

Foreward

April 2017

In the summer of 2013, I lived in Port-au-Prince, Haiti for two months, interning for an alternative media and investigative journalism organization called Ayiti Kale Je (or Haiti Grassroots Watch).

This is the blog I kept sometimes.

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The Orphans Need Me

June 2013

When I travel, I feel like every thought I have is suddenly relevant. Every experience is worth taking note of. The plane smells like fart, and peanuts. The woman at the end of my row is illiterate and has asked me to fill out her customs forms for her. I love her for this. I'm terrified she'll speak French at me and figure out I'm an idiot.

The thing about Haiti is that nobody comes here on vacation. No one at the airport booked a flight to Port-au-Prince just 'cause. I find I'm curious about my fellow travelers' stories in a way I never usually am. If asked on a flight to Dallas-Ft. Worth what I'm doing in Texas, and I'll stare back, full of pity for the person who thinks I'd actually spend any more time than I absolutely have to in Texas.

"Nothing," I say, "It's just a connecting flight."

Where to? they might ask.

The answer is usually either New York or Long Beach, but it doesn't matter much either way.

"Somewhere better," I reply.

Not so with Port-au-Prince. I want to know everything about everybody. The black families speaking French I freely assume are Haitian, and they instantly become intimidating. *Please don't speak to me in French*, I think at them, and it seems to work. I smile like a mute. Then there are the old white men in pressed suits, all flying first class or carrying cards that say Executive Platinum. Businessmen, diplomats, drug traffickers. I couldn't care less. I lump them all into "Rich People" and I hope no one thinks I'm like them. There's the almost white-haired Swedish couple in flowing cotton shirts and glinting silver cross necklaces. The do-gooder missionaries. God be with them. They look like the Targaryens.

Then I see two young French girls in jeans and button downs, with a quiet elegance that seems to come only from not being American. What is their story?

And more to the point, what is mine?

Hearing the boarding announcements in French is somehow what does it. I'm actually doing this.

I'm moving to fucking Haiti.

Whatever information I know to the contrary, no matter how many maps I look at, I still imagine the Caribbean being in the Gulf of Mexico, and Haiti is somewhere south of Alabama. Wracked by disease and oil spills and probably bears.

I don't know why I thought I could do this.

But the plane full of other people whose stories I can't quite figure out is comforting. What are they doing here? Together I think we form this collective of people who don't have a real niche. Or at least, not an obvious one. I like us. I like being part of this group, even if I'm the only one who knows about it.

It's my first night here, and no one has yet asked me what I'm doing in Haiti. If they did, I'm not sure how I'd answer.

"I'm a journalist," I imagine saying, tossing my hair aside and basking in how cool they'll think I am.

I'm a journalist? Lie. I'm a college student. I'm a journalist intern. I'm supposed to teach people how to use Final Cut and update websites and Twitter and such. Like I'm qualified to teach anything.

I don't really think of myself as Here to Help either. I hope I can help somebody do something, but I don't see myself as someone who came to Help People. Mostly I came because I was bored, and I couldn't bear to spend another summer in an office in New York or DC.

Haiti? Sure, why the hell not?

But I don't want to be useless here either. I just don't imagine that I can do much of anything. Against centuries of colonialism and corruption, and the sheer devastation of the earthquake and subsequent cholera epidemic, I don't kid myself that I'll be that important. I'm just looking to have a good time.

I'm reminded of two teenage blonde girls I saw about a week ago. They were standing next to a busy intersection, collecting money for a trip to Haiti. They had large poster board signs colored with bright marker, reading "HELP US GET TO HAITI! THE ORPHANS NEED US!"

This was in La Jolla, an affluent part of San Diego someone once described as "a great place for old people and their parents." I pulled up beside them and chatted for a second, told them about my trip. One of the girls had been to Haiti before, and I asked her what I should expect.

“It’s crazy!” she gushed, “But the people are amazing. Just the *joy* that they have, amid so much poverty. Their *joy* is amazing.”

I zoned out then, immediately seeing this girl’s face plastered in the middle of a crowd of big-bellied malnourished black children on a college recruiting pamphlet.

“Sarah spent the summer *volunteering*. With *orphans*. In *Haiti*” the magazine would say.

Underneath would be a pull out quote from Sarah. “Just the *joy* that they have! They taught me *so much!*”

I drove away shivering.

I hope the people I meet in Haiti will teach me something, mostly because I’m not sure I’m able to teach anyone anything, and someone ought to learn something from this experience. I’m just still wondering how the hell I ended up here.

The house I’m staying in is an off-white compound of dormitory-like rooms surrounded by a very tall, barbed wire-topped wall. It reminds me a bit of the compound where they found Bin Laden, and for some reason this is comforting. My room has air conditioning (score), a bed, and a closet. It’s simple, and I love it.

The first thing I do is break the closet door. Not on purpose, obviously. The lock is jammed and I can’t get the key out. *Great*, I think. *I’ve been in the country five minutes and I already broke something*. I settle down to take a nap before I’m taken to the office, made nearly impossible by the sounds of the preschool right outside the building. It seems silly to put down a mosquito net just to lie down for an hour, but if I don’t it keeps hitting me in the face. Plus, it makes me feel like a princess.

I wonder if Bin Laden felt like a princess in his compound too. Do they use mosquito nets in Pakistan? This is the kind of thing I have no reason to research, but probably will. In fact, I’ll probably spend a lot more time on it than I will on learning anything about the country I’m actually in.

(Side note: I just rolled over and accidentally pulled down the mosquito net. Ten minutes, and I’ve broken two things. I feel like the UN.)

The truth is, I know just about nothing about Haiti. I’m about one step above thinking the country’s biggest problem is tigers. I read *The Black Jacobins* well enough to write a paper on it for a class, and promptly forgot everything it said. None of it is really relevant now, and a lot of it isn’t even strictly true.

Compiled here, for your pleasure, is a comprehensive list of everything I know about Haiti:

1. The founding father of Haiti was named Toussaint L’Ouverture. He was a cool black dude a long time ago who led a slave revolution and kicked out the French. There is at least one street (that I have seen) named after him.
2. There is a preschool right outside my room and they have chickens.

3. I don't really know if *they're* the ones with the chickens, but somebody outside has chickens. Or at least *a* chicken. Maybe a turkey. Or a kid who makes weird noises.
4. It's hot.
5. It's dusty. Everything is kind of greyish white. The walls are all painted with advertisements and the cars are all decorated, but the dustiness of it takes over, like a layer of age.
6. Everything looks pretty broken.
7. Just about everyone speaks Creole, except me.
8. Just about everyone speaks bad French, including me.
9. The nicer houses are all surrounded by eight-foot-tall barbed wire fences and look kind of like that compound where they found Bin Laden.
10. The food is bomb-diggity. The water is cholera-diggity.

I hope to add to this list as time goes on, but for now, that's really all I got.

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That's a Wrap, Boys!

June 2013

At a bar in the Miami Airport at 5 am, something on the TV catches my attention – it's one of those *Army of One* join the military commercials. Electric guitar in the background. Men in fatigues carry cardboard boxes across a barren desert landscape, and sexily drip sweat as they hoist their boxes onto the back of a truck.

What caught my attention, though, were the boxes the soldiers were carrying. All square, brown cardboard, nondescript in every way, except for the label:

Aid.

Typed on the cardboard in large, friendly Times New Roman: "Aid."

In case you were unsure whether the uniformed hunks were there to help people or not. Spoiler alert: they are!

The sad thing is, I think this is how most Westerners think of aid. Do-gooders carrying boxes to poor, well-intentioned people in the impoverished land of wherever. Haiti had an earthquake? Cambodia had a civil war? Pakistan got firebombed by US drone strikes? Send in the Aid! NGOs and soldiers carrying cardboard boxes that will Help People. How will they help them? With Aid! What's in the boxes? Aid! It's that easy. Just give them aid.

But wait! you might say. That doesn't make sense – Shhh. Have some Aid.

What gets me about the commercial is how unspecified it is. Not powdered milk, medical supplies, drinking water, smallpox blankets. Just, "Aid." Maybe they think it makes a more effective commercial. No one watching a baseball game in Miami at 5 am is going to pay that

close attention to the commercial to figure out what the soldiers are doing unless it's clearly spelled out for them. *Delivering aid*. Literally making deliveries of boxes of "aid." The point is that the US Army helps people and looks sexy doing it.

But it's also one of those trigger things – a nod and a wink saying, "Yes, this *is* just a commercial!" It's all fake. There's not even the tiniest chance this is raw footage someone filmed on their iPhone of real soldiers giving relief to traumatized areas.

I wonder mostly about the casting process. Are these trained actors, or did they put out an ad with real soldiers to save money? What were the auditions like? "Meyers – you may have 4 Purple Hearts, but you're fat and your missing leg and left eye socket make audiences uncomfortable."

After a long and grueling process, the army manages to secure 6-8 hunky, racially diverse men to trudge through a dusty desert and deliver boxes of Aid. They're on set, in costume, and then come the final touches to hair and makeup. Load up the boxes of Aid, and – action, boys! Run like those boxes of Aid are really heavy!

"What's in here, sir?" Soldier O'Conner asks.

"Condoms, mostly," says the director, "and some packing peanuts."

They trudge forward through the desert, sweat dripping down their chiseled cheekbones as they wield Aid boxes.

"Looking good, boys!" says the director. "Tighten those pecks, Watkins. Eyes up, smiles. Gorgeous, boys. Remember, you're Helping People."

Watkins rolls his eyes at Rogers as they pretend to strain under the weight of the boxes.

"Chins up, guys," says the director, "You're doing this for America!"

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Excuse Me, Don't You Know That Has Cholera

June 2013

Last night I woke up to gunshots outside my window. 1, 2, 3, 4, rapid-fire and over in a second, but unmistakable. When you're not prepared for it, it has a weird effect. In the silence that follows every sound is magnified a hundredfold. Every footfall, every dog bark, echoes off the walls like a thunderclap. The actual thunder doesn't help matters.

I walk outside, wanting to go down to the kitchen and be around something comforting. Or eat something. Mostly eat something. But my room in the compound is detached from the main house. There are four rooms on the second floor, locked off by another iron gate from the already locked-in house. And there, in that moment, I'm a caged animal, trapped and scared and confused and far from home and alone.

Then I lose it. Waves of panic crash over me like they haven't in years, and my heart is pounding through my throat and up into my brain and I can't think or feel, fear just takes over. I run my tongue along my teeth, remembering how in the dreams I just woke from they were all crooked and falling out. How many times I turned my teeth in my gums and it hurt so real and I'm scared and alone and crazy and helpless and so young.

So I do what any not-sane person would do: I start knocking on doors. At one in the morning. In a house full of people I met this morning who already know me only as the outsider in the group. One door is unlocked and I push it open, and a startled med student looks back at me.

It's awkward, but he's nice about it. In retrospect it must have been so weird, but at the time it felt painfully necessary. Just to be close to someone, to feel connected, to not be alone. We sat up and talked for an hour, and after the thunder died down I finally went back to sleep. I don't remember what we talked about. Travel and helping people and capitalism and movies and Seattle. Even my boyfriends usually want me to fuck off after a couple minutes of panic attacking them, but this guy acted so genuinely alright with it.

I remember he said one thing that stuck with me. "Life is doable." I don't remember the context, but I like it. Life is doable. And it is. I went back to bed, and drifted into another dream where all of my teeth fell out.

Today I went on a tour of the city. This mostly consisted of sitting on the back of a motorcycle and driving past various buildings long enough for them not to make any lasting impression.

"You see?" LouLou, our organization's driver, says as he points out the National Palace.

"Mhmm," I answer.

I don't see. As a matter of fact, past the fence I can't see much of anything. A yard, and behind that... not a building. Maybe he's showing it to me because it was destroyed in the earthquake? I would ask, but his French is even more broken than mine. If I'd actually researched anything about this country before showing up, I'd probably already know the answer. But I didn't, and I don't.

I find my days spent for the most part hoping people don't talk to me. Not that I don't want to talk to them, it's just exhausting trying to speak French when the reality is that I really don't speak French.

My friend Milo from work took me to the Brazilian Cultural Center so I could ask about capoeira classes. He says he wants to learn Portuguese. I try to teach him some things, but it's difficult to teach one language you don't really speak in another you speak only marginally better. I feel like the Dos Equis man – *She speaks Portuguese, in French*. I manage to teach him *Bom dia* and *Tudo bem*, but I falter when trying to explain why they're pronounced the way they are.

“You see,” I start to say, “a *d* is pronounced like a *j*, but only when it comes before an *i*. Or an *e*, but only when the *e* sounds like an *i*. And an *m* at the end of a word just sounds like you’re nose is stuffed up, but doesn’t really make a noise.” I gave up after “j.”

My coworker’s daughter came to the office today. If I had to guess, I’d say she was about three, but I know children tend to look younger here. A visible side effect of early poverty and malnourishment, the small stature of so many people. Milo is an inch shorter than me, and must weigh about half of what I do.

Not speaking Creole and being very lazy about my French, I never quite got the girl’s name. For the longest time, she refused to speak back when I talked to her.

“Ça va?” I’d ask, like an overbearing mother to a show poodle.

She’d blink at me with confused brown eyes. I could imagine her mind whirring, “What is this strange pinkish creature that looks like my mom but is fatter and has creepy pale skin? Is it some kind of alien?”

I promptly give up on us ever being friends and turn to Milo.

“She doesn’t like me,” I say. He laughs.

Then the girl discovers she can open the drawer at my feet, and she does so over and over again. There’s a folder inside, containing some articles on Gender-Based Violence.

“Qu’est-ce que c’est?” I ask, still like I’m talking to a poodle. She laughs louder and louder. She loves me now, the creepy pale alien girl. She finally comes to accept that aliens have names too, and she can’t stop shouting mine. ANNA! AAANNNNAA! BANANA! BANANA ANNA BANANANA! It goes on and on. My smile slides into a grimace and I turn back to my work.

When I say work, I mean my first week “homework.” And by homework, I actually mean homework. I have French grammar exercises. Little fill in the blank sentences like “*Valerie goes to bed early tonight so that tomorrow...*” and I have to complete the sentence. After my junior year of high school, I really thought we were past all of this.

But the old habits quickly come back along with some of my stranger French vocabulary.

“Valerie goes to bed early tonight so that tomorrow she can go on a killing spree.”

The French word for killing spree is *tuelrie*, which to me sounds like a kind of doily. If stopped on the street and asked by a nice old lady if I felt like a *tuelrie*, I’d probably pack a picnic basket.

The rest of the sentences don’t fare much better.

“Veronique is always in good humor despite her lack of legs.”
“I must spend the day in the garden so that I can bury the bodies.”

“Jean has a vegetable for a penis.”

There are armed guards at the supermarkets here. Stray dogs with two rows of bulging tits that drag on the ground hunt for scraps in the gutter. I saw two tall, thin naked men bathing in the river today. I wanted to lean over and shout “EXCUSE ME DON’T YOU KNOW THAT HAS CHOLERA?” But of course they do. They don’t have a choice.

I do, though. I chose to be here. I can leave at any time, in a country full of people who can’t. It’s amazing how slums look beautiful from far away. The rust on the tops of tin shantytown roofs could be red brick on the coast of Dubrovnik when viewed from an air conditioned room high above the city.

I wore shorts today, which apparently means I’m a prostitute. I burned my leg on the side of the motorcycle. Still we drive around and around, pausing only long enough at each place for none of it to make much impression. The heat, the people, the buildings, the rubble, the poverty.

I’m traumatized by how little I’m traumatized.

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White People Tho

June 2013

Happy belated birthday to me (and my mom.) My logic recently has been – it’s my birthday, I’ll eat six pounds of Hershey’s Cookies & Cream drops at my work desk if I want to. And then I’ll go home and eat a box of Danish cookies. And then dinner. Because it’s my birthday, and I’m young and alive and abroad and I have nothing else to do.

I haven’t been writing much the past couple of days, not because I’ve been busy, but mostly because there isn’t anything new to say yet. The initial culture-shock wasn’t very shocking, and the interesting things of note have all been said.

It’s Saturday afternoon and honestly, I’m pretty bored. When I’ve traveled before, I’ve either gone with people, or gone to a place where it’s easy to go out and meet people. When I lived in Israel, I’d just put on some music and take a walk, see a movie, go to the beach, go out to dinner. I met tons of people through capoeira and made some really good friends. Here, I can’t even go to capoeira because our driver only works until seven and the class goes until eight.

It’s easy to make friends when you’re traveling if you’re gregarious and don’t mind latching onto people and hanging on their social calendars for dear life. I’m fine with doing this. But it’s hard to meet people when you’re traveling in a country where you’re not supposed to go out by yourself, or at all after dark, and you can’t go to about half the city at all, and you don’t speak the language, and no one speaks English, and most people don’t speak French, and you stick out like a sore, albino thumb everywhere you go.

So I'm sitting on the balcony of the big, fenced in compound, watching people meander around the streets and enjoying the wind and the cool-ish day, trying to entertain myself with our slow internet and itching to travel.

It's not so much that I can't entertain myself alone. I'm great at wasting whole days watching Netflix and checking Facebook and masturbating. That's easy. But I could do all of that at home. I'm in a new country, in a part of the world I've barely been to before. There's a whole new culture and landscape and so much new food to eat. And I'm cooped up, behind my high walls, alone in a big house with nowhere to go.

According to the internet, there's actually a lot of fun stuff to do in the PAP. Bars and restaurants and movie theaters that charge \$2 a ticket. But being a foreign rich white person, I'm not supposed to go anywhere without a driver and someone to meet at the other end.

Which brings me to something I've been thinking about a lot: white people here.

We're like macadamia nuts in a chocolate cookie: sort of weird looking, hard on the teeth, the part most people eat around and nobody really likes and a chocolate cookie would probably be better off without. But we're easy to spot.

What's weirdest is how much seeing white people comforts me here. It feels sick to me, since I usually kind of hate white people as an idea. Even weirder, because I know most of the white people here work for the UN or some NGO whose work may be helping in a band-aid short-term sense, but is probably in the long run making Haiti aid-dependent, corrupt, and prey to corporate predators from the global north who capitalize on natural disasters and poverty to deliberately keep Haitian labor cheap and Haitian land exploitable.

That being said, every time I see a white person, I want to say Hi. And I know I'm not the only one. I was out for a walk with a girl who was staying at the house, another American, and we passed a tall French-looking white woman on the road. I looked at her the same way I would anyone else passing me on the sidewalk, and she just grinned at us.

I couldn't think why the sight of us would make her happy. She didn't know us, she didn't speak to us, she didn't look American.

And then I thought – Maybe it was just race. We were white. She was white. We were a tiny piece of home in a foreign land, all because of our race. Which isn't to say there aren't white Haitians or black foreigners. There just aren't very many.

I've been thinking a lot about what it might be to travel here if I were black. Would there be the same precaution, the same wariness, the same look of being utterly out of place? When I ride down the road on the back of a motorcycle, people stare. A Belgian woman drove me home last night, and the boys in the tap-tap in front of us looked at us like we were two human-size guinea pigs in tutus driving a car. Or something. Not with hostility or with kindness, just a strange, almost bewildered curiosity.

I have never felt colonialism so deeply.

I feel guilty for speaking French, and even worse for speaking English. I am Western arrogance personified.

But when I see others like me, I don't feel that same hatred or dislike I feel for myself here. I think "PLEASE GOD SPEAK ENGLISH AT ME AND BE MY FRIEND."

Particularly when I see white people on their own. It's like seeing a dog walk on its hind legs. The big groups of white people – students, doctors, missionaries – they stare at me even more than the Haitians do. The Haitians are, I think, by and large used to white foreigners invading their country and not ever interacting with them. The white people conglomerations, though, look shocked. Here I am, some white chick sandwiched between two black Haitians on the back of a motorcycle. I just look at them, aware of my Oreo-cream-filling appearance. They stare at me. We stare and are White at each other.

In the glance between two white people here are so many unspoken questions and curiosities. "What are you doing here?"

"Hello, person whose work I probably don't approve of but I love you in a weird way because you're so obviously a clueless American like me and maybe if we stick together we'll feel less clueless."

In Europe, this might work. Find a traveling buddy and you'll be more confident and maybe blend in more. In Haiti... well, a double-stuffed Oreo still looks like an Oreo.

When I see white people on motorcycles like me, I really lose it. I hate LouLou for driving so slow when they're ahead of us.

"AFTER THAT WHITE DUDE!" I want to yell, and we'll speed off into the sunset, pull up beside the be-stubbled, cargo-panted wonder and I'll say, "What up." And we will be best friends. Even if I hate everything he does, at least he's foreign too.

Which takes me back to the question of what it would be like to come here if I were black. I remember talking to a black woman about traveling in Zambia. She was with a student group, lots of white kids, and they got stared at and pointed out wherever they went. But not her. If she dressed in a culturally-normal manner for Zambia, no one would know she was foreign until she opened her mouth. An invisible minority. I think it must be both comforting and alienating. Or is it how I feel when I travel somewhere like Italy? That race doesn't seem to be an issue, because I am in the majority.

And yet – being white in Haiti feels more what I imagine colonial settlers felt like than racial minorities in the US or Europe feel like. I'm even more easily trusted by the police and the guards.

I remember waiting outside the Brazilian Cultural Center while Milo talked to the guard. The guard was instantly suspicious, wondering what the hell this Haitian journalist was doing at his gate. He tried to explain how he was with a friend who was interested in checking out the cultural center. The guard was having none of it.

And then he saw me.

I spoke to him quickly in French, saying I do capoeira and I wanted to ask about the classes. And boom, we were let in. He laughed when we left and said “Ayyyyy capoeira! Parana eeeeeee.”

I laughed and finished the song. “Paranaueeee, paraná!” And we left.

The armed guards at the grocery stores smile and nod at me. They pull their guns in closer to their chests, away from me. *Because I am white.* And therefore, *rich.* And therefore, to be protected.

I hate it on principle, but the honest truth is my alien status makes me feel safer. If I were black, they would ask me questions. Even in a black country, white people are still setting the rules and colonial racism still persists.

I want to hate it, but I benefit from it.

Really, I just want someone to talk to about it. When I see white people around, I don't really stare at them with curiosity. I more implore them with my eyes, like a dog caught peeing in the living room. *Please, understand me. Be my friend.*

And then we can go out places together, and maybe travel, and you and I can be interesting expats together and I won't be stuck in my house writing blog posts that you will never read.

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Why Anywhere?

June 2013

When I was a sophomore in high school I went to India. It was one of those two-week “community service” fiascos, sponsored by my school. The kind of trip where everyone has to buy a whole new wardrobe at REI and comes home complaining that you just can't get *real* biryani anywhere here. (Side note: you can in Queens.)

The minute the trip was announced, I *had* to go. I just did. But I didn't think about what that entailed much until all the students who were going had a meeting a few weeks before we left. We sat around a big table and talked about what to pack, what to expect, what we were most looking forward to. Most people said they were excited to meet all the kids at the shelter we would be working at.

I blanched and looked at my hands, thinking, “*We're working at a shelter?*”

Somehow I'd forgotten, or, more likely, never bothered to find out in the first place. When they got to me, my mind was racing. "Um, I want to poke an elephant. I want to take one of those stupid Taj Mahal photos where you stand far away and make it look like it's really tiny sitting on your hand. I want to eat so much curry that I start shitting fireballs."

"I'm excited for EVERYTHING!" I said, thinking, "Fuck, how long do we have to spend at this shelter?"

Three days, turned out to be the answer. When we left, I sat on the bus next to a boy who stared longingly back over the fields toward the shelter. Under his breath he prayed to the Bus gods, "Break down, break down, break down!"

I started silently praying myself. "Don't break down, don't break down, let's leave already."

In the end, my prayer won out, and we lurched off down a dusty road into the sunrise. It wasn't that I didn't like the shelter home. It was fine, actually a lot more fun than I thought it would be. I was just itching to get to the next thing. The Red Fort. The temple where the Buddha gave his first sermon. Sunrise on the Ganges. Later, poor kids. I had my sights set on the next horizon.

I really was excited for India. It seemed *exotic* and *interesting*, and personally rewarding since around then I was first getting into yoga and Hinduism and meditation. But my desperate desire to see India ran deeper than all of that. I just wanted to be there. I had an itch, and once it got in my mind I had to follow it.

I get that sometimes with places. I feel some magnetic pull from inside my stomach that knows... what exactly? I can't really place it. Just that there's something for me there. Anywhere. Wherever.

This was all about the time that I first read Elizabeth Gilbert's book *Eat, Pray, Love*. I bought the audiobook on a whim on iTunes, and used to walk down to Starbucks and eat a vanilla cupcake and stare at the suburban moms in their minivans and slurp my frappuccino and pretend we were in Florence, or Kathmandu, or wherever. I was fourteen and bored and lazy and lost in suburban San Diego, a place with about as much exoticism as a pancake.

The book came into my life at such a particular time, my own little, commercially successful sign from God. I was just getting into yoga, in the depths of a soul-wracking spiritual search, in love with the idea of living in Europe, and, to top it all off, gearing up to spend two weeks in India. It broke my heart open. I'd never wanted anything quite like I wanted to live in that book.

I know all of the post-colonial criticism blah that's been levied against Elizabeth Gilbert for writing *Eat, Pray, Love*, and I've levied a lot of it myself. *Oh look, privileged white woman goes to end her first world problems among the happy brown people, appropriates Eastern religion, and, for good measure, eats some pasta and fucks a Brazilian gymnast.*

I get it. I do.

But I also have absolutely no place to criticize. Because I'm a privileged white girl teeming with first world angst. I'm a California Hindu whose spiritual practice includes shopping at Lululemon. I'm just kinda chilling in the third world, hoping it'll make me a better, or at least marginally more interesting person. I do yoga. I love pasta. And I love Brazilians. Really, I'm being a hypocrite.

We're all just selfish.
I think it's about time we all admitted it.

No one does anything, not even something altruistic, for anything other than personal gain. Maybe that gain isn't money or power, you have to gain something from every decision you make. Even if it's just a sense of moral correctness, self-righteousness, fulfilled duty, or satisfaction. If you don't get something out of a decision that's makes it worthwhile, you won't do it. Ever. And selfishness isn't necessarily bad.

Some people's selfish drive is to feel good by hugging malnourished children. Some people are always running at the horizon to see if the sunrise looks different from the other side of the world. I'm just trying to scratch the itches as they come to me. Or get the sand out of my shoes. Or find myself. Or whatever.

Maybe I'm just trying to make myself feel better, for being in Haiti with only a sketchy idea of why I decided to come here.

The guiding principle of my life seems to be that things just pop into my head. They seem like good ideas at the time, so I do them. I end up spending hundreds of dollars on plane tickets because my gut feels like going somewhere new. That was why I went to India, and I think that's why I came here. I was itching for something about Haiti, not to save the children or the wetlands or the whales.

I've never really had that community service drive. I want to make the world a better place, and that's not a soundbyte; I really, really do. But I don't feel like it comes from a particularly altruistic, charitable place.

I want to end war and hunger and corporate abuse and racism and police brutality and rape culture because they make me pissed off and depressed. It's entirely selfish. The world's problems make me intolerably angry and I'm compelled, if by nothing more than a desire to end my own mental and emotional suffering, to try and fix them. That's really it.

I wanted to go to India because it sounded exciting.

I wanted to come to Haiti because it seemed more interesting than working in an office in midtown.

The thing I've always liked about *Eat, Pray, Love* is how selfish it is, and how honestly selfish. Liz Gilbert didn't go on this adventure to save starving Indians, or build roads in Indonesia, or

salvage what's left of the Italian economy. She just went because she felt like it. It seemed like, well, more fun than working in an office in midtown.

At lunch today, my boss asked me to tell the story of how I found this organization.

“Uh, Google?”

Really, I just did a Google search for Alternative Media in Haiti and this group popped up. So I sent off a résumé and they liked me. And now here I am... Hello...

“Yeah, but why Haiti?” she asked.

“I wanted to improve my French...”

“But they speak French lots of places.”

I could've answered something like, “I wanted to help the Haitians overcome poverty and the devastating earthquake and do my part and Help People.” But I didn't, because that's not true.

The truth is that I don't know what drew me here. It's like I counted back from ten and woke up with a plane ticket to Port-au-Prince. I spun a globe around in my mind until every conceivable possibility of my life was a blur, and then I struck out and I landed on this.

Why Haiti? Why India. Why New Jersey. Why Costco. Why anything. I don't know. It just popped into my head. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

So here I am, still selfish, still restless.

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A Healthy Dose of Poverty to Chase Away the Blues

June 2013

Driving in Port-au-Prince is a bit like playing Tetris. The traffic is bad. All the time. Bumper to bumper cars and UN land cruisers spewing exhaust into the air like they're exhaling cigarette smoke, and they never seem to move. If you want to get anywhere in less than an hour here, you take a motorcycle (or moto, here).

We've got a moto driver at the office named LouLou. Given our language barrier, he and I have never had a real conversation, but I kind of like him more that way. It's like how I love that hardly anything in the city is labeled. No streets, no buildings. Words get in the way. I like LouLou, he likes me (I hope), and we don't need to say anything about it.

LouLou is a musician of driving, winding his way between cars and busses and pedestrians like a violin bow through strings. The cars communicate without words. Honking stands in their place, signifying everything.

HONK, coming through!
HONK, move it or lose it.

HONK, hi.
HONK, don't kill me.

When we drive through areas crowded with pedestrians, it feels like HONK, make way for the white girl. HONK, new meat coming through.

Looking at Haiti from the back of a moto doesn't feel as distant as it does in a car. People are in your face, in front of you, but it still feels voyeuristic. Taking in the views, the slums, the faces, I feel like my eyes are camera lenses searching for a photograph in everyone I see. From the back of the moto, they are images, not people. I hate myself for it.

Even worse was driving into the apartment I'm now staying at – a beautiful fenced in complex at the top of a sloping hill. White walls and red tile roofs and climbing green trees and fuchsia bushes of flowers, all sloping down to a tennis court and a crystal clear pool. It feels more like Hawaii than Haiti.

But that's only from the balcony outside the apartment. Outside these walls, a slum has grown up. USAID tarps stretch like old skin over shantytowns and dozens of women and children sit in the shade of crumbling trees by the side of the road. Five feet away from them is the gate to this paradise. Once you get inside, you can't see them anymore. That's the whole idea.

The gate slides open and a boxy Mercedes SUV drives out. It seems almost military, like a Humvee. The driver is an older white guy, who passes the rows of black children on the sidewalk without a second glance.

An image of Hitler swims in the back of my mind, passing over a concentration camp, hoards of people he's helping to keep sick and starving. Of course, I don't know anything about this man. I just assume from the look of him and where he lives that he must be part of The Man, the nebulous conglomerate of UN and USAID-sponsored NGOs that collectively fail to achieve any of their "development" goals and keep this country poor.

But I guess I live here now too. I must also be guilty. It's almost enough to send me packing back to California, the feeling that just by being here, by my physical body taking up space in this country, I am fueling a culture and a history of degradation and exploitation. As well-intentioned as we start out, it seems that no one ever does any good. Maybe we should all just up and leave, and take our good intentions elsewhere. Like back to our own countries. But I'm almost as much an outsider in the Bronx projects as I am here.

It seems to me there are four ways of looking at poverty when you're a privileged outsider:

- 1) Don't look at it. Spend your time in Petionville and sitting on my balcony, where all you can see are trees and flowers and the edge of a tennis court. Eat mangos and fan yourself with the Nouvelliste. Close your eyes on the sidewalk and get on a plane back home.
- 2) Look, but don't see it. Look at the slums, the thin women, the malnourished children, the men digging through the trash, the skinny animals, the sickeningly brown water. Look at

it like a painting – not even a painting. Not even a bad dream. Disassociate words and images from their meanings. These are things happening, and you feel nothing.

- 3) Look at it, see it, and lose it. I had this moment this morning. For an instant, the veneer cracked and the waves of sheer incomprehension at how this could possibly exist in the world crashed over my head. I slumped in my seat and took it in, pushing off the normalcy and the excuses. I could only stand it for about twelve seconds. I don't know anyone who can come here without being jaded.
- 4) I don't know. I want to believe there's a magical fourth way of understanding the poverty, and really *living* in that understanding, without losing your mind. Maybe it comes from doing meaningful work to change things. But even then, you'd start to lose it, hyped up to an insane rhythm by the immediacy of knowing that while you work, people are starving and dying. I want to believe there's a way to stay sane without ignoring it all. I just don't know what it is.

There is another way, I guess, but I don't think it's sane. It's the way I see rich people in the US look at homeless people. They look, they see, and they *loathe*. The reality of the disparity hits them. They don't ignore it. They feel it fully, but in the absence of being able to blame themselves, they hate the poor. They hate them because the situation is so horrific and ridiculous that someone must be to blame. They hate the poor because they refuse to hate themselves.

For people like me, maybe it's not that we refuse to hate ourselves. We just can't. Not *really*. We make excuses, we exempt ourselves from the guilty party even when the rest of the party looks and acts just like us. Not because we don't believe we are complicit, but because it's simply hard to hate yourself, to hate everything you've done, to hate the life you love to live. But even if you can feel that hatred, what does it even do?

I hoped in coming to Haiti I would learn to hate myself. I would be shocked out of my system, turn around and look at me, and see how privileged and idiotic and materialistic and disgusting I'd become. I'd see before me a hulking, sweaty pig, preoccupied with nothing but its own hulking sweatiness. I would be reinvigorated with a new sense of purpose, of gratitude, of the reality of the world.

But not only would I understand it – it would somehow shape my life, and my future decisions. I needed something to get under my skin, to touch me in some deeper way. Because what could possibly hurt deeper than the understanding and self-loathing that comes with unfair privilege, colonialism, and complicity in the system that is devastating the lives of millions of people?

The truth is, I was suicidally depressed this spring in New York. I came to Haiti because it was either this or throw myself in front of an oncoming subway. I hoped I could use poverty like a wrecking ball swung into my stomach, to knock the depression and the anxiety and the misery and the selfish preoccupation with my own emptiness out of me. I'd given up on Zoloft and wanted to use other people's poverty as my drug. I wanted to get high. So high I'll forget that I'm depressed, that I'm empty, that I feel eternally on the brink of finding something that never comes to me.

I may not be a useless development NGO or a greedy corporation, but I'm still a part of this machine. We are the machine that devastates the world – whatever our good intentions may be, we don't know how not to exploit.

So far, a cholera-ravaged country and an earthquake-ravaged city haven't done any more for my mental health than a more traditional SSRI. I still feel compelled to cry spontaneously and fuck strangers and binge eat chocolate to feel alive, and afterwards all I feel is slightly sick and just as empty. All I've gotten is a retrospective look at how fucked up the whole impulse was.

I'm dying to leave and go twelve different places, to every corner of the earth, searching for whatever I'm missing inside myself and slowly coming to realize I'll never find it there. Anywhere.

Any yogi, any lama, any wise person at all, would tell me it's not about where I am, but who I am. It's an internal issue. It's my mind and my heart that are making the world empty. The world hasn't changed. I just have. And it seems so impossibly sick to want for Haiti to fix that for me.

Poverty is not a drug for the wealthy, but we keep treating it like it is one. We're all high on the feeling of being good people by being here, of sacrificing something by forcing this country to sacrifice its space to us. Maybe it's time we stop invading other people's lives because we think Helping Them will help us become better people.

When you do something with the wrong intention, no good can come of it.

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Bored-au-Prince

July 2013

Entertaining yourself as a foreigner in Haiti is an interesting task.

I'd estimate that I spend about 40% of my waking life here playing Solitaire on my phone. Waiting for footage to log and transfer in Final Cut, waiting for the driver to pick me up, waiting for the sun to rise after another sleepless night of contemplating the purpose of my existence and failing to come up with answers. Sometimes I lock myself in the stinking, sweaty toilet at work for fifteen minutes at a time just to clear a game of Free Cell with my pants down. If I get strange looks back at the office, I just clutch vaguely at my uterus and grimace like I'm pregnant with a mace.

I'm not sure how my obsession with digital card games got started. I've never really been *into* cards. Not the way people are into chess or knife games. I play Spider Solitaire or Pyramids on my phone sometimes, on long plane rides or when waiting for results of an STD test. But I've never really liked it. It's just something to occupy enough of my brain to pass the time comfortably.

I'm starting to worry that all the time I spend playing games on my phone means I'm spending all of my time here trying to kill time. In a way I'd rather not admit, that's true. There isn't a whole lot to do in Haiti when you're a foreigner and you don't know anybody. It's not the kind of place you can take yourself out for a night on the town when you're bored and lonely. There aren't any Couchsurfing pub crawls where you can pass the night shacked up with an out-of-work British actor tanned to the color of a pleather sofa. Most nights I sit on my porch naked and stare woefully at the pants I should probably put on. Then I turn on some music, pull out my phone, and play solitaire until it's a reasonable time to go to sleep.

It's not really killing time, more slowly draining it of its potency until it crawls like an incontinent octogenarian toward its grave. Everything I do to keep from being bored just doubles my boredom until I'm ready to scratch my eyes out with a golf pencil.

This isn't how it was supposed to be.

I was supposed to be having *the adventure of a lifetime*. That's what I signed myself up for, even when everyone I knew told me that wouldn't be how it was. I ignored them, filled with vague images of mangos and monkeys transplanted from my brief time in India. Mangos and stray animals and cholera and it'll be *life-changing*, I told myself. And I won't be a pussy this time and get scared of meeting people. I will relentlessly text every person I meet until they're my real friends and I can do all of those cool traveling things people in National Geographic articles do.

So far, I have to content myself with sitting on the balcony and going to the occasional creepily class-segregated expat event. Every Thursday, the Oloffson Hotel has a concert night called Ram. I think it's actually RAM, and it stands for something, but I haven't been bothered yet to find out what.

According to my friend (and by friend I mean person I met two days ago whose social life I decided to hijack for a night), Ram is something of an institution. It's been around forever, and expats congregate at it like flies.

The first half of the show is the whitewash circus. The aid workers, the UN crowd, the expats take over the hotel and drink Prestige and speak English at each other. I told a girl in French that I liked her dress, and she yelled back "WHAT? UM, ENGLISH? DO YOU SPEAK ENGLISH?"

I do, in fact, speak English. But being in a non-Anglophone country, it seemed like the wrong language to start with. I should have known better. I knew before she opened her mouth that she was American too, but I didn't want to give into the ease of speaking English in someone else's country.

I don't know who I was trying to impress with my vague ability to communicate in not- English. I don't speak Creole so I can't really say I'm not being imperialistic. But assuming people speak English abroad doesn't sit well with me. It feels itchy and sweaty on my skin, and I want to shake it off every time it touches me.

Around midnight there's a sort of half-time when the band takes a break. Apparently, this is when the scene changes. The expats clear out and the bougie Haitians show up. I'm not sure which one I feel less comfortable with, but either crowd doesn't sit well with me. I had to take a breather and just sit and comprehend the existence of this place – some rowdy bar party mashing two worlds where we threw down money for drinks like it was nothing, and five minutes away is the edge of another slum.

It's not something I think I'll be able to get over – and yet, it's already something I've gotten used to.

That night I got into my first moto accident. I've been told it's unsafe to drink and drive a motorcycle, but I never thought about how stupid it is to drink and ride on the back of one. When it's 2 am and you've been up for 20 hours and drank too much and it's just finished raining, your moto might hit a small hole in the road, and might tilt, and you, being the drunk tired asshole, might tilt with it. And then keep tilting. And then fall right off onto your ass. This might happen in front of the two new friends you just made and are trying to convince you are a worthwhile human being. You might feel like a bit of a dickhead.

It's not like I broke anything, but sitting upright still hurts.

Last night I went out with some friends of a friend to a party at a house I'll be moving to next week. It's a pretty house, home to half a dozen young expats who all seem to have slightly more purpose here than I do. But it feels like a decent crowd.

From what I gather, Port-au-Prince is a small town for expats. Everyone knows everyone, everyone knows each other's guest houses and organizations and jobs. Meeting expats is a replay of the first week of college. Where are you from, what are you working on. The real question is "How did you wind up in Haiti?" and I think we all just ask it to feel justified at our own answers.

I met a girl from SIPA at Columbia and we bitched about school over beers, sitting on the patio in this gorgeous house tucked away in Pacot. She said in the house she lives in, there are a few *restaveks*, which is a nice word for child slaves.

A *restavek* is a child from a poor family sent by their parents to work in a host household where they live and work from dawn until dusk. They do not go to school and they do not get paid. They work as maids, taking care of big houses for richer people in exchange for a roof over their head and enough food to get by. For a lot of kids in Haiti, that must be more than worth it, but my stomach turns over thinking about it.

My immediate impulse when I heard about the existence of these girls was to make a hard-hitting documentary about it. To publicize their plight so that the world would... *do what* exactly?

This was where I hit a roadblock.

The impulse I really had was to take advantage of their situation to further my own career and artistic portfolio and make myself feel like a good person. Making a documentary about these girls will not change anything. To *really* fix this situation, you'd have to first fix poverty, colonial history, neo-colonialism by corporations and foreign governments, education, food insecurity, housing insecurity, corruption, gender-based disparity of opportunities... The idea died in my head before I even had the chance to speak.

I'm starting to understand it better here: that this is why even the honest, non-imperial development and peacekeeping and sustainable growth efforts seem to fail. You come up with an idea, and before you even have the chance to speak it, you know it won't work. That things will never change. That you're powerless.

Maybe that's why we all go get drunk together and ignore the world outside for a while. Because we have to. You can only do what you can, and what you can is almost never much.

But walking by a starving child without turning your head requires you to separate that starving body from the idea that it belongs to a human. We say we have to ignore it most of the time not to go crazy, and I understand that. But when we say ignore it, we mean dehumanize it. We mean ignore the fact that the *restavek* girl has a name and a face and a favorite color. We are here in this big house because she can't be. We have interesting jobs in development and interesting expat friends because 80% of this country lives in abject poverty. The thing about privilege is that in order for it to exist, someone has to not have it.

This girl I met says the *restavek* at her house is eleven years old and enjoys taking selfies with her camera. Everyone likes taking selfies. Everyone likes to check what they look like, remember their face, remember their own humanity.

I can sleep at night because I have never seen her picture, and I will never see her face, and I will never attach her situation to the reality of her humanity.

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Digicel, Mon Amour
July 2013

Digicel is the clingy, insecure girlfriend of phone service providers. Straight up, I have never seen a network be so needy before.

Digicel texts me all the time. I mean *all the time*. I'll be lying in bed watching porn or whatever and my phone will start buzzing. "Oh Anna," it beckons, "someone needs to speak with you!" Hoping it might be one of my glittering circle of friendquaintances, I'll instantly jump at the thought that maybe someone out there wants to talk to me. I rush to the phone, thinking maybe someone wants to invite me to a groovy house party, or have sex with me, or offer to pay my rent for the next twenty years because I'm such a good person. As I open up the text messages app, my smile will start to spread, anxiously awaiting whatever exciting news I'm about to receive from my dear new lovely friends.

“Pou patisipe nan leve fon pou Ekip Nasyonal la ou ka voye FOOTBALL nan 713 pou bay 25HTG oswa fe yon depo cash nan UNIBANK, SOGEBANK oswa BNC,” Digicel says.

Seriously, Digicel? First of all, I don’t speak Creole, and I have no idea what you’re talking about. Second of all, why are you texting me? You’re my cell phone service provider, not my boyfriend. Calm your tits and figure out your place in my life.

I sigh and go back to my busy schedule of playing Sudoku and watching old episodes of *Arrested Development*. But I hear the buzzing of a text message again.

Having learned from the past, I’m not quite as hopeful this time. *But still*, I think, *karma and probability pretty much guarantee that it won’t be Digicel again. Someone has to actually want to talk to me this time!*

“Ok fek resevwa 67.3 Goud cash back sou appel entanasyonal!” says Digicel.

My heart sinks, and my anger rises. “I don’t speak Creole,” I text back.

It doesn’t go through. You can’t talk to Digicel like that.

It’s not that I don’t understand what it’s trying to say. Despite being American, I know what FOOTBALL actually means, I definitely know what cash back is, and the rest of it is just French when you sound it out. The language isn’t the problem.

It’s the neediness.

AT&T was never like this. AT&T might have been an asshole who’d drop my call and never call me back. It might have gone out at weird times and not bothered to warn me ahead of time or keep in touch. It never offered to save me money, get me in on promotional offers, massage my feet. AT&T was a bad boy who didn’t give a flying fuck what I thought and knew I would always take it back no matter how many times it hurt me.

And I kind of *liked* that. The unknown. The chase. The knowledge that if for any reason I had a problem with my service, *I* had to take care of it. I could reasonably expect to sit on hold for six hours before being transferred to an office in New Delhi where someone who probably wasn’t *really* named Bill would fail to solve all my problems.

I expected to do the work in the relationship. Maybe it wasn’t healthy, but it worked for me. It was all I knew.

Compared to the emotional roller coaster of AT&T, Digicel is just so *clingy*. After every text I send, a message will buzz on my screen that informs me that if I send only 4 more texts today, I’ll get 50 HTG of something I haven’t yet bothered to translate. A cheerful reminder that I don’t have enough friends to text in the first place.

I can read the subtext. “Maybe nobody else wants to talk to you,” Digicel says, “but I’ll *never* leave you.”

When I miss a call because my service went out, Digicel doesn’t play cool and above it all. It sends me a text after every call informing me of when the missed call occurred and where I can call them back, readily removing the option of ignoring someone and pretending to never have heard from them. After the last time my service dropped an incoming call, I got five text messages telling me the precise time of each call Digicel had caused me to miss.

Five little apologies, like kisses on my feet, begging me to stay, that the dropped service was all a terrible mistake, that Digicel really is here for me! I swear! And if you text #120 and send 5 more texts today you can save 50 HTG on your next call! *With Digicel, you get more for less!*

On a side note, the fact that someone called me five times in the space of twenty minutes is also a bit excessive. But at least it was a human being and not my service provider. I don’t get why Digicel is so obsessed with me. It’s not like I’m special.

Digicel has a veritable monopoly on the entire Haitian cell phone industry. And probably also the rest of the Caribbean, and I think a good portion of Latin America. Why is it so needy?

American service providers are aloof and useless. They make you come to them, and they know your business is secure. There’s more competition in the U.S., so your service provider knows you chose *them*. Either you’re intelligent and you have Verizon, or you bought an iPhone before 2012 and you have AT&T. Someone’s grandmother might use Boost Mobile, but it’s not any grandmother you know. You don’t run in those sorts of circles. But whatever plan you choose, it’s secure. Even though there’s more competition, the plans are far more confident. They don’t pester you with constant updates reminding you how wonderful they are.

They just let you live, and in the case of AT&T, they occasionally let you make phone calls.

Maybe Digicel knows it’s not the one, and that’s why it won’t leave me alone. It knows it was chosen by default, that my heart really belongs to another. As pathetic as it is to say my heart belongs to AT&T, I’ll admit it proudly. My service provider might as well be my best friend these days, because God knows no one else is calling me.

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On Happiness

August 2013

Hear ye, hear ye, I’m looking for a job in Haiti. I decided not long ago that I want to stay here for the fall.

Which of course prompts the question, why?

I'm not really sure. Part of it is that I genuinely do love being here, as much as I don't always like it. It's crazy and fucked up and I feel sort of useless, but at least it's not New York, and for that, I love it. But I think the real reason I don't want to leave is that I feel like Haiti might be good for me in some way. I feel like something deeper than my conscious decisions brought me here, and it's looking for something, and I don't want to leave until I find it. I feel like unbelievably good things are here, and I want to know them all.

I told someone tonight that I feel too selfish and arrogant about my own "mental health problems" to let them really manifest here. That knowing there are people five minutes from my house who are starving shocked the depression out of me, that I feel more grateful for life and for all the good in it by being here. I'm looking for a job here in the fall, and I want to stay because Haiti is curing my depression.

This was a blatant, balls-out lie.

I'm as self-absorbed, sad, moping and immature as I always have been and likely ever will be. This blog is not so much a chronicle of my experiences here, but a place for me to make sense of my own incomprehensible mental agony in the face of an otherwise-perfect life.

I want to stay in Haiti because to leave would mean to admit defeat. Defeat not only of my ability to recover, but of the faith I place in spontaneous decisions with no clear mental guidance. I trust my gut over my brain because my brain took a beautiful life and turned it into something miserable, something to avoid, to run from, to seal up inside myself and bury deep at the bottom of my fantasies so that the world behind my eyelids is a stranger to the one in front of me. My brain looks at its incarnation and finds ways to scratch pain out of the walls. My gut still believes in happy endings, in fate, in itself, in me.

If I leave still not having found what I'm looking for, or at least still not knowing what that was, I will have proven that what I believe in is a fairy tale. That the universe is cold and hard and senseless, that people die like flies and decompose into the earth and someday their ashes come back as flowers and that is the most beauty we can hope for. I followed my faith that there is something more down this rabbit hole and I'm in too deep now to climb back out. At least, not with my head held high.

Wiser souls have told me that it's not about where you are, but your state of mind. That the thing I'm itching for – the feeling of being in the right place at the right time, of doing something worthwhile, of being of use, of having everything that I am match up to the space I occupy – that's all in your mind. It will never be perfect in real life, so you have to hold your breath over the itchy parts and settle into what you've got until it feels right too.

They must be happier than I am, and I commend them. But I'd far rather kill myself in the search than die by complacency. There's a line in Moby-Dick that goes "As in landlessness alone resides the highest truth... Better is it to perish in that howling infinite than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee, even if that were safety!"

I think what Melville means is, it's more noble to keep searching for something truer and more beautiful, even when you're afraid, than to accept things as all they can ever be because it feels safer to do so.

I risk living a lonely, dreary, dreadful life, and I know that. But I will never give up the faith I have in my heart, in my gut, that there is more out there. There is something better. More right, more real, more honest, more tuned to vibrate at the same frequency as I am. I would rather be tuned into something greater than myself than simply happy. Happiness seems such a tiny, inconsequential desire by comparison.

But isn't it the only thing that matters, after all? And it is something I do not have.

I am not happy. I have not been happy for a long time. But I'd rather live my life searching beyond the next horizon, yearning for it, than settle into misery and accept it as the best I can get. As long as I have faith that there is more, I will never be happy with what I've got.

So to be happy, here, now, do I have to give up my faith? My belief in the goodness of humanity, in the ability of the world to change for the better, of people to grow, of war to end, of myself to change and grow and make other people happy? I have to give up faith in the belief that I can change people's lives, maybe even change the world. I have to give up faith that there can be something better, that poverty and exploitation and hunger and materialism and violence and pain are the only way the world can ever be.

Because I search for a cure for those things. I search for a cure to the pain in the world as I do in myself. And I believe, with every fiber that knits me together, that something better is possible.

My happiness seems such a small price to pay for such a faith. Without it, I would be nothing. I would be dead.

I would rather die searching and never finding than shrivel in complacent contentment.

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Afterword

April 11, 2017

It's funny, rereading this last post nearly four years later.

I know the feeling I meant then. The searching-and-never-finding, the longing, the certainty that something more was out there. The derision for the idea that it's "in here" always, that it means just letting yourself be shit when you're shit.

And the strange thing is, I have come to understand that it's "in here" in such a profound way. It's not like I made it out to be. It's not like I hold my breath over the itchy parts. I don't choose what's safe.

I choose to let myself be as I am in each moment. I choose to lean into fear. I choose to allow myself to be afraid, upset, angry, useless, and never ask myself to be any more in those moments.

I choose to say that I could never have done better than I did, and then, like Winnie the Pooh opening the honey jar, I breathe, and I do better from here on out.

I am still working on the world. I am working on the world by working on myself, by allowing myself to be as I am in each moment, and trusting that what comes from that will lead to the world being better.

As miserable as I was most of my time in Haiti, I wouldn't change it. I wouldn't change who I was there, or how I acted. It was exactly what it needed to be to get me where I am right now.

And right now, my life is right, is real, is honest, is tuned to vibrate at the same frequency as I am. I feel tuned into something greater than myself, and, often, I am so happy. I am sad so much, and angry, and in pain, and I choose to let myself be in each space as it comes. And they pass. They pass into a contentment that is not complacent. That is eternally changing, shifting, growing, but remains, in each moment, a new kind of contentment.