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Kate and Kilimanjaro

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Kate and Kilimanjaro

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

John Nirenberg

B.A. University of Connecticut, 1968
M.S. Southern Connecticut State College, 1971
Ph.D. University of Connecticut, 1975

May, 2007

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Acknowledgements

This seemed like a good story to tell. My partner Allyson Villars encouraged me to tell it and gave me the encouragement and support throughout this late-in-life academic indulgence to finally put it to paper.

Writers, as other artists, are really quite sensitive to feedback. I want to hear that my work is good, but I also want to hear how it could be even better. That's what this MFA was all about for me. Unfortunately, my desire for feedback is often accompanied by trepidation. Sometimes there is good reason for that, especially when the feedback is loaded with negative judgment and destructive criticism under the guise of being helpful. Sadly, too many teachers find it easier to be harsh and think that dismissive judgment without helpful suggestions is useful to the budding writer. Then there is Kathleen Veslany. Kathleen is a model workshop leader and thesis advisor. I wish everyone at UNO could have the experience of her workshop. I appreciated her meticulous reading of my work, questions and comments. Her manner of communicating criticism was consistently positive and made it possible for me to hear and benefit from her feedback. Though my writing still has a long way to go, I have improved immensely from her guidance. Her helpfulness in both workshop, and as my thesis advisor, will not be forgotten. Thank you Kathleen.

Amanda and Joseph Boyden were enthusiastic members of my thesis committee. Unfamiliar with my work, their spirit of adventure must have overwhelmed their common sense. I'm sure of it given their monstrous work schedules. Their feedback was very helpful and they proved that even the thesis defense could be an important learning experience.

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Chapter 1

Kate

I don't remember when I decided to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, but I remember exactly when I met Kate.

It was a crisp Friday night in December, under an unusually starry night in Silicon Valley. The sprawling Decathlon Club in Santa Clara hosted that month's gathering of the Stanford Bachelors where a large crowd of singles turned out to stave off the holiday blues. My friends were in the spirit and already charged with the energy that fuels overconfidence and closes down that part of the brain controlling self-awareness. It was, after all, a singles event. Some called it a meat market. In either case, it was a hustle and not the time or place for deep conversation. As awkward and distasteful as this kind of situation is under the best of circumstances, sometimes, with the right devil-may-care attitude and absolutely no hope for anything more fulfilling than watching beautiful women dance their hearts out, it could be fun. Besides, I did all sorts of irregular things in my search for a partner.

In our forties, we assumed we'd be married. But when it came right down to it, we were just too damn choosy - some by nature, some, like me, because we had been burned; and, some of us were downright difficult to be with.

If there was ever a group for intellectual pretentiousness based on ideological confrontation dipped in a heavy coating of emotional drama, this little group of ours

was it. In other words, we heartily embraced cynicism and proved, once again, that indeed misery does love company. And, we proudly wallowed in it.

My brother Lloyd was the ringleader. We drove to the event together in his sporty red Masda RX7. A few years older than me, he stands a slim six feet tall with crystal blue eyes and a devilish grin. He exudes an attractive personal charm when he turns it on. Everyone in our little band enjoys his extroversion; and, in spite of my envy, I love him. As my older brother, he was in some ways larger than life and always ready to take the lead.

His charm works like a psychological net for targeted women who approach too close. It is immediate, intense, and engaging; but it dissipates quickly after he beds them. Alas, a couple of weeks, or a month later, he'd point out some fatal flaw and it, whatever *it* was, would be over. His self-satisfied, bon vivant swagger borne of the incredible sex he was having would disappear and he'd plunge right back into the singles pool. He's an inveterate womanizer, though he'd vociferously deny it; the inevitable breakups were never his fault, of course. Back in the pool, his substantial hooked nose would flare like a dorsal fin breaking the social surface seeking yet another repast for his libido. In between his conquests he had more than his fair share of gloomy longing but he, alone among us, was always able to attract and date the sexiest females. I suppose, because of my sibling jealousy, I never understood what they saw in him. It seemed he could pick up women just by looking at them; once he picked up the dental assistant while getting a root canal. I knew that tonight he would turn it on.

When Lloyd and I arrived we easily found Jim, another member of our little group. A fastidious, always deliberately well-spoken, and usually cheerful friend, he makes the circumstances of a breakup sound funny and never wallows too deeply in self-pity. He always lands on his feet. Jim's cheeriness was often accompanied by mystical comments that made us wonder if he was being funny or profound. Out of nowhere he'd grin and say something like, "Why do we love to cook outside but shit inside the house?" Jim graciously and frequently hosted evenings so the group could examine just these kinds of deep questions over a take-out dinner in his living room.

Actually, those evenings were spent shooting socio-political economic theories at each other like bullets from an automatic weapon. An evening at Jim's was the intellectual equivalent of a rumble between the Crips and Bloods, but we enjoyed the encounters, bizarre as that may sound. We'd say whatever absurdity popped into our heads and sometimes we'd end up way beyond the pale, as when Richard totally demolished the underlying premise of my recently completed book manuscript - all in the name of being an intellectual exercise, of course. When we got totally absurd, someone would have the presence of mind to warn us about the Law of Holes: when you find yourself digging one, stop. Either that, or we'd get backed into a corner and simply resort to the final salvo, "Drop dead," as I did that night in response to Richard.

Of course in the next round, Richard's intellectual honesty was discredited since, as everyone knew, he was my writing coach for that same manuscript. No hard feelings, though. Each of these sessions tested the limits of our thinking and, in their own way, confirmed our acceptance of one another.

Richard, a British émigré with a Ph.D. in linguistics, had the good fortune to study with Noam Chomsky and challenged us with his intellectual versatility at Jim's salons. The combination of his seductive accent with his blond hair and blue eyes often magnetized the women he met. Tonight he, too, would take a dip in the singles pool.

The holiday season drew us all to that final blowout and we arrived with moderate hopes of finding a date for New Year's Eve. Any longer than that would be tantamount to a lottery win since we all found it easier to keep an argument going longer than a romantic relationship.

The name Stanford Bachelors was the organizers' genius. It had an allure for women in the Valley as powerful as the promise of eternal happiness. They believed they would meet single men from Stanford University. That was stretching the truth, only a small percentage of attendees were connected to Stanford. But that window on their hopes was actually a two-way mirror. The men who thought it would attract professional, successful women often found themselves meeting women whose only ambition was to marry well, quit work, and raise kids in style. We all lived with the

fiction and fed our fantasies all the same. And sometimes we did get lucky for a weekend romp, but were rarely satisfied on Monday morning.

These gatherings followed a simple formula and you didn't need a Stanford degree to understand it: Take a drink and cruise the crowd, look interesting but not too eager, and hope your meandering will hook a possibility. If that doesn't work at least you end up back with a friend commiserating behind the comfortable curtain of shared angst until you're once again ready for another dip in the churning pool.

We considered ourselves an interesting and capable bunch of talented guys. It wasn't that we had trouble dating, but finding and keeping THE ONE was the hard part. It was the idea of an equal, independent and capable woman that we sought even if we too easily settled for a romp.

We knew good matches were out there. Occasionally we'd connect with one. The ideal was one who would pull us back to bed on Saturday morning and be able to argue politics at dinner Saturday night. By the same token, she'd have a professional career too and would demand a no less challenging partnership from us. But, as often happened, our mutual independence or long stretches of work would torpedo a promising relationship. It was a lifestyle hazard we sadly accepted. Some of our married friends thought that we not only missed the boat but also were swimming upstream.

I fell into this group quite naturally since we all had, to put it kindly, independent lives. My freedom during this period was a byproduct of an earned

sabbatical from an Australian university. Such perks don't usually accrue to an itinerant management professor unable to stay put long enough to earn one through the long twisted channels required of most American universities. As a struggling writer I'd been working on my magnum opus during this luxurious paid time off after almost 20 years of teaching in universities coast-to-coast and overseas. It was the end of an almost equally long gestation period during which I studied and procrastinated and studied and consulted and studied, and tested ideas - hoping that if I just waited another day or year, and read another article and the latest book, and devised every anticipatory defense I could muster, cover all the bases, spell out a solution to the widespread workplace malaise, and not just redefine the problem of modern organizations, the manuscript would become the great American business book and I'd make a fortune.

I was in the final throws of this quixotic adventure when I joined my pals at the Stanford Bachelors that December night.

As I returned from the bar carrying a tray of beers. I saw the boys were having an animated discussion and laughing with several women who happened by. The charm was on. As soon as I recognized Suzanne I could see that she and her friends had been caught in the boys' web. I knew this would be fun. She was a smart, good looking and funny blonde – a nice combination. Her mission was to capture that elusive millionaire but her target was always just a step out of her reach.

As a financial controller at a high-tech company, she succeeded in a man's world and made it look easy. Her life was unapologetically, even proudly, about the

acquisition of money, and her pleasure with life seemed to rise and fall with her bank account. Even her sexuality was heightened in accordance with the size of her wealth. "Size does matter!" she would say unabashedly. Suzanne's appetites were well known and to joke about them with her was actually a way to build intimacy. After flirting for months and teasing one another about our lack of prospects she became one of the guys. Fortunately for me, tonight she found it better to give than to receive. She introduced her friends to us.

For no apparent reason, I was in a good mood, somewhat buoyant. I had earnestly been getting in shape by running about an hour a day through the parks of Los Gatos. At 6'1", 190 lbs, sporting a thick, old-growth moustache, my head still in possession of its hair, and with no debilitating psychological baggage, I felt confident in this mix.

I distributed the drinks and said, "Hey Suzanne, have you gone gay or are you trying to corrupt your friends?"

She responded equally flippantly with a smile on her face and levity in her voice, "No, I just wanted to prove to them that only dolts show up at these things... meet Claire and her friend Kate visiting for the weekend."

"Charming," I said, and added, keeping my mood light, teasing in valley-speak, "Are they alpha-numeric or just dollar signs tonight?" As I heard myself say that, I figured I just proved Suzanne right.

There was a lot of interest in these new faces. My friends had already made their acquaintances and were busily preening and impressing. Lloyd's charm was on. I could hear Richard's accent dominating an aside with Claire.

I was immediately struck by Kate. She looked like a wildflower, the kind that makes you stop the car on a country road to take a closer look. A mane of blonde-brown shoulder-length ringlets cascaded from her in a wild vertical riot framing her face like the heart of a sunflower. The western style boots that ended under her autumn-colored skirt suggested that she would be more at home at a country and western roadhouse than among the Stanford Bachelors.

It was closing time and soon farewells would be necessary. My bantering now mingled with a desire I hadn't felt for some time. I wanted more time with Kate but was focusing on an apparent lost cause. The night was wrapping up and I assumed she was another GU, geographically undesirable, in the parlance of the valley – she was, after all, “only visiting for the weekend.”

“Glad to meet you both,” I said hurriedly to put pleasantries behind me yet wanting somehow to get a conversation going. I experienced an exciting energy pass between us and felt my body chemistry change as our eyes met.

Kate was in a good mood and clearly the focus of a lot of male attention. Lloyd's nose flared when his devilish grin widened across his face. Suzanne introduced her as a friend and as an advisor to her company. Apparently Kate held the contract for both workers' comp case-management, restorative job counseling and ADA (Americans with

Disabilities Act) compliance which, together, was a sizeable responsibility and very lucrative.

She hadn't come to the Stanford Bachelors to talk workers' comp issues, however, but it was clear when we talked that Kate was enthusiastic about her work. She did manage to comment in an offhanded, proud way that she could tell the difference between a real and bogus claim in 20 minutes. That was surely a talent I didn't possess.

When the conversation turned to others, I eagerly interjected, wanting to hold Kate's attention even while feeling a reluctance to begin something when the time indicated I should actually be winding it down, "Where are you visiting from, Kate?" I asked, directly.

"Oh, just down the road in Santa Cruz," she said.

All of a sudden my hopes soared and, given her own apparent eagerness in the way she said this, I felt a mutual interest and couldn't let the chance pass. It seemed like my molecular structure just turned me into a jellyfish, yet I managed to remain standing. Adrenalin instinctively poured into my system enabling me to say, hurriedly, "Kate, let's see each other again," I reached to hand her a card, a slight tremor in my hand. I am rarely as bold in front of other men, even the boys but I felt compelled to act. "Can I have your number?"

Her card was likewise on its way to me, and I took it from her as she accepted mine. I was beaming and her eyes were saying that she felt the same. "I'll be tied up until Monday, why don't we talk then?" she said.

It was going to be a long wait before I could begin dialing. The excitement was unexpected, way out of proportion to the event. All of a sudden I was 18 instead of 44.

The scene burned itself into my consciousness: her look – confident, yet vulnerable, slightly quizzical but most deliberate, quick, yet assured. All these things pierced my flippant attitude. Her smile sent me a message without having to spell it out; the frivolousness I brought to the event evaporated.

She radiated a heat that staked an irrevocable claim on me, that it was irresistible underlined the inevitability of my falling for her. I experienced a craving for her, an urgency that only a long period without a relationship could summon. What else could explain how she took such control over my senses?

The hour-long drive home was fantasy filled. I couldn't get Kate out of my mind. Waiting until Monday was already difficult. It certainly didn't feel like it was going to be just another date. What special something defined this moment as my surrender to her? I had no idea. Yet, a wisp of resistance briefly pulled me back to remind me of the infinite amounts of emotional junk food I'm capable of binging on while seeking a partner: "John-o, be careful."

"Aw, drop dead."

It was easy to fall asleep that night; I was in a hurry to get to Monday.

Chapter 2

Kilimanjaro

I awoke early on Saturday with a great surge of ambition and increased my workout to burn off some of the excess energy remaining from the night before. I did my floor exercises and headed out for an hour run through the streets of Los Gatos, adding laps up the stadium steps at the local high school for good measure.

I was on a mission to get in shape – fast. In early January I was meeting a friend for an adventure we talked about doing together for years – one each of us wanted to do for years before that. Now it was upon us.

Climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro was one of those challenges that I put on a list of “must-dos” long ago. Visit Burma, check. See the pyramids, check. Live overseas, check. Write a book, check. Walk the Great Wall of China, check. Run a half marathon, check, check, check. Save the world. Well, that one I gave up on. Accomplishments. It wasn’t enough to be smart or a good person, or to fall in love. Accomplishments had to be tangible, observable, a sign of effort realized. I don’t believe in an afterlife, so I need to experience life fully, make a contribution, feel the breadth of the planet, and map my inner space as well.

Sometimes realism influenced the list, sometimes not. Having a list of challenges to check off was my way of charting the meaning and measure of an ambitious life. It wasn’t that I would forget things I wanted to do, but having a list to check off seemed to

make them more real than just holding the thought of them. The list became a measure of my life. First, college, check. Military service, proudly but unfortunately, check. Grad school, check, check. Marriage, check.

It hardly seems to merit the weight of the word marriage. We were 22. I was in the Air Force. She dropped out of college to be a legal secretary. Nixon's secret plan to end the war in Vietnam still hadn't been announced. After my discharge our differences became all too clear and significant. After one silly fight too many I awoke on a beautiful New England Saturday morning, Columbus Day weekend, 1972, to the voice of Carol King singing "It's Too Late." On that day after almost exactly three years of marriage all I could say to her that morning was "I can't do this any more." She agreed. I guess the now almost constant bickering made it obvious to her, too. Her boss gave us a free divorce. He was definitely ahead of his time in providing unusual fringe benefits. After the divorce party she got the china, I got the books, and we split our \$1,000 savings. Our starter marriage was over.

I added, "find a partner, not a wife" to my list not realizing just how hard that was going to be. In general, the list was quite adventurous and representative of many different interests. Own a bookstore, check. Own a small bar decorated with the works of local artists filled each day with writers arguing over socio-cultural nuances that might lead to productive social change. Not yet. Publish a newspaper; removed from the list. Travel around the world. Eventually I would have over a dozen checks on that item.

As a doctoral student, I had the fantasy that upon graduating I would reward myself with an around-the-world trip, forget the seriousness of my dissertation, and instead write a travelers' bar guide to planet Earth. That didn't happen. I finished the Ph.D. and took a one-year teaching job at Ohio University for needed cash. Toward the end of that year, two days after my thirtieth birthday, I was asked if I had a valid passport and how soon I could get to Kuala Lumpur. There wouldn't be enough time to write the bar guide, but I was offered an all-expenses paid trip around the world as part of a one-year term directing the university's Bachelor's in Business Administration degree program in Malaysia. The cosmic wheel of fortune certainly turned my way. Off I went. Check.

Before I was due to leave, my department chair and a colleague asked me to discuss the consequences of my choice just in case I didn't see the whole picture. The chair's office was upstairs in the back of the building. It was a quiet place away from student traffic. His office was packed with books and papers stacked everywhere: on his desk, near his desk, on top of filing cabinets, near his filing cabinets. Hidden in the back, buried under more papers, was a table that the three of us barely managed to slouch around when we cleared the top of its paper piles.

I must have looked as though I needed guidance because now, as the academic year was coming to an end and I was planning my trip to Kuala Lumpur with stops in Vienna, Istanbul, Cairo, Amman, Tehran, Delhi and Singapore, I was smiling and moving with an energy usually identified with the beginning of the term, not the end.

I listened attentively. They were certain that if I went to Malaysia, I might as well throw away my career; my academic life would be in shambles.

First, my chair said, "Look, we know it'll be a great experience, but everyone else will think you just took a vacation, and they won't forgive you."

Then my colleague added, "They won't think you're serious about your career. Besides, they'll be jealous." He was a funny guy and on the fast track. Just a little older than me, he was aiming to reach full professor by thirty-five. He also became a friend during my year in Athens, Ohio, and taught me all about the academic pipeline. "You don't just do one piece of research and wait for it to be published before writing the next piece. What you do," he said, "is have a paper sent off to a journal, have one you're working on, and new research underway. Simple," he said, "and keep it flowing like Middle East oil."

I always felt academics were a strange bunch. They hop on a tenure track right after grad school, lock themselves in their offices among piles and piles of papers and, as if living in a boxcar, ride off to a seven year term in an academic gulag before the tenure decision releases or destroys them. I imagined that if I didn't take advantage of this opportunity now, I, too, would be riding those rails deep into the conventional wisdom instead of broadening my experience.

"But this is just for a year," I protested. "What's the harm in that?"

Theirs was no casual warning. They gave me another dose of advice. "If you pass up the tenure track now, you may never again have the chance to get back on.

You'll have a year hanging out in some jungle clearing with native girls seducing you with big black admiring eyes, tight sarongs, and hair filled with fresh-picked flowers." I was wondering what my problem was in all that he was saying.

Then my colleague added with a tortuous grin, "And while you're lured into the most amazing sexual pleasure you can imagine, the next lot of newly minted Ph.D.s will be more up-to-date and more visible to the hiring network than you. You'll be left out. We thought you might want to consider this before going."

I was thinking about being "minted" and how I hated that term for the image it conjured - a huge stamping machine spitting me out of its enormous metallic maw. Maybe I, too, was once shiny but I hated the thought of being identical to those before and following me.

I couldn't tell if they were serious or pulling my leg. "Wait a minute," I said incredulously, "Are you trying to get rid of me or keep me here?" Then I added seriously, "How could this experience not enhance my value? Won't it demonstrate my adaptability? Doesn't being a manager mean something to a school hiring a management professor? Won't this experience give me something others can't get staying at home?" After a pause, to let their advice and my rebuttal sink in, I asked, "What was that you said about a jungle clearing?"

"Nope. Vacation. Everyone thinks you go overseas to vacation or because something is wrong with you. So, unless you publish in the best journals and come

back to the conferences throughout the year, which is unlikely for you to do from K.L. You lose. Sorry to tell you, but that's the way it is."

"Well, I guess the choice is obvious," I said, "I'm going. Thanks for the advice."

My friend said, "Yeah, I figured. Send me a postcard."

My list of goals might have been impressive but it was nothing compared to John Goddard's that I found years ago in *Life* magazine. At fifteen he wrote down 127 goals and devoted his life to checking off his list. He became a naturalist and accomplished most of his dreams. He never revised his list though, which puzzled me, especially when so many new possibilities are born everyday.

But what a list! Number 70, swim in lake Tanganyika. Exotic, but too easy, I thought. Not impressed. Hell, I could do that. Number 84, go on a church mission. Was he kidding? Why ruin a perfectly good trip? Number 114, compose music. He didn't do that one, and I wouldn't either. I didn't have any music in my life until I was a teenager and could hardly tell the difference between a bass and a fiddle, but I was impressed he included that one. Number 127, live to see the 21st century. Now, that was my kind of goal! Check.

After exploring the entire length of the Nile in a kayak, the first European known to have done so, Goddard wrote a book about it (number 97) and in the 1970s earned

the princely sum of \$50,000 a year for speaking about his adventures on the lecture circuit.

There were items on his list that were on mine, too, and I really enjoyed checking them off. Number 42, photograph Iguazú Falls. Check. Number 43, photograph Victoria Falls. Check again. That was easy to do but definitely off the beaten path.

I spent a long day gawking at the water flowing, and then falling, into the great rift of the Zambezi River. I languished under the crashing river's spray that covered me with a cooling patina of moisture and then headed to the local restaurant where I enjoyed a cold beer and updated my journal.

I sat at a rusting old picnic table that had a sun-faded green umbrella poking through the center like one of those adornments in a tropical drink. Visiting the falls, known locally as Musi o Tunya, earned me a checkmark and an unexpected encounter.

A young Zambian approached me and asked if he could sit down. "Sure," I said. His name was Chema

Soon a small crowd gathered and the few remaining chairs filled with people curious about our conversation and me. Chema, getting drunker and drunker, minute by minute, kept talking about how the Zambians were sacrificing their culture to development and being overcome by the evils of the West. I was curious about them and why they found it so hard to resist Western influence, yet I didn't bargain for this confrontation. Check marks on a yellow pad have a way of coming to life as the adventures are lived.

Eventually, someone at the table said, “You must be rich.”

“Hardly,” I protested

“But you are here. It is very expensive to come all this way just to watch water fall.”

How could I deny it? Being able to pay, or be paid, for my adventures wasn't exactly a sign of poverty. My round-the-world airline ticket cost \$1200 and the per capita GDP of Zambia was just about \$580. In their eyes I was successful, rich, and powerful due to my living in the most powerful country in the world and being able to travel this far for a checkmark.

As dusk turned to evening, evening into night and cold beers to warm, I felt the conversation suddenly slide like some hyper g-force carnival ride only to be turned inside out! My notions of success and living an adventurous, I-can-do-anything life were being put into a political context pitting the haves against the have-nots. If the obvious standard to use in measuring success is an economic one, I was successful.

As night settled, hippos that had languished in the great Zambezi River, rose out of the water and headed into the bush. That was my signal. I finished my nth beer and, after judiciously paying for everyone's last two rounds, excused myself to retire for the night.

I find myself enjoying the rigors and dangers of being truly open to the world. I just hadn't figured on confronting the gap between rich and poor finding myself

suddenly on the unfamiliar side of that gap. Nor had I seen myself as a carrier of the “Western plague of globalization.”

Goddard checked number 9 on his list, study primitive cultures in the Congo. Plus, he checked off numbers 10, 11, and 19 for cultures in Brazil, New Guinea, and Ethiopia. For a while I was fascinated by the Orang Asli of West Malaysia and the Ibans and Kadazans of East Malaysia on Borneo, but did not apply serious anthropological standards to my observations. I did, however, learn to use a blowgun. Maybe a quarter check.

What I admired most about the Orang Asli, besides their witchcraft, was their ability to withstand development much like our own Amish.

I reviewed Goddard’s list and saw I had more in common with him. Number 60, visit the Taj Mahal. Check. Number 61, visit the Eiffel Tower. Check. During a trip to find her roots, my then partner and I ran along the Seine. It was dawn on a Sunday, the yellow ball of sun rising slowly. Pigeons flapped into the sky as we approached, the occasional pair of lovers headed home after a long evening, and an old man walked by the river watching as it smoothly flowed past. We ran under the Eiffel tower, empty and undisturbed in the morning silence and kissed on the run, laughing at our clumsiness trying to get our lips in sync with our footfalls.

Number 66, climb Ayers Rock (Uluru) in Australia. Check, except with guilt pangs. The aborigines prefer you don’t climb it. To them Uluru is sacred. However, they recognize that most visitors don’t know this and kindly allow the climb. In return,

they charge a fee to help improve their lands and to educate tourists. “But,” the guide said, “please tell your friends not to put this on their lists.”

Number 77, ride an elephant, camel, ostrich and bronco. Only two checks here. I checked off “ride an elephant” and “ride a camel,” but I’m embarrassed. Lest you imagine me on long excursions through uncharted desert or jungle, or along the Silk Road, it is far from the truth. The camel ride was almost exactly ten minutes around the Sphinx in Egypt while the handler was obnoxiously hounding me to buy costume jewelry - ersatz gold bracelets – the entire time.

Riding the elephant was hawker-free but for only twenty minutes at an exotic Thai elephant training camp in the golden triangle where Burma, Thailand and Laos meet but sans intrigue. I feel better having come clean. I’m sure Goddard did better.

Goddard had items on his list that he hadn’t checked off but I had. Number 57, visit Easter Island (Rapa Nui). Check. A great expanse of rolling green pasture covers much of the island where forests used to be. Thirty-foot high ahu moi (mo-eye), fierce-looking, stone, monolithic totems that once marked burial sites dotted the coastline high above the South Pacific. Yet, their precise symbolic value remains inexplicable. When the timber, needed to move stone from the quarries, was fully harvested and the natives could no longer build moi, war became their primary activity. Eventually, the Long Ears and the Short Ears engaged in ritual battles that decimated them both but nearly exterminated the Long Ears.

Like Goddard, I kept most of the challenges on my list alive long into adulthood but I reassessed them every few years even adding some – become a management consultant, serve in the Peace Corps, work as a disaster relief volunteer – dropping others – learn the guitar, make a million dollars. With the years spinning by, just having the list became important, a road map of sorts.

I forgot why I ever placed “climb Mt. Kilimanjaro” on the list, but I did have an inexplicable attachment to *Africa* sung by Toto:

I know that I must do what's right
As sure as Kilimanjaro rises like Olympus above the
Serengeti
I seek to cure what's deep inside, frightened of this thing
that I've become

Even though my adventures accumulated over the years and I enjoyed my travels immensely, I was tired of my usual routine at home, tired of the responsibilities that I took so heavily upon myself, tired of struggling on a teacher’s salary and having to apologize for it, tired of the angst of striving for meaning only to watch it slip away as surely as dreams upon awakening. I was just tired of a lot of things I’d become and saw no remedy for my weariness except by getting back to the list.

Yet, as much as I wanted to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, I feared it would become just one more distraction, another excuse to focus my time on putting another checkmark on my list, only to make each day fit into the scheme of things. I wondered if what I really needed to do was to consider the gestalt – what it would take to create a whole life

worth living and not just a collection of fun, instructive, but seemingly random, experiences in the name of living life fully.

I didn't realize it for a long time, but the struggle to figure out what it would take to live the right life was really the subtext to the entire list. If teaching wasn't enough to make a life worth living, then maybe I had a bigger problem that I needed to face.

Yes, there were the adventures for their own sake, each being a bragging right in retirement when friends who had waited for their freedom would discover it was lost, traded long ago for the illusion of security. Other occupations and challenges were embedded in the list, but I felt trapped in a conventional, responsible, frame of mind. I was lucky to have the more than occasional adventure but they sometimes distracted me from true inner self-exploration. My load of responsibilities was due to the only core purpose I had known: learn; then teach others.

Though I still had no idea what Toto meant, something in me did resonate with their lyrics, and I had to go to Mt. Kilimanjaro even if, like the Moi of Rapa Nui, its symbolic value would remain inexplicable. As *Africa* slid down the charts, Mt. Kilimanjaro turned yellow with the other must dos on an aging legal pad, and I returned to the daily grind for the time being.

Maybe it was simply the idea of Mt. Kilimanjaro, the romance; the mystery of that damn leopard found dead in the snow at the top and Hemingway telling us enigmatically in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* that "No one has explained what the leopard

was looking for at that altitude." I wanted to see for myself, but it would be another nine years before I'd get the chance.

In the meantime, various jobs overseas allowed other adventures. A trip to the Kadazan world in Borneo, hiking among the spirits of their departed who inhabit Kinabalu, gave me a sense of the sacred and the satisfaction that comes from pitting my body and mind against a goal. Physical adventures have an uncanny way of allowing me to focus on internal conversations. Whether hiking a mountain, running a half marathon, biking to Malacca to raise money for Kampuchean refugees from the Killing Fields, check, check, check, inevitably the event becomes a meditative exercise. As my body takes care of itself, just as it was trained to do before the event, my mind is free for reflection and self-examination, the fruits of which linger long after the sensual enjoyment of the moment has passed.

After triumphantly reaching the top of Mt. Kinabalu, the highest peak in Southeast Asia, check, I was ready to expand my horizons. I didn't realize it then, but it was preparation for climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Two months before I met Kate, my friend Mario called. He was living in Japan and was aching for an adventure. I thought of Mt. Fuji, an opportunity I missed while gazing upon its snow-capped form outside my office window for six months.

"Want to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro?" he asked, reminding me of my long-standing fantasy.

I burst out "Of course!" before I knew if I could.

Despite its apparent ease (it isn't a technical climb) there was still the chance that altitude sickness would get me before I got to the peak.

"The dangers are passive but real," he said. Then he advised me to immediately begin training for endurance and now, early on Saturday morning I was running my daily 10k, thinking of Kate and Kilimanjaro.

When I got back to the apartment Kate was still on my mind and her voice was on my message machine asking if I'd like to share a pizza and beer tonight. She couldn't wait until Monday either.

"Hell yes," I yelled into the empty apartment.

Chapter 3

First Date

Kate greeted me warmly. "Hi John, come in," she said, opening the door wide and stepping back into the apartment. I loved the way she said my name. It felt like an embrace from an old friend, as if she genuinely missed me. I followed her in. She added, perfunctorily, "Excuse the mess. I'm in the middle of moving to Santa Cruz."

Boxes were strewn around; the move was well underway. The walls were a faint white, almost beige, and bare. "As often as I move, I hate it," I said.

"I've been in flux for a long time. My life's gotten really warped lately. Beer?"

"Sure." Hmm, a beer drinking professional woman in wine country, what a great omen.

She walked past some boxes to the almost empty refrigerator. I could see a few deli containers and a green six-pack of beer. "I hope you like Heineken," she said while reaching for an opener lying on the counter top, an imitation stone laminate. "Glass or bottle?"

"Bottle's fine. I like roughing it," I said with a smile.

Curiously, she didn't want to go out for the evening. The beer was in the fridge and the pizza was ordered before I arrived. I imagined we'd share that chore; consult one another on the kind and style of pizza, for example. Or brand of beer. The apartment was obviously a temporary place to crash and, on that very day, most of its

contents were removed to her new house in a fashionable part of Santa Cruz, 21 beautiful miles away over a busy winding mountain road.

“It’s a shame you’re moving.”

“This was temporary, just to get outta Dodge for a while.”

“Sounds like an opening line to a great mystery. Were you run out of town or what?”

She sipped her beer and smiled as if she were deciding how much to reveal.

“Let’s wait for the pizza for that story. Tell me about yourself. What brought you to the Stanford Bachelors, for example?”

“Okay, the Valley answer is that my friends blindfolded me and dragged me out of my apartment so they’d have someone to talk to while they fished in the singles pool.” I leaned up against her kitchen counter and wished she hadn’t asked that question.

“Is there another answer?”

“How’s, I’m desperate and I begged them to take me along?” There was more truth than not if desperate meant longing.

“Desperate. Why?”

“The usual reasons. You know, it’s hard to meet single professionals in the Valley and all that.”

“Not even through work? Where do you work, anyway?”

I got a little nervous about that question since my “job” was patched together.
“Actually I work at home. I teach part time at San Francisco State and take some training at Stanford. And I’m writing a book.”

“What about?” she asked, showing real curiosity.

“It’s about how to create a healthy organizational culture that would make people want to go to work. It’s directed at large companies. You know, reduce turnover, and increase innovation and morale; a magic bullet of sorts. It’ll be a best-seller,” I said with a large grin obviously enjoying the exaggeration. It was hard to capture the concepts in a nutshell so others unfamiliar with the subject would understand. That seemed to be enough for now.

“Have you worked for large companies?”

“Remember the old Department of Health, Education and Welfare? I worked for them, the military and the media and have been studying them for years.”

“Ever work for a *Fortune* 500 company?”

“Not really. Did some consulting with a few.”

“Then how can you write the book?”

I couldn’t tell where she was coming from and felt a bit defensive. “Well, because I happen to be an expert on the concept. The same way a doctor can write about cancer without having it himself.” This was a pretty intense opening conversation. I added, “I’m not sure what you’re getting at, Kate.”

“Well, I was thinking about book learning. As a counselor, I’ve been heavily involved in making assessments of clients.”

“Uh huh, I remember you said something about how well you do it.”

“But it sometimes feels entirely theoretical. I know certain things about the psychology of injuries and rehabilitation but I sometimes have my doubts about judging people’s conditions when I’m not them. I went to school, did an internship, practiced awhile and presto, I can impact another person’s life by judging their veracity.”

“That’s dramatic. Did something happen to you?”

“Nothing really, I am pretty good at what I do but I had an experience that undermined my confidence and I was just reminded of it recently. I was cross-examined in an administrative appeal. You know how on TV the defense attorney will ask something like ‘Are you certain?’ or ‘Have you ever made a mistake?’ Well, of course you have doubts and make mistakes but I didn’t in that case and lost anyway simply because I *could* have been wrong.” She raised her hands and motioned like she was making quotation marks in the air emphasizing could. “A reasonable doubt was raised and my judgment was set aside.”

“I guess you win some and lose some. Isn’t that all part of the process?”

“Actually, that has only happened twice. Still, at this point in my life, it got me thinking about the reliability of my knowledge.”

“Well, you exercised great judgment Friday night.”

Kate smiled and said, "We'll see," and moved us into the dining area to sit with our beers around a table with a box and some papers on it.

"Sorry about the mess," she said again and placed the objects on the floor next to the wall.

"It's not a problem, Kate. Is there something I can do to help out?"

"No thanks, it should be finished tomorrow."

"So, how about you? What were you doing at the Stanford Bachelors?" I asked, pulling the subject back to a lighter mood. "Desperate? Nah, you wouldn't know that feeling. You'd only know that theoretically. Desperate's like book learnin' to you."

"Hey, I'm the counselor. You don't have a license to ask that kind of question. Or make that judgment." She was leaning back in her chair with an arm over the side, fidgeting, twisting a stray curl around her finger while smiling.

"Well?" I said, mirroring her posture and smile. "As soon as Suzanne introduced you, the boys turned into bees around honey."

"Actually, my struggling writer friend, I didn't go there to meet anyone. Suzanne and company had dinner nearby and we thought we'd stop in; simple as that, really. Then I met you."

I coughed at the punch line.

"Look at you, you're blushing," she said.

I also started to sweat, too, and simply responded, "I can see you are an absolute tease."

“Well, you asked,” she said, looking at me. She reached over and gently kneaded my shoulder. “What kind of music do you like?” She stood to go pick something out.

“Whatever’s your pleasure,” I replied and got up to stretch. Kate’s straightforwardness and intelligence was different, attractive, about my age, and just what I’d been looking for. I live what I consider a pseudo intellectual life, more serious than smart, and seek an adventurer, an idealist, and a self-confident and creative partner with whom to explore the planet. Most women I met, especially those my own age, seemed anxious to settle down. I figure that’s what death is for. And the few women I met who were ready for adventure had no anchor – no purpose driving them. They were just footloose. I wasn’t ready to just seek pleasure and drift.

“Do you like country?” Kate asked holding a few tapes in her hand.

“Not usually my first choice but that’s fine, surprise me.”

She put Reba McEntire in the cassette deck and hit play. “I think you’ll like her.”

As it began I didn’t concentrate much on the lyrics and remarked how close to old rock and roll it sounded. I could get used to it, I thought. We were both standing and Kate said, “Feel like another beer?”

We headed to the kitchen just a few steps away; more like a galley. It was narrow with a small window above the sink that looked onto the shared balcony of the apartments on the second floor. Route 17 was nearby and you could see the red and white lights of the traffic flowing as usual. The apartment was very convenient.

“Cheers, Kate.”

“Cheers...Getting hungry?”

“I suppose I’m ready for a slice. Pizza’s the perfect food isn’t it? It’s certainly one of the easiest to get. Twenty minutes from hanging up it’s at your door.”

“Actually, I scheduled it. It’ll be here soon.”

“Clever, I wondered why it hadn’t come yet.”

“So, while we wait, why don’t you tell me your life’s story?”

“Got a pad ready? Shall I lie down on the couch?” I left the kitchen and returned to the dining table and Kate went to the blue cushioned Scandinavian style couch, very spare. The couch and table were it. Everything else was already moved out – except I’d guessed, her bedroom behind the closed door off the small living room. “Is this for official purposes or can I free associate, Kate?”

“There is no client-counselor privilege here so be careful,” she said with a giggle.

“I’ll keep that in mind. Let’s see, I’ve only been back in the States for about eight months, which explains a little about my being desperate. I was living in Australia. Ever been?”

“No, I’d like to go though, mostly to dive the reef and maybe surf. Was it great?”

“The reef is phenomenal and it blew my mind to have a fish the size of your arm get fascinated with my face mask and just look at me as if I were it’s mother.”

“I see we have our first Freudian reference. Let me make a note of that.” She smiled and faked taking notes. “What were you doing in Australia?”

“I was teaching on the Gold Coast - a white sandy stretch of beach about 30 miles long, an hour south of Brisbane. Some considered it paradise. I considered it boring.”

“Boring? Are you crazy?”

“It gets even better. I had a 30th floor apartment with a panoramic view sweeping from inland mountains to the beachfront where the South Pacific lapped ashore. In the summer, rents went up. It was because of the high season for vacationers but the landlord said it was because of the all the topless women on the beach.”

“Okay, explain this again,” she said, her voice animated and disbelieving. “You were bored?”

“How ‘bout that, mate? I was single, over forty and a daily variety of topless women lay on the beach so close to the apartment I had to cut a path through them all to get to the water,” I said with only a slight exaggeration.

“You were saying about being bored?”

“Yeah, it was beautiful one day, perfect the next, like all the brochures said but there was no professional life. I wasn’t ready to call it home and retire. I finally accepted the truth and left.”

“What’s so important about a professional life, anyway? Besides, you had one. You said you taught there. At a university, I presume. So, isn’t that a professional life?”

“It’s complicated. There wasn’t enough of one and additional work opportunities were almost nil. Believe it or not, in the winter the place was deserted except for the

students and my brand-new apartment wasn't even heated." After I said that it still wasn't making a lot of sense. I went on, "Okay, okay, I had no prospects for the kind of relationship I'm looking for. See, I must be desperate to go to the Stanford Bachelors. What do ya think doc, am I gonna make it?"

"Well, now I'm worried about you. Beautiful one day, perfect the next? Ocean and mountains? Sandy beach? Nude sunbathing? Are you all right?"

I took a taste of my beer and wondered if indeed, I wasn't crazy for leaving Australia. I got up and walked over to the music. "It was too much like a vacation, too removed from the action. I guess I needed to get back to my life and on with a relationship. Make sense?"

I listened to the music and heard Reba singing about life's disappointments. "So why the sad song, Kate? Let's get to your story."

Dating is so odd. It's important, essential, and fun but modulating the disclosures, setting a balance between want and enjoyment, between need and off-putting revelations, makes it a difficult process – almost as tricky as I imagine international peace talks after the war has started.

It was out there. *I was seeking a relationship* and I wish I never said anything about being *desperate* – even in jest. That sort of thing releases a flag on the play no matter how it's used.

It was interesting being with Kate. Whether she turned out to be a serious candidate for a relationship or not I enjoyed finding out if our twosome would lead to synergies or just be a doubling of the angst.

I hoped she was at a point where she, too, would be open to new possibilities. She certainly was intriguing. And her work sounded like a nice blend of empathy and pragmatism. Working for companies to help workers get back on their feet sounded helpful and I chose to believe she had a noble purpose and wasn't just mining a market niche of high-paid consulting to cut costs for The Man.

The small talk flowed, and then disappeared as we dropped into an emotional crevasse. It was her turn to tell her story. A moment past and I said, "Okay, Kate, out with it."

"I left my husband but we're still business partners."

Whoa, that's putting it out there. "That must be difficult," I said, only slightly hiding my startle. "What happened Kate?"

"I had an affair with one of our counselors. It was really powerful; I thought we took love to a new level. Two weeks after I left my husband we broke up. He met someone else."

I wasn't surprised she had a past but the dimensions of this emotional complication caught me off guard. I was speechless. All of a sudden that kind of revelation demanded too much processing. I felt as if I just got into a psychic accident. Her ex-husband was still a partner, even if only in business. Thus, he was still in her life

in a major way. I truly hoped he wasn't in too much pain because his pain would become mine in short order.

I had no idea how to follow this up but I heard myself say, "How long was your affair?" I wasn't sure what I was trying to get at here. Would a long affair demonstrate spousal cruelty? Would a short affair be excusable as an irresistible fling that could overcome anyone's sensibilities in an extremely rare and justified moment of weakness?

"Six years," she said. "Now I can't move forward and can't move back. I'm just moving; my new place is near my office."

"It's a lot to handle all at once." I said, clearly not ready for this. Holy cow, I thought, what's weirder, a married woman having an affair for six years or that it ended within two weeks after finally making a commitment to the new relationship? I processed all of this in nanoseconds in the midst of a difficult conversation. I asked myself what I was learning here. Okay, she is capable of incredible deception and then suffered at the hands of the guy who was bringing her to a whole new level - and after only two weeks freed from the confines of any marital inhibitions that might have cramped their relationship. Who knows what level they'd get to if only Mr. X could have been a tad more patient?

As if she saw my inner turmoil, she said, trying to be light about it, "Don't let it bother you, drama's the life of a counselor."

"Sounds like you're in a fix. It must be painful." It was I who was acting the counselor now. I didn't know what else to say or how to change the subject. I wanted to

learn more and didn't want to learn more. I definitely went with the flow and restrained the urge to make judgments. She was showing an amazing degree of sangfroid or she had an equally amazing ability to mask the emotional turmoil. I was also considerably disappointed that my eagerness in a relationship would now undoubtedly be met by her caution, or worse, detachment. But maybe she was capable of moving on quickly. I'd find out soon enough.

Thankfully, she climbed back up to small talk and I was relieved, sort of. Now it made sense as I heard melancholy Reba McEntire still playing in the background. It seemed perfect for the occasion but covered me in a shroud of foreboding.

She married when she was twenty
She thought she was ready
Now she's not so sure
She thought she'd done some living
But now she's just wonderin'
What she's living for

Keeping the mood shallow, I asked, "What do you like to do? How do you usually keep life interesting when you're not in a drama?" As if building her own successful counseling business wasn't interesting! I began to feel really idiotic at this point, still trying to delay judgment or interject some obtuse self-righteous flippant remark. Luckily the apartment buzzer rang. Finally, the pizza arrived and flippancy fortunately sank beneath the emotional waves.

"I hope you don't mind that I ordered," she said, not expecting an answer. "I played the odds, sausage and cheese. I hope that's okay."

“Yeah, sure.” I said and added, “Can we split it?”

“My treat,” she said with a smile.

Her simply making these choices wasn't so bad – basic, straightforward. Nice, really. No big deal.

While she handled the delivery I fell into my own thoughts about what she had just told me.

All right John, I thought, resist, resist, resist judgment. Just be. Accept the world; accept Kate, at least for now. Give her a chance – see who she really is, not who you want her to be. Her reality was still crashing around inside my head despite my effort at mind-control. A six-year affair. Her lover leaves her two weeks after she leaves her husband. I imagined how the affair led to great anticipation for both of them, much like I was experiencing. Was keeping their affair alive their core activity around which their higher love blossomed? I could see the sarcasm seeping into my thinking and I didn't like it. Was it their strategizing that actually kept it going? I can imagine it: *Oh baby, this is sooo much better, you and me.* Uh oh, the sarcasm was persistent but I was at least thankful that it was still inside my head and hadn't yet made its way out into the room.

I thought about her separation being negotiated, or just dictated in a way that left the parties still in one piece, but the fragile three-way emotional house of cards, built on a deception, collapsed in just two weeks after all those years. I could see that it must be impossible to dramatically alter their relationships and yet expect them to remain untouched. No, everything must change. There is no longer an other. There is no longer

the effort that must be expended to secret away one's passion. No more planning and plotting stolen moments to practice that higher love. I was beginning to feel the temptation to judge. It was almost irresistible but I worked hard to tame the urge.

I suppose I'm a meat and potatoes kind of guy when it comes to relationships. I figured that if it's worth anything, it's worth being truthful about. Not working? Fix it or get out. I know that when I was the other man, I was never able to reach a level of trust that I needed to make the relationship work. I thought I did, but when it came down to it, I, too, fled. I would say, *before we can have a real relationship you need to be on your own*. When Kate finally made the move, her lover fled. Double ouch.

There are some people, male and female, who, before they leave a relationship act like disgruntled employees leaving only after they have found a new job. That's the Tarzan and Jane school of thought – some people are so terrified of being alone they need to swing from one relationship into another without standing on solid ground, without testing themselves against the reality of their own world.

So, if I have understood what I was just told, Kate's husband, now ex, is her business partner and Mr. X works for them even while he is now her ex lover. This would prove to be a challenging logical problem for an SAT question – even for California kids. *If Kate has two exes including one who works for her and the other ex, her business partner, what is the value of why?* Better not share this quip just yet, I thought. We were still on our first date. Hell, we were just getting acquainted.

She left the pizza in the box, tore away the top and placed it between us on the kitchen bar. I stood on the galley side, near the appliances and sink; she sat on a high stool on the other side. We dug in quietly, four hands pulling at the still steaming pie. This one could burn, I thought.

Now that we were into the pizza she picked up where we left off. "I like sports. Social ones: bowling, skiing, pool, golf, racquetball, softball. I like to bike or hike with a friend, too. We have teams at work, bowling and softball. You play?"

She raised a slice of pizza to her mouth using both hands to hold the crust. The cheese stretched in thin, thread-like strings from the pie. She pulled at that slice that now looked like a tangled marionette and finally freed herself to bite the damn thing only to catch a remnant of dangling cheese on her nose. She giggled and I laughed while I wrestled with my own slice and resumed the conversation.

"I guess I'm a gentleman's athlete. Mostly I run. But I play all the usual sports and bar games." I didn't feel suitably jockish. To prove I could be macho, because it sure wasn't obvious, I told her my one rugby story. I was hoping to hold my own in this unexpectedly revealing conversation and also establish myself as capable of holding up on the court, field, or alley of her choice.

The idea of her being an emotional juggler of soap-opera-quality dramas and an unstoppable jock was already threatening my little fantasy of us. I wanted that fantasy of Kate as emotionally available to survive a little longer to enjoy the fruits of whatever

would blossom from our mutual sense of urgency about our first date. Somehow, though, I found myself already competing with her and wondered how that happened.

“I played rugby in an international tournament once, but I haven’t played since,” I began. Hell, I thought, I’m lucky to be alive. Damn right I haven’t played since.

“Actually,” I continued, “I was pulled out of the stands to play for the Malaysian Army when half their team was suddenly called away on game day to chase communist guerilla’s in the northern jungle.” I was pleased with this and imagined just how macho that had to sound. I took another bite of pizza and savored that heroic start to the story for a few more seconds before revealing the whole truth.

“I never played the game before, but only my Malaysian friend and I knew that.” He was a national champ and loved watching me sweat it out. Now, from a safe distance years later, I am only slightly less terrified, but at the time I was sure that after the first scrum, either I would die or the teams would die laughing. Hell, if I were bad enough, maybe they would have taken me out in the jungle and shot me for impersonating a player.

“You *are* crazy,” Kate said. “You voluntarily leave paradise and you play competitive rugby on a dare.”

Yes, I thought, this was working just fine. “Hey, I was young, foolish and helping a friend. I laughed off the dangers and eventually threw myself into it, literally. I held my own and even made some tackles.”

“How did all this happen?” Kate asked, her face bright with interest.

Her response was exciting. She leaned over the pizza box and took another bite of her slice. I resisted all kinds of urges. Not yet needing to make long stories short, I took momentary refuge in the full-length version and explained how, if I didn't play, my friend's team would have been disqualified.

"I was on a trip to Southern Thailand as his guest, with the Malaysian Rugby champs. Officially, it was an international invitational involving military teams from Thailand, Malaysia, and New Zealand. They called it a set of 'friendly games.' It was sort of an exhibition round robin. Still, no one wanted to lose. I was the only available replacement player needed to reach the minimum player quota. Breathing while upright was the only qualification as far as I could tell, so I qualified.

"Basically the trip was an excuse to escape wives and girlfriends for a weekend of debauchery in the brothels and massage parlors of Hat Yai at the end of the regular season. These annual weekends were the stuff of legend and I got a hell of an education in the process."

Now Reba was singing *For My Broken Heart* in the background. I suppose that's why this CD was chosen in the first place - to soothe her in this transition. I continued with my story and didn't draw her attention to the song.

"I was thoroughly fascinated by it all, and immersed myself in the cross-cultural experience." I smiled as I said that, not able to stifle all sarcasm. "I was their guest and now a hero of sorts having flung my body at the Kiwis, almost as if I knew what I was doing. They remained in the tournament and went on to win after a few other more

experienced replacement players were finally found and I was given a reprieve without the need for a stretcher.”

“So what about the brothels? Or were they massage parlors?” Kate interjected, curious.

“It was so counter cultural, so unusual, so wrong on so many levels but totally mind blowing – in a good way.” Another smile broke across my face. “This is so chauvinistic and un p.c. It is so unlike me it was a major part of the fun. Being a bad boy for the weekend was like trying on an entirely new personality. I wasn’t supposed to be doing brothels and massage parlors and certainly not so publicly...” I drifted off in a very pleasant memory but just as quickly snapped back. “Ah, but first let me finish telling you about the game....”

Kate really wasn’t interested in more game details. “So, come on,” she said, “what was so mind blowing?”

Adrenaline was still flowing, the beer was decent, Kate disclosed the crash and burn of a really peculiar love triangle that seemed certain to leave multiple embers aglow. We dripped mozzarella cheese on our faces, and I revealed how turned on I had been by the sexual freedom of that weekend; it was an important awakening.

“The pizza’s quite good,” I said, stalling to gather my thoughts. “I could use another Heineken. Can I get you one, too?” I continued, making myself at home and reaching for the refrigerator door right next to me.

“Sure,” she said, moving over to the couch.

I pulled the beers from their cardboard carrier and brought them over. "Thanks," she said taking one. I sat facing her and told her about the body massage. She was quite attentive as I fished for words that captured its meaning beyond the sheer sexual pleasure I enjoyed.

"I suppose I imbibed too deeply in Puritanism because the playfulness and joy of the masseuse was completely unexpected. This wasn't just business. She showed an interest in my pleasure and happiness that I hadn't even felt from my wife." I couldn't believe what I heard myself saying, but I finished the thought, "which explains a bit of why she is an ex, I suppose."

I described the bubble bath the masseuse gave me, whisking me ever so gently back to infancy in a large tub big enough for her to straddle me, the preliminary massage on the air mattress and how she delivered it using her entire beautiful and equally soapy body before we dried off for a traditional Thai massage.

Kate took the beer from my hand placed it on the floor next to hers, leaned over and said, "Let me get this right, there was a bubble bath and a massa..." In a few seconds she hovered over me, her ponytail released, her hair shaken loose and now sheltering our faces beneath. I rose when our lips met gently at first and then more firmly as we began exploring the new territory that comes with great desire. But our initial frenzied taste of each other was only to be a snack not a banquet. We played and teased for a long time to keep the anticipation alive.

Her desire completely disarmed me, running room to room in my compartmentalized brain flinging open doors, whipping curtains aside, pushing open windows that had been long closed by ancient layers of paint. When our kissing and petting finally abated, every muscle was relaxed and she lay her weightless body atop mine for a moment's rest.

But in the here and now when our breath mingled and our mouths pulled at each other and her hair covered us in a curtain filtering the light into shadows and flickers, when we looked at each other, I could feel myself drawn into her gray green eyes. Some time passed as we let the whirl of the evening settle and she said quietly, almost in a whisper, "It feels so good."

Yes it did. It was so comfortable I was greedy for more but knew I had to let this be a marker for the night. She nuzzled into me with the length of her body and I could feel her contented breathing along my neck until she gave me a peck and gently pushed herself away. Gathering her hair and placing it back in its ponytail indicated that tonight's play was over - as if the curtain had been pulled aside for a final bow. I came back from my drowsiness and joined her upright on the couch.

I said, becoming surprisingly formal, "I'm really glad you called."

Then she said, "I may be finished moving tomorrow, why don't we have a drink at Carrie Nation's? Do you know where it is downtown?"

You had to love a bar with that name. It was clearly more than snubbing the self-righteous, it flaunted convention – of course we’d meet there. I could feel the adventure quickening. “Yeah, sure. I’d love to. When?”

“How about six?”

What a first date it had been; so much was completely unexpected in so many ways. Despite the exes, she was high-spirited, a mistress of her own fate, clearly in charge of her life and capable of crafting a living that she enjoyed from the real need for her services. Public service, insurance investigator all rolled up into one. I liked that. Besides, I wanted to have sex with her.

“I’ll see you then,” I said, and gave her a short kiss goodbye.

Reba had long ago gone quiet.

Chapter 4

Pool Shark

I drove back from that first date adjusting to important new realities about Kate. While being in a complicated emotional state, and working through a new transition, it seemed that her desire for me clearly cut through any ambiguity she might have felt. It was palpable and very appealing.

Traffic was light and I drove easily letting the night settle around me. I wasn't in a hurry and passed my exit in order to keep driving into the clear moonlit night to reflect on the evening.

A new relationship is a fragile thing. It's mysterious in its combination of hopes and fears and its promises and obstacles, its like an opening to oneself while also being an emergent possibility of something entirely new – an entity all its own. I seek to augment, complement, and build-upon the part of myself that remains dormant when I'm alone and see a relationship as a tether to the world out there, a reality check, a reason to talk out loud. It had been several years since I was in a really good relationship and I was ready for one now. I was still enthusiastic about Kate even with the revelations about her tumultuous past.

I wondered if I was beginning something that would reveal a welcoming new world or if it would become an entry into a burdensome, complicated maze of emotional intrigue. As I made my way into the East Bay, watching the stark, grassy

undulations spotted with packed pockets of development gobbling up the last remaining open space, I suspended my imaginings of the future and found myself just smiling at the recollection of the evening when our breath mingled and our lips sought each other out unconcerned about meaning. The pleasure was refreshing.

I awoke to a quiet Sunday and set out for a long run through deserted streets. Six miles and another round of stadium steps would keep me on track for the Kilimanjaro climb but I now felt two equally imposing challenges were gripping me and I suspected Kilimanjaro would be the easier of the two. How could I possibly train for Kate, I wondered. As Kilimanjaro would demand endurance, Kate, I thought, would require time to heal and a lot of patience.

I had to go to Kilimanjaro, not just because it was on the list of challenges I set for myself, or for the bragging rights that would come from making it to the top. It was also because I wanted a new perspective on my life that I generously, some say foolishly, still considered on the easy side of middle age. There would be absolutely no distractions for the six days of the climb itself. That means no phones, no TV, no mail, no errands, and no chores.

So, Kilimanjaro held big hopes and fears. For Mario, it was a reprise of an effort made a few years earlier to get above 18,000 feet. In Nepal, he had to turn back before making Everest's base camp. He wasn't sure why he experienced altitude sickness but

thought that perhaps he climbed too fast. Our effort was to be different and I was more than happy to take it easy; Kilimanjaro is over 19,000 feet. This Sunday morning's run was continued preparation for the climb, now less than a month away, and tonight, I would continue the unexpected adventure of courting Kate.

I parked my car in the lot behind the bar and went in to find that Kate had arrived. "Hey, been here long?" I asked, approaching the empty seat beside her.

Closed shops in Los Gatos, the ensuing tranquility after the weekend Christmas shopping frenzy, and the last few hours of calm before the usual workweek resumed, left Carrie Nation a subdued place at six o'clock.

"Nope, just took off my jacket."

"That's good," I said, "How was the move?"

"It's great to be moving back to Santa Cruz, finally. But, I'm not much of a homebody."

We ordered drinks and resumed getting to know one another. "I'm not exactly a homebody either, but I like my little nest. It's got a great view of the Los Gatos hills. Working in the late afternoon sun as it drops for the day feels just right."

"That sounds comfortable."

“The place is great, but you know it’s sad in a way. I’ve been working on this book project for 17 years and now it’s just about done. It may be the longest pregnancy on record.”

“Maybe you can get out more now.”

It was an unexpected comment. I hoped she’d ask about the book. I thought she’d be interested because of its natural relevance to her concerns for healthy workplaces. I went with the flow. “I suppose. Funny you should mention getting out more. I’m planning a trip to Africa; part celebration part reassessment.”

“Really? Where?”

“First, to a photo safari and then to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro. Wanna come? We’ll need to leave after New Year’s.” I hated mentioning this trip knowing I’d be leaving for almost three weeks, breaking up a great start to our budding relationship. And, on a lark, I tossed out the invitation in part to let her know I’d want to be with her.

“Get out!” She exclaimed, unexpectedly animated.

“Yeah, why not?” I replied. “For the first week my friend Mario and I will be camping in the Ngorongoro crater. We’ll be the last campers allowed to do so before it all becomes part of the conservation area. Then we’ll hike Kilimanjaro.”

“That’s very tempting.” she said, “but I don’t know...”

“It’ll be amazing. ‘Lions, tigers and bears, oh my.’ Actually there are no bears or tigers but lots of lions, elephants, wildebeest, zebras, giraffes, and we’ll see hippos along the way, too. It’s wide-open Africa, what do you say? Can you imagine only

having a tent between you and these animals knowing that at any time one might be curious to know who's snoring in the night? I know, it's crazy, but..." As soon as I said this, pushing this lark dangerously close to reality, I worried that she just might come along. Then I started imagining the complications.

"Actually," she said, "I'd love to go but we're trying to sell the business and there's just too much to sort out."

"I know. I shouldn't have tempted you," I said relieved. "It must be awful – ending a marriage and an affair, and closing down a business all at the same time. I can't begin to imagine what that must be like. What IS it like?" I knew about the relationships, but I didn't realize she was selling her business. I was delighted she still felt like seeing me but I couldn't help but wonder why she would welcome dealing with another emotional variable in her life.

"At this point it's more a nuisance of details, really. I'm coming to grips with the bigger issues. They've been developing for quite a while." As she said that there was a slight tremor in her voice and she turned to her drink. A "nuisance of details" was a brilliant way of lessening the need to explain. I imagine her feelings must be rather raw and conflicted and so I didn't pursue it. We could certainly focus on more pleasant things on our second date without having to re-examine that emotional catastrophe.

"Well, it sure seems like a lot," I said. The contrast between our mental states couldn't have been greater, I thought. I was so full of myself – finishing a book, planning to climb the tallest mountain in Africa and pursuing a very appealing woman

- all in the spirit of life beginning at 44, while hers was in such disarray. Maybe in some way her dating again was actually evidence of her resilience. Maybe for the time being I should just leave well enough alone and remember that our contributions to any relationship building would come from very different perspectives. Maybe her travails would help ground me in the realities of life as my euphoria with my own good fortune was getting the better of me. I continued my upbeat approach and said, "So, if that's under control and you're not a homebody, what keeps you going?"

"The business really keeps me focused but I play softball and bowl on company teams a couple of nights a week. Then there's country dancing and bar games in Santa Cruz."

"Some of my favorite things, well, not the dancing part," I said. "I do remember you saying you enjoyed sports last night. But what kind of bar games?" I could see she was intrigued. She responded as if I had thrown down a gauntlet and turned toward me with a sparkle in her eyes and said, "Well, I know where we can shoot some pool nearby. Want to?"

Here goes, I thought. "Sure."

She got up with a big smile crossing her face, "let's go."

As we put our jackets on, I paid the bill then followed her out of the bar.

Geez, no sooner than reaching the parking lot, performance anxiety raised its ugly head. I was not only rusty but never terrific to begin with. I could be a great companion to players across a wide spectrum of talent in almost all games, but Kate

struck me as eager in the way a jock enters a field of play and claims it like an animal marking its territory. I expected her to roar.

“Hop in,” she said, pointing to her dark green Jaguar. “It’s only a couple of blocks away. Don’t worry, I’ll bring you back,” she said with a playfulness in her voice.

“Whoa, this is comfy,” I said, sinking into the leather seat.

“I like it. With all the driving I do, it puts me in the right frame of mind for my appointments. Besides, business is very, very good, John.”

“That ought to make selling it a breeze,” I said, thinking to myself that her financial success was a symptom of something that made me uncomfortable. As an academic turned writer, I wouldn’t even be able to think about buying a Jaguar even if I wanted one. I wondered how this gap between our spending powers would influence our relationship.

“We have an offer of \$2 million but there are some technicalities. We’ll see. We were pretty lucky.”

“You can’t be lucky without putting in a lot of work.”

“I hate to tell you how easy it is,” she said. “For example, I went to a three day conference on the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act), read the enabling legislation and regulations and, because companies don’t want to find these things out for themselves, they pay us, me, a lot of money to explain it to them.”

“Nice. Elegant. Sounds like a great business model.” And it was too, so much so it was ludicrous. There were times I wished I would just make money like everyone else

but I can't do just anything no matter how lucrative it is if I don't truly enjoy it and when I enjoy something I don't think about how to make a lot of money doing it. I don't mind the consequences even if I sometimes feel a twinge of envy when it's in my face like this. The urge to join the fray and focus on making money passes rather quickly, and I am back into the comfort of my rather modest reality.

"Yeah," she said, "As good as the business is right now, rumored legislation could wipe it out. That's one of the technicalities the buyer's looking into. It really is hard to assess, quite a gamble really. I'm hoping to get out before it's too late."

"Any plans for after the sale?"

"Not really. Spend some time at the house in the Sierras or in Maui to think things through. It'll be good to have the freedom though," she said matter-of-factly.

Just in her early forties, she had done well. Now I was having more than a short pang of envy, but this was before I remembered my lottery ticket, the lonesome dollar fantasy in my wallet that would have to hold me for a while.

We arrived at the bar. It was another quiet place with a faint beer smell, a worn carpet, and a small tired patch of dance floor that was darkened and at rest. The thick small wooden tables spread around unevenly under the glow of various neon beer signs had the feel of what must be a hopping place on a Saturday night. It was a plus that there weren't too many observers and the pool table was available. "I'll get the drinks, Kate, you rack 'em up."

"That's a deal."

When I returned with the drinks she was polishing the tip of her cue stick with blue chalk. The balls formed a perfect triangle, alternating odd and even with the eight ball ominously centered. "How 'bout a game of eight ball to start?" she asked.

"Sure, why not? I guess I can't be hustled if I know you're a pro," I said, smiling, already admiring her skill and beginning to catch her rising enthusiasm. "Go ahead, take your best shot."

"Uh uh," she said. "We do this fair and square. Shoot for break or toss, it's up to you."

"Okay, have it your way, but watch out, it's been so long I'm entitled to another dose of beginners luck."

She laughed, "Now who's hustling who?"

"Yeah, right. I wish."

"Well, don't worry, whatever happens," she said, clearly in her element, "I'll respect you in the morning."

"Okay, let's toss. I want to save all my luck for when it counts. Here, I'll flip my lucky silver dollar just to impress the gods. Call it."

I tossed the coin high with a fast spin and placed it to land on the far side of the table. "Heads," she said just before it landed heads up on the felt.

"Okay, Kate, show me your stuff," I said feeling a playful air of recklessness come over me. In a flash she shattered the triangle and the balls scattered like birds upon a shot. One striped ball fell quickly into a near side pocket and another one took a

torturous route to the other side of the table and casually plopped into a corner pocket in what looked to me like a slow motion taunt.

“Nice break.” I moved aside to give her room to set up her next shot. An imitation Tiffany lamp hung over the center of the table blocking my view of Kate’s face but I saw her body and how she was casually holding her cue upright with both hands while gently swaying thinking about her shot. I glanced away. The bar was quiet, and even the ever-present TV fixed to a sports channel wasn’t too distracting. Just then I heard the crack of balls and the thump of another one drop into a pocket. I turned around expecting to see a self-satisfied Kate maneuvering for another target but she was just standing there sheepishly, waiting for my reaction. It took me a second to realize what happened. “Ya just gotta love that eight ball, eh Kate? When you least expect it, it just makes itself irresistible.”

“How ‘bout double or nothing?”

“Why not? I’m obviously on a streak!” I racked them and broke. The game went on passing smoothly, evenly, back and forth. Finally I had a clear shot at the eight ball and asked her not to watch, suggesting in a sly tone that I had something up my sleeve.

“No way. When I’m facing a wreck, I want to see it coming.”

I laughed and had to wait a second to calm down before sinking it in the corner.

“So, is this the point where you put real money on the game?” I asked, smiling.

“You’re not the pushover I thought. But let’s take a break before I burst your balloon,” she said.

With that I refilled our drinks and returned to the table. I was imagining what I thought would be a nice end to the evening but knew it wouldn't be tonight; for that we'd need an evening at home with plenty of time to relax into each other. We took our seats and I asked her what she liked about her work.

"You mean besides cashing the checks?" she said with a grin, then continued, "Mostly it's helping people get back on their feet and able to work again."

"How so?"

"Well, when someone activates a worker's comp claim, the State and the company are anxious to assess it and the claimant wants to recover. But sometimes when a worker is injured they see a way out of their drudgery, so there can be a lot of hanky panky. We check it out. And sometimes it's hard to make anyone happy, everyone in the process usually feels abused."

"I have an acquaintance who's 38. She's been paying for full disability insurance for years. Suddenly she got the yuppie disease that knocked her right out..."

Kate interrupted, "I know what you're gonna say. Chronic fatigue. It's an epidemic, inexplicable, real, and too easy to fudge."

"Yeah, if I don't see a cast, a bandage or blood, I have a hard time being sympathetic - especially when the pathophysiology is unclear. In my case I get a kick in the butt back to work. In her case, she got 100 percent disability and her insurance paid off big time - for life. Now she's living on a ranch near Monterey. How 'bout them apples?"

“That’s what I mean. We check it out. What’s her name? ...Just kidding.”

“I admire your entrepreneurial spirit.”

“Well, I was never good at working for other people but figured out how to sell. I like it.”

“Your counselors must like it, too,” I said.

“It’s really amazing. They hate to sell, so it’s perfect all around. I get the work, they do it, we all get paid – a lot.”

“I like the idea but was always too restless to make the commitment to a business. I do consulting but hate seeing everyone I meet as a potential client, so I dodge in and out of academia. When I get fed up, as I inevitably do, I leave one and go to the other. It’s the intellectual stimulation and tromping around an amazing world I enjoy visiting that keeps me going.”

“But why the restlessness?”

“It’s a big world and I get bored easily or pissed off. So I leave. Never did have trouble getting good work but once I need to job hunt I use the globe as my reference point. If you’re going to pack up and move, it is just as easy to go to Singapore as it is to go to Cincinnati. And I’ve seen most of the world along the way – over 100 countries.”

I felt I was beginning to ramble but she still seemed interested and asked,
“Which one’s your favorite?”

“I don’t know how to answer that question. I like a bunch of places for lots of reasons.”

I always struggle with that inevitable question. Mostly because people are thinking about a vacation spot, while I am enjoying these places as one who likes travel and the unexpected. I like places for how I feel there as much as for their inherent qualities like cheap cold beer served up on a beach beside bathtub temperature turquoise water. If you want that then go to the Caribbean. I liked Bangladesh, too, and can love being in a place just because it's different. I'm a sucker for a smile from a sarong-wrapped woman with a basket of fruit on her head. But that's not how people choose a tourist destination. Then Kate reframed the question and asked, "Okay, where would you suggest I go?"

"Now that's a counselor for you. Okay, Bali. Have you been?"

"Uh uh, only to England on a bike trip. Why Bali?"

"Have you ever met anyone so at peace with life you could sit with her without speaking and feel refreshed, totally relaxed, safe? Can you imagine someone smiling at you in a way that you know you are loved? Then can you imagine that person moving through her life as if it was her calling to approach everything she does as if she is creating art?"

"Wow, I hadn't figured on a spiritual journey."

"It's a dirt poor place but it's spiritual in a very accessible way. It is a total immersion experience. You can really feel it if you let it in. And since you asked, I'd recommend you go. As a shrink, I think you'd appreciate it."

"Well, I've seen *Road to Bali* with Bob Hope," she said joking.

“Funny, but that’s to Bali as the Lone Ranger is to the west. What I just love about Bali is how the whole place is consumed in arts and crafts as a way of life. It’s a mirror for me. I love to return to grapple with the contrast between the image I have of myself and the frenetic nature of our culture to their obvious peace and contentment. It’s a hell of a change but I highly recommend it. You’ll feel the difference.”

A moment later, Kate closed the conversation to return to her world. “You know, I guess my idea of travel is to completely veg out. I’m more of a vacationer, I suppose. Wanna rack ‘em up for the tie-breaker?”

“Tie-breaker?” I teased, and then stretched as I rose and said, “Sure, let’s pick a winner for the night.” It was getting late.

It seemed that some of the levity had been lost with this sojourn to Bali but after we refreshed our drinks and Kate broke, it wasn’t long before we returned to the lightness of being together.

Kate didn’t sink one ball on the break and I was well positioned to get an easy drop. I took my turn and a solid ball miraculously made its way into a pocket. I must have indeed been inspired by another dose of beginner’s luck. It unnerved Kate. “Watch out, I have apparently invoked the benevolence of the gods,” I said. My focus on the game returned and we resumed our bantering, but Kate was clearly disappointed when she ended the evening in a shutout. Okay, I told myself, just get to know her better and be gracious. “What a surprise that was,” I said. “Believe me, it was all luck. Thanks for letting me win, you’re a good sport.”

She gave me a ride back to my car and we talked about another date. "Now that the weekend is over, let me see how my calendar looks," she said, "I guess I'm entitled to a rematch, no?"

"I'd love it but I'm not sure I want that to happen too soon, I do need to enjoy this while I can," I said with a grin. Undoubtedly, I wouldn't be visited by beginner's luck the next time.

When I leaned over to kiss her goodnight, we met with the same eagerness as last night. Despite the bucket seats and interference of the console we formed a good fit as we explored the contours of our bodies and swam in the dizziness of our abandon. I loved her scent and breathed deeply as our lips nibbled each another's. Eventually the swaying car and the fog on the windshield gave us a strange sense of privacy that urged us to complete what we had begun. Our kissing was as effortless as our banter and I wanted to fill myself with the taste of her before leaving.

Soon, we smacked up against the reality of our time and place, when the car phone was knocked off its cradle and a buzzer went off reminding us just where we were.

While carefully disengaging from our embrace to avoid further bumps and regaining our composure we laughed at the dangling phone, the persistent beeping of the open phone line, and the fog on the windshield. "Well, I guess that's the bell that ends round two. I suppose we have to go back to our corners now."

"Next time, let's make it Santa Cruz. I'll call you tomorrow."

“Hmmm.” I leaned over to her for one more kiss, opened the door and said, “Till then.”

Chapter 5

My Candle Burns At Both Ends

Finally, it was time. Tomorrow, I'd be on my way to Africa. I had imagined this trip for years; I was now on the verge of realizing a fantasy. Kate and I had become inseparable since Christmas Eve, and after almost two solid weeks together I'd be leaving for a little over three.

Since we met we moved through one awkward adjustment to another: who would drive, we'd share that chore but usually in her car and we never went very far; when we'd see each other, that depended on her schedule; whose place we'd stay at, hers usually, but mine when she had business in the valley, and we didn't leave so much as a toothbrush at the other's place. But at least the last two weeks had been fun. We were finally getting to know each other in a more relaxed, natural way and after much titillation and making out, crossed the line at last. On our first night at her place, about a week before Christmas, we tore each other's clothes off and left a trail between the fireplace and her bed upstairs.

The fun was in lots of little things. It was the way she would surprise me by batting me with a pillow and pouncing on me after she awoke to demand a morning kiss. Or, one day I'd awake slowly, opening my eyes to find her inches away from my face and watching me with an "I've got a surprise for you" smile of wonderment. What I liked most were the mid-day phone calls and the spontaneous rendezvous when I

expected her to be working. I enjoyed the attention and the effort she made to include me in her day even when we were apart. It was the combination of her attention and the amount of time we spent together that belied her insistence on her freedom and reminders to keep the boundaries of our lives clearly marked on her psychological map.

Today had been exquisite; perfect blue sky, temperature a brisk and refreshing 60-degrees. But in what I hoped wasn't an omen, I felt overcome with a flu-like bug and the start of what looked like a cold sore. I had a moment of panic feeling the worst was surely upon me. As the thought of trip cancellation flashed through my mind, I visited the health center for some relief. A heavy dose of pre-emptive antibiotics and I was assured I would be okay by the time I actually started the climb, now just over a week away. And that thing that seemed like a sore on my lip wasn't contagious or threatening. It was just one of those things, whatever that is, but most likely just a passing blemish. Perhaps the self-indulgence of the trip was gnawing away at my sensibilities. All of my travels had been combined with paying assignments and even vacations cost considerably less. Or maybe my not so hidden fear of failing the climb conspired to keep me back and give me an acceptable reason to postpone, if not cancel it altogether. The young doctor was confident and admonished me not to chicken out now before I even got on the plane.

I left his office with some of his confidence, feeling at last that I was indeed on my way. It was sinking in. I was actually going to Africa to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro.

The past two weeks with Kate were glorious. She drove over to my place where I had been sorting and packing for the trip.

I opened the door to welcome her and she greeted me with one of those hugs from the movies where the heroine wraps her arms around the hero like ribbons forming a bow and rises up on tiptoes for a kiss. I grabbed her around her waist and instinctively pulled her into me until our lips met perfectly.

As I stepped back and led her into the living room, she said, "I'm all yours, no matter what you've got."

I was all packed and ready to go to her place for our last night together. "I'm okay, we can party till it's 1999. Well, till tomorrow anyway." I saw an unmitigated joyful spirit radiate from Kate. As hard as she tried to put the past behind her, her two exes were still in her life and she was still recovering from that double trauma. Sometimes she fell back into her memories and still recent hurt, sometimes she'd be so distracted she didn't see me right in front of her, and sometimes, like now, she was in a natural high. While I had been focusing on our potential and exaggerating the good times and conveniently minimizing the difficulties, today our delight was unambiguous. It surely carried over to intensify our sense of the moment and helped allay the constant analyzing and inner conversations I was especially prone to. It also helped me focus on the here and now for its own sake. I too, was more relaxed and eager to be with Kate as soon as I got the okay from the doctor. Her mood lifted mine.

My impending departure seemed to heighten everything. It was uncanny. Until this last week it seemed we were constantly zig zagging with each other – approaching then pulling back. But this week had been great and right now we were totally in the moment – our world would end tomorrow for a while, no doubt breaking the spell we had recently been under.

I was in the mood to enjoy her fully and though it hadn't occurred to me before, the departure process is definitely an important aspect of traveling. Actually, it's an aphrodisiac.

We packed her car with my bags and headed to a bar where we could watch the ocean crashing on a ragged part of the upper Monterey Bay coastline. The sun would set off to the south this time of year and we'd be chased inside when the temperature dropped shortly thereafter. Just beyond our picnic table on the back deck, was a shaky looking board fence, the only barrier to a fatal drop. The roiling water below and a few seals taking their own repose on the rocks completed the picture of how I had seen our relationship so far. It seemed that in my enthusiasm for Kate and my readiness for a durable relationship I was the wave now washing over her rocky emotions, slowly, if imperceptibly shaping our future. Her history was unsettling and our differences were apparent. But I treated her past as history and the differences hadn't become significant. Maybe we could develop something meaningful between us.

She sipped her Chardonnay and I took hearty celebratory swallows of my beer. "I'm glad you feel better," she said.

“Yeah, me too,” I said with a shaky confidence, still anxious because of all the buildup to this trip becoming burdened with too much psychic baggage – way out of line with my usual confidence about my adventures. I wasn’t on the plane yet but my mind was indeed taxiing for takeoff and the afternoon’s spontaneity was suddenly tempered. I was gazing out to sea, listening to the barking seals down below daydreaming about Kilimanjaro, Hemingway, Gregory Peck and knowing that I might finally find out what that leopard was seeking.

In a few moments Kate interrupted my monkey mind. “What are you thinking?”

“Oh...just that in some ways, it would be a huge failure to go all that way and not make it. I imagine I’d feel it was a waste if I didn’t get to Uhuru Peak.”

“You’ll know soon enough. Why worry?”

At least she was staying in the moment. “I know, but still. This might sound crazy after all my talk, but if I can learn one thing on this trip, I’d like to redefine success. I’d love to be able to walk up to about ten feet from the summit and have the guts to turn around, or maybe turn around at Gilman’s Point.”

“That’s not a lesson I’d want to learn. What good is that? The idea is to go there and reach the top, so why wouldn’t you if you could? How would you like to get to the last chapter of your book and toss it? Or not care if it got published? Isn’t life all about doing your best, shooting for the top, staying in the game to win?”

“You sound like my uncle Jack. He’d say, ‘My boy,’ using this deep serious voice, ‘whatever you decide to do in life ... even if it’s being a garbage man, be the best damn garbage man.’ He never said ‘do your best,’ always just ‘be the best.’”

“Hmmm.”

“I can’t escape it. I suppose life for me is still about achievement. But does everything have to be about being the best?”

“Can’t you pick and choose? Prioritize? Can you take some things really seriously and others more casually?”

“Like you? I thought you were going to eat the cue ball when I beat you at pool that first time. Yeah, sure I can choose. But as soon as I choose to get involved, I fall into that needing to be best thing. Okay, what do you think your first words will be when I come back?”

“Well, if I could get to the top I sure wouldn’t choose to turn back before doing so.”

“Exactly. And I doubt if you’ll ask me how I enjoyed the climb? Hell, I bet you’ll want the photographic proof as well.” I said smiling, “and you’re not alone.”

“Well, it seems obvious that people would want to know if you made it.”

Yeah, I thought, even as I tell people where I’m going they look me over to see if I’m fit enough, as if there is a specific look that could convince them I’ll make it. Most think whatever it is that will lead to my success it should be visible, but there’s no predictive set of factors to count on. No one knows what makes the difference.

“Supposedly even THE Sir Edmund Hillary didn’t make it to the top of Kilimanjaro? That’s a hoot. So let’s talk about this hike with a little respect.”

“Maybe he chose not to,” she said, with an impish smile while giving me a little tickle.

“Touché.”

“If I were going, I’d probably race you, you know. I shoot for the goal in everything.”

“I’ve noticed. By the way, I’m still waiting for you to beat me in – let’s see – racquetball? Pool? Bowling? Hell, you’re a downright wimp,” I said, reaching over to tickle her in return. “When I get back we’ll have to work on a few of these.”

“Who had to wait for you to catch your breath biking up to U.C. Santa Cruz? And, how many times did you fall over cross-country skiing? Really! That was downright embarrassing. And you’re going to make Kilimanjaro? Or are you going to *choose* now not to go to the summit to save face?”

“Ooh.” She always gave as good as she got. “Yeah, well, if I don’t come back, you’ll know why...I wouldn’t dare show my face around here.”

As the sun set we finished our drinks and headed back for our last evening together. She became more animated as she rose, shaking off the conversation and the chill in the air. She used to apologize that she wasn’t reflective or deep. She prefers action to contemplation or the search for some elusive meaning, some nebulous truth. She likes concrete and I seem to wallow in mush – glorified as a conceptual world but

filled with self-doubt – while demanding I walk my talk. It's a damn strenuous exercise like running on deep, soft sand. So far our proclivities really didn't matter since we were able to find common ground on one court or another and enjoyed our evolving sex life. Most of our time was playing one game or another or eagerly waiting for the day to end so we could wrestle our way into a thoroughly deep sleep. Today, the old hem and haw actually abated. We were finally fitting together as pieces in the same puzzle.

It was a short drive back through winding roads and a spectacular second sunset. As the sun fell below the horizon, the high clouds lit up with the last red orange rays before the purple dusk gave way to darkness. When we arrived at her place, she turned on some country music that soon faded into the background as we prepared dinner. Tonight she cooked a special spicy shrimp and pasta plate. I loved spices but I couldn't bring myself to remind her I didn't care for seafood; she was so happy with herself and this evening. Her usual preference for expressing her culinary skills was ordering from a menu. It was fun, though, as we fiddled with the preparations in the large yellow country kitchen. My contribution was mostly to titillate her while she pulled it together.

We fulfilled our chores and frequently stopped to peck at one another and thankfully were too absorbed in each other to allow the usual undercurrent of our idiosyncrasies to rise to the surface. Conversation remained light.

We carried our plates to the smooth rectangular glass topped table into the sparsely decorated dining area. The plates of pasta with red-orange flecked shrimp looked like bloodshot eyes peering up from the blackness of the table below. That would be a strange vision even for someone tripping out but I could only attribute that interpretation to my lack of desire for the shrimp. Yet, I ate it and found it delicious. And I loved watching Kate trying to spear a shrimp as her plate slid along the tabletop away from her. As she saw me watching she cracked up, grabbed the plate with her left hand and successfully landed one with her right like an expert. When she was so absorbed in chasing that first shrimp around the table as her plate slid along, I had a glimpse of what she must have been like as a child. In those moments of playfulness I couldn't help but melt.

We soon took drinks into the living room and sat by the fieldstone fireplace resting our backs on the side of a glass and stainless steel coffee table. The music still played in the background – fiddles and twangy, lonesome voices all suffering a breakup and a broken heart – which reminded me again of what she was going through. I wrapped my arms around her and she nestled into me. The fire rose to a crackling roar, which we sustained by using an inconspicuous gas jet below the logs to feed the blaze – a little faux accoutrement to our passion.

“I’m going to miss you,” she said, staring into the fire.

“Me, too, but I’ll have plenty of time to think about you. No TV, radio, phones, just wild beasts and 50 miles of trails. And Mario, of course.”

Silence returned and the crackling fire pulled us back to the dancing flames that reached high into the chimney. She lay back and I instinctively kissed her neck softly, adjusting my arms around her. In her work mode she appears so professional and grown up, uniformed in square padded shoulders and pumps that lift her an inch or so above her 5'7" frame, but now she was like soft silk fitting into me, her hair just as wild and bright as the fire, against my cheek. For a moment I felt engulfed by the raging flames.

"Kate," I whispered. And she turned her head casually to listen. "I can feel the fire through your body," and kissed her cheek, then the side of her mouth. She turned a little further and soon I was cradling her head. Seconds later, I pulled her toward me and we dissolved together into our loving.

In our first few days together, Kate and I got past the extended unresolved foreplay and tantalizing goodbyes. The long sought moment together finally occurred in her house a week before Christmas when we released our anticipation into a maelstrom of desire. Through the house and up the stairs we were all over each other peeling clothes and tossing them aside until in her bed, at last, our bodies detonated with what we had hoped for since the beginning.

But now, as the frenzied first time together gave way to a more deliberate yet also more relaxed acceptance of one another, we seemed on this night to want to make it last forever.

I was readjusting my position when she asked, "Have you read any of the book?"

She had given me a copy of *Edna St. Vincent Millay: Selected Poems* for Christmas. I remember my reaction, basically a stare, never having heard of her and unafraid of showing my complete ignorance. "Not yet," I said. "But I packed it for the trip. I plan on reading it at 14,000 feet as we spend a day to acclimatize. I'll be thinking of you the whole time." God, I thought, how silly I am. No matter how old, I can't resist a fifties Hollywood approach to love and romance, albeit with a liberated attitude toward women.

"I hope you like her, she's meant a lot to me."

"I can't wait then," I replied.

There was an uncanny physical resemblance between the poet and Kate. Without a picture of Kate to take with me, the one of Millay on the back cover of her book would oddly suffice.

Though I hadn't read the book, I had, of course, skimmed through to some of the shorter poems to see if she were understandable to a non-poet like me. I stumbled onto page 19 and found *First Fig*

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends –
It gives a lovely light!

I read on. *Second Fig*

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:
Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!

I never understood the finer aspects of poetry, the embedded puzzles, mixed meanings, metaphors from hell. Millay seemed manageable. But reading this page sent a shiver through me. I began to think that Kate's hurried, gobbling-up of activity so that people and chores filled her every waking moment, was indicative of a perpetual disquiet based on something impossible to satisfy. Yes, I shuddered with the realization that in the same way that Millay tried to fill her emptiness or satisfy her own ill-defined hunger through multiple lovers of both genders and excessive drinking, Kate too, was burning her candle at both ends. I also realized that I enjoyed the chaos of Millay's life and saw in Kate a reflection of the same urges and unhappiness that I had experienced with the expectations and conventions of life. What I didn't yet realize was that if there is an answer to such an internal state, it doesn't come from another person. It can only come from within. If I were to satisfy my own cravings for meaning, it too had to come from within and not from some romanticized notion of a relationship. I put the book aside knowing in my gut there would be messages for me throughout. When I read this sampler I knew the book was important and stowed it in my gear.

We changed positions, still attending to each other and getting comfortable by the fire. "I hope you have a great trip," she said into the yellow-orange glow in front of us.

"All trips are great, Kate. But I wish you were coming with me."

“Some other time.”

“I’d like that. I’d like to take a long trip, maybe London to Tokyo by rail. Read the Russians through the steppes and Lao Tzu through China. Interested?”

“Let’s think about it when you get back.”

“Sure enough,” I said, knowing it was unlikely. For Kate, a trip to one of her getaways was enough. I changed the subject. “I love the flames and their hypnotic power. Sometimes I just want to curl up inside a fire like this and become it.”

We stayed by the fire working each other into a fine heat of our own until the flames from the few real logs began to die. We didn’t want the night to end but secured the remnants of the fire and turned off the gas before heading upstairs.

Seeing Kate lying on the large bed next to me reminded me of a dune-scape in the moonlight. She was beautiful just laying there, her face framed in a pool of her golden ringlets, looking up at me. As I lay next to her, she reached her arm under me and pulled me toward her. I was raised on my elbow just looking at her and how her flawless skin molded her body so firmly, creating contours, curves, and elevations that I followed with my hand - gently, hardly touching her. It seemed her downy hairs rose to meet my hand but I couldn’t feel them for sure. As my hand slowly made its way up Kate’s body we began to kiss and I felt her warmth - a combination of her burning from within and the residual heat from the fireplace.

She began to rise to my touch and became an eager partner in a slow mutual exploration as our shadows joined in the candlelight. I began to tumble into myriad

sensations and when Kate guided me inside her and firmly engulfed me we formed an almost seamless unity. The flow of the physical and spiritual, the male and female and the experience, and the thought of it, were indistinguishable. A new entity was formed by our undulations. Soon our breath intermingled and bathed our skin in its vapor as if creating an invisible airborne cocoon. I took long deep inhalations of her and it heightened my abandon. I didn't want oxygen; I wanted to breathe more of her. As I encircled her with my arms and pulled her upward I sought her depths, our physical union simply defied our psychic separateness.

With each repetition of the cycle of thrust and withdrawal our lips sought, touched, held, and released all in their path. I was back in a dream, that sumptuous free-floating place where space and time dissolve into pure subconscious awareness. It was like finding the right foothold along a mountain path; one that propels you forward but then immediately collapses and disappears beneath you into a small avalanche below. No sooner than our bodies convulsed and we shared each other's pleasure, the moment our lips paused from their passion, a word, as if somehow put there by a jealous observer, diverted the natural trajectory of our lovemaking from a calm to an almost calamitous ending. She said, "It's late."

I couldn't believe how jarring that felt. Where had she been?

"Where did that come from, Kate?" She might as well have said, "Are you done yet?" for the way that brought me back from my exquisite inner wanderings to the

rustled sheets, the knotty pine paneling, the low pitched ceiling in the bedroom, and the candles now flickering low.

“I’m tired.”

“So am I – wonderfully, so. But...”

She interrupted, “I don’t know...”

“I felt so close. Everything else has been prelude.”

“Well I...”

“Are you scared?”

“What do you mean?”

“That was phenomenal. At least for me. I was totally lost in you. I wasn’t thinking. I felt we were one for the first time. I couldn’t get enough of you. I took in every breath of yours. Even your smell seemed to caress me, empower me, fill me. This wasn’t just sex. I got lost. I went to places I didn’t think possible in a waking state... It’s late?”

“I...I don’t know. I felt wonderful, too, but...”

“I know Kate. Look, it’s okay for me to love you without any promises. It doesn’t have to be more than it is. It’s okay to love day to day, isn’t it?”

“Well, I’m just not ready.”

“Geez Kate, I didn’t ask you to marry me, just love me tonight. We have been doing so well.”

“That’s what I mean, I can’t deal with that. My shrink...”

“Kate,” I interrupted, “let’s not spoil it.” I kissed her again. “Just let it be, okay? Just for now. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

We arose early the next day. The sex was fierce, strong and selfish. There was no talk of love. There was no discussion of relationship. It felt more like our last meal and we were starving. We devoured every last scrap of each other until we lay motionless in a heap. Conversation was weightless and I reviewed my itinerary. I let my enthusiasm for the adventure ahead focus our conversation and Kate responded in kind talking about what she hoped to accomplish while I was gone. We arose reluctantly to have brunch before the drive to the airport.

It was a pensive ride along I-280, one of the most beautiful roads in the world cut through the rolling hills and the mansions of Silicon Valley millionaires on the west side of the San Francisco peninsula. “Are you going to have sex in Africa?” she asked completely out of the blue.

“Well, Mario isn’t exactly my type,” I said laughing that off and wondering where this conversation was headed.

“How about you? Have you lined up a few surrogates while I’m gone?”

“No.”

“Well then, shall we make it a deal, no sex until I get back?” That was easy for me to say.

“Uh huh. Okay”

I was really amazed at this interchange. I hadn't thought about sex in Africa for lots of reasons but I hadn't thought about what Kate was going to do and didn't really want to know. Well, I didn't want to ask, but I suppose I did really want to know. She was a very sexual person and had lots of partners before we met and many more were available if she wanted them. We weren't making a long-term commitment but I did want us to let whatever we did have unfold naturally. This was about the next three weeks, which was the most surprising part; I found it strange since she had made it clear to me that we weren't in a relationship, but what we were in we hadn't been able to name. She explicitly kept her options open and signaled her wide boundaries like an alpha wolf marking its territory. She reminded me of her many social commitments and a wide circle of friends that she attended to. Yet, with all of her busyness and vocalizing her need for distance, she had a curious possessiveness about me. She was uncomfortable with the thought of me in another woman's company but reserved the right to see other people herself. I didn't know how much of that was sexual; other lovers were never mentioned. I figured it was all about freedom and not a real interest in other romantic pursuits. In any case it was a moot point until now since we filled our schedules with each other. Tomorrow we really would be apart and, I felt, she just planted a seed.

Because we had actually been seesawing toward something roughly resembling a relationship, I chose to take it as a sign that she was feeling closer, willing to inch a bit more down that road toward something we could define.

“Kate, this has been an incredible couple of weeks,” I said lamely. “It’s been an amazing holiday. And last night I felt we really loved each other. Well, almost”

“I know. I just can’t...”

I interrupted her, “Don’t, Kate. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t require anything more...”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“Look, you’ve got a lot to catch up on before I get back. Just enjoy the time, shake it out, and get on with a great new year. Make a fortune.”

“I suppose.”

“I know these last few days haven’t been enough but I’ll be thinking about them until I get back. Well, at least up to the part where you said ‘It’s getting late.’” I tried a wry smile.

We became quiet. I could see planes filling the air over San Francisco International Airport and shifted my focus. It was always easier to be the one leaving. I’d be occupied with a million new sensations and be facing the challenges and excitement of travel.

Kate already told me she couldn’t pick me up and she reminded me to take care of that before I left, forgetting my brother Lloyd already agreed to pick me up. We

stopped in front of the United Airlines terminal. She got out of the vehicle for a hug and a last kiss and we held each other as if we were seeking understanding.

She got back in the car. I grabbed the bag, and waved as I watched her pull away from the curb and into the exiting traffic. When she disappeared from sight, I turned and entered the terminal where I was immediately funneled through security and on my way to Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Chapter 6

In Africa

I am in Heathrow International Airport midway between two of the greatest challenges of my life. Kate is 5,370 miles behind me while Kilimanjaro is 4,230 miles ahead.

I have just finished one red-eye and my next flight is another one, hours from now. I try to sleep but find myself drawn to watch the large departure board. There are so many flights that the board sounds like a perpetually shuffling deck of cards.

Finally I slipped off into my memories and fantasies and periodically awoke as the crowds and the hum of activity, and the jostling of people sitting down and getting up all around me, broke in and out of my consciousness.

Finding myself fit enough to try climbing Kilimanjaro, and still romantic enough to feel like a schoolboy with Kate was delightfully unexpected at mid-life. She had been floating in my dream state as I awaited the announcement to board. In no time I was lost in my memories heading toward a dream. I loved her chaotic hair and her natural smell in the morning and when her eyes would glisten, as she'd giggle over something silly. And, I thought of how I like listening to her voice; how it sometimes takes on that playful tone that made me grab her around her waist and kiss her neck that, in turn, made her nuzzle into me. I was remembering when she spilled her drink and laughed and how her smile ended with her lips puckering up; and how she'd tickle me at just

the wrong moment as we were buying a movie ticket or paying a bill — making me crack up just when I was trying to be serious and focused.

I wonder if I smiled in my sleep when I thought of the time while reading the paper together in the back yard on a windy Sunday and she got so frustrated with the pages blowing around that she hosed it all down into a pulpy pile of mush and laughed her head off as I jumped straight up out of my seat when she turned the hose on me.

A young woman's cultured, carefully modulated, British accent enunciating Nairobi softly called to passengers and awakened me from my drowsiness. I was all warm and aroused with the thought of Kate on my mind. I stretched myself onto tiptoes and struggled for clarity before fully realizing the urgency of the announcement to head off to the gate.

I think about Kate a lot. Kate and I, 40-somethings flirting with the relationship thing — that seesaw ride to reach a balance between fulfilling our needs while comforting the other. I hope the ups and downs necessary to make it work smooth out and we find the right balance. A new relationship with a re-activated libido and frequent rummaging through our memories while cuddling by the fireplace is thrilling to me. I hope we can find that balance between desire and caution and between impatience and nonchalance.

Developing the relationship is tantalizing and rife with fears of rejection as self-disclosures become more significant and our histories repeat themselves either to impress or to haunt us. But I am disturbed too. As much as I have enjoyed our physical

relationship, it has come at a price. I ask myself why I have so easily lowered my expectations from a conventional romantic vision to continually reexamining boundaries that push me farther away. I tell myself I need to be patient. I tell myself that she has been through a lot. While I also wonder if I am moving too fast and expect too much, I also convince myself that there is hope. At least there is decent sex. So maybe I don't need to be definitive right now. Maybe I can live with a little ambiguity. Maybe I should thank my lucky stars that the tables aren't turned. Besides, I like Kate's independence and confidence. I like that she can take care of herself. That is also a very appealing part of her. Just once I wish building a relationship would be easy.

Traveling offers a different challenge than building a relationship. It is about knowing the world firsthand and forcing myself to think differently about my place in it. It gives me the opportunity for a contemplative moment to step back while stepping forward into the unfamiliar. Being in a new place with new people and a new agenda helps me dispense with the myths, generalizations and fears of the unknown. It helps me release an entirely new creative outlook on my life, on the world, that usually lies dormant. All aspects of my life are enhanced by virtue of the experience of thinking differently.

Nĩ ▪ rōbē. Kilimanjārō. I spent the \$5,000 to secure a first-class tour and that was that. Cautious friends and family think this is the ultimate indulgence – and almost had me thinking so, too. It proved to them once again, that I was losing it or maybe I had already lost it. “It” was being sensible, practical. Money should be spent on tangible stuff or invested for later. Measure it, collect it, save it; use it to buy real estate, not to visit real estate. As trite as it sounds, this trip is an opportunity to re-think some stale assumptions about my life and the human condition.

In moments, I’ll be at 35,000 feet inside a thin-skinned metallic tube, imagining Africa. This is a long flight. It got the name red-eye for a good reason. Every time I take a long flight like this, I think, “This time I’ll be able to sleep.” But even though I feel so damned tired, sure enough, as usual, I remain awake. I lean back and think about what I know about Africa, order a drink and hope I’ll doze off into a memory.

When I was eleven years old exploring a new way to get to school, I walked past Herman’s Sundries on Broadway and discovered somebody who actually traveled the world. Herman was the first person I knew who had been to Africa. He pasted small black and white snapshots inside the plate glass storefront window until it was completely covered. Many of them showed him in Africa standing next to natives in grass skirts. Men held spears. Some women held their babies. Those pictures were amazing. My eyes opened wide. There were women with large round plates in their

lower lips and some men holding spears were giants – over a foot taller than Herman, probably close to seven feet tall. I remember those pictures in the window and how they proudly declared his excitement of venturing into the world. He was smiling, fearless and proud.

Herman also had pictures of huge wild animals and it was hard to imagine them not being in a zoo and cared for by handlers. He posted pictures of the animals he shot. I brought my friends around to see the pictures. Herman had a tusk in the back of the store and told us how he killed the elephant and ate some of it. We touched the tusk, and for the first time I touched Africa.

None of my recollections helped me get any sleep. The cabin was dark, the hum of the plane droned on. Conditions for passing out were excellent but I didn't. I resumed my recollections of what I know about Africa, hoping I'd follow a memory into a dream.

In college Africa opened up. I learned that the Bushmen of the Kalahari had a society in equilibrium with their environment. They had lived for thousands of years as a nomadic people and then fences were built trapping them between political entities they did not understand.

I learned about Pygmies, too, and how they lived in harmony with their environment in a fully participative, egalitarian culture without gender, class or age discrimination. I no longer used their name to make fun of anyone's size.

But it was the sound of names like Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, and Timbuktu, a Sahara frontier town in Mali, and Dakar, the capital of Senegal that stuck with me. I may not have had the courage to travel with the Bushmen and Pygmies, but I could imagine riding a camel train to Timbuktu – the very eponymous sound of the middle of nowhere. I needed to include these places on my list of things to do in life. And, of course Kilimanjaro, the tallest mountain in Africa, was a big romantic draw. Even without Hemingway and Gregory Peck playing the protagonist in the movie “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” even without Toto, without the yearly story in the *Times* about a suburban dentist who reached the top of it on his fortieth birthday, I was drawn to the idea of Kilimanjaro. Just the sound of it ends in an exclamation: Kilimanjar_oh. Climbing it was simply about being alive, a change of pace and a challenge – something akin to “because it’s there.” Or was it? Maybe it was Herman who planted the seed that took root somewhere between my study of political geography and my urge to see what I had imagined so long ago.

Here’s what I know now: Africa’s a basket case. The staples of life in Africa are famine, genocide and tribal conflicts that flare up predictably as if on a schedule. North to South, East to West, murder, rape, torture, theft, destruction, child soldiers, slave trading, malaria, and HIV/AIDS make the average life in Africa a living hell. Or so it seems from mass media reports.

I also know that Africa is the second biggest continent; that it only appears smaller than North America and Europe on the popular Mercator projection maps

avored by the ethnocentric former colonial powers. Africa was conveniently lost in the equatorial bulge, just as Greenland loomed monstrous, completely out of proportion to its actual size because of the misleading arctic straightening of the curvature. In fact, North America and Europe from the UK to the Urals could be swallowed up whole by Africa if it had a hankering for white bread.

But this huge African basket is also filled with thousands of gems, though seemingly rare and easily ignored if all you see are the overcrowded cities filled with people escaping war, famine and destitution. Most of the gems are in the smaller places, where you will find tribes whose crafts and customs survive. And, there are a great many places we never hear about on the evening news but include interesting, thriving cultures: Mali, Senegal, Botswana, and Ghana, to name a few. But for most sympathetic Americans big game, the Sahara, and impenetrable rain forests, Victoria Falls, the Nile, and of course, Kilimanjaro are emblematic of the bright side of Africa and seem to be enough.

I prepare myself for this experience and quarantine as many of the old beliefs, myths, propaganda and misinformation about Africa as I can. I know better now; at least I should. Considering the exaggerations about Africa that I've imbibed since infancy, it isn't a surprise that some linger, like a disagreeable aftertaste. It is easy to forget that life is more complex. The black and white of my received wisdom about the world fades into a soupy gray. If travel has taught me anything it has taught me that conditions influence much but do not explain everything. They don't define people.

Attempts at pat generalizations about another people or place do a disservice to the truth. The sound bites I've digested, like some intellectual junk food, never nourish real understanding. I know this: myths and realities mingle freely in my mind but experience is explanatory to my soul. I remind myself that Africa will soon become something new to me.

Suddenly the wheels lowered for landing; the night had passed.

My transfer to the hotel was pre-arranged. As I emerged from customs clearance, a tall thin man holding a hand written sign with my name correctly spelled in bold block letters greeted me. He gave me a toothy grin when I acknowledged him, and showed surprise that our meeting was so easy. "*Jambo*, welcome to Kenya," he said, with that distinctive African-English accent that is so melodious. My mind quickly made the transition from the seductive feminine voice in Heathrow calling me to the flight to the pleasant rhythm of my local transfer driver. I am now in Africa. His name is *Taletale*. He explains it means Sunbird. I ask him if his wings are made of wax and how high he flies; I'm being too weird. The play is lost; it's more than likely he wouldn't know I was referring to Icarus. "I go everywhere," he responds. Good enough.

The significance of the journey wasn't lost on me. Already, I sped past multi-million dollar mansions, rose to 35,000 feet and crossed almost half the planet, 170-degrees of longitude, in one hop. Now having flown down 40-degrees of latitude to just

below the equator, I was bumping along a pot-holed two-lane road past corrugated zinc-covered shacks of wood and sometimes brick, through rising road dust along the route into Nairobi toward the Norfolk Hotel. In wending our way into town, we dodged all manner of trucks, buses and cars spewing thick clouds of engine particles and diesel smoke into the air. Bicycles, dogs and scraggly lines of people moved like colorfully clothed black caterpillars along the sides of the road. The van swayed to avoid the obstructions, and somehow we made it to the city center in one piece without killing anyone.

As I near the Norfolk Hotel, one of the oldest hotels in Nairobi (in the colonial tradition) where Neville Chamberlain, Theodore Roosevelt and Winston Churchill all stayed and, I'd guess so too did Ernest Hemingway; I wonder how this new experience will change what I know about Africa. The reality is that it is all true – the misery, the beauty, the white guilt that I carry for the sins of my race, the pride that I carry for the gifts of my race, the personal frustration that so little of the misery I see all around me seems within my power, or anyone else's, to do much about. But I want to understand it. I enjoy being here if for no other reason than it assaults my usual frame of mind and demands that I pay attention. I promise myself to at least try to live in the moment. I tell myself to see the glass half full instead of half empty. How else could it be, here, now?

It is not politically correct to say that Africa is still a basket case. That is insensitive to the very real difficulties – political, cultural, tribal, economic – that face a people who have been ravaged by a succession of European powers that scooped up

the valuables, uprooted and enslaved ten million people during the slave trade era, and subjugated the masses to Byzantine persecution. Yet I am tormented by the poverty and pain I see all around me and feel it could be different, if only...

I hope to learn something about what makes Africa Africa and already wish I had more time.

I try to focus on the trip and not the jumble of confused signals that easily boil to the surface in the absence of sufficient personal knowledge. Arriving at the hotel, I begin letting the romance and the challenge replace my wide-ranging musings bouncing from one extreme to the other about what I think I know about Africa.

The fact is I don't know squat about Africa.

But I know this about me: After years of thinking about Mt. Kilimanjaro, it has morphed from a cinematic backdrop to a romantic notion, to a line on my life's checklist, to a personal challenge to become something different. If only I can take this hike and allow it to be a contemplation rather than a contest, one more item to be checked off the list, it might truly work its magic on me. If it becomes a mere bump in the road so I can say, "been there, done that," I will have lost an opportunity and revealed myself as a tourist and not a traveler.

The worn hotel felt like a staging area. It was bustling with mostly young white tourists – backpackers and trekkers, cameras with large lenses swaying from their necks. A sizable crowd was already drinking beer well before lunch. I fed on that

energy and began to get a second wind. As soon as I reached the front desk and put my pack down, I saw Mario walking across the lobby.

Mario and I met playing on the same American expat softball team in Singapore in 1984. He's about 5'9" with more hair on his face than on the top of his head. He's fit and wiry and constantly in need of a physical challenge. Our respectable softball skills and a restrained sensibility were most of what we have in common except for an appreciation of intercultural experiences. As a pragmatic businessman and an academic, Mario and I inhabit very different worlds, but we love adventures and sharing our experiences. Occasionally we'd go off to run a half marathon someplace in Malaysia or Singapore, but our lifestyles were more closely that of the prince and the pauper except we never changed places.

After a quiet day in Nairobi, catching up with Mario, walking around town and drinking too much, we try for a long night's sleep. Early the next morning we head to Lake Manyara National Park and the Ngorongoro Crater Conservation Area.

Scuffling in the hallway awoke us before our alarm. It only took one direct hit on the door to rustle me awake. Excited travelers swung their packs from side to side as they headed toward the lobby for early departures. Occasionally an overstuffed pack would wobble off a shoulder and hit an imaginary bulls-eye on our door, rattling it in the jam. After the first hit, I got up to look through the peephole in the door in time to

see one young woman suffer under the weight of too much stuff badly carried. She crashed into a nearby door and cursed under her breath. Her friend found this amusing and laughed as he helped pick up her slipped pack.

We resigned ourselves to an earlier start than we hoped and spent our extra time over a leisurely American breakfast. We watched people fill the streets and Nairobi come alive as we waited for our driver. Then, at precisely 8:00 a.m. he arrived, right on schedule. Like the transfer driver, he was welcoming, friendly, and helpful. We would be in his care for the next four days. His name was Justin and he had only one eye. We stowed our gear in the back of his Land Rover and with all the enthusiasm allowed by our jet lag eagerly hopped in, took a deep breath, and slapped each other five.

Justin had trouble focusing on small details – like the gas gauge. Just as we settled into the first leg of our trip, the Land Rover slowly rolled to a stop by the side of the road. At first, Justin wasn't sure why the car lost power. But a big toothy grin in his round black face broke out like the Cheshire cat's when he realized what happened. His one eye glistened and somehow managed a smile as well. When he ran off with a large metal can to a gas station just behind us, Mario and I agreed this was not an omen, it was just Africa. We passed through Arusha, our gateway city to Tanzania. Then, as we left the blacktop, the tires dug into the packed particles of the red, dusty road to create a small horizontal cyclone of dust swirling behind us, and an unrelenting drone inside the vehicle.

This is the big deal. This is the trip we talked about since the early 80s. Now we're taking it. Everything is filled with color though it just doesn't seem so at first. There is the fading green and emergent tan of the dry grassland, burnt orange from the clay road that comes close to looking brick red, dark bark from short straggly see-through trees and even the Acacias that would make you bleed from a thousand places if you fell into one, are brown and grayish. Maybe it was just that our tired eyes made the glare feel so much stronger and colorless. Maybe I just needed to squint to pay attention to what I was looking at and to see Africa fresh despite my jet lag and considerable conceptual baggage.

As we swayed along its contour and bounced over the potholes that were hidden in the road's ripples, heading toward Lake Manyara, the scene soon faded away and my head bobbed toward my chest. The glare, the straining, and my tiredness caught up with me. The warm, dusty breeze, the silent, still landscape, the rhythm of the road, the squinting, drew me inward into a dreamy sleep.

We hit a deep rut and I bounced awake. I see Mario staring out the window. He looks over to me. "You were out."

"Yeah, the swaying and the tiredness, the rhythm of the road put me to sleep. I had this dream." I hesitated for a moment trying to hold on to it and to remember it correctly but couldn't. "Ever wonder why we do this? Five grand, hit the road, take pictures, go home?" I didn't expect an answer and felt it was a senseless question as soon as I asked it, but he answered me before I could erase it.

“It’s fun. What the fuck?”

“I know. I love it. And before this trip is over I’ll be planning the next one. I was just hoping it might have a special meaning.”

As I said that I thought, *I’m an idiot*, but I persisted anyway. I expect each trip to enlighten me. “Travel broadens you, right? Well sometimes I can feel that it does. Sometimes I don’t. It’s always fun though. Still, I want it to be more – especially this one.”

“Jee-sus John, we’re just getting started.”

“Never mind, the flights just beat me up and I’m babbling.”

“Well, now you’re here. Enjoy it. Take it easy,” he said in his straightforward pragmatic way with a smile. He tapped my knee with his fist, reassuringly.

I have big hopes for this trip, maybe too big. A few steps toward a fresh understanding of who I am would go a long way to help soothe my congenital angst, this constant need to reexamine myself even though I have not had much success at living with the answers and insights. Maybe there aren’t any answers. And if there were, maybe I wouldn’t like them. Maybe having answers is the problem. Maybe they would just be too limiting. Maybe I like the Sisyphean task of trying to recreate my identity over and over again. It sure gives me the feeling of a meaningful thing to do. I try to settle into the equatorial warmth. Regardless of the stark contrasts between environments, and the constant questioning, I know this: Intentional re-invention beats reincarnation any day.

Justin arranged some stops along the way. First, he introduced us to Maasai dependent on tourists who would stand for pictures and smile warmly, perfect white teeth like Chiclets lined up across chocolate faces. Thin strands of beads framed their faces and even large beaded discs were worn around their necks making them look like their heads were on platters. With close-cropped hair under a tightly fastened string of small, brightly colored beads, the women looked like an odd sort of living cultural artifact.

The Maasai are pastoralists who skirt the boundary between Kenya and Tanzania. Their movements remain confined to the general area of the savannah, Great Rift Valley, the Serengeti – “the place where the land moves on forever” in the Maa language – and what is now the Ngorongoro conservation area as they seek out fresh grazing lands and water. Increasingly they are settling into permanent villages.

I wondered what I was capturing in those photos yet I also felt it was as necessary for me to take the pictures as it was for them to pose for them. It was their living after all. They walk to the road expecting us to take their picture. Yes, they strike a delightful pose and, though not costumed like a character in a theme park, they seem to serve the same purpose. We play our roles much like we would in Disneyland. It was a strange kind of mutualism and I feel somewhat akin to the tickbird on a water buffalo. We both need each other. I get a photo. I could get better ones in *National Geographic* if

that's all I wanted, even a postcard would suffice for that purpose too, but I need to take their pictures. Instead of mounting a carcass on the wall, I've chosen to capture my prey on film, frame it, hang it on a wall and feel a sense of accomplishment; I took that. I did it. Good eye, adventurer me. I was there. She smiled for me. I was on a great global scavenger hunt and taking her picture was a requirement. Check. But it feels more than faintly artificial, like on one of those guided tours. I hadn't sought out this encounter; it was brought to me. Yes, thinking of their heads on a platter seemed apt. This is what guided tours do to me. It's all arranged. The need to save time and avoid screw-ups leads to this disappointment. *Please tell me she's not waiting there for me.* Has the trip so quickly been reduced to a fast food experience?

This tourist, without knowing her name, did not quite capture her spirit, but happily caught her on film. And as she posed for that moment like a street hawker trying to attract me with her practiced come-hither smile, I clicked away and thanked her. She was most dutiful and held her smile until released by the closing of the shutter. A few shillings later, back in the Land Rover and on our way, the Maasai safely ensconced on my film, her smile forever available to me, she turned away from the road and I quickly forgot who she was. Herman would be really pissed off with me.

Outside the Land Rover we spot individual men walk on worn leather sandals with elaborate jewelry and ceremonial facial scars, wrapped in thin red robes tied at the shoulder. They are walking from or toward places that weren't visible to the tourist eye. Villages were nowhere to be seen, the infrequent circular mud-thatch huts we saw were

off in the distance, some miles away. I wondered where these lone walkers got their water, their energy, and what lay empty in them that they now sought to fill. What would cause someone to walk through the bush for miles with only old sandals and a walking stick? A lover in a far off village? A stray animal? A hurt tribesman in need of a doctor? Forget something at the store?

We see women's heads on beaded plates; neat mud and cow dung-thatched houses. Everything about the Maasai culture will remain a big puzzle to me even being this close to finding answers. I'd like to know more about what I see but time doesn't allow that right now. We'll spend the next four days searching for animals and the rest of the time on the mountain.

Mile after mile passed until Justin pointed out four to six-foot tall termite mounds. These Trump Towers of the Serengeti blend in well with their surroundings and seem so still relative to the activity within. Their massive brown dusty dry mud presence increase in frequency and then disappear.

I am tempted to punch a hole in one to see what's inside. Instead, I take a picture of Mario standing next to a mound that is his height. He doesn't lean against it as I suggest. "Na, that's okay," he says. I imagine there are enough inhabitants in that one structure to carry him off if they were to be released by the sudden trauma I had in mind.

Pictures taken, we get back in the Land Rover and move on down the road. It's still our first full day. The jet lag is easing but the clash of mindsets is still unsettling me.

My mind is still not yet in Tanzania even though my body is. One day I'm in the Bay Area, the next day Heathrow, the day after that the Great Rift Valley. It is a disconnect that is not entirely attributable to jet lag but directly due to the speed of my jaunt across the planet and immersion in a completely different context while needing to function instantly, normally. It feels like the equivalent to the psychic bends. It isn't so much geography; the deserts and south central plains of California look similar to this part of Tanzania. It's knowing that few assumptions apply; people we meet have a totally different experience of life that is hard to fully imagine. The Maasai may expect to see us touring their world, but we have such a hopelessly distorted view of one another; our interaction follows a well-worn script. It is hard to make sense of these people and their world, and I won't even have enough time to give it a serious try.

The Land Rover is our magic carpet. We float along in a parallel universe. Justin is a city boy and doesn't talk much about the Maasai culture. He is pleasant, helpful and has a great disposition – always wanting us to see something unusual. He was raised in Arusha, earned a high school education and got into the tourist business because of some Peace Corps volunteers who were smitten with his willingness to hang out with them and show them things. They, in turn, were kind to him, gave him stuff, and were his window to the outside world. He was a local celebrity of sorts, the go-to-guy – in a

good way. Now, in his 30s, he is a key man in this safari business and still managed to hold on to his youthful eagerness to help tourists see what they've come to see.

Confined to the Rover, I tried to let myself just sink into a travel trance and take in the scenery.

We entered Lake Manyara National Park late in the afternoon. Some of the plentiful baboons played tag with one another while others sat in pairs grooming each other, occasionally picking things out of one another's fur. Some played in the adjacent trees. They were the first mammals we saw, and their sudden appearance reminded us that though they seemed comfortable with us, we weren't at all used to them. It takes some adjusting to be with animals without enclosures and the cautionary, protective apparatus of cages, handlers, and posted signs. As soon as we stepped out of the Land Rover to stretch, we were in their territory and fair game to them. We hung fast to Justin's invisible tether and returned to the car quickly when their noise level began to rise. It was as if Justin heard them speak threateningly about us. It feels disturbing to be so vulnerable in the presence of such cute little creatures. It is just the first wake-up call to realize my place in the world. Who would have thought these little baboons in front of us, one with a little pink erection poking through his fur and his hands on the object of his affection, would even notice me.

Baboons are noted for their powerful jaws. When three or four adult males act in concert they hurl themselves on their prey and literally tear it apart. In just that manner, they have destroyed leopards that threatened their troop. If I were to be seen as an

annoyance, at the very least I'd be a target for liquid excrement pitched from high in the tree by the other baboons watching from above. What seems so pleasant on the outside could turn ugly if we approach one whisker too close or linger for an extra second.

This is the real deal. I'll need to keep reminding myself of that. It is too easy to believe that somehow we are immune from catastrophe. These aren't actors in monkey suits to entertain us, so we listen to Justin and obey. We continue to watch the baboons, and some of them now appear to be watching us. Others approach. They gather. As we get back inside the Land Rover and move slowly along the trail, Mario reminds me that it was in this general area and on nearby Rusinga Island in Lake Victoria that Louis and Mary Leaky found the missing link between monkey and ape and the entire area from the Olduvai Gorge northeastward was essentially the birthplace of humankind.

"What did early hominids know that we don't? It seems that as soon as they could they fled this place to settle anywhere else—even the Arctic. Was life here so bad?" I asked in another one of my flippant moments. "Were the mammoths too salty? Were jobs scarce?"

We moved slowly down toward the lake and then stopped near the edge. What looked like dirt mounds moved. It took a second to see they were hippos. And when one yawned I could see why they have the well-deserved reputation of killing more humans than any other animal in Africa. My guess is that one of these yawns could easily close around a baby or an entire basset hound. Hippos can reach speeds of 30 miles an hour on land and 8 miles an hour in water. If you think they are cute, passive,

and lumbering oafs, as I did, and annoy them; be ready for a stunning surprise and hope you are a faster runner than your companion. Obviously I can't help myself, though. We walked just a little too close to the river's edge and Justin, seeing the hippos' agitated response, called us back, loaded us in the Land Rover and we left for the last leg of the day's trip. Mostly the hippos turn over small boats that get too close or they trample people in their way or otherwise a nearby nuisance when they leave the river in the evening. It was really strange how feeling vulnerable made me want to be obstinate and ignore Justin. Did I need proof I'd die if I didn't listen? I was desperate to figure out a way to test that theory but I might not be able to discuss the results with Mario, so I let it go.

We reached our day's end at the Lake Manyara Hotel above the steep escarpment to enjoy a perfect view of the lake and the valley. The park was filled with wildlife, and its dense growth provided food and cover to various species within. We watched as the sun first appeared bright as an explosion but finally dropped behind the few clouds gathered at the horizon and then, with a last golden yellow and orange pastel spray of light, descended out of sight for the night.

Chapter 7

Natural State

If you understand,
things are just as they are.
If you do not understand,
things are just as they are.

- Zen saying

As we set off for the crater, Justin explained the philosophy of the *Ngorongoro* Conservation Area in two words: natural state. That seems sensible but, ironically, it's hard to keep it natural. Natural. Untouched. No human interference. As long as there were tourists wanting to visit and poachers seeking the high priced animal parts, "natural" gets complicated. Tourist fees help offset some of the complications and pay for the supervision of tourist services and anti-poaching enforcement costs. At least the crater provides a relatively safe haven for the animals and is, itself, a natural barrier to discourage some of the poaching. It is an easier area to monitor than a savannah or rain forest. Still, it was hard for Justin to stand by and watch a huge bull elephant die in a freak accident. It jammed its tusks into a berm so hard it couldn't release itself. Justin wanted to help but the policy says to leave it alone. No human interference is allowed. I protested to Justin even though I knew he couldn't do anything about it, but I needed to

say something and try to understand. "What harm would it have done to free it?" I asked.

"It's not natural. It was an act of nature and nature must take care of it," he said. "It's all out of balance. We have to protect nature so it can survive."

This still didn't make sense to me. "How is leaving the animal to die protecting it?" I asked. He explained, "We only intervene when humans are involved: poachers and tourists."

"What about camping in the crater? Doesn't that disturb the ecology of the place?"

"Yes, and you know you will be the last to camp there. From now on all tourists will be restricted to lodges on the ridge."

It was hard to imagine a bull elephant, already endangered, dying that way and it was just as hard thinking it wouldn't be okay to save him and consider that a future credit against the poachers' take. Damn, I thought, if only the beast had money enough for a bribe.

The idea of an untouched, natural area made perfect sense, of course. Don't mess with nature. We're sure learning the hard way. It was only day two. I felt like my mind was finally catching up with my body and I was certainly more alert and attentive as we made our way to the campsite.

We crested the rim of the crater and were awestruck: a fourteen-mile wide bowl of Eden came into view. In the distance a large lake remained from the wet season and

glistened silvery in the sun. It provided the setting for many life and death dramas as animals met at that water supply and exposed their culinary appeal to one another.

At almost 2,000 feet above it all, the ridge of the crater offered a magnificent panorama of several eco-systems: forest, bush and grassland layered the crater wall. Mario was in heaven. This was indeed his idea of a view. "Eyes couldn't find much better," he said. Yes, I was filled with wonder, too. It was a vista that immediately left me speechless. In revealing the depth of its impression on me, I may have said something like, "Holy cow." The gentle breeze, the absolute quiet, the indescribable beauty of the vast caldera teeming with life below, provided a picture of what original man must have seen. At this height, the horizon is sixty miles away. I could see past the crater wall on its far side and it was all untouched by anything more sophisticated than a cow dung and mud-thatched house.

As we descended into the crater toward the campsite a varied animal and plant species were revealed to us, and all of them were new to me. Small flowers, with yellow, red and blue crowns dotted the trail and in some places illuminated a dense patch in a field of green. A smaller number of pink and purple flowers were strewn among the patch as well and all of their petals would shift and sway with the gentle breezes.

Several African hares were disturbed by our presence and ran through scrub mostly unseen. The movement of the scrub itself, parted by the small bodies as they hopped along, disclosed their route. Several Maasai ostriches in a small flock were off in

the distance and a few Grant's gazelles were spotted looking at us like Bambi, caught in the headlights, waiting for evidence of our intentions. We rumbled by harmlessly and they returned to grazing, their long thin horns curving up into the sky.

Our Land Rover was equipped with an observation roof so we could stand up in the vehicle and shoot our cameras with a full 360-degree unobstructed field of vision. There would be no reason not to have at least a few good photos. All we needed to make this perfect was to see the big ones: elephant, rhino, giraffe, lion, and zebra.

Justin tracked game for us while he slowly headed the Land Rover along the downward trail, his lone eye flashing over the landscape seeking clues to the animals' whereabouts. We were quite eager to see the stirrings of life in the bush and maybe see one or two of the dramas that defined the daily struggle for existence – hopefully extremely violent and bloody with death wails and roars, great ripping and tearing of flesh and a lone face at peace covered in blood or buried in a carcass – not either of ours, of course.

My head moved side-to-side trying to capture it all. More of the complications of the words *natural state* were finally registering. There aren't any additional protections beyond the metal shell of the Land Rover. There were no posted fences of any kind and no semblance of control or a barrier that even a strand of barbed wire provides – though we did have Justin's knowledge of the place. If I were to step out of the vehicle, which isn't allowed while in the crater, but tempting all the same, and, say, Justin and Mario were to drive off, I would have to confront existence at the gut level and be face to face

with questions of survival – a condition I rarely experience. No talking it over, no negotiating, no posse to avert what would undoubtedly become my last moments as a functioning independent organism. Chances of survival without firearms would be miniscule. Who am I kidding; even with firearms my chances would be miniscule. That would certainly feel like being on the edge, face-to-face with my ultimate powerlessness if thrust into an unprotected confrontation with the forces of nature all around me. Face-to-face, indeed. I couldn't remember the last time that was the case. Tennyson didn't come to mind but Mario echoed my sentiment saying something like,

And love Creation's final law –
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw.

To which I said something like, “Huh?”

Justin was pointing out all manner of wild little animals. A tree hyrax, bushbuck, vervet monkey, and, in the light blue, cloudless sky above, fish eagles and black kites. The bushbuck was the biggest animal of this lot but still relatively small at about 50 pounds with two modest but pointy horns between its oversized ears. No doubt they'd leave a pair of handsome puncture wounds about a fist-width apart if they landed, say, in my fleeing butt. The black kites looked strikingly similar to North American hawks. The feathers at the end of their completely splayed wings allowed them to glide in the air currents, silently circling their hunting grounds.

I could see the birds; the others, even after being told where to look were completely hidden from me in their stillness. It was like playing *Where's Waldo* and

losing every time to one-eyed Justin. He laughed at us good naturedly as we kept asking “Where? Where?” When we took an extra long time catching up with him he burst out in a great laugh, “Hey, I got one eye, you got four!”

Warthogs, gazelles (Grant’s and Thomson’s), jackals and hyenas all revealed themselves to Justin and we kept squealing like children, “Where? Where?” Looking from his outstretched hand pointing into the bush to various spots in the distance where we thought they’d be. “Mario, you see it?” I’d ask each time – especially interested in seeing the hyena, the scariest predator so far.

We were on the bottom of the crater now and the wide expanse was as good a place for the animals to hide as under cover of a scraggly bush or in a stand of trees. We were seeing more animals, however, especially birds and a huge mass of storks, herons and ibises in Lake Magadi that even Mario and I couldn’t miss. There were thousands of spindly-legged, plump, white and pink birds busily attending to their socializing. Except for the very rare jackal and hyena, though, my eagerness to see gangs of predators subsided.

The day ended as the long shadow cast by the rim covered the caldera in twilight. Darkness was close behind. We reached our campsite, tents already in place. Camping here was going to be completely different simply because of the magnitude of the potential dangers. If something snuck in to the tent for an unusual gourmet feast on rather tender white meat – an unexpected treat on me – well, I guess Justin would think that was just nature’s way.

We stowed our daypacks in the ample tents that had served campers for years at this site. Only a few other campers were expected but we never saw them. After a short survey of the site we managed to enjoy a couple of ice-cold beers that Justin had very presciently packed away in the provisions. It hadn't occurred to us to plan ahead in that way. Without him realizing it, this brilliant move added to his tip.

There's ice-cold beer. There is even great ice-cold beer. But there is absolutely nothing better than an ice-cold beer when you are dying for one, think it's out of the question and it then appears. It is almost like what I imagine winning the lottery feels like when you're about to declare bankruptcy. We had our dinner, basic minute steak and scrawny vegetables but none of that mattered; Justin brought the beer.

The campsite was in a pocket of growth nestled into the base of the southeastern area of the crater wall, sheltered in part by trees and brush. We were sitting outside the tent looking into the sounds of the nearby growth and watching a few small monkeys play. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye I saw something move then I heard a loud rustling sound. About 50 yards away, a bull elephant crossed the entrance to the campsite, sauntering slowly, trunk swaying in the same easy gait as the rest of his body, his ivory tusks arching beautifully upward. He was in no hurry. We took pictures without disturbing him, excited by the notion that an elephant had just walked past our campsite.

Jeez. No, Jesus fucking Christ. Natural state. As we settled into the evening, and the night quickly filled in the vast bowl, the rising sounds of the nearby monkeys, and,

of course, the tree hyrax, sounded like something out of a horror movie. A tree hyrax looks like a cross between a rat and a Koala. You don't know whether to pet it or to shoot it until it starts screaming. Then there is no doubt. Much to my moral disappointment, I enjoyed the guilty pleasure of wanting to shoot it straight to kingdom come.

We became very interested in what to expect now. With only a thin canvas sheet between the inevitably curious and hungry inhabitants of this place, and us, we were again eager to hear Justin's wisdom. The great grey one moseyed on to follow his bliss, but there were other scenarios that our imaginations conjured that made a good night's sleep even harder to envision.

Okay, say a vervet monkey gets curious and pokes his darling little head into the tent. Say that just as he looks over at me, I look over at him and rather than admiring his cute little black face surrounded by his beautiful fluffy white hair that looks much like a woman's adorable winter hat, all I can make out is a shape against the darkness? Okay, say I yell at him to get the fuck out and he doesn't understand English. Maybe he'd cackle back to me demanding some treat and I wouldn't understand. Then, not wanting to wait for an interpreter, I'd throw a shoe at him. Let's just say at that point he gets pissed off and before I can grab my flashlight he decides to take a few souvenirs and leaps into the tent? So now I imagine one of those cartoon dust clouds when two characters fight each other and every now and then a head becomes visible before being

pulled back into the whirlwind. I see the tent walls swaying madly being pushed out from the inside helter-skelter. That was a mild scenario but enough to rattle me.

Justin was clearly in his element, and enjoyed cautioning us before we went to sleep. "If you get up to piss, be careful of the elephants. Don't walk into them and don't trip over a lion." Before the shock on our faces wore off, he continued, "And if the monkeys or hyenas come into your tent just let them have what they want."

"Hell yeah, but what if they want Mario?"

"Don't worry he's too skinny, but you? heh, heh, heh."

"Okay, Justin, how 'bout I sleep in the Land Rover?"

"No. No. No, man. Don't worry."

So, of course I worried. We sat out late listening to the brush but mostly stared up as the perfect, cloudless sky filled with stars. We watched the surrounding trees flicker in the light of the camp torches dancing in an easy breeze and talked about the cosmos, big ideas, the sort of thing that men discuss when sharing a moment and a cold beer under a perfect night sky.

"You think a lion would actually sleep near the tent?" I asked Mario.

"Nah," he said. "They couldn't be bothered."

"Come to think of it, didn't a lion wander into camp in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*?"

"Nah, they don't do that."

"Why am I asking you, anyway? Geez. Did you even read the story?"

“Look, we’re here, and what happens, happens. Just don’t fart unless you want a hyena in your tent.”

Eventually, we got tired enough and actually went to sleep.

After a couple of days, as with any conditioning, we soon grew accustomed to the sounds, accepted our vulnerability, and settled into the pace of our adventure. We even managed to sleep well and didn’t bump into an elephant though I sure did want to, sort of.

On the day we left camp to head for Mt. Kilimanjaro we still hadn’t seen a lion, a rhino or a giraffe. The herds of gnus and zebra and the flocks of birds carpeting one large section of the lake were now commonplace, but elephants were scarce and the other big ones remained elusive.

Then Justin hit a trifecta. Check. Check. Check. We came upon a part of the lake, which is really more like a giant puddle since it is only about four to five inches deep, where thousands of Blacksmith Plovers, flamingos, storks and Yellow Wagtails stood in a combined mega flock drinking, squawking, preening, cleaning, mating. Off to the far left was a massive cloud that signaled a herd of thirsty somethings coming for a spot of water. Justin started the engine and we went to see what all the commotion was about. On the way we came near a small mud pool hidden from the lake in tall grass but between the rising dust cloud and us. Suddenly Justin killed the engine and the Land Rover came to a stop. We froze.

Several lions were resting, a couple hunched over the pool taking slow tongue-fulls of water completely oblivious to our presence – we were literally just feet away. Mario and I were ecstatic. No cages. No handlers. No food dishes nearby.

Justin said in a loud whisper that demanded attention, “Stay quiet.” We did, mouths agape at the scene we had stumbled upon. After a few minutes Justin said, “One at a time, you can stand for pictures.” Slowly we each rose to poke our head above the roof, careful not to arouse their interest in us for as long as possible. The film sped through our cameras.

The females looked rather thin. The males looked as though they had just feasted, one was passed out flat on his back and looked like a gigantic house cat with his full belly rising straight up, beautiful long hair as if coifed that morning, and smooth golden skin. This guy had it good. The animals in the *Ngorongoro* area were accustomed to and unafraid of the Land Rover. But if we were to step outside we would instantly become prey. It is only one second between tame and deadly and you might not live to remember the difference if you even reached out of the vehicle at this distance from the lions.

The occasional attacks that have occurred were due to human noise and interference encouraged by feeling invulnerable, as if in a theme park. That feeling of being in a protective bubble sometimes overtakes me, too, especially when the animals seem so peaceful. It is easy to think they are tame because they are not on a kill. Justin told us that some people figure, “Aren’t they cute, so close. I think I’ll go over and pet

them." His African accent rose and fell rhythmically. Then he laughed and said sarcastically, with a smile and in a whisper, "Want to step outside?" I guess he felt we learned by now. Or not.

After taking their fill, all but the sleeping male slowly moved on. Justin started the Land Rover, hoping not to disturb him. "Say goodbye to *Simba*, Swahili for lion," he said. We said, with admiration, "So long, slug." Fortunately he was out cold, his stomach still gently rising and falling with his steady breathing. Justin eased the Land Rover back toward the approaching dust cloud.

"Fantasy is great," I said to Mario when we picked up speed, "but reality is an eye opener. I am always struck by the ordinariness of things and how my mind is usually so cluttered with misconceptions. I mean, look, we were within clubbing distance of a bunch, if not a whole pride, of lions and they were completely nonplussed. They didn't growl or paw the car; they didn't rise up on their hind legs to inspect us. Nothing; not even a sniff."

I suppose I expected lions always to be in role – roaring, tearing prey apart – not passed out from a binge and left behind by pals. As he is about most things, Mario was much more realistic about the encounter. He was impressed, of course, but didn't expect the lions would behave otherwise. I suppose the gap between his picture of the world and the way it really is is narrower than mine.

As we approached the cloud of dust, it became quite apparent that a herd of gnus (wildebeests) was making its way toward the water. A gnu looks like a cross

between a bison and a water buffalo. Its horns form a beautiful “w” as if a calligrapher wrote it in lower case about a foot and a half wide at its top. Groups of zebra were making their way, too. I couldn’t resist, “Hey, Mario, are zebras white with black markings or black with white markings.” And, as usual, piercing right to the heart of things, like Alexander cutting the Gordian knot, he kept watching the animals and simply said into the window, “Who cares.”

There must have been a mile-long train of these animals slowly dragging themselves toward the watering hole when another cloud of dust arose behind a lone lioness that swiftly emerged from the grass not far from us. She broke into a gallop and headed straight for the herd. I thought for sure we would be witnessing a kill. The lioness would show us the other side of that second between tame and deadly. But something even more astonishing occurred. She stopped. After about a minute-long chase, after scaring the hell out of the backside of that crowd, hundreds of animals now also in a gallop toward the water hole, she just stopped, looked and turned back walking slowly to where she had come. What a mystery. What was she thinking? She looked like she could use a meal. I watched her slowly walk back. Her head seemed lowered in disappointment. She looked sad. Maybe she expected her sisters to follow her out to the kill and would need to have a word with them later. Equally surprising to me was the speed of the wildebeests, faster than the zebras.

Here was a case of being caught between emotions. Just as I was beginning to worry for the slowest one, I was furiously focusing my telephoto lens expecting to see it

taken down, I found myself disappointed. I was caught yet again between the desire to capture the horror I anticipated on film, and sympathy for the target animal – the devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. I dodged them both, “Not now, can’t you see I’m taking a picture.” So much for my moral certitude.

Damn. She just stopped after chasing them to a pretty good speed, dust flying in a colossal cloud, and walked back to the grass. “Hey Mario, what the hell was that? Practice?” I couldn’t believe it. Like a pace bunny at a greyhound race, the lioness seemed only interested in getting the herd up to speed. I added to Mario, “What? To help it work up a thirst?” I had no idea they would exercise themselves like this. So in the end the insight trumped the kill.

“Awright John, what’s a zebra? Think riddle,” Mario said, after the action died down.

“That’s easy, arbez spelled backwards. Ha.”

“Cute. Nope. It’s 26 sizes bigger than an ‘A’ bra.”

“Mario, you’re a grown man for god’s sake.”

“Remember, Victor is a middle-schooler...” Then he threw me another of his son’s riddles as we watched the herd settle down. “Okay, if a lion goes to a barbershop, and the barbershop cuts off all the lion’s hair, should the lion stay or run away?”

“Should I bother?”

“No, you’ll never get this one. The lion should re-mane!”

“Mario, you are regressing faster than a wildebeest running for its life.”

“Victor prepared me well for this trip.”

“Chip off the ol’ block. Thank him for that wonderful tension breaker.”

Before leaving the crater for the long ride to Kilimanjaro, Justin happened upon a black rhino. Check.

Our mood became electric again, snapping us out of the trail trance that had soon overcome us after we left the action at the lake. Justin called him *faru*, rhino in Swahili. To us, he was *the beast*. He was about 200 yards away, close by telephoto standards, but Justin closed that gap to about 75 yards and stopped the Land Rover. The animal was huge like an enormous armadillo. No, he was huge, like, well, a two-ton rhino. Just standing there – grazing. I found it paradoxical that the biggest beasts – elephant, giraffe, zebra, wildebeest, rhino – are herbivores, unashamedly vegetarians while smaller creatures like jackals, hyenas and lions tear life apart in gruesome attacks to satisfy their hunger.

Eventually Justin pulled up to about 50 yards and killed the engine. On the inside, I was a giddy teenager at a Beatles concert. On the outside, I simply said to Mario, “Holy shit.” Maybe I was too loud. Justin turned slightly keeping his eye on the rhino while holding a hand up to me. “Shhh. He will hear us. He may be blind, but he can hear a cigarette hit the ground.”

“I guess that would include a shutter release?”

“Yes, but if we keep our distance he’ll let us be. Just don’t make too much noise.”

I stood to shoot away, trying to capture on film what my mind was finding hard to grasp. Just standing there, this animal looked so improbable. It was one of many creatures that I find hard to believe actually live among us. It has beady eyes and small megaphones for ears and a pair of horns in the middle of its big stubby face that poachers know are prized by the Yemenis as daggers and by the Chinese as a mixture in aphrodisiacs. The beast just magnetized my gaze. No boundaries. Natural state. This creature was just standing there, grazing. It surely reminded me of some pre-historic creature. Hell, it is a pre-historic creature; this one still lives, though maybe not for long. The Black Rhino has been on the endangered species list since 1986. There are only 2,300 left. I felt a sort of anticipatory sadness that this beast may become extinct before I die.

Standing in the Land Rover, holding my camera after the first frenzied photos of the lone rhino, I was marveling when I said, again too loudly, excitedly, "Mario, get up here!" He had been re-loading his camera and I was eager for him to see this unobstructed view. It felt like we were sharing this space together with the animal as if we were in a diorama. It hardly moved until, that is, I called to Mario. Then, in one of those split second moments, the animal raised its head and spun. I mean it spun like it was a cartoon character - so fast that he moved from facing east giving us a profile to south, facing straight at us. It did not saunter. It did not mosey. It flew in a blur. Justin said, "Shhh. Get down." But he did not start the engine. Instead he waited that additional second with his hand on the ignition key and in that moment assessed the real danger. Not yet. Again, I was grateful we weren't attacked and disappointed we

weren't attacked. If we had been attacked it would have been an even bet whether or not we'd survive, Land Rover or no Land Rover. As fast as he turned he could get to about 30 miles per hour in seconds. We could, too, but in the bush, facing him head on, it wasn't advisable because of the rutted terrain and uneven clumps of grass. I'm glad not to be the jerk responsible for future stories among the guides about the rhino that gored the Land Rover. It wasn't like I had to tell Mario he needed to take a picture of what was out there and I sure didn't need to do it loudly. For that one second I must have gotten a pulse beat too comfortable with the apparent passivity of the scene. I knew that as an herbivore he wouldn't want to eat us, he'd just want to see us dead. Sometimes half measures can be comforting though. I think "killed but not eaten by a rhino," sounds preferable to "killed and eaten by a rhino" in an obituary. Fortunately, the rhino just turned for a better look, fuzzy as it might have been, and to swivel both of his little cone shaped ears in the direction of the obnoxious noise.

Seeing the rhino turn like an enormous spinning bottle was shocking in its way, not like the Challenger disaster or a bad blind date or a mugging, but it was another reminder to be mindful of that split second between calm and chaos.

Justin put the Land Rover in gear and we slowly headed out of the crater and southward toward Mt. Kilimanjaro and the Marangu Hotel. After an hour, he pulled to the side of the road for no apparent reason, cut the engine, and drew our attention to a clump of trees. "There, look," he said. And we looked. In another one of those *Where's*

Waldo moments, time seemed to pass as if it just oozed down a drain until it disappeared altogether. The world seemed to stand still, nothing was moving.

Justin said, "Look over there," having learned to hold his hand so the city slickers could carefully follow the direction of his eye. Amidst the trees, the long spotted neck came into view. Justin made great time and with his one eye watching the rough road he also managed to find this giraffe, the perfect conclusion to our *Ngorongoro* search for our favorites. Check.

Justin's eye looked us over as if to say "you guys are hopeless." Then as we made out not one but three giraffes and appropriately erupted in appreciation, Justin's perfect white teeth again filled his face from ear to ear. "Good eye, Justin, good eye," I said and with Mario grabbing the cameras and getting Justin's approval to approach on foot, we headed across the road. "Slowly," Justin said. "Slowly."

We actually made it to within 50 feet before they stopped feeding and began to move away. They were about 12 - 15 feet tall, somewhat shorter than the average male but they must have wandered off by themselves since giraffes usually travel in herds. As they headed away from us they seemed to be moving rather casually, yet their distance from our cameras quickly outpaced the zoom of our lenses.

We stood there for several minutes and watched the three of them disappear, blending into the great expanse with their perfectly camouflaged bodies. In an instant they were gone, loping off into the borderless savannah, an invisible part of the scenery

to our untutored eyes. Finally, our attention was drawn back to Justin and the road ahead.

We reached Marangu, Tanzania, in the shadow of Mt. Kilimanjaro in late afternoon. We were sad to say goodbye to Justin who had been the spirit of this trip as well as our eye and ears. He would head back to Arusha and prepare for his next game of *Where's Waldo* as we began the main event: climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Chapter 8

Slow Slow

Standing in the open mess hall with about thirty people of various ages, sizes and nationalities, we listened as regal 78-year old Erika Lany briefed us. Standing on a step leading into the rustic, wood-beamed living room of the European styled main house, she waited for us to calm down before speaking. With a confident, athletic posture and her long grey hair in a neat bun she gave us a short pep talk. She seemed sensible and commanded our attention just by looking at us. The soft-spoken enthusiastic way she talked to us was most reassuring. It was clear she eagerly wanted to help make our trip as beautiful and fulfilling as hers had been.

She was born here, the daughter of Lutheran missionaries. As an avid climber, she worked this family land as one of the first Kilimanjaro outfitters. It is a pre-climb staging area, bunkhouse, hotel, and garden all in one. She spoke fluent Kiswahili and Kichagga and spent her life welcoming and preparing climbers for the hike of their

lives. She first climbed Kilimanjaro when she was a child and repeated the trek ten more times. She is so well regarded as a local personage caring for this land, helping the local community and knowing Kilimanjaro as intimately as she does, that the natives call this whole area *kwamiserika* (the place of Miss Erika) in her honor.

We listened with respect as she outlined the route on an old hand-made crayon-colored cardboard map about three feet square. She told us the three rules of making it to the top: first, she said, *pole* (pronounced po-lay); second, *pole*; and third, *pole pole*. She smiled warmly and confidently leaned into the audience with her hands grasping a wooden rail in front of her, her eyes crinkling in a delighted grandmotherly way as the audience laughed. “Slowly. Slowly. Slowly slowly. Oh, and one other thing,” she said, and I expected her to say, again “slowly.” Instead, she said, “Only breathe through your nose. That will ensure the right pace.”

We awoke at dawn for an early buffet breakfast – everything from cereal, yogurt and fruit to eggs, sausage, potatoes and toast. It was cool and Kilimanjaro was crystal clear. For the first time we saw the full profile of the object of our desire, and she was beautiful. From our vantage point it looked like a long pillow of a mountain with a saddle-like valley between two widely separated peaks, as if a giant’s head had left its mark after resting there. You could see the dark green at the base change color, first into blue and then brown as the climate changes until turning white where a glimmering glacier crowns the area at the highest peak, the one we were hoping to make.

We met our team that arrived at the reception area promptly at 9:00 a.m. and conducted a final readiness check. Anderson, our guide, introduced us to the rest of the team members: a cook, a supply porter, and two porters for our stuff. They did everything for us except walk the trail. It seemed that it did indeed take a village to get Mario and me up Mt. Kilimanjaro. But I can at least testify that we in fact did put one foot in front of the other toward the campsites and upward toward Uhuru Peak.

Everything we didn't need was stored at the hotel. The rest would be split between a small daypack that I am proud to say we each carried ourselves, and the rest, which the porters carried, mostly high altitude clothing and supplies. Walking stick, check. Daypack: water, check. Journal, check. Pen, check. Camera, check. Film, check.

Listening to the porters' cacophony of Swahili I just knew they were talking about how to even out the loads or at least talking about taking turns with the differing weights. They took our top-of-the-line backpacks with all the fancy doodads, reinforcements, zippers, pockets and rubberized, thickly-woven, color-coordinated Gore-Tex this and Velcro that, stuffed them into old potato sacks, and swung them up on top of their heads. Boom and they were off. And, like the giraffes along the road, the porters disappeared into the trail and were gone in seconds. One was barefoot in contrast to us in our brand new hiking boots. Mine had ankle supports, easy-tie eyehooks and waterproof flame red panels on the uppers over a blue-grey lower panel. Mario took no chances. He strapped on an altimeter, an apparatus to measure his pulse

and a GPS locator. I suppose it was just in case he was lost. Undoubtedly a reconnaissance satellite could find us in a second. We were a sight.

Anderson turned out to be a man of few words and few worries. These qualities harbored a monumental patience. He had been in the guide business for many years and, like Justin, knew exactly how to be there for you precisely when he was needed. He was also able to get to the top of Kilimanjaro following any of the routes but as he got older chose to take the easier trails with the likes of us. Even in his early fifties, this was all an effortless exercise for him in his worn flip-flops. He chain-smoked homemade cigarettes and balanced a 20-lb bag of charcoal on his head as he led us to the trailhead. The casualness of the guide, porters, and cook made us feel a little foolish because of their nonchalance and distinctly low-tech approach, but mostly they helped us put all this in perspective and start out with a laugh.

After the obligatory photos at the trailhead next to the sign that told us we were expected at Mandara hut at 2700 meters (c. 8800 ft) in about three hours, Mario and I toasted our departure by clinking our DayGlow orange water bottles. "To the snails of Kilimanjaro," I said. "*Pole, pole,*" he replied. And we followed Anderson into the equatorial bush – up and away, walking sticks poking ahead of us.

Anderson walked near us like an old sheepdog, sometimes ahead, sometimes behind us; close enough to keep us on track but not part of us, respecting our privacy as

he puffed his cigarette and, heeding Erika's advice, we drew in long breaths through our noses wheezing like tracheotomy patients.

It was remarkable how few people seemed to be around. We had seen almost no one during the entire *Ngorongoro* leg of our adventure – a few at the hotel, of course, and only a couple of other Land Rovers in the distance during the day in the crater. But with 30 people at the briefing before we left and an unknown number already on the trail coming and going, we were still surprised at how suddenly they would appear and disappear leaving us with a feeling of having a solitary experience. Having a short trek on the first day, we were decidedly dawdling. We actually took the advice we were given. We were going slow and were breathing through our noses. This was a good sign. We took pictures of everything. The low forest was lush and the glacier melt combined with the previous seasonal rainfall created many pure-water streams. Click, Click. We captured the wildflowers' red against green, blue against brown, all with a thick forest backdrop that hid the fact that we were on a mountain at all. Click. And the large heart-shaped leaves of the common *Macaranga* tree filled the sides of the path. This was the density I expected in Africa, the impenetrable knots of dark green vines, brown trunks and fallen limbs. Soon, I tasted the grit of the trail as it mixed with droplets of salty sweat sliding onto my lips.

As I moved further into the jungle and the base camp fell out of sight, a cloud of gnats, mosquitoes, flies and assorted unidentifiable but able-bodied biters flew across my path and alighted on my calves, neck, arms and ears.

I moved erratically up the path slapping at bugs but didn't wait long enough to taste the few that landed on my lips before spitting them away. Combined with the sound of our feet crunching along the path and the walking sticks grinding small pieces of the crushed earth digging into Kilimanjaro, the spitting and slapping made me appear like an orchestra conductor gone wild. Miraculously the insects faded away but not before leaving itchy souvenirs.

Before we were halfway to Mandara Hut it became apparent we were headed for last place in this round of climbers. People cheerfully passed with big smiles and various accented English hellos. No one was breathing through their noses. French, Swiss, Swedish, and half-dozen American high school teachers from the United Arab Emirates who decided rather spontaneously on their New Year break to do this trip quickly. They assembled all their supplies from returning climbers and were able to get everything they needed from walking sticks to cold weather gear. They promised to donate all of it to the guides upon their completion. Ah, to be young and totally spontaneous. I loved their high spiritedness, camaraderie and devil-may-care attitude. They were in a race to climb the mountain and rush back to school before the start of spring term. We wished each other well and they sped along and out of sight.

As I walked on I thought about how people I don't know and will never see again suddenly become mirrors. I compare myself with them as if I must determine my life's value and worthiness based on their momentary appearance and disappearance. Why did I even think about being in last place? Perhaps comparing myself to them was

really my concern in the here and now about making it to the top of this mountain. Is this climb all about experiencing some sort of a victory? Is it a race? Am I now feeling bad about going slow? Slower than whom? The teachers? The Swiss trekkers? The septuagenarian Swedes? The French family, who just happened to choose this time for a family vacation? Was the climb for nothing if I didn't get a brief moment at the top? What exactly is standing atop Kilimanjaro a victory over, anyway? "Hey," I tell myself, "What the hell has gotten into you making this adventure into some faux competition? Cut it out."

Pushing along toward the first of three huts, still out of sight, I realized that my introspection was stimulated in a way that it hadn't been on other adventures. The ruminations, even though they often resembled the proverbial dog chasing its tail, were forcing me to look at my life. Something was going on inside. The idea of feeling badly at the thought of being last to the hut was an alarm bell I had to pay attention to. I think it came to the surface because I am in a transition and find myself constantly wondering about next steps. I have relocated back to the United States from overseas, changed jobs, written a book, pursued a new relationship, and zoomed halfway around the world for an adventure with an old friend. In some ways I am living a dream. In some ways, nothing makes sense anymore. I am still searching for that elusive feeling of fulfillment that should come with the territory. Instead, what bubbles up in my consciousness now is an imaginary competition. But I muddled on about the transition and reflected upon

all I've achieved. Instead of feeling amazingly fortunate I hear Peggy Lee singing *Is That All There Is?*

Shouldn't this and all my adventures make me feel different? I keep thinking so but I'm still waiting. When I hear of others doing these things I actually think it has significance but when I do them, I feel like Groucho Marx who "wouldn't join any club that would have him as a member."

Coming face-to-face with this absurdity is helpful. Though I still search for meaning, getting clarity sometimes starts with asking the right questions.

I climb the trail, breathing through my nose, trying to take in the incredible environment and the new terrain of my inner space. I realize I have never been on such a trip before. Even when I traveled for extended periods by myself, I was more social and open to the serendipitous. There were plenty of distractions and contingencies all around. Mario and I are lost in our thoughts most of the time. This part of the trip is essentially six days alone. No distractions.

I dive back in on this theme of comparing and competing with others. Can the first or the 10,000th person feel victory over the mountain simply by taking a long catered walk to its summit? Can one really then lay claim to something special beyond discerning one's own personal metric for satisfaction while being shown the way and nudged up the trail and supported by a crew who've done it a hundred times? I can't lay claim to it, name it, or own it, but I can appreciate the experience or I can ruin it with disappointment should I not make it to the top. The mountain is what it is and will

remain so whether I reach the top or not. Undertaking this contemplation is itself a great reason for being here. Though, if I could just quiet the incessant repetitiveness of my questioning it would be an improvement.

Okay, focus. Today, the main issue is to pace myself, to go slow, to become one with the mountain, to combine the physical effort and the mental contemplation while elevating both my altitude and insight. I realize the entire challenge is to master myself and find peace of mind. I need to understand that whatever my rhythm and pace it is mine and mine alone. I also know that accepting this is the first step toward peace of mind.

It is good that Mario is also at home in his own thoughts. As we meander along this path to our first campsite, we speak infrequently. We crisscross the path, stopping every now and then to take pictures. All the while we breathe through our noses, which, I think, is a great amusement to Anderson because we are so self-conscious about it we clench our lips closed as if to be sure not one molecule of air passes. Maybe it's because our noses are making a straining, filtering, wheezing noise. I'd laugh myself if I weren't so damn serious about keeping my promise to "do it right."

The warmth of the Tanzanian day, the lushness of the surroundings, the zigzagging along the reddish brown packed clay path, our awkward breathing, Anderson's slow flip-flopping all established a rhythmic pace which is somehow comforting.

Mario was a few yards ahead and stopped suddenly. "Hey, look at this, I almost wiped out a division of army ants."

As I approached I could see a wide, reddish brown column of ants thicker than a python stretching across the entire path and into the bush. The path here was more than 20 feet wide. The ants were carrying shards of leaves and I said to Mario, "Where the hell do you think they're going that they need to carry food with them? It is food, right? Or is it their camping equipment?" I had to live with the fact that this was just another of the many puzzles I find but rarely try to solve. This was a mild reminder of a nagging personal tic, the same one that gets me on the mental merry-go-round: observe, question, become befuddled, blame myself for not knowing basic stuff about the world which means virtually everything, realize I'm in an angst accelerator, get out, marvel at the mysteries of the universe, toss an attitude out there that is invariably the wrong one, laugh at the silliness of responses it causes, believe everything's all a cosmic joke anyway, blame god or whatever and start over. What's the alternative? Accept everything as is, go to work, do chores, watch TV, die? I don't want to think that's just the way things are but it is tempting. It sometimes seems sensible. Maybe that is a route to peace of mind. But if that's the cost for getting peace of mind, it's too high. I think that I can determine the purpose of my own life. So I question and marvel and have put my unoccupied mind down that fruitless trail for the umpteenth time. It's just what I do, I guess. But I wish I did somewhat less of it, or did so with more constructive results. Maybe after finding the puzzles I should try harder to solve them.

Yet, I find it is important for me to ask some questions about the world and my life over and over. It gives me a chance to change the answers. It prevents boredom but sometimes at the cost of angst overloads. Wanting answers keeps me motivated. Having answers doesn't. If I have them I then have to live with them. Hell, that feels so, so, terminal. Uh oh, I can feel the angst accelerator warming up. Six days on Kilimanjaro. Nothing but quiet. I can't remember if I have ever spent six days without any music or chores or objectives other than putting one foot in front of the other. I haven't. I now have no choice. Except for conversations with Mario, I only have my own mind to rummage around in and I *must* rummage around.

My heartbeat and the coursing, pulsating flow of my blood were drowned out by the inhalations through my nose, but I could still feel my pulse when I picked up the pace. When my mind settles and when effortlessness is reached, when I am into the hiking and not the thinking about the hiking, an invisible threshold is passed. When my self obsessions are overcome and my incessant robotic muddling in abstractions is tamped down, I can just "be" and the joy in the experience of the climb, for its own sake, emerges in the here and now. Wanting to "be" and getting to "be" in all things whether climbing a mountain or seeking a relationship, is my challenge. Mostly, it depends on staying present. It takes awhile for me to reach that place and to shed the sophomoric mind. I feel I might actually get beyond the tortuous struggle to settle into the experience of this mountain, soon. Yet...

We arrived at a clearing in mid-afternoon to see Mandara Hut, signifying we were close to 9,000 feet, only an hour off ETA. *Pole, Pole*. It was delightful to put one foot in front of the other without racing or even rushing. *Pole, Pole*. Reaching the hut, we got the distinct feeling that we were indeed on a mountain. The clearing gave us our first view of where we had come from and though it was somewhat overcast, there was undoubtedly exhilaration with our progress so far. The cloud cover thickened as it rolled in, the drying sweat still clinging to my clothes cooled my skin. I welcomed the change and raised my face in the direction of the breeze, closed my eyes and listened as it passed over me steadily whispering on its way. I inhaled in great chest-heaving pulls, enjoying the sensation of air rushing down into the farthest recesses of my lungs. I hoped to clean them out from the dusty debris of the road and the thick air below, laden with jungle vapors.

So far so good. The climb was comfortable. The main hut is a big A-frame and inside, picnic tables encouraged climbers to mingle and share tales. Climbers came from all over the world, but there were no black Africans among them with the exception of the staff. Heroes were on their way down, eager wannabes on their way up. We also got the feeling from talking with those coming down that it was just a matter of time before we, too, would stand atop Uhuru Peak. *Pole, pole*. All those that passed us on the way to this first hut were sitting at the tables. And, it didn't occur to me then to feel as if I lost some race because we were last to arrive. That was a victory of a different kind.

Soon, fires were started and the air filled with smoke from burning charcoal, as dinner was prepared. The acrid clouds blew all over camp and settled into everything, clinging to fabric like sunlight. We were warned by returning climbers to get used to steak and potatoes, steak and vegetables, eggs, bacon and toast, and lunchtime sandwiches and apples. That would be our gastronomical fare for the six days on the mountain. Hmm, yum. The reality was that even the limited menu turned out to taste of one thing, charcoal. And it was fine.

Chapter 9

In Pursuit of Uhuru

Slippers, flip-flops, sneakers, and loafers race up the supply trail beneath bodies that have done this a zillion times before. A cigarette hangs from Anderson's mouth.

We still breathe through our noses, *pole, pole*.

Anderson stays with us and goes slowly. I think he does so intentionally, knowing what's best. He, like Erika, knows that hurrying would be useless and ultimately defeating. Going slow is a means to the goal, not a weakness.

Here on the edge of the zone is a cactus like stump of a plant several feet tall that blooms only once every 75 years. It is green and brown but when we pass it, there is no bloom. We do not consider this an omen.

We are heading toward Horombo, the second hut at 12,000 ft. We should make it in five to seven hours. We are like ants walking along the back of an elephant. I am still trying to let the mountain speak to me. That sounds weird. I try not to think of it as something to overcome, as an object "out there." I focus on my feet and think of them smoothing the path under me with each footfall.

We are in an area carpeted with irregular, short straggly green and brown hard-edged plants we can't identify. Some plants look like a combination of Saguaro and oil palm trees. They are the tallest vegetation at about twenty feet. Mostly the land is covered with low knurly bushes and tall brown dry grass. It looks like parts of Arizona.

The path turns upward and the mountain seems to roll ahead of us. Some low clouds over the first ridge block our view forward. We alternate putting on a sweatshirt or taking it off as the clouds block then reveal the sun. My sweatshirt is over my shoulders most of the day. Mario wears his around his waist and it makes him look as if he is wearing an inner tube because it covers his water bottles and fanny pack.

The terrain is not threatening and poses no physical danger at this point. Mario, Anderson and I snake along, each in our own thoughts. For me the challenge continues to be about mental self-mastery. Our meandering is more or less self-regulating but my mind oscillates between observation and physical sensation on a superficial level, and an inner quest and internal conversation on a deeper level. I push on.

When I allow myself to take in my surroundings, to forget about breathing while still doing so through my nose, I become fully immersed in the present and thoughts about the effort and reaching the goal disappear.

I experience a little heavy breathing but there is no discomfort. As the air thins and the atmospheric pressure is reduced, we expect the first symptoms of being at altitude. Nothing yet, not even a mild headache; we're only a little more than halfway.

I am getting a grip on the pace. I've decided that reaching the top has been part of the fantasy for too long to think I could or should do away with it now. At least I'm not racing. Getting to the top is what counts, not how fast I get there. Goal setting and the desire for achievements, is part of who I am. It is also how I engage with life at

home: set goals, give all I've got to reach them, stay committed to reaching them, do my best, check them off a list.

I concede that I should be less goal-directed when it interferes with enjoying the process of achievement. Reaching milestones and reflection points such as the next hut provides feedback about progress and adds value to the journey. The link between the process and the goal helps me appreciate living. It's almost like having your cake and eating it, too. Together process and goal are revitalizing, rejuvenating, renewing. Both goal and process are essential; two sides of the same coin; yin and yang. I shouldn't need to learn this so late in life but I'm glad I'm paying attention to this lesson now.

As I progress along the trail I am not occupied with ropes, carabiners, crampons, alternative strategies, or contending with punishing weather. I am not distracted by equipment and the porters carry our supplies. I have only my own thoughts and the scenery to occupy me.

I look at my mental models of the world. I try to accept whatever I am able to accomplish and not devalue it. In baseball you'd like to hit a homerun but are happy with a single. I try to convince myself that I'd be disappointed but not devastated if I don't make it to the peak.

It occurs to me that on Goddard's 127-item life list of accomplishments, not one of them, not one, explicitly identifies an inner growth goal. He had extraordinary clarity about his external goals at a young age and he most certainly did not have an angst gene. I remember the day I hand set an antique letterpress in my basement to print one

of my goals in two colors using four fonts. Peace of Mind was repeated down the 8 ½" x 11" page until the paper was filled. It was December 16, 1972, sometime before dawn. I was pleased that I learned how to use the press as an art form. Check. I'm still working on "Find Peace of Mind." The page is still framed and hanging on my study wall. Even though evidence suggests I should get a replacement goal like "self-acceptance," I'm holding out. But if I did substitute self-acceptance, I'd still only manage ¾ check.

Other hikers pass and I know some are thinking of competing, wanting to be first. One told us, "You guys will never make it at that rate." Another said, in false jest, "Want to race?" What, to be first for the day? The week? First among those who left with them a day earlier? They create us as "other" in their minds. This is what I don't like about myself. I don't like making everything a contest or personal challenge, and now I see it in these passing Europeans as well. We come from the same mindset, the one that overtook us with the evolution of the Industrial Revolution, the one that colonized, exploited, beat down and ruled the very people now making our journey upward a pleasant one and who do so effortlessly. Now competition is just who we are as people. The porters, cooks and guides are invisible to the competitors; for surely they would win. A 64-year old Frenchman passes us. A Swiss/German family passes us. Reaching the top is virtually guaranteed when going slow yet so many are obviously racing. Clearly I am part of this Western malaise that imbues us with a shared delusion about competition. Everything is up for grabs even if it is just being first among a self-defined handful of random strangers along the same path. Off they run. When we

behave like that we become all goal and no process. I sigh to myself. Without a conscious effort to resist, I would also feel the pull to join them, to show them, to take the challenge and run along. But I don't. Much of my time along the trail has been spent grappling with this very issue. Competing is a reflexive part of my nature and I am trying to gain some control over the impulse so that I can be more deliberate about its use.

Sure competition has resulted in a creative, dynamic, culture but it also divides us into winners and losers ultimately estranging us all from a sense of community. In the extreme we are all deemed inadequate – always with room to improve, and improve we must. I suppose we could all use a bit of unlearning to find the right balance between ambition and joy.

Rushing along the path would destroy the experience by making it something else. Not a climb but a race, not an introspective hike but a competition. And for what? No one gets a prize no matter when we finish or how fast we do it.

Taking time to really see what is all around me and not just the path, I notice scraggly brush pushing through the topsoil and crustiness of the mountainside toward the nourishing sun. What seems so timeless and unchanging I now see as part of a continuously shifting scene created by the sun moving across the sky. I feel the wind pass and watch it muss the small green tops of bushes. I see dwarf trees twisted by years of a windblown existence. I hear the sound of scree crunching underfoot. I even manage to hear the labored breathing from inside my body as the wind whispers past

my ears. I enjoy seeing the small, slowly trickling streams that eventually disappear underground, inside the mountain. The clouds that crawl low across the sky and disappear in a blink change the landscape as they move. The sky becomes darker, foreboding and then reawakens, opens again. The passage of time becomes the sculptor of the experience. I am not just on the mountain, I am on a natural canvas and the forces of light and wind create a moving picture out of eternal elements. When my mind thinks of being halfway, of hours to the next hut, lunch times and bunk conditions it isn't seeing the big picture. It's falling victim to its old impulse to compete. When my mind considers a race to the top it doesn't even see the mountainside. Ironically, to hurry is simply to spend more time at the campsite. There's already more than enough time for being at the campsite and all I'd do there is have a few distracting conversations with strangers. Maybe I'd compare notes and maybe we'd learn about one another's lives. That's often a pleasant social activity but here it would take me out of the experience and off the mountain. I purposely minimize it.

It eventually dawns on me that the rushing may have absolutely nothing to do with competitiveness in the personal sense of the word but could be due to habit and conditioning. From where we all come from, time is the enemy. A finite amount is given to us and the only way we think we can make it last longer is by doing everything faster. An extra day on the mountain makes it impossible to spend that day differently.

Horombo Hut is just below the highland desert and tree line about 7,000 feet below the summit. There is a cluster of small A-framed bunkhouses and a very large A-frame for communal meals.

Once again, we arrive only an hour off ETA. My body still feels good; the preparatory daily 10-Ks and repetitions of stadium stairs have definitely paid off. So far, just a little heavy breathing and mild, satisfying fatigue indicates that I met the challenge and used my muscles but didn't overdo it.

Weight is the enemy of travelers and the killer of trekkers. I carry no shaving cream, no shampoo, none of the niceties of modern American life. Taking anything unnecessary is not only foolhardy when attempting a climb like this but disrespectful to the porters. But on this trip I actually carried *The Selected Poems of Edna St Vincent Millay* that Kate gave me for Christmas; a hardback brick I didn't foist on the porter. We have a couple of hours at the campsite before dinner, and today it seems appropriate that I delve into it here on the edge of the Mooreland.

I propped open the door of the A-frame and it filled with light and a late afternoon chill. I lay on my bunk inside a musty flannel lined sleeping bag, opened the book and held it toward the light.

I tried the shorter poems first. In four lines in a verse entitled "Grown Up," Millay despairs of adult boredom and one line captures her incredulity: "I should retire at half passed eight?" Then a few pages later in a longer piece she reveals her hearty lust as she proclaims to her lover how she will soon forget him so he must enjoy the

time he has. Reading "So, make the most of this, your little day..." I was instantly propelled back to the Bay area and those last nights with Kate. Millay was shown to be a fiercely independent, vigorous social adventurer. I believed Kate was doing more than sharing her favorite poet with me; she was sending me a message. I jumped around some random selections from the book and re-read Kate's inscription several times: "To friendship... 'It gives a lovely light.'" Reading Millay was helping me understand Kate. Yes, a deeper message was now taking form in the rarefied air of Kilimanjaro.

Mario called from the short steps in front of the A-frame and alerted me to the time. I crawled out of the bunk and stretched out, hands to the sky, put a sweatshirt on and joined him for dinner.

"I was just reading a book of poetry Kate gave me," I said to Mario as we waited for dinner. "Some hot stuff in there. Edna St. Vincent Millay. Have you heard of her?"

"You mean the swaggering, drugged-out nympho who never made it to sixty? Yeah, I know her. That she was so popular was amazing for the times. She really did burn her candle at both ends."

I was very impressed with his knowledge of Millay, "I had no idea you knew poets but I suppose I should have guessed with that reference to 'tooth and claw.'"

"She was unforgettable; one of those post-war, Greenwich Village, airy-fairy hippie types that kept our interest. Even engineers had to take a lit course."

"She clearly made an impression."

“Hard not to. I’m surprised you didn’t know about her.”

“Yeah, well, poetry isn’t my thing. You always manage to surprise me.”

“I do my best. Remember, I’m an engineer, not illiterate.”

After our dinner dose of charcoal flavored steak and potatoes, it was back to the bunk for an early night. Tomorrow we rise to over 14,000’ and spend the day getting accustomed to the thinning air.

I eagerly awoke early on day three glad to get out of the A-frame that serves its purpose but felt like I was enveloped in something toxic. As tidy as the trails are, the bunks seem completely ignored; I imagined they festered with invisible life forms. There were large and varied stains like great dry lakes. It didn’t take much to imagine the kinds of bodily fluids loosed upon the mattress or that varied bacteria were just waiting for rain to awaken them. I hoped that at this altitude and with the lower temperatures, whatever might be in there couldn’t survive. The ragtag army of porters, guides, and cooks chattered away as they prepared breakfast for their respective clients. I resisted watching them prepare our meals but looked forward to breakfast all the same – even with its flotilla of “spices” sprinkled on the eggs. The toast is a stiff brown and black crisp under a spread that looks like butter. It’s almost yellow, anyway. Mario points to his food. “I don’t want to hear it,” I say.

“Boy they sure put a lot of pepper on today,” he says sarcastically.

I leave it at that.

Mario woke up first and took a morning stroll around the campsite. He is the more eager climber and, true to his profession as a risk analysis engineer, has prepared for many contingencies and brought a back-up for almost every possible need. He has packed a battery and a re-charger for a video camera and the same for two still cameras, plus extra boot insoles, gaiters, and layered clothes in multiples. He also packed medicines for every imaginable circumstance from cuts and infection to diarrhea, insect bites and unexplained rashes. Maybe he knew our A-frames would be vast repositories of invisible threats. He was ready. His guidebooks were stowed in waterproof bags, his other gear was in unbreakable containers or strapped to his body like the small devices that monitor his pulse and blood pressure and the gizmo that displays altitude and temperature in both centigrade and Fahrenheit. I guess he was unconcerned about weight.

As for me, I put my t-shirts in the laundry at the hotel and forgot them as we headed on up. One pair of long pants was stained on the first day, I had no purification tablets and I even forgot a towel but was able to make do with a worn thin sweatshirt. Fortunately, I was spared the embarrassment of needing any of his supplies after kidding him about being a walking ranger station.

This day in the saddle of Kilimanjaro between two peaks, Mawenzi, the lesser one and Uhuru, our target, began with the lead weight of boredom threatening my

enjoyment of the experience. Apparently I already forgot the great insights from yesterday. Today was simply a time to hike up into the saddle and return. Those six hours and the night in camp was all a body needed to get it ready to carry us to the top, more than a mile higher into the sky. The desolate plain of rock and scree presented itself as a barren, inert passage that needed to be finished rather than enjoyed. It was also a day to take some notes and to reflect on the journey so far.

We headed up the trail and through a field of small rocks and I noticed that many stones had been collected and piled into messages by previous climbers. One was a nudge. It said simply John + Barbara. It didn't take much to rearrange the stones to read John + Kate and take a picture of my romantic efforts that appeared entirely original. I hoped Barbra wouldn't be coming to check her lover's work anytime soon. I wondered how long my configuration would remain. Potentially, it is still there, though it probably now spells Joe and Marsha. Even here on this sweeping plain that seems so unchanging, one small human gesture using remnants from the Ice Age, again reminded me of how quickly things do change.

We trundled onward. Facing rock and scree sweeping upward, I was surprised how with each second, with each step, with each labored breath I began to notice changes everywhere. Even the wind beating against the mountain would, in due course, reshape this place. It wouldn't take an eon to see the evidence. Even my body was changing as I moved through the landscape adjusting to the alteration in air pressure and available oxygen.

We walked through a small field of eternity formed by rock fragments that finally settled here 100,000 years ago after the last geological disruption. It had an extraterrestrial look like debris from the asteroid belt. I noticed that I move my head to hear the sound of the wind over my ears. The clouds roiled against the mountain and looked like waves against the Big Sur coast of California on a cloudy day but crashed silently before me. In moments the landscape disappeared and reappeared as the sun breaks through to again illuminate the path. It also casts shadows from distant rises. The dark outline of *Matwenzi* Peak moves across our path as if the mountain decided to come to us on the wings of the fleeting clouds.

From one second to the next the clouds, temperatures, the point of view, and even my body condition, alter. Day is summer, night winter. Sitting, standing, walking seem as different as each season. Each breath makes a difference. There, a few miles ahead, seemingly forever away from us, was the top of Kilimanjaro.

If boredom is the absence of change, my fear that this day would be excruciatingly boring turned out to be far from the case. I am no longer fooled into thinking of this as geological permanence. Just focusing on our meandering up the lower slope of the peaks kept me in a river of small changes amidst apparent impenetrable monotony.

It is odd how such apparent emptiness is so full and how after chasing the clouds away the sun warms me and I become inexplicably moved just being here. I didn't try to identify the source of the powerful feelings that overcame me but it verged on the

sacred, the mystical, a result of recalibrating my expectations and allowing myself to surrender to just being in the moment. It proved that indeed moments are all there is and these were filled with a vast variety of experiences. The big chunks of “things to do” that I seem to surf, one to the next in a hurry to grasp the essence of daily life, here turn into an appreciation of the glorious details that add up to the big picture. Now instead of a telescope I am using a microscope and finding an entirely new world. I am overwhelmed as each stone, breath and step suddenly strike me as a marvel in their very existence. I am not usually affected this way.

I take pictures of the sweeping rocks and the light emerging and retreating as the clouds pass. As I focus the camera and wait to choose the perfect moment I feel as if I am poised between eternity and the shutter snap. Simultaneously I felt the rapid speed of change, too, as I tried to capture light and shadow at just the right time when a cloud passed over. In a second, it was on its way to oblivion. Kilimanjaro never remained exactly as I first saw it. For that matter, neither did I. Click. Click. Click.

As the day ended, a bowl of stars covered Kilimanjaro. Descriptions of the night sky can't quite capture the experience. It was a combination of both what I felt and what I saw. Diamonds in the sky? Seeing the stars unobstructed from two and a half miles above the equator made them larger, more full, more radiant than from any other place I had ever been. I was in the universe and not merely looking at it. My imagination gave substance to the distant light and it wandered off to create various life forms on new worlds and even imagined a being out there among the stars that might be wondering if

the likes of me might be staring back. I swell with the feeling that life is good. Yes, I am healthy and privileged to enjoy this moment but I am reminded that I am part of an enormous mystery that might best remain unsolved. Like the answers I'd prefer to search for rather than find, I felt, perhaps for the first time, that understanding my birth and death as a routine part of the process of an unfolding universe where even stars are birthed and die rather matter-of-factly, was a doorway into a state of acceptance. I felt a fundamental compassion for humankind. At that time and place, seeing the universe spread out above me was like being in the cockpit of spaceship Earth.

As I settled into the idea of limitless possibilities and let my mind wander among the stars, I knew that my personal transition was truly a gift. What I once saw as a burden became an opportunity. With no debt, good health, adequate savings to cushion the passage thanks to my "fuck you" stash – a year's salary put aside to insure my freedom – I couldn't be in a better position to truly craft the life I want to live.

The fourth day is our biggest challenge thus far. *Pole. Pole.* Breathing through our noses helps. Acclimatization helps. We are now hiking into that place that tests our bodies by acting upon unseen and unconscious aspects of our physiology and psychology. Our bodies' efficiency with oxygen and our minds' stamina are both being tested. We are decidedly slower than our usual slow selves. We see Kibo Hut, in the

distance for most of the day but for hours it doesn't seem to get any closer. Kibo is the last camp before our attempt on the summit. We see it is a fieldstone structure at the foot of the last leg of the climb. We stop more frequently now for air and water. It seems like every fifteen or twenty minutes. We have no complaints. We're feeling good, but are extra slow. Mario's instrument package indicates all is well. It is getting decidedly cooler and we now require sweatshirts, long pants and a windbreaker. Anderson and the other staff even put on boots but only laced them halfway.

Time and distance are discombobulated for this city boy stepping slowly in the thinning air on grand sweeps of now barren landscape. Not only is the comfort of the familiar missing, I have no ability to judge distance in this setting. I just keep walking.

We come upon a clump of people moving quickly down the mountain as we slowly closed in on Kibo. As they approach us we see they aren't looking their feisty selves. The American teachers, the Swiss alpinists and the 64-year old Frenchman had called it quits. Headaches, nausea, dizziness and congestion – sure signs of altitude sickness – had taken command of their bodies and ordered them to turn back. We don't gloat. Instead, we share their disappointment in the vein of "If not for the grace of God, there go I," sort of way. Or at least in the vein of "If not for Erika's wisdom and walking stick, and Anderson's patience..." Another reminder of the silliness of the competitive or hurried frame of mind in this context; another reminder to keep our focus on the goal, not a false competition; another reminder that the ego can sometimes be a

dangerous thing. Keep your eye on the goal. Enjoy the process. Do it right. Do it together.

After seeming beyond reach, we make it to the hut by late afternoon and are greeted by a few others waiting for the midnight departure to the top. Breathing becomes much more labored, the temperature drops significantly but the sky is still clear. All our cold weather gear will soon be put to use. After an early dinner and just before the daylight completely vanishes, we try to get some sleep until 12:30 a.m. when Anderson will wake us for our 1:00 o'clock departure. Staring at the upper of my double bunk, heart racing, it isn't easy to dispel the excitement of being on the verge of my moment of truth.

The most devastating part of the climb begins in the dark but is an exhilarating prelude to what awaits us: a top-of-the-world sunrise. The midnight departure is necessary to get to the top before the clouds cover it and make the return hazardous.

Mario and I are bundled up and ready to go. Cameras and water supply are tucked under our outer coat to prevent freezing. Anderson leads us onward bundled in his ragtag castoffs from previous climbers. Our departure is timed with an extra hour to spare just in case we have to reduce our pace even further. We are incredibly lucky that there is a full moon as we start up the trail. Conditions couldn't be better. We wear

small box-lights strapped to our foreheads like miners. The moon, much like a nightlight, is really bright enough to guide us. It's all we needed most of the way. It's quite steep and we are in the zone with the greatest risk of altitude effects. We must climb the better part of a mile of altitude by dawn. Breathing routinely through our noses, we're very disciplined and focused on going slow. *Pole pole.*

Everything gets tested here in the dark on the scree along the steepest slope, dotted by boulders of various sizes that require us to scramble over them, sometimes on all fours bent over in a thick bundle of clothes and gear. The unknown above, revealed only by an eerie glow cast by the full moon, is the sole focus of my imagination. We press on, showing no signs of altitude sickness. Steadily we put one foot in front of the other. We rise.

As I climb the mountain I revel in being here, thinking again that it is really happening, we are on the upper reaches of Kilimanjaro. I enjoy the darkness and think about many things but mostly I am carefully observing the trail to find firm footholds.

It is hard to get perspective in the dark, even on a moonlit night. Climb over a small ridge and you can't see the peak ahead, it disappears. At the top of that ridge the peak is off in the distance, seemingly unattainable, yet I know it is so close now. It doesn't matter. I have no say about the process; it simply unfolds. I push on. Patience, perseverance, commitment, a rhythmic follow through from step-to-step; these qualities and trying to remain in sync with the experience of climbing the mountain is a workable strategy. I let the effort and the pursuit of the goal unfold to find a natural

pace, that match between effort and energy and outcome that has guided us on the climb so far. Because of this, I feel strangely pulled along finding myself in the equivalent of a slipstream.

Pole pole. I hear my breath filling my lungs in a beautifully steady rhythm. Unexpectedly we come upon other climbers and pass them one by one. Some of those who so excitedly left us in the dust were slowing. I am thrilled to be chugging along so well and satisfied with myself as we pass each one bidding them good luck and cheering them on. “Only a short way from here. We’ll be there soon,” we say. The moon is spectacular and we watch it fall in the night sky as the dawn light inches its way down the mountain. The final small ridge is underfoot as dawn brakes; a sign announces that we have made it to Gilman’s Point. The snails of Kilimanjaro are on top of the rim, alone. We are relieved to get here and briefly stop, in awe of the sun and moon lighting up the glacier above. I exclaim, “Fucking great!” to which Mario says, “How ‘bout that” before checking his instruments to find everything’s in order. By his calculation we are exactly 777 feet below Uhuru Peak.

We shake hands in a subdued celebratory acknowledgment that we have made a milestone but we are ready to move on quickly to the top – our primary goal.

From here it is another hour. We walk with the glacier off to our left and the great caldera of Kilimanjaro below us to the right glistening in moonlight. In no time, we see the Tanzanian flag flapping in a gentle breeze at Uhuru Peak. We are on top. We made it. There is no chest bumping, no hugging. We whoop and holler, and thank

Anderson (the rest of the crew remained below during this leg). We manage a high-five and teach Anderson how to do that with us, and immediately take pictures to immortalize our success.

We lugged our cameras to the top of Kilimanjaro for this one shot. The extra batteries, Mario's backup equipment, the stills, the videos, everything was for this moment. All we got were two pictures: one with Mario and Anderson, and one with me and Anderson. Both were overexposed and I cannot make out any of the details of Anderson's completely darkened face deep inside the hood of his gray parker. Mario's face is somewhat more visible; at least he's identifiable. So am I, but a tad blurry. In spite of being out of focus and overexposed, I can see unabashed pride on my face. I have unzipped my outer coat to reveal my alma mater splashed across a sweatshirt and bright orange water bottles hanging from my belt like six-shooters. I hoped to use the photo for the alumni magazine but that was out of the question since "Connecticut" in big bold letters was already scrunched together and in this photo couldn't be read with any certainty. At least the flag was focused and clear and we could see where the mountain ended and a cloudless powder blue sky filled the background. It was the exact same texture as the sky I saw from the airplane that brought me here.

It was only when we developed our film, after I returned to Los Gatos and Mario to Japan, that we knew the extent of our loss. All Mario could bring himself to say when we realized what happened to all the evidence was, "How 'bout that! Sheesh."

"What do you suppose the odds of that were?" I asked, thinking his quasi actuary's mind probably knew.

"Somewhere between a high number and impossible," he replied.

It probably was a function of the extreme cold on both the Cameras and our hands that caused just those few pictures to fail. "I guess we'll just have to do it again." I said. "You're buying, right?"

In a few minutes we will head back. We relax and let the joy seep in.

Uhuru means Freedom in Swahili and commemorates Tanzania's independence from the United Kingdom. Done. Check. Damn! We see it with our own eyes. The expanse of equatorial Africa, below and away to the horizon, is filled with both roaming unseen herds and Maasai, just as unaccustomed to fences, crisscrossing the vast Serengeti far from the black, gray, brown and green striations of Kilimanjaro below us. Below us. The idea of Kilimanjaro now being below us is astonishing. It is an amazing realization.

The joy of achievement, the heaviness of fears and worries dissolving, makes me buoyant atop the tallest freestanding mountain in the world, the highest peak in Africa. It is completely exhilarating. My breathing is decidedly faster now. Oxygen is half that

at sea level. The emotions are palpable and my heart raced to keep up with my excitement. We made it, damn it. We made it.

Let's face it, if we wanted to walk for six days we could have done that anywhere. Sure I would love to be able to take it or leave it but we made it. If we hadn't made it, the disappointment would have been clear and painful, a sign of some inherent weakness or flaw, another personal fault; surely it would have been a diminution of my being. Yes, that's absurd intellectually, but emotionally it's true. Kilimanjaro, the object of innumerable fantasies and mysteries and a personal quest for years, is now, for the first time, beneath us. Beneath us. I can't get over that notion.

And that is it. A few minutes, a few photos and a few congratulatory backslaps; it's all over. At least six years in the making, this fantasy turned reality ends much too abruptly.

No, there must be more! Shouldn't the mountain erupt now? Shouldn't we be presented with a medal or be in a headline? Shouldn't I grow an inch taller with all that dissipated anxiety and worry? Shouldn't a blinding light pierce the cloudy sky and the finger of God reach down to touch mine? Shouldn't answers to life's enduring questions be placed at my feet? There isn't even a band to strike up. No one cheers but us.

We had a goal which was as important as the process – if not more so. How can you have it both ways? Well we did enjoy the hike, the conversation, the quiet...the charcoal-tasting meals, the *pole pole*, the army ants crossing our path, the 75-year old plant, the tiny alteration of eternity sculpting the rocks in the saddle of Kilimanjaro. So?

Can there be more to it? Standing almost four miles atop the equator, the Sun rising and Moon setting, Earth's celestial parents in perfect harmony and in a completely functional relationship that gave life to us each day, lit our path. It is great to know that my body is in complete sync with the requirements of making this trip a success. The confluence of these forces and our light-headed giddiness before turning back does, in one small way, remind me that the fears and the doubts were misplaced, that they alone get in the way of pursuing life's goals and may even interfere with the creation of really ambitious goals in the first place.

Okay universe, my newfound love for you will endure. Done. Check. The route down doesn't have those pesky boulders, so, giddy with our success, we down hill scree! It is so steep that leaping off into it was faster and a lot more fun than hiking down. We fly down the mountain relieved of any fears of failure or anxiety about altitude sickness. I felt like Neil Armstrong on the moon.

There is something surreal about heading down and home. What seemed long off and far away suddenly is today, is now and will quickly become history, gone, dead, no longer with me, no longer a part of my future, no longer a purpose. It will be checked off my list. Is the value of it in not having it? The consciousness of being there of having realized this goal melts, disperses like so much vapor. What difference does it make? I drink in the view hard. I stuff it in with each deep breath. I want assurance this is a cosmic moment. But where does it go? The view, the joy of being atop the world is gone as soon as we turned back from the peak. I made it. But the mountain will soon be

above me again. No matter how I try I couldn't make it a part of me, a third arm, say, or at least a scar to fondle unwittingly on a bitter cold night at home and then be reminded of this moment in a future now. I couldn't claim the view, the feeling. Climbing Kilimanjaro gave me an experience, a stimulant to contemplate my life, and an achievement like passing any milestone, another checkmark, a testament to my being alive – all systems still go after all. But I could not keep the view. I could not hold on to the giddiness, the oceanic feeling, or even the pride. I could not take any of it very far or for very long. As soon as I turn away and back down the trail, it is gone and already as I leap along it begins to fade.

Yes, as I gambol down the scree foolishly throwing myself in great wild leaps down the side of Kilimanjaro, I am exhilarated. Unlike walking up Kilimanjaro to the pace that felt set to *Pomp and Circumstance*, on the way down I sing *pole pole* to myself to the tune of my version of *Louie Louie*: Oh “*pole, pole, oh my, me gotta go now...*” With the satisfaction only an insecure ego could enjoy my attitude transforms itself into a form of youthful invulnerability. After being so respectful, courting this Kilimanjaro so carefully, in two hours we cover the distance it took us seven to climb.

Why did I create that goal in the first place? Haven't I learned anything? I knew lessons were being squandered – already fading into the need to create yet another goal, another experience. What exactly was IT? Get this, get that, do this, do that. Why? I've resisted most of the pressure to pursue a material lifestyle. I live modestly. I've definitely charted my own course. But there is that pressure to jump on the bandwagon

and get going again – at least to set new goals. I may have wrestled valiantly with the idea of competition on the way up the mountain but coming down I see that collecting experiences for me has been like any other thing of desire. I always saw experiences as if they were more than mere stuff, somehow more virtuous. But now? Have they become an end in themselves? Are they merely my equivalent to shopping mall baubles? Check. Check. Check. Check. Check. Why?

What happened to all that mumbo jumbo Zen-like stuff about “the process is what counts” and “it’s in the hike that the joy is felt? Reaching the top is just one more step. What difference does it make in which direction you take that step?” Sure, I’d love to be able to believe that. I would. I envy the orange-robed practitioners, the meditators, and the explorers of inner space who really practice what they believe and aren’t tempted and corrupted by all the stimulation around them. But I can’t resolve this challenge as if it is really either/or. The dichotomies became more and more apparent as we move from dark to light, night to day, moon setting to sun rising, and I, thinking about the idea of success and failure, male and female, focus on the relationship between the halves.

I think about and try to live in a place where both parts of the dichotomies may co-exist. I begin to think of the dichotomies like light – being both a particle and a wave. Indeed, to me that state of acceptance of both goal and process in appropriate measure is true enlightenment.

There is no letdown. Yes, I wish I could hold the feeling, somehow ingest the beauty and serenity of the moment at the peak, consume the experience as if I could meld with it, make it mine to enjoy and feel forever. But if I learn anything from the experience it's not about physical or even psychological possession but about the recognition of elements already within me: my capabilities and good fortune. Perhaps that Zen thing is what it's about and I need to re-learn the principle to accept things as they are. But when it comes to my personal development I want to be more practical, paraphrasing a self-help mantra: "to accept the things I cannot change, to have the courage to change the things I can, and to develop the wisdom to know the difference." And, finally for me, not to wallow in the angst.

Bottom line: I was relieved not to have to report to the gang back home that altitude sickness got me.

Gilman's Point is behind us. We reach Kibo Hut and keep on going. Down, down, down - fast - back toward Horombo Hut. We pass the ancient rocks and continue down below the scree and hardscabble high Alpine desert, down into Kilimanjaro's Mooreland and down to Horombo Hut for our last charcoal-flavored steak and our last night on the mountain. In only one more day, after a taste of African-style luxury at the Arusha Mountain Village, we will be heading home.

Chapter 10

Home

Twenty hours after boarding the return flight in Nairobi, tracing the route back through Heathrow, building up another dose of jet lag along the way, I arrived in San Francisco feeling like a returning hero. Passport formalities, baggage retrieval, and customs clearance were efficient and quick. I passed through sliding, frosted glass doors and was in the arrival hall filled with a crowd of passengers' waiting friends, families and lovers milling around.

With an expectant look on my face and needing to keep moving so the great surge of travelers could disperse, I pressed on looking for my brother, hoping he'd be on time so I could complete this seamless return trip.

Everyone in the waiting crowd repositioned themselves, craning their necks as the arrivals pushed through towards their transfers and greeters. As I started to feel let down and wondered if I needed to call him, Kate jumped out from behind a concrete column and wrapped her arms around me. "Surprise! Welcome home, John!"

I was blissfully shocked. "Kate!" I said, dropping my bags and throwing my arms around her, "You came!"

"Did you make it?"

"Make what?" I said mischievously.

“Kilimanjaro, silly.”

“What do you think?”

“Of course you did. Just look at you. You’re beaming.”

“That’s because of you.”

“Well?”

“Did you miss me?”

“Well?”

“Ah huh,” I said, still beaming but even more so now. Her hug tightened.

“I knew you would.”

“Kate, I’m so glad you came. I wished you would. Let’s go and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Kate typically cycled between self-absorption and gestures that connected me to her and I was always pleased when she did the romantic thing. Those moments were addictive and this was one of them. Maybe with Kilimanjaro behind me and the three-week break over, we could really attend to the relationship. I hoped that while I was away she settled some of her loose ends: decorating her new house, finding a buyer for her business and getting some distance from her exes. Maybe surprising me was a good omen.

We set off to the car but at the elevator under the parking garage we embraced, then kissed as if we were already back at my apartment. We couldn’t stop touching, talking, smiling. We were so excited with each other. Yet we were both shaking; there

was a strange but delightful awkwardness between us that could only be dissipated through touch. The tension and anticipation was like the first date, and in a way returning felt like starting over. We had been apart for almost as long as we had been together. There was now so much to say, so much to look forward to. We finally made it to her car. As she headed the car toward the airport exit I was jabbering on fueled by a mixture of adrenalin, jet lag and desire. "Kate, there was this lion. I couldn't believe she went tearing after a huge herd of wildebeests and zebra; they kicked up dust a mile long. I could have sworn it was you. Her light brown skin and golden glow; her thin fit rhythmic stride; her power, all of it was you. She was frisky, too, but didn't have your smile. She wasn't on a kill. It was all in fun!! It was all somehow for her amusement, Kate."

"Maybe in a dream I teleported to be with you."

"Ah Kate, I wish you were there."

"Maybe I was."

"Hmmm. I hope we'll take an adventure someday."

We reached Los Gatos and stopped at Carrie Nation's. Over drinks we began to catch up. The excitement faded a bit in the dark interior as jet lag began to overcome me.

We returned to my apartment. I popped an Anita Baker tape in the player and jumped in the shower while Kate prepared a couple of drinks. My energy came back as the water refreshed my spirits and reawakened my excitement. Moments later I felt a

cool breeze waft in and a second after that Kate quietly slipped into the shower and surrounded me in her arms and said “I figured you’d need some help.” In an instant we fell into each other to satisfy our longing, luxuriantly filling our senses, our hands sliding like silky pads along the contours of our bodies above the soapy film.

When we were in bed and I was about to fall off into the first sleep in my own bed in over three weeks, Kate asked me “Did you have sex while you were away?”

I thought she was joking. I said with a peculiar feeling but too tired to let it register fully, “Well I like Mario a lot but not in that way. Kate, are you crazy? I was on a mountain in the midst of Africa. Besides, you weren’t there. No, I didn’t have sex,” I said managing a smirk at the question. “Did you?” Now wondering if something was up.

“Nuh, uh. Nope.” With that she rested her head on my chest and before I could finish stroking her wildly curly hair to her side, I fell asleep.

Climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro was easier than getting to know Kate. With the holidays over, the New Year rapidly unfolding, Kilimanjaro behind me, being with Kate felt very much like we were recreating, not extending, our interest in one another. But life is more than our relationship; work and a million little details kept us both busy.

Kate’s meet and greet upon my return formed a beautiful matching bookend to her loving sendoff; both occasions, though brief, were wrapped in a sensual whirlwind

of undivided attention and physical expression. It was a period of uncomplicated intimacy created by our mutual sense of urgency driven by our lust. On both occasions we were completely focused on each other with uncluttered minds. It was like tuning a radio dial to locate the right station through the veil of distracting static, finding it, and hearing a crystal clear broadcast - finally getting its message. When we let it be and just allowed ourselves to flow we enjoyed each other fully, clearly, before the static of our lives bled into our time together. But on each occasion, just at the end, Kate dropped some small bombshell that caught me short and belied the blissful state I hoped we had achieved.

There are moments when we were in flow, undisturbed by other aspects of our needs and the life beyond our bed. In those times, we merged and I felt as I did atop Kilimanjaro; in the crescendo of our rock and roll I want to thoroughly devour her, completely integrate with the experience of her, to possess her somehow, and to make her a part of my self. That's when the relationship was exquisite. I felt her desire match mine.

When I was immersed in the experience of climbing Kilimanjaro, of stepping naturally, effortlessly, becoming a part of it, finding the right path and feeling the process indistinguishable from the goal of reaching the top, the mountain seemed to be an extension of me. When I reached a state of mindlessness, each move became a caress and I rose as if Kilimanjaro pulled me along. Occasionally, even on all fours below Gilman's Point, hands deftly searching for some handle in the stone, it was as if I found

a secret, personal route to the top. The feeling was more than simply being in flow with the mountain, in sync with an unthinking experience. Each step was more than just a platform to the next step. It was the process of becoming, in an inexplicable manner, a more complete human being.

The right frame of mind for climbing Kilimanjaro is only reached when the preparing and the climbing, the experience and the thought of it, the spiritual and material flow together like a cloud on the wind. On the night of my return Kate and I felt like this as we had the night before my departure - completely comfortable. It was the kind of moment you don't want to end. Yet right at the end, as if things were too good or she didn't want to give me the wrong impression, she would toss in a word or two that would spoil it. I thought we might work on that but instead found myself lowering expectations from a Hollywood ending to something slightly above tawdry.

As we resumed our lives our relationship was reduced to a telephone tether and our moments together were unpredictable but frequent. For all the distance she tried to maintain she sure didn't wait long to call. With an invitation to play racquetball we also resumed non-carnal physical activities. I loved the game. Five years earlier I played three times a week.

We went to her club in Santa Cruz. The workout to prepare for the climb got me in shape and having lost almost ten pounds on the trip, I was in as good a place as I could be to take on my little jockette, as I'd call her when we played.

We scheduled late morning; it was easy to get a court, and we could go to lunch together afterward. I resist the hassle of clubs: the sweaty smell of the locker rooms, the quiet posturing in the weight rooms, the claustrophobia of working out in limited space, the lockstep monotony and resultant boredom from counting repetitions. At least racquetball was social. Plus, I loved the geometry of it and anticipating the next move, the smashing blue ball slapping off the walls with a sharp crack and all shots being in play.

Our court had a thick glass rear wall so observers could enjoy watching the action. Kate dressed in whites, her hair pulled back and collected in a ponytail by a rubber band, loose ends falling to her ears. I hoped my funky outfit of running shorts and a torn stained sweatshirt from the Cenozoic era over a torn psychedelic t-shirt didn't put her off or offend club members, but I really didn't care. After a short warm-up we got started.

Her vitality and spirit moving around the court, ponytail flying, racquet swinging for the killer shot, earnestness on her face just elicited an urge to hug her, not beat her. Then I remembered just how serious she becomes in game rooms, on courts and on lanes, and that she hates to lose. Scores rising, sweat forming, you could cut the mood with a knife. Still, between serves I loved the way she raised her left wristband to meet sweat dripping from her brow and how she'd tilt her head toward it.

With each loss her mood seemed to dive until after six straight, well fought but losing efforts, we called it a day. We set out to have lunch overlooking the Pacific Ocean on one of those perfect crisp January days.

It was there that trouble came my way.

“Are you hungrier after a defeat or a win?” I asked rubbing it in a bit but with a big smile.

“You have a great reach, you big lug.”

“Yeah, I love to play and can stretch like a bat out there.”

“You still do surprise me.”

“In just how many sports do I have to whip your butt before you get over that?”

“I don’t know, I’ve got to find one I can win,” she said. Then, added, “You don’t even ski. Consider your butt whipped, maybe even broken, too, if you ever tried downhill skiing with me. And, don’t forget that cross-country fiasco!”

One of these days, I’ll surprise you again, big time,” I said and let the topic drop.

She had a glass of wine with lunch that indicated she wasn’t in a hurry and might not need to return to the office. But as we were nearing the end of the meal she said, “So, do you think you can keep up with me?”

“Keep up with you? I just beat you six straight.”

“I don’t mean that way. I’m thinking about finances. We’re pretty far apart on that score. You don’t seem to have an income.”

“Wow. What brought this on?”

“Well, I’m just concerned.”

“Haven’t I been paying my way? Hell,” I said, feeling a heavy dose of defensiveness stirring up my adrenaline, “haven’t I been doing almost all of the paying when we’re together, by the way.”

“I’m concerned because my lifestyle is expensive.”

She sure wasn’t kidding about that: a Jaguar, a half-million-dollar house in Santa Cruz, a house in the Sierras and a shared condo in Maui. That’s just the framework.

“Well, on that score, dollar for dollar, you win hands down.”

As a single professor, my income was modest and consulting paid for most of my adventures. I was fine with that but I was put off by women without means expecting me to support them and cynical about women with means who didn’t want to support themselves either and who worried about men taking advantage of them. I sure wasn’t interested in a free ride. My ideal of a relationship was as a partnership; neither party buying the other.

“I don’t want to stress you out, it’s just that I need a man that can carry his weight financially.”

I exhaled slowly not knowing what to say next, picked up my napkin to daub my mouth, a shockwave creeping up my back.

“Well Kate, it isn’t like there’s no future. Who knows how my book and consulting opportunities will turn out? Besides, what are we talking about here, sharing a mortgage?” I asked facetiously.

“I don’t have one but that’s besides the point. It’s clubs and restaurants and general overhead for a lifestyle I’ve enjoyed for a long time.”

“Well I don’t know what to tell you, Kate. I don’t see the problem myself, though I wouldn’t mind if you paid your share from now on.”

She smiled ironically. “Well that’s fair. Let’s drop it. I didn’t want to upset you, but I’m afraid it might become an issue.”

“You mean you’re thinking of a future?” I said, again letting my sarcasm escape.

“I’ve been thinking about a lot while you were gone. You know, my therapist thinks it’s way too early for me to get involved again. I’m still grieving the loss of two relationships. He says I’m behaving like I’m in mourning and need to give myself time to heal. I still have a lot to sort out before I can deal with a new relationship.”

“Yeah, I know; you’ve been through a lot. I’m not asking for a commitment just a continuation of the great times.”

“Just so we don’t become obligatory I want you to see other people. I have other people in my life, too. You know I’m very social.”

This one-two punch came from completely out of the blue and took me entirely by surprise. Then I connected the dots. *We* made a deal not to have sex while I was away, but it now looked like only I kept my word.

“Whoa, Kate. I’m sorry I beat you at racquetball,” I said, trying desperately for a little distance, a moment to think. “If I had known all this was coming I’d have let you win a few. What’s going on?”

"I'm just confused and don't know how to respond to you, you're so enthusiastic. You're at the perfect place to start a relationship and I'm just not."

"Look, I know what you are going through and thought I understood what that meant to you. I haven't asked for any commitment other than when you're with me, and not focused on some free-floating demons. But I'm beginning to think that something's wrong with me and that this is not about the situation. Is money that big an issue?"

"No, really, you're just the kind of man I'd want in a relationship."

"I'm having a hard time with all this, Kate. What's wrong with just letting it be what it is or what it might become without setting such limits?"

"I just feel that you need to know where I am. And right now I am distracted by a lot of things and don't want to add another complication on top of what I already have. Look, my lifestyle is different from yours. Besides the business, I have a busy network of friends and, well...I have other lovers."

"Lovers? Ers? Oh shit, Kate. What *is* going on? This is getting too crazy, too fast. Lovers? Ers?"

"Look, I'm just very active. While you were gone an old lover came to visit and...well."

"Ah, this is why the sex in Africa question. Oh jeez, what were you thinking, Kate? Were you hoping I'd have sex with a hooker or something to make this all right? Jesus Christ!"

I felt sick as if nothing I knew was true anymore, as if being with Kate was just an illusion. It WAS an illusion, a self-created little fantasy that I let carry me away. Soon shock completely engulfed me and I was feeling myself flush and my pulse quicken until I couldn't take it any longer. I stood up. "Look Kate, I've got to go. I'm just sick with all this." I have become an object on a to-do list, just dangling from her calendar like the ribbon on her Filofax to mark some empty space. This so-called relationship was all about her convenience — all desire but no destination.

"I wish you'd hear me out, John."

"You mean there's more? I can't right now. Look, I just want to throw up so..."

I turned away from Kate, and walked out of the restaurant. "Let her handle the bill," I thought resentfully. I got back to my eight-year old Toyota Celica and drove back to my apartment hitting the steering wheel in absolute frustration. My heart rate was through the roof and I was hyperventilating until the point where Route 17 crests in the Santa Cruz hills twenty minutes away. Damn, I didn't see this coming and only in hindsight did I begin to find clues. But I couldn't make sense of this in any case. I knew we hadn't asked for or even discussed monogamy but we did talk about not having sex while I was away. Besides, where could we find the time to be with other people anyway? Between my research, writing and teaching I hardly had time to go shopping. And I thought Kate was buried in all of her relocation chores and her business. Plus, she called me almost everyday, sometimes twice.

Damn she's somethin' else. I should be glad we at least talked about the situation. Her husband didn't know she was having an affair for six years, until she asked for a divorce. Oh, man, the more I thought the worse it felt. I was working myself into a frenzy of hurt and self-pity and needed an escape. Fast.

When I got home there was a message from Kate. She didn't mean to make me crazy. She was sorry. About what, I wondered. I value the truth even if I didn't particularly like to come face to face with hers and certainly not now, not within a few weeks of being back, not after that surprise reception and first night. I ignored the message, grabbed a beer, put on *The Fabulous Rhinestones* and cranked it up as loud as I could take it under heavily padded earphones and tried to sing-along to a doleful track about love lost, independence, freedom.

It seemed all too familiar but I drifted off while the tracks pounded their sympathetic lessons into my head.

Forty-five minutes later the needle was clicking over and over again in the last groove of the record; the side was long over. With groggy effort, I got up, turned the record over, placed a few others on an automatic changer, got another beer and buried myself once more under the headphones.

I awoke in darkness to a knock on the door. Then the apartment buzzer sounded just as I was heading toward it. I was hoping the pizza fairy read my mind. It was Kate.

"John, I can't stand this. I didn't want to make you mad and send you away. I want you in my life. It's just complicated right now. I'd like to explain."

I stared at her cautiously but strangely happy. I guess I also wanted to know more and hoped it wasn't just a masochistic curiosity. I really didn't want to end the relationship like this and hoped there was more to her. I really wanted another chance to see if a relationship was possible. She held a large shopping bag full of assorted containers, wine, beer, coffee, and a pot; yellow and purple wildflowers poked out of the top. She was standing there pouting with a crinkly nose and glistening sympathetic eyes that implored me to let her in. I was just standing there, not knowing exactly what to do, wondering what other surprise was awaiting me now.

"Well, aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Yeah, right, sure." I responded, pulling the door open.

She immediately sorted out her stuff and, as she prepared two plates of exotica from a Middle Eastern deli, said, "I hope you're hungry," and turned to look at me before filling the second plate.

"Ahh huh, I said. It looks good." She prepared the dishes and placed them on the table. My appetite came storming back.

"I didn't know you cared that much, John. I'm enjoying our time a lot, more than I really expected. It's important that I see you. I feel good with you. I want more but I can't call it a relationship; it's too early. No, I can't even think like that now."

"Look Kate, I don't know what I want either but I've been enjoying this too. I just didn't think things through from your perspective. I didn't know that ex husbands and lovers are still active parts of your life. It's much more complicated than I thought. I

know we never talked about monogamy; hell, there hadn't been a lot of time not to be as I see it. But it feels like shit being stunned like this, especially about ers."

"I hadn't seen him in years. He came over for old times sake and well, one drink led to another and the next thing we knew we were..."

"I get the picture."

"It really was nothing and I didn't even enjoy it. Really, it's not something I'm proud of. It's over."

"It was over before. Maybe there's a pattern here."

"I'm sorry it hurt you. I'm trying to explain. We have only been going out a short while and never talked about sex with others."

"Technically, you're absolutely right. No, we didn't. But you raised the issue about sex while I was away and we promised we wouldn't. Remember? This stinks. It just didn't seem likely, anyway, I suppose, for many of the same reasons you gave: so much is going on, so many complications. And, besides, why would you need to?"

Kate leaned over to me. I could feel her warm breath on my face as she said, "I want you." She was smiling. "Let's keep seeing each other."

Her hair was falling on my chest and I moved closer and put my arms around her and asked, "You brought a pot Kate? What's that about?"

"Remember the night we burned yours to a crisp before you left? Well..."

I did remember and pulled her toward me. In a moment we separated and she hit the lights; in a second we were on the living room floor reenacting that night with

the reassurance of knowing the burners were off. Clothes were strewn everywhere and only the lights from the parking lot illuminated the apartment. The sex didn't make things all right but at least it didn't lie. This time was more intense, rougher. I felt a passion tinged with license. It became an odd mixture of ecstasy and anger – a power struggle over whose pleasure it would be. Eventually we made our way to bed snuggling into each other and fell asleep while our separate dreams overtook us. I didn't like being yanked around by her, but I couldn't resist. I was too thirsty to worry about the condition of the stream.

The next few days went as well as could be expected. I was adjusting to my new reality. Maybe this fit in the category of “something is better than nothing.” When Kate allowed herself to find a clearing among the many circumstances of her life and let herself be immersed in the experience of us, it was hard for me not to want more and she, too, found herself unexpectedly drawn into a sort of relationship. She was comfortable. Ultimately, it was that hesitation to let the relationship, or that something between us, simply unfold, that got in her way. But with all the loose ends in her life compounded by the traumatic, hurtful failures in her two most intimate relationships, we were repeatedly jarred out of our enjoyment of one another. Her network was extensive and every now and then she would reassert her unconditional freedom. “We need to let each other know when we've had sex with someone else,” she'd say for no particular reason and talk about methods of disease control if we were to indulge.

“Sure, Kate,” I’d say, disturbed about the topic but trying to get used to her insistence on her sexual freedom. But each time we’d have one of these little reminder sessions that usually followed an insensitive comment, my interest in her slipped sharply even though she didn’t report exercising her prerogative.

There is no topographical chart that I could use to figure her out and determine if my particular path was the right one; it was more like stepping into quicksand. Though Kilimanjaro is foreboding at the beginning, Kate conversely seemed much more achievable at the outset and became more and more impossible. Her desire at the start, her continued sense of urgency, her refusal to let me walk away and her attempts to figure out what it would take to keep me in her life were very appealing, even while she asserted her freedom. But the moods and vacillations were worse than the unpredictable arctic weather atop Kilimanjaro. The mountain would only pit me against myself. Failure would necessitate a re-examination of what success is and possibly undermine my confidence, but I’d still have my self-respect. With Kate the challenge was almost entirely emotional, figuring out at what point my dignity and self-respect would completely disintegrate.

I introduced Kate to some of my friends at a party they hosted to celebrate my climb. She fluttered around so much they couldn’t tell whom she was with and added an entirely new dimension to the concept of being social. I had to ask her to come out of the kitchen to see the slides and was certain she’d smile at me when she saw our

personal mark in prehistoric stones at 14,000 ft. above Africa. It had the opposite effect; she was embarrassed and got up to refill her drink.

When climbing a mountain, one's efforts instantly translate into visible signs of progress or setback. With Kate the unspoken feedback was finally clear. I could at last see I wasn't getting through to her after all. I was increasingly negated, invalidated. It was always about her. It was like hiking up the scree but sliding back — never to get any closer to the peak.

That night after the party, we stayed at her place but she wasn't really there at all. It was late and we were both subdued, again lost in our separate worlds.

It was a fitful sleep, one of those where the pillow gets beaten up and the comforter ends up at the foot of the bed. I woke at dawn feeling the cold, and sensing Kate was awake.

“Look, John, I need to tell you one more thing.”

“What’s that Kate? What’s bothering you? You look worried.”

“I think you should have an AIDS test.”

“What?”

“I just think it will be safer?”

“Safer? What does that mean? Safer. Safer for whom and how? Isn’t it a bit late anyway? I popped out of bed haphazardly getting dressed completely aghast. I could feel the fury rising.

“Well there was someone else and we...”

I burst out "Jesus fucking Christ, Kate. Are you telling me there is a chance to test positive for something like that. Are you kidding me? Awright, that's it. I'm outta here and you're outta control. Maybe I'm crazy but the price for being one of your fuck-buddies just got too high."

"John, it's not like that, but I thought you'd need to know."

"You're a real piece a work, Kate. Couldn't you have mentioned that little detail before if you thought it was seriously necessary? Wasn't it you, in fact, who insisted we tell one another about our sexual activity so the other could make appropriate choices?"

"I should've. I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" I said loudly, "Well, it's too late for sorry," I added, incredibly having returned to an ethereal calmness. Suddenly, I seemed to disassociate from this conversation, seeing all of this as an observer might. It was like being on the scene of my own horrific accident and simultaneously the passerby who saves my life. The promise of what might have been just collapsed. Another little piece of my heart was torn out and I just needed to leave. I moved through the house to go, completely disgusted with myself for letting this go on, for being so weak.

The beginning of the end was much earlier of course but it doesn't announce itself. It slams the messages back at you later like so many I-told-you-sos. I was feeling so humiliated and ashamed at being so blind when the clues stared at me hard and deliberate over the short time we were together.

Kate was following me through the house in a panic. Maybe she realized what she was losing. I don't remember if she said anything but she stood in front of the door as I reached for the handle. She was silent, looking down, small, in the way.

"Yeah I'll get that AIDS test."

I pulled the door open and heard a whisper, "I'm truly sorry, John."

"Good bye, Kate."

Chapter 11

Renewal

I never imagined I'd place "get an AIDS test" on my to-do list but that was the first chore of the day. After I left Kate, I drove home and for the entire half hour I was beside myself, cursing her out in my empty car. I felt so stupid; I cursed myself out as well. Rush-hour traffic was bumper to bumper and now I had little patience being in the molasses of commuters pouring over the Santa Cruz hills toward Los Gatos and Silicon Valley.

I quickly showered and changed and arranged an appointment at the free and anonymous HIV/ AIDS testing service in San Jose. I still had an hour to kill and I wondered if I'd begin counting hours for the rest of my life. There was a message from Kate on my answering machine that I deleted while cursing her out all over again. I must have spewed out my entire x-rated vocabulary several times but settled on a mantra of mother-fucking-cunt set to a slow cadence. Over and over I repeated this in disbelief while staring at the Los Gatos hills outside my window, wondering how someone I had hoped would play a positive role in my life could become the vehicle for ending it. Holy shit. This ruined courtship turned me upside down from bliss to bizarre as fast as that rhino spun around to target our Land Rover. Finally, with one last round of my entire curse vocabulary to the empty apartment, I turned and left for the test.

On the drive to the clinic, I became extremely self-conscious and embarrassed that I was getting the test. I thought, "Oh hell, I couldn't bear seeing anyone I knew coming or going from this place. I can't believe I am one of 'those people.' Jesus, I don't borrow needles or shoot-up on the streets. I'm not some promiscuous sexual delinquent. What am I doing here?"

It was a small office on the second floor of a non-descript four-story office building. My face was flushed and I was sweating as I registered for the test, took an informational package, and sat down. Everyone was hidden behind the literature furtively looking at the newest person to enter the office. No one looked up directly. It was a somber place, of course. I looked at the pamphlet that described the process and the questions to be asked. There was little reassurance. I couldn't concentrate. I was still cursing Kate to myself as I imagined the worst. I suppose there was a lot of silent cursing in that room.

How in hell could she not have mentioned this sooner? How could this be happening to me? I looked around the room. People seemed ordinary. They didn't look the type to worry about AIDS. I guess no one does.

I took the test and was weakly assured by the nurse that under the circumstances I reported, a positive result was not likely. I like getting positive results on tests. I asked, "Is that a good thing?"

“Yes, you want a negative result,” she said, probably thinking I was born yesterday. Taking little comfort from that, I began a two-week nightmare while awaiting the results.

How could Kate be so damn calm? Could she have had her test and somehow I could be positive and she could be negative? This was quickly descending from the bizarre to the macabre. I was infuriated. My face was beet red – glowing a mixture of shame, embarrassment, and anger.

Nights were fitful and days were absorbed in daydreams. It was almost impossible to concentrate before I’d drift off into a revenge scenario or an end of life plan. Kate called several times. It would have been useful to know her results, but as miserable as I was with the possibility of dying from AIDS, I couldn’t bear to speak to her.

I’d occupy myself with all manner of mindless chores and I’d run a 10k every day on the Los Gatos Creek trail but mostly I’d listen to music and drink beer. Friends were comforting and reassuring and eventually I managed to get a grip. Fortunately, the boys were there to commiserate with. I began hanging out more at Lloyd’s office where I might do some editing or reading or stare out the window without interfering with his work. But every now and then he’d let out a string of obscenities and let me know that the contempt he had for Kate was thorough. I’d be reading a book in the conference room adjacent to his office and I’d suddenly hear him yell “I hope you’re not

thinking about Kate, that dog-shit eating remnant of a human being. Think of her as a urinal. Piss on her,” and return to his work. He cared. We were bonding.

His office was our clubhouse of sorts. Jim and Richard would often stop in. We were all self-employed more often looking for work than actually doing it but each gig paid well. The consulting life gave us the freedom we all needed and our lifestyle, combining periods of frenzy with periods of monumental sloth, suited us just fine. I was glad Jim demanded I run with him into the Rancho San Antonio Open Space just west of San Jose. It was a killer. But getting my endorphins going usually brought my mood back from the red zone and I could again join polite company – at least for a while.

We returned to the clubhouse from one of those runs and were talking softly in the conference room when Lloyd warned from his office, “I don’t want to hear you talking about that vile, infectious pucker-faced, bitch-rat, hedgehog, fart-sucking villainous canker-eating human stain.” I knew exactly whom he meant. On that occasion his work for that day ended and he joined us, changing the discussion from challenging Bay Area runs to wireless telecommunications markets. Jim was an expert in the field.

Richard also visited the clubhouse more frequently during this first week’s vigil and when Lloyd would loose another string of invectives from his desk, Richard would chime in with a Victorian counterpoise. “My dear boy,” he’d say in his heavier than usual Buckingham accent, “surely you need not stoop to the bottom of the gutter to get

your point across. A simple reference to the poor girl's being a lumpish, plume-plucked barnacle should do."

In the second week of waiting, I came back from the brink ready to return to normal — at least more normal. I was no longer going totally crazy. I would deal with this, whatever happened. I was actually feeling the beginning stages of compassion — toward myself and even toward Kate, though I had no desire whatsoever to see or even talk to her again. I began to see my situation realistically.

Since returning from Australia less than a year ago, a new love was shattered; Mt Kilimanjaro was now behind me; I was looking ahead to when my book would be published, and now, about two months after I met Kate, I was given a look at mortality up close and personal. I certainly added to my storehouse of once-in-a-lifetime experiences and tried to understand the meaning of what I'd become.

The mountain helped me understand the destructive power of internal chatter that debilitates the energy needed to take on any goal. I considered the period until I'd get my results back as a case in point. Though it was damn hard, I had to ask myself, "Why worry?" There was absolutely nothing I could do about my situation at this point. To allow myself to wallow in self-pity and hateful scenarios was of no help and little real comfort. Internal chatter about things I can't control also diminishes any satisfaction that can come from being in the process of reaching the goal. I know that internal chatter can be replaced by forcing myself to think about positive scenarios and

by focusing on the moment. Chances of reaching the goal are increased when there is clarity and joyfulness in the process involved in reaching the goal.

The culture of competitiveness focuses solely on reaching goals, often sacrificing attention to the means necessary to get there. For those of us touched by that culture, we are peppered daily with supportive platitudes to keep us in that mindset: “You win or lose.” “No one remembers who comes in second.” “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” We measure our worth relative to others and our pleasure in the process is lost, if we do not win. If I succumb to the pressures to compete simply because others compete, I risk sacrificing both my enjoyment of the experience and achieving the goal. Goals checked off on a list followed by new goals made me a junky for the form but not the substance of many of life’s experiences. A balance needs to be struck – reach for goals worth achieving but only when enjoying the process, otherwise pick new goals.

Loving is never wrong. Kate didn’t teach me much about the affairs of the heart but she sure reminded me to watch my assumptions. Patience doesn’t work in an abusive situation. Love can be misdirected. A relationship is about so much more than passion. I know that. What I learned once and for all and it was about time, too, is that passion should not be the starting point in a relationship. I had always thought the chemistry had to be there first. Yes, an attraction is necessary, but I have since found that trust, a feeling of partnership, mutual caring, and friendship can kindle the passion that at first might not make its appearance.

I think of these things and see how hard it is not to slip into trite or simplistic expressions regarding such complex matters. Yet, it is a fundamental truth I had dismissed before. I didn't realize that my needing chemistry first was the basis for letting several wonderful women become the "ones who got away." I didn't fully realize until now that I had allowed myself to be at the mercy of a fantasy life that proved no better for me than the competitive culture I had unconsciously obeyed for so long.

Toward the end of the second week a nurse called from the HIV/ AIDS clinic and told me my test results were back.

"Well, do I live or die?" I asked standing up and pacing with the long phone cord trailing behind me.

"I'm not allowed to tell you that over the telephone. Can you come in? We are required to counsel you when you get the results."

"I'll be there right away."

"There might be a short wait but okay."

"Ya gotta tell me, am I gonna be disappointed?" Desperation was in my voice.

"Look, I can't..."

"Please, please don't...just can't you give me a clue? Happy or sad?" I tried everything. Finally, she said, "You won't mind what you hear."

I tested negative. I hoped my spontaneous scream of joy didn't hurt her ear and thanked her profusely. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. I'll be right there."

I celebrated the results of the test by inviting my friends out for a beer and to share the happiness of my restoration. I was never as grateful for being given the opportunity to start over and another chance to do it right than at that moment. No more Stanford Bachelors and no more forcing relationships based on wishful thinking.

In setting out on these adventures with Kate and Kilimanjaro, I had no idea I'd discover that life really began at 44, but for me it did.

Vita

John is married to Allyson his great love. He's been to over one hundred countries and has degrees in Liberal Arts, Social Science, and Administration. He loves blue sky, big ideas, intelligence, creativity, photography, travel, and imaginative people. This is his first effort in creative nonfiction/memoir.