Streets With No Names

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Creative Non-Fiction By

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The following essays represent the beginning of a work in progress. My intentions with this work are to provide detailed travel essays relating to my study abroad experience in Accra, Ghana during the summer of 2005. This thesis constitutes approximately the first half of the completed work.

For my Dad,

Who always made me believe I could do anything.

And my Mom,

Who gave me words, and the strength to use them.

Foreword

I wanted to go to Africa.

When I was a child, my father used to read me bedtime stories. My favorites were the African folktales he brought home, full of exotic people, places, animals and a magic that might really exist. By the time I was in high school I was reading African literature in my spare time and trying to keep up with the ever-changing politics. When I started college, I took an Anthropology class in Cultures of Africa. It was like every article we read and video we watched drew me closer to the continent. I felt Africa calling to me, and I knew I had to get there somehow.

I didn't really have a country in mind, although I thought it would be better if I could find somewhere where they spoke at least a little English. After my first semester at UNC Asheville, I found a study abroad group planning to go to Ghana that summer. The program was through NC State University, and I figured my chances of getting in were limited considering my freshman standing and the fact that I was from another institution.

Still, I applied for the program, sent my $150 application fee and waited with bated breath to hear back. It was February when I found out I had been accepted. Working the lunch rush at Beanstreets, a local coffeehouse cum kitchen, I got the call and wedged the phone between my ear and shoulder in the noisy kitchen. As soon as I heard

the words, the panini I was working on dropped to the ground and I ran out the kitchen door, jumping up and down in the street, screaming. My boyfriend, Theo, who had been making coffee drinks up front, came running around the side of the building to celebrate with me. I'm sure he wasn't as thrilled as I was at the prospect of being separated for nine weeks, but he jumped and screamed and hugged me all the same.

I stayed on as kitchen manager at Beanstreets for two more months, saving my money and preparing to leave in mid-May for Ghana. I could hardly believe my childhood dream was coming true. All I knew as I prepared to leave the country was that I would take two classes at the University of Ghana while living with a local family. My excitement overwhelmed me as I finished up the semester in Asheville. I was going to Ghana, to Africa, and it was going to be *amazing*.

Theo and I shared a tearful goodbye in front of Beanstreets before I left Asheville for Raleigh. The study abroad group would meet up at the airport the next day. My Dad lived in Raleigh, so I spent the night with him, sharing stories and excitement over my impending journey, before heading to the airport in the morning.

Dr. Theresa Edmunds, the program director, and her assistant, Erin, greeted me at the ticket counter. I turned around to see them both standing there, smiling, and trying to hear my conversation with the check-in clerk.

"You going to Ghana?" Erin interrupted in the energetic and unapologetically inquisitive way to which I would slowly grow accustomed.

I answered yes, and Dr. Edmunds reached out to shake my hand.

"Welcome to the program," she said in a soft voice, "I'm Dr. Theresa Edmunds and this is my assistant, Erin. She's working on her Masters Thesis and is helping me chaperone this trip."

Dr. Edmunds was a short, round woman with braids that just touched to top of her neck. Her chin was narrow and pointed though her forehead was wide, and she had a discerning smile that intimidated me despite the pleasantries of our conversation. Erin bounced on her heels next to her, eager for approval and obviously a little nervous about her role as both Dr. Edward's personal assistant and authority figure for the college students.

"We are still waiting on a few students," she said, "before we can head to the gate. There are nine of you in all. Seven will come here and we'll pick up two more in New York. Why don't you go meet the other students?"

I met Rachelle first. She sat against the wall with her mom, a short, pudgy Filipino woman, and her father, an older, black man clad in his army uniform. Rachelle laughed at her mother, who dabbed tears from her eyes and went on about how her baby was leaving for such a long time. Her father put a hand on her back, doing his best to comfort her. Rachelle seemed to embrace his cultural heritage over her mother's. She was heavy set and wore a red bandana, tight fitting jeans and a pink shirt bearing the emblem "Baby Phat." I introduced myself and sat down in a chair next to them. After a few exchanges of pleasantries, Rachelle turned her back to me to carry on a conversation with her family.

Just as I was beginning to twiddle my thumbs, a tall, thin girl with almond skin and Egyptian like features made her way over from the ticket counter to sit with us. She

introduced herself as Nadira, and seemed to be on familiar terms with Rachelle. Apparently, they had met earlier at a gathering of NC State students preparing for the trip. We talked for a few minutes and, watching Rachelle with her emotive mother and stoic father, the topic of our parents came up.

"My dad is suing Wachovia right now," she said while fidgeting with the water bottle in her lap. "We're going to win like a million bucks."

"Really?" I said, interested. "What are you suing them for?"

"Racism," she answered matter-of-factly, as if that was the only explanation I might need.

"What happened?" I asked.

"They kept refusing to promote my dad, even though all of the whites got promoted. Then they tried to blame him for all this stuff he didn't do and fired him when he started asking questions about why he hadn't been promoted when the whites had." She took a sip of her water. "We're winning."

"Oh," I said, suddenly a little uncomfortable at the contempt in her voice when she spoke the word "whites."

I looked around and saw a new woman sitting with Dr. Edmunds. She was older than the other students, maybe in her thirties, and by her accent I could tell she was Jamaican by birth. Her loud voice echoed throughout the airport lobby. We found out later that she worked for the airline while continuing her education at NC State, and she seemed more thrilled than any of us at the prospect of going to a place populated entirely by black people. She lived in Jamaica through her early twenties, and had always dreamt of moving back to Ghana, where she said her people came from. I gathered from her

loud orations that she had two young children at home, one hers and one her sister's, and she was not at all sad to be leaving them to take a vacation for herself. Erin guffawed at her seeming disregard for her children and called out her name, "Debbie!" when she thought she'd said something particularly outrageous. But she and Dr. Edmunds talked like old friends.

Nicole and Danese were the next to arrive, having flown in the night before from Tennessee and Chicago, respectively, and shared a hotel room near the airport. Nicole, a flutist from Vanderbilt, had such light skin it was almost indistinguishable from my own. Danese's skin was as dark as Debbie's, and she worked as a professional photographer for a suburban newspaper in Chicago. She mostly covered sporting events, but had aspirations for bigger stories. The two seemed to get along well, but they were a study in contrast. Nicole was easy going, polite, and never contrary as far as I could tell. Danese, however, stood rigid and watchful, like she was waiting for something to jump out and surprise her. She had a strange air of calmness about her, but just as if she were on the verge of snapping any moment.

"Where is Kevjorick?" Dr. Edmunds kept saying. Our plane was set to take off in forty minutes, we still needed to clear security, and the last member of our group, Kevjorick Jones, had failed to arrive.

None of us knew how to pronounce his name. Erin and Dr. Edmunds called frantically on their cell phones, leaving messages all over the place for 'Mr. Jones.' Just as we were about to give up on him and head through the gate as a group, possibly leaving Erin behind to wait, he suddenly strolled through the sliding door. Glancing around, he spotted the group of black people and strutted over holding his ticket. Dr.

Edmunds had her back to him and didn't see him enter. She fretted through a pile of documents, separating his from the rest of the group to leave behind with Erin. He tapped her on the shoulder and she jumped around, gave a little shout and clutched her bosom.

When she caught her breath, she started, "Are you—' "Kev-rick," he said, "I'm Kev-rick Jones. For the Ghana trip." "So that's how you say your name!" Erin burst. "We was all wonderin'" "Yeah," he said, "The "j" is silent. I always thought maybe my dad was Swedish or something, but it turns out my mom just made it up."

"Have you checked in yet?" Dr. Edmunds suddenly grabbed his arm. "Uh, no," he said. "I had a few delays before I came here." Dr. Edmunds rushed him to the front of the check-in line and told Erin to go ahead and take the rest of us through security.

Kevjorick was tall, and had smooth skin the color of a warm latte, with an extra shot of espresso. *Ugh!* I thought to myself. Here I was about to leave for Ghana and I still had my mind on Beanstreets and the morning coffee I was missing!

On the plane, Dr. Edmunds handed out packets to each of us, detailing the classes we would be taking, the family we would be staying with, and, most importantly, who our roommate would be. I was slated to share a dwelling with Jessica Mason, from Pennsylvania. We would meet up with her and one other student, Chris Tinson, in New York.

Debbie and Dr. Edmunds went off shopping in the duty free stores during our layover. The rest of us waited at the gate in New York, playing cards to pass the time.

Suddenly we realized there was a stranger among us. He was a young looking man, with dark skin, glasses, and a round face that had stubble growing all around his chin and neck. He smiled at all of us while watching our game.

When she noticed him staring at us, Erin sat bolt upright. "Who are you?!?" she said, accusingly.

He smiled again, revealing two perfect rows of white teeth. The skin around his eyes betrayed his age, wrinkling into premature crow's feet when he smiled. "I'm Chris Tinson," he said, reaching out his hand for a shake, "Pleasure to meet you." His voice was deep and refined, and he spoke with absolute confidence. "And who might you be?"

"Oh!" Erin exclaimed. "You're Chris! Nice to meet you. I'm Erin and this is the rest of the group. Danese, Nicole, Nadira, Rachelle, Kevjorick, and Anna," she went around the circle, pointing at each of us. "Dr. Edmunds and one of the other students are shopping around here somewhere. We're still waiting on one more." He sat down with us and, after a few minutes of small talk with the new guy, we settled back into our game.

So now there were eight of us, only one more to go. My roommate, Jessica. I was excited and nervous and anxious to meet the girl I would be spending so much time with over the coming weeks.

When she finally showed up, I got even more nervous. She was tall, with medium skin and a big afro which she wore tied back in a black bandana. She had on a denim jacket, open with a dark shirt underneath, jeans, work boots and a messenger bag sagging across her chest. She greeted everyone and plopped down in the middle of us, breathing out a sigh of exhaustion.

When she had finally caught her breath, she said, "Hi, uh, I'm Mason," and sort of laughed to herself. "Sorry, I've been running all through this airport trying to find the right gate. I just flew in from Philly and thought I would be late."

Erin piped up first, as per usual. "Mason? Like Jessica Mason?"

"Yeah, that's me," she said. "I go by my last name."

"So it's not Jessica?" Erin repeated.

"No, no—Mason," she said. "I don't like Jessica. I mean, you can call me that, but I go by Mason."

Things settled again and I introduced myself as her roommate. She didn't seem too interested in me, but I chalked it up to her being tired from the flight and from running through the airport trying to find us. I would later find out that she, like myself, was a lesbian who had somehow ended up dating men. We didn't talk much during that initial meeting at the airport, but I figured we would have plenty of time to get to know each other when we were sharing a roof in Africa.

So here we all are, I thought to myself. *Next stop Amsterdam. And then, finally, Ghana.*

I sat next to Dr. Edmunds on our flight to Accra, and talked her ear off the whole time about how excited I was to be going to Africa. I told her about how I had wanted to come since I was little, about my dad and his stories, and how I couldn't believe I was finally on my way. She smiled and seemed to get excited with me a little bit, telling me about how she had first come in 1994 and had been bringing students back, every other year, since then. She had met her husband, Kwesi, there, and the two had been carrying out a long distance relationship for over seven years. This seemed strange to me, as Dr.

Edmunds struck me as too independent a woman to have a husband, especially given what I had read about Ghanaian husband-wife relationships.

I watched out the window as we passed over the Alps, briefly covered the Mediterranean, and then spent hours flying over the Sahara. I couldn't help thinking to myself how terrible it would be to have a plane crash or to be stranded in that desert. The sand seemed to go on forever. I shuddered at the thought of being trapped there, isolated with nothing but harsh sand and sun for thousands of miles.

Nighttime had nestled in when we entered the airspace over Ghana. Dr Edmunds smacked my hand playfully and told me there would be a surprise when we landed on the ground. "It's great," she said, "it really reminds me that I am coming home."

I thought about what she meant by that for a second. It had not yet occurred to me that Dr. Edmunds, along with many of the other students, would think of Ghana as home. I still thought this trip was a study abroad, to learn about African culture first hand and experience a truly different way of living. The fact that other students saw Ghana as home, as the place their ancestors came from and the place to which they should return, escaped me. To them, Africa was a construct of liberty and freedom, far removed from the industrialized west that had so debased and corrupted their heritage.

I had not yet begun to contemplate this, or what my presence, as a white person on African soil, might mean to them. I was all smiles as we landed in Accra. Dr. Edmunds grinned and grabbed my hand as we touched ground on the tarmac and all of the passengers on the plane simultaneously erupted in wild applause.

I stuck my face to the window to catch my first glimpse of Africa. Outside I could see the steel frame of the airport hangar, and beyond that, blackness. As my eyes adjusted, I could see the stars hanging low over a long stretch of barren ground. The side of the aluminum building was spray-painted with puffy pink and yellow letters to greet the arriving planes.

"Akwaaba!" it said. The Ghanaian word for "Welcome."

Ghana

The streets don't have names here. I notice it first when Kofi tells us to memorize the landscape because, after today, we will be on our own. Kofi is the thirty-year old nephew of Comfort Asamoah, the host mother who has temporarily adopted me and Mason. The three of us hobble along a maze of dirt roads through the village of Ashale Bukre. Kofi leads the way and we follow on his heels, dodging hawkers and the two foot wide gutters that pass for a sewer system here. I try to keep our path in my mind, marking the way with storefronts I think I can remember. We start at the "Unique Love Chop Bar," and take a left at "Jesus is Lord and Savior Tires and Parts." Not all the shops have names here, but the ones that do are often named biblically. We are on our way to pick up Kofi's cousin, Akos, who also lives with us. She is an apprentice at the "Fear God Salon." Her shop is down a side road pocked with muddy red puddles and children chase chickens out front. The "Trust God Salon," a rival braiding shop just across the street, offers corn rolls to its clients.

We wait on the porch of the shop for a few minutes while Akos is bossed around by her overbearing employer. As an apprentice, Akos works over fourteen hours a day with no pay. She must do this everyday for two years before she can earn her license to

be paid to style hair. When she has a free moment, Akos politely tells us that she will not be ready for a little while yet, so I seize the opportunity to wander around some and learn more of my neighborhood's geography. A sort of suburb of Accra, Ashale Bukre is home to many working class Ghanaians. Almost everyone who lives here owns a shop in the market, whether they sell unclaimed luggage from the airport or snails they caught and de-shelled themselves. I stop for a minute at "Burger King Unisex Fashions" and finger homemade batik fabric. There is a rack out front with twenty or more lengths of fabric baking in the sun. The patterns are vibrant and full of life, but I am not interested in buying today. I want to shop around first. The pudgy woman who owns the shop comes to me with a tape measure wrapped around her shoulders. "You like?" she asks, though it hardly comes out as a question. "I give you good price." I tell her no, thank you, not today. She tries her best to get me to stay but I'm too quick for her.

I ask a man pushing a wheel barrow full of coconuts if he can tell me where I might find an internet cafe (I had seen a sign for one on our way into the village). He points with his machete to a shop about 50 meters away. I struggle to contain my laughter as I make my way towards "Trust and the Lord Will Provide Internet Service."

Before I can explore anymore, Kofi is at my heels. "Come," he says, "she is ready." We meet back up with Mason and Akos, kicking chickens out of the way as we leave her shop. The sun hangs low in the sky, and already people are packing up their goods for the day. Shops that wish to stay open longer turn on porch lights, if they have them, or light candles to soften the darkness. We stop at the "Unisex Forex" to exchange some money before heading to the tro-tro stand to catch a ride home.

Aside from walking, a tro-tro is the cheapest way to get around in Ghana. For two or three cents you can go almost anywhere in your suburb on a tro-tro. The taxi-like vans are small and cramped. With seating for about eight, one can usually expect to find 13-15 people crammed aboard. People put their baggage on the top of the van. One time a man dressed in black robes with a white collar tied two lambs to the luggage rack before taking the seat next to me on the tro-tro. I learn quickly not to talk to the drivers; they can't help you. Any dealings must be negotiated with the mate hanging on the outside of the sliding door. It is with him you discuss your destination and the price you will pay, and he is the one who will tell the driver when to stop. On the way home we pass a drugstore with the name "I am Afraid of My Friends, Even You" that bears a brown painted cross in the front window.

Our home doesn't have a street number, but that shouldn't surprise me since our street has no name. It is in a neighborhood of sorts, two rights and a left from the Coco Cola bar on the main drag. Mama Comfort is a school teacher, but she lives nicely, thanks to her husband who works as a professor in the U.S. Like most of the houses in this neighborhood, the yard is surrounded by a concrete wall with broken glass wedged in across the top. A red iron gate unlocks with a key to let Kofi's dented Previa pass through to the driveway. The van only has one door, but is exactly the same color and model as the car my mom and dad drove when I was a young child.

In the living room only one piece of art decorates the wall: a portrait of Jesus in a wooden frame above the rabbit ears on the TV. The house has three bedrooms. Mama Comfort, Akos, and the eight-year-old Adelaide share the largest room in the back. Kofi

insists that he will sleep in the alcove off the living room while we are here so that Mason and I can each have our own room. There are two refrigerators next to the TV, but only one of them works. We are told to help ourselves to the water pouches inside whenever we want. I am surprised to see that there is nothing else in the refrigerator.

Our family is fortunate to have a toilet in the house, though it takes a bucket of rainwater for each flush. I am here for three days before I realize this just sends the waste into the backyard through a gutter. There is a large blue "Bazooka Bubble Gum" tub in the hallway full of rainwater for any toilet or showering needs. The "shower" is a small room with a drain in the concrete floor, and I learn quickly how to enjoy taking a shower in a bucket. Every morning when Kofi sees me walking through the hallway with a bucket of water and a wash cloth, he asks me if I am going for a swim. At first I thought he was making fun of me somehow, but I came to find out that's what they call bathing here, "going for a swim." I suppose in a land so parched with a shore so rocky and ill-suited to recreation, covering oneself with water to bathe is a close analogy to swimming.

On our second evening in the house, Kofi looks up our birthdays and bestows on me and Mason our Ghanaian day names. The naming system in Ghana is unique and unlike almost any other system in the world. When a child is bom, it is kept indoors for at least seven days. During this period the mother is allowed to come outdoors but the baby is not supposed to come out except in a case of emergency. On the eighth day, the child is given a name. The child is not assigned a name before the eighth day because during that period it is considered a stranger from the ancestral world who has come for a visit. Another line of reasoning logically follows that in the ancient days when child mortality was very high a lot children died before their eighth day. The elders decided that they would wait for the eighth day, after which if the baby were still alive it would be considered a human being and then given a name. The waiting period was to lessen the pain that the mother would have to endure should the baby die before the eighth day, because the elders believed it was more painful to name the baby and for it to die than for it to die nameless.

Days of the week in Ghana are very important aspects of the naming culture. In Ghana everyone is supposed to have a day name in addition to his or her other names.

The day name comes first, and is followed by either a tribal or Christian name, or both, and then a family surname. The day of the week on which one is born determines what name he or she is given. There are day names for each of the seven days. The names come in pairs for each day; one for a male, the other for a female born on that day. For Monday the names are Kojo for the boy and Adjua for the girl. Tuesday is Kwabena and Abena. Wednsday's children are Kwaku and Akwea, and Thursday's are Yaw and Yaa. Boys born on Friday are Kofi and girls are Efe. Saturday has Kwame and Ama, while those born on Sunday, the holy day, are Kwesi and Akos. After flipping through an old Almanac, Kofi determines that I am Abena while Mason is Adjua. He asks if we will go by our day names while in Ghana. Mason laughs and tells him she would rather be called Mason. Mother Comfort smiles and me and tells me her name is Abena too. I tell Kofi he may call me by my Ghanaian name.

Abena. I

like it.

It is Sunday evening. Mama Comfort tells me and Mason she has prepared spaghetti for dinner. We eat apart from the rest of the family, early in the evening at a small table in the dark living room. For the entire two months we will always eat like this, though I will never discover why.

When we come to the table, our plates are laid out for us. We are each given a mound of white rice with red sauce on top, and pieces of tilapia on the side. I get the

head of the fish and Mason the tail. So this is Ghanaian spaghetti; we exchange a glance and cautiously approach the plates with our forks.

After dinner Mama Comfort tells me I will be accompanying her to school in the morning. Mason has class at the University, so she will not be able to come along. I am excited to get some time on my own with the school children in Ghana.

I wake to the sound of goats bleating outside my window. The rain has fallen hard during the night and my small windows are covered over with the cool condensation of morning.

Everyone in the village has their own livestock. Goats and chickens wander through the streets during the day, wearing tags so they may be identified and brought back to their owner's home in the evening. Their meat gets tough this way, as they walk around all day, doing as they please and getting as much exercise as they desire. The cooked meat of chicken and guinea fowl that have been raised in this manner is referred to as "yard bird," warning the consumer of its tough nature. When Erin gets a piece of overcooked Tilapia one day at lunch, she jokingly refers to it as "yard fish."

I stretch my arms across my hard, single bed. There is no sheet to throw off, as is my usual morning habit. The room is hot enough as it is, and the mosquito netting around the window already stuffs the room with humidity. I get dressed and brush my teeth using nothing but my carefully guarded toothbrush and a bottle of water. I have to resist the urge every morning to turn on the faucet when it is time to rinse the bristles.

Breakfast isn't ready yet so I walk outside to visit the goats. There are three dogs in the yard, Blessing, Goodness and Kibu. They congregate in the front and keep their

distance from the goats and chickens that sleep behind the house. Kibu runs over to wish me good morning and Goodness follows behind, dragging a three-foot length of chain from his collar. I asked Kofi earlier why Goodness had to wear the chain. He told me he kept running off, and that the chain made him easier to catch.

I work my way past the water buckets and clothesline on the side of the house and over to the goats' small pen in the back. Amid the seven or eight goats there is a small white one who I name Susie and spend time with everyday after school. Kofi told me the story of how they got her. Comfort used to have another dog, Kindness, but when he got old and lazy they gave him to a family up the street. The family ate the dog (which is NOT a common practice among most Ghanaians). "They were so happy with the meal," Kofi had explained, "they dashed us a goat." To "dash," in Ghanaian slang, means to return the favor. The goat I had dubbed Susie was their gift.

She was small and white, and not nearly as timid as the other goats in the pen. She was a baby, and had not perhaps witnessed the slaughter of one of her mates. After school everyday I would spot her wandering through the neighborhood on my way home. Invariably I fed her some pieces of granola bar or trail mix I had taken with me to school. She usually followed me home after that, and more than once I saw Mama Comfort smile as we walked in through the front gate together.

Now I stand over her pen in the morning sunlight and wonder if it was she that called to wake me up this morning. It is doubtful, I know, as mostly the older goats are the ones who bleat and bray in the morning. Next to their pen chickens scratch at the dirt

and squawk in their wire enclosure. As I scratch Susie behind her ears, a soft rain starts to fall and the pat-pat-pat echoes off the tin room next door. A hen in the next pen lifts her wings up and three or four chicks come to gather underneath.

I walk back inside to get out of the rain just as Adelaide sets a bowl of oatmeal and a hard-boiled egg on the table. "Good morning," she says, meekly grinning with her head down before walking back into the kitchen for her own breakfast. Mason is still asleep. No one will wake her, even if they know she will be late for school. To wake a sleeping guest is a grave offense of decorum.

When I have finished eating, Mother Comfort appears in a nice dress and head wrap. She smiles at me and says she likes what I am wearing.

"Are you ready to teach?" she asks.

I nearly choke on my bush tea. "Teach?" I manage to squeak out. None of the preparations for the program mentioned anything about teaching.

"Yes," she says. "Today we are doing HIV education. I don't like to teach that. You will do it for me."

"What grade do you teach again?" I ask.

"Third."

Almost one third of the population of Ghana is stricken with HIV or AIDS. Increasingly, younger and younger people are contracting the virus. It has become especially common among adolescent girls, owing largely to a rumor that one way to cure the sickness is too sleep with a virgin. Men who are desperately ill and near death rush out to find the youngest girl they can and rape her, believing it will cure them. Because of her age and her previous inexperience with sexual activity, it is even easier for her to contract the virus than an adult.

Ghana's government recently ruled that HIV education be taught in the schools, starting with those children in grade three. The grades are a little different here than in the U.S. Because children are so often needed at home to help their parents work, they come to school only when they can. Thus, a grade is not completed at the end of a school year, but is rather determined by the child's attendance in that class for a preset number of days. What a teacher of the third grade ends up with, then, is a classroom of thirty or forty students, ranging in age from about eight to fourteen.

The students in Mother Comfort's class were among the sweetest children I have ever met. They all rushed out of the classroom to meet me when they saw me and Mama Comfort climbing out of Kofi's dented Previa. We drove right into the courtyard of the

school, and all around were posted signs warning the children to be good, reminding them that God loves good behavior.

Mama Comfort had given me a couple of teaching "manuals" to look at in the car on the way to school. One was a pamphlet called "Educating Africa: Sexual Health and Education." The other was a small book, written for children. It was about fifteen pages long, with a sentence on each page, and pictures done in colored pencil. The title was "I am HIV Positive," and it was told from the first person point of view of a twelve year old girl living with HIV.

Her name was Abena, which is also my Ghanaian name, and I was surprised at the central character's blatant descriptions. She went into great detail about how she had contracted the virus. Alone one night when she was walking home from the market, a man had jumped out and grabbed her. He did things to her that she didn't like, and when he was done, she had HIV. The picture on opposite page just showed the girl with a fearful look on her face, and a dark shadow coming across the page.

Her brother had died of AIDS the year before, and she explained, almost spunkily, how she cared for him before his death. She also talked about how she was protecting herself from AIDS, by always washing her hands, eating healthy foods, and always making sure she had clean clothes and bedding.

As I stood in front of the class, I clenched the pamphlet and the small book in my hands, looking out at the innocent faces of these attentive children. How could I talk to them about sex and rape and a disease that had no doubt killed many of their family members? What could I say to these children who needed to protect themselves against

members of their own communities, their uncles and cousins and other adults they should be able to trust? Mama Comfort watched from the side of the classroom.

I suddenly appreciated all the work I had done in my high school drama department with improvisation classes. It had made me quick on my feet. I thought back to my elementary school classes, and how those teachers talked to the students. So I started by asking the children all to come and sit around me.

They looked a little nervous at first; obviously this was not how Mother Comfort typically conducted the classes. A few of them let their eyes slip over to her and she nodded to tell them it was okay to follow my directions. They got up from their desks and gathered around me on the floor of the classroom. One older girl, who was maybe fourteen, brought her child and sat the baby girl down on her lap. I looked down at their brown faces and breathed in deeply to still myself for the talk.

First I asked how many of them knew someone who had HIV or AIDS. Nearly all of them stretched their hands towards the low ceiling.

"Well I do to," I said, "My good friend Jeff is HIV positive, just like the girl in this book." Jeff was my Dad's partner, and I tried to identify with these children by likening my experiences with him to what some of them were sure to have witnessed at home.

"HIV is the whole world's problem," I went on, "and it is up to each and every one of us to protect ourselves and our friends from what it can do."

There seems to be a myth in Ghana, and much of Africa, that AIDS is not so much of a problem anywhere else in the world. Many religious people take the epidemic in Africa to be a sign from God against sinful actions in their lives. This mentality only

furthers the spread of the virus, because those who consider themselves righteous believe they cannot contract or spread the disease. And many espouse the notion that AIDS is God's way of punishing Africa for her misdeeds. What I was trying to instill in these young children was the idea that HIV and AIDS are everywhere. That the disease does not discriminate, and that just because they or some member of their family might contract the virus, it does not mean God hates or is punishing them.

I read Abena's story to the class, and we talked about people the children knew who were like Abena. Many mentioned members of their own families, their sisters and fathers, who were HIV positive. During the break, Mama Comfort told me I was doing very well and that she was leaving to go home. She told me to keep teaching until about four, and then to come on home on the tro-tro. She would have supper waiting.

At the end of the class I asked the children what they had learned about HIV today. Shouts rang through the room.

"Stay in well-lit areas after dark!" a boy shouted.

"Don't go anywhere with strangers!" said another girl.

"And don't let anyone touch you where you don't like it!"

"Always wash your hands!" The last response was my favorite, coming from the youngest boy, who had seemed amazed during the reading that something as simple as bathing could help keep down infection.

For the last hour I let the children go out into the courtyard to play. Many of them stayed around me, touching my hair and skin, and asking more questions about our lessons.

Some of the questions were hard. The girl holding her child asked me, discretely, what she should do if someone she loved had been touching her like that, meaning sexually.

"Is this someone in your family?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "My brother."

"Is this child his?"

She hesitated.

"You don't have to tell me," I said. "It's okay."

She boosted her baby on her hip, keeping her lips tight.

After all the children leave to walk home, I ask directions from another teacher to the nearest tro-tro stand. It turns out to be a fairly complicated trip, and as dusk begins to settle I make my way through the maze of nameless streets. I take a left at the woman selling snails, a right by the batik stand. Through the market to the bank, and then down the alley past the barber shop. Across the street is the shop "Niggers," which sells urban, American clothing, and next to that, the tro-tro stand.

I find out the next tro-tro going my way won't be coming for another forty-five minutes. Next to the tro-tro stand is a taxi stop, so I walk over to see what kind of a price I can get to Ashale Bukre.

As I walk up, a man is trying to coax a young heifer into the back seat of a two-door taxi. The driver doesn't seem worried. Instead, he just looks determined to get the calf in as quickly as possible.

I wander off to find an empty taxi. There seems to be a driver waiting for fares in the back corner of the lot. He is leaned up against his trunk smoking a cigarette, and I address him in Twi.

We barter for a few minutes. He wants me to pay twice what I should, and I finally agree because I am tired and just want to go home. As we drive out of the taxi

stand, we have to wait behind another taxi pulling into traffic. Crammed up against the back windshield a terrified looking cow glances around with his back hunched and his ears pinned down.

On the way home my taxi driver rear-ends another car. I fly forward and my face hits the windshield. After my driver gets out and yells at the man whom he hit, the other man gets back in his car and drives off. My driver gets back in our car, mumbling to himself in Twi. He doesn't even ask if I am okay.

The car won't start. He gets back out to look at the engine and will not listen to me as I try to point out that he is out of gas. I noticed the "Tank Empty" light on his dashboard earlier when we were wandering through the nameless streets. He had ignored my questioning that he might be lost, and refused to listen to my suggestion that he might need gas.

There is still some light in the sky, so I get out of the car in a huff and tell the driver I will find another way home. He argues with me at first, angrily demanding that I pay him our agreed-upon fee. I tell him I will not pay for something I didn't receive, a ride home, or for the headache I have from banging my head on the windshield. He tries to say that it is my fault he got in the accident, because he wouldn't have been on the road in the first place if he had not gotten lost trying to give me a ride home. I tell him "No," firmly, and turn to walk away. He sucks his teeth and spits on the ground as I make my way quickly back to a main road, glancing behind the whole way to make sure he is not following me.

By the time I get home Mother Comfort has laid dinner on the table.

"What took you so long?" she asks.

"It's a long story," I say, sitting down at the table. In front of me is a mound of red rice, some goat meat and fried plantains.

Mama Comfort watches me eat, which is unusual because she usually takes her dinner in the kitchen and leaves Mason and me alone in the living room while we eat. Mason has not gotten back yet. I assume she is off with some of the other students.

Not having eaten since breakfast, I gobble down my hot meal. Mother Comfort grins at me the whole time.

"This is really good," I say. The goat meat is not quite so tough as it has been before.

"You like?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, finishing up. "It's really good."

"Yes," Mama Comfort says, "You did a very good job today in my class. I like the way you teach."

I swallow my gulp of water. "Thank you."

"I saw how much you liked that little goat," she says, "We don't usually slaughter them so young, but the meat is much nicer."

I feel my stomach turn.

"Susie?" I whisper.

"The little white one. I saw how much you favored that one." She smiled. "You deserve a special treat for teaching my class for me today."

I ran to the bathroom to throw up.

After dinner, I thank Mama Comfort for her special efforts and tell her I was not feeling well before dinner. She offers me some Pepto to ease my stomach and I accept, telling her I must have accidentally gotten some bad water to drink. She doesn't seem to equate my sickness with her cooking, which is for the best.

Mason comes home while I am in the bathroom, and gulps down her meal before I can warn her that little Susie is no more. I'm not sure she would have cared much, as she didn't play with Susie as often as I did, but I feel like it would have been polite to let her know ahead of time. Evidently she also spent the day at a school, as she and some of the other students wandered over to an elementary school after classes. She tells Mama Comfort about it as I settle on the couch to watch the nightly news. The anchor changes almost every night, with a few women in steady rotation. Tonight Kevjorick and Chris's host mother delivers news of a bank robbery in Accra.

When he gets home from work, Kofi tells us that the family will go to church in the morning. He professes that it will be the happiest day of his life if we will accompany him, and of course we agree. Mama Comfort pulls dresses out of her closet and lays them on our beds before she goes to sleep.

She and the rest of my host family are Seventh Day Adventist. We leave for the church around nine in the morning, and the service has already started by the time we arrive. Our tardiness goes unnoticed, however, and in fact, people still come trickling in for about an hour. I had been warned before that people here operated on "Africa Time," meaning that time is nearly irrelevant to the people who once told it by the rhythm of the sun. The service lasts over four hours, despite the fact that it pours rain the entire time and those of us sitting on the outer flanks of the congregation are drenched. The pastor speaks in Twi, so I do my best to tune my ears to the few words I can pick out amid the impassioned sermon. When the service ends, my Mother Comfort asks if I would accompany her on a short trip, to get some medicine for her rheumatism. We say goodbye to Kofi, who is surrounded by eager children, as he is directing the Sunday School play, and set off.

I assume we are heading to a pharmacy of some sort, a drug store, perhaps, in town. But about half a mile down the road, Mother Comfort veers off to the left and down a narrow path lined with tall grasses and muddy red pockets. She senses my concern.

"It is not far," she says, kindly. "I know the place, just up here. You will enjoy the walk."

No elephants out today. This is a different part of the same field I walk through on my way to school each morning. I have grown accustomed to sharing the road with the occasional two-ton majestic beast, walking her child through the underbrush. They must have gone back into the forest today because of the rain. We plod through the

overgrown terrain in our Sunday dresses, Mother Comfort clutching her purse to her bosom as she leads the way.

Soon a hut appears on the horizon. Mother Comfort claps her hands. "Ah!" she says, "I told you. He will have just what I need."

"Who is he?" I ask, smacking a mosquito on the back of my neck.

"The fetish priest," she replies, as if it were obvious.

The fetish priest! Did we not just sit through a four hour sermon on the evils of witchcraft and the damnation of those who choose any path but Christ? I ask my mother.

"Nobody talks about it," she explains as we tramp further towards the hut, "but everybody does it. Everybody knows it's the only way to get anything done."

"But what about prayer?" I ask, a little dumfounded.

"Prayer, yes, too. That works also. But this is a more immediate result."

The fetish priest is a kind old man with creases in his face who recognizes Mother Comfort instantly and invites us inside, watching the landscape behind us, as if expecting someone else.

He blesses Mother Comfort and gives her a little baggie full of yellow brown powder. They chant a prayer together -1 am not sure to which God—and she hands him a few coins, maybe 20,000 cedis, by my guess. A few bucks.

Witchcraft is illegal in Ghana, I later find out, except by the few nomadic tribes who still make their homes in the north. It is a law that is not enforced. The missionaries can convince the people to follow Christianity, but they cannot convince them to give up the innate, healing spirit of the earth. It is too powerful to be denied.

The relationship between people and their religion in this country is something that was difficult for me to grasp as a person brought up with the western ideals of religion. Almost ninety percent of the population is Christian. They were converted by the missionaries into mostly the stricter sects, Mormon, Seventh Day Adventist, Catholic and Episcopalian. What is strange is that, despite their belief in Christ as the "one true way," nearly all of them believe in and practice the superstitious witchcraft native to their country. No matter which set of beliefs they place more value in from day to day, the people of Ghana take their religion very seriously.

One day in Accra I picked up a newspaper. On the front was a picture of a man staring at the camera and holding a lottery ticket. The headline read "Local Man Gets Lotto Numbers from Jesus." The continuing story, which was front page news, went on to describe how this man had gotten so fed up with not winning the lottery that he threatened in a prayer to abandon his faith unless he was given the winning numbers.

Two days after threatening God, Jesus came to him in a dream and told him the numbers to play. The man asked for more, wanting to know the numbers of the following days as well, but Jesus refused to tell him. The next day, the man told his friends at work that he was planning to buy up all the lotto tickets that he could because Jesus had given him the numbers. They all laughed at him and called him crazy. Feeling embarrassed and a little ashamed, the man only bought one ticket. That night, his numbers were called, and he won over three hundred dollars. Realizing he could have won much more, he blamed his friends for discouraging him, and Jesus for not being more insistent or giving him future numbers. He tried again the next night, but apparently threatening God only works once.

Still, there is a strange dynamic between the people and their two religions. If you ask almost any Ghanaian, she will tell you that witchcraft is evil, and that Christ is the only way to salvation. Yet when it comes to healing the sick or improving one's lot in life, the fetish priest, a renegade in his modern Ghana, is the clear, if discreet, solution.

I didn't expect to go from the fetish priest to our own version of the flood story.

The nine of us on this study abroad have been reunited to spend a week traveling around the country. We are planning to head out of Accra, following the Volta River up to Kumasi, a wildlife reserve, and Ho, where we are destined to spend the night among a "real" Efve tribe in the mountains. From there we will follow the western border of Cote D'lvoire down to Cape Coast and Elmina, effectively circling the country before returning to Accra and our host families.

Our rickety tour bus bumps its way through the muddy streets of Accra. The roads seem to be painted like a canvas, with women in bright clothes carrying baskets on their heads and babies on their backs. Rain from the night before makes all the roads and tin roofs shiny, and even the people seem to glisten in the sun.

When we get to the smooth, asphalt road, most of the students fall asleep, exhausted from their long night at Club "Oops!". They partied and danced to hip hop music long into the wee hours of this morning, and now rest with their heads vibrating against the Plexiglass windows. Everything is going smoothly until, about two hours into the journey, we see the first signs of trouble ahead.

Thunderstorms rocked the earth before dawn, pouring down rain like the driver said it had not come in years. The ruddy road is pocked with shifting soil, and we can see

the trail ahead is flooded in places. Our driver and guide, Kwaku Passah, carefully maneuvers us around a few of the watery pockets, but by the time we get to the third flood we can see it is far worse than its predecessors.

Men walk almost up to their chests in the orange water. Just ahead of us, a taxi cab is coming our way. It is rusted and full of holes, and men push it through the mud up to its empty eye sockets. We push farther ahead to join the queue. A few of us silently notice that beneath the joint in our sliding door, our bus is beginning to fill with water.

Suddenly we lurch forward. There has been a break in traffic ahead. We drive a little further before we hear a loud "Pop!" The bus stops. Smoke pours like Poseidon's breath out of the engine.

Eight strong men from a nearby village "volunteer" to push us through the mud. We give them five dollars a piece to push us almost two tumultuous kilometers through the flooded road while we bail buckets of opaque water and bits of leaves out the windows. The photographers among us snap as many pictures as we can before the water gets too high and we have to wrap up our cameras and store them on the racks over our heads.

We make it out of the flood, but the engine still spits up when Mr. Passah tries to turn it over. We all de-board and get behind to push our car and luggage to the side of the road. Kevjorick and I share an umbrella while we wait for the clutch to be fixed.

About half an hour later we happily clamber back onto the bus and follow the road to Kumasi. We fall asleep again, exhausted from the ordeal. Around four, the landslides come. We wait in line for nearly forty minutes before we find out the reason

for our delay. The rain has caused landslides all over the mountain, and three or four have come in quick succession just ahead.

Outside our window sits a village. I watch a little girl who is maybe four or five playing with a machete and cutting her friends hair. She has quite an attitude, and as I snap a picture she mocks me, miming an imaginary camera and goofy face. *She doesn 't understand what the camera is,* I think to myself. Every time I raise it to look through the viewfmder, she cups her hands to her eyes as if we were playing some kind of Simon-says game. Except, instead of a camera, she has a knife in her hand.

When I feel the bus jerk again I wave goodbye to the little girl and look ahead up the hill to where the road is blocked off and people line the roadside in front of their homes, praying towards the sliding mountain. As we pass through we are suddenly hit on the right side with a force of oncoming sludge. Our shaky bus tips to the left, where people press their palms to the windows to keep us from falling over.

Eventually we make it through, and some of the people want money for helping us through the landslide. Mr. Passah gives them the equivalent of twenty dollars to split among the entire village. After a short argument over the small sum, our bus lurches forward again and we continue around the curvaceous mountain.

I watch the landscape pass by my window through the palm prints that might well have saved my life.

Our bus finally gives out when we are still several hours from our destination. We happen to break down at what is known as an "arts and crafts village," where men and women make all the handicrafts paid for in stores by Americans who want to fill their homes with an air of the "exotic." Shops selling stools, masks, drums and wall hangings line the unnamed road for about half a kilometer. As Mr. Passah goes in search of an alternate form of transportation, we wander around the small village.

At the end of the road is a larger market, mango-scented and covered by a roof. It is filled with booths run by people who bring their wares into the village. When they see us coming, hoards of children, old women, and men in wheelchairs flock to our van. They have learned to smell tourists. The wooden framed marketplace is built of stalls and it is often difficult to tell where one ends and another begins. Hands grope from all sides to pull us into their shops when their voices don't quite do the trick. We look like cattle being herded and then separated as we are shown batik fabric, tie-dye clothing, carved statues, leather and canvas mats painted with scenes of African life.

I stop to look at a painting of drummers in a circle and another vendor pulls me away, through a labyrinth of people and into a booth more isolated than the other stalls.

A few of his friends gather around the door. He shows me his paintings, which are inferior in quality, and I tell that I want to leave. My group is waiting for me.

He says he understands and speaks in Twi to the quartet of men lingering around the booth. They move to stand in formation with their arms crossed, blocking my only exit.

"Wait here," he says, as if I have a choice. "I will bring you more to see."

When he comes back I tell him again that I really want to leave. That he is making me uncomfortable. He lays out some batik wall-hangings and asks which one I like.

"If I buy one of these," I ask, "Will you let me go?"

"Which one do you like?"

"This one," I say, pointing at the first one he laid down. I just want to get out.

"One hundred U.S." he says.

I almost laugh, but then realize he is dead serious.

"You must be joking." I say. "I don't have that kind of money."

"How much do you have?" he asks, not taking his eyes off of me.

I loop my fingers through the top of my jeans, covering the money pouch in my pocket.

"I only have cedis," I lie. There is a fifty dollar bill I keep for emergencies stashed in a secret compartment on my money belt.

"What?" He shouts, angrily. "I don't believe you. How much do you have?"

"About forty thousand cedis," I lie again. "We have been traveling all day. I was waiting until we got to the next town to get some more money from the bank."

He makes a clicking sound with his teeth and paces the stall as though deciding what to do with me.

"You give me one hundred U.S." He says.

I reiterate. "I don't have that much."

"This is worth more than forty thousand cedis!" he shouts. The men standing in the doorway begin to shift.

"Well that's good because I didn't want it anyway!" I shout back. The men are all surprised at my reaction and I seize the opportunity to shove my way through the door, running back through the maze of stalls to where I finally see some of my group members.

"Where have you been?" Nadira asks when I show up, panting. "Mr. Passah found a car. We're all ready to go."

"Good." I say. As I follow the group back to safety, I glance over my shoulder just long enough to see the man staring at me intensely as I walk away from the market.

The car Mr. Passah had found us was a Jeep four by four. The nine of us crammed in while Dr. Edmunds stayed behind with our luggage, presumably to find a better form of transport and meet up with us after our night in the village. Debbie stayed behind with her, unwilling to pile on the four by four with the rest of us.

The ride took three hours and the road was so bumpy I thought several times one of us might just bounce out of the car. Our bodies were a tangle of skin and hair, and by the end of the rough journey we had all taken on one another's smells.

When we finally got to Ho, we unfolded ourselves from the Jeep and stretched out in the sun. We reeked of body odor and river water, and our clothes were stained with sweat and orange mud. It was too late to leave for the village, so we would spend one night in the hotel here before climbing up the mountain the next day.

That night, I thought about the little girl I had seen with the machete and the man who cornered me at the arts and crafts market. Did they go to church regularly like Mama Comfort, Kofi, Akos and Adelaide? Or were they more familiar with the fetish priest, living so far up the river, far north of where so many missionaries had made their camps?

I was still having trouble reconciling the two forms of religion. During the flood and the landslide, I had watched people praying on the sides of the road. Who were they praying to, I wondered, and, if they prayed to both, how did they know to which they should appeal on any given situation?

I asked Mason what she thought about all the Ghanaian religiosity.

"What?" She asked, almost incredulous. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, don't you think it's kind of weird? That they have two religions that both seem to contradict the other?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. "There are Christians and there are people who do the tribal stuff. Just like there are Christians and Jews in America. What's so weird about that?"

I put my hands behind my head. "Nothing, I guess." I stared up at the cottage-cheese ceiling.

A moth came to rest by the overhead light.

"I just wonder what they think happens when you die."

"Short walk, small climb." Our guide promises us the next morning as we set out into the rainforest.

We follow a narrow path that snakes through the forest. It is thickly overgrown with shrubs and plants, slick and muddy from the recent rain. Sunlight filters through the canopy, reflecting rainbows off dewy leaves. The path takes us over rocks, through ravines, past a huge waterfall and up a small mountain. Short walk, small climb, he said. After nearly a whole day of this grueling hike we are ready for helicopters to lift us out of this place.

But soon we get to the village. It sits on a plateau atop the mountain, surrounded by green grass, red earth and palm trees. From half a kilometer away we spot the houses. Round, thatch roof huts made of mud and sticks dot the horizon. When we arrive, the villagers are waiting for us, many in the traditional, fancy dress reserved for foreigners and dignitaries. They pour libations to welcome us for the evening, and some of the smaller children offer to take our packs. We are seated so that the ceremony can begin.

A procession of the chief, the queen mother, the linguist, the eldest woman, the eldest man, the priest and the midwife make their way beneath a huge, ornate umbrella to

their seats opposite ours. They are introduced and we pay our respects by lowering our heads as the chief speaks to us in a language we do not understand. When he has finished, the space between the royalty and us is cleared to make way for the dancers.

In modern, matching tank tops and skirts made of Kente cloth, a team of the village's teenage girls welcome us to their home. Women begin to chant and drums carve out a melody in the dusty air. The oldest girl dances out first, presenting us with her own, individual show of talent. Another follows, and soon eight or nine girls are joined dancing in unison, kicking up sand with their bare feet and calling out in their native tongue. We do not speak their language, but we have brought along a translator. For the meantime, we communicate through dance. When theirs is finished, they invite us up to dance with them, and an orchestra of teenage boys and old men strike their drums furiously to entice us onto the dance floor. We join in and the children clamor to our sides, hugging our knees to dance with us. When the beat changes, some of the members of my group try to teach the others how to dance in the hip hop style. They move their feet and wave their arms up and down. As it turns out, the two styles are not so different! We all laugh and dance long into the night.

Before the fires have even been put out, however, I am suddenly overcome with sickness. The wave of pain in my stomach overpowers me and I nearly collapse on the dance floor. An older woman takes me to the priest's hut, and he has to be awoken to tend to me. The translator tells him my symptoms and he nods his head knowingly. His apprentice, a boy of about twelve, is sent to get some herbs from the bush. In the meantime he cools my forehead with water from a carved wooden bowl. I am in so much pain but, god help me, all I can think about is how my mother always told me not to put

wood in the dishwasher because water would damage it. I assume I am delirious and try to pass out so that I will stop hurting and hallucinating. The boy returns a few minutes later with a gnarly root in his dirt covered hand. The priest skins it and grinds it in a mortar before feeding it to me while chanting a prayer. Soon the pain ebbs and I am released by a comfortable sleep.

In the morning, I wake up in the priest's hut to the sound of rain outside. I am alone. I get up and fix my clothes. Outside the hut the villagers are all in their separate thatch houses, save for a few milling around in the common space. I see that the priest is talking to the translator over the water pump, so I walk over to say good morning. I thank the priest for helping me to feel better the night before, and for allowing me the use of his hut. He smiles at me with kind eyes and I don't need the translator to tell me he is honored to have helped me. I listen to him and the translator talk for a few minutes more before I am tempted to ask a burning question.

"What religion are you?" I venture to the priest and the translator translates.

The priest laughs. The translator tells me he has said, "That depends on who is asking."

"So the missionaries got all the way up here?" I ask.

"They send representatives," he says, "We know all about Jesus."

"Are you a Christian, then?"

He smiles to himself. "Christ was a good man. Thank the Goddess for sending him to us."

I had only been in Ghana a few days when I found out my religion was going to isolate me from everyone if I didn't keep quiet about it. I am agnostic, something even worse than being a Jew or a Muslim in an area like this one, so dependent on Christianity and witchcraft. I was raised by a loosely-practicing Methodist mother and a gay, experimentally Buddhist father. Though I came to agnosticism on my own, later in life, religion has always interested me. Having few spiritual beliefs of my own, I am fascinated by what and why people believe what they do. When I asked questions to my host family and teachers I had to be careful not to reveal too much about my own beliefs. If I was ever asked, I simply responded, "I was raised Methodist," which is true. Somewhere in my adolescence, however, I came to loath the way Christianity so thoroughly took over the indigenous cultures of many third world countries. The proselytizing nature of fundamentalist evangelicals gnawed at me until I had rejected the ideals of Christianity entirely. My father was gay, and if that meant God hated him, I had no business worshipping that god. But here in Ghana, it was blasphemous to say that you chose no god. No matter what religion you were, spirituality had to be paramount.

I respect Christians. I respect people of all spiritualities. I don't care what religion other people are, so long as they don't try to push it on me. That's why, in this

group especially, I had to be careful what I said about my spirituality. My group, including the leader, was composed of god-fearing, gospel-choir members ready to rescue any soul in need of saving. It astonished me how they could ignore the negative impact of the missionaries on a place that they called so dear to them. It was the missionaries who rounded up the first slaves to be sent to America.

We tread on floors eight inches higher than when they were built. We tread on impacted excrement, petrified because it had no choice. We tread on fragments of skin and bone, long melted into he hardened mud of the slave dungeon. The hole is dark and the hard, rocky walls echo silence, with the occasional drip of water from somewhere in the darkness. A tiny stream of runoff interrupts us as it makes its way down the center pipeline designed to carry urine and feces and menstrual blood.

This is the slave dungeon at Elmina Castle in Cape Coast, the place where slaves were chained to the wall while they waited to be shipped over seas. We ascend to the courtyard, tripping over chains embedded in the ground where women who misbehaved were left to the elements and the lustful appetites of European soldiers. The captives were kept in chains, beaten, bound and raped before being sold across the ocean in America, Britain, and the Caribbean Islands. This was the last stop before leaving Africa behind forever.

Now the castle smells old and hollow. It is a place that no longer belongs to the living. The tour-guide speaks softly and in reverence to the departed as he tells us their tale. Missionaries went around and recruited members of the local tribes to learn the way of the Lord, Jesus Christ. These men then rounded up their brothers, their sisters and

their mothers, and brought them to the castle's church. The missionaries only converted the slaves so that masters would be kinder to them on foreign soils. Unfortunately, many of the slaves took their teachings to mean that if they prayed to the white man's god, they might be released from their iron chains.

When we get to the cell where they kept the tribal priests and witchdoctors—the cell with a skull and crossbones on the door, because no one who entered came out alive—my diligent camera suddenly refuses to snap a photo of the tiny room. There is a church in the center square of the castle, which during the later years was used as an auction post for slaves and training area for soldiers. The altar inside has long since been removed, but the steeple rises tall out of the center of the castle courtyard. There is something terribly ironic about showing reverence to God in a place like this. It doesn't take an agnostic to know that God never visited this place.

We enter the final holding cell and see first hand the infamous "Door of No Return." It is made of wrought iron bent into the shape of a cross. Patterns of the crucifix shine on the floor and walls of this small room. There are fingernails embedded in the walls and scratches in solid rock where people clung before being dragged out of the castle and onto a boat. Many committed suicide, we are told, by jumping into the sea instead. Their bodies were found floating after the boats had left, chained to two or three others, whom they had carried with them to their death.

On the way home we stop at a petrol station. The statue of a light skinned woman stands outside her plastic shop. She is familiar, concrete and stern, wearing white robes and an expression of disdain. In one hand she raises a painted torch above her head. In

the other, a book is cradled between her forearm and breast. The letters are painted in big letters on the cover: "B-I-B-L-E," so that everybody knows what America stands for.

I wonder what liberty means to the people of Ghana. Liberation from the British Colonizers, who held rule over the country until the late 1950's? Or from the dark days of voodoo and witchcraft, driven out of Ghana by the forceful hand of missionaries with guns? I wonder if they have any idea what the statue of liberty means to Americans, or if their replica means something entirely different to them.

To the African Americans on the trip, liberty meant freedom. And perhaps a freedom that doesn't exist in America, one that can only be found by going back to your roots, back to the way your ancestors lived, back to Africa.

They saw this study abroad as a "going home" experience for those whose ancestors were stolen during the Diaspora. Once we were overseas, it became clear that the leader of our group felt the same way, and saw herself as reintroducing African American college students to their heritage in West Africa. I, as it turned out, was a concession made on her part after she was investigated for never accepting white students into the program. The rest of the students seemed to know this, though no one ever informed me. There was more than just tension between us, and in my naivety I often took their avoidance of me as a sign of fatigue. It wasn't until about a week into the program that I began to understand what was going on. I was a trespasser in Africa, *their*

Africa. I didn't, and would never, belong. Their animosity towards me became more overt, and the other students often seemed to be downright angry at my presence on their "home" continent. I was repeatedly left out of conversations, mocked to my face, and relegated always to the back of the bus, the back of the line, or the back of the tour group. Always alone.

It was hard on me for the first few weeks. The other group members whispered behind my back, mocking my solitary attempts to leam the local language and converse with waiters, taxi drivers, and our professors. I became adept at bartering in Twi, and the fact that I always paid less for taxi rides, batik cloth and food items only heightened my alienation from the other students. Some mornings when I showed up to class they would be talking about the club they visited the night before, an outing to which I was never invited. I felt desperately alone. The ones I thought would become my closest companions on our journey shunned me for no apparent reason other than my skin tone.

Every attempt I made to enjoy the "real" Ghana was met with eye rolls or sneers from the other students. On class days, the group almost always ate lunch together. We would go to the only restaurant on campus, Taco Bell, which had neither tacos nor bells, but only a few local dishes. They got the sign from some American Taco Bell when the chain changed their logo, and their sign had a big crack down one side. The sign was the only thing the two restaurants had in common, however, as there was nothing even resembling Mexican food on the menu. Almost everyone ordered potato French fries instead of yam fries, even though they cost twice as much, and fried chicken. I usually ordered Fufu, a staple in the Ghanaian diet, consisting of a spicy ground nut soup, goat or chicken meat, and lumps dough made from pounded plantains or cassava. You eat it with

your hands, pinching off a lump of the dough, scooping up some soup with it and swallowing it in as few chews as possible. It is like nothing in American cuisine. Warm and spicy and soft, with flavors of plantain, peanut, tomato and chili pepper. Since it is such a common dish, it only cost about a fourth of what the others paid for their chicken and French fries. I loved it, but it grossed out some of the other students. They especially didn't like to watch me eat it. If I was going to order that, they said, I had to sit at another table. So I ordered French fries and chicken and sat with them.

It only took a few days for me to realize the Fufu wasn't what had been keeping me from fitting in with them at lunch. They were as cold to me as they had always been, I was just starting to notice it more. I went back to ordering Fufu, and again the ultimatum was given, so I moved to sit alone at another table. I glanced back at them while I ate. They seemed to be having such a good time, laughing and eating together. I didn't understand why I couldn't be a part of it; I thought they just didn't like my personality. But things got worse, and I began to obsess about why I couldn't seem to fit in.

I'll never forget how one day, distraught by my exile from the group, I approached another student to ask for advice. Chris was the oldest student on the trip, a twenty-seven year old Africana Studies major working on his doctoral thesis. Thus far, he had showed me the most kindness, and I believed if anyone could offer advice or a sympathetic ear, it would be him. Of all the students, he had treated me with the most respect, and I felt I could trust him. At the time, he was working on a thesis in ethnic studies, and seemed like someone who could shed some non-judgmental light on the situation. That's one of the reasons I was so shocked when, standing outside the

psychology building at the University of Ghana, he informed me that as much as he might like me as a person, we could not be friends, *because I was a racist.*

In my entire life I had never thought of myself as someone who was racist in any way. While I had read about white privilege and understood at least in some regard how I benefited from it, I was deeply hurt by Chris's blatant labeling of my character. What he meant was that we could not be friends because I was *white.* I tried to argue with him, stumbling through my defense and spitting that his assumptions made him more of a racist than I was. Still, he persisted. I was nice enough and smart enough, but racism was inherent in all white people; it was unfortunate but unavoidable.

So that was it. In a place where I had freely chosen to be, where I was the only white person for miles, my racism made it impossible for everyone else to be friends with me. It seemed like backwards logic. At first I tried to fight it, going out of my way to alter who I was for their benefit. I did everything I could think of the rid myself of the offensive label, but my actions were superficial. I started wearing tank tops instead of tee shirts, even though I knew it could offend some Muslim Ghanaians, because that's what the other American girls wore. I tried to use slang like they did, but they just laughed at me. After overhearing someone make a comment about how ridiculous it was to have hair down your back in this climate, I cut my long hair to my shoulders. Every time another student said something mean to me, I laughed it off like they had been joking and I didn't care, thinking maybe they had been feeding off my insecurities. In my attempts to gain acceptance with my African American peers I changed my clothes, my language, my hair and my attitude, but I failed to gain their respect or acceptance.

I tiptoed around conversations for a long time, carefully avoiding the subject of race and white oppression. I tried to keep things light and casual, talking about the class lecture, the weather, or how things were going with our host families. Every effort I made was to avoid confrontation, and I made every attempt to steer clear of conversations about race and racism. After the visit to Elmina Castle, however, that became impossible.

We gather around a campfire built for us on the beach near our huts. There are wooden stools for each of us, and I can't help but think how every person here, including myself, is thinking that I don't deserve to sit on one. In the Asante tradition, only the chiefs and queen mothers sit on such finely carved stools, though now the ancient symbol of authority has become another commodity in the modernly touristic Ghana. It has been a few hours since the bus brought us back here from the castle, and having eaten dinner, Dr. Edmunds has called this meeting for reflections on the day's events.

We are all somber, looking at our feet, wringing our hands, captured by the stagnant cruelty of the slave castle. At any moment I wouldn't be surprised if one of them leapt across the fire to attack me, unwilling representative of white oppressors everywhere, and no one would have stopped them. When Dr. Edmunds joins us, the girls dab their eyes and sit up straight before we begin. The men stay hunched over, contemplating.

We go around the circle, one by one, each sharing our reactions to the slave castle, our thoughts and feelings about our ancestors and their turmoil. Several mention how surprised they are at the missionaries' role in the slave trade, tearfully expressing their inner conflict that it was Christianity, *their* religion, that had done this to their

people. I try to cry. Earlier, in the castle, it wasn't hard. But here, an unwelcome link in their human circle, it is much more difficult. When my time comes to speak, last of all, I say what everyone wants to hear from me: I am ashamed to be white. You speak of your ancestors with such pride, but my ancestors, the people I come from, they are the monsters (which is not at all true, seeing as during the Diaspora my ancestors were starving to death in Northern Ireland and barely had enough money to bargain for potatoes, much less slaves.) Still, I choke up my voice to sound sincere, and Dr. Edmunds gives me a pat on the back. A couple of the students look on with contempt, still angered by my presence. I still hold on to the false hope that I might win them over.

After the circle, I walk with Dr. Edmunds back to her hut, and ask her what she thinks I could do to win the friendship or at least acceptance of my fellow students. After all, she is a licensed psychologist, and ought to be able to deal with issues of adjustment. Standing in the moonlight outside her hut, she listens to my concerns, my frustrations "fitting in" with this group, and smiles at me like one would a child. Her tone is condescending as she tells me I have some things to learn, and essentially justifies the others' treatment of me.

The next morning at breakfast she gives me some photocopies of articles on white privilege. I hide the fact that I am somewhat insulted by her gesture, having read quite a bit about white privilege, thankyouverymuch. While I know that I can never understand systematic racism in the same way as she, an educated black woman, can, her patronizing attitude is demeaning, and it is clear that she undervalues my intelligence. It does not matter how much education I have on the subject or my intentions as a person. What matters is that I am white—and they are black—and that is all any of them cares to see.

Whether we like it or not, whites and blacks have equally created in each other the "other," against which they see themselves as essentially different. My attempted rejection of this concept in Ghana was based in my fear of losing a sense of entitlement. My peer's mention of "Affirmative Action" was especially unsettling because it meant confronting the very real disparity between treatment of whites and blacks in academia, and becoming a member of the stigmatized group. I had always lived with a fear that maybe I didn't really deserve my success. My perception of my achievements was painfully undermined by the assumption of the black students that I personally deserved none of it.

While I never stopped trying to win the approval of the other students, I recognized that they would probably never see me as anything but what they had already constructed in their minds. To them, I would always be a racist white girl out of place in a continent full of beautiful black people. I wondered, as I began to cope with the alienation, if my acceptance of their view of me was anything like a black person's acceptance of the racism inherent in white society. It was not something we liked, but we lived with it.

The reaction of local Ghanaians to my presence did not help the growing animosity between my fellow group mates and me. I remember, during the early days of our arrival at Mama Comfort's home, Mason and I trying to explain the "race issue" in America to our host family. We had just finished watching *Fahrenheit 9/11,* which Kofi had borrowed from a friend. The English subtitles were all wrong, so Mason and I spent the majority of the movie translating, adding our own interpretations of the president's actions where appropriate.

At the end, Mason felt the need to go further, passionately orating to our silent, smiling mother about the even more unjust treatment of blacks in American society. She said that even the current situation, where she and I, a white and a black, were living together would be very unusual.

Mama Comfort raised a tired finger at me and smiling, almost excited, said, "So you are black."

"No, no, no," Mason interjected, "She's white."

"So you too, you are also white?"

It only got worse from there. To the people in Ghana, skin color is not such an important issue. Mama Comfort had trouble grasping the distinction between my tan white skin and Mason's light-toned African heritage. After Mason had finished explaining the difference between our skin colors, she went to bed. I was ruining her trip back to the homeland, and she didn't care if I knew it. It became her duty to ruin my experiences in Ghana as some kind of retribution for my audacity at coming here. She was furious with me, and I knew the moment she slammed her door we would not be friends or even roommates. We were people forced to live underneath the same roof.

That night her self-righteousness was so overwhelming I could do little but roll my eyes. If she was hell-bent on making this into some huge, racial drama, she could do it on her own. I stayed up with Kofi and we watched *The Mummy* on TV. It was his favorite movie.

"They play it every Friday," he said, "I watch it every week." I asked if he had heard of the sequel, *The Mummy Returns,* but he hadn't. I promised to send him a copy once I returned to America.

I have given up on trying to fit myself into the group. Tonight finds me at the counter of the CoCo Cola Bar, wondering up at the stars and sipping from a giant bottle of Castle Milk Stout. The open air bar is just a little ways up from our house. White tables and red plastic chairs sit in the tiny courtyard, a brick wall enclosing the space though it is so short you can see right over to the busy street, and across that to the vast plain where herders are bringing in their sheep. There are a few stools at the bar, and I talk to Cynthia, the bartender, through a prison-like grate separating the counter from her working space.

In my decision to break from the American group, I resolve to make friends with the locals, to experience all Ghana has to offer on its most deeply personal, human level. Cynthia is the first friend I make. She is the bartender here, day and night, though she does not own the place or seem to have any particular attachment to it. Her skin is dark and her hair short, and she wears bright striped tee-shirts bought second hand from the local market. They are Gap, Old Navy, Target Brand clothes. The leftovers of Americans who grew out of them, spilled mustard on the front or tore the sleeve, and

dropped them off at the Salvation army, patting themselves on the back for their generosity. I wonder if they know this is where their clothes end up.

The first night I met Cynthia, it was clear we would be fast friends. She was so excited to have a white person in her bar, and from America no less. She wanted to give me a hug and told me to come back every day to see her. If I needed food, some banku or fufu or fried plantains, her sister ran a little shack just up the street and I could get it in no time. Whatever I needed she would help me out. She started by cracking open my first bottle of Milk Stout.

Cynthia is nineteen or twenty, and she would like to have a boyfriend. She was with one guy, Kwame, for a while, but he turned out to be no good. Now she wants someone taller, handsomer, with light skin. Most of all, she wants him to be rich. She looks up at the stars from her cage behind the counter, dreaming of the wonderful man she will meet someday, who will take her away from all of this.

I become a regular at her little bar, one of very few. Often I am the only one to keep her company all night. Sometimes Kofi comes with me and buys me a drink and we sit at one of the tables and laugh. When I buy, he orders the most expensive whiskey, which is fine with me because it still only costs a couple of dollars U.S.

I change my drink from night to night, ordering mango Fanta with rum one night and cola with whiskey the next. Most often, though, I opt for the Milk Stout. It comes in a bottle about three times the size of an American beer, and though it is not the cheapest Ghanaian beer, it is certainly the best. Most of the time I lean over the bar ledge, cradling its neck in my hand, talking to Cynthia as she washes glasses and thinking of what it will be like when I get home.

"How long have you been working here?" I ask Cynthia, lazily. "About five years." She says, "I would like to go, but the money is good." "Where would you go?" I slur my words a little, suddenly taken with this new kind of beer.

"To America," she says, "You will take me there."

The number one goal of all Ghanaian people, I've discovered, is to get to America. No matter what you try to tell them, nearly all hold the unified belief that everything in America is better than it is in Africa. To live there is their dream, and they hold on to it fervently.

If you say that life is not as easy as it looks in America, they will counter that it can't be harder than life in Ghana. If you tell them there are no jobs, they say they will do housework or clean hotels, and become rich. If you tell them about the racism, the low pay, the expense of housing, food and medical insurance, they will tell you they have been through worse.

Cynthia, a singular representative for dozens I met with the same goal, was utterly convinced that the American Dream would come true for her, if she could only find a way to get there. She was not the only person who blatantly asserted that I would take them to America. "You will take me there," and "You will come back for me," were common phrases, some speakers adding an "I am sure," to guilt you into saying that you would. I tried hard to talk Cynthia out of her beliefs about America, but she would have none of it. I told her I could not afford to bring her to America, but she said that if I had

saved up to come here this time, surely I could save more to bring her over. It didn't matter if it was five years from now. She could wait.

Kofi was the same way. He was always talking about how great it would be to live in America, or even just visit for a little while. He would like to meet my family and see a movie on a big screen. His view was like a child's. America was full of candy and rainbows and shiny white faces wishing you good morning as you got into your red convertible and drove to the mall, where you could afford *everything.* He wasn't as delusional as Cynthia though, and even though he mentioned several times that I might bring him there, he seemed to know he would always be of Ghana, and nowhere else.

Though he was over thirty years old, Kofi reminded me of an adolescent boy, always dreaming and scheming, dodging out of work early and hiding from the boss, or shyly flirting with a girl from church. I once asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, forgetting for a moment that he already was. He didn't seem to recognize my slip, though, and answered as though he were thinking about a time far into the future, when he was, indeed, grown.

"I'd like to be a farmer, maybe," he spoke slowly, as though picturing it in his mind, "With a huge field where I could plant all kinds of things. That would be good. I would like that."

I tried to imagine Kofi as a farmer, bumbling through his crops or tilling the soil with a machete. I had trouble seeing my silly host brother as a farmer. But I could see he took this dream very seriously.

"It is too expensive, though," he looked down, sadly. "Land is expensive."

I finish my hard-boiled egg as Mason glares at me across the table. It is Saturday, so we are free to make our own plans instead of walking the silent four kilometers to school together. She gets up to leave as I drop a couple of sugar cubes into my tea, and as soon as she is out the door Mama Comfort appears from the kitchen.

"Your hair is bad." She says. It is not a question. "I will take you to a woman today who will fix it. She is very good."

It is not a salon we end up at after the long walk, but a stool in the middle of the red dirt, with a makeshift hut no bigger than a closet a few feet behind. It is just off the main road, a few kilometers up from the CoCo Cola Bar, but there are no such commercial enterprises around here. Sitting blankly on the stool is an eighty-year-old woman, surrounded by four or five attendants who look to be in their early teens. I wonder why Mama Comfort didn't want Akos to do my hair, but from the time they hug it is clear that she and this woman are old friends.

"She is the best in all of Ghana," Mama Comfort says, "When you take her corn rolls to America, she will be world famous."

Braids? I don't think my hair is long enough to braid. Not to mention the flack I am sure to catch from the group tomorrow when I show up with corn rows.

"She doesn't speak English," Mama Comfort says to me, "but the girls do. You can find your way back home later, I will cook you a big supper for your new hair." She turns and leaves, and I watch her disappear over the ruddy hill as the old woman clamps a firm hand on my shoulder and pushes me onto the stool.

The girls pull at the strands of my hair, touching its softness and giggling amongst themselves. The old woman jerks my head around to look at it from all angles, then says something to one of the girls that sends her running up over the hill.

About ten minutes later, the girl returns with her outstretched arms draped in mane of burgundy dyed horse hair.

I begin to shift in my seat.

"Uh.. .why the weave?" I ask one of the girls.

"Oh you must have weave," the answer comes.

A few seconds later I venture again, "Um, why the color?"

"That is the color."

Oh, -well, that answers everything. The elderly woman grips my head and yanks it back before I can protest, and I feel her sharp fingernail drawing lines through my hair. She works fast and it hurts, pulling and tugging and threading the burgundy hairs in and out as though my head were a loom.

It is nearly sunset when she finishes, having taken almost five hours to complete. My headache is so bad I feel like all my hair has been ripped out, so I am surprised when I stand to feel that my short, airy hair has grown to tips of braids brushing halfway down

my back.   I thank the old woman and turn to follow Mama Comfort's path home, but one of the girls stops me.

"You must pay now," she says.

I assumed Mama Comfort had taken care of that, it being her idea, but I am not offended. This is how things are done here.

"How much do I owe?"

The quote she gives is nearly $40 U.S. and I protest, saying I was not told it would cost that much to have my hair braided.

"It is very nice weave," the girl says, softly, looking at me, "Very expensive."

"It looks very nice on you," another girl adds, "Don't you like it?"

The whole thing smacks of a scam. Ghana is full of people who have absolutely no qualms about overcharging white people, or conning them out of a few extra dollars. Usually I am quick to call them out on it, but this situation is delicate. This is one of Mama Comfort's oldest friends, and I cannot risk insulting her.

The work is nice, and I know from Akos that quality braidwork often goes for twenty dollars or more. I take out my change purse and offer the old woman all I have, 300,000 cedis, about thirty dollars.

She smacks her lips and counts it, then looks at me hard as though I am the one trying to pull something over on her. She addresses me in Twi and then gets up and walks into her closet. One of the girls translates.

"She says it was a pleasure to braid your hair. She has never touched a white person's hair before. For that and Comfort's friendship, she will accept what you have given her, though the work is worth far more."

Then she adds (though I am not sure if they are her words or the woman's), "Your hair is fine and slippery. It was hard to make the weave hold. You should be grateful for how nice it looks."

I thank them all profusely and most of the girls seem excited to see me with my new braids. *I should be grateful,* I think to myself as I pack up my things to leave. I try to mark out Mama Comfort's path in my mind, following alongside the unmarked streets that complicate our little village.

The girls wave at me as I leave their little stand. I walk off into the darkness, towards home.