

I Never Intended to Be Brave

By Heather Andersen

chapter one

AN OMINOUS START

“I want to meet Paul,” says Elias again as we get off the plane in Blantyre, Malawi.

“Okay, but I haven’t even met him yet,” I reply.

I only just met Elias, who is returning home from a military training in South Africa, sitting next to him on the plane. With a ready smile, he wanted to know what was bringing me to his country, the “warm heart of Africa,” a phrase I will hear repeated many times over the next few weeks. I explained that I was beginning a three-month bicycle journey here.

“Alone?” he asked.

No. I told him my story: I’d tried to put together a small group through a cycling organization but had found only one person to join me—and would be meeting this person, Paul, for the first time when we landed in Blantyre.

He raised his eyebrows.

African men and women don’t travel together unless they are related, and Elias seemed unable to grasp that things were different in other cultures. He was educated and spoke English well. He understood all my words individually, but the concept of traveling with someone I’d met only through email, which he vaguely knew about but had never used, was just too foreign a concept. Throughout the

flight, I asked Elias questions about Malawi and asked for his help pronouncing a few basic words of Chewa, the most commonly spoken language in the country. But he kept returning the conversation to my mysterious riding partner and asking me where Paul was. I kept telling him I wasn't sure but he should be on this plane with us.

As we get off the plane, Paul and I are able to identify each other by our carry-on luggage: panniers, or saddlebags, that clip onto a bicycle's rack. He looks like the bad photo on his web site—dark, brown, layered hair with a bit of wave, silver-rimmed rectangular glasses, medium build—but, with hunched shoulders, seems tense, unlike the easygoing guy I'd imagined from our emails. As I walk toward him, I wonder what he's really like? How well do I know him? We introduce ourselves and get in the "foreign passports" line to officially enter Malawi.

At times over the past several months, as I corresponded with people who were interested in joining me, I wondered if this trip was really going to happen. Now I have my answer. Here I am in Malawi, planning to spend the next three months cycling through Malawi, Zambia, Botswana, and Namibia with someone I'm just meeting. Elias' unspoken question, "Why are you traveling with him?" is one I will come to ask myself.

I've just finished my U.S. Peace Corps volunteer service in the tiny southern African country of Lesotho but I'm not ready to return to the U.S.. I feel a strong need to see more of southern Africa, a region I was originally drawn to for its mix of culture, wildlife, and scenery. I don't want to return to the U.S. and start characterizing all of Africa as Lesotho. I do want to see more of the continent and understand the differences among the countries.

Contrary to the portrayal of Africa in the media as a war-torn, insect- and disease-infested, poverty-stricken monolith, it's an incredibly diverse continent, with terrain ranging from desert to mountains to rainforest to farmland. Like Europe, there are some similarities from country to country but also vast cultural differences across the continent. In my two years in Africa, I've met Kenya's Masai who still

subsist largely on milk and blood, watched Basotho horsemen wearing blankets as coats ride by in Lesotho, sweltered bicycling across the equator in Uganda, been snowed on both in Lesotho and atop Mt. Kilimanjaro, watched a leopard hunt, seen cheetahs lounging under a tree, and met some of the warmest people I've ever known.

Paul is an American from the Chicago area taking a year off work to travel primarily by bicycle. He has already cycled in New Zealand and England on his own, is curious about Africa and wants a cycling partner for this portion of his trip. When we first agreed to do this trip together, we thought it was going to be as a group of three. Then our third person, a woman who'd emailed me that she was definitely committed to the trip, disappeared from contact. I have no idea whether she flaked out or died or what, but it's just Paul and me. We have been corresponding by email for about six months and seem to have similar interests and travel styles.

As we stand in the immigration line in the airport, Elias comes over to introduce himself to Paul. He reiterates an invitation he made to me on the plane to call him when we get to Zomba, where he is stationed, and he will show us around. After meeting Paul, Elias moves over to the more quickly moving "Malawi passports" line.

"Do you want to put the bikes together and ride to Doogles?" I say to Paul after we clear customs. By email, we decided to stay at Doogles, a backpackers' hostel with a camping area, so we'd have a meeting point in case either of us was delayed.

"You mean you want to bike now? From the airport?" He sounds surprised.

"Sure, it's what I usually do on a bike tour. But you've traveled farther than I have to get here. We can find a taxi big enough for our bike boxes if you prefer." As usual for airplane travel, our bikes are partially disassembled in cardboard boxes.

He does, so we find a taxi, or rather one finds us, as several taxi drivers approach us, offering their services. "You need taxi?"

After setting up our tents at Doogles, we sit at thick, wooden tables in their open-air restaurant, order dinner, and talk about the trip. Paul asks me a lot of questions about Africa, including whether I've been sick.

"Not seriously. I had a bad cough during Peace Corps training, a cold or flu-like thing once, and my stomach has been queasy at times, but no awful debilitating illnesses."

"I'm going to eat whatever you eat," he says with a smile but a serious tone.

"Okay, but I'm a vegetarian, so that's what you're committing to." I smile, too.

"Well, maybe I won't only eat whatever you eat."

Two days later, we are on the road.

"How far is it to town?" asks Paul.

"Which town?" replies Herman, whom we've just met.

If I believed in omens, I'd have to say this seems like a bad one. Only a few hours into a three-month bicycle journey, we are already lost—and not simply lost but lost with the sun setting and a broken bicycle.

After taking the obligatory beginning-of-a-long-journey photos, we cycled out of Blantyre, early in the afternoon, staying on the main road south. We were surprised when the road turned from asphalt to dirt. I suspected we might have missed a turn. This road didn't look or feel like a main road—the dirt and lack of traffic made me dubious, but Paul insisted it was. He had asked a local cyclist if we were on the road to Thloyo, and the cyclist had responded, "yes." In Africa, however, yes is frequently the right answer to give a foreigner. Tell him what he wants to hear, the thinking goes—don't be the one to disappoint him.

If yes had been the honest answer, though, we should be only a few kilometers from Thloyo, a sizeable enough dot on our map to be able to count on finding accommodation, when we stop by the side of the road because Paul's rear wheel isn't spinning as freely as it should.

While he's working on his bike, a short but stout, bearded, white South African in a small white truck stops to ask if we are okay. Herman introduces himself and we learn from him that we are definitely not on the road to Thloyo. We are on a backroad to Mulanje. We accidentally left the main road when it veered right and we stayed straight. This explains why the road we are on turned to dirt. We hadn't missed a sign; there wasn't one. If there had been, it should have read "Welcome to Africa, where logic does not always prevail."

Herman works at a road camp just off this road a few kilometers back. He tells us we're about thirty kilometers from a town in both directions on this road. Paul thinks he can eventually fix his bike but we're running out of daylight. I ask Herman if the road camp has anywhere we can spend the night.

"No," he quickly replies.

"What about somewhere we can set up our tents?"

"No, definitely not."

His abruptness shocks me. Africans are generally much more hospitable than this.

Camping along the side of the road without enough food or extra water is not an appealing option, especially for our first night on the road, but what choice do we have? No other people or villages are in sight, and no one else has passed since we stopped. Herman says maybe he could give us a lift to one of the towns but he has to check with his boss first. Paul thinks he might have to return to Blantyre to get a bike part anyway. Herman drives off to check, promising to return soon. Paul stares down at his bike in frustration, but I am more optimistic.

"As long as there are Africans running that camp, we'll have a place to stay and probably also dinner with them tonight," I say. I am confident that Africans' strong sense of hospitality would not allow them

to leave us stranded here, despite Herman's initial outright rejection of the possibility of accommodation.

Even after putting on long pants and jackets, we both get chilled waiting for Herman's return. Journeys in Africa often involve intense heat. To avoid the worst of it, we are starting ours in mid-June, the beginning of the southern hemisphere winter. When the sun was shining, we were comfortable cycling in T-shirts and shorts, but now with the sun and temperatures dropping, it's chilly. Luckily, we don't have to wait long.

Soon Herman's white truck approaches. He brings good news—we are invited to spend the night at the camp. It's not quite finished, he says, but you'll be warm tonight. And they even have a workshop where they'll help Paul fix his bike.

I offer to cycle to the camp, but they have security guards who won't let us in unless we arrive with Herman. We load both our bicycles into the back of his enclosed truck. They barely fit side-by-side with our gear packed around them.

Paul walks over to the front passenger door, turns towards me, and asks, "Are you comfortable waiting here?"

I understand that he is not. To most Westerners, this truck would be full, unable to take an additional passenger, and Herman offers to come back for me. But two years in Africa has changed my perspective. I tell him that's not necessary and squeeze myself into the back of the truck, reclining back across the tops of the bikes. If I try to sit up, I'll hit my head on the ceiling. It's not too uncomfortable—until the truck starts to move and every little bump starts to jostle me. I press my elbows and feet into opposite sides of the truck to keep from slipping and getting wedged between the bikes. The truck's back window has bars across it, and I wonder if prisoners have ever been transported in it.

When we arrive at the camp, I use my yoga-based flexibility to extricate myself from the back of the truck and look around. The camp is a fenced-in compound with a one-story white house near the center,

a tin garage workshop that is about as big as the house off to the side, and faded yellow shipping containers converted into buildings near the outskirts. A sense of place is lacking. This isn't anyone's home, just a place to stay temporarily. Dead grass and gray clouds add to the barren feel.

Andries, another bearded South African and with a slighter build and darker hair than Herman, introduces himself as the camp manager. He's most likely responsible for our invitation to the camp, and we thank him. Hierarchy is important here, and Herman probably told us we couldn't camp here because he didn't have the authority to give us permission.

"Do you have any food?" Andries asks.

"Some," we reply.

"If you'd like to join us for dinner, we eat at seven." He has someone show us around the camp—the main house, the workshop, and the container where we'll stay.

It's not unusual in Africa for shipping containers to be used as buildings after they are emptied. These intermodal containers are originally used to ship large loads of freight by cargo ship, train, or truck, and sometimes the freight costs of returning them empty are higher than replacement costs. I knew of one in Lesotho that had been used as a bicycle shop, but I'd never thought of one as a potential home. Yet it is a comfortable home for a night. It's heated and has two bedrooms and a bathroom with a hot shower—much more luxurious than our tents.

As we carry our bicycles up the three brick steps to our container, which rests on brick pedestals, Paul says, "I think they were considerate enough to give us one with two bedrooms because they don't know if we're a couple."

"You're probably right. White South Africans would wonder, because they do travel platonically with friends of the opposite sex. Others will assume we are," I reply.

When I told my Peace Corps friends about my plans for this trip, they almost invariably asked, "Who is this guy?" I explained that it isn't like that, there's nothing romantic or sexual between us. I hadn't

even met him in person yet. The group I tried to put together for this trip, thinking that four or five people would be ideal, ended up as just the two of us, but it's not what we intended. I placed the ad in a cycling magazine looking for self-sufficient, compatible riding partners for an adventure trip. I wanted to have some company and didn't think I'd feel safe bicycle touring alone in the region. Paul answered for similar reasons. It wasn't a personals ad. This isn't a three-month blind date.

At seven we walk to the main house for dinner. It's Andries, Herman, and five Portuguese men, along with Paul and me. A cook serves us as we sit around a large wooden table that fills the dining room. We find out that the company that owns this camp is Portuguese and they have a contract to pave half the road that we've been cycling on since our missed turn. There is not enough money in the government's budget to pave all of it, so their contract is to pave only half. Maybe the rest will get done another year. They talk as if this is normal for doing business with the Malawi government. They are concerned that the money will run out early before their contract is up, so they are planning to finish early, to ensure they get paid. Andries talks about how they have built the whole camp since he arrived four months ago and about how the local people living there when he arrived had not taken care of their property.

"What happened to these people?" I ask.

"I don't know and I don't care," he immediately responds. Apartheid is no longer South Africa's government policy, but its sentiments live on in the hearts of many of the country's white citizens. Perhaps realizing by my silence that he has offended me, he adds, "We have provided the neighboring village with electricity and running water."

There's a lot of poking fun at each other and joking around at dinner—about the whiskey they are passing around and drinking and about how they built the camp. The most rotund of the Portuguese men keeps starting sentences with "Me speak." Not even allowing him to finish his sentences, Andries keeps interrupting and correcting him with "I speak."

After dinner, Paul and I walk back to our container.

“If I weren’t worried about my bike, I’d love this,” he says, “I thrive on these kinds of experiences.”

“I know what you mean.”

Experiences like these always reaffirm my choice to travel by bike. By traveling through an area at a human speed rather than zooming through enclosed in two tons of steel, I get to know it on a much deeper level, what it’s really like rather than just how it appears through a window. Even problems such as wrong turns and broken bikes become opportunities to meet people and learn about their lives and cultures.