

When we arrived at the Village of Hope, Mark was at the guesthouse waiting for us. He ran over to hug me as soon as I got out of the van. I almost didn't recognize him, despite the fact that his photograph still smiled at me from the fridge door every morning as I opened it to get milk for Van and Tatum's cereal. His once frail body looked plump and healthy, his skin glowed, and the scars from where he had been beaten had healed and disappeared.

I couldn't wait to see John Arthur. After hearing from Fred about how well he had done, I wanted to see for myself. Because he was in the third grade now, his class ran longer than those of the younger students, so I waited until it was dismissed before finding him. I spotted him walking across the dusty lawn. There is just something about this boy. He walks with an air of confidence that I've never seen in any other twelve-year-old, and has a face that could grace the pages of any magazine. When he saw me walking toward him, he ran into my arms.

"I knew you were coming back today, and I couldn't wait," he said in nearly flawless English. He then reached into the back pocket of his sky-blue shorts and pulled out a piece of paper. It was my name over a drawing of two hands holding what looked to be . . . an egg? Okay, maybe I wasn't as thin as I would have liked, but I wouldn't go so far as to say I looked like an egg. I asked him to explain.

"You carried us all as carefully as an egg, so we wouldn't be broken anymore," he said to me, smiling bashfully. "Thank you. Thank you for my life."

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On our third afternoon there, Aimee and I decided that after dinner, we'd walk into the town of Gomoa-Fetteh and look around. We had been warned by some of the more, shall we say, reasonable Americans who were also staying at the Village

of Hope at the time—people who had come to volunteer at the onsite medical clinic—that it wasn't safe for two women to walk through the village alone after dark. But we didn't care. We wanted to see the town, see how the people lived, and experience more of the culture. Okay, fine, we wanted a beer. Alcohol was strictly forbidden at the Village of Hope, and it wasn't like we could go to the corner store and pick up a six-pack anyway. While I knew at the time that I was possibly risking all the good karma I may have built to this point by what I was doing—lying to people to sneak out of a Christian orphanage that frowns upon alcohol to go have a beer—I was desperate. The electricity had gone out the last two nights, which meant we didn't even have a fan in our room and I swear it was like two thousand degrees in there.

So after a dinner of rice and beans, we headed out, past the security guards (who, I never understood why, wore pink knit caps as if they were waiting to get picked up to go skiing), and walked toward town. Now, should you ever find yourself in West Africa, allow me to impart a few bits of useful advice: Take your malaria pills, don't drink the water, and watch out for guys with strings around their waist, as they may try to urinate on you.

We had been told that the string was a local custom meant to identify people with mental illness, and one man in Gomoa-Fetteh, whose name was Kashee, had earned a reputation for peeing on people. As we entered the town, about a mile outside the Village of Hope, we saw him approaching. It was easy to see the string. It was all that he was wearing.

“Okay,” Aimee said, linking her arm with mine. “Don't do your thing, Pam. Don't stop and talk and ask him about his life story. Just look ahead and try to blend into the scenery.”

Aimee and I had only recently met, but ours was one of those immediate connections. Our first meeting took place a

few weeks earlier at a small café in Manhattan, and an hour later we were sitting in my hotel room, shoes off, drinking coffee and revealing the intimate details of our lives. A few weeks later, we decided to travel to Ghana together. It was in the airport that our connection deepened: My luggage had gotten lost and for the last three days, I had been wearing her underwear. Well, because I liked Aimee, and thought I should be extra nice to her because I was wearing her underwear, I chose not to point out that her suggestion that we try to blend into the scenery was the single most ridiculous one I had ever heard. While that may have been a good idea in theory, it was made a little difficult by the reality of our situation: two white women walking alone down a dirt road in a remote village in Africa long after the sun had set. To make matters worse, a crowd of children had gathered behind us, kicking up dust and shouting into the darkness: “*Obroni! Obroni!*” White man! White man! They weren’t trying to be rude, the way this might have seemed had it occurred back home; it’s just that this village was so remote, it was likely we were the first white people these children had ever seen. Seriously, even the goats and chickens in the road seemed to register surprise.

I decided to take Aimee’s advice anyway, and when Kashee stood in front of us, blocking our path, I simply looked away and tried to make out my surroundings in the darkness. Most of the houses had no electricity, and besides a small number of solitary fluorescent bulbs that hung from string on a few porches, the main source of light was the sticks on fire held by some of the young boys who ran behind us. Groups of women sat on the ground or on thick wooden benches along the road. Some of them smiled at us and waved but most looked at us with disinterest and went about their business: breast-feeding their children, washing their clothes in the bucket at their feet, or kneading the cornmeal and water that would be their family’s meal the next

morning. Children passed us carrying on their heads large buckets of water that they had likely gotten from the ocean or the well that had been dug at the Village of Hope, which people from the village were welcome to use.

“Are you sure you know where this place is?” Aimee asked, the doubt growing in her voice as she moved aside to allow a sickly goat to pass.

“Of course,” I said. Crista and I had walked through the village one afternoon during our last trip, and had stopped for a Coke at a hotel bar around here. Somewhere. We passed a shack where men sat on stools sipping sodas and beer, and another with a sign that read MEDICINE SHOP. I stopped to peek inside. There were narrow shelves lined with dusty bottles of things I could not identify. It smelled of the earth.

Finally, about another half mile down the road, I saw the sign: a big yellow arrow pointing down a dirt path. Till's Beach Hotel. The little restaurant area at Till's is, I believe, the world's most perfect. It's right on the Atlantic Ocean, on a part that remains largely undiscovered by tourists, not that West Africa gets too many of those. It's wholly outdoors, with no walls—just a huge slanted thatched roof held up by large posts that people here call Summer Hats. The restaurant was empty except one table. Seven large, burly-looking white men sat around a table laden with large platters of steaming lobsters and bottles of bourbon and vodka. They smoked cigarettes and laughed loudly, taking long drinks right from the bottle. Aimee and I each ordered an African beer, and they glanced in our direction. “CIA,” I said, sure of it. One of the men then waved to us and spoke in what sounded like Russian. “Okay, maybe former KGB,” Aimee said as the waiter handed us two bottles of beer, dripping with ice.

As much as I would actually enjoy a conversation with seven former Russian spies at a bar in West Africa, Aimee and I decided to take our drinks down the grassy hill to the

beach. Every single star in the sky seemed as if it were on fire, and the beach was empty. The only sound was the surf. I took off my sandals, and we walked down to the shore. The ocean felt like bathwater, and both of us waded in, getting wet from the waves, which soaked our shorts. Finally, we gave in to the ocean and dove in.

As we lay in the shallow water, the waves washing over us, I stared at the sky. "I'm not sure I've ever seen a darkness like this," Aimee said, breaking the silence.

I nodded in quiet agreement, my head sinking into the soft sand, and the water covering my ears so all that I could hear was the rhythm of the earth in my head.

"How do you feel right now, Pam Cope?" she asked.

This question had become somewhat of a joke between us. I had been telling her a lot about my life and about Jantsen and our work in Vietnam, and she'd often stop me and ask how I felt about something. I usually made fun of her when she asked me this question, telling her to stop trying to analyze everything, but this time I gave it some real thought.

I thought about the seven kids, who were sound asleep right now, and how safe and secure they were. I thought about how much I loved Randy, whom I hadn't spoken to since I'd left the United States three days earlier. He was probably wondering what we were doing while getting Van and Tatum ready for school. Crista was probably doing homework in her dorm room. I thought about how eager I was to help build the Village of Life, and bring home possibly hundreds of other slave children. I thought about the fact that here I was, lying in the Gulf of Guinea well past midnight, with the taste of salt on my lips and the water cascading over my chest and face.

And for perhaps the first time in my life, I knew *exactly* how I felt.

"I feel totally . . . content," I said.