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Being Here

I slipped on my Birkenstock sandals to walk the forty-five minutes to the university in Dakar. It wasn't overwhelmingly hot, so I didn't bargain for a taxi ride. Sometimes I wish I had taken taxis more often, as haggling for prices with the drivers was always an adventure, and taxis were sometimes the greatest places to practice my Wolof language. The drivers were always impressed when I had memorized a Senegalese proverb, and told me that I was truly becoming Senegalese. The comment to follow was inevitably, *Am nga jekker?* or, Do you have a husband? Every American girl needs a Senegalese husband. Although taxi rides were exciting and humorous, walking to class had its own leisurely appeal.

The first stop was the boutique. I bought a bottle of filtered water for the day - I never went anywhere without one - and I picked up some breakfast. There weren't many options for breakfast in Senegal: half a baguette with my choice of butter, chocolate spread, or fish paste. I opted for the butter, because, believe it or not, no matter how wonderful chocolate on bread sounds for breakfast, it gets old after a few months; and the fish paste? Not a chance. I also bought a bottle of superglue to repair the plywood shelf I broke in my bedroom, and one envelope - not a box full - to send a letter home.

As I ate and began to cross the major road near my host family's house, a thin shepherd and his herd of at least thirty massive bulls and cows thundered by me. I wasn't sure if the shepherd was leading them or if they were leading him, but they navigated the main thoroughfare just as well as I did. As I continued down the road, I saw the progress of several construction sites, where men used pulleys and levers to bring cement and handmade cinderblocks up to the higher stories of soon-to-be new homes. Haggard horses pulled carts with buckets of water and raw materials. I walked past the Red Cross building, marking the halfway point of my walk. This place on my path to school was where I saw new automobiles, men dressed in suits, women wearing pants, and *toubabs*. The term *toubab* refers to the French, but the Senegalese tend to use it to describe any white person. Near the Red Cross building, a large family of homeless goats roamed around, bleating and scrounging for food. We had sheep in the courtyard of my host family's house, but I could never tell the difference between goats and sheep in Senegal. They're both shorthaired due to the hot climate, so they were all the same to me.

I approached the end of the *Ancienne Piste*, close to where it intersected with the *Route de Ouacam*, where the street vendors sat on the sides of the road. They offered fruit, hibiscus, and peanuts, and many were women. I bought peanuts from one woman who held her young child by the hand and carried her baby tied to her back with a *pagne*, a large piece of cloth used by Senegalese women to carry their babies. She was already cooking rice and fish for the midday meal, when she and nearby vendors would gather together on a straw mat on the ground to eat with their hands from a large communal bowl.

I never learned that vendor's name, but after less than a week of walking to school, she became familiar. I shook her hand and greeted her, saying, *Salaamaleekum. Nanga def?* which means, May peace be upon you. How are you doing? She smiled and replied, *Maleekumsalaam. Maangi fi rekk*, which means, May peace be upon you also. I am here only. I am here only means I'm fine.

I am here only. Here is no longer Senegal. It takes me less than a minute to cross the snow-covered street to get to my classes at my small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. A stray cat lives in my backyard and there is a family of squirrels that screeches from the tree out front every morning. I can eat a plate of food that's just for me, and doesn't involve rice or fish, and I can eat

something other than bread for breakfast. I can buy water that's measured in ounces instead of liters. And I rarely say hello to people I don't know.

I'm slowly falling back into my life in the U.S. I am here, and I am fine, but I am worried. I don't want to lose the experience of living in a place like Senegal, where time is unimportant, but people are. I don't want to forget that if something goes wrong, or someone is late, or I break something like a shelf or even a sink, life will go on. I don't want to forget that there are people who live with cockroaches in their beds and in their kitchens, and there are people who cook over a fire when the gas has run out, and there are people who deal with power cuts multiple times a day. I was one of those people for a little while.

When I was in Dakar, I often thought about what I missed at home. I missed my family and friends, and I missed things: a flushing toilet with a seat, the internet in my house, constant electricity, a refrigerator, a washing machine. I was happy enough, considering, but I didn't really understand the importance of being there until I came home. Now that I am back in Pennsylvania, with so many privileges, I don't know how to be happy while keeping alive what I learned about myself when I was abroad. I have changed. I can live without a lot of things and be very content. Here I have every thing I could possibly need, and I find myself longing for simplicity, and time spent well instead of quickly.

And then I remember that I learned something else in Senegal, something that makes that place what it is, and that makes living as a study abroad returnee in the U.S. a little bit easier: being fine is as simple as being here only.