hours by the fishing boats and seagulls, talking about Gambian marriage and religion. He had stopped in the waves then and peered out at the water, which he was afraid to swim in, as if looking for something.

"Ruh-chel. Where is your home?" he had asked.

I thought about it and pointed out and slightly northward to some imaginary point on the horizon. "It's right about there. Buffalo, New York. My parents are probably starting breakfast right now." I fought a wave of homesickness by digging my toes hard into the

sand. Amadou was still, letting the bottom of his shorts get drenched by the waves.

“That’s the U.S., right there?” He pointed, and I nodded. He squinted as if he could see the Statue of Liberty. “The U.S.,” he repeated.

I remember imagining volumes into his tone: reverence and resign and bitterness and disgust and understanding and misunderstanding. I stepped back to give him space for something I couldn’t, or perhaps didn’t want to, interpret. I wanted to tell him lots of people lost their dreams in that American paradise he talked about so much, but I didn’t. We just walked on, and later he showed me a childhood game he played with his brothers, where they pushed their feet into the wet sand to build little compounds, and drew lines for roads with their tiny fingers.

Months later my house seemed filled with people. Neighbors stopped on the porch to see how my trip had gone, and my friends wanted to see pictures, which I flipped through so many times I memorized the order. My aunts called, eager to hear how the traveler was. I had become the family poster child for world travel, and felt smothered by the role, convinced I was fulfilling some awful stereotype and that the trip would be cheapened by their assumptions. Everything, it seemed, made me cry. My brother Eric, a year younger than me, sat up late with me going through my pictures again and again listening to me tell him how Amadou had told me he would never joke with a woman, how when he used English incorrectly he seemed to hit something more central than I could ever hit. The tears seem silly, even problematic, now, boxed up by time.

My parents, like my brother, were overly gentle. They were conscious, I think, that their daughter was going through something they could only guess at. They forgave my long silences, my excessive comments on the absurdity of our luxuries, the dishes I left out on the table. I had repeated for them the reminder I’d heard in my volunteer group, and from the Operation Crossroads orientation – that “return

culture shock” would be more intense than in the other direction. My mother gathered this information up gratefully and ran with it, telling friends and family over the phone that I was “adjusting.” I was grateful for the buffer, but didn’t understand the process myself. My own house felt like an inn, there to house this transitory version of myself temporarily.

With only a week left before my senior fall semester would start, I was driven home from my friend’s house with a high fever. I recognized the signs of malaria – intermittent waves of fever, chills, and full-body aches – from the symptoms of my group members on the trip, and my mom skipped school to take me to the ECMC hospital the next morning. In the same waiting room we’d sat in months before, for the immunizations against the disease it seemed I’d gotten anyway, my mom read her book with calm efficiency, her way of keeping upright, and nodded professionally for the both of us when the nurse informed us that we were very lucky.

“You’re lucky,” she said. “We only have one foreign diseases doctor in residence, and he’s in today. He’s one of the best doctors we have.” Her look was one of unmistakable pride. Dr. Kumbo, we learned, was famous for his intelligence, skill and also for the compassion and personality that made the resident nurses stand straighter behind their clipboards and say his name as if he, himself, was the cure.

We waited longer than we wanted without complaining in the little examination room. I clutched the exam table, grateful for my mother’s solid presence in the room, and fought foggy waves of nervousness. When Dr. Kumbo opened the door, he apologized for his lateness and shook our hands before leaning gracefully on a stool. He was shortish, younger than I had expected, maybe in his thirties with a full head of blond hair and full, comfortable eyes.

“You’ll probably have a lot of interested people coming in to ask you the same five questions,” he said apologetically. “We don’t

get a lot of African diseases in here. But this is a private discussion, just so you know, and they don't have to know anything we don't want them to know. They're just curious, as good medical professionals should be sometimes." His personal, calming cadences made my feelings of fear and sick inconsequence subside.

When he turned to my mother and asked if she would give us privacy, she agreed seemingly without hesitation. Her thoughts as she left the room are still unknown to me, though I've often wondered at her train of logic, her speculations. The doctor sat on the stool again.

"I'll be concise here," he said kindly. "And I need you to be as honest as possible with me. Did you have any encounters of a sexual nature while you were in Africa?"

The room was suddenly dislodged from the continental world, floating in some landless space and containing only me in my sweater and jeans, the exam table, the cabinets full of medical supplies, the man in front of me. I nodded, unable to speak. At that crossroad in my mind he had ceased to be a doctor, and had become instead my only guide to surviving the next indefinitely long section of my life, with its own scorpion grasses and strange growths and unmarked roads. He was nodding acceptingly.

"Were you safe?" he asked,

"Yes," I said defensively. "I talk to him every couple of days. We're still in close contact." *We agreed to give it a shot*, I wanted to tell him. *We agreed that I would come back to the Gambia to visit*. I needed to defend Amadou, defend our relationship from something I couldn't define, partly because I had a good idea of what Dr. Kumbo was going to say to me next.

"I ask you this because there are some things we have to rule out," he said kindly. "You probably just have malaria, or something similarly non-life threatening, but there is a slight risk that you may be HIV positive. A very slight chance," he emphasized as I covered my

face with my hands, "But it's my responsibility to inform you of it. Okay?"

I nodded dumbly. My muscles felt shredded; my head seemed bloated with fever, fear and nerves. What had I done, I thought over and over. Dr. Kumbo studied my face gently for a second before taking off his gloves.

"I traveled a lot when I was younger, about your age," he said. "I traveled to India, the Philippines – all over the place, anywhere I could go, I just wanted to go." He tossed the gloves into the trash from his seat and rested his naked hands comfortably on his thighs. His gaze was steady, and by the way his voice changed I could tell he was uncharacteristically off the record. I looked up at him. A central part of myself understood the desire he described, to bust outward, to send your mind out before your body to all corners of the globe.

"I did some things I regretted," he said. "With girls. We were young, I was stupid, far less prudent than you were. And there was no love there, as it sounds like you had." I cried to hear someone say it out loud. He went on, "My experience from then on ended up being the catalyst that brought me here, to sit in front of you, to be a doctor of travel-borne diseases. I guess what I want to say is," and he took a deep breath, searching carefully for words, "Travel brings out parts of you that you didn't know existed. It changes your normal systems. You end up making decisions you wouldn't expect of yourself in a million years."

We looked at each other and I let out a laugh of relief or absurdity or nerves or all three. Dr. Kumbo closed his young eyes as if to say, "I know, I get it."

It was strange. My mother had been completely forgotten, and what was left was an acute awareness of my solitude. I was suddenly inside a body I didn't know, or understand – a new physical landscape, polluted by an unknown toxin, overrun by outcroppings of guilt, pride, and longing, ravaged by the strain of trying to fall asleep and wake up in another country. The only possible solution – and I

couldn't believe I hadn't seen it before – was to make peace with my mind and body, at any cost. It didn't seem dramatic then; just independent, honest and surprisingly devoid of loneliness. I was suspended from any continent by my body's commitment to heal, and by the doctor's understanding; free, in a way, to put my feet down where I chose.

The hospital performed some tests, and I stayed the weekend at the hospital, propped up in an otherwise empty room because my quarantine forbade roommates and discouraged visitors, which didn't seem to bother my parents. My mother didn't cry, but smoothed my forehead and smiled. I received my guests and nurses like a hostess, fought my fever and slept and had no room to imagine Amadou's face as it would look if he were here, standing dwarfed by endless walls of chilled sanitized tools, or tasting the relative luxury of hospital food, or staring down from the fifth floor of this brick and steel palace. He called me that Sunday on my cell phone, breaking into my reverie of repair.

"Rach," he said, his voice muffled by the bad connection. "You okay?" I told him peacefully about the malaria, against the hum of the IV machine, empty of the usual heart-pounding, sweating and adjustment I was so used to after two weeks of phone conversations. I assured him I was well taken care of. He was worried but subsided at the tone of my voice.

"Rach," he said. I imagined him sitting on the edge of his straw bed, staring out past his door curtain into the afternoon courtyard, where chickens and goats scratched the dirt.

"Amadou," I answered.

It was the start of a ritual we would establish in the next months of phone contact, a cycle of repeating one another's names, asking after the other's parents and siblings, comparing our weather patterns as New York dipped into snow and the rains stopped in Penyem.

It was the week I stopped dreaming about the Gambia that I realized I wasn't

certainly going back, that I didn't know if I could follow through with our rash promises. I told him these terrifying things over the phone, on a December morning as I stared out at the valley, not knowing if he could quite understand me through the connection. I stood in the snow and confessed that I'd fallen in love with New York, as irreversible and unexpected a love as I'd ever experienced.

"Rach," Amadou said in shaky acceptance, "S'okay, you know. We can keep on the good side of life."

Walking around my campus that semester, searching out African clubs and classes and aesthetics, I felt – and may feel, to some extent, for a long time – like a sort of soldier, bearing marks of pneumonia and malaria, rebellious in the face of skepticism and defending impossible connections to the death. Perhaps it was this willingness to fight that made it possible to preserve more than either of us thought possible, after both of our homes called us back.