

Heavier Concerns

By Valerie Wayson

When my Peace Corps interviewer asked me what I would do without a gym, I replied that if we're issued bikes, I'd take bike rides. He complimented me on my response, saying it showed problem-solving skills, and this compliment bolstered my confidence, tricked me into thinking I'd already solved a problem I hadn't yet encountered.

While actually in Madagascar, though, I took few bike rides. Brickaville, my village, on the main road between the two largest cities in Madagascar, Tana and Tamatave, was described in the Bradt Guide as a truck-stop town where you didn't want to get stuck. Although this road was paved, because of its steep twists and turns going from mountains to sea-level, Peace Corps classified it as dangerous. Most of Brickaville lay along this road, which was why it was a trade hub, and a point of distribution between the larger cities and smaller villages.

When I started biking, I steered toward Tana and rode for half an hour before turning back. The route was hilly, and there were places I would heave up an incline before coasting down the other side, the wind buffeting my flushed face and pressing the brim of my hat over my eyes. My preferred biking time was dusk, and every day, I was dumbstruck at the way the light hit the green palm and banana and coconut trees, bathing everything in a warm glow. I first found my love for Madagascar on my bike on this road.

The proviseur of the school, my boss, agreed with Peace Corps that the road, full of trucks and *taxis brousses* careening past dogs and chickens and children, was dangerous. Laure, the secretary of the school and my self-appointed best friend, tried to discourage me by pointing out a teacher whose son had been hit and killed by a truck. I'd already noticed the woman, whose hair was as short as a man's and who smoked, both of which broke, or at least bent, basic social mores for Malagasy women.

Laure also didn't like my workout attire. When I returned after my ride to the classroom where I lived, children were still loitering in the courtyard of the school, chatting with friends. Laure, scandalized, eyed the students, eyed my sweaty backside, and whispered in my ear, "*Il faut changer.*"

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A taxi-brousse drove off the bridge and into the river, killing a man, woman, and child. No one I knew.

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Next, I tried running. I ran around the soccer field, dodging muddy puddles as gleeful children chased me. Maybe if I'd been stronger, I would have embraced the children's laughter, seen it as an opportunity to teach about fitness and health. But I was too conscious of how slow I ran, which they loved to point out when they sped past me; too conscious of the fat on my arms and belly and thighs that did not appear on theirs, which they also loved to point out daily.

"*Maventy anao,*" they'd tell me in Malagasy, but then they would always remember that I didn't speak Gasy very well, so they'd add in French, "*Tu es grosse.*" Then they would gauge my reaction, confer amongst themselves, and several would come

out with “You are fat!” almost simultaneously, yelling it out in triumph at being the first to think of it. Some might accidentally say “is” instead of “are,” but the others would set them straight. Then, just in case something was lost in translation, one or two would bulge out their cheeks and round their arms in front of them, as if resting on a great girth. Everyone did this, not just the children—even my co-workers in the school. It was amazing how similar the conversations were: the same cycling through of languages, the same puffing up of cheeks. They didn’t mean to hurt my feelings; I think it was actually a compliment, or at least, not an insult. They never understood that it should bother me.



The years I lived there, Madagascar was the eighth poorest country in the world. Two thirds of the population live below subsistence level. Being fat is not a bad thing. Their health issues are not heart attacks or cancer, but syphilis, polio, malaria—in some regions, the bubonic plague. Many are malnourished, discernible from distended bellies and orange-tipped hair. Losing weight, burning calories, are not

concepts many are familiar with. I could see their thoughts in their faces: *muscles are from labor, and you don't labor.*

I wasn't skinny, but I wasn't exactly fat. I was at or under the medically overweight for my height line. Compared to the Malagasy, I was pretty big, but also, at only 5'4", I towered over most of them, even the men. I tried not to take these comments personally.

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When someone dies, the Malagasy collect money from well-wishers, put it in an envelope, and present it to the grieving family, accompanied by a speech expressing condolences from the most senior member of the group. The first time I witnessed this was in training—the maid's father had died. When we gave her the envelope, she involuntarily let out a sob before stifling it with her hands clasped to her mouth. The girl was young, around eighteen, and shy, and her grief was so raw that I immediately teared up. I dropped my eyes to the floor. She was silent through the rest of the speech, but I could see her body shaking, almost violently. Trying to keep my own tears from being visible, I watched her feet. One was clenched over the other, the toes white-knuckled.

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I ran on the blacktop for awhile, which came with the same warnings as before, and I became a source of amusement for adults as well as children, as I was the white girl, their *vazaha*, dressed in a ridiculous outfit and running to the point of sweating when there wasn't anywhere to get to. The attention, not the trucks, eventually drove me behind the train tracks, where I found hidden pathways through the sugarcane and rice fields.

The earth was red, the rice fields impossibly green, and the sky was orange and purple and pink. The sugarcane reached ten feet tall and gave the impression of solitude.



I constantly tried to stay busy, to do productive things: I set aside several hours a day to lesson plan or grade papers, and when I didn't have anything else to do, I read from *Les Trois*

Mousquetaires, thinking that improving my French was at least more constructive than pleasure reading, which I still did seven hours a day, on average. I listened to music or BBC on my shortwave radio while I cooked dinner, washed the dishes, swept the floor. I never let myself think.

While running, though, I had revelations. I composed journal entries in my head, pinpointed where I stood on important issues. I pictured David Letterman interviewing me in front of an adoring crowd who hung on my every word. Letterman would be equally adoring as he probed my stance on issues from the futility of country development to the palm-sized spider that lived in my outdoor shower. My runs grew to an hour each evening. My stride lengthened. I felt strong, calm, and centered. It was my favorite time of day.

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“*Maty, maty, maty! Isanandro, maty!*” Laure exclaimed. *Death, death, death. Every day, death.* Laure no longer had a husband, and her secretary's salary only went so

far. Constantly giving money to grieving families meant that she probably wouldn't eat meat this week.

Who died, I asked?

An eighteen-year-old boy.

From what?

Sickness.

What kind of sickness?

Sickness! This said exasperated. This situation was not unusual. The cause was unknown—dirty water, malaria, any of the other millions of things that could happen. Did it matter?

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The Proviseur and his wife called me into their house. The wife's presence startled me, as she preferred Tamatave to Brickaville, and I rarely saw her. She was middle-aged, matronly, mustached, wearing a thin tank top over braless breasts.

"Tu vas être violée!" she claimed, hoping that the threat of rape would end the matter. It didn't. I rarely saw anyone on my runs, and mostly, they were surprised when I jogged by. People were generally solicitous to me; they wanted to be my friend, and I never felt myself to be in danger. The most dangerous event on one of my runs was the time the runaway zebu thundered down the narrow path, its owner shouting *"A-omby!"* in warning, chasing after the bull. I jumped in the mud, and it ran by.

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I'd never taught before Peace Corps, and in those first days in the classroom, I realized some things:

1. Whoever came up with the saying “Those who can’t do, teach,” never tried teaching.
2. Just because someone knows English—can spell words and form grammatically correct sentences—does not mean that someone can convey this information to someone else.
3. The daydream I’d had of being perfectly adjusted, perfectly fluent, an asset to the community, and who would improve the lives of its people, would never be a reality.

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In the middle of a *cyclone* one afternoon, which was really just non-stop rain, we closed the school to go pay our respects to the president of the *fikambanana*, who’d died. I didn’t know who he was, but being the president of the neighborhood was a big deal, and a line snaked out of his door and through the row of stilted huts. Woven mats of raffia were laid on the ground for people to walk on, but the mud crept over the sides, over the edge of my flip-flops, and squished between my toes. Laure tried to hold an umbrella over me as we waited in the rain, and water fell from the spikes down the back of my neck. Men stood a short distance away, butchering a bull that had been slaughtered for the occasion. After a leg had been hacked off with a machete, a man held it aloft, trying to negotiate his way back to the huts without the benefit of the mats. His bare feet were sunk in up past his ankles, and the blood dripped in the mud he stood in, mingling together. It would eventually harden and become part of the earth. When he carried it past me, it dripped near my own feet. I willed myself not to flinch.

An hour later, we climbed into the hut and saw the body, lying on the bed, wrapped in gauze. Everything was dark and brown—the dried frond roof, the wooden

plank floors—except through the window, where rain dripped from the brilliance of banana tree leaves. Madagascar can always be described in shades of green.

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When I was thirteen, I wrote a note to my mom saying I was sorry before I put almost an entire bottle's worth of aspirin in my mouth. I spat it into the sink, crying, reveling in the melodrama, and left the note for my mom to find. The next morning, I saw she'd responded, *I'm sorry, too*. She'd thought I was referring to our fight. Another night, I grazed a serrated knife back and forth over my wrist, unknowingly the wrong way, until, from the scratching, a white line appeared, and I got too scared to do any more. After that, I gave up on suicide, too much of a coward to see it through or to endure any pain, but the feelings of self-revulsion and apathy toward anything but my dogs and books persisted until I was accepted into the drill team in high school. I'd taken dance classes as a kid that I'd never cared much about, but this, somehow, was different. I was good at it. It gave me an identity. Overnight, I found something to care about and work for. My body became stronger, and the exercise inevitably boosted my mood. I felt normal.

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In the market one day, I saw a woman coming down the street. She was wailing, scooping away the space in front of her with her arms as she stumbled, as if swimming. A man followed, a horrible grimace on his face, struggling to keep up while carrying the body of someone small. A cloth covered its head.

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The rain quarantined me to my house that season, a cacophony on my tin roof. I did any kind of exercise I could think of: jumping jacks, sit-ups, push-ups. Dancing to my

fastest music. One day I put on my running shoes and ran for forty-five minutes in a circle around my room. It wasn't the same.

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