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The African Roller Coaster created by Frank Rice

Chapter 1: The Applicant [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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“Oh, that’s nice.” It is January 2002, our youngest daughter’s senior year at SUNY Geneseo. Lauren had just informed us that she was applying to the Peace Corps. Are we believing our ears? Although she was heavily involved in Habitat for Humanity (“Changing the World One house at a Time”) since her Sophomore year, she was the only one of our three children who craved designer clothes and an extra soft mattress. As Lauren’s Peace Corps application advances through various stages, my wife, Ruth, and I are getting increasingly nervous. Questions like: “Do you have back problems? Can you squat for long periods of time? Can you ride a bike? Can you ride a bike on rough terrain?” Should she really be doing this? Five months later, her application is on the verge of acceptance and we are sitting through another of numerous but, of course, special commencements. In addition to those of our two older children, as a faculty member of Albany Medical College, I’m expected to attend the AMC commencement every year. We warily peruse the program. Ho hum. Who was the long-winded speaker going to be at this one. Dr. Mark Gearan... .blah, blah, blah ... recently appointed President of Hobart and William Smith College... blah, blah, blah... retired a few years ago as Director of the Peace Corps!!! Not only that, we realize that Dr. Gearan is the brother of a close friend and uncle of one of Lauren’s high school classmates, Mark Svare. The address is on volunteerism and Dr. Gearan acknowledges that 6 graduates had applied to the Peace Corps. So, if we are looking for a positive sign, that one hits us right over the head.

The acceptance letter comes a few weeks later. Lauren’s thrilled, we’re ...well... supportive? Her assignment will be in Togo, West Africa. Another good omen. For several years, our church, Bethlehem Lutheran, had directly supported a missionary in Togo. But after 10 years there, Pastor John Palka had recently returned permanently to the United States, his wife having health problems. Bad omen. Lauren’s mission will be health education, sanitation and AIDS awareness. Of course, she has no background in that whatsoever. We wonder what that has to do with her Major in communications and public relations with a Minor in music. Her background will actually be more useful than we imagine.



Chapter 2: Training [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com

The letter lists Lauren's departure date as September 11th, exactly a year after the attack on the World Trade Center. Aaaaach! What are they thinking??? Another letter quickly follows. Oops. The departure date was moved to September 27th. The staging area was a hotel in Philadelphia. A strict weight limit of 80 pounds eliminates most of what we had already purchased for her anticipated needs over the next 2 years and 3 months. "That scale can't possibly be right.... It still can't possibly be right."

As required, we take Lauren to Philadelphia on the 25th, part with the proverbial stiff upper lip and drive home as the tears flowed freely. Then we hold our breath in anticipation of future communications. Upon returning the next day to her music teaching job at a Niskayuna Middle School, one of Ruth's 8th grade students excitedly informs her that her Uncle had served in the Peace Corps "... and...and he was in Togo!" "Really! How did he like it?" A pause and a frown, "I don't know.... He died there. I think the bees got him." Pick jaw up from floor, compose yourself, say "I'm sorry" and remember to ask for extra prayers at church. The student plows on nonplussed, "There's a memorial well there that's named in his honor. Maybe your daughter could visit his well!!!" Grit your teeth, smile and say, "That would be nice."

A brief phone call during a layover in Paris. Then a brief call from Lomé, the capital of Togo. She's still alive! The weight limit had been strictly enforced. Most others had to leave a lot of stuff in Philadelphia. "*I had numerous shots for yellow fever, typhoid, cholera, meningitis, tetanus, hepatitis A, B and C, etc. I also started malarial medication, but we were warned that it can have hallucigenic side effects.*" Togo is rife with disease. As we later get our own shots to go visit her, small maps of the world posted on the clinic wall indicate risk levels for various diseases. Togo is right in the middle of the highest risk zones for all but Oriental meningitis. Missed out on that one! Too far away from Southeast Asia I guess.

Then, an e-mail. An e-mail! Togo is part of the modern world! But this will be a false hope. She is now a couple weeks into her three month training period in the highlands of central Togo. An intense crash course in French attempts to prepare her for communicating in the official language. Playing the French horn was about as close as she had come to French since high school. She is in the lowest beginners class. I can identify with being forced to learn French under pressure, nearly 30 years ago.

October 12th:

“Nice to hear from you! I don’t have much time left and these computers have French keyboards so the letters are in different places and the commands are different, and I already stink at typing, so here goes. I am bogged down with classes. My brain literally hurts from all the French and technical info I am trying to learn. I don’t have electricity, I am afraid of my latrine (more specifically the snakes in my latrine) and, yes, I have to get water. Washing my clothes by the river and carrying my laundry back to my house on my head!!!! have all become a major part of my life. There are goats and chickens and lizards and “ginormous” snails that live in my front yard. I am doing well though. My host family is pretty cool for the most part, more to come on that later. I am living in a beautiful village. However, it is located on the top of mountains and the internet is 12 kilometers down-hill. Thus, it is impossible to ride my bike there and back. Especially since the road is really very bad and bush taxis fly by you at 65 miles per hour. I had my first bush taxi ride today. It was definitely interesting. 16 of us (including the driver) crammed into a vehicle about 3/4 the size of a VW minibus. I am learning a lot and my French is improving rapidly. There is SO MUCH VOCAB to learn, especially health related vocab. Thank you for your letters and e-mails. On the rough days it is truly uplifting to know that I am in your thoughts as you are always in mine. I hope that everyone is healthy and happy. Make sure that you enjoy the fall for me! I sweat all the time, its pretty hot here and will only get hotter in the following months.

The togolese people are very friendly and hospitable. Everywhere we go people say “bonsoir” or “bon arriveé” (welcome)! Also have had three marriage proposals. We were warned about that. I’ve been fortunate enough to attend a church service here and twice I’ve gone dancing under a clear African night sky! Wow, what an experience! The villagers play the drums AND DANCE FOR HOURS. It is truly amazing! I love and miss you all so much!



Chapter 3: Communications (or lack thereof) [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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The message was upbeat, but communication was clearly going to be a problem. Not only was the internet 12 kilometers away, but so was the nearest telephone “telecabinne”... and \$5.00 a minute. We work out a system where she would call us, give us the number she was at, and we would call her back. A bad day. A call in tears. Please call back. We call. Nothing. Call again. Nothing. Again. This time a recorded message, “We’re sorry all circuit are busy.” Many calls later, nothing or more recorded messages, some in French. We’re going nuts. We try anything. A prior old number works for a “telecabinne” in Lomé which, as Togo’s only seaport, is at the southern extreme of the country. A random French speaking African who was standing by the phone is clearly baffled by our call, but we’ve confirmed that the phone’s are working at least somewhere in Togo. But nothing works in central Togo. We call for an international operator, and after plowing through a half hour of recorded menus that lead to several dead ends, we finally reach a human being who tracks down a directive that “Togo is no longer accepting calls from outside operators.” How can a country no longer accept calls from international operators? We’re distraught. Over an hour has gone by, and our phone has been tied up in our attempts to get through. Lauren calls again in sobs, wondering why we haven’t called back. It takes several more bad communication experiences before we accept that “it is just the way it

is.” We never know whether we will get through on the rare occasions that Lauren can get to a phone. E-mail is no better.

We have an expression here called “WAWA” (West Africa Wins Again) that we use when we have been waiting hours for a bush taxi, or the internet doesn’t work, or the phone lines aren’t working... clever, huh?

On this particular bad day, we learn that several of the volunteers “washed out” of the training program [eventually more than one third drop out] and Lauren’s been sick. We had been forewarned. “It’s not whether you will get sick, but how often and how severely.” Someone in the village had died and this time the drums were not festive, but frightening...and continued all night long.

Couple this with the side effects of the anti-malarial drugs.... This was just the first downer of a long roller coaster ride.

Chapter 4: The Post - Boadé [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
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November 8th:

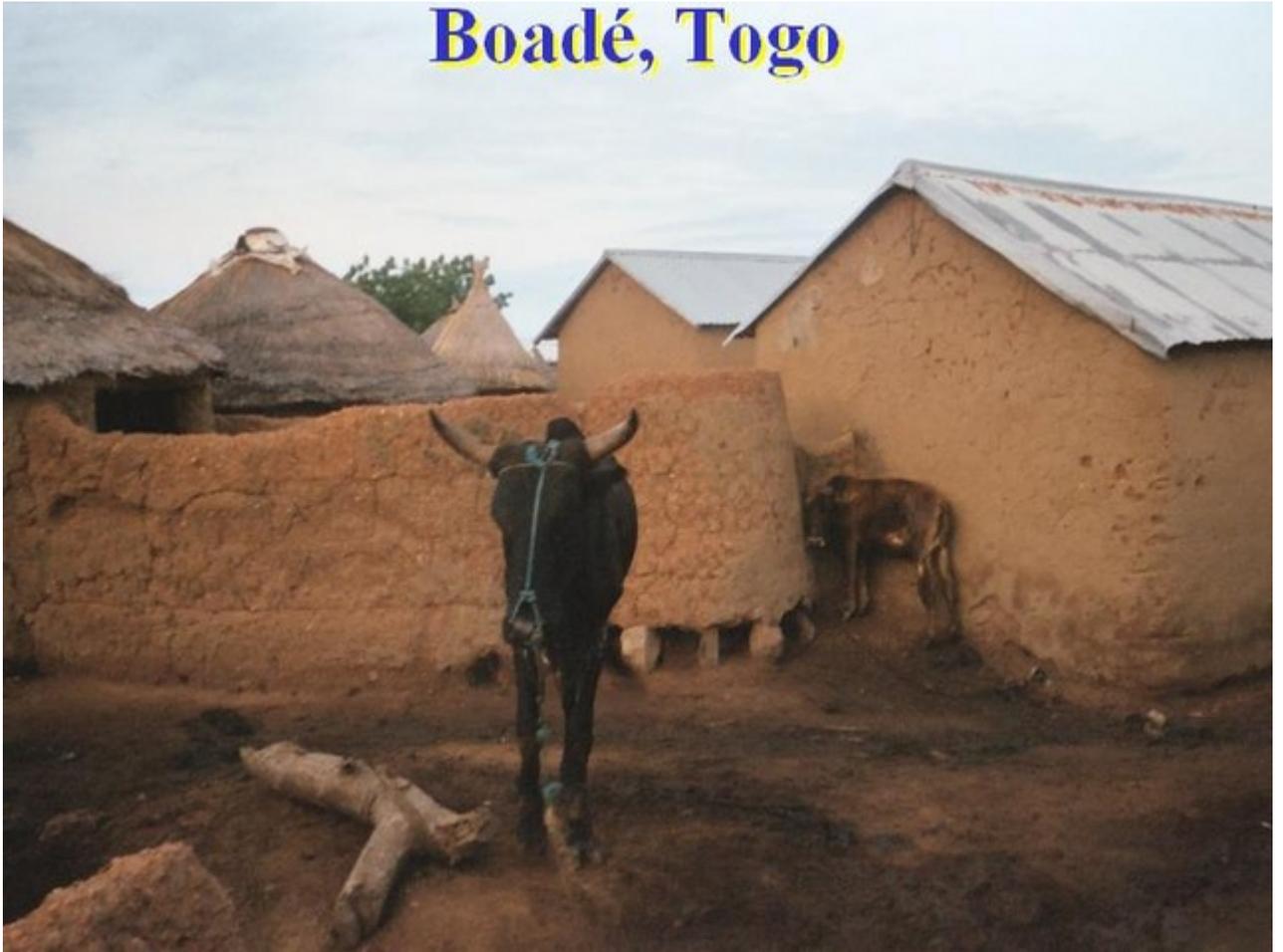
This is the first time I’ve been able to write an e-mail in 3 weeks! Last week we went away for the weekend with my training group. It was an educational field trip to the Kara region of Togo. I got my post (aka: the place I will be living for the next two years) last week and this is the first time I have been able to tell anyone about it! I will be living in the Savannah region. Basically I have an island- not in the sense that I am surrounded by water, but in the sense that I am literally on this tiny piece of land as far north-west in Togo that you can be. AND I am sandwiched between the borders of two other countries (Burkina-Faso and Ghana). My post is called Boadé. And I am very excited! It is a brand new post and I am living in the same compound as the chief-AHHHHHH! This is just slightly nerve-racking for me. My closest PCV (slang for Peace Corps volunteer) neighbor is 45 kilometers, which is farther than I’d hoped but maybe there are some volunteers closer to me in Burkina or Ghana. I’m excited because I’ll get to know three countries at once! We have a running joke here that I’m not actually serving in Togo because, basically if I fell off my bike onto the other side of the road I would be in another country.

I am going to try and go to the film festival that is held in Burkina-Faso once every two years. Today has been a difficult communication day, it seems like the computer knows that I’m anxious to contact you all! I love you all so much. I won’t be able to call again this weekend. Good news is that I can get a cell phone at my post! This will make at least receiving calls a lot easier. I’m starting to feel a little burnt out by the training phase. Oh and in two weeks I go to my post for a site visit for a week... 18 hours in a bush taxi-YEAH!!!! Wish me luck! I love you!

Lauren’s assignment was a pleasant surprise. The closest city, Dapaong, (39 kilometers away) was the northern-most regional capital and was the area where our missionary, Pastor Palka, had been stationed. We immediately call him for moral support. He knew where she was being stationed. It was indeed the most remote, undeveloped region of

Togo. She was going to have her work cut out for her.

Boadé, Togo





Chapter 5: Travel (or travail) [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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There will be no closer volunteers in the adjacent countries, and the cell phone will be too far away to connect. Years ago the Peace Corps supplied the PCVs with motor bikes, but too many were killed in accidents. Now, each one gets a mountain bike and a sturdy helmet. Some still get killed. There is no public transportation except for the minibus bush taxis, which only depart when they are full (minimum 15, as many as 25) or when the driver just plain feels like it. WAWA. The last trains stopped running over 20 years ago and only one two-lane, poorly maintained paved road runs the length of the 350 mile long, 50 mile wide country. The only other paved roads are a few in each city center. The Peace Corps has a van that shuttles once a month between Lomé and Dapaong in Togo. However, it is expected that the volunteers will plan travel around the schedule of the shuttle. Too bad. Lauren will learn that the Peace Corps doesn't coordinate required events in Lomé with the schedule of the van. They also only reimburse volunteers if there are 3 volunteers to fill a 5 place car or 5 volunteers for a nine place car. There are only 9 volunteers in the northern region, all in different programs, and they rarely have to travel at the same time. They're also too spread out and can't reliably communicate with each other to coordinate plans. They learn to watch for the bush taxis that are the most full

because they are likely to leave the soonest. We try to imagine up to 25 people jammed in a minibus for 350 miles in intense heat without air-conditioning. Lauren doesn't have to imagine this.

Chapter 6: The Homolog and the Chief [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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November 22nd:

Communicating with y'all was sure tough yesterday with the phones and all. I tried to e-mail from Dapaong and the connection was terrible, I got to read two, but, alas I was unable to write any. Now we know what it will be like while I'm at post. Apparently, the phone connections in the north are hooked up by satellite and they are sometimes hard to get through (as though they aren't already??). Right now I am in Kara, located towards the center of Togo. Here there is an excellent internet connection.

So, about my post.... My rooms in the chief's compound weren't ready yet so I slept in my Homolog's (counterpart's) house. She is the accoucheuse or midwife kind of person. She is very hard working but slightly overwhelming! She wants to be my homolog/mother/tutor in French, Houssa (a major fairly universal African language), and Bissa (another local language more frequently spoken in my village however I'm not very interested in learning it). That is just too much to take from one-person. She is hard-working and very much aware that I am not there to do all the work; I am there to collaborate and facilitate. It is very important that she understands that because that is the only way to maintain SUSTAINABLE development. Anyway, the dispensaire (health clinic) in my village seems to be very well run and organized and the infirmier (doctor) is a very intelligent and respectful man - I am looking forward to working with him.

There is a lake right next to the chief's compound where I'll be living. Supposedly there is water in it all year which is surprising because the rivers are already almost all dried up and this is only the beginning of dry season. It is supposed to get colder in the next two months- YEAH!!!- but then it is supposed to get HOT! Like 130°, no joke. And me without AC and a fan. The three days I was there I realized how important it is to drink tons of water- I have never been so thirsty in my life! The first full day I was at post we crossed the border into Burkina-Faso to go to the market, isn't that cool! Oh yeah, and there are crocodiles in the lake by me but they told me they don't eat humans only small animals.

I met the Chief he seems cool. His compound is like a labyrinth. I'll probably get lost finding my rooms. I met a lot of the military in the surrounding areas, and there are a lot since I'm on the frontier of three countries. I also met chiefs in the surrounding areas and the regional director and police in Cinkassé which is a larger town 11K away from my village. I think that I will be doing a lot of work in the surrounding villages and in Cinkassé. I'll probably be starting health clubs and training community health workers at first. But I'll start after I'm settled and integrated in my village.

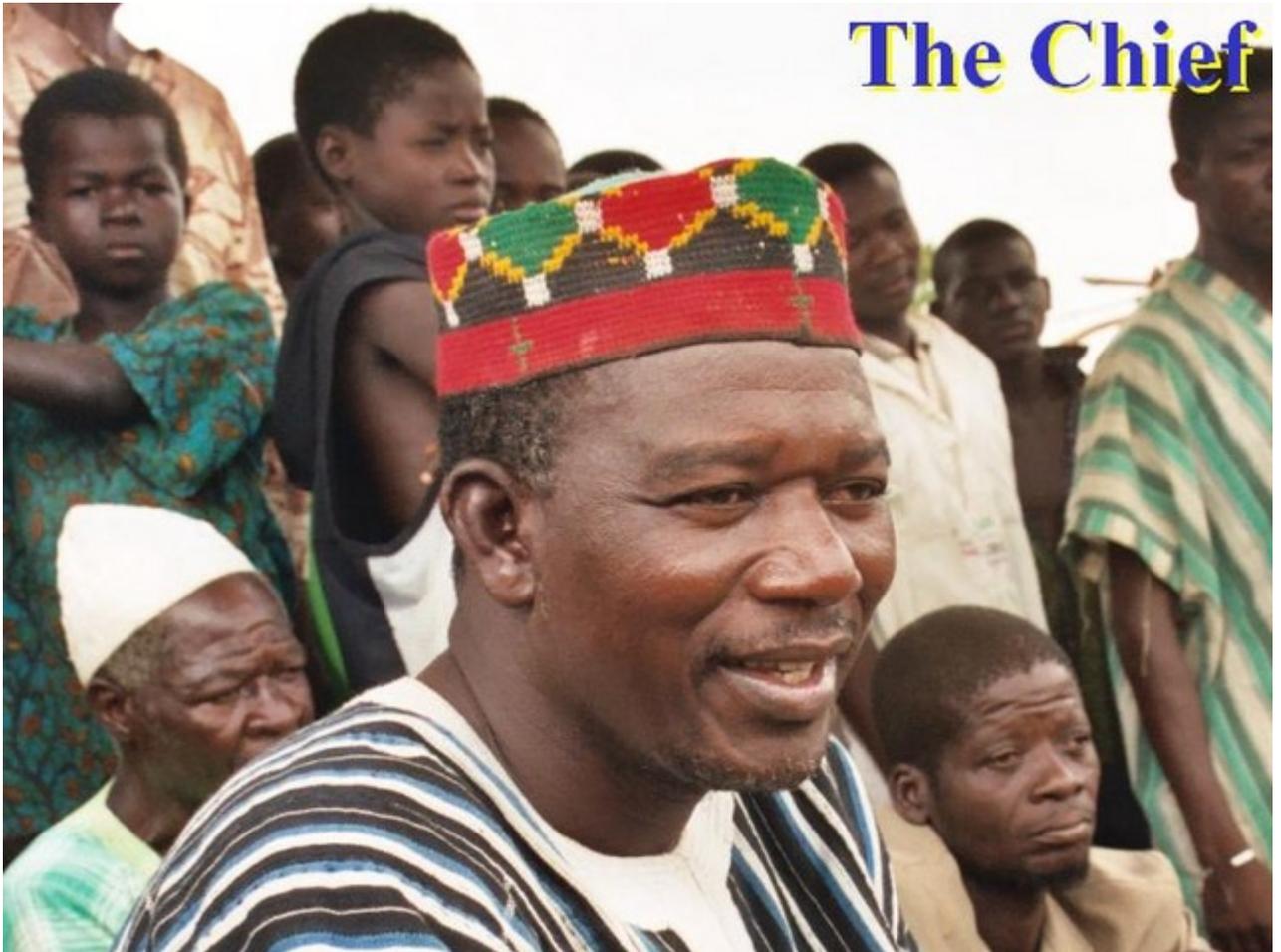
Crocodiles!!! We learn later that some villagers have been attacked. Lauren's village has no electricity and no running water. The nearest water was from a foot pump, a half mile

away and has to be filtered and treated with iodine. The Peace Corps provides them with a filter: about a half hour per quart. It turns out that colder meant dropping into the upper 80's. Although Houssa is a major African language of commerce, Lauren finds that Bissa is more important to communicate with the children and most of the women. It's not a written language so there's no dictionary, and she's already going to be translating through her newly acquired French. The men and some of the women and older children have learned French, the official language from colonial days.

The Togolese military can be somewhat of a problem. Individual soldiers equipped with AK47's are posted in huts at intervals along the highways. Although they are there to "protect the countryside", you must stop at each hut and, depending upon their mood, they may just sit in their chair and wave you through, or take their time to saunter up and interrogate you. You may or may not have to pay a "tax" to proceed.

December 3rd:

It was great hearing your voices on Thanksgiving, definitely the best gift I could have gotten. Do you remember when Shannon [Shannon Cornelius, another Bethlehem graduate, who was a recent PCV in Ghana] told us about the computers in Ghana... yeah, well, Togo is not that far along yet. Sunday some friends and I walked to the Ghanaian border. Once you cross into Ghana you can instantly tell there is more money there just by the improved condition of the roads and the phone lines. I can't believe that it is December already! This morning we did soy transformations. We made soy milk and tofu and these beignet things that are like fried bean cakes. It was very interesting. We are learning that kind of stuff because part of the job is to work on improving nutrition, or lack there of, of the Togolese people. As you know, soy is an excellent source of protein plus it puts nitrogen back in the soil. Very interesting right? Tomorrow I get to pick up all this furniture I ordered at the carpenter! Isn't that cool! I am getting hand crafted furniture. I ordered it here because there is not a lot of wood up north and it would be a lot more expensive. It's really not that expensive because I got it made out of the cheapest wood and unvarnished. I am going to paint it myself, all colorful and arts-n-craftsy like. So I finish with training on Friday! Yeah for me! Then we head back to the coast, Lomé, until 12/13 and I'm off to my post! Pretty exciting! Did I tell you that our swearing in ceremony is being held at the American embassy because it is Peace Corps 40th anniversary in Togo? Apparently it is going to be a huge bash and anyone who's anyone is going to be there. I had an outfit made for the festivities. Yes that's right... I'm rockin' in the African world of fashion.



Chapter 7: Accommodations [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
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Lauren indeed completes the training, rated at an intermediate high French language level. Takes after me. Learns fast under pressure. After the official swearing in ceremony at the US embassy, she's now an official PCV and begins getting paid. \$200 a month. There is a bash that culminates with all the volunteers jumping fully clothed into the embassy swimming pool. Nice new outfit?? Then it's off to their posts 6:00AM the next morning.

December 16th:

So hello everyone! Bet you weren't expecting to get an email from me, seeing as I am supposed to be at post and all.... After a two-day long journey up north and dropping everyone else off at their posts (which required going an hour off the main road only to back track to get back to the road...) we finally got to my post. We were listening to Christmas music in the van on the way here and "I'll Be Home for Christmas" came on... that was a little bit tough. I arrived only to find out that my place is not ready! Once again, an important lesson to be learned in patience. Last month when we went to my "house" it wasn't even close to being done and they reassured me that they only needed

about two weeks to finish (anyone else getting flashbacks from the Money Pit? “Two weeks”) Anyways when I arrived there were no doors, the latrine was built but it is just a hole. They have yet to put the seat in, and the floors of my rooms are covered in dirt and soot from building, the walls have to be painted, and I need a screen for the window and door (to prevent mosquitoes). I also really need a screen door because there is only one tiny window (actually the place is very small) and I will need to keep the door open to get a nice breeze. I am now staying in Dapaong with my friend Lacey [another PCV]. She has a big house with 2 bedrooms, a huge living room, kitchen, front porch, and bathroom... it looks like a cabana. I might stay here until after Christmas and then go back to my village on the 26th. I also might stay with a family in Cinkassé (which is 11K, an easy bike ride) away from my village. At least that way I can bike in and out everyday. I’m kind of bummed because I was looking forward to getting settled in at my village but I have already made a couple of connections in Dapaong and I am finishing ordering all my furniture and stuff. I don’t think that my house will have a lot of floor space but at least it will be cozy. If there was too much empty space I would feel lonely. I am also going to get a cat!!!! but probably after a month or so at post.

When a village applies for a volunteer, the Peace Corps requires certain housing “standards”. Lauren’s two small rooms, each about twice the size of a double bed, is in one of the few buildings constructed of cement block and with a corrugated sheet metal roof. Hers is the only building with a concrete floor, a screen on the foot square window, and a metal door that can be locked. Most of the “houses” with multiple occupants are smaller and made of dried mud with thatched roofs and dirt floors. If they even have a window, it doesn’t have screens, and a ragged hanging cloth is the door. The buildings are interconnected with mud walls that partition small dirt courtyards without doors. This cluster of small buildings, courtyards, and meandering passages – called Boadé Centre - occupies the space of about half a block in our neighborhood in “old” Delmar, and houses about 500 men, women and children. The “island” region of Boadé has 21 scattered clusters with a total population of 5,000 inhabitants. Lauren also has the luxury of a small high-walled, concrete floor courtyard with an area partitioned for her “bucket shower” and private latrine with a real toilet seat. It’s the only toilet or latrine of any kind in her village. We have visions of a raised bucket with holes in the bottom for taking a shower. We learn, when we visit her, that a bucket shower means using a scoop to pour water over yourself from a bucket, then soaping yourself and rinsing off the soap. Since you’re constantly sweating, you’d like to take several “showers” a day, but remember that the water has to be pumped and transported from a contaminated well, a half mile away. The residents of this region own no cars, only a few motor bikes and a few more bicycles. When we visit later, we are amazed to find that there are hardly any wheeled carts of any kind, so everything is carried, usually on top of their heads, and almost always by the women. The income of her area is less than \$50.00 a month. It is expected that she will support the local economy by paying others to help her transport water, wash her clothes in the lake (with the crocodiles) and prepare food. The diet consists almost entirely of boiled maize or corn meal, boiled tubers, boiled rice, peanuts, papayas and an occasional tomato, chicken or some goat.



Chapter 8: The Maison and Christmas [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
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The PCV's within the overall Dapaong region chip in each month and rent a house (maison) in Dapaong where they can get away for an occasional weekend. Its a touch of home: hang out (speak English!), recharge batteries (there's electricity!), make real food (pancakes, pizza...and vegetables!), use a flush toilet (again and again), sleep on a mattress (filthy, but at least its soft) and take a real shower (but no hot water). They never know who will be there on any given day. There's a library of accumulated dog-eared paper backs and tape cassettes. No CDs, they use up batteries much faster than tapes.

December 22nd:

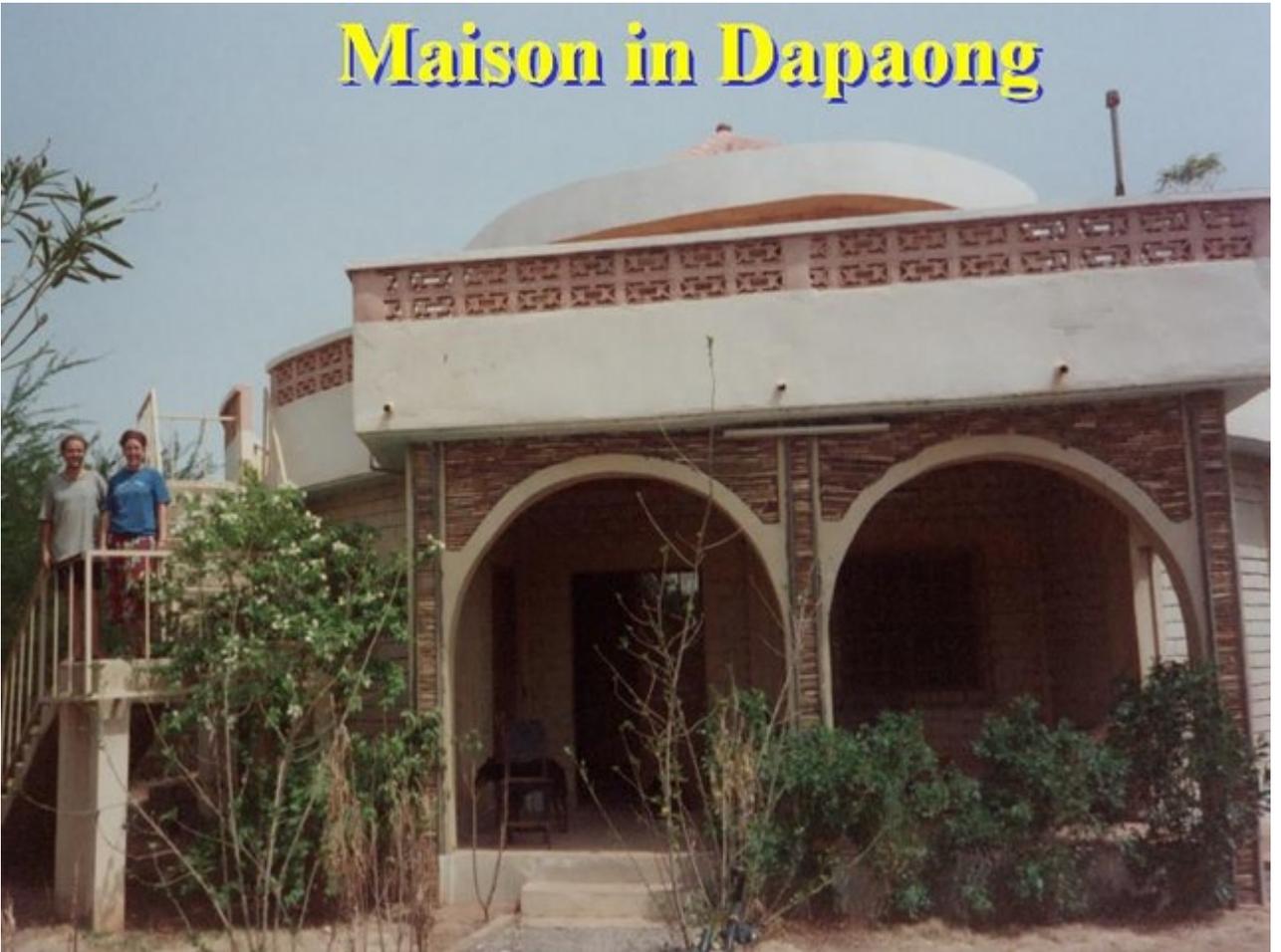
The closer it gets to Christmas, the more I want to go home to be there to celebrate. My friends and I are having a really good time though. We decorated the regional house... we made paper chains out of old Newsweeks and strung them around the room, cut out a big fireplace out of that big brown paper and made stockings for everyone that is coming from other regions, then we found dried gourds and painted them like ornaments, they are very pretty. It looks good and we are making chicken and rice with peanut sauce and everyone else is bringing food. There are going to be 14 of us total. I'm not sure about

that Christmas Eve service/party the Polka's told you about because they alternate where it is held and I don't think it is in Dapaong this year. I am going to try my hardest to find a service to go to.

December 26th:

Yesterday was actually one of the best Christmases I have ever had (of course excluding the fact that I was not with my family and loved ones doing the traditional things that I always have). I can not even express how much more I appreciate what I have and what I can give. It was actually an amazing time to reflect. There were tears of sadness and of happiness as well. The people that came up are all wonderful. We had homemade cookies and egg nog, both of which were made from scratch!!!! Cookies without an oven!!!! Did you know that was possible? You can make this thing called a Dutch oven. We played more games and then had dinner, which again was incredible!!!! We had garlic mashed potatoes, grilled pintade (the chicken like fowl that is really good, when you come to visit we will go out for pintade), rice and a really good peanut sauce, and a fresh tomato cucumber salad, and bread. These people are amazing we made everything using a gas camping stove!!!! Throughout the day we also drank some of the local brew called tchouk. Then we finished the night off with a really fun Charades game!!!! We all had a wonderful time. Tomorrow morning I am going to post.

Maison in Dapaong



Chapter 9: Integrating [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
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During their training, the PCVs are advised that they will typically need about 6 months before they can reasonably initiate any programs. During that time the PCV needs to become integrated into the life of the community and identify potential leadership. It seems like a lot of time given that they will only be there two years. The reason for this advice soon becomes evident. Lauren is the first white person to live in the area, and the children run away from her crying in fear. Most of them have never even seen a white person before and the negative stereotypes persist from colonial days. As Lauren was warned, her every move is watched constantly. The men and women, and eventually the children endlessly stare and stare from a distance. She visits the village market on market day and helps at the clinic. The clinic lacks everything and the doctor is rarely there when he is supposed to be. Few of the women bother to bring their children to the clinic even for the inoculations that are available.

During her second week, the village officially welcomes her with a festival (fête) and a naming ceremony. She is given the Muslim name “Sakiratou” which means “gift from God” and is deeply touched. She gives a short speech in her newly learned French and, in closing, boldly adds an advertisement. *“I hope to see all the women and children at the*

clinic tomorrow.” Fifty women show up with their children and Lauren is ecstatic. She develops color coded charts for them to keep track of which inoculations the children have had, and which ones they still need. The women and children gradually warm up to her as she gradually learns the local language. It’s a polygamous society. Aisha, one of the wives of Tchima, a nephew of the Chief, takes Lauren under her wing and helps her cook, clean and wash laundry (“*Aisha said I really suck at washing clothes!*”). Aisha has a baby that was born just before Lauren arrives, so Lauren uses the baby’s development as a measure of her time at her post.

February 8th:

I found an internet connection that works!!!! More expensive but reliable and faster. Anyways my time is almost up so I just wanted to let you know that I love you all very much and you will all be getting letters soon! The dispensaire could use things like latex gloves, cotton swabs, antiseptics, a detachable clamp for delivering babies, brushes for pap smears, compresses, bandages, a stethoscope, big yellow dish washing gloves, pens (black and one or two red), wooden pencils and stamp pads (blue and red). They are fairly well stocked with medicines. The doctor is good but he covers a huge area and is not often here. DO NOT send diapers, the mothers use rags, which work well and are much better for the environment. Try your hardest to come on vacation this summer!



Mothers and children at the clinic

Chapter 10: Mail (or lack thereof) [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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We learn that even when we pay the exorbitant postage to send her supplies (typically more than \$20.00 for a few pounds), she still has to pay a tax (\$5-10) to receive the shipments if and when they get there. Interestingly, the “tax” varies depending on the postal clerk. Sending a pair of flip-flops? Send each one in a separate package or there’s a good chance they won’t get there. Putting the return address as the name of a church (in French) also improves the likelihood of delivery.

February 21st:

It really was great talking to you today! Sorry that it was kind of a downer. I just wanted to tell you that I received the package with the vitamins, People magazines, cleansing pads, etc. Thank you very much. Mail seems to be working pretty well lately, although I’m still waiting for that Halloween package you sent in October (ha ha). Anyways, accompanied with the package was the receipt for how much the tax cost to pick up the packages. I gave them 25,000 CFA (\$50.00) when I was sworn in and there is only 2,000

CFA left! The packages that size are running about 7,000 each so we need to start using the Dapaong mailbox because then I can pick them up myself and not worry about how to get money down to Lomé. Currently, I don't know what will happen if another package is sent there without enough money to pick it up... I hope they don't just leave it there to collect more tax charges.

Chapter 11: Marché [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com

One of the highlights of the African week is market day, marché. A big regional market is held every Thursday in Cinkassé. Lauren goes as often as she can, making the 11km trip by bike over the severely eroded dirt road. The application question “Can you ride a bike over rough terrain?” comes to mind. At least during the dry season the road is hard-packed red grit and not mud as in the rainy season. The trade off is that the temperatures do indeed get up to 130 degrees. Most of the villagers who go must walk that distance - both ways. They start out before dawn and get back well after dark. The market is a jam packed cacophony of animals and vendors, noise and smells of all types in a writhing mass of twisting paths among rickety stalls build from scraps of wood, sheet metal and cardboard. Grains are sold from mounds on the ground. Vegetables are rare, expensive and carefully arrayed. Nothing is refrigerated, and meats and fish are coated with flies. Like sentries, dozens of vultures (“Vultures?” “No kidding”) are poised on posts and trees waiting literally for the spoils at the end of the day. Many women and girls maneuver through the crowd balancing wide round trays on their heads that are piled high with...EGGS!!! A striking feature of the marché is stall after stall of meticulously folded bolts of bright, gaily colored printed fabrics. Although most everything in the region is of poor quality or otherwise extremely expensive, tailoring and embroidery are reasonably priced and extraordinary quality despite the fact that even highly-priced sewing machines are run by hand. The women wear their best to the market in a dazzling array of color. Lauren has had several beautiful dresses custom made, but one of her favorite seamstresses emigrates to Baltimore where her craft is in high demand.

The Boadé marché is held on Sunday and is a meager scattering of grass-covered tree-limb lean-tos surrounding a large tree. The vendors are all selling small clusters of the same few types of produce to each other. The smell of heavy cooking oil permeates the air emanating from large wok-like pans sitting directly on ground fires made of sticks. Women are cooking golf-ball size, soft dough balls or bracelet-size rings of ground peanut mash that become hard as rock. No one is really earning any money; it's really a time to socialize. The women do the work while the men sit in the shade of the tree. Although there's never much there, Lauren goes regularly to meet everyone and always buys dough balls and peanut rings that she hands out to the children.

Marché







Chapter 12: Mana and the Mercy Ship [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
nerveresearch@hotmail.com

Lauren notices that there is one elderly woman, Mana, who uncharacteristically shied away from the marché. Mana had an ugly, pitch-black, softball sized tumor that had grossly deformed the side of her face.

We get a call. “*Did we ever hear of the Mercy Ship?*” I vaguely recalled a system of non-profit, donation supported hospital ships staffed with volunteer physicians and nurses that visit the ports of third world countries (Link: [Mercy Ships](#)). Lauren had learned that a Mercy Ship was coming to Lomé and wondered if they might be able to remove the tumor. The question was whether it could be done, and whether Mana might be too old. After just a few phone calls, I was patched through a satellite connection to the ship which was already in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean in route to Togo. Amazing how communication works in a different world! I was assured that age was not a consideration, just general health and whether the condition was operable. We give Lauren the green light to work out the logistics, which were not going to be easy, and wired her some money to cover the travel costs. Boadé was in the extreme northwest corner, and Lomé was 350 miles away in the extreme southeast. Mana only spoke Bissa which was only spoken in Boadé and the adjacent region of Burkina-Faso. If she could be

treated, she would have to spend a prolonged time in Lomé. Lauren, Mana and an interpreter (Tchima) commence the two day journey not knowing exactly what awaits at the other end.

February 27th:

Thanks again for everything you have done and are doing. I must admit that our church has got to be one of the most generous, compassionate, and embracing group of people I know. I feel a little guilty always turning to that community of people to help and I worry that they might think I am taking advantage or the easy way out of searching for a solution myself, although I think that God is a pretty great solution to any problem. I tried everything I could here (you should have seen me running around on my bike) however, knowing that people at church are willing and wanting to help me here, how could I refuse asking for your/their help to fulfill a once in a life time chance for a woman who I believe suffers everyday. I mean I've had flies land on mosquito bites and it hurts and I watch them constantly landing on her infected tumor all the time and know that that is probably the least of her problems, in terms of the tumor bothering her. She doesn't complain about it and no one in the village mistreats her or draws attention to it but everyone knows it just has to be removed and that is the only solution. So, when I opened the flier explaining Mercy Ships I knew that it was the only solution and that my thoughts (because truthfully I don't remember praying for this woman specifically) had been answered by God. Although, I guess there really isn't much of a distinction between thoughts and prayers, if anything thought is more honest) because with prayer we are setting aside time to talk with God. But anyways, thank you again and know that someone's life may be drastically changed and improved. Doesn't that just feel wonderful?! I have reserved three spots on the Peace Corps' Lomé limo, found very cheap boarding for the 5th and 6th of March (one bed but I am fine sleeping on the floor and she is probably not used to sleeping on a bed anyways), taken "workdays" so it won't mean taking vacation time, and found out I will at least be able to stay with her throughout the consultation. Also, I found out there is a Lomé limo coming back to Dapaong the 9th of March so at least my transportation and possibly the woman's is covered!

March 7th:

***SHE'LL GET THE SURGERY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!** I brought Mana down from my village to receive (hopefully receive) a consultation from the screeners and doctors at Mercy Ships. From the moment we got to Lomé things just seemed to be going smoothly... too smoothly it almost seemed, but I know that it just must have been meant to be. For two years this woman has suffered with a tumor the size of both my fists put together on her face, swollen over her left eye. The front is completely infected and rotting (I think from treatment she got from a traditional healer a year ago).*

Yesterday were the consultations. Fortunately, Mana slept outside the stadium where the consultations were going to be held the next day. I met up with her at 5:30 in the morning and we waited together, with the translator I brought from village, until 8:30 when they

began to try organizing the people to open the gates. The line was HUGE, there were so many people there but we were near the front of the line very close to the gate. Our bodies were smooshed together, there was no space in between and not a lot of air circulation, especially with all the humidity. For three hours I stood next to Mana and had to smell her rotting tumor (occasionally I had to put on some Bath and Body hand sanitizer and breathe into my hands to get a break from the smell, which is still lingering in my nose) The people surrounding us had many different deformities including, tumors, burns, cleft lips, goiters, eye problems, facial bone structure deformities from birth, etc. Some people seemed perfectly normal and I assume they were curious to get free medical treatment.

The security people at Mercy Ships tried to rope off sections (we were probably 5th in our line - I am so proud of Mana for sleeping there overnight) but when the people in line saw that they were getting ready to open up the gates they started pushing so hard to get through. Of course, they didn't open the gate and they pushed harder and harder. It was like a riot and we were being crushed. I was yelling in French that if they didn't stop nobody would be seen. The pushing went on for a while and they were trying to get people through. One of the Mercy Ship workers saw me, grabbed my arm, I grabbed Mana's arm and my translator, and pulled us through. I was shaking. Then they led us into the stadium. She was immediately passed through initial screening just by looking at her tumor. Then we went and answered questions (I was very thankful to have the translator), several screening stations (they took blood pressure, pulse, weight - she really is in good health) asked more questions, etc. Finally we got to the station with the doctors. The doctor checked her out and then turned to me and said, "I think we can help her" I put my hands up to my face and started to cry a little. I asked when they could do the surgery and he said soon. Then she had blood drawn, signed consent forms, and we were given an appointment for the surgery. It is scheduled for MARCH 27th!!!! In two weeks her tumor will be removed and her life will be changed forever! She is so excited and happy (although she didn't cry as I did).

The Mercy Ships organization is incredible. The people were so patient, kind, organized, and thorough. Those who couldn't be helped were directed to counselors and ministers. On our way out of the stadium a camera man, who had been filming the line of people in the beginning off the riot, saw me and said, " You are very brave. I looked down and you were the only white face in a sea of black." I don't think that I was brave for being the only white face in a sea of black, but I did and do feel pretty darn good about the day and everything we went through together to get her the surgery. She has received a once in a life time chance. Thank you for all your support. I love you all very much and am still in wonder and amazement at God's work.

Tchima tracks down a relative in Lomé and Lauren makes arrangements and pays the expenses for Mana to stay until her surgery. Lauren is ecstatic as she stops at Dapaong on the way back to her village. She and other volunteers converge on their maison to celebrate St. Patrick's day. They wear green and paint calabashes with festive designs and slogans. Then wander through Dapaong handing out the calabashes and buying tchakpa for anyone who is wearing green, who, of course, is baffled and dumbfounded.

Being mostly Muslims, they aren't all that familiar with St. Patrick.

Mana (before)



Mana (after)



Chapter 13: Vacation Plans [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
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We have completed our plans to visit her in July. We've started our series of vaccinations that will cost over \$300 each. The physician advises us, "Don't bother with the cholera vaccine. It has a high likelihood of side effects that can be worse than the disease." Flight arrangements are somewhat of a challenge since there are only a few countries that have flights into Togo or adjacent Burkina-Faso. And most flights only go every other day. No special rates, everything's full fare. The plan is to have Lauren meet us in Paris for two days, then fly to Madrid where her older sister and brother, Suzanne and Kevin, will join us and all continue on to the Canary Islands for a family week of rest and relaxation. Where are the Canary Islands? Off the coast of West Africa, but you can't get there from Togo or any adjacent country. So we will all trek back to Madrid, where Suzy and Kevin will return home to their jobs. Lauren, Ruth and I will fly back to Paris where we can then fly back to Africa. We figure it's best to go on vacation first then go with her to Togo, rather than the other way around. We're not sure whether Lauren whether Lauren would change her mind and not go back.

Ruth has kept her middle school students apprised of Lauren's progress. One day, she posed the question: what they would send Lauren if they could only send one thing that would have to be very small? One student enquires, "Let me get this straight. There's no running water, toilets or electricity." "That's right." "It's riddled with disease and the food and water is contaminated." "That's right." "And she's volunteering to do this?" "That's right." "I'd send her a one way ticket home."

Instead of flying into Lomé, we will fly into Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina-Faso, which is closer to Boadé. Also, amazingly, there is actually scheduled commercial bus service with reserved seats between Ouagadougou and Cinkassé. There is no scheduled commercial transportation of any kind in Togo. Of course, this means we are now going to have to pay for visas for both Togo and Burkina-Faso. It's going to be a very expensive trip, but Lauren can't wait.

Chapter 14: Dealing with Death [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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Lauren is really thrilled with how things turn out with Mana but gets some bad news. She had indeed gotten a cat shortly after her arrival in Boadé. Pets were a rare luxury, and some men teased her that they might eat her cat. While she was away with Mana, it had died from eating a poisoned mouse. The men felt badly for having teased her. Instead of burying it, they hung the carcass in a tree to protect it from vultures so that they could prove they hadn't eaten it. Putrefying, it was swarming with flies and riddled with maggots. She was horrified despite their good intentions.

March 18th:

I saw my first dead body yesterday. He was a 34 year old man that lived in my compound. A truck hit him on the Route Nationale while he was riding his bike back from the marché in Burkina. His skull was cracked but seeing as there are no ambulances in this beautiful country, a friend strapped him on his motorbike (way to stabilize the head, but what else can you do?) and took him to a hospital in Dapaong where he died 4 hours later. They brought the body back to the village, and when I went to pay my condolences the next morning, they showed me the body. I'll tell you, dead people in the United States don't look dead. It was kind of traumatic. We buried him yesterday morning, next to the compound. I am starting to think twice about the water situation. What is really sad is that he has a little 5 year old boy, Moussa, a friend of mine, who's mother died just 5 months ago.

The same day a woman was brought into the dispensaire with severe nose-bleeding. She had given birth at a different dispensaire about 20 days ago and they had done something improperly causing her to have an internal infection and bleeding. She also died that night. I saw both of them, spoke to both of them hours before their untimely deaths. It is so strange and unreal (yet really too real at the same time) to see these people, way too young to die, and then the next day hear about and see the evidence of their deaths. I haven't had an appetite for the last two days. Today was the first time I ate something of

substance.

I feel better now that I am in Dapaong but I am still a bit shocked. The good news is that today not only did I get one marriage proposal on my way to Dapaong... I got three! Really, I'm quite a catch. Also, yesterday was Mana's surgery date so hopefully everything went well, and they put two more windows in my house last week so I am much happier. As for me, I spent the WHOLE day trying to put a screen door on my house with the village carpenter. Sometimes small accomplishments here are HUGE accomplishments by our standards. Don't ask me to explain why it would take the whole day to attach a screen door, this is just how life here in Togo works. I wouldn't have it any other way. I really, really miss you guys. I can not wait to get a big long hug in July and be in the CANARY ISLANDS... drinking wine, swimming in clean clear water, having real ice cream and cheese, and BEING TOGETHER- YEA!!!!!!!

Chapter 15: Soul Mate [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
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While she was occupied with Mana, Lauren's creative soul mate, my Aunt Mary Bee, had died from cancer. Lauren was just a baby when we moved to Delmar, and my Dad's sister really bonded with her from the start. Mary had been the creative force behind Albany-Schenectady area theater and founder of a highly successful marketing agency, Madison North, which was way ahead of its time and won numerous national awards. She played a major role in the renovation of historic Proctor's Theater in Schenectady, coining its logo "It's Just Off Broadway". That is, Broadway in Schenectady.

In 5th grade, Lauren wrote a play that won first prize in the New York State, Imagination Celebration Young Playwright's Competition. As part of the Celebration, her play was chosen for public performance by a professional theater troupe, with her as the Director! She spent an entire weekend with "good ole Aunt Mary" refining the script for the performance. They had a great time barbecuing porterhouse steaks (prime cuts), eating specially baked Italian bread (with real butter!) and squirting each other with Super Soakers (some kids never grow up). Lauren went on to perform extensively in Bethlehem Middle School and High School musicals and Shakespeare productions (the Nurse in Romeo and Juliet; Aunt Em in Oklahoma...with a live sheep...that defecated on the floor during one of the performances. She disappeared offstage and reappeared with a broom as though it was part of the show.). By then, both Ruth's and my parents had died and Mary was at every performance and graduation. She became Lauren's confidant when she needed to really talk. Mary had been battling cancer for a long time before Lauren left for Togo, and we had had realistic heart to heart talks that she might die before Lauren came home. Now it had happened, and we didn't have the heart to tell her, especially after the cat incident and the preceding e-mail.

We incremented the bad news over a couple phone calls until she was having a more upbeat day. "How's Aunt Mary?" "Not toooo good." (She was already dead.) "How's Aunt Mary?" "She's going downhill fast." (Real fast. Her ashes were already interred.) Lauren took the eventual truth very well, and even understood when we told her that we had strung her along for a better day. A memorial service was planned for the end of

April, Kentucky Derby Day. Mary loved the races, and one of my cousins was a racehorse veterinarian for the Mellon stables in Virginia. He had named a racehorse after her, Mary Bee. But it was too high spirited to control. Aptly named. Apt soul mate.

Chapter 16: New Beginnings [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
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April 25th:

I am really sorry that I cannot be at Aunt Mary's memorial. You know that if wishing on stars worked, I would be there right now. I am extremely disappointed that I can not celebrate her life, wonderful accomplishments, and more wonderful personality and generosity of love and laughter with you all. You will be deeply in my thoughts tomorrow. I miss you guys very much.

After a very long day the other volunteers and I finally moved into our new maison in Dapaong. It is a beautiful house; clean with tiled floors and bathrooms (3 toilets and 2 showers!!!!- a much improved expansion over the one we had in the other maison especially considering gastro-intestinal problems in Togo), a roof top veranda- with Spanish tiling, 3 bedrooms, trees and flowers outside, and a largish living room. All this for only 30 mille a month (that is the equivalent to \$50 rent a month)!!! Come move to Togo... we would be loaded! This is one less bedroom than our old maison but it is cleaner (no huge cockroaches, mice running around, and ants the size of small grasshoppers) and classy— think flowers and roof top veranda. I can't help but have a "Money-Pit" fear that everything will go terribly wrong in about a week.

Last week Mana came back to my village. She looks amazing! Although the Togolese aren't ones to act on self-consciousness and show (or think about) low self-esteem, Mana's self-esteem seems to be flying high. Before the surgery I didn't see her very often out and mingling in the village; the two occasions we interacted were while she was briefly passing through the marché. This past week we had two market days and she was out and socializing for hours (she always makes sure to buy me at least two calabashes of the local brew whether I want/need them or not)! Her overall persona is that of a much more happy and chatty person. People from across the border have been coming to see this "miracle" (not ever forgetting to point out an ailment that they too have been suffering from.) Unfortunately this was a one shot deal. I usually break out into a huge smile every time I see her and attempt to speak Bissa. This has been a very exciting experience, truly amazing.

Other than my Mana update I am now the proud owner of a new orange kitten that makes village life even more enjoyable. I named him Bailey. Work and several projects are officially underway and I am finally feeling settled into my life here. For the most part I am happy and surprisingly healthy (of course there have been a few exceptions to this...I'll leave that to your wonderful imaginations). It has been EXTREMELY hot the

past month and a half or so and will continue to be until the end of May. Wish me luck! I am trying to convince myself that I love sweating...a lot. Only two months more to go before Canary Islands!

Small things from home make Lauren very happy and her work is beginning to go well. We had sent her flip-flops, one each in separate packages. We hope there are no one-legged postal clerks.

May 3rd:

I got both packages; pretty incredible, huh? I can not believe that I already got them. The mail system is working really well right now! Did you guys get the letter I sent you? Thousands upon thousands of thank you's for the WONDERFUL flip-flops! AND the M&Ms and string cheese and People magazine. The flip flops fit perfectly! Also, Mr. Naylor sent me some really interesting bandages for the dispensaire, that was extremely thoughtful. I am sending some more film to Suzy to develop and a tape with some traditional music so you guys have more of an idea what to expect. This past week in village went really well. I had my first health club meeting (over 60 students showed up) and three very successful meetings in Boadé and the surrounding villages. Finally, Bailey is doing really well. I really like having someone to come home to and take care of (besides myself). Plus, she is a really cute little cat. We are going for lunch soon and then to the marché. It is one of my very close friend's birthday and we are having a cinco de mayo fête for her (even though it is only the 3rd). Anyways, we are making bean burritos and black beans (lots of beans... good thing this house has three toilets) and we have Spanish music and we are going to enjoy our roof-top veranda. See, Peace Corps is not rough and tough all the time! Anyways, the pizza we made in the Dutch oven was fabulous, thanks to the string cheese I donated. Only two more months to go before Canary Islands!!!!

Chapter 17: The Health Club [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
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Lauren's health club for teenagers is going well, but it's difficult to get the right disease associated with the right vehicle for transmission. They draw pictures of mosquitoes spreading AIDS. "No, that one goes with malaria." How to teach about viruses and immune system to kids with no education... who've never seen an airplane, let alone a microscope...hum. Her excellent artistic skills pay off with illustrated diagrams. A carved wooden stake provides a means to demonstrate the use of condoms. She draws a realistic looking, full-sized naked man with an erection. They play a variant of pin-the-tail-on-the donkey. Each condom has a different informative fact on how to prevent AIDS or how AIDS is transmitted. I have visions of a generation of young Togolese men screaming in the night. An International Red Cross representative from Germany visits and is impressed with her artistry, and takes some of her posters back to Germany to show what she is doing.





Chapter 18: The Election [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
nerveresearch@hotmail.com

The mail system isn't working very well, again. It takes over two months for her to get her airline tickets as we wait on pins and needles. A new problem arises: the forthcoming national election. The current president has been in office since a military coup 36 years ago that ousted the first elected president of newly independent Togo. Although constitutionally mandated term limits have long expired, the parliament rules that he is eligible for re-election and, wonder of wonders, his most popular opponent is ineligible. Meanwhile, civil wars are already raging in Liberia and the Ivory Coast which are just on the other side of Ghana. The PCVs are warned to not get involved in, or even discuss politics. All telephone and e-mail communication will be shut down for three weeks

preceding and during the election, while we are frantically trying to track down Lauren's plane tickets that were sent by FedEx weeks before. The Peace Corps is on top of the situation and issue several directives.

Safety and Security Directive
Peace Corps/ Togo
Updated May 8, 2003

Peace Corps' Approach to Safety and Security:

Do you remember what you learned about the Peace Corps approach to safety and security? In short, the better integrated you are within your local community, the safer you will be. This integrative approach to safety is supplemented but not replaced with a solid Emergency Communication Network and an Emergency Action Plan. The degree to which you establish respectful relationships with your host family, your homologues, your neighbors, and your community leaders, the safer you will be. As we approach a period of potential civil disturbances, take time to revisit your community leaders. REMIND them that you count on them for help in emergencies. ASK for help when you are sick or frightened. In many cases your neighbors will be shy about intruding and uncertain whether you want their assistance. You want their help! Ask for it!

Presidential Election Update:

April 30 was the deadline for registration of candidates for the Presidency of Togo. The portfolios of 7 candidates, including President Eyadema, were accepted. The electoral commission rejected the portfolio submitted by opposition candidate, Gilchrist Olympio, stating that he had not met residency requirements.

Restriction on Political Expression:

Let us remind you once that Peace Corps Volunteers are not allowed to participate in Togolese politics. Do NOT allow yourself to become engaged in political discussions. Do NOT express your opinion concerning the elections. Do NOT discuss the elections in public places with other Volunteers. Be mindful of what you write to family and friends over e-mail. Do NOT write about the political situation. If your parents become concerned during any possible emergency, instruct them to telephone the Office of Special Services at Peace Corps/ Washington, 202 692-1400 during business hours; 202-638-2574 after business hours. Failure to comply with this regulation not only jeopardizes your status as a PC Volunteer, it could also jeopardize Peace Corps ability to operate in Togo.

Travel Restrictions: May 18-24

The week of May 18 marks the beginning of the "heavy campaign season." Volunteers are instructed to restrict all non-essential travel. This is the time to review your Emergency Action Plan, ensure that you have adequate food and water to care for yourself in the coming weeks, confirm your communication plan with your Contact Volunteer and pay courtesy calls on the officials in your village. Your quarterly living allowances will be in your bank account by May 22. Be sure that you have an emergency

supply of cash on hand.

Stand Fast May 25 - June 7 or until instructed:

Peace Corps Volunteers will go on Stand Fast during the weeks prior to and following the election. Stand Fast requires that you 1) remain at your post, 2) keep a low profile, 3) prepare for an emergency, 4) remain alert to further instructions. Please refer to your Emergency Action Plan for more information.

Communication:

These directives are not intended to alarm Volunteers but simply to ensure that Peace Corps/Togo takes all necessary precautions concerning your safety during a period that has the potential for civil disturbances. Do not hesitate to telephone the CD, your APCD, or the Medical Unit if you have questions or concerns.

Lauren forwards us these directives along with a brief e-mail:

May 23rd:

This is really informative as to what is going on here because of the upcoming elections. There is also a number you can call in Washington D.C. if you would like to know what is going on. I've been told that because the telephone company is a monopoly "they" will be cutting cell and land lines any day now. I don't know when we will be able to talk again. Truthfully, I am a tad bit nervous.

Okaaaaay. So we're not supposed to be alarmed. Clearly the Peace Corps is well prepared for the situation. We're not nervous, are we? But how are you supposed to call anyone if the phone systems are shut down? This is serious stuff and Lauren is careful to comply. Although her border post is normally swarming with military, any civil unrest is expected to be in the South and some fighting occurs in and around Lomé. Several people are killed. Before Lauren left for Togo, we were aware that the elections would be forthcoming, so we had worked out a system of code to communicate in secret if problems were developing. "Everything is quiet in "Philadelphia"." It's too far away from Lomé for anyone to care about. Sometimes it's a blessing to be so remote.

June 7th:

So far so good... at least as far as I'm concerned: for the country now, that is a different story. The results are in and guess who won? Surprise, surprise! My Togolese friends (as well as I) are really down, and I don't blame them. Apparently, "it" is not over yet...; think the aftermath of the Bush/Gore election with the addition of violence. Not to worry there is no violence in my village and I wouldn't even have known the results if it hadn't been for the short-wave radio BBC coverage. I love the BBC. I am only in Dapaong for the night- I had to pick up some forms for a girl's scholarship project I am working on and I wanted to get my mail. Peace Corps lifted the stand fast so I am not breaking any rules or anything. Mother and Pops if you'd like to call tonight or tomorrow morning feel free (the phone lines are working again after being cut) . If I don't hear from you, I will

be back in Dapaong next weekend so we can talk then. I'm still waiting for the plane tickets...mildly frustrating. The last two weeks in village were fine. I love my cat, Bailey, she is the only thing that keeps me sane. AND, drum roll please... it started RAINING. Hallelujah praise the LORD!!!!!! The temperature is much more pleasant (my heat rash is slowly going away although now that the prickly pain is over it has started itching!), the ground is turning green, the air smells fresh and clean and I have started clearing my small plot of land to grow soy and peanuts.

NOW.... about vacation. I have never been more excited about anything in my life. It feels like the compilation of anticipation of all the Christmases of my lifetime.

Chapter 19: The Embassies [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
nerveresearch@hotmail.com

Whew. A sigh of relief . And her tickets do finally arrive. Another sigh of relief. We focus our attention on finishing our inoculations and getting our visas in order. We know we need visas for both Togo and Burkina-Faso and we know how slowly things work in Africa. Instead of sending our passports to their embassies by mail, Ruth and I take a day off from work to go to Washington DC and get our visas directly from the embassies in person. We call several times to make quadruply sure we will have everything we need and that both embassies will be able to process our visas on the same day we are there. Togo requires a letter from our employers certifying that we will return to our jobs and not stay in Togo. No problem there, even though Lauren's proposal about the financial windfall of living in Togo is tremendously appealing. Right!

Anticipating that we will probably need the entire day, we get down the day before and off to an early start. Both embassies are on embassy row in a high class area of Washington. We count off the addresses, passing one beautiful town house after another, each flying it's country's flag. Togo's embassy is immediately evident, every bit as sadly dilapidated and unkempt as the country itself. We move on to the Burkina-Faso embassy, which was nicely appointed, and are greeted by a poised, immaculately dressed receptionist. As previously instructed, we had a postal check and all materials were in order. However, the receptionist informed us that there was an additional fee to process the visas on the same day. They would not take a personal check or even cash, so we need to get another postal check. Okaaaay. We decide to stop at the Togolese embassy to get those visas processed while we are getting another postal check for Burkina-Faso.

The front door is slightly ajar. We enter...and no one is there. The once magnificent, high-ceiling rooms are completely barren except for a dusty empty desk and a well worn sofa. "Hellooo...hellooo." No one answers. We go outside and double check the address and verify that it is indeed flying the Togolese flag and has a plaque indicating that it is the Togolese embassy. Ruth pulls out her cell phone and calls the embassy number. A voice informs us that he is upstairs, all the way in the back room. He knew we were coming. The rundown enclosed sun porch has a handwritten sign on the door announcing that the visa fee has just increased from \$60 to \$100. The pleasant gentleman is seated behind an old desk next to a few battered file cabinets. No office equipment is in sight. He accepts our application materials and passports. As previously instructed, we pay him

in cash. There's no receipt. He tells us to come back in 3 hours. Clearly he is a busy man. We go for a long, early lunch, get our postal checks and return. Someone is sleeping on the sofa. Everything is in order and the visas have been stamped in our passports. Making small talk, we ask the gentleman if he has any recommendations for places we should visit in Togo. He is puzzled by our question. Maybe he didn't understand. Mustering our courage, we ask again in our rusty French. He brightens but still doesn't understand why we are asking. We shrug, thank him and head back to the Burkina-Faso embassy.

The receptionist accepts our materials, passports, both postal checks and informs us that they will mail our passports back to us with the affixed visas. We're skeptical and persist that we would be happy to come back later if it was at all possible to process them today. She leaves to make an inquiry. We can come back at 4:00. With a couple more hours to kill, we take a long walk up and down embassy row perusing a couple small museums and embassy displays. Everything is ready when we return. She had been mistaken. We had overpaid and she cheerfully refunds the difference. We hesitantly trotted out our French to enquire about Burkina-Faso. She is delighted and we have a wonderful long French conversation about her country.

Chapter 20: French [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com

I had been a terrible foreign language student in high school and struggled through the college language requirement, opting for German. Since I was interested in science, and "everything of importance was now written in English", foreign language was clearly a waste of time. So I was part of a student movement to eliminate the requirement and replace it with something more relevant like a computer "language." Finishing graduate school several years later, my first job was on the faculty of a medical school in Switzerland and I had six months to prepare for teaching Gross Anatomy... in French. Foreign language had suddenly become very relevant. I learned fast under pressure and Ruth resurrected her years of high school and college French. It was now paying off in ways that we never imagined and was about to be an even more important asset.

Chapter 21: The Trip [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com

Lauren sends us a list of supplies to bring when we came. It includes gifts for the chief and other special villagers including Mana. Also loads of stuff for the kids (a soccer ball, a basketball, small bouncy balls, pipe-cleaners, stickers, soap-bubbles etc.) as well as the dispensaire. All in all, about an additional 100 pounds over our weight limit, but the airlines are understanding. All the travel arrangements that Ruth had slaved over work great. We are grateful for years of international travel and living experience that included Japan as well as Europe. But we never experienced anything like our 12 days in Burkina-Faso and Togo.

Ruth's meticulous travel plans go like clockwork. We get to Paris a day before Lauren and we wait the next morning with baited breath for her arrival at Charles DeGualle airport. How will she look? We remember our prior inquiries. Comment: "With all that sun, you must have quite a tan." Response: "*Maaay-beee, but I feel really white!*" Question: "Have you lost any weight?" Answer: "*I guess so. My clothes are looser...but*

there aren't any mirrors...and there aren't any scales....” There she is!!! There she is!!! She looks like.....LAUREN!!! She's tired from the long overnight flight, but has a craving for “the four C's”: chocolate, cheese, croissants, and coffee....and wine. After a day of fulfilling her cravings in Paris, we link up with her brother and sister for a wonderful week in the Canary Islands that goes entirely too fast. Then back to Paris and on to Ouagadougou. The 7 hour flight on Air France (classy) ends at night on a short paved airstrip with two faint rows of lights. After a long walk across a completely dark deserted and broiling hot tarmac, the realities of Africa hit.

In the small un-air-conditioned one story terminal, we are separated from Lauren as she haggles over whether her visa to Burkina-Faso is valid. She has to pay for a new one. Even though she is stationed at the Burkina-Faso border, she is not allowed to apply for a long term visa and has to pay for one, two weeks at a time. We are anxious to get to our luggage which has a high probability of disappearing. An immigration official demands that we pay an “entrance fee” despite the fact that we have a proper visa “obtained directly from your embassy”. We are well prepared, know this is a spurious demand, and refuse in pretty decent, forceful French. We're allowed to pass without paying. All our luggage arrives, YEA!!!, but side pouches that contained Skittles candy for the kids have been cleaned out except for one pack. That's typical, not everything is quite stolen. (All but one battery will be missing from a multi-pack enclosed in a mailed package.)

Exiting the terminal we are literally crushed by a mob grabbing for our luggage and demanding to take us in their particular taxi. Eyes straight ahead, Lauren forcefully takes charge, chooses a driver and fends off attempts by others to carry our wheeled luggage the few feet to the taxi. Taxi!?!?! It's a tiny Toyota hatch back. There are three of us with 5 large pieces of luggage and several carry-ons. Lauren negotiates a price (there are no fixed rates), and the luggage is crammed in, hanging out the back, held in place with bungee cords. Shock absorbers are a thing of the past, and the windshield is a mass of cracks. That's standard fare. We never see a single car with an intact windshield until we return to Paris, and only ride in one car with functioning shock absorbers.

At Lauren's suggestion, we are spending two nights and a day in a Ouagadougou. From her research in numerous travel guides, Ruth had made reservations over the phone in French at a nice small local hotel. Clean, air conditioning, hot shower, not a bad start, but not cheap. One problem, we had naturally assumed that they would accept payment by credit card. Silly us, but we are okay for cash and travelers checks. Daylight is an eye opener. The poverty is unlike anything we had ever seen, and this city was relatively very well off. We are constantly besieged by men, women and children thrusting everything imaginable in our faces, not asking, but demanding that we buy. Beggars not asking, but demanding money. The fact that we speak French helps enormously, but our courteous refusals are brusquely ignored and they swarm and cling like flies. We put on a blank face, stare straight ahead and ignore them even though the condition of the little kids breaks our hearts.

Chapter 22: Yovo [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com

“Yovo, yovo!” Except for French, we don't understand most of the comments directed

our way, but this derogatory African term for whites (like the white term “nigger” for blacks) rings out everywhere clear as a bell. We had been warned but we were clearly the tiny minority here. We had always thought of ourselves as racially sensitive. Ruth had spent years as an extremely successful teacher in inner city schools (“You’ve got soul, too bad you’re the wrong color!”) and, of course, “some of our best friends are black.” It really does hurt to be harassed and called at, even though we have the luxury of knowing that we will be leaving it behind.

If you want to buy anything or need a taxi, everything is negotiated. “Yovo, yovo!” They name a price, you typically counter at a third or less. The final price is always well under half. “Yovo, yovo!” African crafts are everywhere, dirt cheap, poor quality...and basically the same. Think low end Pier 1: mass produced, “hand carved” battered wooden elephant and masks with drying cracks. “Yovo, Yovo!” (It really grates on you.)

Lauren had indeed gone to the film festival here the previous February (“*saw a Nigerian film in Arabic with French subtitles*”) and had found two artisan “villages” whose craftsmen produced truly extraordinary, exquisite and unique wood carvings, bronze castings, ceramic jewelry, hand-woven fabrics. Prices are much higher, but far below their worth for the level of craftsmanship. However, unlike the street fare, the prices of the best crafts are not negotiable. They more than earned the price and knew it. At Lauren’s suggestion, we hit the restaurant in the United States embassy for thick hamburgers and French fries, just about the last palatable food we are going to have for the next 9 days.

Chapter 23: The Bus [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com
The next morning, we hail a taxi to take us to the bus station for our scheduled, reserved seat bus trip to Cinkassé. “Yovo, yovo.” Where was the taxi taking us? Most of the streets in central Ouagadougou were paved, though lined by open sewers. The streets quickly become dirt and more and more deteriorated. “Yovo, yovo.” Multistory buildings of concrete give way to shabby cinder block or mud brick huts. Amid the increasing squalor, the taxi sloughs in and out of foot deep holes (shock absorbers are clearly irrelevant) on a barely recognizable road and stops in front of a walled compound teeming with people laden with everything imaginable. This is...the bus station?? A porcelain sink, a motorbike engine, chickens, sacks of rice, a widescreen TV (??). Large, battered buses with smoking exhausts jam the compound with inches to spare. The drivers are clearly very good. Incongruously, the company names printed on the sides of the buses are followed by their web-site addresses on the internet. Amid the surrounding poverty and squalor are large bill-boards advertising cellular phones.

We buy our reserved seats. “Yovo, yovo.” As expected, we are the only whites on the bus, but no one makes us sit in the back. Though narrower than a bus in the U.S., it seats 5 across. We are jammed into 3 seats on the one side. I am on the aisle with the sharp metal armrest (long stripped of padding) cutting into my side. The thinly padded seats are so close that my knees are drawn toward my chest. Our luggage had been tagged and stowed below in a wet, muddy compartment. Numerous carry-ons and a case of precious bottled water are piled on our laps. Every seat is filled, the aisle is jammed with belongings, there is no toilet. It is 95 degrees...and the bus is not air conditioned.

Astoundingly, as the bus eventually pulls onto the paved road and picks up speed, everyone closes their windows. They don't like the wind blowing in their faces. Only two vents in the roof remain open. Lauren assures us that this was luxurious compared to a bush taxi.

With 3 brief stops (people exiting to relieve themselves against walls), we arrive at the Ghana border – 6 hours later. Almost the duration of a transatlantic flight. I decide I'll never complain about tightly spaced airline seats again. Everyone has to dismount, walk across the border, then remount to complete the last kilometers to the Togo border. The bus does not actually cross the border to Cinkassé. We have to walk the last kilometer with all our luggage. Some teenage boys balance our heavy suitcases on their bikes. We register with the border guards who knew of Lauren and warmly welcome us to Togo. Burkina-Faso was far more developed. We are hot. We are tired. We ache. We still have 11 kilometers to go to Lauren's village, Boadé Centre.

Chapter 24: Alain, Tchima and Aisha [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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We had heard about Alain in numerous phone calls and e-mails from Lauren. Alain was a nephew of the village chief. His brother, Tchima, was married to Aisha (and two others) who helped Lauren with cooking and cleaning. Tchima had accompanied Lauren to Lomé as the translator for Mana, and keeps watch over the 500 inhabitants of Boadé Centre like a shepherd protecting his sheep, constantly and inconspicuously keeping watch, helping here and there as needs arise. Alain was unmarried and vowed to have only one wife when he found the woman he loved. He was also the only person of the 5,000 residents of the Boadé region who owned a car and one of the few with a cell phone. He was a taxi driver (chauffer) who plied the 27 kilometer run between Cinkassé and Dapaong. He, too, was a shepherd like his brother and often provided emergency transportation even if it cost him a paying fare.

Lauren had arranged to hire Alain if we needed transportation and gives him a call after we cross the border. He is in Dapaong and will be on his way. An hour and a half later, a small red Toyota hatchback pulls up with the familiar spider web windshield. "*Je voudrais introduire Alain.*" He smiles broadly, shakes our hands warmly and stuffs our luggage (hanging out the back with bungee cords) and us (Ruth on Lauren's lap) into the car. Although battered, it is in excellent mechanical shape and even has functioning shock absorbers!

Before embarking, Alain treats us to a local beverage being sold by a small boy where we stop to buy gas for the car. He hands us small tightly knotted small plastic bags bulging with a milky white liquid. As instructed, we bit off a corner and suck out the contents: slightly sweetened, slightly sour goats milk. He and Lauren polish theirs off in short order. Ruth and I decide to ... ah... take our time and to ... ah... prolong the enjoyment of this treat. A jerry-rigged tape player blares cheerful Caribbean music as we weave and bounce along the 11 km dirt "road" to Boadé Centre. It's like an obstacle course: huge pot holes, vast erosion crevasses and concrete culverts with the dirt long since washed away from the edges. (Flashback to application question: Can you ride a bike over rough terrain?) The trip takes almost an hour, including the requisite stop at the hut with the

AK47 toting soldier, who warily needs a long explanation of who we are. He's not the only one who's wary.

How would we be received in the village? "*You will probably be called fat and old [well, we are!!], but don't take it personally. It means you're healthy and wise.*" "*The children will probably run away and cry, then stare at you endlessly. It's creepy but don't take it personally.*" Lauren was wrong, clearly indicating the degree the villagers had embraced her. Our French pays off handsomely as we are warmly greeted by one gentle villager after another who offer their right hand (its wrist clasped with the left hand) to shake with a modest dip of their body and downcast eyes. Men and women, young and old...dry, leathery, hard working hands. We meet the Chief. Indeed, a handsome man whose presence commands respect. The children smile, giggle sheepishly, then eagerly offer their hands...dry, leathery, hard working hands.

At dusk, the village is a sad interconnected maze of weather beaten mud huts, walled-courtyards smoky with cooking fires, and narrow uneven passageways. Everything is dirty, but its not the filth and squalor of the garbage and open sewers we saw in Ouagadougou. This is farming dirty. The passageways are filled with dry and wet cakes of manure and piles of droppings from the cows goats that are led into the village at night for protection. (Think crocodiles.) Children and adults alike plod through in bare feet. We tip-toe through in our shoes. Ruth grew up on a poor, Pennsylvania Dutch farm and has a built-in sense of where not to step even in the growing darkness. Unfortunately, I grew up in the city. Lauren leads us to her - by comparison - clean, princely lodgings with the concrete floor, white-washed walls, screened windows, real door and private latrine equipped with a toilet seat. Aisha has taken good care of Bailey who cries for attention. There is absolutely no way this scrawny little cat is going to die whenever Lauren is away!



Lauren and Aisha



Alain and village children



Tchima and village children

Chapter 25: An evening out with the Chief [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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We're exhausted and ready for bed, but the Chief has invited us to go into Cinkassé for beers. It's getting dark and PCVs are not supposed to travel at night. But how do you say no to the Chief? Besides, she's in the protection of her parents!!! (Or is it the other way around.) We head back down the terrible "road" to Cinkassé with the Chief (THE Chief) perched on the back of Tchima's motorbike which has a long-broken headlight that will never be repaired. We follow in Alain's car with his headlights illuminating the way. A surrealistic sight to say the least. This time, we only pause briefly at the soldier who waves us through.

The buvette is an open terrace covered with crushed stone. A few dim light bulbs (Cinkassé has electricity) illuminate the battered tables and chairs. The Chief, Tchima, Lauren and I get large African beers (Castle or Flag... not bad) and Ruthie and Alain get Cokes. We're relieved to learn that Alain doesn't drink any alcoholic beverages, a rarity. The beverages are ice-cold and a refreshing break from the hot dry air. A man comes over to inform the Chief that he was on the same bus with us. We're obviously important celebrities. Tchima returns with a platter of grilled chicken. A small bowl of water is

passed around to wash our hands. No soap. This seemingly sanitary ritual before all meals is somewhat dubious since the water is contaminated and everyone washes in the same bowl. We expected that there wouldn't be utensils and Lauren has instructed us to eat only with our right hand. The left is used for other bodily functions. Glancing at each other, we both note that both hands are washed in the bowl. It's too dark to see, but the chicken has been hacked into tiny pieces served in an oily spicy sauce. Fortunately, Ruth and I like very spicy food, but we gingerly nibble for the little meat that's on mostly jagged pieces of bone. Every piece seems to have parts of vertebrae. The edible parts are clearly not all muscle. The bones and what we've pretended to eat are tossed on the ground. Lauren happily eats her morsels of chicken craving the necessary protein she rarely gets in village.

After my second large beer, the French is flowing freely. A bit less inhibition works wonders. Though never much of a drinker, I learned that in Switzerland, too. Alain and I have a delightful conversation about life in general and the U.S. in particular. He's a very intelligent man, anticipating the consequences of circumstances before I mention them. I describe living in upstate New York. Snow? What about the roads; how do we get rid of it; where do we put it? Subzero temperatures? What do we wear; how do we keep our houses warm? He's amused that I don't usually put a jacket on until well below 20 degrees (68 degrees Fahrenheit). He guesses correctly that we adapt to our environments. "Our heat must be unbearable for you." I hadn't complained, he figured it out. After two beers each, Lauren is splitting a third with the Chief. She played on a women's rugby team in college, complete with the requisite post game revelry. *"I know you didn't like it when I drank in college, but it's sure helped me hold my own with the Chief."* We're grudgingly amused.

Tchima and the Chief will stay the night in Cinkassé with some of their other wives. Alain weaves us carefully back to the villages, then heads back for the long drive to Dapaong. Tomorrow, the village has planned a fête in our honor. Although dead tired, Ruth and I lie wide awake, sweating on Lauren's one and a half size bed made out of welded metal rod, tightly strung with woven string, and covered with a two inch thick cushion. It seems hard as a rock. We admire our daughter (who grew up insisting on the softest mattress) now sound asleep on a thin straw mat unfurled on the concrete floor.





Chapter 26: Breakfast [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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We awake to the knock of Aisha, her baby slung precariously on her back, little feet protruding around each side of her waist. She has brought us breakfast: sliced hard-boiled eggs coated in thick extremely rich warm mayonnaise. She deftly slices a papaya and nonchalantly tosses the peels and pit over the wall. The food, our hands and arms are completely coated with flies. (Wonder where they came from, as we remember tiptoeing through the village last night.) The baby's mouth, eyes and nose are coated in flies. "You'll get used to them." We don't. After breakfast, we take the first of many bucket showers. "You'll get used to them." We don't. Growing up with an outhouse when all her friends had indoor toilets, Ruth doesn't find that the latrine is quaint even though it at least has a real toilet seat. Lauren seems to have adjusted fine. Small pieces of screen block drainage holes at the base of the wall to keep out lizards and snakes.

Chapter 27: The Fête [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com
The fête is supposed to start at noon and we plan to wear a traditional dress and shirt that Lauren had a tailor make for us from the same colorful fabric with a musical instrument pattern. But for now, 10:00 AM, we head out for a tour of the village in our U.S. clothing. We'll come back and change before the fête. We're warmly greeted again by men, women and children as we make our way through the village, but the village looks even worse in daylight, especially what we tiptoed through in the dark. A large tree on the fringe of the village serves as the meeting place. The Chief and hundreds of people are already waiting for us even though it's two hours early. He and the subchiefs from the other Boadé villages are in traditional dress and we are ushered through a greeting line shaking hands adding our dip in return respect. The fête begins immediately without our new garments. The Chief, Lauren, Ruth and I are the only ones honored to sit in chairs

(Application question: “Can you squat for long periods of time?”). A drummer pounds incessantly on a “talking drum”, three others play two-stringed instruments fashioned from sticks, gourds and dried crocodile skin, and a troupe of dancers shuffle intricate rhythms from dozens of stone-filled, palm-frond rattles tightly spiraled around their legs. Women contribute high-pitched warbles. At some point in her life, Ruth had discovered a similar high pitched Tarzan yell, much to the chagrin of our children over many years of their soccer games. The village women are thrilled when she joins in. Though thoroughly fascinating, the music, dancing and singing goes on and on for hours.

The festival now moves to the school which was over by the lake about a half mile away. Tchima originally tried to find three horses for us, but only procured one; a scrawny little white horse. I got the honor. They hoisted me and my 230 pounds up on this poor horse, and we all process towards the school. Although they were honoring us, I feel like I am in a bad B-grade colonialist movie. The white man on the horse surrounded by this sea of black faces. The school consists of three run down modest-sized, cement block classrooms with broken cement floors and a tin roof that extends over a cement front porch running the length of the building. A checkerboard pattern of block-size openings supply the only light into the classrooms. We’re seated on benches on the porch next to the Chief. The music and dancing continues for another hour and I am presented with an elaborately hand embroidered traditional cap and cape, and Ruth with a shawl and string instrument. They know she’s a music teacher. They specifically killed a crocodile to make it for her. We in turn present a gift of a hundred pounds of medical supplies and a new soccer ball. I give a speech in French thanking them for their gifts and fête, and for their generosity and support of Lauren. Tchima translates the speech into Bissa. More music and dancing, then into a school room for a village-wide meal. Aisha has prepared three huge cauldrons of rice and they’ve killed and cooked twelve chickens and a sheep. The rice is full of grit and the chickens and sheep are tough, greasy and barely palatable. The beer and soft drinks are more than warm. This represents months of food and money and we’re deeply touched.

Several of us wander over to the lake with the Chief. (Flashback: “*Oh yeah, and there are crocodiles in the lake by me but they told me they don’t eat humans only small animals.*”) We had imagined that there were just a few. We count over 40. Some of them are over 4 feet long. The lake is not very large and doesn’t have many fish. Virtually any other wildlife is long gone. Exactly, what doooo they eat?? No one seems to know.





Chapter 28: The Soccer Match [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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The culmination of the festivities is a soccer match. All three of our kids had played from 8 years-old through high school. Lauren had told them that I coached for over 12 years. The junior men's team from Boadé will play a team from Burkina-Faso. They will use the new ball. The field is the hard-packed, gritty red earth of the region with a few patches of worn grass and scattered deep holes. Deep erosion crevices slash into one edge. Goals consist of uprights made from sturdy tree limbs whose upper Y-shaped ends are topped by a dead limb crossbar. Razor straight lines etched into the ground define a full size regulation field that includes a large tree. There is a full complement of a referee and sideline judges who raise leafy branches instead of flags. The men are in their late teens and early 20's. Only the team from Burkina has uniforms. These guys know how to play with a high level of skill. (The Togolese national team had recently defeated Senegal which had reached last year's World Cup quarter-final.) A man along the sidelines becomes the sports commentator and provides a running account of the game as though it were a national radio broadcast. I don't understand a word, but I know exactly what he is saying.

The match is as fast, intense, and hard fought as any of the innumerable soccer matches of that age level that I've seen, with one major difference. Most of the players on both teams lacked shin guards or shoes, let alone cleats. They play barefoot on ground hard as rock and rough as coarse sandpaper. Near the end of the game, the top Burkina player (their sweeper) is injured. He has ripped open the bottom of his foot. The match ends in a tie. The ground was so hard and rough that I no longer recognize the shiny new soccer ball. It's dull brown and all the markings are already worn away. I am privately a bit embarrassed. I brought sandals, shoes and sneakers. Not only that, since it is the rainy season, I've brought spares in case my others get wet. I won't need the spares back home.

Chapter 29: Getting to know Boadé [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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Although we had been warned that the villagers might object to having their pictures taken, we encountered no such reluctance. They gladly mug for the camera and love to see their pictures from the films Lauren had sent home. We had brought several extra-copies which Lauren gives out. We cautiously venture out a video camera which is also eagerly received even though most aren't sure what it is. They are thrilled to see themselves in the small color flip-out digital screen. I taped some of the match. The players are thrilled, and crowd around the tiny screen. They had never seen themselves play. Most had never even seen a televised match. Our first day ends with an horrific thunder-storm. Huddled in Lauren's tiny unlit rooms, our ears ring with the pounding of the rain on the uninsulated sheet metal roof. At least it was cooler...low 90's. The day-time swarms of flies turns into night-time swarms of mosquitoes. At least we had screens...the only place with screens. We haven't heard "yovo" for the entire day.

We had been warned by previous PCV parent to keep our visit to Africa fairly short. Regardless of any precautions we took, we were likely to get sick after the first week and it was best to be back home before it hit. Their advice will prove dead-on accurate. We planned for 9 days in Togo. Initially, we considered spending a couple days in Boadé, then hiring Alain to drive us to other areas including Lomé. Although the representative at the Togolese embassy had not exactly given us a ringing endorsement of sites to see, Lauren had assured us that central Togo had mountains with lush vegetation. We opt to stay in Boadé with a one day and night run to the maison in Dapaong. The villagers clearly appreciate that we have come to see them and we are glad we stay.

As advertised, the northern savannah region is mostly flat and rocky with a scattering of widely spaced trees. Barren during the dry season, it is now well into the rainy season and the fields are green. They are also immaculate. The rows of corn, maize, peanuts, soybeans, rice and cotton stretched endlessly and are as uniform and meticulous as any multi-blade, tractor-plowed fields we had ever seen. Not a weed is in sight. Nor any vegetables. With the exception of one single-blade plow pulled by two cows, these field were entirely plowed, planted and maintained by hand. Literally by hand. The work is all done continuously bent over with short stubby handled hoes. Everything is done bent over to the ground: food preparation, laundry, gathering wood, child care, etc. Tables are

rare. (Application question: “Do you have back problems?”). Discreet question to Aisha: “Do the villagers have back problems?” “Yes, everyone does.” It’s just the way it is. The lake had been created with an earthen dam built decades ago but there is no mechanism for irrigation. Fortunately, the rain has been good for the last few years. Yes, the villagers do rotate crops, but at the end of the harvest the fields are burned. It’s far too much labor to plow the remaining vegetation back into the soil.

By comparison, Lauren’s small garden looks absolutely pathetic, small plants cluttered with weeds. Her Pennsylvania Dutch grandparents are rolling in their graves. However, at harvest time the villagers are surprised to find that Lauren has as many as 50 peanuts per plant where they typically have 20. She informs them that “*there is a whole church full of people in the United States praying for my peanuts.*” She was right about that! Her pathetic garden needed all the prayers it could get. Prayer works!





Chapter 30: The Children [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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One of Ruth's amazing gifts is the ability to remember children's names at first contact. As a music teacher, she teaches all the children in her school and knows them all by name after the first day of having them in class. As at home, she attracts kids like a magnet and they flock to her. It's tricky. Most of these names are unfamiliar and the children delight in her attempt to learn them. But she quickly finds a clue to remember them. Each child wears the same torn, dirty clothes for the entire week. Though mostly well-fed, many have large protruding umbilical hernias.

As in any group of children, one stands out as a natural leader. Nine year-old Mohammed has a polite, quiet regal bearing beyond his years, and a sly smile. He commands the obvious respect of the others. Lauren has splurged on a beautifully carved drum, and Mohammed is an extraordinarily natural drummer. Becoming a Master Drummer requires years of training and they are highly regarded in African society. This kid's got a future. Then again, maybe he doesn't. We learn that his mother has run off and Mohammed lives with and takes care of his father who is "fou" (crazy). He hasn't been in school for two years because he can't afford the \$15.00 per semester. We'll see to it that he can go next year.

Children are essential for planting and harvest, so school must be limited in between. They work hard in the fields. No dolls or toys as we know them are in sight. Do they ever play or have fun? Indeed, despite the hardships, they laugh and sing readily, and just plain horse around. A worn out bicycle tire and a stick become a hoop-rolling toy like those seen in etchings of medieval Europe. A little boy on the ground has a small, broken pot and is absorbed in making mud-pies. We watch unobtrusively. After a while, he looks up, sees us, flashes a broad smile and goes back to his serious business. From an e-mail two months later, I picture Lauren holding a 6 year-old boy who is dying from treatable diarrhea because his father, a member of the village Development Committee, didn't bother to bring him to the dispensaire weeks before. She has her work cut out for her.

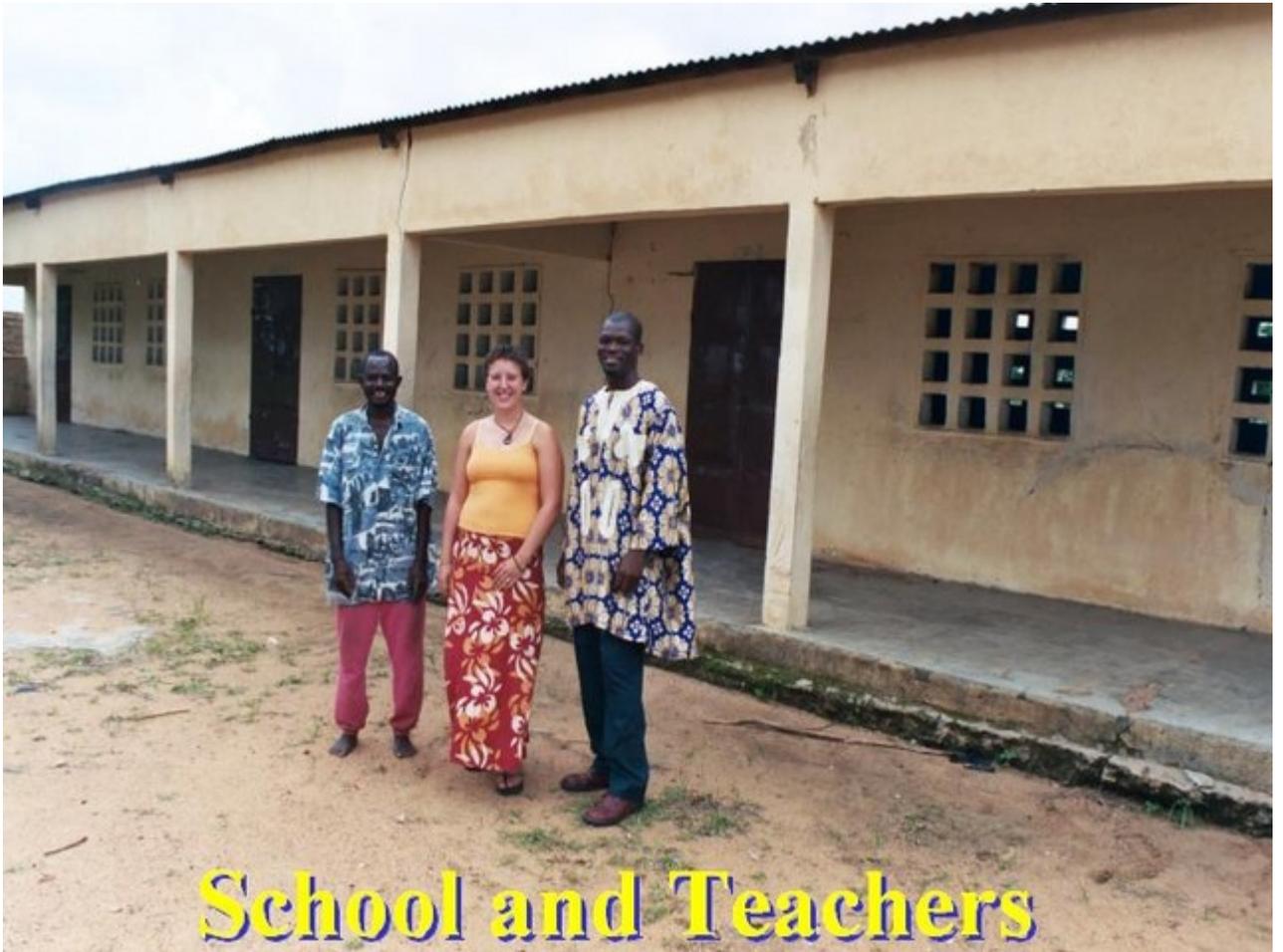




Chapter 31: The Teachers and the School [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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We'd already met two of the three teachers. They are wonderful men who obviously think highly of Lauren. As is typical in Togo, they are assigned by the government from another part of the country. They don't speak Bissa, the local language. How do they teach the kids? One is new: tall, young, handsome and unmarried. He has already distinguished himself as a star player on the soccer team and has become their coach. I have brought a pair of used Adidas that are slightly too small for me. They fit him perfectly. He's thrilled. The other teacher is a delightful small man who is married with four children, including newborn twins. He and his family live in a small, round mud brick hut with a dirt floor and well-worn thatched roof. It's smaller than our living room.

The needs of the school are severe. We've seen that the 50-year-old school is in dilapidated condition, though better than any other buildings in the area. There are over 80 children per classroom, and that represents only 10% of the eligible children. The national average is over 50%. There's no storage space for the meager supplies that they have. There are no books. The desk-benches are just plain worn out, like the building as a whole. The black boards are worn to where they are too smooth to hold chalk very well. We can barely read the conjugated verbs written on them.



Lauren with teachers at the school



Chapter 32: Cinkassé and Dapaong [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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Two days after we've arrived, Alain drives us to the fascinating marché in Cinkassé, which is exactly as Lauren described it. There are endless beautiful fabrics, wide trays of eggs...and vultures...and "yovo". We continue on to spend the evening at the maison and to explore Dapaong the next day. In the past, we were always happy when Lauren was able to get to Dapaong with its access to phones and e-mail. We knew that she rode there by bike. The dirt road to Cinkassé was certainly tricky to negotiate, but the remaining 27 km road to Dapaong was absolutely frightening even by car. (Flashback: *"I saw my first dead body yesterday.... A truck hit him on the Route Nationale while he was riding his bike back from the marché in Burkina."*) It's the same road. During our brief stay in Africa, we see five serious accidents along this lightly traveled road, that clearly have fatalities. Lauren later describes assisting at an accident where all three occupants of the car were killed. We now wish she would stay in her village. We stop at periodic intervals to satisfy the posted soldiers. At one point, Alain pulls into a parking lot filled with bush taxis and other cars. Some men come over and talk to Alain, who pays them some money produced from under the floor mat. Lauren informs us in English that they were the chauffeur mafia. Alain has just re-upped his "insurance policy." WAWA. It's just the way it is.

Although it's the regional capital, Dapaong only has one paved road other than the

passing Route Nationale. The maison is at the far end of a long, unlit remote dirt road that's as bad as the one to Boadé, just a lot shorter. It's like a spaceship that has fallen out of the sky: a large pink circular masonry building within a high-walled compound that includes a single-car garage. We wonder who used to live here. We enjoy a nice evening with several other PCVs from all over the U.S. One young woman is the daughter of foreign service parents who lived and served in U.S. embassies in Latin America. Though she had dealt with the culture shock of living in the third world as a child, never had she experienced the intensity of living alongside the poor. She'll soon be heading to graduate school with a new perspective of the world. I make them a breakfast of pancakes served on the ceramic tile-covered rooftop veranda that overlooks the countryside.

“Yovo, yovo.” We have walked into the center of Dapaong. We do some bargaining at vendors Lauren recommends, purchase more bottled water (a lot more bottled water), cash some traveler's checks at the bank and buy some stamps at the post-office. An extremely pressing urge for a toilet is fulfilled by dropping in on Lauren's favorite seamstress. We are “relieved” to go back to Boadé Centre.

Chapter 33: Dead Yovo Clothing [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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Over the remaining days, we take long walks through the country-side, stopping to chat with every one we pass. Everyone in the fields waves and smiles when we pass by. Daily villager clothing is an incongruous hodge podge of garments, much recognizable from Salvation Army repositories and church basements throughout the United States. It is called “dead yovo clothing.” They could not comprehend that living people would just give away such good garments. Many men's caps, shorts and T-shirts are emblazoned with U.S. team logos such as the New York Knicks and Chicago Bulls. Yes, they did know about the NBA. Yes, they had heard of Michael Jordan. Basketball was popular but the hoop on the makeshift backboard at the school had broken long ago. I have to chuckle at one man sporting a Detroit Red Wings jersey. He doesn't have a clue about ice hockey. He has no concept that a lake could be frozen over with ice.

Chapter 34: The Dispensaire [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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One day takes us to the “*very well run and organized*” dispensaire which looks much like the school and was probably built in the same era. Some broken plastic syringe parts are sparsely scattered on the ground. The doctor has not been around for a while and a young woman lay on a blanket on the covered broken concrete porch. She is burning with fever from malaria. The nurse dressed in a threadbare dirty white T-shirt ignores her as she shows us around the dispensaire which consists of four barren rooms. One relatively cheerful room is the office and examination room which had Lauren's colored charts on the wall. Among the other three dimly lit rooms, one had some counters strewn with IV bottles and tubes. A broken kerosene driven refrigerator is open in the corner and all the vaccines had spoiled. They had been waiting months for a part. Another room has four empty cots with thin, dirty mattresses. That room was for the very sick. I guess the woman on the porch doesn't qualify, but maybe she doesn't want to. The last room has a table with stirrups. A scale is on the counter. That is the birthing room which is seldom

used. Lauren's immediate neighbor in the village was pregnant and had gone to bed one night in her hut. The next morning Lauren found her out working in her small courtyard with a newborn infant wrapped on her back. Lauren had not heard a sound.

Out in back of the dispensaire is a small dwelling that houses four latrines that are also rarely used. That's just as well. A foot pump water well is nearby. One of the few in the region. Lauren explains that foot pumps wells are shallower and not as clean as hand pump wells. Boadé has no hand pump wells. She hops up on the bicycle-like apparatus and pumps empty bottles full of water that will be dripped through the filter at her room.

Chapter 35: A Simple Lesson [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
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On Sunday we walk to the Boadé marché and visit Mana's residence, which is nearby. Tchima wanders over with us. We had met Mana before but only briefly. She stands quietly after greeting us and shaking hands. Her eye is blind and face is distorted but remarkably little considering the size of the tumor that had been removed. The barely visible scar from the surgical incision starts at the edge of her eye, extends back to her ear, then down the side of her face and neck and over her collar bone. The volunteer surgeons had done a remarkable job. She beams brightly as Lauren puts a necklace that we had brought around her neck. I am amazed by this heroic elderly woman. She had probably never been far from the village in her entire life and only spoke Bissa. Yet she had had the courage to leave the safety of her village to journey with a stranger for two days to the other end of her country where they spoke a different language. Then she had put her trust in foreign doctors whom she couldn't understand and boarded a huge ship to undergo extensive surgery, never having seen a hospital or a ship in her life. It had to have been a terrifying experience. How did she ever muster the courage? Tchima patiently translated my curiosity into Bissa for Mana. Without hesitation she points to Lauren and Tchima and briefly speaks. I didn't need to wait for the translation. "They told me to go." Nothing philosophical about it. Some things are just that simple. I had learned an important lesson from this elderly, unschooled lady.

Chapter 36: The Men [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com

I spend some long evenings in the dark out by the village tree talking to the Chief and several other men of the village. Large brown bats that live in the tree dip and dart overhead. Ruth and Lauren prefer to be elsewhere. We had traveled all over the world with prolonged stays in several different cultures. I was convinced that if you randomly grabbed a group of people in any culture you would find the same range of personalities and intellects. My conviction is re-enforced. They know I couldn't "squat for a prolonged period of time." Only the Chief and I sit in chairs. They can't believe Ruth and I are over 50 years old. (The average survival there was just over 50 years, although this was skewed by a high infant mortality rate.) They also can't believe that I have only one wife and only three children. They can't believe I have only one brother and that Ruth is an only child. But my brother has 8 children. That was more like it! "But all from the same wife???" They are shocked and shake their heads in disbelief. I knew that one of the major problems in Africa was that they had a lot of kids, and many of them died young because of malnutrition and disease. A major long term objective was to get them to understand that fewer children would have better health and more would live. I knew this

was not the appropriate time and place to raise this issue. I just emphasize how healthy our children were. Lauren has her work cut out for her.

I wasn't aware that Lauren had carefully been hiding her age from their curious probes. For more respect, she wanted them to think she was older than she really was. I didn't know. They trick me into revealing her birthday. They quickly do the math. "Lauren is only 23?" Later she is furious with me but, in fact, they had greater respect and were amazed with her wisdom at such a young age.

Chapter 37: Foreign Policy [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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While we converse one evening, a battery powered shortwave radio plays a French news broadcast. I can understand enough to realize that it was criticizing the United States foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even though their conditions seemed primitive, the African men were keenly aware of what was going on in the world. This had led to a long standing concern about Lauren's assignment. Ruth and I knew that Boadé and the surrounding areas were about 80% Muslim, 20% Christian. They had assured Lauren that "We are too busy just trying to stay alive to worry about politics." A few months before, Lauren was very uneasy when some of the young village men appeared sporting "Osama Bin Laden is my hero" T-Shirts that someone had been handing out for free in Cinkassé. Tchima sensed the problem before Lauren said anything. He informed the men that Bin Laden was not a good person. They immediately took off the T-shirts, turned them inside out, and put them back on. After all, they were brand new, good quality T-shirts.

Nonetheless, the men are deeply concerned about American foreign policy. It is a challenge. How do you try to explain the principles behind our actions to Muslims in a remote African village in French? They are aware of the attack on the World Trade Center as best they could imagine, not having any concept of the size of commercial airliners or height of skyscrapers. They are aware of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and have a surprisingly balanced perspective of the situation. They do have a very negative opinion of Osama bin Ladin, but their opinion of President Bush isn't laudatory either. Following my explanation, they agree that our government had done a very poor job communicating our worthy principles, justifying legitimate actions, and mustering wide-spread support.

These were politically savvy people who fully appreciated the difference between the phony posturing of government leaders and the genuine motives of individual citizens. While we were in the Canary Islands the week before, President Bush was in Nigeria announcing – ho hum - still another African initiative that - this time - would alleviate the problem of AIDS. The men are skeptical about his sincerity and the likelihood of success, just as we had been when we heard his speech. He had not made a single mention of the hundreds of PCVs who were already risking their lives for a pittance, dealing directly and living with the AIDS epidemic. How much of the promised billions would trickle down to where it was actually needed or where it would do any good? Even unschooled Africans knew how to ask rhetorical questions.

Chapter 38: Food From the Heart [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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During our visit to Boadé, Aisha brings us most of our breakfasts and we eat at her hut with Tchima, their children and miscellaneous others who come and go. Everything is cooked on a little earthen fireplace on the ground that is hand fed with a few sticks at a time. Wood was a precious commodity and children foraged for sticks from miles around, carrying them home in loose bundles balanced on their heads. Everything tastes basically the same. On different nights we are served three different types of large, sticky white globs resembling play-doh about the size of a baseball. One is rice boiled and compacted into a solid mushy mass. A second is a glob of boiled ground millet. The third is boiled tuber called “fou-fou”. To be edible, the tubers are pounded for over an hour in a large wooden crucible using a heavy wooden post. Lauren and Aisha take turns. After the ritual washing of hands, we use our right hands to pull off pieces and dip them in oily hot sauce. Otherwise, all three types of globs are equally tasteless by themselves. They are also all laced with grit. That’s typically all that’s eaten, but every night we have the luxury of grilled chicken or pintaide prepared like that on our first night at the buvette. Normally, they would only have goat meat once a week. Chicken or pintaide once a month.

By the time we eat it’s already dark (the amount of daylight doesn’t vary much over the year near the equator) and we eat by the dim light of a small soot-coated kerosene lamp. As at the buvette, we can’t see what we are eating and we gingerly nibble around the fragments of bone. We mentally and verbally appreciate that they are going to great expense on our behalf. It’s hard to convey that appreciation to our stomachs.

The conversation, however, is always spirited and fulfilling, laced with laughter. Other times more intimate and serious. “If we could raise donations to support your community, how could we know that the money would be used for its intended purpose?” Tchima was not insulted. We had discussed the widespread problem of corruption before. We kick around some ideas. He is the president of the Red Cross in Boadé. “If we could channel support directly here, would that cause problems with your government?” “Are you kidding, they don’t even know we are here.” Sometimes it’s a blessing to be so remote.

The beverage of choice is fermented millet called tchackpa that comes in three strengths. The strongest isn’t bad. Unfortunately, it was also the beverage of choice among nursing mothers at the expense of drinking sufficient water. Subsequently, babies were often needlessly undernourished. Lauren has her work cut out.

Ruth and I are definitely not fussy eaters. Two years before, we were the honored guests in Japan of faculty and families of a PhD student at the University of Kyoto that I had co-mentored from abroad. We had gamely eaten everything we were presented though we rarely knew, or wanted to know what it was. On describing our experience to a Japanese friend in the United States, she nodded knowingly and said, “Ohhh, you got special treatment!”

Our stomachs rebel with three days to go in Boadé. I gag and just can’t eat anymore. It is

touch and go to repress a reaction more severe than that. Ruth admitted she had hit that wall two days earlier. From then on, we pretend to eat (glad that the light was dim) and live off of Lauren's precious supply of "imported" granola bars. Lauren is annoyed with us, until she realizes that she had had a three-month training period to adjust.

Chapter 39: Simple Gifts [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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On our last full day in Boadé we work our way through the village privately handing out the gifts Lauren had requested for special people in the village. It is another matter for the children. We had brought plenty of colorful bouncy balls, pipe cleaners and stickers for all the children in Boadé Centre. We are besieged by laughing children. However, the cut-off for who still qualified as a child keeps creeping ever higher. When we run out, some older teenagers are a bit disappointed. The children are puzzled by pipe cleaners. Lauren, Ruth and I show them how to fashion bracelets, hearts and figurines. Stickers start showing up on faces and within minutes on their foreheads, cheeks and chins are plastered with them. Then Ruth and Lauren open the bottles of dilute liquid soap and start blowing bubbles. They had never seen this. Children, teenagers and adults alike delight in blowing and chasing bubbles. It is a great way to culminate the visit. Just laughing and having fun.

Some of the special gifts include small toy tractors and cars for some of the children with whom Lauren had especially close relations. They are the kind of toy vehicles that have a friction mechanism that winds up when you pull them backward, then propel the vehicles forward when they are released. Before long, the fathers are gathered together having a great time with the toys as the children stand by eagerly waiting for their turn. "Hey, hey, hey, guys. The toys are for the little children!" They burst into laughter and reluctantly include the children into their play.

At our quiet last dinner that evening, children wander through Tchima and Aisha's courtyard as before. This time, several stay and spontaneously break into a beautiful call and response song with one taking the lead. Two children drum on an overturned metal basin. More and more children appear, faces still plastered with stickers, and the singing swells. Liling voices, numerous songs, one after another with a different child taking the "caller" lead on each one. Ruth has slipped back to Lauren's lodging and brought the video camera. It is well charged and has a powerful small light. As the two hour impromptu concert comes to an end, the children gather around to see and hear themselves on the small flip out screen. At first they giggle and laugh and point out each other. Then they become completely silent, listening contentedly to their own beautiful music. We wish we had had another video camera to record them listening and watching themselves. Their expressions are priceless. As this special evening draws to a close, Tchima goes into his house and emerges with a small antique bronze statue and a beautiful small pottery bowl. They are their gifts to us. It's too much to bear. We leave for Lauren's house in tears. We pack slowly, knowing we are going to leave Lauren in the morning.

Chapter 40: Heart to Heart [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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Lauren and I have had a number of heart to heart talks during our visit. We have now witnessed first hand what she has been experiencing. We toss rhetorical questions at each other. “Is her presence going to make a difference?” “Should she try to make a difference?” “Would change help or harm the village?” “Are the villagers happy as they are?” “Look how stressed we are at home.” Lauren is a bit frustrated with her progress. She is envious of a French group that had just come somewhere and built a school, pump, and case de santé in two weeks ...and left. Immediately something tangible! But that’s not the Peace Corps’s philosophy. Their objective is to promote, organize and facilitate sustained development among the Togolese themselves. The old adage surfaces, “You can give a person a fish, or teach them how to fish.” We note that in Ewé (the language spoken through most of Togo) the word for yesterday and tomorrow are the same. WAWA. Things are just the way they are. Is it the same in Bissa? She doesn’t know.

We have no answers, but try to fit together the puzzle. It’s true, the villagers do know how to laugh and have fun. But there are real problems. Lauren has heard the arguments between husbands and wives in their huts at night. The arguments are usually over money. They are familiar even though the language has changed. Some women have begun to confide. They’re not happy about polygamous marriages. They are jealous of the other wives. Husbands and wives do cry when their children die. Some men do beat their wives and children. Alcoholism is a problem. They know they should and could have a better diet. They know they have few resources. They want their children to go to school, though many can’t afford it. And we’re back to money issues again.

Most importantly, they’ve taken the initiative to request a PCV and mustered their meager resources to meet the housing requirements. They’ve warmly welcomed Lauren into their community. Fortunately, Boadé is far off the beaten track of truck drivers, chauffeurs and prostitutes that have fueled the devastating spread of AIDS. Sometimes it’s a blessing to be so remote. But they’re frightened. So Lauren’s assignment and mission is timely, before that problem has hit their community. Maybe she can have an impact. We confirm our plans to fly Lauren home for Christmas to recharge for the following year when her commitment would end the following December. Ruth and I wonder, will she choose not to go back?

Our discussions continue as we fall asleep. Alain will be there at 6:00 AM to drive us back to the border to catch the bus to Ouagadougou. Our flight to Paris leaves that night. We are comforted by the fact that Lauren will leave the same time for a week long conference in Lomé. She will be with a lot of other PCVs. We’ve hired Alain to drive her there. We don’t want her to go alone by bush taxi. At first, she was frustrated about the upcoming conference. Each PCV was supposed to bring a homologue with them for combined training in health related issues. Lauren had been trying to get Tchima, but he’s been increasingly unavailable due to necessary work in his fields during the rainy season. She’s not even sure if he is planning to go. Ruth recommends that she asks Alain. Since

he is so honest and has high personal standards, maybe he could start a program to reach the chauffeurs and truck drivers about AIDS? He loved the idea and will stay in Lomé for the entire week.

Chapter 41: Parting [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com
We're up at the crack of dawn. Alain is waiting...and so is most of the village. We're down to two fairly lightweight suitcases and get a wonderful send off. We thank the Chief, Tchima, Aisha and others for everything. They thank us in return. We're glad we got an early start to catch the 7:30 a.m. bus. Alain hits a snag at the Burkina Faso border with our passports. After a half hour of discussions we're allowed to pass. We get our tickets, see Lauren on her way with Alain, and board the bus in tears. It's not so crowded. Lauren cries all the way to Dapaong and on and off to Lomé.

We know the routine. At some point we will need to exit the bus, cross a frontier, and reboard the bus. We need to make sure that we get back on the right bus. We set our eyes on several African nuns and stick to them like glue. We have engaged them in light conversation when we hear our names. It's Aisha... with her baby on her back. She has ridden her bicycle to the border to make sure we've gotten off okay. (Flashback: "*I saw my first dead body... A truck hit him on the Route Nationale while he was riding his bicycle....*") She is worried about us!!! What a magnificent gesture. The long ride back to Ouagadougou is not so bad. Lauren is in good hands.

Our hearts are set on cheeseburgers at the embassy restaurant and a long cleansing dip in the embassy swimming pool. We know how to dicker with the taxi drivers and arrive at the embassy. Someone's distant relative has died, so the whole restaurant is closed just for that day. WAWA. One last parting shot. But, we do get the wonderful dip in the pool and a hot shower. Refreshed, we don our last set of clean clothes that we carefully sequestered for the flight to Paris... and home. A few small hassles at the airport (thank you Lord for forcing me to learn French), one last long walk across the sweltering tarmac, and we are seated on an immaculately clean Air France airliner for an overnight flight to Paris. Shortly after takeoff, real, tasty food is set before us with bottles of wine. They're consumed in a flash. In a flash we're sound asleep.

Chapter 42: A Different World [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com

Charles DeGualle Airport. Long slow line at customs. We hope our luggage got out of Ouagadougou. Relief, it's all there. We've now got a 6 hour layover before the flight home, but we know exactly what to do. Before our flight to Africa, we had spotted an all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet at the airport Sheraton. They didn't know what hit them. We nearly clean it out ourselves. Then comes the transatlantic flight home, and friends from church chauffeur us the last three hours in a minivan with an intact windshield, functioning shock absorbers and...air conditioning! A cooler filled with ice is well stocked with cold soft drinks. After 36 hours on the road, we're home. A message is already on the answering machine. Lauren made it to Lomé. We're relieved. We crash. Wonderful hours of sleep on a real bed.

Previous recommendations were right on the money. Although we did have some temporary problems in Africa, within a day or two of arriving home, Ruth and I begin a long, intimate relationship with our toilet. We're grateful we didn't stay a second week. Two days after visiting our family doctor, the verdict is in... full blown cases of giardia. Even though I am in the research side of the medical center, far removed from any patient contact, within an hour of my diagnosis, I get a call from the State Health Department. In minutes they are satisfied that there has not been a water or food source contamination in our area. I hang up. It's a different world.

A member of our church offers to edit our three hours of video tape into a single half hour composite. He works for a company that builds electrical generators and has frequently traveled "to the most remote villages in Mexico." A few weeks later he appears with the completed tape...and shakes his head. "This is far worse than anything I've ever seen. It's a different world."

Chapter 43: Moving on [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
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July 26th:

How are the stomachs feeling now? I hope not too bad. Like I said, I'll be in the Lomé region until Thursday so you can call my cell phone. It's charged and waiting. Do you guys feel settled back into life at home? I wish I could be there. The conference went well, though they tried to cover too much information/topics and there was not nearly enough hands-on work. I think Alain got a lot out of it, so that is good. I miss you guys. It was really hard to say good-bye and I'd be lying if I told you I didn't cry at least as far as it took to get to Dapaong. Alain was good about it though and I am glad to have December to look forward to. I am also glad I got to see my wonderful PCV friends for the past week- it was a necessary distraction. It is so nice to see what kind of different experiences my fellow volunteers are having. Sure, some things in terms of readjustment are similar but the specifics are totally different. I think coming here gave you guys a much more realistic understanding and perspective about what life is like here (at least in the north). As I was driving down south I realized yet again how different the country is the farther south you get.

August 1st:

Glad to hear that your giardia is clearing up. Well, I am finally back in Dapaong. Tomorrow I am going back to village and I am looking forward to it. It will be nice to have some me time again and sleep in the same bed for more than just a day or two. This morning when I woke up I didn't know where I was. Alain's car needs some minor repairs (it is basically impossible to drive from Dapaong to Lomé without some damage). The road from Dapaong to Kara is covered in potholes from neglect and that is about a 200 km stretch. In terms of future calling... the week of Aug. 17th I will be in a village for the Guinea worm education and eradication. Most likely there will not be good reception or electricity. You can try calling again next weekend I might have to come back to

Dapaong to drop off the girl scholarships. I love you guys very much.

The Peace Corps strongly encourages parents and families to visit their volunteer at their posts. They're absolutely right. Lauren's calls and e-mails have an entirely new meaning now that we've been there. We were indeed relieved that Lauren had gone to a conference immediately after we left. We can now truly picture Alain, his car, the conditions of the roads, the country side, Boadé Centre, the Chief, Aisha, her children, Tchima. The images become much more animated as though we are actually there and participating. We are delighted someone like Alain who can become, and is interested in being part of solutions for his own country. From our evening at the maison, we can picture Dapaong and the faces of other PCVs as they recall their different experiences of small successes amid huge frustrations - expressions of disbelief about still another unbelievable WAWA situation, while the others knowingly nod. When they think they've seen it all, they know that they will never see it all.

While we were there, Lauren and others PCVs were busy preparing scholarship applications for many girls in their communities. Girls who receive this scholarships get their education paid for through University. Educated women are in severe short supply and are going to be crucial for any changes in Togolese initiated efforts in family planning. Stipulations include delaying marriage and pregnancy. Lauren submits nine applications. She is thrilled when four are approved for scholarships.

Chapter 44: Guinea worms [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
nerveresearch@hotmail.com

On top of all the diseases rampant in Togo, Guinea worms were something we had never heard of. Lauren had been sent to a special program about guinea worm eradication and treatment. She told us about them but it was difficult to believe what we were hearing. I sit at my computer and access the internet. It's just as she said. Larva of this parasite are ingested from contaminated water and migrate from the digestive system to locations beneath the skin. This thin worm then grows up to three feet long and causes sores that erupt for them to discharge the eggs back into the water. To remove the guinea worm, you attach its protruding head to a small stick, and gradually wind it out...a centimeter a day, a process taking up to several months. Affected persons suffer intense pain and frequently infections that can result in scarring and permanent crippling. Through intense United Nations campaigns, I learn that the Guinea worm is now mostly limited to only thirteen countries. Of course this includes Togo. "Most cases occur in poor rural villages that are not usually visited by tourists." Gee, wonder where that might be? I stare at my computer terminal in disbelief. Among the website listings is the "Save the Guinea Worm Foundation" dedicated to saving this endangered species from the ecoterrorists!!! They pity this poor worm whose mistake was to have chosen human beings as their host. I nod my head knowingly. I will never see it all in the world we live either.

August 8th:

I came into Dapaong yesterday to welcome the newbies [new PCVs]. I would have preferred to stay in village seeing as I have to leave again next week but everyone else is

away doing medical things, Peace Corps summer projects (like camp and guinea worm weeks), or vacation. We made them dinner and bought them drinks. This morning I made my now famous French toast. They really appreciated and felt very welcome and comfortable. It was important to do that for them, it makes the transition just a little bit easier. The volunteers did that for me and my group when we arrived so I didn't mind coming in. This is just how Peace Corps works during their rainy season and our summer vacation. The villagers work in the fields all day and don't leave the house when it rains (like when we have major snow storms, which makes it difficult to plan meetings), and we work on outside of village stuff. While I am here I did program a meeting with the guy that is the head of the red cross in the whole northern region (he is the one that is impressed with my work and sent my drawings from the world AIDS day to the head in Germany). We are doing a day long session this next Wed. for my CVD: a formation of sorts to get a solid plan of action mapped out. That should be very educational and a lot of work. ALSO, Tuesday there is a fête for the Chief. He just got distinguished with a title they would give to the Chief of a city (it is called a canton). BIG honor. I got your letters and the package with the fly traps. Nice addition to my care packages.

Chapter 45: Malaria [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com

August 25th:

This is the first time I have been able to check my e-mail since like the 8th of August. Crazy. Anyways the remainder of the week that we last talked was not a good time for me. To begin with the phone lines were completely down, and so were the cell phone connections. So that blew any plans to call or e-mail anyone. THEN, I found out that a friend of a volunteer died. The volunteer is a Christian Scientist. I don't know how familiar you are with the religion but one of their beliefs is that you only get sick if your connection with God is faltering. Therefore, Christian scientists refuse to take medication because they believe that their sickness will be healed with prayer by strengthening your connection with God. I personally believe that God gave us the ability to create medications for a reason but that is besides the point. So the volunteer's friend, who is also a Christian Scientist, came to visit her. The three of us rode the bus together when I went to Burkina Faso to catch my flight to the Canary Islands. The volunteer had to sign a form basically promising that she would get all the vaccinations and take her prophylaxis to prevent Malaria. I have to take a pill once a week for that too). Her friend got cerebral Malaria, refused medication and died. So that hit kind of hard.

THEN, the day before I was supposed to leave for the Guinea worm campaign my friend Alain comes up to me and says that one of the other volunteers is in the hospital and really sick. She didn't believe that Malaria is all that serious and that her body will adapt to it like the Togolese. WRONG. Her eyes were rolling back into her head and her blood was already so infected that she was severely anemic. Since all the phone lines were down she couldn't call the med unit. I finally got through on my cell phone and had to call about 20 times for a minute at a time (the connection kept breaking up. surprise, surprise) They got her on medicine and an emergency med vac unit came to take her to a hospital in Lomé, She really scared me. Especially considering the death of the other volunteer's friend. I felt like a mom that was really angry at their child for intentionally

doing something unsafe to themselves but I think that she has learned a lesson from this experience. Combined with my already fragile state at the time, this was just a wee bit stressful.

We remember the woman lying on the porch of the dispensaire. Adapt is only partly right. Virtually all the Togolese have the malaria parasite (visions of no screens on the windows or doors) which is then a ticking time bomb. There is no cure. You can try to prevent it, but even existing prophylaxis is uncertain. In our case, we began taking daily prescription doxycycline tablets two weeks before leaving for Togo and were firmly admonished to continue for 30 days after we get home. Malaria is serious business and the e-mail reminds us that Lauren will be at risk throughout her tenure in Togo. There is absolutely no letting up. In fact, there's a high probability that she will return with the parasite and will be at risk for a long time after her service in Togo is complete. Question: "Will the doxycycline medication interfere with the medication we need to take for giardia?" I'm assured that it will not. Thought: With the intense international effort to eradicate malaria, is there a "Save the Malaria Parasite Foundation?" I am afraid to look.

But then the following week was really great. We painted 4 wall size murals to warn about drinking unfiltered water and getting Guinea worm. We also went around and replaced damaged filters. It was a rewarding and productive week. I had a really good time. I also talked to a lot of people about some of the pressures and frustrations I have been feeling and I feel a lot better now.

This past weekend was AMAZING! There were a bunch of volunteers with birthdays so we had big party basically all weekend in an absolutely beautiful region of Togo (the south of course) . Anyways we were surrounded by lush foliage and mountains that were covered in mist in the early mornings and we went HIKING to an amazing waterfall. Since it is the rainy season there was a lot of water and it was really intense. I really enjoy hiking and plan on doing lots more of it when I get home.

So now I am on my way back to the north and my village. I am in Kara where I have a great internet connection, the cell phone will work (if maybe you want to try calling), and I just had a ham and cheese sandwich. Life is feeling pretty good right now.

August 27th:

I just got back to Dapaong and I am TIRED. Two days in a bush taxi is more than enough thank you. I don't regret not having you and daddy experience a bush taxi ride at all. About the phone... at this point frustrated is not a strong enough word to describe how I feel about the current phone situation. Keep trying to call me, I think it might work now. Alain called me earlier this afternoon and it worked fine. I am going back to village early tomorrow morning. I love you very much.

Chapter 46. Development [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
nerveresearch@hotmail.com

We get an excited phone call from Lauren the beginning of September. Since the time

that she arrived at her post, one of her responsibilities was to identify village leaders to create men's and women's Development Committees. The laudatory long term of objective is to develop village leadership who will identify and prioritize needs, and who will formulate plans to meet those needs. It has been difficult to get them to do this themselves. A breakthrough. Their highest priorities are to drill deep wells for cleaner water and to renovate and expand their school. Lauren is thrilled that they are finally taking some initiative, but is worried about her ability to help. Typically, a first time volunteer to a region is someone with construction experience who can address infrastructure needs. Someone with Lauren's training would typically be assigned next. They've skipped a step. She has no experience or training in infrastructure needs. They don't have any financial resources and don't know where to start. Neither does she. She knows that the proposals can be submitted to the Peace Corps to support such projects, but she is not confident on how to write such a proposal, or where to begin to get estimates for the costs. Besides, the application process is very slow. Only the months of November-February are amenable for construction. Before that, there is heavy rain. After that is oppressive heat. I tell her that I'll make some calls and see what I can find out.

I call the Peace Corps office in Washington, DC, am directed to the West Africa Development Office and explain the situation. Do they have any information on the approximate cost to dig a well? Do they have a database with the names of architects, sources of building material, building contractors? Building cost estimates? I am astounded by the response. No. "You mean to tell me that after 40 years of presence in Togo, someone hasn't compiled a database with such information?" I am politely informed that each region is different. I agree that I can appreciate that, but certainly over the years they've had volunteers in the various regions, they should have some general idea of how such costs differ from region to region. "So is each volunteer supposed to start from scratch and re-invent the wheel?" I am politely informed that that is what development is all about.

Although Lauren had looked longingly at the French team that had come to Togo and built a school in two weeks, I am well aware that historically such policies haven't been that successful. As with homeownership in the United States, people generally appreciate and take care of things if they have some personal investment in the project, either financially or physically. That's not the issue in this case. Lauren's not trying to do the project, she's trying to help them find the information they need in order to progress with their plans. I continue to press the case with the Peace Corps representative on the other end of the phone. "If I wanted to do something I've never done before in the United States, I wouldn't try to figure it out from scratch. I'd track down someone who already has the expertise. That's what they're trying to do but they don't have the luxury of the Yellow Pages." Again she sweetly informs me that that is what development is all about. Again, I counter that I appreciate that, but development should also include building on that which others have developed before.

Clearly this conversation is going nowhere. This is a dead end. But I did have a strong impression. Over the times that we had had occasion to call the Peace Corps offices, it was clear that virtually everyone there had been a prior volunteer. I commend them, and

I've seen what they've gone through. But there's a bit of a somewhat unintentional bonding attitude that I've seen before in other situations (think: fraternity hazings ... or medical residency programs). It's a near cult-like mentality that "if it was difficult for me then it should be difficult for you." It truly is difficult enough, why make it worse? Although I have enormous respect for the accomplishments and organization of the Peace Corps, I'm left with a gnawing question. Exactly what is the Peace Corps for, the growth of the volunteers (yes, to a degree) or the benefit of those who the volunteers serve? In the former case, they have the luxury of going back home. In the latter case, they stay there.

Chapter 47: Rotary International [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
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Ruth and I tap another resource. We contact Pastor Palka and explain Lauren's dilemma. From his years of serving in Togo, he agrees that our reading of the Peace Corps mentality is pretty accurate. Although colonialist missionary policies had historically been often misguided, if not downright destructive, most modern missionaries have become much more astute about working with indigenous peoples and cultures. However, despite the non-religious resources that missionaries developed over the years, PCVs generally (it varied from volunteer to volunteer) had a negative attitude about consulting with them for expertise and kept them at arms length.

Regarding Lauren's dilemma, years ago Pastor Palka had founded a Rotary International Club in Dapaong composed of Togolese business leaders who were devoted to developing their region. While he was in Dapaong, his father-in-law's Rotary Club in Rutland, Vermont, had funded a major water purification project in conjunction with the Dapaong Rotarians. He said the Dapaong Rotarians might be a bit far from Lauren's post to help, but provided names and contact information that we forwarded to Lauren. Some of the other PCVs serving in the Dapaong area were surprised that they had never been told of such existing organizations as part of their training.

Within a few days, Lauren made her way down to Dapaong and met with both the incoming and outgoing Presidents of the Dapaong Rotary Club. Within another week, a group visited Boadé. "C'est ne pas possible!" They couldn't believe how undeveloped Boadé was, and this was based on a comparison to Dapaong which was not so great itself. Within a few weeks Lauren had obtained blueprints, cost estimates and names of potential contractors. This is lightning speed in Africa. The villagers would supply most of the labor. We had a round of early morning phone calls.

September 24th:

Sorry for the rude awakening earlier this morning. I've attached files with information. Everything is pretty good except that the budget I added on at the end is lacking specific quantities and prices (for example of cement and the foundation, supports, roof, cost of the brick layer's work etc.) I'll send that later. All of those specific prices were included in the cost estimation. This is what I discussed with the future president of Rotary Club

here in Dapaong. I think his rounded estimate for the cost of the two class rooms, bureau, and renovation is pretty accurate (he has worked with constructing schools before). His name is the one I gave you, Paul. One of the attached files has a rough estimation of measurements for the new classrooms and bureau. I have a meeting with the entire Dapaong Rotary Club at 6 tonight so keep me in your prayers. I hope that you don't have any problems opening the documents and printing them. I just tried to call you to have you check and see if you received them but the line won't go through. Notice the total for the 2 rooms, bureau, and the renovation came out to about 6,500,000 CFA (about \$13,000); that is not including the costs that will be cut through volunteer work from the community.

At our end, we contact some of the Rotary Clubs in our area. Several members of our church belong to the Albany Rotary Club and they are potentially interested in supporting the project. I forward their president the files with the blueprints, budget and proposal that Lauren wrote with the assistance of her village Development Committee and the Dapaong Rotarians. A French friend of ours translates it into English. The Albany Rotary Club already has a foundation where people can make tax deductible donations that can be forwarded to the Dapaong Rotarians. Ruth and I are invited to talk to their Board of Directors. Lauren is ecstatic about the progress.

Chapter 48: Mugged [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice - nerveresearch@hotmail.com

We get a call the next morning. *"I just wanted to let you know, I'm okay, but last night one of the other PCVs and I were mugged."* We're stunned...and helpless. Up to this point we've only been worried about disease, diet and dangerous roads. We had been concerned about physical attacks, but Lauren had repeatedly assured us that this had rarely occurred outside of Lomé. Now this security, too, was broken. Lauren's confidence was shaken. After her meeting with the Dapaong Rotarians, seven of the PCVs gathered at the maison and had headed into town to eat and celebrate. Lauren and another woman had lagged far behind the others, taken a different route and were attacked by two men, who had been silently following them. The other volunteer had been grabbed around the neck and Lauren screamed. By the time help arrived, the attackers were gone and had taken their wallets with some money and their Peace Corp IDs. They were physically okay but upset. Again, Ruth and I had once been thrilled to know when Lauren was in Dapaong because we could reach her by phone. When we saw the road that she road her bike on to get Dapaong, we wished that she would stay in her village. This incident intensified that wish. The villagers in Boadé were extremely upset about the attack. "Your parents sent you here in good health, and we have an obligation to send you back the same way." The concerns of parents to parents across cultures, across an ocean, across millennia. They had become her ex officio parents. They didn't like her leaving the village either.

However, shortly after, the Peace Corps paid for her to go to Lomé to greet and share her experiences with the new class of trainees. This was a big honor. She had been doing a great job. She had a lot to share, right up to some new experiences, and didn't pull any punches. The trainees appreciated her candor. They wanted to know where she was

stationed. A large map of Togo was on the wall, with a pin in the location of each PCV. "Look for the farthest pin from Lomé." They had no trouble finding it. It was also the farthest from the nearest other pin.

The timing for this trip was good because the Peace Corps personnel provided some counseling to deal with the mugging and she got a new ID. Unfortunately, Lauren took a bush taxi back to her village and fell asleep for a while. When she awoke, her wallet had been stolen along with the new ID. This time she just shrugged and blew it off. WAWA.

The good news, our meeting with the Albany Rotary Club Board of Directors went well and they voted to support the school project. We would soon be mounting a community wide fund raising campaign. This bolstered her spirits.

Chapter 49: Project Updates [\[African Rollercoaster\]](#) - Frank Rice -
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October 7th:

So after yet another wallet being stolen I am back in Dapaong. Tomorrow I am heading back to village. Moms and pops if you would like to call tonight/today I am good to go. Actually the invitation to call is a never ending invitation to all of you. SO it is already October and that means there are only 2 1/2 months until I get to see you again in December! YEA! Last night I had another meeting with the Dapaong rotary club and it went well. Their role will be to basically make the project official, the money will be sent to their bank account and then I would like to make a system where myself and the treasurer of the rotary club have to sign when withdrawing money. They will also be responsible to make sure the project is followed up properly. I love you all so much. Wish me luck getting settled back into village once again. I MISS YOU!!!!!!

October 17th:

Hey you guys! I am in Dapaong and would love to talk to you and see what is going on! I got the package with the messages from the people at the church picnic. I haven't read all of it yet but it was very sweet- thank you for thinking of me. Village is going well. To be honest I don't feel very comfortable when I am outside of village (which is not necessarily a bad thing). After being robbed twice I am really paranoid. Anyways, I am not sure when I will be coming in again so if you could call that would be great. Other exciting news. Work is going really realistically well. I am restarting the health club and starting another one at the other school. I am starting this women's group that is going to be amazing. The women are really eager to speak with me and share ideas about nutrition and family planning and stuff. I am using the soy I grew to show them what they can do to add protein to the diets of themselves and their families. We might also be bringing someone to the village to teach us how to make soap. The group is comprised of 20 really powerful and smart women who are from the 20 small villages that make up my area. We are meeting twice a month and then the other 2 weeks out of the month they will be forming women's groups in each of their villages to share what we talk about. Hopefully there will be a network of 20 different women's groups before I leave. My

development committee is doing wonderfully. The school project is well on its way (the villagers are starting to clear the land and gather sand and gravel that is necessary for making the concrete bricks) other than that we are lying low until funding comes through. Finally I started working with the prostitutes. I talk to them every Tuesday, help sell them condoms, talk about their problems - it is so interesting. And we are doing an AIDS tourney to 7 or so different villages; we will be bringing a theater group and a puppet group and an actual AIDS victim to talk (it is really hard to get people who are infected to talk to others, usually they just hole up in their houses until they pass away). Pretty exciting stuff huh?

Chapter 50: Reflections [[African Rollercoaster](#)] - Frank Rice -
nerveresearch@hotmail.com

Yes, pretty exciting stuff from the little girl who preferred designer clothes and the softest mattress. Lauren will be home for a few weeks at Christmas...she will be going back. She has sent two general letters to all her friends that sum up the year:

October 13th:

A couple of weeks ago while in my regional capital opening my mail, I received the Geneseo alumni newsletter. I skimmed through it not quite believing that I have been a Geneseo "alumnus" for over a year. Towards the end of the newsletter there were years people have graduated since like 1960 and a list of what people are doing. Under the year 2002 there were only about 25 names listed with their current occupation and location. ALL of the people listed were living in NY until I got to my name (I can only assume that my mother sent in my info- thanks mom) "Lauren Rice, Peace Corps volunteer, Togo, West Africa." I started laughing because it just seemed so random.

Needless to say I think you'll all agree that I have a touch of a random streak in me. Unbelievably I am swiftly approaching my one year mark as a peace corps volunteer in Togo. Okay so you are probably thinking , great what does that have to do with me? Well, much like mother's day serves as a reminder for us to tell our mothers how much we love and appreciate her or Valentine's day makes us tell our significant others how much we love and care for them (yes, I know both of these holidays exist to help Hallmark sell cards, but work with me on this...) I am starting to feel all nostalgic and wanted to let you know how much I love and MISS you all. I also apologize for my sad attempts at keeping in touch with you all. I've told you all before how frustrating communicating and the infrequency of my getting to do internet combined with gaps of time and inconsistent arrivals of letters is for me.

You all are probably wondering what in the world I've been up to. I finally understand why peace corps volunteers think it is so funny when they are asked to describe a "typical day". The only thing typical about my time here has been the guarantee that my day will be untypical. I am on a never ending roller coaster. I thought that by now the highs and lows would have subsided and although they are slightly less shocking, they still remain ever present.

Last week at my dispensaire (local health unit), I watched as a less than skeletal 6 yr old boy gasped his last breath and died because his parents neglected a bad case of diarrhoea for over 2 months. His father is one of my friends and was educated enough to know that he should have brought the boy to the dispensaire when the diarrhoea started. I have witnessed a lot of death that could have easily been prevented. That is hard.

However, the next day I found myself hanging out with friends at our small market, drinking calabashes of tchakpa, and laughing at the village fou (every village has a fou) who has just entered the market wearing a woman's blazer 3 sizes too big with shoulder pads and stirrup pants that again are too big (I know, is it even possible for stirrup pants to be too big?!) with an armful of branches. When he saw me he dropped the branches and did a bare-footed jig. Everyone laughed. But they are not laughing maliciously, it is just a nice moment of comic relief.

Once I was having a conversation with someone about how much I enjoy the moon because I know that the people I love at home are seeing the same moon as I am (you know, kind of an "An American Tale"-esque kind of moment). Shocked they looked at me and said, "you have the moon in America too?" Moments like that solidify why I am here.

For the most part we have no idea what life is like in other cultures. No matter how much I researched Togo I still half expected to witness many of the stereotypes that are believed about African people in general. I pictured myself starving because "people are starving in Africa!" You'd be surprised how much food people eat and how strong they are. Admittedly a lot of the food is not as rich in nutrients as the food in the resource plentiful US. Nevertheless people are generally not starving. I also pictured people walking around in grass skirts while clucking their tongues, the latter largely due to Kathryn's (one of Lauren's college roommates) influence and the frog she had sophomore/junior year. In my village people live in small mud based huts with straw thatched roofs and occasionally don traditional dress for festivities and ceremonies. Sadly grass skirts are not included in traditional dress and I have yet to hear any tongues being clucked.

The exchange of cultural ideas and traditions has been one of the most interesting and educational facets of my life here. However this exchange has also been a huge challenge when we are attempting accomplish any work and projects. There are so many cultural barriers and I am finding that some of them are simply too high and too steep to even begin climbing. Many of our western ideas and priorities just don't figure into the scheme and patterns of life here. I thought that I arrived here fairly open-minded as to the kind of work I would be doing and how much of that work could actually be accomplished. Time and time again I am forced to try not to question why something has occurred or how it was done or to try and ignore certain aspects of life in Togo. For instance I can not pass judgment on why the teachers beat their students or the negative financial consequences that are caused by most of the polygamous relationships or the corruption that starts with the president and trickles down like a waterfall through every division of work and play.

There are exceptions- there always are. In the past year I have made some beautiful friendships and connections with the people in my village and in the other areas of my region. These relationships (along with my cat) are what keep me debatably sane and motivated to stay in Togo.

As far as work goes I am still struggling to communicate in local language, my peanuts and soy that I planted in July are finally doing well (I done my grandpa proud), my health club did fairly well and I'll be restarting it this upcoming school year. I also formed a development committee with my community and we have big plans for the upcoming year. We are currently repairing water pumps and planning to drill more wells, improving the conditions at the dispensaire and working on a literacy project/campaign. The literacy campaign includes encouraging parents to send their children to school, helping them to budget school expenses, and hopefully building an addition and renovating the current school building. I am starting a woman's group in village and an art club at the primary school. I am thrilled because 4 of the girls I nominated were accepted for a scholarship that could carry them through university! Girls are rarely even sent to school so if they can make it through to university it would be a huge accomplishment. Right now we are working on a campaign to educate the villagers about malaria because the rainy season is in full force (YEA! It is not as hot anymore!) and the mosquitoes are out and biting fiercely. Life here is challenging and frustrating. For the most part I am happy and doing well (depending on the day you talk to me).

I would really love to know how you all are doing I really miss you so much! Please write me a letter and or send me an e-mail. I promise to try and write you more consistently even if they are mass e-mails so that when I do write my letters are not so long... SORRY! I can not say it enough- your support means everything to me. For those of you who are back in classes GOOD LUCK! For that matter good luck to all of you with all that you are doing. If any of you have new addresses or e-mail addresses please keep me updated. I hope you are all happy and healthy. Enjoy the incoming Fall weather and beautiful scenery. I miss the Fall.

November 7th:

While having a moment to myself in my sanctuary, I mean my latrine, I had a thought... brace yourselves. Prior to my arrival in Togo I thought wouldn't it be neat if I could conduct some kind of sociological /anthropological study of the people in my village. When would I ever have the opportunity to live with a group of people who base their whole way of life on different experiences, backgrounds, and cultural beliefs? Never. However, I am realizing that although I am beginning to understand my villagers' way of thinking and acting, the most dramatic study that I have been able to conduct is on myself. I will never fully understand the Togolese people or their culture but I do know myself and it has been thrilling to see who I am becoming within this experience.... I feel like I have finally found a walkable path through a field that was full of uncertainties and unknowns. In general I am much more assertive, I've spent a lot of time with just me and

myself and am much more independent, I am a lot more direct (people in Togo tend to go around the point and then around it again until I find myself saying, “what are you getting at?” or “what is your point exactly.”), my faith is stronger in myself and God, my body is stronger, my sense of humour is pretty much the same, and I finally get it (“it” being what I have and don’t have and what others have and don’t have in more than just the material sense). The past couple of months I have entered a wonderful phase of my service because I am finally comfortable feeling like this is my home for now and the upcoming year.

When my parents came to visit in July the three of us were lying in my bedroom getting ready to sleep and my father said, “Lauren, this is the closest I have ever come to being back in Boy Scout camp.” really? “Boy Scout Camp” has been my life for the past 14 months. actually, strike that – Boy Scout Camp combined with boot camp and a large dose of international development with a pinch of college spring break has been my life for the past 14 months.

The first 9 months of my service the highs and lows of my life were intense and unbearably frequent. In the span of 12 hours I would experience drastic mood changes of elated joy and happiness then just like that feelings of sorrow, sadness and loneliness would flood over me. I was constantly aching to be back at home while at the same time trying to adjust to the life I was/am trying to adapt to in Togo. I felt selfish for leaving my friends, family, and loved ones. It was hard for me to know that some of the people at home were hurting and missing me... however. When thoughts of ETing (leaving early or “early termination”) occurred to me I thought, “Lauren if you ET that would also be selfish because the people in Togo have given you so much; you have grown and changed, made fantastic relationships, and experienced so much of this amazing country. The people here are letting you into their lives. Your village has given you so much and what have you given them... nothing.” This is what I used to think.

Now I am feeling good. Throughout my service the highs and lows have never ceased but at least now it is more like an entire week or even month of feeling high followed by an extended period of lows. This emotional ride is much more manageable; at least I have time to down shift and up shift so as not to burn out the transmission. I still miss everyone so much and I’m sure they miss me but I am used to the ache, like the effect of cold weather on a bone that has once been broken, that never goes away. As for the people here ... slowly I am giving back to their acts of kindness and hospitality. I am part of the community (at least Sakiratou, my village alter ego is). The other day the community was forming a committee for an organization that uses profit from the cotton crops for community needs and they nominated me for secretary! I said, “ummm, you guys do know that I’m leaving in a year....” and they were like, “yes but we’ll have to re-elect people next year anyways.” cool, huh ?

Today the sous-préfet (the regional director/mayorish person personally appointed by the president) came to Boadé with the Chief of Cinkassé (a sketchy man who I can’t stand – I have honestly lost count of how many times he has told me he wants to marry me.... and unlike some people he actually is serious). They have been trying to mobilize the region

to come up with money to host an annual fête that honours the traditions in Togo (no comment on why they can find money for the fête but not vaccinations...). The fête lasts for two days and highlights the different types of music, dancing, dress, food etc. that exist in Togo. I believe there are over 50 different ethnic groups and languages present in this tiny country. crazy. Can you imagine finding over 50 ethnic groups and languages in a country the size of West Virginia? !! anyways, last week I wrote a letter to the sous-préfet informing him about the school project my village and I am doing with Rotary Club International and asked his permission to carry it through. Considering in the past, préfet have told volunteers they must sleep with them or give them some of the money in order to do a project (don't worry they refused) I was very lucky. He was very supportive and grateful. While he was wrapping up the meeting in my village he spotted me. "I would like to take a moment to thank our sister," he said, "she is helping you build this school because she likes you. This is not her role or her responsibility but she has chosen to help you because she can see how much Boadé is suffering especially for education – the literacy rates in your village are incredibly low. And... she obviously likes you." He turned to me and said, "Thank you in advance for all you are doing." of course all of this was in French but that is an exact translation of what he said, I had to put it in quotes for you guys. Then everyone applauded. All I can say is that an uncontrollable smile spread across my face and I felt really good. I still do.

The villagers have already started working really hard to realize this project. Everyday they are transporting sand on their heads and by donkeys so that we can start making the cement bricks. Surrounding the school are tiny dunes of sand that will soon be the mountain that is necessary to make all the bricks. The development committee that I formed made a calendar that assigns a different village to bring sand and/or help the bricklayer every week until the school is finished. The villagers might not be able to contribute a lot of money but they are certainly demonstrating their dedication and motivation towards improving the lives of their children.

In other work news, my first health club was a great success! Over 100 students came! unfortunately too many . I had them write a paragraph on why they want to be in the club and what they want to discuss throughout the year. Based on what they wrote 35 of them were chosen to participate in the club. I feel like such a teacher. If it wasn't such a commute... by bike I would break it up and do 2 clubs but I can't go to Cinkassé that often. Working with the prostitutes has been eye opening and interesting, and I wish I could work with them more often as well. The end of November I am teaching my group of women how to make soymilk, tofu, and couscous (all from soy) and how to use soy in their traditional dishes. Soy is a cheap and efficient way to enrich their diets with protein – I'm very excited! I've become kind of a soy freak actually.

Now for the bad news... Henry, my car, is no longer with us. My parents told me they had to sell him because he was taking up too much space. If we could all take a moment of silence for Henry in his junkyard grave it would be greatly appreciated.

The good news is that I am coming home for Christmas. YEA! YEA! YEA! !!! I probably won't be able to see all of you but at the very least give me a call so that I can

hear all your beautiful voices!

It's been a little over a year. Lauren has changed...a lot. Ruth and I have changed...a lot. The people in Boadé have changed...a lot. Peace Corps. "Changing the world, one village at a time." How true. The world includes the United States as well as Africa.

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