



RICHARD WHITTAKER

What Feels Like Destiny

JAMY BOND

*W*hen I worked at Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C., I was sometimes made the after-hours emergency-duty officer. I carried a beeper and a cell-phone and a laminated list of important names and phone numbers. There were seven thousand Peace Corps volunteers out there, in the most remote places of the world, and if something bad were to happen to any one of them during the night, something tragic, I would take the call.

I never slept well on those nights, the beeper next to my pillow. When it went off, which was rare, the sound started low — a pulsing heartbeat — and got progressively louder until it became a high-pitched keening. My palms would sweat as I fumbled to turn it off and then called the Peace Corps' phone emergency service to retrieve the message.

"Country director in Malawi requests immediate callback" was the message one time. "Volunteer dead."

Two Peace Corps volunteers had just completed their service in Malawi and were leaving in three days to return to the United States. After celebrating with a few beers, they'd decided to take a late-night swim in a lake. One of them had drowned.

Thankfully I wasn't the one to call her family; the Peace Corps director or a counselor from Special Services did that. A counselor once told me that the most important thing when calling the family of a dead volunteer was to say the word *dead*. *Dead, dead, dead*. They needed to hear it more than once; they needed it pounded in; they needed to register the reality of it.

When my mother called to tell me that my younger sister was dead, I was drunk. It was 5:23 in the morning. I had been to a Maceo Parker concert with my boyfriend, and I'd had one too many vodkas, then had come home around 4 A.M. and passed out, still in my boots, jeans, and leather jacket. The phone rang a ridiculous number of times — fifteen, twenty — and I was pissed that my answering machine didn't pick up. The room was hazy with dawn light. My head pounded. Outside the window I could see the tops of the bare trees on the street below, fragile gray branches shivering in the wind.

When I saw my mother's number on the caller ID, I sobered up instantly and answered the phone, prepared for terrible news. I could hear it in her voice, the way she said my name with sadness and a hint of fear.

"What's wrong?" I asked, stiff and commanding. I wanted to know right away, whatever it was.

"Shelby's been killed in a car accident," she said in a cracked whisper.

I slapped my forehead and held my palm there against my skull, as if to keep the information in.

I had spent Christmas at my father's house just two days before, and I'd talked to Shelby on the telephone. She was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mozambique, a place so far away it had been strange even to hear her voice.

"What's Christmas like there?" I'd asked her.

"Hot as hell," she'd said.

"Did you get any presents?"

"Shoes," she'd said and giggled. "My boyfriend got me a pair of flip-flops."

I could still hear her words in my ear. Surely my mother had misunderstood. A string of mix-ups had brought us to this moment.

"Are you *positive*?" I asked my mother. "Has this been *verified*?"

"Yes, honey," she said.

I thought then of that Peace Corps volunteer floating on the surface of Lake Malawi. I imagined a bright moon, a starry sky. I thought of her family on the other end of the telephone, listening to that counselor say over and over again: *Dead, dead, dead*.

My self fractured at that moment. There was the me before my sister died, and then there was the me after she was

dead. The me before was employed and deeply in love; the me after was jobless and alone. Well, I was not alone in the literal sense — I still had my boyfriend — but I was alone in my grief. It felt as if everyone I had ever known had taken ten steps back and narrowed their eyes at me, perplexed. I walked the streets and wondered what others saw: A woman in pain? A woman having a breakdown? A woman on the brink of suicide?

It was December 2001, three months after the terrorist attacks in New York City. While the country was consumed by that enormous public tragedy, I was overwhelmed by my own tiny, private one. I developed an obsession with my sister's death, a crippling need to understand the minutiae of her suffering. This turned into an obsession with death in general, with the minutiae of anyone's suffering, with the certainty of dying, the glaring possibility of it everywhere I turned. On the street, walking with a friend, I would think to myself, *What if a car hit her right now? Her broken body would fly up and somersault through the air before crashing to the ground*. In a restaurant, sitting across from my boyfriend, I'd think, *What if a bullet smashed through the window and into his head? There would be blood and brains all over*. Pumping gas made me think of fiery explosions; grinding blenders made me think of severed fingers.

The only way to quell this madness, I decided, was to learn every detail of my sister's death, to answer every lingering question I had about what had happened to her that night. I knew this meant I'd have to go there — not just to Mozambique, but to the very place where she'd died. I would stand on that spot of earth, under the wide sky beneath which she took her last breath.

Arrive in Maputo in January 2004, a few days into the new year. It is the height of summer in Mozambique, and the air is sweltering. The sun feels close, a fireball in the heat-hazed sky. I am hoping to find my sister's old boyfriend, Idasse, who was in the car with her that night and survived, but I know only his name and a few details about the accident — details he told my mother on the telephone, through tears and in heavily accented English; details I continue to dream about.

Maputo is a city of contradictions. It is poverty wrapped in beautiful landscapes. Multimillion-dollar high-rises stand among tin-roofed shacks; expensive hotels tower over shantytowns. There are barefoot children eating from trash dumpsters and legless men lying on sunny, tree-lined avenues.

I rent an apartment in a high-rise on the city's eastern side, close to the ocean. From the east-facing window, I look off the edge of the continent: land crumbling into a sea that spreads wide, like the sweeping wing of a dove. To the west I can see where my sister lived: a yellow, dirt-smudged apartment building standing tall against the sky. At night I watch the lights of other people's lives flicker in its windows, the human silhouettes inside. In daylight I walk past her door on my way to the market. On the wall beneath her window is some graffiti that says, "T-Baby," in white paint. Wet laundry hangs from a line across her balcony, T-shirts and towels

bleached white and clean.

When I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Bulgaria, I lived on the seventh floor of a dilapidated high-rise. From each corner of the building, close to the cracked cement roof, loudspeakers dangled like big, round eyes — remnants of communism. I sent Shelby a letter and four photographs that, placed side by side, formed a panoramic view of the town from my apartment window. You could see the schoolhouse where I taught, its pink paint chipped and peeling. You could see the cold, dirty streets that snaked through town, pools of white snow melting into black asphalt. You could see the misty, snowcapped mountains in the distance and a thick gray sky that hid the sun for weeks.

“Do you live in a dump?” Shelby wrote back. She was a student then at the University of North Carolina, a political-science major. She loved Bill Clinton and wanted to be president, but would settle for the number-two position. “The country’s not ready for a female president,” she’d joke.

“It’s not a dump,” I wrote back, “but this *is* the Peace Corps. They don’t need us in Paris.”

Shelby had been the most popular girl in her high school, the same school I’d passed through like a ghost. She had long blond hair, flawless skin, crystal green eyes. She was the homecoming queen; I was the intellectual. She was the cheerleading captain; I was the nonconformist.

When she told me after college that she wanted to join the Peace Corps, I nearly passed out. Then she insisted on going

to Africa.

“Are you crazy?” I asked her.

“Not at all,” she said.

The Peace Corps was about to launch a program in Mozambique and offered Shelby an assignment there. Because I worked at Peace Corps headquarters, I knew the trial-and-error way in which volunteers were thrust into what the agency called “new country entries.” I told her she shouldn’t subject herself to the unknown like that. I suggested she go to a country where the Peace Corps was more established.

“That’s so boring,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I want to be the first volunteer in a country. I want to be a *pioneer*.”

Shelby’s plan to go to Mozambique hit a snag when an allergy prohibited her from taking antimalaria medication. She wanted to go so badly, though, that she researched alternative remedies and wrote letters to every Peace Corps official whose address she could find, petitioning their approval until finally they relented.

On a chilly October morning, I watched her board a plane headed for that faraway continent and thought, *She’ll never make it.*

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