

June 17, 2010

T- Day 15

Thursday

In some ways, it will be good to get away from American food. I sat down to type this journal and immediately slipped into a post-doughnut coma. So now, an hour later, I'm trying to remember what it is that I wanted to say.

It's been seventeen days since I left Montana. Four days were spent with my brother in South Dakota, eleven days with my sister in Texas, and two days in New Hartford, New York, with my sister and our grandmother. My brother and I played the typical tourists while I was there, visiting Mt. Rushmore and The Reptile Gardens in Rapid City. I spent most of my time at The Reptile Gardens photographing the poisonous snakes of Africa so that I could better identify them when I get there. At night, Keith also helped me with my Swahili exercises by reading the words to me and having me describe the picture to him. I found out that I am much farther behind in my Swahili acquisition that I would like; when I couldn't see the pictures, I had trouble identifying the words.

After my visit with my brother ended, Africa became strangely distant to me. In Texas, my sister was moving across town. Every day of my visit was filled with packing and hauling boxes in and out of 95° heat, breaking for fast food, and crashing in front of the TV (usually before the work was completely finished). I feel like I watched dozens of movies in my week and a half there and consumed my own weight in greasy food. It was a world so far removed from life in Africa that I rarely remembered what going to Tanzania would be like. What was worse, I was so exhausted that when I did think about my trip, the expectation I had felt in Montana had become almost a burden.

Fortunately, I had trouble falling asleep two nights ago. I don't usually consider thrashing restlessly in bed a blessing, but that night, desperate for something to slow my mind down, I pulled out the mp3 player that my good friend Jesse Costin had given me months ago. I selected a playlist, put in my earphones, and tried to settle down. Still feeling restless after several songs, I grabbed for the player again. In addition to music, the player also stores pictures. I had loaded up my last two summers' worth of pictures show my Tanzanian friends. I began scrolling through the pictures for myself. Each time I saw a familiar face, I imagined what it will be like to greet that friend again. Today, I am feeling a renewed sense of longing for the trip and, *especially*, the people there.

June 18, 2010

T- Day 14

Friday

A dragonfly bit me last week! I meant to write the journal that night, but time escaped me until today. It all started with dinner at Olive Garden, at which I ate more salad than I had in my entire life. Combined. I waddled out of the restaurant with my crummy rotten sister harassing me with jabs to the stomach – physical and mental. Anytime someone mentioned food that night, I felt an immediate queasiness. We got out to the car, and my sister headed toward the driver's side with me taking shotgun. After a moment (I wasn't terribly alert at this point), I realized that my sister hadn't unlocked the car door. I looked over and saw her backed away from the car with a horrified look on her face. A dragonfly had planted itself right next to her door, and she was afraid that when she opened the door, it would fly right inside.

“Get it off,” she ordered in typical crummy-rotten-sister fashion.

I didn't actually mind – I'd been rescuing her since I was five. I would hear a scream from down the hall, rush in with a Kleenex, and carry a spider safely outside. I don't think I ever told my sister that I put them in the tree right next to our house. If she had known, I'm sure she never would have walked past that tree again.

Anyway, I grabbed the elongated abdomen of the insect, feeling a little bit excited because I had never caught a dragonfly before. The whirrrrrrrrrrr of frantic wings immediately filled the air as the dragonfly struggled to get free. I turned away from the car, but before I let it go, I wanted to look at it a little more closely. It never gave me that chance. The insect's body, which had been straining to get out of my grasp, suddenly whipped around, curling toward my fingers. Before my eyes even registered what happened, the mandibles opened up and clamped down on my thumb. I let go.

“It bit me!” I yelled at my sister. It didn't actually hurt, and there was no mark, but I had felt one mandible on the front of my thumb and the other at the tip of my thumbnail – a good quarter-inch away! In my surprise, I had lost sight of the dragonfly. My sister told me it hadn't flown away, and sure enough, we found it clinging to my shirt below my right arm. I grabbed it – far more gingerly this time – and pulled it off. The dragonfly made its frantic escape...all the way to my left hip. I had to grab it a third time before it finally figured out it should fly away.

Crazy bugs.

June 19, 2010

T- Day 13

Saturday

“How long did you scream when you saw him?” Anastasia asked.

Stephanie looked disapprovingly at her younger sister and rolled her eyes.

“Not that long, Stasia,” she replied. “It’s not like people scream for a long time when they are surprised by something.”

Somehow Stasia hadn’t heard the scream herself, which was a bit of a shock because everyone else in the park pavilion had heard it loud and clear. Stephanie was having her graduation party along the shore of Cayuga Lake in Ithaca. Before I had left Montana, I had told Stephanie that I was going to try to make it to her graduation next Saturday. *Try*, but no promises. Meanwhile, I told her mom that I was going to be there a week early to surprise her.

My sister and I had left our grandmother’s house that afternoon after a few rental car complications. Getting the rental car was a slightly stressful end to an otherwise great trip visiting our grandmother. We were able to help her with a few chores and attend her English as a second language class, which she has been tutoring faithfully for four years. Once we had the rental car, the trip remained slightly stressful for my sister because I was navigating our journey. I was having a great time staring off into the distance and remembering to tell her to turn as we passed the correct streets.

But we made it to Myers Point and to the graduation party. As we pulled up to Pavilion E, my heart started to race. It didn’t help that my sister kept asking if I was sure this was the right place. I could see Stephanie sitting on the nearest picnic bench, but having not seen her for three years, I felt a little uncertain. There were Frisbee players in the field in front of us who I thought might be Steph’s brother and sister, but they had changed even more since I had last seen them.

I grabbed Stephanie’s present (wondering what it was because I hadn’t seen the contents since I’d wrapped them three months earlier) and walked toward the pavilion. I felt more confident with each step, but my heart didn’t stop racing. How did Steph handle surprises? With all the other people at the party, would she even care that I had come? I had nothing to worry about - it was the perfect surprise. Stephanie was talking with a friend as I walked closer and didn’t look up at me until I was right next to her. She screamed and jumped up to hug me.

All I could think to say was, “I lied.”

I'm glad I'm not psychic. Because with four minutes left in the Algeria-US soccer game, I predicted that the Algerians would come back from being outplayed in the second half and score a goal, ending our chances to advance in the World Cup. But five minutes later, in extended time, Landon Donovan sunk a rebound into the left corner of the net, propelling US soccer to a win and their first group title since 1930.

I say this not because I am an avid soccer fan (though I did watch the game with Stephanie's father and siblings), but because I could not predict the outcome of the game any more than I could predict the outcome of my trip so far. I knew it would be my last time with my sister for a year, so I was hoping for a great time, but God has given me (reminiscent of Ephesians 3:20) immeasurably more than all I could ask for or imagine.

At the graduation party, the Lyon family invited us to go on a Father's Day hike with them after church. We hiked through an amazing gorge that looked like God had taken a Saws-all to the rocks because they were cut at such straight angles. It was a great time for us to fellowship and learn more about each other. It was also a great time for Anastasia to escape from the clutches of injury when her dad and I were throwing rocks off a footbridge to splash her. I heaved a fifteen pound rock in the perfect place for maximum splash, and to my horror, it skipped. It missed her knees by inches.

Val and I continued to navigate the roads of upstate New York, stopping at Dunkin' Donuts to (once again) eat ourselves sick. Then on Monday, our uncle's family flew up from New Jersey for dinner (my uncle has his own plane). We ate together at Ithaca's famous Moosewood restaurant. My younger cousin immediately began talking to me about a book series he was interested in, and we connected right away because of our love of reading. He even offered to send me books while I'm in Africa.

The night before Val left, we also went to a movie with our Aunt Megan, who was hosting us for our visit, and we had a great time talking and laughing and telling stories. I had to say good-bye to my sister yesterday as she flew back to Texas, but the trip was a blessing. Last night, I also moved out of my aunt's house and in with the Lyons, where I'll be staying until Stephanie and I fly out on July 2nd. Her mom is flying out the same day to visit Stephanie's sister in Australia. I can't wait.

June 24, 2010

T- Day 8

Thursday

Wendy, Stephanie's mom, got home from the library, took one look into the living room, and went to find Stephanie.

"What did those two do to each other?" Wendy asked.

She was referring to Anastasia and I, each of whom was passed out on one of the Lyons' two couches, sound asleep. The time: 3:30pm.

"I don't know, mom...they were playing soccer earlier."

We were indeed playing soccer together on the street in front of the house, but that was just one of the many adventures from the last few days that seem to have worn both of us out. Almost any downtime we get, we're out in front of the house playing Frisbee with whoever will join us. Yesterday, Sean came out to play. When we came inside, we were so hot and sweaty that Stasia suggested we go down to the lake to cool off. We got our swimsuits on, packed a few snacks, and headed out. Unfortunately, the air conditioned drive down to the lake cooled us off so much that we had to play Frisbee all over again when we got there just to warm back up. But we spent the rest of the afternoon at the lakeshore, playing Frisbee in and out of the water, collecting things from the bottom of the lake and trying really hard to dry off before getting back into Stephanie's car.

Stasia has also been helping me take my bags for a walk. I'm allowed to check two 65-pound bags on the plane, a baggage limit that I'm taking full advantage of. This means I'm also responsible for lugging two 65-pound bags from the airport to the Amani Center. I'm not sure how much walking will be involved. Ideally, it will be one short haul to John's car, but it may potentially involve several bus transfers instead. Either way, I don't want to arrive in Africa without experience hauling my own belongings. So I'm taking my bags out each day to acclimate myself. Our first walk together lasted five minutes, so we tried for six today. I made it, but the entire walk hurt like a string of expletives because yesterday's lake adventure also resulted in my first sunburn of the year. I had red marks on top of red marks from where the straps had rubbed into the burn.

I expect Anastasia and I will have plenty more adventures before we leave, but after today's nap, Wendy is threatening us with an 8:30 bedtime.

June 25, 2010

T- Day 7

Friday

Stephanie graduated tonight, tomorrow is her birthday, and we leave in exactly one week. Life is busy. Sean, Stasia, and I just spent a couple hours making thirty gift bags of various common household items to give to Stephanie as “birthday presents.” (This is a trick I’ve perfected over many Christmases of gift exchanges with my sister.) In addition to her malaria medicine that we picked up from the pharmacy earlier and a pair of her own socks, one of the bags contains a triple-wrapped plastic knife, two layers of which is solid packing tape. The bags are laid out on the entrance stairwell to read “HAPPY BIRTHDAY STEPHANIE JOY LYON!!!” as soon as she walks in the door from the all-night graduation party that she’s at right now.

Tomorrow’s birthday plans include driving up to Syracuse for an IMAX movie then eating out at the monstrously famous Dinosaur Barbeque. I was around when Stephanie and her mom were planning the night. Because her brother Sean is a vegetarian, they had to go online and check the Dinosaur Barbeque menu to make sure there was something he could eat.

“Let’s see...” Stephanie read. “Beef, beef, pork, chicken, beef, chicken, pork. What’s brisket? Okay, so beef, beef, pork, beef. Oh, wait – here’s a chicken cordon bleu. That has cheese.”

That immediately went onto my Quotable Quotes file that is my favorite appendix to a year’s worth of journals. Anastasia is constantly trying to say something funny because she’s the only member of the Lyon family without a quote.

The Lyons have certainly taken me in as part of the family (although they do let me sleep in *way* later than any of the other kids). I’ve been going along on errands, doing Bible studies, grocery shopping, enjoying family meals, playing games, going on walks, and thinking of more crazy things to do with Anastasia. Last night we decided to throw water balloons to each other over the garage.

I’m going to be sad to leave this place, sad to move on from another stage of life, however short this one may have been. But as Stephanie’s graduation speakers reminded me tonight, we are always moving *to* someplace, even as we leave. Indeed, I have much to look forward to in Africa, but I wish I could go without leaving anybody behind. This ebb and flow of people in and out of my life sometimes makes me afraid that I’ll be washed away by it.

July 2, 2010

Day 0

Wednesday

Day 0 is going to be the longest day of my life. Seeing as how I'm just now on the cusp of it (12:49 am), today is going to include: showering, sleeping for six hours, loading the Lyons' minivan with six people and about two hundred pounds of luggage, a six hour drive to JFK International Airport, a flight across the Atlantic, an eleven hour layover in Cairo, Egypt, and a six hour flight to Dar es Salaam. But since I refuse to start Day 1 until I'm in Tanzania, I'm going to include the next forty-five hours as a single day.

I don't even know what to feel right now. I haven't even been able to journal for a week because I've been such an emotional rollercoaster. Three days ago I was physically sick because of how scared I was about the upcoming year. Right now I feel like I'm leaving for a quick trip to Cairo, not a year-long mission. When I wake up in the morning, who knows how I'll feel. Besides tired, that is. I've been tired everyday this week. The whole family is pretty exhausted because their church hosted a Vacation Bible School this week – everyone else has gone to bed.

I'm not tired, so I don't want to go lie in bed awake, but I can't think of anything else to do. I finished "helping" Stephanie clean and pack most of her room. I pretty much just took down all the signs and posters and pictures on her wall, giving her a hard time about all of them while she was trying to do real work. We took a short break to climb onto the roof with Sean and Stasia and watch the Ithaca area fireworks show. Sean and Stasia were also in and out of the room while we were packing, and I didn't want to finish because we were having so much fun. This was actually the second night of merriment in a row for the four of us – last night we ate at a Chinese buffet and stayed and talked until they started turning out the lights. Nobody woke up to get to VBS on time this morning, but it was well worth the time we had together. I'm pretty sure I'm going to cry tomorrow.

Then in case I'm not going to miss Stephanie's siblings enough, my own brother and sister called to say good-bye. I realized that I didn't play mini-golf with either of them before I left, so it's the first thing on my list to do with my brother when I get back. I still haven't grasped just how far away that is. Come to think of it, I've never been anywhere for an entire year. I've always left Butte for vacation during the summers and come home from college over breaks. This will be the longest stretch of time I've ever spent in one place. I can't believe I didn't think of that until just now.