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Continents

In November, I tried to recreate Western New York snow over the phone for Amadou Bah, who had never touched it. He had seen snow 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 suffer biting animals, muscles pulled tight inside someone else's coat.

That afternoon 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. I barely registered them as I approached my apartment. 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 lapsed 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. Though the joke was a mystery to me I laughed with the pleasure of hearing him laugh. 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 be 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, had accomplished our goal of building a chain-linked fence around the community garden in Penyem. We boarded a plane home from Dakar 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 got out of the car and motored toward me, leaving the passenger door wide open. The familiarness of her, rounding the revolving doors in black Teva sandals and half-rimmed glasses, unraveled me. We were both laughing by the time she got to me and we stood like that, locked together and swaying, as my dad waited behind, 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.

My dad grinned and tapped the new air freshener dangling from the mirror. He looked both exhausted and relieved in the reflection as he buckled

into the driver's seat, his balding hair sporting a few more grays than I remembered. "I can't believe you're home," he said honestly. "Mom and I have just been talking about this day for so long, coming to pick you up—it's kind of unreal."

My mom got in the car silently. 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 the here and now, 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, and as a man and first son from his culture he wore responsibility like a God-given weight. My independent, feminist side balked at his 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 once put it, 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 was strangely similar to coming home from college—I felt both carried by my parents and responsible for protecting them, retroactively, from the loss of a daughter to an unknown world.

Perhaps partly for this reason, the one burden I couldn't unload on them that day was that of missing Amadou: his company, his lean body, his tight smile. His loving declarations.

My mother knew our relationship had gotten romantic. I'd told her one night on the phone, pacing between the latrine and the kitchen, just desperate for someone to make sense of what I'd allowed to happen. Shaking with nerves, I described our friendship, Amadou's overtures, my uncertainty and growing trust. After a silence that had nothing to do with the phone connection, my mom took 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—it was like an electric shock. That night I had latched on to my mother's words like a prayer, but in the car with her I could barely think of Amadou. 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 did.

The fence had been the daily routine, the discussion topic, the meeting point of the village. Every morning, before the day's heat could burn our lungs or get into the ground, we would gather up shovels and water bottles and walk the hundred yards to the garden, scattering clusters of goats and chickens. Three American girls, four boys and our Gambian counterparts, all men, pulled up the old, rotting fence before mapping out the new one. I loved the hand-hardening, skin-darkening work, even though our African helpers could effortlessly carry six iron posts to my two. It became a given that the men took the harshest work. The girls and I accepted our gentler tasks with resentment, carrying water and untangling wire as the men sweated.

Amadou was one of the Gambian team, slighter and quieter than the other men. He wore a red baseball cap and a sleeveless blue jersey and ducked his head in deference when he laughed. Once, on a digging day, he came up behind me and gently removed the shovel from my hands.

"Like this," he corrected seriously, and I bit back my protests, stepping back over a bed of pungent, rotting mangoes to watch him dig the hole with fantastic efficiency.

"Thanks, I get it now," I cut in finally.

He handed me the shovel and grinned. "Don't strain yourself," he advised, paternalistic.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm fine."

Amadou watched me keep digging, slowly but better. You work hard, Rach," he said.

I looked in his face for the joke, but there was none, and I smiled back at him, surprised by the strength of my gratitude. He picked up another shovel and worked next to me in silence.

In the U.S., my dad's car passed a co-ed construction crew, two McDonalds, fleets of semi trucks. They gleamed like bars of gold against rows of summer trees, gorgeous and manicured; I'd never noticed how many of them lined the highways, or how smoothly the pavement hummed under the car. I thought with amazement, *I can slur my English here and still be understood. I can look a man in the eye without appearing brash*.

When I got home, I took a real shower with heat, and tried to stop comparing everything around me to its equivalent in the Gambia. I didn't want to be obnoxious about the contrast, even though I felt it acutely. I 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. After we waved goodbye at her connecting gate, 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. The African sounds solidified all the memories instantly—the communal dinners, the card games under mango trees, the clogged, colorful marketplaces—in a way English conversations could not.

We babbled our way through our African languages and then reverted back to English as I knelt, shivering with nostalgia, on my bed. I had been practicing not to lose those speech patterns, the vividness of the trip—my room was covered with African fabrics. I clutched the phone like a lifeline.

"I miss African fruit," Marissa groaned. "And bush taxis, those death traps. And the kids, and building the fence." She paused. "You must miss Amadou a lot."

I didn't reply. It was both mortifying and thrilling to remember that she had witnessed our romantic relationship. It was a relief not to have to start from scratch to tell the story, but picturing Amadou waiting for me halfway across the world tightened my chest. I felt thin under the weight of his expectations, my expectations, and those of my family and friends.

When I found the Operation Crossroads Africa program online and spontaneously applied the fall before, I had longed to seek out these strong connections. I wanted to 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 ripped 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. "It's so 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 myself as Jainaba, the name I'd been given 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 hearing 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 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, as if he were pronouncing, *paradise*.

I remember reading much further into his tone, too: reverence and resignation 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. So many Gambians thought the US had everything, and I wanted to tell Amadou that lots of people lost their dreams in that paradise he talked so much about. Instead I was silent and we walked on. 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, in New York, 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, and how when he used English incorrectly he seemed to hit poetic truths I hadn't considered. The tears seem wasteful, 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 immediately—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 hospital the next morning.

In the same waiting room we'd sat in months before, for immunizations against the disease it seemed I'd gotten anyway, we sat in front of the televisions. My mom read her book diligently, her way of keeping calm, and sat up when a nurse approached us.

"You're lucky," the nurse 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 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." As he spoke, the waves of fear and sick inconsequence subsided.

"Will you give us a moment alone?" he asked my mother. My mom looked at me and raised her eyebrows, but left the room. I can only guess at what she was thinking.

Dr. Kumbo 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 sex 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, Dr. Kumbo 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.

Dr. Kumbo was nodding acceptingly.

"Were you safe?" he asked.

"Yes!" I was defensive. "We're still in close contact. I talk to him every couple of days." We agreed to give it a shot, I wanted to tell the doctor. I told Amadou that I would come back to the Gambia to visit when I got enough money. I needed to 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."

Shame washed over me like a cold bucket shower. I covered my face with my hands.

"A very slight chance," Dr. Kumbo emphasized. "But it's my responsibility to inform you of it. Okay?"

I nodded dumbly. My muscles felt shredded; the fever pounded at the backs of my eyes. *You got yourself into this*, I berated myself. *You got yourself into this*.

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. Empathy lifted my head. A central part of me 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 eyes as if to say, "I know, I get it."

For a few minutes my mother, the hospital, the approaching semester, all

were completely forgotten. 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. The Rachel I had known was now polluted by an unknown toxin, overrun by outcroppings of guilt, pride, and longing, and ravaged by the strain of trying to fall asleep and wake up in another country. As I waited for my mother to come back into the room, I understood instinctively that my only destination from then on would be health. Not college, not Penyem, not Amadou. With the retreat came an overwhelming and surprising sense of peace.

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. This didn't seem to bother my parents. My mother smoothed my forehead and brought me tupperware containers of strawberries. I kept the possibility of HIV a secret from her, and everyone, ashamed and determined to ride it out by myself; I wouldn't receive conclusive tests until six months had passed. I fought my fever and slept. There was no room to imagine Amadou's face as it would look if he were here, standing dwarfed by endless walls of chilled sterile 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. "I haven't heard from you. You okay?"

"I really am," I said, astonished at how easy it was to talk to him suddenly. His voice had changed for me; he seemed farther away even than he had before. The IV machine hummed peacefully next to me. I assured him I was well taken care of, that the malaria was under control. The HIV threat stayed lodged in my throat. I could tell Amadou was worried, but he subsided at the peace in my voice.

"Rach," he sighed. 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. The things that connected us now were few and simple.

That winter, November, I woke up with a shiver that had nothing to do with snow. I had dreamt that I was at a barbecue in the suburbs and felt a twitch in the air behind me. When I turned, hotdog in hand, I saw that

Amadou was ripping a hole in the air, and through the hole I could see the red dust of Penyem.

"We are having a race," he told me, his face blank with assumption. "Come and watch—I'll win it for you."

I called him that day. My brain hurtled ahead to marriage and moving to his village and growing peanuts, or flying him here to the cold, lonely demands of American capitalism, and I chilled at the thought of being trapped together in the wrong climate. I realized I was falling in love with New York—as irreversible and unexpected a love as I'd ever experienced. In the release, I felt again that familiar suspension between continents, rooted in both and neither.

"I thought I could do it," I told him on the phone. "I really did."

"Rach," Amadou replied, voice shaking a little, "S'okay, you know. You are in the U.S, it's very difficult." I nodded as if he could see me, and he said, "You know I keep always on the good side, don't worry much about me."

It was what I needed to hear to pull out of Africa and root myself on that New York slope; Amadou knew this, I think, and granted me that leave as a parting gift. Navigating my campus that semester, searching out African clubs and classes and aesthetics, I protected and sometimes hated the weight and weightlessness of his gift, bursting as it was with sacrifice, and empty of accusation. Evidence that he was somewhere turning away with his own set of gifts, facing a familiar country made foreign.