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# Everything

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# Everything

## **Abstract**

This is a memoir piece that details a tumultuous period in my life between departing for my study abroad experience in Rwanda and Uganda, struggling with what I encountered there, and then attempting to reintegrate into the same life prior to my departure. Specifically, it focuses on my time in northern Uganda, and a woman I met in an IDP (internal displaced persons) camp who really made me think about what my role should be both there and at home. This piece explores a number of themes including guilt, blame, and, ultimately, a certain amount of forgiveness.

## **Keywords**

memoir, Rwanda, Uganda, study abroad

## **Disciplines**

Creative Writing | English Language and Literature | Nonfiction

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### Everything

“Hey, man! Long time no see. And who’s this hot piece of ass you brought with you?” A tall college-aged guy stood up from the couch through the haze of cigarette and pot smoke. He passed the videogame controller he was holding to the person next to him and extended his long arm toward me. I cringed internally at his obvious objectification and tried to hold the left-wing feminist in me back from trying to sock him in the face. *Try to fit in, try to fit in*, I repeated silently to myself.

I tried to pull the corners of my mouth back into an expression that resembled a smile, but something about the tension in my jaw caught John’s attention. In our last week together before departing for our respective study abroad destinations, he’d dragged me to a party full of his high school classmates, most of whom were college dropouts. I was uncomfortable enough at college parties, but this was something much father out of my element.

“Oh, uh, this is my girlfriend Hannah,” John sputtered. “She’s a feminist.” *Nice one, John.*

I reached toward the tall man who stood in front of me and shook his hand—probably a little too hard—to cover up the discomfort. He had to duck to keep from hitting his head on the ceiling, and his hair was greasy enough to suggest that perhaps he’d been playing the same videogame for the last week without showering. “So nice to meet you,” I said loudly, trying to be heard over the music blaring in the adjacent room. “What’s your name again?”

“It’s Max,” he responded, raising an eyebrow at me.

We stood there awkwardly for a moment until Max offered us a seat on the couch—prime video game seating. John and Max exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes between

rounds of Max's hand at the controller for the game. After passing a particularly grueling level, Max handed the controller to a drunker young man sitting next to him and looked to John.

"So, what's this I hear about you going to England?"

John sat up excitedly and placed a wandering hand on my knee. "Yeah, I leave in about two weeks. I'm going to Lancaster University with one of my school programs." It was his favorite subject these days. For the last two weeks we hadn't had one conversation that didn't revolve around his immanent departure.

They chatted for a few minutes about all of John's travel plans for the coming semester. *Yeah, Paris, Bracelona, Scotland. The whole nine yards. It would be a shame to miss out on all of that travel opportunity if I'm right there.*

"What about you, Hannah?" Max asked suddenly. "Will you just be hanging out, pining after him while he's gone?" *Gag.*

I cleared my throat and pulled my knee out from under John's hand to answer him. "No, I'll be studying in Rwanda while he's in England." I waited for the softened eyes and the quiet "*How nice*" I was accustomed to receiving from those who had nothing better to say.

Instead, Max scoffed at me. "And why the hell would you go there?"

I looked at John and saw the embarrassment clouding his face. "What is that supposed to mean?" I spat back bitterly.

"Well," he paused to take a sip of his beer, "John gets to travel and go to all sorts of cool places. You can't exactly go traipsing around Africa, can you? I mean, everyone's got AIDS there. It's not exactly safe."

I pushed back farther from John and felt a burning sensation climb up my neck. “I still get to travel. We’re going to Uganda for two weeks. And not *everyone* has AIDS. That’s a really ridiculous and unfair stereotype.”

“Oh, Uganda, *quite* a vacation,” he remarked sarcastically. “But really, what do you study? Why Africa?”

Now, this question I was prepared to answer. “I’m studying English, just like John. I just really want to go to Rwanda because I’ve known lots of Rwandan students and a Rwandan guy lives with my family.”

“Why Uganda then? You doing a two week safari there or something?” Max tipped his beer back, sucking in the last bits of foam that stuck to the bottom of the bottle.

I turned to John again and gave him a *what-the-fuck-did-you-get-me-into* look as best I could. He tried to bring his hand back to my knee, but I swatted it away. “I don’t know a lot about it. The visa for Rwanda expires after ninety days, but if you leave the country and come back again you get another. I haven’t studied Uganda; it’s not why I’m going on the trip. I’m going to learn about genocide restoration and peace-building in Rwanda.”

Max let out a condescending chuckle. “Yeah, good luck with that. Those Africans are always killing each other over one thing or another. Well, anyway, I hope for John’s sake you don’t come back with AIDS or something.”

I’d had it. I slapped my knees with the palms of my hands and stood up, my face burning with simultaneous rage, discomfort, and embarrassment. The force by which I was holding back my angry tears burned the back of my throat. “John, it’s time for us to go.” I didn’t wait for him to say goodbye to Max. I pushed through hordes of drunk people to get to the door. Storming out into the cold rain that had been drowning upstate New York for weeks, I stomped my way

through the marshy grass and waited, leaning up against John's car until he came running out after me.

"Hannah," he called, sprinting through the yard. He was casting mud sprays up at the backs of his heels from the soggy grass, splattering wet, brown dots onto the backs of his legs. "I'm *so* sorry. I didn't know he was going to be that much of a prick."

He unlocked the car, and I yanked the door open, slamming it hard enough when I closed it to let the window rattle against the frame.

"Well you could have said *something*! Jesus, John, he was verbally assaulting me. What a racist, sexist *douche*! I can't believe you for not standing up for me." I started biting at the edges of my fingers around the nail, my nervous habit.

John reached across to cup my cheek in his rough palm and pried my fingers away from my teeth. He hated my habit. "Look, I'm really sorry. He was an idiot. You've always wanted to go to Rwanda. That's why you're going. I'm so proud of you for doing it. Not everyone is like me, though."

I sighed. I knew he was right. Over the course of the last few months, I'd been met with some strange reactions when I admitted I'd be studying in Africa. *Is it safe there? Are you going on a safari or something? Will you even get to shower the whole time you're there?* But this was the first time anyone had been so hostile. The angry tears that flooded my eyes finally started to trickle out.

"Don't cry," John begged. "I hate it when you cry. I'm so sorry I brought you here."

I waved my hand at him to encourage him to shut up, but he pulled me in to kiss the top of my head, making me cry harder. He cooed kind, inaudible words of comfort into my ear while I let my rage pour out of me the only way I knew how.

After a few minutes of uncontrolled sobbing, I tried to sniffle up the slow drizzle of snot that was threatening to escape farther down my lip. Finally, I took in a deep breath to compose myself.

“I think I’m afraid everything, John. Rwanda, Uganda—it’s all just so insane.” I finally said quietly.

“That’s normal; you’re supposed to be nervous.”

And it *was* normal. But what I couldn’t tell John was that Max had finally pointed out what I was secretly just as fearful of. Why *was* I going to Rwanda? Was it because of the personal connection I had to a few Rwandans in the U.S.? Or did I just like the idea of doing something different from my peers? Here I was, going to East Africa with no academic background or preparation. Hell, I didn’t even know *what* we’d be studying when we got to Uganda. I knew no one on my trip and was utterly unprepared to say good-bye to him, and everyone else I loved at home. What the hell was I getting myself into?

“John?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think it’ll be hard?”

“What?”

“*Everything*. Rwanda, Uganda. All of it.”

He sighed and lifted my face up to meet his lips. “Of course it will be hard. You’re studying *genocide*. That’s not easy. But you’ll be fine. It’s what you really want to do.”

But was it what I wanted really wanted to do? What was it inside of me that urged me to try to tackle such a dark subject? That desire couldn’t be normal. Was there something *wrong* with me?

I didn't ask him my questions—I was sure that he couldn't answer them any better than I could answer them for myself. So I sighed, kissed him back, and readied myself to take on a future for which I was wholly unprepared.

“You'll be fine. You'll make all kinds friends in Rwanda and Uganda. It'll be an awesome experience. You'll come back with so many stories,” he said softly as he flipped the ignition in his car.

“Yeah,” I agreed as he shifted into reverse. “I will.”

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The bus lurched forward as we hit another pothole. My stomach seized up, and I tried to suppress the carsickness for the hundredth time. We'd been in a bus for over twelve hours, having traveled across the border from Rwanda into Uganda. I was halfway through my study abroad trip, and we were bound for our two-week “break” in Uganda. First stop: the Nakivale Refugee Camp. We were traveling to meet with Rwandan refugees who had escaped from government persecution.

“You need a bag, Hannah?” asked one of the girls sitting behind me. I didn't turn to figure out who had asked me; the concept of turning backwards made my stomach do more flips.

“No,” I squeaked out.

We finally rolled slowly past a sign that read “Nakivale Refugee Camp” first in English and then six or seven unidentifiable languages beneath it. The bus rolled up to the top of a hill, and we looked down on the camp before us. There were people bustling along the dusty road, some with bags or jugs balanced on their heads. We rolled past homes constructed out of scrap metal that read “We love USA” printed in red lettering. Our driver brought the bus to a stop amidst a packed group of refugees. The crowd became eerily still as our driver put it in park.



Our academic director, Dan, bounded out of the bus to locate our guide, greeting the bystanders in Luganda as he shoved past them. I glanced out the window and was met with the silent, angry stares from hundreds of eyes. One man approached my window. His t-shirt was small enough that it was tearing at the seams. It was white with some light brown stained patches and read “Homecoming 2009” across the chest in green puffy paint. His hair was shaved down close to his head, making his forehead seem as though it stretched back endlessly. I could see a freshly healed scar across his right cheek.

I tried forced a smile to my lips to break the tension. In response, he lifted his hand with no sense of apprehension and rapped his knuckles against my window. I jumped slightly, startled by his aggressive gesture.

“Hey!” he called, looking at me through the window, “Why are you here?” he asked, articulating each English word laboriously with his thick accent. I turned my head, searching for an encouraging glance from one of my peers, but I was met only with startled, shifting glances that matched my own.

Another rap on the window. My head swiveled sharply back to the man. “You come to look at us like we are animals,” he said with apparent scorn. “You come here like you come to a zoo.”

I met his eyes briefly and we stared at each other for half a moment. He suddenly began to laugh, startling me once more. But he didn’t laugh with his eyes. Instead the laughter erupted ominously from his stomach, causing his abdomen to rise and fall with each slow “ha, ha.” The man retreated, still laughing, knowing that he’d done the appropriate damage, and slowly the crowd surrounding us returned to its regular business.

*Well, I thought to myself, Welcome to Uganda.*

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“I-D-P. It stands for Internally-Displaced-Persons,” our guide explained. We’d been in Uganda for over a week at this point, and we’d had this history repeated to us numerous times during our stay already. We’d settled in Gulu, a northern town, five days ago. It was the heart of the most recent conflict in Uganda, the town that had been most terrorized by Joseph Kony’s army—the Lord’s Resistance Army. We knew some of the history, and we’d seen a few IDP camps dotted along the roads as we drove in. But we let him tell us his version of the history, anyway.

“Museveni put our people—the IDPs—in these camps. You see them all over Uganda, but so many in Gulu. He did it for their protection from Joseph Kony.” The name stuck in the hollow, back of his throat, sounding more like “Coin.” I was learning that this was the correct way to say his name.

I’d had very little experience with the history of Northern Uganda prior to this trip. Other than a book and a few scholarly articles, we’d been brought to Gulu with little context of the conflict. I knew that Joseph Kony was the enemy, and that the current Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni was somehow also at fault. But the pieces didn’t fit nicely together for me. Joseph Kony killed his own ethnic group—the Acholi people—because they didn’t believe in his cause to overthrow the current regime. He picked off the children, abducted them, and forced them to be soldiers in his army. He married the girls and forced them to bear more children to support the cause. And in response, Museveni put them in these IDP camps, claiming that he was there to offer them protection. But really, he just made them easier targets for Kony and his child army.

It all made my head spin. Why did Joseph Kony kill his own people? How did he manage to brainwash his followers into staying loyal to his cause? And why the *hell* couldn’t anyone find

him and take him out of power? The Ugandans we'd spoken to told us that he was hiding "in the bush," but that was as specific as anyone could get. It didn't make *sense* to me, and I surmised that the death and killing made little sense to the victims, too.

Our guide was continuing to drone on about the history, and my eyes glazed over.

"The Acholi people do not have to live in them anymore, but many stay. We will go try to talk to some of them today." He was unnecessarily cheery for such a dark subject, smiling as he spoke and punctuating each sentence excitedly. Here he was, talking about murder and oppression and smiling all the while. This guy irked me.

My friend Hadley stood next to me, and she was trying desperately to scratch her scalp. She'd decided to try out a weave a few weeks ago. Her hair was short—not even to her shoulders—and dusty blonde, but the weave was black. It looked ridiculous at best. But at least this way she didn't have to wash her hair, not that that was a particularly likely prospect with a bucket shower, anyway.

She finally gave up, unable to reach her scalp through the wiry knots, and raised her hand to ask a question. "Do you know the people we're going to talk to?"

Our guide chuckled. "Oh no, dear." He wagged his finger at her. "We will just go and talk to them."

"So they have no idea we're coming?"

"No!" He chuckled again and directed us to climb onto the bus in front of our hotel. Hadley and I exchanged worried glances. It didn't sound particularly ethical to me, barging into someone's home and demanding their life's history and all. But what were we supposed to do about it? Our regular group of nineteen had been broken down into fours and fives for our day's excursions. Some of our classmates were visiting local non-profits and hospitals. But not us. We

were the “lucky ones” that were going to explore the IDP camp. Our academic director told us it would be an “...authentic experience. You’ll really get to talk to people who are *living it*.”

I climbed onboard despite my apprehension and helped Hadley reposition her hair as we made our way across the bumpy, unpaved roads. Uganda’s landscape was vastly different from where I’d been living for the last six weeks, and was unlike any I’d seen in the U.S. It was decidedly flat, with thick green-brown patches of grass growing in clumps in every direction. The roads were mostly unpaved, and cars kicked up dirt as they barreled past us. I found myself scrubbing my skin until it burned in my bucket shower to try to peel away the layers of dust and sweat I accumulated throughout the day.

The clouds felt like they were farther away here than they were anywhere I’d been before, and the sky reached up farther. When I’d mentioned this observation to Hadley a few nights prior while we lay under our mosquito nets, waiting for the calls of the street vendors to sing us to sleep, she’d rolled her eyes dramatically.

“That’s bullshit-poetic talk, Hannah. The clouds and the sky are exactly where they always are.” I’d only laughed in return, mostly at myself. I appreciated her honesty, even when it did come across a little too harsh. It kept me in check.

We rolled through Gulu, past the street vendors frying eggs and bananas at their various charcoal stove tops. We passed Café Larem, where I’d befriended a young Ugandan man by the name of Akenna during our first days in Gulu. His two goats stood in front of the café, sipping from a trough he set out for them. He’d let me name them, and I’d settled on Hansel and Gretel. It took Akenna a while to commit the names to memory, and since there wasn’t enough time for him to keep everyone’s foreign names stored, he’d decided that Hansel was a good enough nickname for Hadley, too (“It has that same sound, and now I only have to remember one of

them!”). Akenna had been a child soldier in Kony’s army. He didn’t like to talk much about it, and I didn’t ask him to. I felt more respectful—maybe less invasive—that way.

Just on the outskirts of the town of Gulu, our guide signaled for the bus driver to pull over.

“We go on foot from here,” he explained. There were waist-high grasses surrounding us, but I could see a few thatched roofs spotted in the distance. And so, to make our way, we tore through the grasses with our hands and legs. More than once, something sharp caught my calf, leaving it scratched and bloodied. I thought to myself that it might be useful if our guide had a machete, or anything to hack at the stalks creeping up our legs. But then again, what would it look like if he came marching into an IDP camp wielding a machete? I swatted at the sharp, dried stems with my hands and inhaled. Shuttering at the thought, I resolved to deal with the scratches when we returned to the hotel.

Finally, I pushed through the tall grasses into a clearing. Hadley stepped through with me, leaving our guide a few yards away. A guttural noise reverberated to my left and my head swiveled to identify it. The sound emanated from a little boy dancing excitedly on his toes. Undistinguishable sounds tore from his throat.

He was naked, and his body appeared somehow abnormal. His arms and legs were wiry, with jagged turns at the elbows and knees. The black skin that stretched over his jagged bones was coated in a thick layer of dust—he was more gray than black. His belly protruded outward because his back was arched back so far, and his outward turned belly button pointed at me. I couldn’t make his eyes meet mine. They didn’t focus properly, and that put me off. His hands began to swing around his head as if he was swatting away a bee, but there wasn’t anything

there. My eyes came to rest on his scalp, studying the thin bits of hair sprinkled between scaly, bald patches.

Part of me wanted to approach him and try to talk to him. But most of me was too afraid. He made me uncomfortable; maybe it was his nakedness, or perhaps his eyes. I couldn't place it.

He started to pee. The urine formed a cloudy pool on the dirt at his feet and pulled dark streaks down one of his legs. I averted my eyes.

Hadley reached over and tugged at my wrist. I didn't want to say anything, fearing that I would startle the boy. I looked to Hadley, raising my eyes in concern. She met me with a thin-lipped stare.

"I think he has AIDS," she whispered to me.

"How do you know?"

She sucked her teeth back against her lips and gestured uncomfortably with her chin. "In the eyes. He's blind." I nodded, unsure of how she came to such a quick conclusion, but trusting her regardless. We walked on as the boy's eyes rolled back and fourth uncertainly between us and his toes tapped against the puddle of pee at his feet.

Ahead of us sat the first in a line of round, clay homes. Their grey-brown color matched the dirt, and they sprouted up from the earth, seeming to match the landscape. The dark, thatched roofs sat perched on top of the clay domes. The first home had a blanket draped over a rounded doorway, which appeared to be the only way in. Our guide jogged up behind us and to the door. Without any announcement of his presence, he poked his head in, and I could hear him chirping excitedly in Acholi.

I turned to Hadley. "Is it just me, or do you feel horribly uncomfortable about what we're doing right now?" Before she got a chance to respond, our guide reemerged with a fragile-

looking Ugandan woman. Her back bent forward with an age that the smooth skin on her face didn't reveal. Hadley only looked at me and shook her head, eyebrows pulled together in concern. I understood that she agreed.

He held the woman by her shoulder as the group filed in around Hadley and me. "This woman will speak to us about her experience living here in this camp!" he exclaimed. He didn't share her name with us—I'm not sure he ever even asked her what it was. She didn't offer it to us, either. Our guide waited for her to speak, but she only looked out upon the group of young, white women in front of her. My cheeks began to burn with embarrassment.

He offered a few encouraging words in Acholi to her, and she began to speak slowly. He translated for her as she spoke.

"I have been living in this camp for fourteen years." As she paused, she pressed her lips together. She seemed to be taking us all in, debating whether or not to continue. Debating whether we deserved her story. I wondered to myself whether we were. Sighing heavily, she continued. "I came here when the government first made the camp. We were told it would be safe, and that they would give us food and water. They did, sometimes." She paused again and rubbed her palm against her eye, letting her fingers trail over a scar across her forehead that I hadn't noticed before. It looked old; it was clean around the edges and just as black as the rest of her skin. I wondered where it came from but the potential realities of the butt of a rifle or the edge of the machete were much too vivid, so I tried to focus on her words instead.

Her language flowed more fluidly the longer she spoke, and the Acholi was foreign to my ears. After weeks of intensive Kinyarwanda study, the Acholi language sounded like it had far too many consonants. The "ch," "k," and "ft" sounds cut against my ears aggressively.

“I came when Kony and his army were attacking in Gulu. Those were bad times here, people disappearing and dying all the time. But he has not been back here for many months. He must be hiding out somewhere in the bush now.”

Our guide asked her something in Acholi and she paused again. I watched as a fly buzzing around her face landed on her left temple. She didn't take any notice of it, even as its feet twitched and tickled her skin. It jerked side to side and finally settled in at her hairline, rubbing its front feelers together contentedly. I had the urge to approach her and swat it away, but I didn't. When she opened her mouth to speak again, the fly still perched, frozen on her temple. Our guide translated for us as she spoke, explaining that he'd asked her why she doesn't leave the camp now that it is no longer mandated by the government that she stay.

“I can't leave. Not now. I'm positive. And so is my husband.”

I didn't understand what she's saying, so I looked questioningly to Hadley. I raised an eyebrow at her and mouthed, *Positive?* She nodded and mouthed back to me. *HIV*. My ears started to ring and a chill climbed up my back. I understood that the spreading of HIV was a tool used during genocide. It was a simple fact that I'd highlighted across the lines of scholarly articles for weeks since I'd arrived to Africa. But it wasn't one that I'd had to face quite so personally.

“We are very close to the medical clinic here in this camp. I can go get us our medicine here. And now my husband is very sick and can't move. He can only lay inside.” She gestured with her hand to the dark doorway behind her. On the ground at her feet, a few children sat with their arms wrapped around a blue bowl with a crack down the middle. White goo sat in the base of the bowl, and the children kept dunking their fingers in and sucking the goo out. Its



consistency reminded me of wet Play-Doh, and I suspected that it likely had the same nutritional value.

The speaker paused and clenched her jaw. I noticed that somewhere along the way, the fly had departed. Her long, thin fingers scratched at her nearly bald head where it had sat before. Our translator offered her a few encouraging words, but she held up her hand to quiet him. I understood that she didn't need his encouragement. This was her story to tell. Looking around at us—white, college-educated, clean and fed—she narrowed her eyes before continuing.

“I am going to die,” she began, continuing to look at us as to direct the words not to her fellow Ugandan, but to the invaders. “I will die from this disease. I have many children here. Five are mine, but many of them are not. I care for them because their parents have died of this disease, too. One of my children is positive, too.” The hair on my arms rose and prickled, and the chill climbed farther to my neck. “But only her,” she gestured to one of the children sucking the white paste out of the bowl. “We were lucky.” Lucky seemed to me to be the wrong word. My ears wouldn't stop ringing. “But where will my children go when I am dead? What will they do?”

She paused, sincerely waiting for a response. Our guide translated and looked to us. He apparently had no intention to aid us in finding an answer. I looked frantically about my classmates for someone, *anyone*, who knew what to say. Hadley and I made eye contact and she cleared her throat, stepping into the role of spokesperson.

“I...um...I'm not sure.”

The Ugandan woman nodded once, not waiting for a translation. She understood perfectly well. It was what she must have grown to expect of people like us. She continued,

“What are you going to do for my children? You’re going to leave here knowing that I am going to die, and that they probably will, too. What will you do to change that?”

I looked at my feet, not allowing myself to face the shame that I had no answer for her. What was I *supposed* to do? I didn’t work for the government. I had no money. It struck me, though, that likely those very people who did work for the government and did have money had long since come and gone, not offering much of anything to her. We were just another group of white people swallowing up her story and returning to our hot showers and health care.

Hadley spoke again on our behalf as the burn of my cheeks crept up my ears. “We’re only students,” she began quietly. “We’re here to learn. So we can take your story and try to share it with people in our home. We can advocate there. But that’s the best we can do.”

Our guide translated to her and she nodded her head. She thanked us quietly and turned to reenter her house, leaving us. I finally looked around at my friends and saw their cheeks were red with the same embarrassment as mine. Hadley filed in behind me as we turned to leave, and she grabbed my hand from behind.

I could feel hers trembling. I couldn’t tell with what. Fear? No, it wasn’t fear. Rage? That felt more accurate. Rage at the world. And rage at our insignificance in it. I squeezed her hand in return and let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding.

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Hadley and I lay next to each other in our beds that night, mosquito nets tucked carefully around us. The power was out in Gulu again, as it was every few days, and not even moonlight could creep in through our window. Power was scarce in Gulu, and we were lucky to have it for the short spurts that we did. Most of the shops and hotels had generators, but since it was well past waking hours, our hotel wasn’t likely to turn theirs on. My only reassurance that Hadley was

next to me was her quiet breathing and her occasional turn from side to side. Though we'd been lying in silence for over an hour, I knew she wasn't sleeping yet.

"Hey, Had?"

"Mmm?"

I didn't actually have anything to say; I just wanted reassurance that she was listening to me, too. After a minute or so of silence she whispered to me, "You okay?"

Silence.

"Are you thinking about that woman?"

"Yeah."

"Me, too."

I sighed. "Do you feel like we did something wrong? Something bad?"

"What do you mean?"

I rolled onto my side and tore the mosquito net up over my head so there were fewer barriers between us. She did the same to hers, though I could only see her rough shape in front of me. "I mean," I started, "She told us that she's *dying* and we told her we were going to let that happen. Doesn't that feel *wrong*?"

Silence.

"Had?"

She let out an exasperated grunt. "I don't *know*, Hannah. I think we just have to suck it up. I don't think we're always doing the right thing by being here, but at least we're getting the truth. That has to mean something."

"I just don't know if it does."

Hadley turned to face the other way, not wanting to continue the conversation. I reached over and retucked her mosquito net, and then my own.

*Suck it up.* That was what she'd told me to do. *Deal with it.* It wasn't like there was a guide that taught me just how to take this all in, though. In roughly six weeks we would have to return to our respective homes in the U.S. and try to make this experience a part of our lives. But how was I supposed to do that without Hadley, without all of the people who *saw* what I *saw* that day? These were images I could write and tell, but they would never be realities for anyone but us. And yet, if I did nothing with this experience it was wasted. And if I wasted it then this Ugandan woman would die with her children for nothing at all. Helplessness crept over and into me, welling in and around my throat as if to suffocate me.

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*Thrrrrump. Thrrrrump.* I rolled my fingertips against the edge of the table. I'd been waiting in the crowded dining hall for twenty minutes, politely nodding precisely six times when different parties of people asked if I was using the table.

"Yeah, someone will be joining me soon," I told them each time. But I was starting to doubt that fact myself by the time John jogged in through the doors and tossed his bag down at my feet.

"Sorry," he muttered, running a fingers through his shaggy, red hair. "I'm always late. I guess that nothing has changed since..." he trailed off.

"Since we broke up." I finished his thought and looked up at him, hands clasped in front of me. *I will handle this professionally. I will be respectful.* He ruffled his hair up again instead of responding.

"You're letting your hair grow out," I remarked.

“Yeah.”

“Looks good.”

“You hate my hair when it gets long.”

I plucked a chip out of the bag in front of me, breaking it apart in my fingers but not eating it. I'd avoided an encounter like this for almost a year. We'd been leading separate lives since returning to college after our respective trips abroad. “So, why did you want to get dinner?” I asked, trying to be casual.

John unrolled his sandwich from its wrapper. “I don't know. I guess I want us to stop being so awkward around each other. We have to have class together.”

I rolled my eyes. *Yeah, sure, let's snap our fingers and pretend like you didn't dump me the after I came back with a trauma diagnosis from Africa. No problem.*

“John, we don't have to be friends. Actually, I don't really want to be friends.” *There goes the hand through the hair again.* God, I wanted tell him to sit still and stop messing up his hair.

He took a bite of his sandwich and spoke to me through the half of his mouth that he wasn't chewing with. “Yeah, I know. I just thought maybe after dinner we could be nicer in class and stuff.”

I rolled up my bag of chips and tossed them into my bag. This conversation was killing my appetite. “Yeah, sure.”

We sat there, both focused on him eating his sandwich, for a few sorely uncomfortable moments.

“So...” he started, “What are you planning on doing after graduation?”

I cringed at the mention of graduation. The truth was that I didn't have a good answer for his question, well at least not one that he'd want to hear. "I...uh...I applied for Peace Corps over winter break."

He scoffed. "Peace Corps? You kidding?"

"No, why would I be kidding?"

"The Peace Corps is full of pretentious ass holes that try to shove American culture down other peoples' throats."

"Thanks." It was the response I'd expected. When I'd returned from Rwanda and Uganda, John found that I had changed a bit too much for his liking. This very subject had been the cause of a fight that was the breaking point in our relationship. I'd returned from study abroad socially crippled and depressed, grappling with exactly *how* to take in what I'd seen, fighting for a cause that I had yet to uncover. He couldn't understand the hours I spent cowering in my bed through the day, or the nights I spent awake, fighting my mind to stop plastering images too painful to look at onto the backs of my eyelids.

"Sorry," he said, a piece of turkey hanging out of his lip. "I didn't mean that you'd be like that. It's just most people. I'm sure you'll be fine."

I imagined ripping the sandwich out of his hands and throwing it in his face. *You will handle this respectfully, Hannah. Be the better person. Forgive him and move on.*

"Yeah, I will. It's the perfect fit for me. I happen not to be a pretentious asshole, in case you didn't know, so I think it'll be great."

John nodded, not looking at me. "Never would have thought you'd go that route when you came back. You couldn't even talk about Rwanda and Uganda without crying for weeks."

*But that's not who I am anymore*, I think to myself. But I don't feel like I have to prove it to him anymore. *I am where I am, and I'm finally coming to terms with it even if he can't*. "Yeah, well, it wasn't exactly a three month safari ride for me. You know it better than anyone; you dated me through it. But if I did it—and I made it this far—I can do it again."

"Yeah, I'm sure," he said with little confidence.

I could feel my skin prickling with simultaneous irritation and anger. Picking up my bag, I pushed back from the table. "Time for me to go. This was nice. I'll see you in class."

John stood up, too. "Good luck with everything."

*Everything*, I thought to myself, *that's a loaded word*. I knew he meant with the Peace Corps, but "everything" seemed like a lot more to me.

Everything was the beginning. It was my fear and my self-doubt when I cried in John's car. Everything was the middle—the woman in the IDP camp with a fly perched on her temple. But everything was also the end. The end was *here*, with the two of us trying to have a grown up conversation about our futures. But the end wasn't really the end. The end was *now*.

I could continue to choke and drown on my own bitterness with what I'd experienced. I could continue to hide under layers of blankets in my bed, paralyzed with guilt and anger. Or I could go out into the world and *do* something with what I'd seen.

I didn't need his luck with *everything*.

I'd need luck with chance, not with purpose. And to me, purpose was *everything*.