

## CHAPTER 12

### BIRTHDAY GUESTS

On my third trip back to Africa, I wanted to see more of the continent I had fallen for, so after brief stints in Tanzania and Kenya, I headed to Uganda to visit the mountain gorillas and volunteer for a month. I was in Fort Portal, which is in the west of the country not far from the Congo border. Fort Portal is a beautiful town, amidst lush terrain with the Rwenzori Mountains as the backdrop. It only has about fifty thousand people and is clean, safe, and friendly, just what I needed after a brief stint in the capital Kampala, the exact opposite. Kampala has a few bright spots and probably many more that I never got the chance to see, but a few hours at the main bus terminal and even more time spent languishing in traffic solidified my aversion to it in all forms.

My homestay and volunteer placement were out of town about ten kilometers, so it was even more isolated and quiet than being in Fort Portal proper. The volunteer house I was at had about fifteen people there. We had shared rooms, three showers and two toilets between us all, hot water when we were lucky, and electricity some days . . . just not most days. We had a communal room where we congregated to eat and relax, but there were also plenty of nooks and crannies on the property to hide away in when privacy was a

necessity. We also had the wonderful Mama K, the definitive ruler of the roost who was in charge of the cooking, cleaning, rule-making, security-guarding, and mothering. She was quite jovial despite the long hours she put in, and you could tell by her general countenance she liked us all about as much as we liked her.

The best part of staying there was the tranquility and relaxation, nothing but fresh air, and the sounds of the country. There was so much green in the surrounding forests, the kind you can smell if you close your eyes and imagine it. And I do sometimes.

It seemed to be consistently sunny and hot, but there were still periodic bursts of rain and thunder to mix things up, I suppose. It down-poured every day, but I wouldn't say it was a hindrance or even a nuisance. It would be brief and cool everything off, which would make things fresh again and amplify the green hues afterwards.

I was volunteering at a school for impoverished children, many were orphaned and most lived on site. The volunteer work was enjoyable but more physically challenging than what I had done in the past. My days would begin about 7:00 A.M. When I arrived at the school, I would walk about fifteen minutes to the nearest stream to haul water with a few of the children, staff and my partner in crime, Manuel from Austria, who was the only other volunteer willing to get up as early as me. It was such a pleasant walk there but no easy task on the way back to the school—carrying two full jerry cans of water over a dodgy bridge, up a hill, and through a banana patch. The first haul of the day got our blood going but by the third or fourth in the afternoon sun, our arms were numb and legs were like jelly. Every time I did it, all I could think about was not having to endure that trek every day before my actual day even started, which was the reality for most in the community.

After morning water duty, most of the other volunteers would have sauntered over and we'd all fall into our regular duties, some in the classrooms, some on construction, others taking care of the smaller kids, some like me doing daily chores and whatever else was delegated to us. We'd wash an endless number of dishes in large plastic tubs of water, one for soaping up and the other for rinsing off.

## BIRTHDAY GUESTS

This took a whole team of us and a lot of patience as the dishes were endless and our supplies were less than adequate. Then, we would help serve mid-morning porridge at the school which consisted of carrying huge pots of steaming porridge across the road and doling it out to each class. Next, we would de-pod an endless amount of beans, which also took a team of us and even more patience. Afterwards, we would get to wash more dishes and get more water. And then repeat. And repeat again.

We got downtime in between chores to have lunch and play with the smaller children who did not attend the adjacent school, which broke up the day and added much needed comic relief. We made each day light because bean-picking turned into a contest, dishes turned into a sport, and carrying water turned into a race.

I liked all the volunteers in the house although my patience wore thin quickly. It's not because of what anyone did, but rather the sheer number of humans in my personal space got to be tiring. There were, of course, a few odd ducks in the bunch . . . the loud talker, the fork biter, the mouth breather, the tab keeper, the shit talker and a few other—er title bearers. I'm sure they had one for me too, which wouldn't have fazed me and made a whole lot of sense.

I realized that my upcoming birthday was shared with another girl in the house, so when the day arrived most of the gang went out for dinner and drinks and then to a local dance bar. The camaraderie felt natural, the laughs, necessary. I was right where I was supposed to be.

The next day a few people in the group bought us birthday girls the best gifts we have ever received. Hot showers. Literally. There was a fancy schmancy resort in Fort Portal that had a pool and health club, and you could pay seven thousand shillings (about \$3.50) to use the pool. None of us cared much about swimming though—we were mainly in it for the hot shower you could take, along with fast internet and western food choices. Everybody took a turn escaping there every few days likely to feel human again and recharge, and my birthday would be no exception.

On my way to the resort that afternoon, I had my funniest travel experience to date and fodder for many a Ugandan who would later

tell the story of the *Mazungo* and the great flash flood of 2012. I was by myself on a *boda*, which is a motorcycle taxi of sorts. The ‘of sorts’ part is because there are no helmets, no set price, no speed limits and no concern when operating one. And the driver most certainly does not have an official taxi license. He just has a bike, legs and eyes, and voila—he’s an entrepreneur, a taxi driver ‘of sorts.’

On my way to the resort, I was on a *boda* when my driver and I were caught in a freakish monsoon-ish downpour, which was not uncommon in Fort Portal. My *boda* driver couldn’t communicate what he was doing, but it raised no alarm bells when he gestured that he was going to stop to wait out the storm somewhere dry.

He pulled over and into a nearby ‘store’ (I use that term loosely) right off the main road. It was sandwiched in between other local businesses and as unassuming as the others. I think it was supposed to be a general store, but it was no bigger than a large bathroom in my world and most of the shelves were bare. It had a dirt floor, no windows, a heavy main door made of wooden slats, and lacked signage as did the other businesses nearby. There was no electricity, which may or may not have been from the storm. Due to the lack of light I could faintly see that the shelves were scarce, except for a few random household items for sale such as a large pot and washing basin, a package of red plastic cups, a half-empty shelf of dried goods in faded packaging, a few cheap imported snacks, and some familiar and unfamiliar brands of alcohol prominently displayed next to the cash box.

Not long after we entered, the store owner had no choice but to shut and latch the large wooden door to prevent the rain from pouring in and the wind from blowing it open. As the heavy door was closing and I realized what was happening, it all seemed to move in slow motion. It was me, my young *boda* driver, the middle-aged store owner, and a drunken elderly gentleman—settling in in the pitch dark. I stood frozen. The store owner lit a few candles and pulled out two stools from behind the counter which he gave to me and the elderly man. However, I felt little reassurance with the seat and sudden visibility. I took the stool and sat down nonetheless. He got

himself a large crate to sit on, and by then the boda driver flopped down on a few large burlap sacs of supplies nearby.

As we hunkered down in a little circle, hearing the rain beat down on the flimsy corrugated roof, the men began to speak to each other in quiet tones. What little they said was not directed at me, nor did I understand any of it, so I kept my head down and tried to be invisible. It didn't take long for me to fully grasp the precarious situation I was in—alone in a hot dark room with three men I didn't know nor could communicate with. We were also in a place where I couldn't be reached, off the grid and away from anyone I knew. As my predicament became increasingly clear, every horrible scenario from every awful horror movie flashed through my mind. I knew that things could go terribly wrong at any moment, so I started to survey my surroundings and commit to memory everything in the room. This was perhaps a reflex of watching too many after-school TV specials and *America's Most Wanted* episodes as a child, but it gave me something to do other than cry. I scanned what was on each of the near-empty shelves and most importantly where the door to freedom was and my quickest way to get there.

The candlelight shone brightly on the faces of the three potential axe murdering rapists I was confined with. I studied each of their faces without trying to make it too obvious, with each passing glimpse committing to memory one more detail the police would need later—that's if I could crawl out to safety on my one remaining leg. My boda driver wore the brightest of red shirts, which clung to his body from the rain. He was youthful, likely in his late teens or twenties. He looked strong, sturdy in fact, with a dark complexion and short-kept hair. The store owner was short with a stocky build, dressed conservatively as if church was his next stop after the rain let up. He had soft kind eyes, but I refused to take the bait. Ted Bundy did too. The elderly gentleman was very tall and thin. He looked worn and weathered and his hands told me he worked hard in his life. His eyes bulged slightly, perhaps naturally or perhaps from fatigue and drink.

I realized that they were all looking at me too and what I could only imagine was just how different I was from them or perhaps what I would look like in a few dozen pieces. I sat smiling awkwardly, barely breathing, heart pumping, hoping my facial expression wasn't too inviting but not weak either. "How did I get myself in this god-forsaken situation?," I thought. "And can they hear my heart beating like a drum because I sure as hell can?!" I thought the worst was likely to happen at any moment. Happy birthday, Maia. Nice gift to yourself. Get ready for your torso to rest near the red plastic cups.

As the rain persisted, the store started to leak through the holes in the roof. Since I was planning a getaway should I need one, I wanted to stay in my spot close to the door. So, when a steady trickle of rain began to run down my back, I didn't dare move.

The store owner, sensing my unease, tried out a few languages to see which ones, if any, I could follow. I'm useless in Luganda, the widely spoken local language, but he seemed pleasantly surprised when he tried his hand at Swahili and I could speak it back to him. He gave me a *jambo* (hello) and I gave him a *nzuri* (fine). He asked *unatoka wapi* (where are you from)? *Natokea*, Canada, I replied. Then, his eyes smiled. The older man said he was from Congo, so I gave him a *bonjour, comment ca va?* and his eyes smiled too. At least I could plead for my life in a way they'd understand, I thought.

My boda driver was already napping at this point and said little to anyone in any language, so the three of us slowly began to chat about the day in a mixture of our three languages. We discussed our families, our countries, the weather, and of course, football.

The store owner made us some murky tea I tried not to gag over; however, I did not overlook this kind gesture. I shared some biscuits I had in my bag even though I had absolutely no desire to eat. I figured offering something in response was the right thing to do, and I should eat with them. I chewed as fast as I could and swallowed as hard as I could—the lump taking extra long to make its way down my nervous throat into my even more nervous stomach. At one point, the man from the Congo whipped out a little bag of

alcohol, not a bottle, a bag, and offered the first swig to our strange little group. I politely declined but was touched that he was willing to share his stash which he had clearly been tucking into all day. And there we sat, eating, laughing, learning. While I was unable to follow everything that was said, I realized that I was enjoying our candlelight conversation and felt my fear subside.

After it sounded like the rain had stopped, the store owner got up and opened the door. The torrential rain was gone, replaced by a heavy dose of sunshine which seemed to be waiting patiently for its turn at the day. I realized then that I had made it through the experience unscathed, and the three blood-thirsty assassins turned out to be perfect gentlemen.

The ordeal was not over though as I saw that the road was partially washed out. I say ‘partially’ because I couldn’t see it at all; I only know it was there because my boda driver, just up from his nap, was wading out to the road to fish out his bike from where he left it. He soon started beckoning for me to do the same. “Are you kidding me?” I wanted to say “No, it’s my birthday, I cannot wade in waist-high sewage; this is not how it’s supposed to go down.” However, with a crowd of a few dozen now looking on, it seemed I had little choice. So, I did what I had to do . . . I hiked my pants up over my knees, put my sandals in my bag so I wouldn’t lose them and waded thigh-deep in the sludge to get to the road and get the hell out of there. As I walked deeper in, smelling and feeling unexplainable things under my feet, I began to gag. I saw a tire float by, a random boot, a doll, and a cooking pot. Then I slipped a little on some mystery gunk and almost fell over to the amusement of the now jeering crowd. I kept my balance and soon felt the water recede, at my knees, now my calves, finally my feet. Made it.

My getting out alive delighted everyone even more than my slip, and they all erupted in loud cheers and hooting that I “made it through the lake without a boat” as one man told me in English. Covered in the inexplicable, I gave a sheepish wave and smile to the crowd, hopped on the wet motorbike and waited for liftoff. As I held

on tight to my boda driver, I looked back to see the store owner and elderly man standing in the doorway, waving, smiling, seeing me off. A cast of warm light shone on them both. I waved back and nodded, sort of a thank you for your hospitality wave, but also thank you for keeping me safe, thank you for proving me wrong. As I locked eyes with the store owner, I had a feeling he knew. “*Asante*” (thank you), I mouthed. He nodded back.

We carried on to the resort as if the last strange hour of my life never happened; I was soaked and covered in mud from the waist down, so the hot shower let me forget about the parasites I envisioned were all over me. Later that day and many times since I’ve reflected on the experience. I spent a portion of my birthday in what felt like a dank cage with three strangers, one of whom drank brownish alcohol. From a bag, I waded in sludge almost at waist level in front of an audience. But I got through it.

Many of my adventures and predicaments don’t come with an epilogue of sorts. They’re just experiences one goes through while travelling which show how unique and interesting people are if you take the time to interact with them below the surface. However, the silver linings here cannot be overlooked. Chivalry exists across cultures and can get you the good stool. Everyone loves soccer so it helps to follow it even if you don’t care. And while some people like to watch others fall, they also like to see them stay afloat. However, there were deeper lessons to be embraced as well; they lie in the fact that I can tell this story, that one can be treated with kindness and respect in the worst of predicaments, that language isn’t always spoken in words, that stereotypes are just that, that a chance encounter might not be from chance at all, that people are good before they are not, that the positives outweigh the negatives if you just let them.

I enjoyed birthday tea, friendship, and laughter in rural Uganda with random strangers in a dimly lit hole in the wall with water streaming down my back.

A gift, indeed.