

Passport

To

SELF-DISCOVERY

*A Compilation of Life-Changing Travel
Stories from Extraordinary Authors*



VOLUME 2

AMANDA BIALACK

PASSPORT TO SELF DISCOVERY

**A Compilation of Life Changing Travel Stories from
Extraordinary Authors**

AMANDA BIALACK

TRAVEL THE WORLD TO LEARN MORE ABOUT YOURSELF



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Dedication

This unique book is dedicated to women around the world who aspire to travel and who enjoy traveling. It was created to inspire you, reader, to make a big change in your world and to embrace the old adage, “It’s the journey and not the destination, that counts most in life.” This book of life-changing travel stories from extraordinary women around the globe will give you the inspiration you need to explore the world, too-- and yourself. We want you to dive into your wanderlust and purchase that ticket to live your life to the fullest. It’s all about using travel to get in touch with your true self! We dedicate this book, also, to the women out there who need a burst of inspiration in order to press the “restart button” in their own lives. Read this book, and then-- travel the world to learn more about who you truly are.

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Introduction

This chapter in your life could possibly be about finding yourself through travel. Many of us get caught up in our daily routines. Work, marriage, kids, responsibilities and so forth. The expectations of life can wear us down so much that we forget to actually **live** our lives. Let's really think about this concept for a moment. When was the last time you took a special trip by yourself, for yourself? I've often heard it said that when you travel solo, you learn much about yourself and you are forced to take full responsibility for your happiness. Being comfortable in our daily routines doesn't leave much room in our lives for self-discovery, now, does it? Traveling forces us to reflect on our identity and on our daily experiences overall. When we travel, we experience so much outside of ourselves, like new cultures and different perspectives on life, love, and fulfillment. We start to appreciate what we have and what is truly important in life.

Let's dig deeper here... While traveling and learning more about yourself, not only are you developing better skills of patience, but you are becoming courageous and more confident within yourself. How? Let's think about this for a moment... How many people do you know that travel by themselves? How many people are courageous enough to say, "This is where I'm going this year, simply because I want to!" Making this bold decision alone for yourself shows that you possess confidence, independence and freedom.

The stories that you are about to hear are not only incredible and inspiring, but they are also full of life-changing, heartfelt transformational moments shared by women around the world. Women who wanted more... More fulfillment, more adventure, more culture and more of what isn't "the norm."

So! Grab that coffee, tea, wine or whatever your favorite beverage happens to be, and let's take a trip to a few magical places around the world through the lives of some incredible women.

Denita Austin- Best-Selling Author

Chapter 1

Venchele Saint Dic

I dedicate my story to God, my family, mentors, and friends who helped me discover my purpose during my journey.

Journey to Redemption And Faith

I am the daughter of an immigrant who migrated to the United States in my teenage years. During the eruption of violence in Haiti in the 2000s, I returned to live in the United States to finish my high school and college studies. At a young age, I witnessed young children not being afforded access to quality education or health care services. Young girls compromised their livelihoods by dropping out of school to take care of their families. When my mother lived in the states, I started college at Simmons, located in the heart of Boston. During her transition of starting a new life in the United States, I was placed into a new norm-- one that consisted of assuming adult responsibilities, specifically taking care of my mother by helping her understand a culture different from her own.

In my early struggles of supporting myself in college while working two jobs, being mom's advocate, and being a full-time student, my faith led me to wonderful people who pushed me to achieve more than what I had in mind for myself. This experience taught me the value of cultivating a strong work ethic and getting an education.

In addition to this, I acquired a passion for travel, which was kindled by many people I met along my path in similar life circumstances to mine. Through sharing their stories with me, I was inspired to take a leap of faith-- so, I packed my bags and flew across the globe to embark on my journey as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Senegal. The combination of my transformative education at Simmons, my humble beginnings, and my exposure to the face of poverty prompted me to decide to help nurture communities in need by pursuing a career in public health.

I remember my first morning in Senegal waking up to the sound of a woman in labor. She had been waiting in the clinic for the past few hours in excruciating pain. She had skin that was a yellowish-brown colored and eyes the color of earthy amber. They resembled tiny fibers of light shining through a lustered, cinnamon-colored stone. Her hair was nicely parted in waves. Her posture informed me that she had travelled far seeking medical care to alleviate the pain

of labor. Even as she looked for the nearest seat, the appearance of her legs were of an open gate waiting to exhale life. Her name was Fatima.

With the scorching heat pressing against her bare arms, Fatima had walked for hours just to get to her nearest health facility. The world of the clinic around her must have seemed to be a confusing, bustling whirlwind. There were a mixture of sounds like the brisk opening and closing of cabinets and the shuffling of feet. There were mothers holding on to their shawls as if carrying their own hopes while trying to soothe the bad dreams of their wailing children.

I initially saw Fatima through the corner of my eyes, her head drooped and lips strained. As a Peace Corps volunteer it was my job to find medical personnel to help Fatima, a newly-arrived patient. Darting through thatched-roof houses in the evening, I began to search for someone to help Fatima give birth to her unborn child. This experience was the beginning of my journey as a health volunteer in Senegal.

With a brisk wind pressing against my face, I looked for the midwife who worked at the clinic. Thirty minutes elapsed until, after taking many twisting and turning paths through the village, I finally found Aissatou tucked beneath a quilt on a hammock hung between two mango trees. The noise of the bristling, pretzel-like movements of my footsteps as I hurriedly searched the area broke the pattern of her sleep. Her eyelids began to slowly open as she registered the noise of my approaching footsteps, and finally her legs reached the bottom of the hammock and then to the ground. Her arms were crossed against her chest as she began to gather her thoughts. At last, her watchful gaze rested on my shoulders.

Aissatou's living conditions represented that of thousands of community workers, overworked and underpaid, as they tried to support the emotional, financial, and varied life needs of children and their families in the community and the surrounding area.

We hurried back to the clinic where Fatima and two other women were waiting on the bench to be examined. As soon as we arrived, Fatima's labor intensified. She was quickly rushed to a nearby room. As I was recovering from this experience that felt like a nightmare, I began to wonder how Fatima even survived the journey to the hospital.

Shortly, muffled under the sound of rain, I heard the crying, wailing of a baby from the room Fatima was in. Her struggle was consummated in the sound of a miracle won in spite of the odds. The next day, Fatima left the hospital, vanishing with her newborn child in to what

seemed like the distant horizon. I never expected to see Fatima again, although I did near the end of my service at the clinic.

Fatima's departure reminded me of the anguish and anxiety I felt when the Peace Corps van drove off when it brought me here. The town is nestled between a tourist town and the border of Gambia. I was an uncertain young woman with an uncertain future laid in front of me at my Peace Corps village Dassalami Soce.

As I lived in this town, the history of the Mandinkas enveloped me with open arms, helping me gain an appreciation for the fusion of various facets that lends Senegal its distinct socio-political position and its traditional customs, uncompromised by westernized perceptions brought with foreign aid assistance.

In the aftermath of Fatima's parting, my days were consumed with being fully present in my community, doing health projects, or being tucked away in the comfort of a small, straw-thatched hut when the rainy season came.

Living in the square space of my hut, I began to realize that all of us live settled in our own makeshift boxes filled with dreams, unaware of the vastness the world offers beyond our sights. It dawned on me that my role as an outsider consisted in part as a form of privilege. No matter how I felt about being integrated in this community, I could only partially understand my cultural experience in this community. Further, my understanding of this cultural experience was not wholly shared by those around me. My ability to share my story could not paint the whole picture of my experience for the Senegalese people I lived amongst, even if I tried to share it with them. Further, my gender and cultural identity did not grant me a magical wand to draw judgment on the lived experiences of the Senegalese people, nor did it make me an expert on the hidden or visible socio-ethnic values of the Senegalese culture. Instead, my experience provided a puzzle-like chasm I needed to try to understand to define for my own sense of belonging.

Volunteerism gave me a canvas to explore different ways I could channel my desire to serve the greater good of communities like Senegalese village I lived in.

With a suitcase in hand and Sengal before me, I found myself at the precipice of the door of doubt. I struggled to find an equal footing between the person I saw in the mirror and the fearful version of who I once was. Routine and structure governed my day-to-day life. I was in search of an answer to define my concept of what home meant to me. I yearned for a true

understanding of the cosmos living outside of the familiar nooks of my living room. The mundaneness of my environment ignited my desire to explore the roads less travelled. The desire to leave my comfort zone kindled my curiosity to trust my faith to carry me through the waves of uncertainty, self-doubt and absent-mindedness.

Walking in the footsteps of the women and men returning from the rice fields before the resounding call to prayer, I found solace in our day-to-day conversations around cups of attaya juxtaposed against the background echoes of community meetings allowing us to share ourselves through listening. Traveling became a channel to unravel the essence of the people I met along the way and to establish a space to express my effervescent desire to illuminate the places in myself that were in need of healing, attention and reconciliation.

The Senegalese infused me with resiliency and a cup of self-awareness to commit to the service of mankind. Growing up in the Caribbean, the United States and living in Spain strengthened my ability to evaluate how my cultural and gender identity fostered or undermined dialogues in male-dominant spaces. From the customary Teranga, or hospitality shown to guests, to embracing the new day as a sign of divine favor, to the vast displays of brightly-hued aromatic spices, and traditional accoutrements-- each of these things helped me rediscover the essence of my purpose that was once encased beneath the dreams of my buried ancestors.

Growing up in the United States and the Caribbean made me realize I was never afforded a comfort zone. My life was a parallel contradiction to the daily routine of my host family in Senegal. They grew conditioned to the customary expectations of how men and women ought to behave. Men are conditioned to provide for the family and women were taught to be obedient housewives. In some ways, I felt connected by the constant reminder of the importance of bringing family units together around the comfort of sharing food. Also, from another light, I felt I was suffering from imposter syndrome because I did not fit their concept of how a woman should behave. I laugh at the countless times I was asked why I was always carrying loads of notebooks, and a computer to community meetings. My behavior was far from that of an ideal woman in their eyes-- more like a sign of laziness. We may have been in a transitory phase without my realizing it as I was going through the motions of helping them assess their needs.

With the many tribulations of adjusting to different environments while enabling my mother to settle in Boston, I do not think I carved out time to understand my own transitory

state. My life had always been in a state of flux, moving in many directions, and I never felt balanced or that my feet were planted on firm ground. Countless times, I have been asked, “Where are you from?” And, somehow, I always fell short in my answer. I guess it was hard to explain that the union I sought in the two cultures I grew up in was almost non-existent. Volunteering helped me face the hard truth that I would have to become comfortable paving my path at the intersection of the roads named Familiar and Unknown because I didn’t fit perfectly in either culture. My misfit-ness was the agent that allowed me to understand others and conform to cultures different than my own.

My comfort zone was acquired by traveling over extended periods of time. My exposure to new ways of how to fully live forced me to define my freedom and my boundaries. It helped me rely on my intuition. In the United States, resources were at my fingertips until I moved to a rural village where most family households lived off of paltry resources. Losing track of time and resolving to conform to a non-structured life catapulted me from the strict confines of my thoughts. I released the principles or sets of behaviors that shackled me to an abyss based on years of social conditioning. Instead, I clung to the things or places that felt good to my soul, heart, and spirit. I adopted a renewed sense of self unadulterated by previous modes of baseless rationale that hinged upon compromising my soul, heart and spirit. I clung instead to the promises that unfolded in front of me to reclaim my sense of belonging through the pursuit of happiness and its manifestation in my life. Most, importantly, I learned that all changes worked for me, instead of being a victim to how I think things ought to be. I learned from each of these changes.

Considering the many places I have visited, Senegal was one of my favorite destinations because it provided me with a transformative experience by shaping my character and strengthening my resolve to give back to those who are less fortunate than me. The preconceptions I held about communities different than my own were exposed. The experience forced me to challenge my thoughts instead of just digesting the images social media fed me during my youth. The strong presence of elders and women in my village brought me closer to what I defined as building a community that is unabashed by color, race and gender. I learned that resiliency is not defined solely by one exercising it daily, but also through those around you who replenish and empower you to be the best version of yourself.

Traveling to different countries at a young age built my definition of soul work which is required to build and sustain a community around me. I truly believe in the adage, “it takes a

village to raise a child.” In my case, it took a village to raise me from the ashes of who I thought I was based on the external stimuli and information transferred to me from my immediate environment.

Before my trip to Senegal, I didn’t have the knowledge or a true understanding of how living in Senegal was going to change my outlook on life. Traveling across the world informed me that I could find pieces of myself in cultures seemingly different in cultural and faith but based in shared values. It helped me understand my own strength and my ability to find outlets to nourish my mind, soul and spirit. The practice of finding my identity is a fluid and active process. It required me to dig deep into the nooks of my soul to find the rhythms that resonate with me.

I believe people should invest in traveling because the experience itself can help people understand who they are as individuals, but, most importantly, because traveling makes them realize that identity should not only be consumed in the happenings in their own backyards but, rather it should be challenged and nurtured outside of their comfort zone. As long as they bask in the vicinity of their comfort zones, they can never know with certainty whether or not they are missing out on transformative experiences that can reveal to them a new sense of self and the nuances of understanding people different from them.

My community in Senegal imparted more knowledge and wisdom to me than I could have given to myself. Senegal is one of the rare places I would recommend for people to travel to both because of its vast array of activities and volunteer opportunities, and also its ability to give you a genuine understanding of community. These different aspects of Senegalese culture make it an ultimate destination for travelers to indulge in a country with a strong pride in its history and people.

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Chapter 2

Lindsay Jackson

This chapter is dedicated to my daughter, Savannah Elise Webye. You have the power to create a life filled with love, joy, and laughter. Remain curious about what the world has to offer and what you can offer to the world. I love you MTLIS!

Flow.

It was 2008, and life was dishing out more than I could chew. I had recently left my apartment in Maryland and moved back to New York to live with my mother, I could not land a job, and I was having a hard time dealing with a break-up. Let's just say that I was in a BAD space. I was unhappy and entirely not thrilled about where I was in life or who I was as a person. I was oblivious to how this "rejection energy" I carried with me was affecting the people around me and negatively impacting my life. At first, there were small moments of awareness-- Like the time I went out with a girlfriend and the entire night, I complained about the music, where we were going, the route we took, my hair, my outfit, not finding parking, and everything else possible. My homegirl pulled the car over and demanded that I stop ruining the night with my "Eeyore shenanigans!" Soon my destructive energy grew to the point where the saying, "sometimes God knocks you down so you can look up" became my reality.

One evening, my ex and I went out to party (let's not judge!) and the evening ended with me going through his phone and looking for anything that would give me permission to be upset and turn my emotions on my companion. What I found was outdated and no longer relevant, but in that moment, I didn't care. I confronted my partner about a text message I found from 1995 and, no matter what my ex said, I wouldn't let the pointless argument end. I wanted to be mad. I wanted to validate that I wasn't enough. In my rage and disappointment, I saw a jar of coins and drunkenly made the decision to bang it on the table in order to emphasize my non-valid points. The act of slamming the jar broke the glass (duh), and it shattered in my hand! And so, there I was-- drunk, crying, bleeding from my dominant hand and feeling defeated because, if I wasn't enough before, I definitely wasn't enough now. In short, that night was my "rock bottom." It made me realize that it was time for me to "get my shit together" or else I was going to either explode or implode. Not long after, my mother, unaware of the true story about my hand, sensed I "needed a break," and decided to plan a

trip for the two of us to go to Jamaica. Even as excitement over the trip circulated through my body, I couldn't stop my sulking. Deep down, I knew I wanted to connect inwardly and move forward with gratitude, faith, and self-love. I wanted to look forward to new experiences and I wanted to be happy about my "now". However, I distinctly remember experiencing a strong pull of regret, guilt, and disappointment yanking at me every time I tried to move forward. But, I tried to access whatever "push" I had in me. I really wanted to be able to enjoy this trip!

I boarded my flight to Jamaica with a cast on my dominant hand and a torn tendon. Despite my struggle for positivity, in my mind, this trip was already a guaranteed bust. There was no way I was going to have fun with this albatross on my arm! Suddenly, the pilot's announcement of our arrival snapped me out of my daze of misery-- It was time to leave the plane. After dealing with customs madness (which did not help me at all with the whole "seize the moment" thing), I remember stepping off of the plane and immediately feeling my mood change. The warm air and blue skies were refreshing and I felt a surge of hope. The bright colors and hibiscus flowers sent signals of love to my soul. The breeze whispered words of love and acceptance; it felt like home and there was a sense of peace which comforted me. The palm trees danced to the "riddim" of the reggae music blaring from the cars driving by. In that moment, everything felt right. Although my mother has been to Jamaica several times and the familiar view it did not seem to inspire her the way it did for me, I know she saw me taking it all in. She leaned in, looked me dead in the eyes and said "Lindsay, ***there is only way to enjoy life-- by living it.***" Usually, when my mom gives me a pep-talk, I reject it in an effort to stay in my "funk". Well, not this time! Instead, a bolt of energy moved me and I was motivated to spiritually "show up." She was right; in order to enjoy life, one does have to "live it," and I simply was not. Instead, in my effort to stay miserable, I was letting opportunities of joy and discovery pass me by.

After mom's rendition of "This is Your Life", we arrived at the hotel and the smell of lavender permeated the lobby, sending my nostrils to heaven. The accents were nostalgic to me because I was reminded of the sound of my maternal grandmother's voice talking about the "pickney" in the neighborhood. The hotel staff greeted us with cold cucumber cloths for our face and infused water for our throats; I felt like royalty. Initially, being treated this way made me feel uncomfortable! Those wicked negative thoughts started creeping in, and I was soon suspicious of their kindness; naïve to the experience I figured there must be something the hotel workers wanted us to buy in addition to our stay. In my mind, there was no way I deserved this treatment-- I was adamant about seeing myself through a lens of disapproval and

unworthiness. My mother could see me sizing up the intentions of the staff, so she instantly redirected my attention by showing me the view through a nearby window... My jaws dropped; it was beautiful and it was nothing like what I see in Virginia Beach, where we normally vacation every summer! The reflection of turquoise water shimmered on the window pane. There were four pools, one with a bar in the middle, and in the distance there was the ocean-- calm and endless. In that moment, I was consumed with gratitude for God's love.

The next day, we hired a driver to pick us up from the hotel and show us the hidden secrets of Jamaica en route to Rick's Cafe in Negril. Our travels through town provided moments of thankfulness and opportunities for reflection. The driver, whose name was Gus, took us to a small "mom and pop" restaurant, which really looked like a small house, on a dirt road, for the best stew chicken we've ever tasted; the food was so delicious, I could've slapped my momma who was sitting right next me (but, since I wanted to live, I just slapped the table). As we were headed out with our bellies full, a young boy selling guinep approached us. A true New Yorker is immune to panhandling, so at first glance, I didn't see him. Then, intuitively, I felt that I needed to connect with him. The young man's presence was captivating, and I found myself admiring him for his persistence, confidence, and wit. Here I was, struggling with how to make lemonade out of lemons, and this young man who didn't even have shoes on his feet wore a smile of hope and seemed to have the heart of a lion. He was not only a true salesman (he could've talk the clothes off of my back) but also a person who knows at a young age how to create opportunities! I asked him why he was out here selling fruit instead of playing with his friends, and his reply paralyzed me. He said *"hog say, 'de first dutty water mi ketch, mi wash'*, which means, "Make use of the opportunities that come your way." He was right on time with his message and he didn't even know it! *How could someone so young be so wise?* I wondered to myself. He knew that selling fruit was an opportunity to change his circumstances. He knew that it was *up to him* to go after what he wanted and *not wait around for someone else* to make it happen. Let's just say, I walked away with more than guinep.

We made a few more stops along the way and ended up spending most of our time at Seven Mile Beach and Biggas in Green Island. By the time we arrived to Rick's Cafe, I had no more room for food but plenty of room for fun and new experiences. As we waited for the sun to set (Rick's Cafe is known for its memorable sunset view), we talked with a group of locals. They stood tall in their audacious stances and spoke with ease about their journeys, which is surprising because getting information from my maternal grandmother was "like pulling teeth," as the saying goes. Luckily, that wasn't the case with the four people we spoke

with. I felt comfortable talking to them, I think because there was a part of me that knew that I would walk away from our conversation with a new perspective. We talked about politics, global warming, tourism, and the spirit that lives in all of us. One of them shared that he believed he was **“given life to serve life”**. He continued to share what he had learned about how important it is to pay attention to the patterns in our life. He said that we must be curious about who and what we attract, why we attract them, and also that we should often be still long enough to allow the spirit within in us to guide our direction. I later learned that this is “flow:” the practice of letting things happen naturally, without force and expectation. He said that it was never him alone who determined his direction. It was “Jah” who he obeys. It is the “Jah” that lives in him and guides his path toward self-discovery and love. I was so moved and captivated by our discussion, that it wasn’t until someone walking by accidentally bumped me that I realized I had missed the main event! There were no more brave souls jumping off of the cliff, there were no more people standing in line to capture the best angle, and the kitchen had run out of jerk wings. Despite the fact that I missed the sunset, I felt the sun rise within.

The very first night I spent in Negril ignited a fire in me that I had let die a long time ago, and the rest of the trip did not disappoint either. We rode horses through sugarcane fields and into the ocean. We ate fresh lobster from a local fisherman, we danced all night to the tunes of the steel drum band, and we relaxed on cabanas, letting our appetite dictate our next move. Going on a trip, away from the chaos, showed me how imperative it is to spend alone, quiet time with myself. By habit, when I am alone, I listen to music, watch television, or even get on the phone so I’m not alone (“only child behavior,” I am told!). While on this trip, I sat in silence often enough to truly experience its benefits. Alone time is quality time. For me, alone time was about listening to “Jah” and making room for my higher-self to show up and teach me. Jamaica deposited the amount of clarity and direction I needed to shift my perspective and realign my purpose, which led me to discover FLOW. Allowing “flow” in provided me with opportunities to embrace the now, be present, and release my trust from the shackles of expectation and disappointment. I now know that on the excursion of life there will be bumpy, dirty, treacherous roads, and challenges will be present. Through all of the discomfort, it is important to transcend with courage, tenacity, hope, and love. When we emerge through the darkness, we will see the sunlight and know that we are loved and worth every ounce of what life has given us.

I know now that I am here to first access the love that lives in me, and then share that love with others, joining them in accessing the love within each of us. To you, reader, I urge you to remember to FLOW:

First look within

Lead with love

Open your mind

Walk with faith

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#lookleadopenwalk #whatsyourflow #flow #eleven11coaching and #lindsaylovelines)

Chapter 3

Amanda Bialack

To all women living in fear of the unknown-- Life begins when you push through that fear and get to experience everything you've been missing out on. Push though, life is short.

When my Life Begins just outside my comfort zone

In my late twenties I started learning more about Judaism. I was born and raised Jewish, however my family's version of the religion was lax, at best. I didn't know much about Shabbat, Chaggim (holidays), or Halakha (Jewish law). I knew I liked matzah ball soup and that my whole family got together family twice a year, for Passover and Rosh Hashanah.

I always wanted to learn more and do more with my religion, but I never really knew where to look or how to do it.

After a failed relationship with an Israeli man ,who had opened my eyes to a new world of more traditional Judaism, I begin my quest to learn even more about it. This journey lead me to a greater understanding of not only the religion, and the Jewish community, which I became a part of but also of Zionism.

I began to develop a genuine love for Israel, this magical country that for thousands of years was home to the Jewish people. To my people. I saw pictures of it-- the beaches, the holy sites, the kotel (wailing wall). The food looked amazing. As I became more integrated in the Pico-Robertson Jewish Community, I started hearing about people going to Israel all the time, as though it was just around the corner. I started to know people who were making Aliyah (moving from another country to Israel). I joined a Jewish learning organization, and the learning partner I was matched with, Sarah, was a women from Connecticut, who had, six months prior, moved to Israel with her family. The draw to travel to Israel, and experience it myself became stronger and stronger. I had to go.

There was only one problem: At sixteen I had developed debilitating panic attacks as a symptom of Agoraphobia, and I was terrified of flying or going anywhere outside of my comfort zone. Just a forty-five minute flight to san Francisco was a horrendous experience for me! I'd have take Xanax, and basically struggle to fight off a panic attack for the first twenty minutes on the plane. Once I did finally arrive at my destination, I could never enjoy my experience to its fullest extent because of my panic attacks and uneasy feeling that living

with Agoraphobia produces. Traveling anywhere was difficult, but the thought of going to the other side of the world, in a different time zone? It was out of the realm of possibility.

Then, at age twenty-nine, a series of important events took place in my life. First-- I decided I was going to live to be ninety, and that I could not allow these panic attacks to interfere with my happiness for the next sixty years as I had allowed them to for the last fourteen. I began taking my CBT exposure therapy seriously, and I went through the painstaking work of desensitizing myself to panic attacks and agoraphobic situations. Then, a thirty-six- year- old woman I knew, Heather, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She spent the last year of her life talking about bucket lists, and living your best life with no regrets. She said, “If you want something, you need to go out there and get it, because you NEVER know when something could happen that will make doing it no longer possible”. So, I started small-- with little flights here and there. I went on the Ferris wheel at the Santa Monica Pier. This may sound small, but it was HUGE for me! I also went to Catalina Island, where I went zip lining. Zip lining was something I had always wanted to do, but hadn’t out of fear. And then... I went to New York. I could not sleep the night before that flight. I was terrified. But I went! Following New York, I went to Mexico, San Francisco, Las Vegas, and Boston. Through all of this, I was overcoming fears and making up for lost time.

Fall is a busy time of year in the Jewish religion because of the many holidays. We call them “The Chaggim.” The season starts with Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), and is followed ten days later by Yom Kippur (the day of atonement). Then a few days later is Sukkot, an eight- day holiday during which observers eat meals in Sukkahs (huts) that people build in their yards, and the season ends with Simcha Torah. It’s a long few weeks with lots of food, and not a lot of working.

One fall day, Sarah and I were talking, as we often do. She was teaching me something about the upcoming Chaggim, as she has every year since 2015. We were talking about all our plans, and as she always does, she said, “Just come to Israel for Sukkot, It will be fun. I’ll pick you up from the airport.” This time was different though, because.... I said, “okay.” Of course, she didn’t believe me-- So, I bought a non-refundable, round-trip ticket! I was going to Israel for Sukkot.

On October 2, 2017, I landed in Israel. I like to caption this moment by saying, “It only took me fourteen hours and thirty-one years to get here, but I finally made it.” And, I really did.... I FINALLY MADE IT.

Sarah picked me up from the airport, and we went directly to the old city. It was such an incredible experience to walk through its gates! We first went to Aish, where we wrote notes to put in the wall. The experience of going to the kotel, putting my note in the wall, and then touching it and praying, was a pinnacle moment in my life. I spent the next few days at Sarah's house. She took me to the beach and boardwalk near where she lives. At the beach, we did Tashlikh together, which is a ritual performed during this time of year. I also put my feet in the Mediterranean and experienced warm beach water for the first time.

Side note: I had a halloumi salad at a restaurant on the boardwalk that night, and let me just say-- Israel has incredible dairy! Their cheese is so rich and so fresh. The food throughout Israel was absolutely amazing. They don't use preservatives and everything tastes fresh and delicious!

On Friday, Sarah drove me to Jerusalem, where I met up with my friend Nicki. Nicki set us up to have some Shabbat meals with a few friends of hers. It was truly amazing to be halfway around the world, in a Sukkah, saying the same prayers I say in Los Angeles on Shabbat. It felt magical. I was here! I had made it and I was having Shabbat in a Sukkah in Jerusalem.

That Sunday I went to Yad Veshem, the Holocaust museum. I spent a few hours there doing the audio guided tour. The tour ends with the end of the Holocaust and the liberation of the camps. It left me with this overwhelming feeling of, "But what now, where do they go from here?" When you walk out of the museum, you come to a courtyard that overlooks the hills of Jerusalem. At this solemn and beautiful place, I thought to myself, "This is where they go, this is where they went." It was one of the most powerful experiences of my life.

Monday morning I took a cab to Tel Aviv and I booked a hotel right on the beach. Nikki met me, and we spent that first day and evening together. As soon as we arrived, we put on our bathing suits and went to the beach. I had dreamed about the day I'd be at the beach in Tel Aviv. I wore my "Live Like Heather" Shirt. She, along with so many other things, had played such a huge part in getting me there. I felt the need to honor her, and so I did!

I was in Tel Aviv Monday through Thursday nights, and I spent every evening with the doors to my patio open, listening to the waves from the beach.

I spent my time in Tel Aviv seeing old friends, as two people I'd grown up with had made Aliyah and were living in the city. I went out one night with Nicki, and spent a lot of time at the beach. Sarah came down one day and we went to a museum and shopping!

I left Israel the day Sukkot ended. It was the trip of my lifetime. It is an incredible place that I believe everyone should go to. I think it'll feel like home to you, regardless of your religion. One may hear different things about this magical place, but to know Israel is to experience it for yourself-- the nightlife and beaches of Tel Aviv, the holiness of the old city, the food, the people, and the culture are all truly magnificent.

Traveling is something I recommend to everyone. If you only live in a bubble of your own world and your own experiences, you'll never truly know the rest of the world. We, as Americans are rich in ways other people, in other lands could never dream of. We can't fully appreciate that fact until we see what someone else's "normal" is. Traveling, for me, has opened my eyes to different cultures and experiences I could only ever see by going FAR outside my comfort zone. I can't wait to start my next journey.

Chapter 4

Helane Anderson

To my fellow Egypt travelers: Thanks for being part of the magic!

The Magic of Egypt

For me, traveling to Egypt was “a bucket list trip.” Growing up, watching Sesame Street and having a glimpse of Bert and Ernie at the Pyramids as a child had planted a seed in my mind. I also wore a store-bought costume and went as “O Mighty Isis” for Halloween one year, and had dreams of being Cleopatra. Needless to say, Egypt was certainly on my mind in childhood.

As life progressed, I went through a career-shift from corporate classical music into the healing arts. As a lifelong musician, I eventually found myself in Sound Healing training at the Globe Institute in San Francisco. My dreams of the pyramids came back into focus as I spoke with people about their crazy existential experiences there and learned more about the sound frequencies that are present in large tuning forks at the Karnak Temple and especially the frequency of the King’s Chamber in the Great Pyramid! My seed had grown into a tree and it was ready to be planted.

Traveling the world alone was not a new thing for me-- For my previous job in classical music publishing, I often traveled internationally by myself. However, I knew that traveling to Egypt alone was not really the best option as a blonde, white, green-eyed American. So, I “did my homework” and found a sound healer from Austin, Texas, Paul Hubbert, leading a trip to the sacred sites. The trip was focused on sound healing and included an Egyptologist tour guide and five-star accommodations. Even though I didn’t know anyone involved with the trip personally at the time, I followed my gut and signed up to go!

Disclaimer for those of you questioning my mental state at the time: Before I left, I truthfully dealt with some mixed feelings from family and friends about my decision to travel to Egypt when parts of the country were still in the “red zone.” However, I knew that I was meant to go and meant to go with these people at this time, so I listened to my voice and went anyways. And the value of always listening to your voice is truly the moral of this story.

Looking back on it now, I can only think THANK GOD (and myself!) that I did go to Egypt, as it turned out to be the best and most transformative vacation of my life so far.

The magic of Egypt is ever-present, from the moment you fly into Cairo, see the pyramids below, and feel a visceral knowing beyond the mind that this place holds a special significance in world and mystical history. Upon arrival, I was met at the airport by a guide with my name on a sign who transported me to the spectacular Mena House Hotel - a beautiful, five-star resort hotel with a view of the pyramids in the distance. I came in a day early to adjust to the time difference, have a massage at the hotel and settle in. At that moment, I had no idea the depth of the adventure I was about to embark on.

The next evening, I met my new sound healer friend Paul and my traveling companions about to become lifelong friends, in the lobby. There were only ten of us total and most were from Austin, Texas-- Paul, four women who were grandmothers, one mother, one family man and world traveler in his own right, two young men in their twenties, and me. Joining us on the adventure were Samy, our brilliant Egyptologist and Mohamed, his assistant.

The next morning, we were off on our very early flight to Aswan, the heart of Upper Egypt. And yes-- "Upper Egypt" is actually the southern part of the country, and "Lower Egypt" is the northern part of the country-- this has to do with ancient history terms. Aswan is famous for its spice markets, so we entered into that space at night, observing people and buying hibiscus and other spice goodies, and clearly noticing that the energy of this country was very different than anywhere I had been up until this point (it was the twenty-second country I visited). The next morning, we were awakened EARLY (3:30 a.m., to be exact!), and we made our way via bus and boat to the Philae Temple, the temple of Isis.

If you are unfamiliar with the original story of the Goddess Isis, the legend is that she married Osiris, King of Egypt, but his brother Set, jealous and wanting to be king himself, murdered Osiris and cut his body into many pieces, burying them at various temples throughout Egypt. Isis then went on a mission to recover all of the pieces of Osiris to reassemble his body and bring him back to life. Somewhere in the middle of this journey, they had a child together (yes, with Osiris posthumously!) named Horus. Horus became the falcon seer God who eventually challenged Set to the throne of Egypt, won and restored order to Egypt. And with his mother Isis then resurrected Osiris. This story is depicted in the hieroglyphs present throughout the many temples in Egypt, often accompanied by the various other gods and goddesses that they worked with along the way, including Hathor and Sekhmet.

At the Philae Temple, visitors can see many depictions of Hathor, the goddess of music, love, healing, dance, beauty, motherhood and joy. In the Egyptian legend, the Hathors are interdimensional beings that communicate through sound and are connected through the goddess Hathor. There are a number of interpretations of how these beings are all interconnected, and I am no Egyptologist! However, I do know that the hieroglyphs depict many connections between Isis, Hathor and the lion goddess Sekhmet, known as the goddess of fierce compassion and healing.

So, Sekhmet is a goddess whom I had never heard of before this trip. Truthfully, I was a complete novice about Egyptian history before my travels there, and I really just wanted to visit the place and feel its energy. The basic knowledge about these places I now possess is something I only learned along the way. And learning about Sekhmet was the biggest surprise and gift of all.

That day at the Philae Temple, our group assembled in a small room to create sound together. Paul brought two crystal singing bowls and took them out. Then, he opened with an invocation and all of us brought our singing voices into the space. I had been improvising with my voice in the sound healing realm for a couple years at this point, so this was not new to me, though the sounds coming out of my voice were definitely new. At the end of our sounding which lasted about thirty minutes, my new friend Linda turned to me and said I was channelling Sekhmet. “Who’s that?” I asked.

Now, I know some of you might be turning on your “skeptical brain” at present, but I ask that you keep an open mind. All spiritual transformation takes a belief in the mystical and the concept of channelling is also not a new one. All artistic creations are often said to come as inspirations from “somewhere else,” and channeling is just opening up the ability to access the energy of creation and let it move through you. As someone who works with energy in all forms through sound and healing (I am also certified in Craniosacral Therapy), I personally do believe, in the words of Einstein, that energy is neither created nor destroyed, it only changes form. And from that moment forward, the mysticism and energetic transformation began to unfold.

Abu Simbel was the next temple visit, and it is a magnificent structure that was, at one point, underwater; UNESCO rescued it piece-by-piece so that people could come and view this building in it’s full form. Upon entering the massive temples, it seemed to be built for people ten to twelve feet tall (Ironically, that is the same size as the legendary Hathor beings

were said to be). It was there that I began to learn more about Sekhmet, the daughter of RA, the Sun God, who was depicted in several forms at Abu Simbel.

In the story, Sekhmet was originally brought to Earth because Ra wanted to punish humanity, and she unleashed a rampage that left many people dead in her wake. The legend is that, in order to stop her from her blood lust, they dyed the Nile River red with pomegranate and added beer so she would drink the water, thinking it was blood. She fell for the bait, and after she drank from the river, she fell into a deep sleep. Upon waking, she was able to tap into her immense healing powers with fierce compassion, and humanity was saved.

So needless to say, she is a very intense goddess!

Once we boarded the bus at Abu Simbel, we were transported to the dock where our group boarded a private luxury yacht to begin the trip up the Nile River (and no, unfortunately it was not pomegranate-dyed beer!). This was the Quest Travel tour company owner's own private boat, equipped with twenty private guest rooms, four levels of lounging space, a beautiful dining area, lots of outdoor seating, and a staff that outnumbered our very small group of ten. We definitely fell under the "spoiled vacation traveler" category!

Our first boat stop was the Kom Ombo temple, which was probably the least interesting of all of the temples to me, though there was a museum next door of petrified crocodiles (I somehow thought they were supposed to be real crocodiles, though, so was thoroughly disappointed). At this location, I was more intensely drawn to the snake charmer outside the temple than to the structure itself. He had multiple cobras! I took advantage of this discovery by taking some amazing pictures holding one of the snakes (and yes, they no longer had the venom, or I maybe would not have been so apt to play with them!).

The next days brought tours to the Temple of Edfu, with its focus on Horus, son of Osiris and Isis, the Temple of Hathor, the Valley of the Kings, Karnak Temple Complex and Abydos. The Karnak Temple Complex was the place that housed what Egyptians call the only "living" statue of Sekhmet, in a small temple away from the main entrance requiring special access. Luckily, we were granted entry!

It's hard to describe the feeling I felt when walking towards that temple. I remember feeling a powerful pull of energy as we walked through a small pathway between ruins leading to a small room. We all piled into this small, stone-walled space which contained a statue of

Sekhmet and nothing else. As we had done in all of the temples, Paul pulled out his bowls again and we all started to sing. And my voice came out loud and vibrant in that space, more than it ever had before. After our group toning, we were all given time alone with the statue in the room. As I took my turn, I went up to the statue and touched Sekhmet's hands. The next thing I knew, I was crying uncontrollably. I'm not really sure what happened, but I couldn't stop crying! I had an overwhelming sense that I had been there before and had a deeper connection with this place beyond this lifetime. It took me a while to recover after leaving that room.

Later that evening, one of the women who is a gifted healer and reader, Leslie, offered to do a past life reading for me as a trade for a Craniosacral Therapy session. I figured it was worth a try! In the reading, the woman saw my connection with Sekhmet. According to my friend, I was Sekhmet's muse in another life and used to sing to her for inspiration (as I mentioned before, I am a singer and, at the time of my trip, I was just coming into full expression of my voice-- in this life). As she did the reading, I could feel something in me start to shift in ways I didn't understand and I again started crying. It was a deep release and gave me an odd sensation of using my voice in ways I had not previously seen.

Because, as I mentioned previously, I am a novice at best in my study of Egyptology, after this reading I promptly went back upstairs to the lounge area, grabbed an Egyptian mythology book, and started reading about Sekhmet and her story. In her incarnation to earth she transformed aggression and anger into healing and compassion (even with the help of the dyed beer) -- something that connected deeply with my own life journey of healing trauma and turning it into my healing practice. At that time, I was realizing the depth of significant blocks I had towards receiving love and nurturing as an independent single woman with two businesses and a practice that kept me very busy - it was much easier for me to be the giver. And, one by one, it felt like the blocks were being ripped away, just as the power of my voice became clearer. This trip was becoming a big part of this process for me and reading about Sekhmet felt very timely.

The thing that stood out to me the most in this book was that the goddess worked with the colors gold and white and with serpents, particularly the cobras. Backtrack to two days before this reading -- I held a cobra for the first time, and--- flashback two months before leaving on this trip-- I bought a new bed and bedding in gold and white, and hung a Shipibo Shaman tapestry depicting serpents above my bed. It was as if the energy of Egypt was already working through me, especially the energy of Sekhmet.

As for the feeling I had of being there before: At one of the temples I visited, the guard stopped me and “accused” me of being in Egypt before and having instruments in my bag (I had not been there before, but I did have instruments in my bag). Luckily, the tour assistant pretended to take it back to the bus and then secretly snuck back in with my tuning forks. But, the guards were definitely convinced I’d been there before.

Throughout the rest of the trip, I was learning more and more about the stories surrounding the spaces we visited, the significance of them, and their connection to the Western world. And, on the Spring Solstice, our final night as a group brought us to the highlight of my journey-- having the inside of the Great Pyramid to ourselves for a couple of hours. I quickly went to the King’s Chamber and spent some time in the sarcophagus toning in a way that made both the room and my body vibrate. Just feeling the sheer history of the space was enough to feel complete. As everyone else entered the room, we started sounding together for the last time as a group and something extraordinary happened. My entire body and being felt like I lifted into a dream space dimension and I heard a voice (not one from the group) tell me to lay down and receive. Everyone else began singing the “Gayatri Mantra,” a hymn to the Sun God and a mantra said to illuminate the mental, physical and spiritual realms of being. All I was able to do was lay on the cold, stone floor and weep uncontrollably.

In that moment, I felt as if I left every pain of this current life and any other past lives in the Pyramid to be transformed. It took awhile for me to recover and pull myself off the floor that night. And, as we left that room, I felt my third eye space between my forehead pulsing and open. I felt like I was light and free within my body.

That release, the connection I felt, and the healing I experienced, was a lot to process. And, the high that being in that space invoked in me lasted for quite a while, even after coming home to America.

During the summer and fall following my incredible journey to Egypt, I developed my six-week transformational voice program, wrote the book to accompany it, *YOU ARE MEANT TO SING! 10 Steps to Unlock Your Inner Voice*, and began working with people to uncover their innate ability to heal themselves by using their voice.

In retrospect, I can’t help but think that Sekhmet had something to do with my embarking on this new path. It certainly seems as though someone helped me to release

whatever was still holding me back and so I could finally take the action needed to make my vision a reality.

In my mind, I imagine that Sekhmet was not just holding my hand, but pushing me along, sometimes with compassion and sometimes through welcomed aggression-- and always with the intention of reminding me to do the work I was meant to do in this world.

I accepted her Egyptian magic then, and my journey continues today.

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Chapter 5

Kyle Cooper

A Mother and Daughter Bond

This is dedicated to all those that need or want to rediscover their passion for life and re-visit their desires. The most profound thing I have found is that we don't need to go farther than our own street corner to discover all the things we once knew about ourselves. The things we used to spend hours thinking about-- how we wanted our life to be, what we thought our true passion was, what really made us tick-- it's all there, still inside of us, and we don't need to travel halfway around the world to re-discover it. We had it all along. We had it in our soul, it just needed permission to be released or re-discovered.

A Personal Letter

To my daughter, Haydn,

There are no words for me at the moment to tell you how I feel. I can start first with, "Thank you." Thank you for being the amazing, vivacious, loving, brilliant woman that you are. You have an incredibly open and giving heart, soul and spirit. You can brighten someone's day just with your smile and that is what you have always done for me. You were open to taking a road trip with me instead of a flight to Chicago. And you actually seemed as genuinely excited as I was to spend that time together! What a time it was. We laughed, we smiled, and we sweat... Boy, did we sweat! But, despite that and other difficulties, things never "got ugly" between us. We had our moments, but they each lasted for as long as that-- a moment. The incredible thing about the trip is that the memories we created on it will last a lifetime. There is never a time when I think about our trip without a smile and chuckle. All in all, I would not have traded the time I spent with you for anything.

Thank you for taking time out of your life to spend with me... Together we created an amazing experience that left us with memories that will last us both for the rest of our lives.

I love you!

Love, Mom

To my Mom,

There is never a day I don't think about you. Your smile, your hugs and just the love you had for everyone. I have never met a person with a heart as big as yours and I miss it EVERYDAY! I don't have many regrets in life, but I do have a few-- And they all have to do with you. You would ask me to travel with you and I always said I was too busy. I just couldn't find the time. Then, you would go and take the trip by yourself. Now, looking back, I know I should have dropped everything I was doing to make that time, because today, there is nothing I can do to get it back.

Thank you for teaching me that lesson. I have learned it and learned it well. I now know how to find the time in life to enjoy and make memories.

I miss you, I love you, and most of all... I wish I had those memories of you. All the memories we would have created that would have lasted a lifetime.

I love you Mom!

Love, Me

Life Was Good

Life was good. I wasn't looking for anything different than what it already was. I enjoyed what I had.

Driving to Chicago-- A simple road trip! Who knew it would be so great? Who knew how much was yet to be rediscovered?

It was a day like any other in Los Angeles. A perfect seventy- eight degrees with beautiful blue skies and a few clouds speckled about. I was ready and so was my car, which was packed with miscellaneous items because, let's face it-- I am a Girl Scout at heart and you never know what you're going to need. So you know, why not bring it all?

Looking back, I felt foolish. My car was was packed with stuff I thought I would "accomplish" while sitting in the passenger seat for hours on the road. One of the boxes of stuff was a box of blank photo albums that I was hoping I would find the time to fill with photos that had been homeless for the past ten years. Who was I kidding... I don't think I ever touched them. Well, really, maybe once, just so I could prove to myself it was not a waste

of space to have them in the car. It is amazing to me the amount of things I packed. Things that just took up space where the new memories would have fit, almost as if I was scared I wouldn't have any. But that is really how I felt inside; that I had no more room; like I was bursting at the seams. As I struggled with these thoughts it occurred to me that I was reminiscing about a picture I had seen in the box of my daughter as a little girl while I was staring at my daughter who was now old enough to be driving. Where had all the time gone? I sat in amazement looking at my daughter realizing just how much time had passed and how long I had actually felt overrun with "stuff". While we are on the subject, along with all my misc. "stuff" we had 2 cases of avocados (one for guacamole and the other for breakfast). That was a go-to for my daughter, an avocado and Fritos (Fritos made such a great dip chip). 1 case of artichokes, 2 cases of strawberries so we could chocolate dip them, and a few cases of stone fruit to use in a cobbler we were making at our friends house for their party which was why we were driving to Chicago in the first place.

My daughter doesn't question my "stuff" anymore. She just knows and loves me the way I am which over time I have come to understand, and it is an amazing thing, unconditional love. It just so happened that the other day someone said casually in a conversation, "Unconditional love-- it's really not unconditional at all because the people we say we love, 'unconditionally' we eventually get bothered by or angry with, which if you really loved them unconditionally would never happen." Food for thought one might say; something to ponder over at another time. Back to the experience of a lifetime-- no really, that is what it turned out to be.

We were driving to Chicago to visit some friends for their annual family and friend event. My daughter and I looked at a map, figured out what states we wanted to see, and we were off. It felt good, laughing, chatting, playing music and just enjoying the thought of being together and getting out of the L.A. traffic for a while.

We drove with an idea of where we were heading, but didn't make any reservations. We figured we would make them on the road since we didn't know how far we would actually get each day. That was part of the fun, where to go, where to eat, where to sleep-- the possibilities were endless.

Arizona, and No Air

Somewhere in Arizona the air conditioning in my car went out. It was a "real hot" ninety-five degrees in July and we felt like we were sitting in a sauna. We were both so hot.

My daughter would laugh while she was wiping sweat from her brow, face and neck while saying, “What a great way to get a facial”. By that time, it was pretty funny.

We decided to take a break from the heat, so we stopped at our, go-to deli, Chompie’s, a place we stop at anytime we are in the area. We like to drive and never know where we are going to end up. Needless to say, we have been there a handful of times. We always get their corned beef or pastrami sandwich which is packed with so much meat, you can barely fit it in your mouth to take a bite. It is totally yummy!

We finished up, packed our leftovers to snack on and headed on our way to New Mexico. On the way we saw Matadors Coffee Roasting Company in Flagstaff Arizona, a coffee shop that roasted their own beans, so we just had to stop. We each ordered a coffee and stood and enjoyed the smell while they were being made. That was the first time I had ever tried a Cold Brew and I was hooked, it was amazing. Suddenly, here I was drinking a cold coffee in a torrential downpour. The rain came out of nowhere and I was caught in it, running to the car hoping not to spill a drop of my coffee, laughing all the way as I was hopping over all the water puddles in hopes not to soak my tennis shoes. It was pretty funny. My daughter was sitting in the car, dry as a bone and totally relaxed as I came busting through the driver’s side door and into the car. We both looked at each other and burst out into laughter. I can only imagine what I must have looked like. It felt like I was pretty wet and my hair was stuck to my head.

After the rain it was so beautiful out, we sat and admired the rainbows. It was just amazing.

My daughter made it her job to locate the hotels we would sleep in each night and where we were going to eat dinner. Sleeping and food were a big part of the trip for us. We really wanted to make it an experience and just enjoy our time. This was the first time we were on a trip together, just the two of us, with no real plans; just enjoying each other’s company and sharing space. So we really wanted to make a “trip” out of it. Even though it was in our backyard per se, we treated it as if it were a trip we were taking somewhere exotic or far away. Our preference was a four or five star restaurant or one with a Michelin chef. We were on a mission and food was at the top of the list.

New Mexico, Silver Shopping

Once in New Mexico we headed to the old part of town where the original silversmith shops were located. We found amazing pieces of jewelry crafted with beautiful cuts of turquoise and gems. The shop we spent most of our time at was Richardson's Trading in Galup, New Mexico. They also had a room with hand woven rugs. We spent hours there. The people were super helpful, friendly, patient and just downright nice; they were such a pleasure to be with.

After a long day of driving and walking around, we headed towards dinner. My daughter had found a restaurant online and for a while we thought we were going the wrong way. We were driving through a residential section where the trees were thick and tall, it felt as if we were in the woods. Then all of a sudden we were there, at The Indigo Crow. When we pulled up, we were not sure what to expect. It looked like an old home, original to the area. The restaurant looked like it was covered with wood on the outside which gave it a super homey feeling. We chose to sit outside on the patio. It was amazing. The sky was black and the stars glistened like diamonds. The weather was perfect and so was the lighting. Not too dark and not too bright-- just enough light to sit back, relax and enjoy the beautiful setting. It was the perfect place to end our day in the car. The waiter was attentive and made the experience that much better. He told us all about the specials, the chef, and answered all our questions, which I ask a lot of. He took it from there, and we just sat back, enjoyed and allowed the experience to unfold.

Texas

The next day we were headed to Texas. We had a few places we wanted to stop, and one of them was Black's BBQ for beef ribs. For me, it's all about the beef ribs. They had more than one location, so we really had to decide which way to head so we could time it just right and arrive while they were still open.

Our first stop was a place where there is an open field of Cadillac's standing up out of the ground. It was out in the middle of nowhere. We had just found out about it, but it seemed like a lot of people knew it was there. You bring a can of spray paint with you and paint them. It was called the Cadillac Ranch in Amarillo, Texas. We looked it up and this is what it read: "Standing along Route 66 west of Amarillo, Texas, Cadillac Ranch was invented and built by a group of art-hippies imported from San Francisco. They called themselves The Ant Farm, and their silent partner was Amarillo billionaire Stanley Marsh III. He wanted a piece of public art that would baffle the locals, and the hippies came up with a tribute to the evolution of the

Cadillac tail fin. Ten Caddies were driven into one of Stanley Marsh 3's fields, then half-buried, nose-down, in the dirt (supposedly at the same angle as the Great Pyramid of Giza). They faced west in a line, from the 1949 Club Sedan to the 1963 Sedan de Ville, their tail fins held high for all to see on the empty Texas panhandle.”

The next stop was Heritage Boots in Austin. There we met one of the guys that made the boots. We spent what felt like hours there too. Trying on different styles, some with whacky colors and designs, some just one color and beautifully crafted. They were like a piece of art for your feet. Boots, one of my favorite things.

We pulled into Black's BBQ in Austin, Texas just in time for dinner. It was a small hole-in-the-wall type of place with yummy food. The people were super nice and the ribs were absolutely delicious. Seating was family-style, big wood tables, which I love. There we left with a to-go box for breakfast.

I had watched the show, “Fixer Upper” since it originated and could not fathom driving through Texas without stopping there. The 10 hour out-of-the-way adventure was well worth it, which is what my daughter asked as she informed me of what a deviation it was from our original plan. But we did it. We decided we were not really on a schedule and were making our schedule as we went. We had a good laugh there because we both purchased purses and if you know the show, they are all about furniture and home decor; but we could not resist the handbags.

The store and grounds they created were beautiful. Gardens filled with vegetables, a place to order snacks or have lunch, an area to let the kids out to run around. Nice job Gains family.

Colorado

It was a long drive from Wako to Colorado but it was well worth the drive just because I got to spend more time with my incredible daughter. The car was so hot, it was a continuous facial and body cleanse. The down side-- the smell of rotting produce that was in the car.

Next stop, Colorado. The restaurant we were heading to was Mercantile Dining and Provisions located inside the Train Station in Denver (*LoDo's Union Station*) which was pretty cool. When we walked in, we walked straight into the bar into a little shopping area, from there into the restaurant. We were seated next to a great couple who we chatted and chatted about life with.

There were so many amazing-sounding dishes on the menu, we just couldn't decide. Between the waiters suggestions and the couple next to us, the decision was that much harder. We kept looking around at the dishes on other peoples tables and they all looked so good. So we narrowed it down to a few and figured we would eat the left-overs for breakfast. We started with multiple appetizers and soups; then moved on to a few entrees. Everything was so good that we found there were not many leftovers for breakfast as we had hoped. The waiter told us about the farm-to-table cookbook they had and that it was from a restaurant in Martha's Vineyard that sounded amazing. It sounded like a place I'd love to visit so I, of course, bought it and had the waiter sign it.

What a great dinner it was-- not just because of the food, but because of the people we met while experiencing the food. That is the reason to enjoy experiences as they come. You never know what you may receive. In this case a full belly, warm heart, and a lot of laughs and love.

By the time we left, it was almost midnight and pitch-black out. Those beautiful Colorado mountains you hear so much about, we drive right through them without being able to enjoy the view. That was tough as I would have loved to see them. We drove from the train station to Vail and stayed in a hotel there. By this time we were both so full and exhausted, sleep felt amazing. The hotel had down comforters which were super comfy.

The next day was absolutely beautiful and amazing. We walked around the town of Vail and then headed out. We went river rafting as a spur-of-the-moment activity which we saw signs on the side of the highway. The river rafting company wasn't going to let us go because they were booked. Understandable since the boats were heading down the rapids in less than 30 minutes. But, they said, if we were able to fill another boat they would allow us to go. Well you guessed it-- a family of four walked in and wanted to go. Now with the two of us it equaled the six that was needed to fill a boat. That was fun. From there we went to the natural hot springs which we learned about from our tour guide. The whole day was just amazing.

After such a great day, we got back in the car and immediately noticed the fruit smelled really bad. There is nothing like the smell of rotting strawberries. It became pretty funny because there was nothing else we could do but laugh-- if I didn't do that, I would have cried. As a matter of fact I am sitting here laughing as I am writing this remembering just how bad it all smelled. We did everything we could preserve the fruit. We brought it into

each hotel every night hoping to get some of it into the hotel refrigerator, added bags of ice in the cases and covered the cases up with a blanket in hopes to keep in the cold. I would like to think all that effort did do something towards the preservation of the produce.

Arkansas

On our way to Arkansas. Once in Little Rock we had seafood. That was a quick stop. In and out of the city.

In each new state we dressed in fewer and fewer clothing in hopes that it would help us deal with the heat. But no matter what we wore that day, we always put on the incredible cowboy boots we bought from Heritages Boots in Austin, Texas. They were so awesome! We loved those boots.

Every few hours we would stop at a gas station and pick up cups of ice to suck on, or put in front of an open window in hopes of producing a cool breeze. We took as many back roads as we could, so that we could stop at the, “off the beaten path” antique shops in every state. But, since I had packed so much stuff in the car with us, each time we bought something we had to roll down the window to get it in the car, because if we opened the door something would fall out! “Comical” is the only way I can describe it now. We almost peed our pants laughing every time this happened-- sad, but true!

We made it: Chicago at last!

On the fifth day of our trip, we arrived at our friends’ house-- and everything we thought was going to happen, didn’t. Our host missed a meeting because we were lost and couldn’t find her house, then, her daughter was home unexpectedly, and, finally, my own daughter’s plans fell through. They lived in the outskirts of Illinois, way back in the country. So far in country that, when we called for directions, we were actually asked if the sun was in front of us or behind us!

However, once we arrived, settled in, and all made dinner together, it was really nice. Everyone was in the kitchen helping each other cook while we filled our friends in on our road trip adventure from California. Even after we ate, we continued to just sit and talk. We laughed about our childhoods, our memorable experiences, and just about life. We drank wine, and, when it got dark, we realized there were fireflies outside. So we turned off most of the lights and just watched. They were absolutely amazing. I couldn’t remember ever seeing fireflies before! I just sat and stared, and I felt more relaxed than I had in a long time. Even though

that evening may not have been anything out of the ordinary for many people, the entire night was magical to me. The next morning came way too quickly for me, and when I finally got up, I realized I felt different. I can't put my finger on what had changed; I just know I woke up a different person inside. I felt a sense of calm. I didn't feel rushed or scattered, or even uneasy about waking up somewhere totally new. I was probably the most relaxed I had been in years!

I realized I had fallen in love with everything, the house, the farm, the dog, the tractor, the life. I had somehow "drank the Kool -aid." Before this moment, I didn't know I could feel this calm. It felt amazing.

This experience was never about anything else except learning how I treat and value myself. I have come to understand that how I feel about myself is how I treat myself and allow others to treat me. I realized that when I was speaking the words, "I am angry." or "I am sad," I was allowing those words and feelings to define me. I have now come to understand that I am not those things. I may feel angry or feel sad, but those are just feelings; nothing more, nothing less. They were just that-- feelings. And they come and go.

Who knew a road trip to Chicago would end up being so significant! I didn't have to go halfway across the world to Bali or India to find out something that had been inside me for a long time. The most important thing I learned from this trip was just how easy it was-- How easy it was to just jump in the car and go. With only a general thought of where we wanted to go and how to get there, we had made our own experience. The best part of the trip was when my daughter asked if we can do it again next year. After all that time in the car, together, no air, and some pretty bad smells, she wanted to spend another ten days with me! Are you kidding? You don't have to ask me twice, Haydn! I'll pick you up in an hour....

Kyle Cooper

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#motherdaughter

#experience

#vacation

#roadtrip

#trip

Chapter 6

Kartini Wahyu

To my beloved mother who introduced me to travelling and a “fancy” lifestyle, to all women (or should I say, goddesses!) and to everyone around the world who has been inspired to widen their horizon by exploring what Mother Earth has to offer through traveling. May you discover The Oneness in all of us through experiencing these new natures, cultures, traditions, histories, languages and food. I hope travelling will enhance our humanity’s connections as a whole so so that we can all joyfully live together, side by side.

See the World

“Your mother has asked you to come live with her to continue your education because I can’t afford to have you anymore, and she needs your help.”

Sadly, I had no choice when my father told me this. I moved to Jakarta to continue my education. My mother had decided to pursue her own life when I was just two years old, leaving my father, my older brother and my older sister with only each other.

But at this moment, barely sixteen years old, I had to leave this childhood behind: my father, my older brother, my older sister, my friends, my neighborhood, and everything I know, my hometown, my beloved city of Bandung. I left to pursue my desire to learn English, and to live with my mother in Jakarta who I didn’t know except for vague memories of her visiting us in Bandung and buying us gifts of books, money, fancy dresses, dolls, or food. I was very fond of her. I was sad that I had to leave my father but at the same time I was excited to experience a different lifestyle. I went from living in a very modest way in Bandung to experiencing a “fancy” lifestyle in Jakarta. Even though I had to work hard-- studying, helping my mom cook, cleaning, and taking care of my younger brother-- I also got to eat good-quality food, go to nice restaurants, and travel. My typical day would be as follows: Wake up at five A.M., do house chores, go to school, come home, help my mom cook for her restaurant and make her new husband dinner, clean up afterwards, and go to bed around ten P.M. In my spare time, I loved looking at atlases. I would imagine myself travelling in Europe, and taking the train from one place to another: Glasgow to London, London to Paris, Paris to Rome and so on. Just seeing the map made me really happy! Sometimes, I would listen to radio stations that broadcast American hits. I learned to sing the songs and, with an English-Indonesian

dictionary in my hand, I learned to understand their lyrics. My favorite song at that time was “Greatest Love of All” by Whitney Houston. As soon as I understood the meaning of the song, I was inspired. It became my mantra when things got tough with my mother (or with classmates that made fun of me because I “was not pretty enough”!). Finally, I graduated from high school and got to pursue my education at the next level. I enrolled myself in a college and declared English Literature as my major. At the same time, adult life also kicked into gear, and my mother asked me to help her by working in her restaurant-- first as a cashier, then a waitress, and even, sometimes, as a cook. My typical day had changed. Now, I woke up at five A.M., did house chores, went to school, came back home, helped my mom cook for her restaurant and her new husband, took the food we had prepared to the restaurant and work there until two in the morning, slept and repeated the whole thing the next day. I had no idea where all the energy came from, but I kept on going! My burning desire to learn English, travel and be independent motivated me.

The first country I visited was Singapore. We chose to go to this country because my mom’s new husband, a Japanese man, needed something called an exit permit in order to continue to stay in Indonesia. To get it, he had to go out of the country every year. This time, all four of us went as well: My mom, her new husband, my baby brother and me! At the time of my trip, I didn’t even know how to buckle and unbuckle my seatbelt, and when the airplane was about to take off, I was terrified! I prayed and closed my eyes until finally I heard the stewardess preparing and offering drinks and meals to passengers. When I finally did arrive, I found Singapore to be very clean, organized and interesting. It includes a small island, called Sentosa island. I found that one could explore this whole country in a single day-- literally! During our time there, we did touristy stuff like taking pictures to be printed on mugs, taking pictures with well-trained parrots and taking pictures in front of a dragon statue. We did plenty of other things too-- But I remember those silly moments best!

From then on, I traveled often. I went to Bali three times (once with my mom and the whole family, once when meeting up with “the love of my life” and once for honeymoon, yes-- I am divorced!) Each time it was the “same deal”-- I did traditional tourist things, like taking pictures with monkeys in Ubud and by the beaches in Sanur, Kuta and Jimbaran, and also buying souvenirs and eating local food. I then went to Japan with my older sister to visit family in Hokkaido (My older sister is married to a Japanese man, too!) This country was similar to Singapore-- It was also very clean, organized and interesting. During our stay, we were taken to a hot spring bath in a hotel on the top of the mountain located in a region of northern

Hokkaido. It had a magnificent buffet! I also went on a local tour by myself, but, since I spoke only very little Japanese, I had no idea what the tour guide was speaking about! One time that the tour bus stopped, I saw a small ramen restaurant. It looked very appealing, so I went inside and ordered myself a bowl. What I didn't know, was that the only reason the bus stopped, was because a passenger needing to use the restroom! When my ramen showed up, I had to leave because the tour guide came to me, saying urgently that we "really needed to go." That experience gave the phrase, "lost in translation" a whole new meaning to me! A few years later, I went to Japan again, this time departing from my new home of Los Angeles to see my sisters. We again went to a hot bath and had the most amazing time! Each pool was a different temperature and had its own specific benefits and properties- There were sulfur and saltwater pools, indoor and outdoor pools, pools that soften your skin and pools that tighten it. This experience helped me appreciate the value of time with family!

I have been lucky enough to go to Singapore two more times, and the first of the two was with a couple of my closest friends. Even though we did similar things this time as on my last Singapore trip, this visit was a completely different experience for me. Without my mom around, I felt suddenly free and liberated. I wore whatever I wanted to wear, and this departure from wearing the modest Muslim clothing I was used to in Indonesia allowed me to feel like I was finally able to express myself through the clothes I chose to put on my body. A little later I went to Singapore again, and in this instance I took my other best friend. We extended our trip in order to experience Malaysia too! I found this new country to actually be very similar to Indonesia-- although the language sounded a little funny to my ear! After all of these adventures, I become an expert at buckling and unbuckling my seat belt. My fear of taking off was still there, but it had greatly diminished!

To too long after, my older sister asked me again to accompany her family to Singapore. Instead, I used her trip as an excuse to take my own journey, to Malaysia again-- this time to see a man who I thought of as the love of my life! It was the perfect cover to avoid my mother's questions. I was so excited-- I was about to see my first love! As I was packing for that trip, I couldn't stop thinking about the young, tall, handsome Scottish man with curly hair, sideburns, and beautiful eyes that made my heart beat like a drum. He worked in the oil industry, travelling from one country to another on contract. My visit started with him picking me up in Kuala Lumpur. As is our culture, we didn't hug, kiss, hold hands, or even speak that much-- I was just content walking beside him. The next day, he took me to Frazier mountain, and played me Whitney Houston-- the same album that was playing in the club the moment

we first met. Enjoying the scenery, my favorite songs and my first love sitting beside me, I felt like the happiest woman alive.

He tried to book a separate bedroom for me, but found that only one was available. I was nervous yet excited to spend the night with him. Though I returned to Indonesia still a virgin, that trip-- and that night-- was everything I wanted it to be.

I went on to visit this man in both Thailand and Norway, and, although we didn't ultimately end up together, I treasure each experience.

Not only have I taken short trips abroad, but I also lived in Germany for some time. During my stay there, I got to travel to Istanbul, Turkey; Cairo, Egypt; and Paris, France; as well as all around Germany. Although I was glad to have the opportunity to see all these places, I did find the people and the food in Germany to not quite be to my liking, and I eventually moved back to Indonesia.

I went to Bali on more time-- this time on honeymoon! Looking back on it, my decision to marry a British man who I didn't really have feelings for seems like it might not have been the best idea! I followed my mother's advice-- "Get married, and, if you don't like it, get a divorce,"-- And, I eventually did get my divorce. Being with him did, however, mean that I lived in another place! For a short time, I lived in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Despite a few trips to more liberal neighboring places like Bahrain and Dubai, I felt very confined while living in Saudi Arabia. I was glad when my divorce brought me back to Jakarta.

However, fueled by a burning desire to live a better life, I quickly transplanted again-- this time, to Los Angeles! I had dreamed of moving to this city since I was a teenager, and I was ecstatic to finally make it a reality. Not long after I arrived, I, again found myself with an offer of marriage! I was overjoyed, and, at first, the marriage was just what I wanted. My husband was a dream: kind, soft spoken, handsome, and well- educated. However, as time went on, I found him to be too controlling and traditional. He didn't want me to have a job, my own money, or my own life, yet he never wanted to do anything exciting with me! I recall clearly one time when he said, "I am your husband, not your entertainer." I thought quietly to myself, "Well, in that case, then I am your wife, not your house maid, slave or prisoner!" It wasn't easy, but I finally got myself a job, a car, and a savings account. Quickly after that, I ended the marriage.

Newly single and independent, I decided to take a trip on my own! I went to Amsterdam, where I visited a good friend of mine. She and her husband gave me a gorgeous tour of the city-- complete with the red light district and several marijuana bars! I also enjoyed seeing the Anne Frank House. After spending a few days reminiscing with my friends about college and travelling, I decided to venture out on my own and take the journey to London by bus. I enjoyed seeing the sites in London and tasting the local food-- although, I concluded that the fish and chips at Ye Old King's Head in Santa Monica is just as good as it is "across the pond"!

Every time I travel, I'm excited and inspired to see a new place, no matter how far from home it is. In the next few years, I took quite a few exciting journeys!

First, was a road trip from LA to Washington DC by way of the Deep South. I went with a very close friend, and this trip made me feel like a "legit" American citizen! My favorite parts of the trip were visiting local natural parks and sampling the native foods in each place we stopped at. And there were plenty of cuisines to try-- We managed to visit New Mexico, Texas, Georgia, and both Carolinas. I even got to take in New Orleans and the Grand Canyon!

My newfound love of yoga spurred my next vacation. I went with a guru I had met previously and several other yogis, and we started out with an incredibly long plane ride-- twenty hours from New York to New Delhi! The highlight of my trip to India was seeing the Taj Mahal. I was fascinated by its story and the beauty this world wonder possessed. The trip as a whole taught me a lot about Indian's cultures, traditions and their beliefs, and I also felt very grateful for the opportunity to taste the culture's modest meals.

For my next journey, I drove alone to Big Sur. Although doing this was definitely not comfortable for me, when one of my yoga teacher friend's invited me on her camping trip, I decided to get in my car and face my fears. I actually ended up enjoying the drive quite a lot! I took Highway Five, and enjoyed passing beautiful wineries, stopping at the Hearst Castle, and eating a quiet but pleasant lunch by myself. I remember distinctly looking out at a beautiful, flowery garden and a blue ocean in the distance as I enjoyed my Mexican meal. Once I arrived at my destination, I camped, hiked, cooked over a fire, and took in a gorgeous sunset. The most memorable part of my sunset- gazing was spying a couple making out non- stop! It was hilarious. I'm sure I'm not the only one that was silently thinking, "Geez-- Get a room!" Driving home along Highway One was a meditation in itself, and I arrived back in LA focused and relaxed.

On September 2, 2016, I again found myself on a long plane ride. I had given myself a birthday present of a Mediterranean cruise, and a Law of Attraction workshop taught by Abraham Hicks at the cruise's final port city. Our group met up in Amsterdam and from there cruised to Belgium, Bilbao, Cadiz, Palma De Mayorca and Spain, onwards to Gibraltar, and finally to our final destination, Rome. And, of course, I made a wish by the Trevi fountain and ate delicious pasta while I was there! Overall, each country and city I saw on this trip was interesting and unique. When I came back to LA, I felt so much abundance and gratefulness in everything back home.

In 2017, I went to Lake Tahoe where I enjoyed fresh air and snow. This year, I am already planning my next adventure-- the Northern Lights and ice caves of Iceland!

I urge you to keep your travelling dreams alive, and to surrender to the idea that, if you truly want to travel, the universe will conspire to make it happen. All you need to do is relax and live. I wish you much love and gratitude. I hope that all your travel dreams may come true, just as mine have.

Kartini W.

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Chapter 7

Alexis Collins Shuster

The Space to Be

To my Aunt Coralie Collins who gave me a lifeline to the larger world, was an amazing example of a courageous, engaged, entrepreneurial woman and, simply, helped me feel special. And, to her sister, my Aunt Domini Collins, and Brian Milton who picked up the torch when she passed on-- Together, you all are the most loving family anyone could wish for.

Special thanks to my mother, Isabel Wadsworth, my stepfather, Garret D. Leahey, Jr., and to my brothers, Garret D. Leahey III and Peter Merrick Leahey. Thanks to you two for always “letting me go.”

To my travel buddy and best friend of sixteen years, Megan Bouchier. I am so grateful for your friendship and your memory.

And, last but not least, to my amazing husband, Stephen A Shuster, and my children, Eloise and Joe who have been my greatest joy and constant reminders that the true journey is inward. I have a great life!

It was 2009 and I, being a twenty-nine-year-old overachiever, had been working in the corporate special events industry steadily since college-- for the past seven years.

It took me until we landed in Istanbul on July 19th (*approximately three days and three flights since embarking on our journey!*) to finally enjoy my first relaxed moment since beginning to lead my insane, workaholic, Los Angeles life. From the moment we landed, the trip was about me becoming comfortable in my own skin and learning to breathe in new landscapes. When it is affecting me best, travel helps me to recall my true self through the discovery and integration of new things. If you can't tell, I have a hard time unwinding! However, taking a vacation helps, because when I am in an unfamiliar place, its' “newness” keeps me out of my head and, without a stressful schedule, I am able to be more present to the beauty around me. Furthermore, having an itinerary gives me permission to “just be.”

I spent my whole young, academic life trying to be a “good girl” and “have it together”-- or, at least look like I did. I was a hard worker who sought validation, and to be acknowledged for following the rules -- of which there were a lot (or so I thought). That

intensity lead me from an independent private elementary school, to private high school, and later, to Princeton University. I will never forget the way I felt when my Princeton acceptance letter came in the mail. I was so relieved that I threw myself on the ground crying - as if that letter (or, the prestige that it carried) held the key to my future and my life. It was my second of many, “If I get there, I will be okay” milestones. It was my ticket away from Los Angeles and a life that felt sad and limiting. The East Coast flights in my late teens and early twenties to and from Princeton were exciting and fueled both my desire for independence and my fantasies of travel.

I had been working on my jet-setting fantasy since elementary school (even though it had been limited to the infamous “Hawaii” where all of the affluent Angelinos vacationed regularly during breaks). What I like about travel is the feeling of freedom that has always accompanied it for me (that is, until the kids arrived, when traveling light ceased being an option and the gear list -- and experience of going through security -- stifled that joy). The idea that I could, literally, fly away, with an exciting adventure ahead on the other side, was a life-line, a survival fantasy that kept me going from my teens through my mid-thirties. That idea that kept me inspired was that I could leave it all behind - and that things would be different - or better - both when the plane landed at my destination, and arriving home after.

After I graduated, I spent the next seven years working in the world of high-profile corporate special events with home bases on both coasts (I started in NYC and moved back to LA). Event planning was not a common job for people who graduate from Princeton - most moved on to Wall Street or Law school (*or so it seemed*). However, by the time I graduated, what I knew about Alexis was that she was a detail-oriented, organized, planner who liked to party... Plus, my stay-at-home artist mother had a very successful friend in the world of corporate events who helped me get started.

The ensuing period of my life was characterized by extreme workaholicism, isolation, perfectionism, long, grueling, days on my feet and an overall betrayal of self. During this time, my business sent me to Bermuda, all over California, Florida, Nevada, Michigan, Utah, and there was a time I was traveling at least once a month between Los Angeles and New York.

When my best friend, and later maid of honor, Megan, called me to go on an international vacation (after several burnouts and heading full-steam towards another one), I was ready. So, we planned a trip to visit Istanbul, Athens and the Greek Islands of Mykonos, Ios and Santorini.

I don't remember at what point I realized that I wasn't going to be able to go back to my job. Something about planning the trip made me finally feel like I was LIVING. And, I wasn't feeling that behind my desk. Now, let me be clear-- It wasn't necessarily the work that I was doing, but how I was doing it that was the problem. My obsession with controlling every detail and my anxiety around "something going wrong," coupled with my inability to have faith that everything would work out and that I was going to be okay regardless, made the job unsustainable for me.

If I was going to "let go", I felt that I had to let *everything* go. I put in my notice and called my friend with the update. Note-- Megan's nickname is Megabyte because she remembers more details of my life than I do. When I called her to reflect on the trip in preparation for writing this chapter, she reminded me that I called her up before we left with no advanced discussion or warning to casually report (as I've been known to do), "So... I quit my job so that I can be emotionally free for this trip." Her endearing laughter and appreciation for who I am, quirks and all, warms my heart in a way that only a friendship that spans decades can.

My first vivid memory of our trip to Istanbul was sitting on the rooftop cafe of our hotel, La Maison, overlooking the Bosphorus. The river was a vibrant turquoise. The crystal water coupled with the cityscape was a visual meditation for me, someone who felt like she had been looking at nothing but a computer screen for years. The view of contemporary structures against the historic domes of mosques was exquisite -- like nothing I had ever seen before outside an art history book.

The outdoor cafe meals, walk on streets with stray cats at our feet, and the strolls in famous markets looking at beautiful tapestries and carpets were wonderful. I will never forget a few extra special moments from my trip-- Like taking in the grandeur of the expansive Blue Mosque barefoot, while imagining all of the bodies packed in during prayers, or walking through the abundantly tiled Haram in the Topkapi Palace trying to imagine what it must have been like packed with beautiful women.

Then there were the moments where we were forced to remember the real dangers of being two American girls alone in Turkey-- like being in a hostile cab, or being harassed by a male street vendor outside the Blue Mosque, or being aggressively followed by men on the street. We were both very aware of the gender bias, but Megan and I took two different approaches. She was cautious, and I let my wave of "travel courage" carry me all the way through Istanbul. I have always had a fierce sense of independence and confidence -- albeit

one impacted and muted by my desire to fit in and my fear of not being good enough. But, at my core, at home and with my closest friends there is a leader, one who is opinionated, and even mouthy and domineering at times. Megan had no idea that my bravado had been suppressed for so long.

I have always loved walking through abandoned palaces -- I enjoy seeing private, empty spaces reflecting the richest, most luxurious lifestyles of the past. After waiting for what felt like forever outside the Dolmabahce Palace in a maxi dress, sneakers and an ankle brace (like the fashionista that I am!), I found... my dream bathroom! Dolmabahce is exquisitely positioned on the edge of the Bosphorus, which is in itself a clean, monochromatic masterpiece. Inside, the Sultan's Alabaster Hamam made my heart sing. While most of the palace details and furniture I found ostentatious and over-the-top, the sheer power and natural beauty of the entire bathroom of pure Alabaster stone was awe-inspiring. Despite the artisans insanely intricate designs, and molded columns and arches, what really impacted me was the powerful veins of the stone. The beauty of the natural stone dominated the human impact on it.

What happened to me on this trip was a sort of grounding - in culture, time, and truth. What I came to realize was that, for me, the older something is, the more energetic history, the closer it brings me to God.

The Parthenon in Athens was magical. Megan and I walked and hiked around it, sat on steps taking pictures of each other, and meandered around the structure, absorbing the magnitude of the columns and architecture. We were also able to sit and enjoy the amazing view from the Parthenon. And, later that night, we dined in a restaurant with a perfect view of the lit masterpiece. To take in a good meal with a historic view is a life-giving experience.

By the time I made it to this pivotal trip, I had nursed a compulsive shopping habit for over fifteen years, fueled by my insecurity and my desire to "look good." The concept of limiting my wardrobe to what I could carry on my back was foreign to someone hiding behind clothes and accessories in Los Angeles. However, freed of most of my material attachments, except those I could fit in a backpack (and fewer as the trip went on because the backpack got progressively heavier), the trip became about me and God exploring, walking and feeling.

On the Greek Islands, around more people, I was confronted with less desirable aspects of my character -- my insecurities, my self-loathing and my self-centeredness. My experience

is that when I step out of my comfort zone, when I say “yes” to the Universe and to life, I am confronted with parts of myself that I need to reflect on, and blocks that I need to release in order to grow and have a more rewarding journey in service to those in my life.

The people and the cultures were very different from Greek Island to Greek Island. For example, Mykonos was packed with older Europeans while Ios was packed with young Australians. Santorini was packed with lovers of all ages and races. I was blown away by the energy on the beach in Mykonos. While I was self-conscious about my weight and how I looked, I was still able to experience the joy and energy of the European dancers, the Elephant G-string wearing DJ on the dance cube, and the hot bodies on the beach -- all without grabbing a drink or being the life of the Island party.

On Ios, we stayed at a quaint hotel where we went on a hike to a little chapel, capturing a view of fields, mountains and ocean, simultaneously. At the same time that I was taking in new topography and feeling connected to the Island’s natural beauty, I felt old and tired, and was confronted with this overwhelming fear of not being “good enough” or “fun enough.” All I wanted to do was rest and read.

It was on these party Islands where I learned that I am a person who needs space. I love people and I do well with one-on-one conversation -- I am very interested in getting to know everything about everyone, their business and their lives. However, I get overwhelmed in big groups and get overstimulated often, sometimes finding it hard to concentrate when a lot is going on. I retreat into my head-- That is never a good place for me to be for too long without a loving guide!

By the time that we got to Santorini I was serene again and ready to relax. I will never forget the powerful views from the Ferry of the steep cliffs, or the drive to our hotel in the taxi with the special steering wheel to navigate the passes up the cliffs from the docks. The volcanic rock is majestic. It is hard to doubt the existence of a spirit of the universe when you visit and absorb a sunset in a place as dramatic as Santorini. The remaining days of our trip Megan and I spent at the hotel pool overlooking the ocean. I wrote in the sun in peace. It felt like I was at the edge of the world after a long journey.

My trip to Turkey and Greece was almost ten years ago now. Today, I am a very different woman. I identify as a recovering artist and healer coming back to her true spirit through mentorship, fellowship, motherhood, parenting, marriage, and other teacher’s practical tools. I

serve others in my job in Special Events as well as through my intuitive business coaching work, which brings me profound joy and fulfillment.

Today, I don't have to wait for a big trip to relax or learn about myself. My true journey now is right in front of me. It is about accessing the state of youthful freedom, excitement, energy and empowered movement on a daily basis -- through strengthening my mind and body, exercising, being in nature, playing with my kids, meditating, connecting with my husband, laughing (though I can always use more laughter!), and helping others grow. Although, I still have to schedule it into my daily/weekly "itinerary," or I can forget!

I know now that the journey is not outward as I for so long believed it to be. It is not a race. It seems to me like a long stroll. Pacing myself and allowing truth and vulnerability to come through me at all costs is essential for spiritual survival and to experience true "*Joie de vivre*."

For me, being present to the beauty, history and abundance of other places and cultures is a skill that can only be developed and truly appreciated with a complimentary inward passport.

To find out more about Alexis and her coaching services, please email her alexis@mytruejourney.com or visit <https://mytruejourney.com>

Chapter 8

Marilyn “Tiya Dk” Kirby

To my Father, Dr. Ronald F. Kirby, who gave me the courage, hope, and

Inspiration to travel and live like there is no tomorrow. #YOLO

A Trip like No Other

My name is Marilyn Kirby, but most people know me as “Tiya DK,” the artist from the Washington, DC area. I love to paint and write, but recently traveling has become another passion of mine. Despite struggles that at first kept me from leaving the country, I have since become quite an avid traveler. Since my dad passed away, I have found traveling to be a therapeutic, priceless experience. I hope that my story inspires you to travel, be open to new things, and live like there is no tomorrow.

Near the end of February 2016, I started to have an itch to travel, and I thought that maybe it would be fun to venture out for my birthday on March 20th. However, I wasn’t sure what to do, where to go, or who to go with! One thing I did know was that I needed to get out and do something for myself, because I was finally coming out of a deep depression from the unexpected loss of my father.

You see -- about a year or so prior, I had lost my dad unexpectedly to a crazy serial killer who gunned him down while my father was standing in front of his doorway of his own home. It was the most horrific, egregious, and unimaginable tragedy to experience and endure. The horrible news of my father’s death caused me to shut down and become deeply depressed. And, as if that wasn’t enough, during the exact same time that I was grieving, I was also dealing with a crazy ex that would not leave me alone, which forced me to have to defer to my legal counsel. Can you imagine the emotional stress I was dealing with? Having to hear about my dad on the news daily and listen to reporters constantly asking for a story didn’t make things any better, and worst of all, I wasn’t able to travel to get away from all the madness... Well, at least not in the beginning.

When the murder initially happened, my family and I all had to stay close. We were not allowed to travel outside of the country until law enforcement could rule us out as suspects; it was a process of elimination. After some time, once the detectives found out who the

perpetrator was, we were finally cleared and were allowed to travel wherever we wanted to go.

During my profound loss, I found a wonderful family therapist, Mary-Ann, to help me get through the grieving process. She strongly encouraged me to “start living again,” “make time to do me,” and also, to start traveling again. She felt it would be a good idea for me to venture out, have something positive to look forward to, and, she hoped that the excitement of it all would help me bounce back from the mourning and toxicity of the past year. Once I got out of my funk, crawled back out of my hole, and started seeing how important it was for me to get myself “back together,” I started to have that craving for travel again, but the problem was, I had no one to go with.

Because it was so last minute and traveling usually takes time to plan and save for, I knew it would be inconsiderate and insensitive for me to ask any of my friends to go with me. Therefore, I decided I would go alone. But then, the thought of traveling alone didn’t sit well with me! I thought to myself, “Maybe, I just shouldn’t go at all.”

Out of nowhere, on that very same day, a good friend of mine, Kim, who also loves to travel, called me. She asked me what my plans were for the week of my birthday, which fell on a Tuesday. I told her, “Probably nothing, because, more than likely, no one can take time off or has the money to go on a trip so last minute.” She said, “Well I’m available, so what’s your excuse now!” She was serious, too, so I laughed and said, “I guess I don’t have one now, huh?” “You have nothing to worry about, so pack your shit and be ready to have some fun!” said Kim. “We’re leaving in two weeks and don’t ask me where we’re going or be nosey...I’ll take care of the plans; you just be ready when I pick you up and don’t forget your passport. If you do, you will be left in the dust!”

That phone call changed my whole mood, and I was beyond ecstatic. Needless to say, a trip was planned by Kim. I had no idea what an amazing experience I was in for.

Fast forward to two weeks later, and there I am at the BWI airport in Baltimore, Maryland, meeting Kim. She has this big grin on her face and gives me a huge hug, before saying, “I got a surprise for you...” Sure enough, she already has something up her sleeve. Kim tells me to turn around, and suddenly I see this tall, slim-thick woman running up to me. It is my best friend, Nikki! I’m stoked and ecstatic as Nikki gives me a huge hug while jumping up and down screaming and singing the 50 Cents rap and hook, “Hey Shorty, it’s

your birthday, we goin' party like it's your birthday..." Pretty soon, we're all singing, jumping up and down and smiling ear to ear.

Kim hands me my plane ticket and it says, "We are going to Montego, Jamaica." I'm elated and scream with joy, "What!? Are you serious!?" We all start jumping up and down with excitement and I do a happy dance! Everyone laughs, and then I give them both another hug and tell them that they are the best and have truly made my day. Nikki responds back and says, "Girrrllllll, now you know you deserve it! With all the shit you've been through, this is the least we could do for you. And, you know, it's time for you to bounce back and act like Stella got her groove back! Okay?!" We all laugh and start walking toward the kiosk stand to check in.

Once through security, my friends and I sit down at a bar-- mind you, it's seven in the morning! Nevertheless, Kim asks the bartender for three long island ice teas and three tequila shots with lime. I look at Kim like she has lost her mind! But, she stares right back at me and says, "Come on now, you only live once...so drink up, Biiitttttcchhhhes!" We tap our glasses together and slam them back, or, as I like to say, "Drink it to the head"! After that, I'm already feeling warm and fuzzy. I am definitely ready to get this party started.

We get on the plane and there is someone sitting in our row near the window seat. It's a Bad Ass Chick, looking fly as hell, who's wearing all red with a blonde medium length bob cut; she is glowing and has a beautiful tan complexion with a gorgeous smile. She turns around and gives me a warm hug, telling me that her name is Meeka and she is Kim's friend who is joining us on our trip to Jamaica. I'm pleasantly surprised how warm and friendly she is. I feel like I know her from a past life, that's how well we connect and hit it off.

We all take a seat and wait to take off. We, of course, ask for a round of drinks and, we luck out-- Our stewardess buys us our first round because she overhears my friends blast the news to everyone on the plane that it's my birthday. And then, after that round, a group of guys sitting a few rows up decides to buy us our next round! Even after that, the drinks keep coming. I start to wonder if I am going to need a barf bag and an extra bottle of water because I just know that one of us is going to overdo it. And, it will probably be me! Regardless, all of us are excited that the trip is starting off so well. We toast our plastic cups together and... take it to the head.

Finally, we land in the Montego airport, and go through the whole process with customs and immigration. Meeka has a friend, named Brandi, who is also going to join us on our trip,

but her flight doesn't land for another hour, so we decide to kill time and look for something to eat. We find a cute tiki bar right outside of the airport. The venue has authentic Jamaican food, and we all get beef and chicken patties. They are to die for! And, of course, we also order their famous Jamaican rum punch drink, which is quite strong! We find a table and all sit down with our multiple bags of luggage. The way we packed, you would think some of us were traveling for a whole year!

While we relax and enjoy our food, we notice a group of men (at least eight or ten of them) wearing bright blue polo shirts that say, "Birdie Bunch." They all walk up to the tiki bar and start ordering drinks. A few minutes later, a waitress comes over to us and hands us another round, informing us that they are from the group of men in blue. The guys look over and wink at us, we thank them from across the room, and then Meeka jumps out of her seat and walks over to them; she is a social butterfly and not shy at all. The guys gravitate to Meeka's bubbly personality and they all exchange contact information.

Meeka then walks back to where we are sitting and informs us that they are all from Barbados, they are here for vacation, they have a villa in Montego Bay, and they've invited us to come and stay there. At first, I think to myself, "What a nice gesture," but then, I reconsider and say, "Nah, I'm good...I'll pass on that offer," So, I don't respond; I just listen along with Kim and Nikki. As Meeka is talking, she grabs her phone and changes the subject, exclaiming, "Brandi is here, y'all!" A few seconds later, we see this woman in a wheelchair with a guy pushing her toward us. Meeka jumps up joyfully and calls Brandi's name. The woman in the wheelchair has a huge smile on her face! It isn't until that moment, that Kim, Nikki, and I realize that the woman in the wheelchair is Meeka's friend, Brandi!

Brandi rolls up in her wheelchair (screaming Meeka's name) and she literally hops over to us (with a look of agony on her face!) before she gives Meeka a huge hug and is introduced to the rest of us. Then, we all hug her and someone from the Birdie Bunch buys her a rum punch. Brandi sits down with us and we start talking; I ask her if she is okay because I noticed her right leg is in a leg brace and she just got out of a wheelchair. Brandi laughs and says, "Girl, please...I'm wearing this so I could get VIP treatment, be pushed around the airport with all my bags, and be first to go through customs!" We all burst out laughing, and I almost spit my drink out!

After I started to see the different dynamics of all our personalities and how well we meshed, I started to feel confident that we were all going to get along. In the past, I have

traveled with one person or an entire group, and had it be a disaster, so I knew that traveling with others can be a hit or miss-- especially when those others are Queens full of drama, and Bad Ass Divas! After all, we women can be crazy, and dramatic, so when we're together anything, can happen. Now, however, seeing how well we all were getting along, I knew that everything was going to be okay and that this was going to be an amazing birthday trip!

Meeka, on her phone, blurts out that our driver is about to pull up. We hurry up and get our things and start to walk away from the airport, towards the taxi. A young driver pulls up. He says his name is Sam, he is happy to be our driver, and he is Meeka's friend. We hit the road and during our ride, Meeka starts saying, "OMG, I just can't..." and Nikki says, "Can't take what...?" Meeka says, "This damn heat, fuck it!" At that moment, she grabs her hair and flings the blonde wig off her head. We all have a moment of silence, processing what she has done, then, all of a sudden, we start laughing hysterically in absolute disbelief of what she just did. Then, one of our favorite songs comes on the Jamaican radio, and we all start singing to the hook, while Nikki decides to turn her ass around, twerk and make her bootie clap for all the local Jamaicans. Everyone is looking at her (and us) with their mouths wide open and jaws dropped. We all start laughing uncontrollably like little kids with tears streaming down our faces with joy, and some are laughing so hard, that they are snorting like little pigs and a couple are laughing like old men that can hardly breathe. It's one hell of a ride!

We get to our destination and pull up to the house. It looks amazing-- a beautiful mini-mansion in Ocho Rios, Jamaica. The house is updated with eight bedrooms and five baths; the bottom floor is an in-law suite with a huge bar, complete with plenty of liquor bottles, and a pool table. The back of their house has a beautiful backyard with gorgeous flowers, a large balcony and a huge swimming pool with a hot jacuzzi. We settle in and relax, deciding not to do too much for now, and to instead just enjoy the house's amenities. We all agree that we are going to do something fun and adventurous each day.

The next morning we have an amazing breakfast made by our personal chef. Once we eat, we hit the beach, where we enjoy the hot sun and the beautiful breeze... The weather is perfect. All of us talk about going on an excursion, so we jokingly decide, "Let's go jump off a cliff." One of the girls, Brandi, expresses that she is actually serious about wanting to experience the free fall of jumping off a thirty-foot cliff under a beautiful waterfall. The rest of us let out a collective, "Hell Nahhhhhh," but we all agree that we will watch Brandi jump

off the cliff as bystanders. Sam, our driver and friend, tells us to, “Get our asses up,” so we get going!

We pull up to a place called the Blue Hole in Ocho Rios and the tour guides are all young men. They first give us swim shoes to wear so our feet don’t hurt and we then follow them. As we get closer to the water, we can all see a small cliff with a beautiful waterfall; the first cliff is approximately fifteen feet high. The photographer takes a bunch of group pictures of us standing in front of it, although Brandi is the only one that is open to actually getting in the water. We all decide we will just continue to “walk around and look cute” (with sweat dripping down our faces and our hair poofing up as the sun gets even hotter), but for some reason, once we see Brandi getting ready to go in the water, and our tour guides start to encourage us to go in, we suddenly have a change of heart and slowly, one- by one, agree to put our feet in the water. By the time Brandi dives in and jumps off the cliff with a rope, I am motivated and find myself being next in line to jump. I remember saying, “Hell, why not!” and holding onto the rope and screaming before flying off the cliff and crashing down, making a huge splash. The adrenaline rush was euphoric!

Nikki, Kim and Meeka hesitate, but then Kim does the same thing I did, and says, “Hell...why not!” as she jumps. Nikki follows right behind Kim. Meeka is the only one, who doesn’t jump off the cliff, but she does get in the water, and that is a huge accomplishment because she is afraid of water and cannot swim. Even the tour guides and other tourists cheer her on. We all give her a standing ovation.

Next, our tour guides take us further into the water, and we all hold on to each other as we swim up to the beautiful waterfall. We can see that about twenty- five feet above us there is a small cave that is almost hidden behind the waterfall. We all are challenged to climb up the waterfall and not slip on the slimy rocks, and are each glad when we manage to climb up safely. As we enter the cave, we notice that it is fairly dark, the walls are muddy with a clay-like texture, and walls are colored burnt orange and brown. Each tour guide starts to scrape the walls with their hands and put the mud on their bodies. When they see our eyes bulging with shock; they inform us that this is our mud bath and the mud-like clay will exfoliate our skin and cleanse us. Kim, Nikki and I are in one group; Meeka and Brandi are with the other tour guides. My group is standing closer to the back of the cave and the others are almost out of site, but we can hear moaning sounds! The three of us all look at each other and start cracking up. We hear Meeka laughing, but it’s Brandi’s voice we hear moaning. Later, we find out that she was getting a massage from one of our hot tour guides! To this day, no one

but Brandi is entirely sure what happened between them, but we never stop giving her a hard time about it.

After our beautiful excursion at the Blue Hole, we decide that we are going to relax for the rest of the evening by just finding some authentic Jamaican food. We drive all over Ocho Rios to find somewhere that serves my favorite meal...oxtail with cabbage, peas, and rice. But, for some reason, none of the local places we go to have it! We find out that the only place serving the dish is a restaurant-lounge far away from the house, but the girls insist that I am going to get what I want, so we all decide to take a drive over there and check it out. We order outside at the bar and mingle with some of the locals while we wait for our food to be prepared. We meet several interesting individuals and some businesses owners, and they even buy us a round of drinks and shots when they find out that it is my birthday.

When the food eventually comes out with the final bill, Kim grabs the tab before I can get to it (or anyone else) and we all start to argue about who's going to pay for the food. As I watch everyone argue over the check, I can't help, but think what an amazing group of friends I am with. I affectionately call all these ladies "hustle bunnies," because they are very independent, strong minded women, who are financially stable and making moves. That means that paying is never an issue! Eventually, I give in to Kim because I'm too tired to argue; however, I notice that our food costs five times more than what it would have cost us if we had bought it from one of the more local bodega stores. "Oh well, it was worth it," I think to myself; after all, it was some of the best oxtail I've ever had!

When we get back to the house, we hear male voices, and realize that the owner, Nigel, is back and has a few friends over. Sam is here! It's the first time that all of us have had the opportunity to meet the owner of the house, except Meeka, a friend of his. They are talking about yachts, and we all get excited and jokingly ask if we can go for a ride on one. Nigel and his friends all grin and say, "Whatever y'all lovely ladies want...we can make it happen!" We are elated about the idea of a boat trip, and we spend the rest of the evening laughing and joking about "Brandi's hot ass" and our beautiful waterfall adventure.

The next morning we wake up and Sam tells us it is time to go. We take a nice drive through the city, and an hour later we pull up at a beautiful beach and see tons of yachts docked at the pier. We get out of the car and follow Sam to the front of the gate where the boats are. All of us are excited as we listen to him talk to the men on the boat. A few minutes later, he tells us to follow him, so we walk towards the yacht. Just then, the owner of

the boat, Speedy, comes out and waves, welcoming us by extending a hand to help us onboard. All of us are excited (including Sam) as we accept his invitation. We hop on and they ask if we want some rum punch-- to which we respond with an enthusiastic, "Hell yeahhhhh!"

The girls all inform the guys on the boat that it's my birthday (technically it's tomorrow, but, whatever!), so they request that my drink has to be extra strong so I can "get turned up." We all toast and drink before getting a tour of the boat and deciding to lay out, catch some rays, and enjoy the beautiful weather and amazing Caribbean breeze. The guys all start taking photos of us and we start to literally have a photo shoot right on the boat! We have fun taking different poses and making sure we suck in our guts and pucker our lips.

After we have fun acting crazy on the boat and taking a million photos, Speedy invites us to come around to the back and hang out in the common area of the boat for a bit, while he asks Kim and Meeka when we would like to come back and have the boat party. My ears perk up and I exclaim, "What!?" Nikki and Brandi quickly turn around and tell me to, "Mind my business!" I laugh and have a big grin on my face, but I'm actually thinking, "Wow, this sounds amazing, but a yacht party is probably crazy-filthy expensive." Then I hear Kim and Meeka start negotiating with Speedy. The two of them are great negotiators, so I enjoy their conversation with him. I hear them say, "Of course, why would we not...it's her birthday and who wouldn't want a birthday party on a boat, so let's do it big, and live it up!"

All of us are excited to hear the plans. I'm beyond myself and don't know what to say or do! I say, "Ladies, really...you don't have to." But, they are persistent! They are already talking about having a personal chef cook for us, asking me what kind of liquor I want on the boat, and what kind of music I want the DJ to play! I'm so grateful seeing my old friends and new friends go out of their way to make my birthday so special. It truly warms my heart.

Kim and Meeka finalize the negotiations and confirm a date for the party...the next day, on my actual birthday! I can't believe they are doing this and continue to tell them, "It's okay, you really don't have to." They all are in sync as they sternly tell me to, "Zip it up!"

Nikki pulls me to the side and says in a joking and loving way, "Hush it up, Chick; you're getting on my nerves with all these questions...take it like a G, Anime, and let us do this for you, okay?" She rolls her eyes at me, smacks her lips, and snaps her neck as she gives me a crazy look. I laugh out loud and finally give in. After I tell her that she is crazy!

At that very moment when Nikki tells me to zip it, I realize how incredibly sweet and thoughtful everyone is, putting so much effort into making sure I have a great birthday. I feel this enormous sense of warmth and gratitude. I get emotional and feel like I'm almost going to cry like a big baby, but I hold it together. In my mind, I think of it like this: these are grown women with their own lives, who work super hard, and have many important responsibilities, goals, personal issues, and so much more... The last thing they need to do is worry about making me happy on my birthday and blowing their money when they could save it for something else. I love that they are incredibly sweet and thoughtful, free-spirited, and I love that they live like there is no tomorrow!

We hit the beach real quick before the sunsets, and then we find a beautiful restaurant. The weather is absolutely amazing. Some of us are sitting at the table at the restaurant and some of us are on the lounge chairs just a few steps down. I notice Meeka is walking on the beach alone; she's close enough that we can see her from a distance. I walk over to her; as I get closer, I ask if she is okay and she shares with me that she is thinking about her mom.

I find out that she, too, lost her mother a couple weeks prior from an unexpected illness. She knew traveling would be really good for her and I completely agree. Then, I briefly share with her that I also lost my dad a while ago, that I've been a mess ever since, and that this trip is helping me heal. We both agree and instantly it feels good to know that we aren't alone. We have an unspoken understanding. I let her know that I truly admire her strength; I never would've known she lost someone close to her or that she was even mourning and going through any turmoil because she always has a smile on her face and is in such a good mood. But the lesson here is that you can't judge a book by its cover and behind every beautiful face and smile, you just never know what a person may be going through.

It starts to get late, so we start to head back and walk toward the restaurant's exit. Kim and Nikki jump in front of me and tell me to wait a second. I have no idea what's going on, but obviously they are trying to distract me. I can see Brandi and Meeka talking to several people. A few minutes later, the girls and the restaurant owners and staff take me to the back and tell me to follow them... As I walk up, I can see my name, "Tiya," spelled out on the sandy beach and it's literally on fire. My eyes get huge and I can't believe they surprised me with this beautiful gesture. Everyone starts singing "Happy Birthday" to me. I am so shocked they would do this for me and I hug everyone with delight. The owner of the restaurant and staff give us all a round of shots and before we toast, I thank everyone for the birthday wishes. I toast to new and old friendship.

When we get back to the house, Meeka calls all her contacts and coordinates the details with us for tomorrow's party. She asks me what I want on the dinner menu. I give her an idea what I want and she talks to a professional chef, named Weasy, who happens to be friends with Sam and also knows Speedy. Meeka connects with everyone she needs to get in touch with to make sure everything goes smoothly.

Later that night, some of us decide to go to a lounge bar called Margaritaville. We get there and see a lot of young locals and college kids on spring break. It's fairly empty, but that doesn't stop us from having a good time... We take shots and enjoy the reggae music, the people, the drinks, and the company; we have a blast!

When we get back to the house, we find Brandi and Nikki, who decided to stay in, are up and full of energy. So, we all decide to skinny dip in the pool. Mind you, this is something I have never done and I never imagined I would jump in butter-ball naked, but guess what... You only live once and it's my birthday! So, we all jump in the pool and scream, as we get wet! The pool has no lights, so the only thing that can be seen is our beautiful silhouette reflecting off of the water from the bright full moon. We are laughing and giggling hysterically. We even have a personalized bartender making us drinks and handing them to us right in the pool; we toast it up and everyone's screaming, "Happy birthday" again... and we drink the shots to the head! When we get out of the pool, I realize the bartender must've made my drinks extra strong...I'm drunk as a skunk!

The next day, I wake up with a horrible headache. Brandi and Nikki knock on my guestroom door and they walk in with breakfast food, water and a glass of juice. I can barely open my eyes and they tell me to sit up, drink some water, and eat the toast, so I can feel better. Nikki smacks her lips, tells me to get it together, and that, "I better be right for this boat party!" I immediately sit up straight and start stuffing toast down my throat, hoping the water will help me feel better. I tell them, "Give me another hour or two, and I promise I will get my shit together." Brandi is all motherly and tells me it's going to be okay and Nikki is bossy and feisty as hell, which I always find amusing! The two of them look at me crazily and Nikki says, "You get a pass because today is your actual birthday, but I'll be back to check on you and when I come back you better have it together, Chicken!" I laugh out loud; Brandi giggles and Nikki gives me the crazy look again. They walk out and I shut my eyes and pray that I will wake up feeling much better.

A few hours go by and I finally wake up and I feel like a brand new person. I am a bit surprised that I feel like a million bucks compared to how I felt a few hours earlier. I walk out and all the girls are sitting in the living room area talking and laughing hysterically amongst each other. I'm wondering what in the world are they laughing about and, as I walk in, I see all of them playing a drinking game called, "Never Have I Ever!" It's a fun, crazy game that reveals people's darkest secrets. For example, "Never have I ever cheated on my partner or lied to my boss. If the other person has, then he or she would have to drink up and take a shot. If they have never done it, then they do not need to drink. From the looks of it, Brandi and Meeka are winning, which means, they are drunk. As I stand there, Nikki and Kim start laughing and joking around when they see me. They ask me if I'm awake or sleep walking! They said last night I was knocked out, but I sleep with my eyes open. Everyone starts laughing and I laugh, too, because I know it's true. Meeka starts to tell the story that after our dip in the pool; I had to be carried to my room. When all of them came later that night to check on me, they all noticed that my eyes were wide open and Brandi started talking to me, thinking I was awake. Apparently, Nikki then interrupted Brandi and told her to stop talking to a dead person! Everyone laughs including me. I change the subject and start dancing to the song that's on their playlist just to let them know that I am okay and ready to party!

Everyone is happy to see me back to normal and we all start to get ready. As a group, we agree it would be fun to where all black when we get there, so we can all match and stand out from the other guests. I make sure my makeup is on point and I wear my best outfit; I also pack a bag with different outfits and a bathing suit, so I can be certain I'm ready for anything that might happen.

Sam comes by to pick us up and we head over to the boat. When we pull up, Speedy and his team (his staff and other guests we've randomly invited) are lined up to greet us; they have champagne waiting for us. The boat is beautifully decorated and the DJ is already there, spinning the hottest tracks. All of us are amped and we all sing to the words and hooks for each song that plays; we reggae dance to the music, a few of us are twerking our asses against the side of the boat ledge and several guests are on the very top of the boat deck enjoying the view. We're screaming to be careful and not fall off the boat; we pop champagne bottles as we sail across the ocean enjoying the beautiful summer breeze of Jamaica. Later on, Speedy gives us a tutorial on how to drive the yacht and he actually allows us to steer the boat. We feel like true, "Bad Ass Divas," killing the game with our hair blowing in the wind while we are truly living our best lives! We take tons of photos and pose like models while the drinks and music

keeps us hyped! Meeka, Kim and I start dancing like strippers and Brandi and Nikki start throwing bundles of money (U.S. and Jamaican dollars) and everyone, even the guys, “Make it rain,” a couple hundred dollars. We are laughing our hearts out and having such a good time living it up! I pull Kim to the side and grab her to tell her how much I appreciate everything she’s done. I make a point to let her know how much it means to me that she went out of her way to coordinate this trip and make this birthday so special. Kim smiles and let’s me know that she’s got my back. We all continue to dance, converse and laugh. After we “party like it’s 1990,” the chef announces that the food is ready to be served. We all come running for the food and we fill our dinner plates up with fried fish, jerk chicken, oxtail, rice and peas, cabbage, and plantains; we enjoy every bite. I feel so blessed to have a personal chef cook for me and the food is amazing! After we stuff ourselves, we all get the “Itis” and decide to lie down and hang out in the living and bedroom suite area for a bit.

Our little nap ends quickly when Sam comes down to get us and we follow him up the stairs. The boat has stopped and it’s sitting in the middle of the water. The sun has set and it’s fairly dark, but you can still see the beautiful skyline of Jamaica. The distant water looks black, but the water surrounding the boat looks like a royal crystal blue because under the boat there are fluorescent lights beaming and projecting off the water. All the guys that were on the boat (except for Speedy and his co-captain) jump off the boat and start encouraging us to jump in. Brandi and Nikki are first and they start screaming at the rest of us to jump in. They call me out. They tell me that because I am the birthday girl, I have no choice but to jump in or be thrown in! Surprisingly enough, the water is warm. We form a small circle with our drinks in our hands. Some of the guys dive deep into the water with snorkel gear and swim back up; they bring us beautiful shells from the sea and even something that looks like a squishy cactus flower ball. And, the whole time, our personal bartender is swimming around refilling our drinks! My girlfriends all start screaming my name and wishing me a happy birthday. They start singing the upbeat, Stevie Wonder version of, “Happy Birthday,” right there in the middle of the ocean. Our voices echo throughout the whole island and it gives me chills down my spine. At that very moment, as everyone sings joyfully to me, I feel an incredible warm sensation and a deep sense of gratitude; I feel my eyes get glassy and I looked up at the beautiful sky... I can see the sparkling stars shining bright; I lift up my drink and say, “This one’s for you, Dad! Thank you for getting me this far; I love you to the moon and back.” I look back down and smile ear to ear as I hear everyone’s beautiful voices singing. I appreciate every word, melody, and harmony as they sang their hearts out to me-- It’s truly a moment I know I’ll never forget.

Before we toast, I tell everyone, “Thank you so much for making this birthday one of the best ever. I love you all!” I’m blowing kisses too and clinking glasses with everyone as we all drink to my birthday. By the time the boat finally pulls up to dock, it’s fairly late. It’s time for us to go back home.

We all get in the car and go back to the house. It’s almost midnight, but the girls all tell me we have one more place to go before my birthday ends. My first reaction is that it is too late and I am too tired, but then, realizing I don’t want to be a “Debbie Downer,” especially with only a few more days left in my trip, I catch myself. “I’m down for whatever!” I say.

We all get ready, and then we head off to the city of Ocho Rios. I ask them where we’re going and they all turn around with big grins on their faces. Meeka and Nikki reply, “Somewhere you’ve never been...” I have a moment in which I process their response, and then I give them all a blank stare and start laughing nervously. I already know they are up to no good!

We pull up and it looks like a house party in the front with locals hanging out, but as we walk in, the further we go back to the building; it appears to be a fairly large area where you see a long line of people standing outside waiting to get in. You see all types of people dressed from formal wear to casual attire. All of us are wearing cute sexy outfits and everyone is staring at us. We all look stunning and we walk in with confidence. It’s pretty dim, but enough for you to see what’s going on, especially on the stage. I can’t believe what I’m seeing. We find bar tables and sit on the side near the stage, then I turn around and look at all of my friends and say, “What the Hell Is This?” They respond and say it’s supposed to be a strip club, and we all laugh and agree this is not like any one we’ve ever experienced before. I’m laughing and smirking with my eyeballs bulging out of my head; I can’t believe what I’m seeing.

As I turn back around to look at the stage, I see two naked women; one is a heavy-set, curvy woman standing fully naked and holding a slender woman’s skinny legs up in the air; this slender woman is doing a hand stand and you can see her large breasts dangling. All of a sudden, the curvy woman grabs her legs and pulls her legs over her shoulders and dives right into her vagina. She performs fellatio on her and the crowd goes wild. Everyone who’s watching, including my friends and me, all have our jaws dropping with utter shock and some with a disgusted look on their faces. As we keep watching, we suddenly see a slender naked man come up to the stage; he walks over to the two ladies and he gets on his knees and

spreads the heavy woman's legs apart (she's standing and continues to perform fellatio on the slender woman). He begins to lick her inner thighs and then starts to eat her ass from the back as the woman continues to eat the other woman's vagina. Then, another woman comes out and starts to give head (fellatio) to the guy who's eating the woman's ass out, and then one more man comes up to the stage and goes behind the woman who is giving head to the guy and he starts to fuck her doggy style. The crowd goes insane and cheers them on.

All of my friends, especially me, are bewildered and in total disbelief. We cannot believe what we are seeing. We start laughing and giggling hysterically. I tell them, "I can't...this is way too much for my virgin eyes and I need a drankkkkk!" They all laugh and we order drinks and shots. As we talk and wait for our drinks, I notice a beautiful tan-complexion woman with very long dark brown straight hair, wearing a black jump suit nicely fitted on her body (just enough to see her cleavage line), and she is staring at me across from the stage. I automatically assume she is one of the dancers of the establishment (because she is sitting and talking with all the other strippers), so I don't pay too much mind to her. But as my friends and I continue to talk, I can feel her staring right at me; I can see her in my peripheral view, so I try to avoid any direct contact, but she makes it a point to continue to stare at me. When I finally think she stopped staring, I quickly look over in her direction and, sure enough, she is still staring right at me, so I turn my head around. I'm embarrassed she caught me looking at her, but a few minutes later, I can't help but to look again and there she is with her eyes hawking right at me, and then she winks and smiles. I look behind me to see whom she's winking at me, but there's no one behind me, so I turn back around and she grins with a devilish smile and bites her bottom lip. By now, I start to feel a little awkward and somewhat nervous. I see she's playing games, so I completely stop looking her way.

I notice Meeka and Kim get up from the table, so I listen to Nikki bragging about her new "Baby Daddy," she just met at the bar, named Pataeo. She points at him and I quickly throw a jab and say, "You mean Potato Head?" Nikki smirks and then I jokingly tell her, "Ewwwww, he looks like he could be your brother." Brandi and Sam laugh at my joke, but Nikki gives me her fist (jokingly). I laugh and tell her to relax, and I take it back. The three of them continue to gossip and I listen to their conversation for a bit, then I quickly glance across the room and I notice the beautiful woman who's been staring at me, is no longer sitting across from me. As I turn back around, I see her walking and talking with Meeka and Kim. They are all walking back to our table. Seeing them all together got me totally confused

and I think to myself, “What the hell is going on and what is she doing with my friends!” lol. All of a sudden, the woman who’s been staring at me all night is now in the same space and presence as me; she grins at me then she walks directly toward me and sits on my lap. Kim and Meeka whisper in my ear and they tell me that she is my birthday present. I nervously laugh and all of a sudden the DJ and host start saying my name on the MIC and the music comes on. Then the beautiful woman starts to dance right in front of me and starts twerking her big bootie in my face, then she sits on my lap from the back and starts to slowly grind her ass on me and grabs my hands to feel her up and down. Everyone is cheering me on and screaming happy birthday as she continues to dance on top of me. As she dances, I whisper in her ear and I ask what her name is and she says her name is Candi. The song is over and I can feel her breathing down my neck and she slowly presses her face against my cheek then gives me a kiss on my cheek and wishes me a happy birthday. I thank her and I tell her she is the only stripper in the club that’s beautiful and attractive with class. She grins and whispers in my ear, “Thank you sweetheart, but I’m not a stripper!” She gives me a devilish look and my eyes get huge and I’m shocked to hear this so I respond and say, “How so? You got your ass twerking on me.” She smirks and says, “I know, but that doesn’t mean I have to be a stripper.” She let’s me marinate on that thought for a few seconds and then she grabs my waist and pulls me close to her then whispers in my ear again and says, “I just liked you the minute I lay my eyes on you...plus, I heard it was your birthday, so I had to give you something for you to remember me.” I blush and she remains sitting on my lap for a few more seconds then she finally let’s my hand go and stands up, then looks back at me with a sexy smile and walks away.

We get back to the house and do a recap of the eventful day on the yacht and at the club. We all agree that this trip has been fantastic thus far and we look forward to more adventures. We take a few more shots and all hit the sack.

The next morning, Brandi heads out early to go to the store. When she returns, she comes to my room and tells me to come out and join the group. As I walk out to the main room, I notice everyone is sitting at the dining room table waiting for me. I also notice that there are five black gift bags. Brandi has a huge, excited smile on her face. She looks like a little kid as she jumps up and down and tells all of us to open our gift bags one at a time. Each gift bag had something special. Brandi decided to give everyone an early Christmas present, and she took the time to pick out a meaningful gift for each of us. She ended up getting me these beautiful earrings that had the Jamaican colors, which I had admired earlier

in our trip. It is so sweet and thoughtful that I almost cry when I open my gift. Seeing her have so much joy in making others happy (including me) is priceless and I am blown away--especially because this woman barely knows anyone in our group outside of our trip.

We all give Brandi a big group hug and she starts crying with joy as she openly shares with us how much she has enjoyed her time in Jamaica. She says she has never met such a phenomenal group of women. We all chime in and agree that this trip has been by far, one of the most special trips any of us has ever been on. We also agree that we have met some really amazing people. We get a round of shots and toast, "To new experiences, to new things, and to new friendships," then we all take the shots to the head!

Meeka's phone rings as we guzzle our drinks down and she looks at her text and then says to all of us, "Hey badass queens ...are ya'll ready to head out to Montego Bay for our last two nights?" Brandi and Kim are all for it and say, "Yes," but Nikki and I just say, "What's in Montego?" Meeka tells us that we're going to stay with the guys we met at the airport, "The Birdie Bunch," and stay in their beautiful villa!

Nikki and I look at each other with a blank stare, but then we giggle and mutually get excited for the adventure. Meeka reassures all of us and says, "Ladies, those guys know better than to try us! I told their asses, 'We are not coming over to be your concubines or mistresses!'" We all laugh and Meeka adds, "And besides, if anything were to pop off, they would have to take us all down because we are some bad hefty bitches with some big asses, and we aren't giving up without a fight! So y'all got nothing to worry about, okay!?" We all laugh out loud and agree. Meeka tells us to hurry up. Sam will be here in thirty minutes to pick us up.

Sam pulls up shortly after and he starts packing all our bags in the car. We head off and start our journey. First stop...a rendezvous with the guys in the nearby Dunns River parking lot.

We pull up and meet them in an open lot. Most of us barely remember any of them, which goes to show how much we were paying attention in that encounter, but Meeka remembers all of them and gives each one of them a hug and introduces us. We graciously say hello and thank them for inviting us to their villa. They are more than happy we accepted their invitation. Mike is the main guy in the group who has been coordinating with Meeka.

We all get in the van and I notice that there are ten guys and five women total. We settle into our seats and get acquainted with everyone in the van. They have a driver and he's got the music blasting to our favorite reggae songs! Our new companions start making us rum punch shots; Mike does a toast and he raises his shot glass and says to all of us, "To new friends!" Everyone agrees and says, "Yahhhh mannnn" as we drink.

A couple hours later, we pull up to a beautiful gated community on top of a green mountain hill. When we pull in closer to the villa, the first thing we notice is a half- sized basketball court. On its left side is a gorgeous landscape full of trees and flowers that are bright and beautiful. We get out of the van and are greeted at the door by the butler, who hands us champagne. The first thing I see, when I step inside the villa, is the amazing view from the front door to the back of the mansion. I see the pool and courtyard overlooking the gorgeous blue water. It is breathtaking! All of us are stunned and can't believe how beautiful the view is; we all are so thrilled that we decided to come to Montego Bay. We tell Meeka she did a fabulous job setting this up and we are going to need her services going forward. We call her, "Ms. Coordinating Queen" and sit around the patio sharing stories with our new friends.

Mike has the Butler take our bags to our rooms and he introduces us to a gorgeous woman, named Courtney. She's exotic looking, with beautiful long curly hair. She is half Chinese and half Jamaican. Mike informs us that Courtney is the manager of our villa and she will be taking care of all our needs. All of us are so impressed with the hospitality and attentiveness that Courtney provides us.

We all get ready for dinner and head to the open foyer to meet everyone before eventually making our way to the dining room. The table is outside and it's nicely set up for us to eat in. I love the layout of the villa and the fact that it is so open, allowing one to see all the different rooms, but still be under a huge roof when it rains. As we sit down, we enjoy the cool breeze and the gorgeous skyline. The red-orange sky makes for a spectacular view.

The butlers announce that dinner is ready, and Mike asks for all of us to sit down so he can bless the food. He gives a beautiful speech and we all say, "Amen," before we dig in and eat. The food is lovely and we stuff ourselves!

After we eat, we relax for a bit and talk. Some of us head down to the pool area. We listen to music and a few of us jump in the water and then, everyone jumps in the water and it turns into a pool party! Meeka starts twerking in the water near the steps and makes it splash everywhere. The guys go crazy and we cheer her on. They ask Meeka how to twerk so the rest

of us can twerk with her. I quickly say to them, “If Meeka shows us how to twerk then all of you (pointing at the men) have to twerk, too.” The guys’ happy laughter quickly stops and all of us women start laughing. Kim and I are like, “What’s the problem...if women can twerk, why can’t men twerk?” The men are all saying, “That shit is not sexy and only women should twerk!” The topic becomes a great conversation to debate. We all enjoy the difference of opinion and then Brandi tries it herself and says, “My booty is too small and flat; I can’t feel nothing twerking!” We all die laughing and encourage her to try again, because all booties can twerk. It was quite the day.

It’s getting late, so we get out of the water and get dressed. Some of the guys want to go out to a lounge. We first say no, but then we realize this is our last night before some of us have to go back home. Just Nikki opts to stay in and relax.

We pull up at the upscale lounge. There, we listen to a live reggae band, meet some very interesting locals, and even spy a couple celebrities. We drink and dance for a bit and have a great time. We don’t stay for too long because most of us are exhausted.

When we get back to the villa, we see that Nikki’s door is closed. We knock to see if she is sleeping and she doesn’t answer, but we can hear noises coming from her bedroom. We all start giggling and wonder who in the hell is in the room with her! We think about who went to the lounge with us, and everyone that came with us, so it couldn’t be any of the guys... So, the Chef? A Butler? Meeka and I say, “Fuck it! Open the goddamn door, Nikki!” Meeka flings the door and turns on the light, revealing.... Courtney! We quickly slam the door shut, laughing hysterically, and we start running down the hallway. We sound like little kids and we can’t stop laughing. We laugh so hard it makes our stomachs hurt and we tear up crying. Brandi is snorting as she’s laughing and it makes us laugh even harder. We eventually laugh ourselves to sleep.

The next morning we wake up to the smell of breakfast food. Everyone goes to Kim and Brandi’s room to meet up. We all start laughing again about last night and we see that Nikki is nowhere to be found. We call her and she doesn’t answer, so I text Nikki and tell her to “bring her nasty-freaky ass over to our room.” Nikki walks in with a devilish smile on her face and looks sleepy. We notice the little bit of hair that Nikki has in the middle of her head (her sides are shaved and she has medium length hair in the middle that’s always neatly styled in a sexy mohawk) is sticking up. We burst out laughing again when she walks in. Meeka tries to be funny and says to Nikki, “Oh, so that’s why your ass didn’t want to come to the club with us,

huh?” We all start laughing hysterically and Nikki’s face turns bright red, but then she says, “Don’t hate Bitches, that I got some and y’all didn’t!” Everyone burst out laughing and Kim and Brandi are saying, “TMI, Nikki!” We laugh again and start to walk out to the foyer toward the breakfast table.

As we sit down, the guys, who have no idea what went down with Nikki last night, genuinely all ask if Nikki had a nice evening. She is fairly low key with her response and tells them that she definitely had a nice evening with a big smile. All of us (the women) stare at Nikki and smirk with a big grin; I turn around and say, “Oh, yeah...she sure did; in fact, I think she had more fun and had a more eventful evening than any of us.” The guys are caught off guard with my response and they become intrigued and keep asking Nikki what happened. Then we see Courtney walk up to the table and all of us are grinning hard trying not to laugh out loud. Nikki’s face turns red again and you can tell Courtney is also not comfortable, so she doesn’t look our way at all and definitely tries to avoid eye contact with Nikki. She speaks fast, giving us the breakdown of the menu that the chef has made for us before making a swift exit. Awkward!

Mike and all the guys are confused and not sure what just happened, but they notice how awkward Courtney was when she was speaking to us. So Mike says, “Hold up, what’s really going on?” and looks at us girls for an answer. We all start giggling and Meeka says, “Listen, all we’re gonna say is this and don’t ask us nothing else...but let’s just say someone in this group got more action than any of y’all!” Meeka’s looking at all the men and everyone laughs out loud. The guys keep asking for more details and we all shake our heads and stay quiet. Eventually the guys let it go and we enjoy our breakfast.

Later we all lounge around and, realizing this is the last day for some of us (Nikki, Kim and I have to go back home), Meeka and Brandi tell us that we should check to make sure our flight hasn’t been cancelled. The weather is not good in Washington, D.C., and we’re all hoping for some extra time in Jamaica. Sure enough, we get a notice that our flights have been changed to the next day! We are ecstatic and we make sure we enjoy one more last day together.

The guys have a golf tournament to go to, so we decide to venture out and head to a flea market. We buy a bunch of different exotic fruits then go to the private beach that the villa offers us. When we arrive, the view is stunning and the place is perfect...The sand is white, the water is crystal blue, the weather is warm with a beautiful ocean breeze, and the beach is

secluded. We enjoy the friendly, people and talk to some of the other guests who are visiting. Then, we decide to order almost everything on the menu! We can't seem to agree on which appetizers to order, so Kim and I are like, "Fuck it, you only live once, so why not... Let's just order all of them!" Everyone agrees, and we order shots and buy a round of pina coladas in a coconut with extra shots on top. The waiter comes back and tells us the shots are on the group tab that's sitting a few lounge chairs down. We all thank the group (both men and women) and buy them a round. We all get together and enjoy each other's company. The food comes out and when we see all the different choices, we are in heaven. We eat like pigs and then lie down on the lounge chairs and fall fast asleep in the sun. Later, when we wake up from our long nap, some of us jump in the ocean. We take countless photos and talk about all the fun we've had. We decide that we have to do another trip soon. We buy one more round of shots and toast again, this time to "new friendship and to the next girls' trip." Later, we head back to the villa to have our last meal together.

The next morning, we wake up really early and have a quick breakfast. We take group photos of the guys and we all say goodbye to the Birdie Bunch. We also thank everyone in the villa for their wonderful hospitality, including Courtney. All of us are sad to go, but we know it is time to go back to reality. Some of us get emotional, but we promise each other we will keep in touch and go on another girls' trip in the future. Brandi starts crying and we all give each other a big group hug; we finally all say our goodbyes and reluctantly walk out of the beautiful villa.

As we head back home and get on the plane, I take some time to reflect on everything. I smile thinking about all the fun, crazy and hysterical moments on this trip that made me laugh out loud and tear up all at the same time. My heart feels such a warmth of happiness and joy that I have not felt since my dad passed.

This girl's birthday trip was spiritual, and it also made for one of the most amazing, adventurous, fun-filled, sexy, raunchy, heartfelt, thrilling, and exciting birthdays I have ever experienced. It was definitely a trip like no other, hands down! Who would've known I would become lifelong friends with these girls? But they are amazing souls-- The level of respect for each other and the synergy and positive vibes we all shared were priceless. Our experiences together made me truly appreciate that there are still good, genuine and loving people that really care about others in this world. I loved how each one of them (and even the people we met along the way) made it a point to make this birthday special; it could have been a disaster, but they made sure this was a birthday I would never forget.

Sometimes it's not where you're at, but it's who you're with. In this case, I was lucky I had both, and the combination made for the trip of a lifetime. To my readers I want to say: Traveling is therapeutic. You only live once, so live your best, and have no regrets.

After having time to process everything that happened in Jamaica, I realized the trip really helped me heal and recover from the open wounds of loss I was suffering at that time. When I look back at all the special moments from it, I believe that everyone I met along the way was meant to be there, and that they were placed in my life for a reason. Meeting Meeka, especially, seemed like destiny. Who would have known we both were enduring a similar pain and loss? Her support, and the love of the others in our group towards us, really helped my process of grieving. Not only that, but, those moments on the water, and seeing the beautiful Caribbean sunsets reminded me of my father. I almost felt like he was there with me. My experiences on my trip mirrored some of the times I shared with my dad, like sailing on the ocean, eating exotic foods, walking on the beach, laughing, and talking about life while sunset-gazing. It's almost as if he was with me in Jamaica, guiding me and helping me move on to the next chapter of my life.

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Chapter 9

Thi Santos

To my beloved angels,

This is for you.

Angelic Calling

As I became an adult, traveling both internationally and close to home became my escape. While traveling by myself, I found peace from the emotional burden of my childhood struggles. From a very young age, I grew up in foster and group homes. I spent most of my life trying to figure out my identity and where I fit in, and, because exposure to emotional, physical, and mental abuse was normal to me,

I was forced to be mature from the age of five years old,

Experiences involving drugs, suicidal thoughts, and self-harm took a toll on me. I also moved around frequently, which added to my instability. At times, I felt so inadequate that I questioned my existence. Because I was a child who had to endure daily hardships, I felt I had no chance of living a happy life. Having no biological parents to call “Mom” or “Dad” created a void within me, and not only did I feel inadequate, I felt so unloved that I questioned my faith each day. I hit my lowest point when I was just eleven, when my innocence was taken away from me. And that is how the chapter of depression, PTSD, anxiety, self-hatred, suicide attempts and self-harm began in my life.

The trauma not only devoured my soul, but also took away what little hope remained within me. Unfortunately, hiding behind a smile was how I coped. Everyday was a constant battle, yet somehow practicing farewells made life a little easier. Although I was always on the move, suburb to suburb, career to career, the experience of daydreaming about traveling somewhere far, far, far away from the life I was living awoke the “travel bug” within me.

Fast forward to 2017-- I would not say that I was living life to the fullest at that time, but I was very content. I was certainly in a much better place than I had been in my childhood and early teens. However, life continued to throw many curve balls my way due to the traumatic scars I had from my time spent in foster and group homes. But, as the years went by, I continued to transform into someone that I was somewhat proud of. Unfortunately, in 2017, I lost not just one special person, but two angels, both who are now watching from the heavens

above. Their passings occurred practically one month after another. This happened in such a short time frame that I wasn't able to grieve for the person who had passed away prior. Although I was used to saying goodbye quite often and having people walk out of my life, this time it was different. My heart was beyond its breaking point. Because of the weight of others' expectations of me and a feeling of having to be strong for everyone, I could not deal with my own burden. Loss of my loved ones became too much for me.

At that time, I was employed by a small, family-owned business. My boss, who was also a friend of mine, had the audacity to call me asking me to work from home after the funeral! Now, what made that a breaking point was that I not only had lost two loved ones one month apart, but my friendship of six years had come to an end due to that person's deceit and selfishness.

My world was collapsing before my very own eyes in what seemed like such a short period of time. I felt so hopeless that I could not bare to stick around any longer; I just wanted to pack my bags and run away. I wanted to start a new life where no one knew me; where there weren't any expectations of me.

I broke down in tears, uncertain of what my next move would be. Then, I remembered what my beloved foster dad once said before his passing. "It's time for you to put down that mask you wear daily and be selfish," he said. He was right. For so long I have always put others needs before my own needs, even if it meant sacrificing my career or my soul.

So, for once in my life, "be selfish" was exactly what I did. I followed my heart and put my own needs before others. Although I did not put down the mask or stop hiding behind a smile, deep down I knew it was time I put myself first so I would be able to find the real me. I needed to create my own identity rather than accept the labels that others have given me. But, as I was sitting outside in the cold, overthinking and contemplating life itself, two doves appeared before me. Somehow, my inner-self just knew that this was the sign I was needed. It was confirmation.

Creating My Own Identity

Sydney to Queenstown, New Zealand, 2017

One week later, I was standing one hundred and thirty feet above a river near Queenstown, New Zealand. Queenstown is the heart and soul of bungee jumping. I felt a

rush of mixed emotions, but I decided, “If I am going to take risks by putting my own needs first, I needed to step out of my comfort zone.” I thought I might as well start by ticking off a few lines on my bucket list.

As I waited to jump, my feet were steady on the bridge. The scenery all around me left me speechless. I never knew how beautiful Mother Nature could be until then. On the count of three, the instructor said, “Jump”! One, two... On his final count, I jumped symbolically into my new “myself first” life. I first screamed and then giggled as I plunged from the top of the bridge to the water below. Feeling the adrenaline pumping through my veins was an unforgettable experience. I enjoyed it so much that I went for a second round. Never, ever had I felt so free. The experience itself was like no other; I felt like a phoenix rising above the ashes, being reborn again.

Queenstown to Auckland, 2017

The following morning before I left for the airport to fly to Auckland, I stepped out onto my balcony. It had views of the mountains and clear, blue sky. While I gazed, two doves flew by. I could not help but smile because I felt it was a sign to reassure me that the best is yet to come in my life. I couldn’t help but replay my memories of bungee jumping. I relived the emotions I felt before and after the jump. It was like I had found what I had been searching for all my life. I found me. I found the me I thought had died when I was younger. I was soul searching at its best.

When I was in Auckland, I stayed with my brother. We had not seen each other in a long while, so it was good to catch up with a familiar person. I felt so relaxed and carefree, like I had no responsibilities in the world. As we sat outside drinking tea and reminiscing, my brother’s gaze suddenly locked onto one of the trees in his backyard. “Thi, do you see two doves in the tree?” He asked. I suddenly had chills run down my spine. It was as if there they were with me again. It was just as he had said; two doves were sitting in the tree. I explained to him that embarking on this journey, there had always been two doves I sighted wherever I was. He looks at me and said, “I guarantee you when you leave, they will be gone because for as long as I have lived at this house I have never seen doves, let alone two at the same time.”

“They are your beloved angels watching over you,” he said.

Auckland to Sydney, 2017

He was right. The day after I left Auckland for home, he texted me saying, “No doves in sight.” I smiled.

As I looked back on my new memories of my trip to New Zealand, my desire to inspire others became more prominent. I felt it was time to share my stories. But of course, this meant reopening a lot of wounds and reliving the emotions. But I felt it was what needed to be done. This is how I have begun a new chapter in my life as a writer and author.

Healing

Sydney to Los Angeles

As 2017 ended and 2018 began, the travel bug came knocking on my door again. I do not know why, but this time my heart was drawn to Los Angeles. My intuition was telling me that new opportunities would arise and assist me in making this dream into a reality. So I listened to this voice, and, sure enough, I connected with a few organizations and business opportunities in Los Angeles via social media.

As I arrived in Los Angeles, although I was anxious, opportunities came my way. I knew I was on the right path, whether I was connecting with someone, being directed to events, attending workshops, or exploring in general. In honesty, however, because of the life I have lived, I am not used to having a lot of luck or having good things happen to me. Even though I felt I deserved every good opportunity that came my way, I still found my good fortune hard to accept. Just going with the flow wasn’t easy for me, but I did it. And I am glad I did!

My stay in Los Angeles was an eye-opening educational experience. Being able to see how Americans lived their lives as well as talk to them helped me understand their struggles. This gave me a new perspective on life. To be honest, when listening to some of their stories, it made me appreciate my life in Sydney. Especially when I heard about their experiences in the United States with the health care system and wages they received at their jobs. I started to think more about what I actually wanted to achieve in business. I felt I wanted to help others. The more I explored Los Angeles, the more I started to overflow with ideas of how I could improve myself. I also had ideas of how I could help others. It became clear to me what I needed to do as soon as I got back home.

But, little did I know, life in Los Angeles had one more surprise waiting for me. Romance! Meeting this certain someone ignited the flame within me that I thought I had lost

many years ago. I had created high walls to keep my emotions safe and they had guarded me for a long time. As soon as I met this new person, my walls came down. I felt like we were meant to be together. As cliché as it sounds, it just felt right. This was my fairytale that I had longed for.

During my short stay in Los Angeles, I not only found a better understanding of what I wanted in life, but I also allowed myself to self-heal. Most importantly, I started to love myself again.

Self-healing and growth were the purposes of this trip to Los Angeles.

Los Angeles to Sydney 2018

I was flying at 39,925 feet above the ground. Fourteen hours had passed since I left Los Angeles. There were 1,091 kilometers remaining of the flight, and one hour left to relax and watch the sunrise through the clouds surrounding the aircraft. I grabbed hold of my sterling silver cross because its touch made me feel closer to my heavenly angels. And in that moment, I had a realization. I understood that all of my childhood and teen sacrifices, scars, pain, and suffering welded me into the person that I am today. These experiences did not just happen to me, they happened **for** me. Through this newfound awareness, I realized my angelic calling as a light worker. This I know for a fact is my life purpose.

In that instance, my soul was happy, my spirit was soaring, and my heart was beating. I felt completely happy and free. This was the most rewarding feeling of all. I finally felt like myself. Realizing how traveling changed my life gave me an amazing, magical feeling. I felt like I could not wait to travel again and see the rest of the world.

I'm still on my journey of self-discovery, whilst creating the life I truly desire with no regrets. I can't wait to share more about it soon as I continue to travel, explore, and find my purpose in the world.

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Chapter 10

Alison Vellanoweth

Door to Self-Love in Dublin

To my sister, Lauren Olivia Hohnbaum, for reminding me how to find myself again just when I thought I was completely lost, and to every woman who thinks they're not good enough. You are!

There are two words that describe the way my relationship made me feel in 2017: emotionally abused. I met my fiancé when I worked at a cosmetology school when I was twenty- three years old. After dating for nine months, he proposed. Eight years and two children later, I found myself numb to a life that should have made me feel alive. Throughout those two years, I was told by my husband that I was not enough. He told me that no one would ever love me, and that I was a terrible mother. I let myself become normalized to these things he said about me. I knew subconsciously that the way I let him speak to me was wrong, disrespectful, and degrading, but for some reason I felt trapped. I believed that even if I kicked him out, he would always be around. I knew deep down inside that it was time for a change.

One evening, while I was getting my kids ready for bed, I received a phone call from my younger sister who was happily engaged to be married. Even though she is two years younger than me, I looked up to her. She is a beautiful and intelligent human being. She was telling me I needed change in my life. She said it would take seeing things in another light for me to really feel free from what I considered my own personal hell. She told me about a trip to Ireland she was planning for our mother's birthday. I wanted to go so badly, not only to get away from this personal prison, but also to experience a new place. She begged me to come saying it was time for me to take a leap of faith before the moment had passed. So I sat down and considered what a trip like this could mean to me. It would be a special time spent with my sister and mother. I may not get another chance to travel with family like this so after looking at my checking account, which had a balance of exactly \$496.45, I thought, "Could I even swing this?" How could I get someone to watch my four and one year old daughters for six days? Is it even right that I spend this kind of money on myself when I have two kids to take care of at home?

The answer in my heart of hearts was "Alison, you need to travel to discover more about yourself, and through that discovery you can be the best person possible for everyone around

you.” I found a round trip ticket on Delta Airlines for \$467.00. I bought it! I could not believe I had actually hit the “purchase” button. At that moment I felt my my life change entirely. Our flight to Dublin was scheduled to depart on Saturday evening.

The night before we left, my sister Lauren, some friends, and I went to a bar by Newport Beach to celebrate my sister’s engagement. That night, I met a tall, handsome man with the sexiest accent I had ever heard. As he bought me a drink, I asked him where he was from. It felt as if the universe was re-assuring me that I made the right choice to go on this trip. He told me “I am visiting from Wakeford Ireland.” My jaw dropped. I was so excited to tell him I was headed to Ireland tomorrow night! We hit it off as we continued to talk. It turned out I was in the presence of a Formula Drift race car driver. After exchanging numbers he gave me a sweet kiss on my cheek. I was not sure if or when I would see that tall handsome Irish man again, but I was certain that fate had brought us together that night, even if was just for a moment.

I woke up the next morning excited about the long flight to Ireland. I could not help but smile knowing that a handsome and talented race car driver from Ireland found me intriguing. At the time, I viewed myself as a self-conscious, weak, wounded woman with a broken heart who was in an abusive relationship. Later in the day I boarded my plane. We were off on our flight to Ireland! After arriving in London I was in for a surprise. I was shocked when I found out my next flight was out of a different airport an hour away. I was told to catch a bus that had apparently already left. After spending two hundred dollars that I didn’t have on a taxi, I made it to my next flight to Dublin. I was used to obstacles in my life. However, obstacles in another country were a bit more frightening. As soon as I landed in Ireland, I called my children to check on them. I had left them with their grandmother and their dad. They were happy! Knowing they were safe, I told myself I would enjoy this trip.

I made it to Dublin, Ireland. I was tired and hungry. My family was at the hotel waiting for me where they greeted me with room service! I ate what seemed like the best cheese burger I had ever put in my mouth.

I was still thinking about the Irish race car driver I had met in the states, so I decided to let him know I made it safely. To my surprise and delight, he texted back saying “I’ve been waiting to hear this good news! I’ll give you a list of places you should see while you are there!” He did just that. I took his much appreciated advice. I saw the church where remnants of St. Valentine are. I toured Trinity College. I ate at the oldest pub in Dublin where I had the most

mouthwatering fish and chips I have ever tasted. I also got my nails done at a cute little nail shop. Finally, I bought ten Disney dvds at the Disney shop in Ireland. I later had to laugh at myself since none of those dvds worked in the DVD player in the US when I got home!

I had never felt so at peace with myself than I did while I was in Ireland exploring an entirely different culture. On our second night in Dublin, my sisters, our mother and I went out. We hopped around from pub to pub until we found a place we just did not want to leave. This pub was a small, homey bar called Gogurty's. The Irish decor was unique. The welcoming smiles on the faces of everyone there made me feel like I had friends even if I didn't know them. I walked into a room where I was greeted by the energetic sounds of a local Irish band playing music. Everyone was dancing, laughing, and drinking. My mom ordered us Jameson Whiskey shots and Guinness beer. I immediately felt like this was where I was meant to be. I heard a familiar tune as I grabbed my drink from the bartender. The band was playing "Galway Girl" which is one of my favorite songs. The singer yelled "Someone grab that beautiful American lady and give her a dance!" A tall handsome Scottish man came over and grabbed my arm and brought me onto the dance floor. I danced until I was so exhausted that I couldn't dance anymore. When I sat down to rest, I looked over across the bar. I made eye contact with another handsome Scottish gentleman. He waved me over and gave me the sweetest smile as I made my way through the crowd to him.

I looked at my mom and my sisters as they were pushing me that way! I sat with him, while he told me how captivating I was to him and how beautiful I looked. I blushed, and turned away feeling very shy. I was overwhelmed by the positive attention and compliments that I was getting from men. He ordered me a drink. We danced, laughed, and I felt wanted. I will never forget turning to my sister and watching her pretend to be a drunk, sloppy mess. Her secret plan was to act that way so my mom would take her back to the hotel so I could have my fun! I still owe her for that.

My family left, and I went my separate way with my seductive Scottish man. We hid in every dark corner while strolling down the cobblestone streets. The way he kissed me made me feel like no one else was around. The next moment, I realized, I was in a beautiful apartment in downtown Dublin where I had the most amazing one night stand with the most mysterious, yet intriguing man. Back at my hotel I quietly walked in, showered, and went to bed smitten.

We saw each other every day that I had left of my trip in Ireland. He taught me how to loosen up and laugh at the little things in life. He showed me that I should appreciate the moments I create. It was hard to say goodbye, but I knew in my heart it was not a forever love. It was only an experience in my life that I knew I was supposed to grow and learn from. The time with him was a memory to cherish forever.

Back in the states I called the Irishman I met at the bar before my trip, and he picked me up at the airport. In that moment, I realized what the purpose of this trip was for me. I began to think that, even though one man tells me, “you’re *worthless*,” what he was really telling me was, “I am not *worthy* of your love.” I found that just because one person told me I was unlovable, does not mean it is true. Through that trip to Ireland, I was able to find my strength through the wandering of my soul. I was able to believe that I am a beautiful woman and I deserve someone who would give me his world. I needed to make sure I remember just how special I am. I learned, that in discovering another culture and another part of the world, I was able to stand up and do what made me happy.

Back at home, I decided to separate from my husband, a man who did not appreciate me the way I knew I deserved to be treated. I packed my things and my children. We left our little cabin in the woods that we called home and we moved in with my parents. I got a new job. I started nursing school. Most importantly, I began to live everyday remembering just how important I am to myself and my children. Not long after my decision to change my life, the father of my children decided to change his as well. He went to rehab to become a better person, not for me, but for himself and our kids. As for me, I am happy where I am. I am currently a single mother living with my parents and pursuing a new career. I know there is love in this world waiting for me to cross its path. When I do find that special love, I will never look back.

Alison Vellanoweth

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- Slows us down: Gives us a break from our fast-paced lives
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- Helps us break habits: mentally, physically, and emotionally
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- Promotes patience by releasing heavy expectations of the “one right way” mentality thereby allowing life to flow more organically
- Invites the opportunity to get lost and face one’s fears of the unknown
- Helps you get to know yourself better: the true you is rediscovered
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