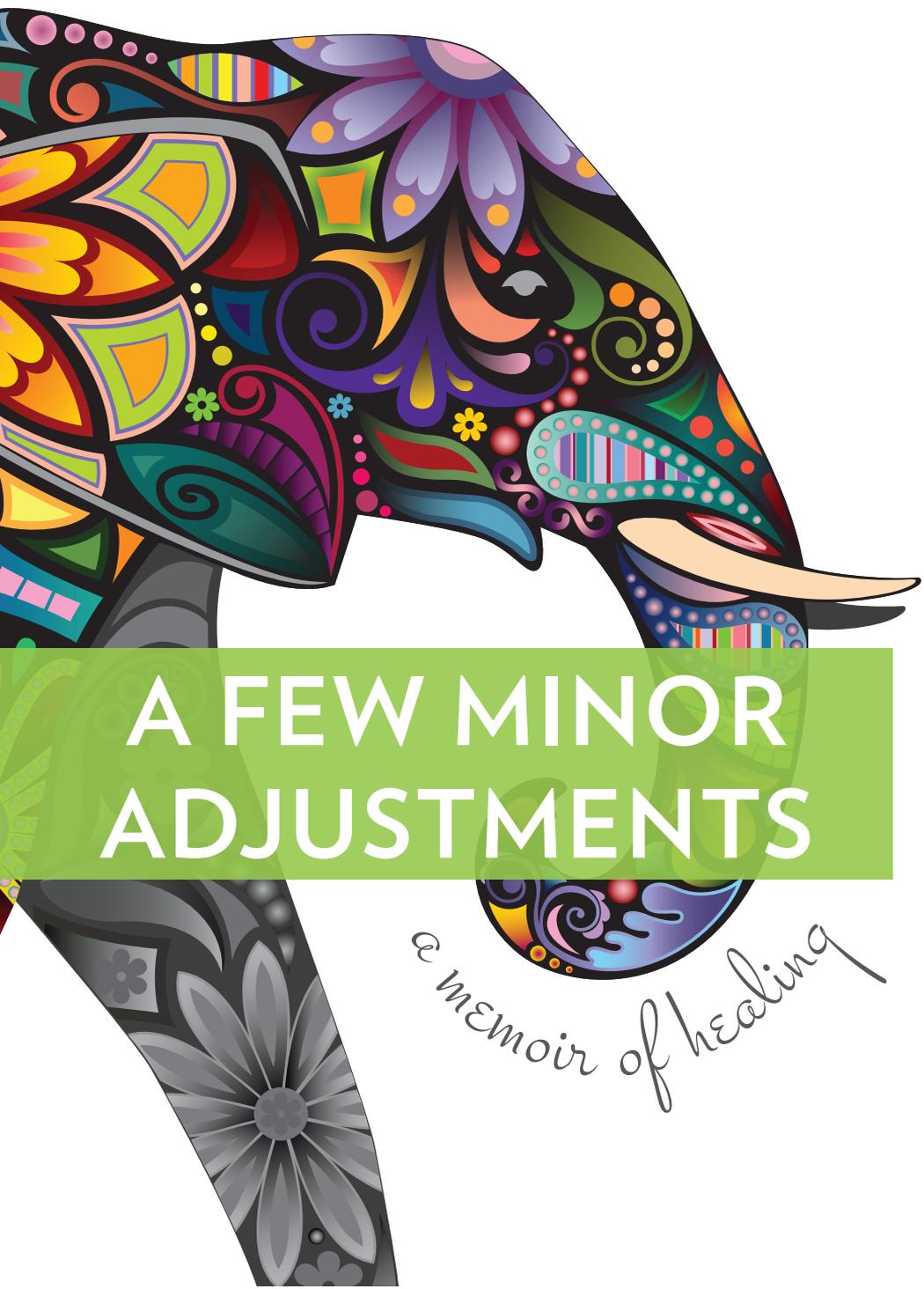


CHERIE KEPHART



A FEW MINOR  
ADJUSTMENTS

*a memoir of healing*



## PRAISE

### *for Cherie Kephart and A Few Minor Adjustments*

“Kephart’s solid debut memoir is a story of gut-wrenching perseverance and determination.”

—Publishers Weekly

“A mesmerizing and ultimately uplifting memoir about one woman’s journey to healing.”

—Foreword Reviews

“What a story. I am so inspired by the author’s courage, resilience, and ability to convey her darkest feelings without self-pity. Here’s hoping her next book tells a happier tale.”

—Daniel Asa Rose, author of *Larry’s Kidney*

“*A Few Minor Adjustments* is everything you want in a book. I was drawn in from the first sentence and pulled quickly to the last beautiful sentence. It is magnificent, reflective, truly touching, and meaningful, with the welcomed relief of the perfect touch of humor condensing twenty years of life with the right amount of detail for one to grasp and feel part of her story—and it is a great story!”

—Dr. Melinda Nevins, D.O.

“Inspiring reading for any on their own paths to recovery and enlightenment, making *A Few Minor Adjustments* a ‘must have’ chronicle of perseverance highly recommended for anyone!”

—D. Donovan, Senior Reviewer, Midwest Book Review

“A rich and complicated story, told on each page with clear dialogue and memorable anecdotes.”

—Kirkus Reviews

“Cherie Kephart’s illness and trials make the story personal, her vulnerability and her fierce determination to thrive make this a universal triumph.”

—Barbara Villaseñor, editor, *First Reads*

“With raw guts, wisdom, and a spirit as tenacious as they come, Cherie tells the story of her harrowing experience with an undiagnosed condition in a way that will keep you wanting to turn the page. Intelligent, tender, and triumphant, *A Few Minor Adjustments* is a must read.”

—Marni Freedman, editor, and award-winning author of *Playing Mona Lisa* and *7 Essential Writing Tools*

“Cherie Kephart’s *A Few Minor Adjustments* takes you on a perilous inner and outer journey to places and dangers into an unknown that even the most seasoned adventurer would fear to tread, and in doing so teaches us by courageous example how to survive by the only available resources we have when all else is lost; wit, humor, and perseverance.”

—Matthew J. Pallamary, author of *Spirit Matters* and *Land Without Evil*

“Cherie brings a delicate balance of humor and brutal honesty to a tale that would be dark and grim in the hands of a lesser writer. That she is here to even tell her story is a miracle—that she has the talent and insight to tell it so brilliantly is a gift for us all.”

—Jeff Thurman, author and retired FBI agent

“Everyone has been physically ill at one point or another, and it’s rarely pleasant. Cherie’s treatment of such a difficult, personal topic is nothing short of lovely. It’s a story celebrating life. We all need that, even when we’re healthy.”

—Reina Menasche, licensed social worker and author of *Silent Bird* and *Twice Begun*

“*A Few Minor Adjustments* is the moving, heartwarming memoir of Cherie’s courageous struggle and eventual triumph and is sure to inspire others who suffer with never-ending pain.”

—Roger L. Conlee, author of *Dare the Devil*, *The Hindenburg Letter*, and other historical novels

“With *A Few Minor Adjustments*, Cherie Kephart communicates an important message to the many people struggling with undiagnosed illnesses and their friends and relatives, who want to help them, but don’t know how—you are not alone. The struggle is real and prevalent. This story not only shares Ms. Kephart’s experiences, from her time in Africa to the mounting health issues she faced back home, but it starts an important conversation about our society and how we handle health problems that are not clearly defined.”

—Lindsey Salatka, author of *Fish Heads and Duck Skin*

“A powerful, gripping, and insightful story that keeps you engaged and wanting to read more. Reading someone else’s brutally honest struggle makes you thankful for what you have—and what you don’t have! Cherie Kephart is a living tribute to learning how to laugh at life and see the light and lesson in every dire situation.”

—Dr. Kevin Groid, Ph.D. in psychology  
and CEO at EDReferral.com

“In today’s world of social media, hand-held devices, work, and family responsibilities, infrequently do I pick up a good book, but after I picked up *A Few Minor Adjustments*, I could not put it down. Cherie Kephart’s memoir is filled with adventure, heroes, villains, and beautiful descriptions. Most outstanding is her sense of humor that carried her through her medical challenges. As a physician and cancer survivor, I appreciate her strength and perseverance that others facing known and unknown diseases will be inspired by.”

—Dr. Sharon Sternfeld, MD, FAAP, Dr. Good-for-children

“After her excruciating ordeal, Cherie has re-opened her heart to write this vivid account of her courageous journey, leaving readers with an inspiring message and a sense of awe.”

—Peggy Lang, editor, ghostwriter, and co-author  
of the award winning novel, *Assassin’s Game*

“*A Few Minor Adjustments* is a memoir that reads like a novel. It contains all the elements of a compelling read: a great story, with perfect pace, and a seasoned/mature writing style. So put this memoir on your must-read list.”

—Gerardeen M Santiago, PhD, Publisher, Aionios Books



# A FEW MINOR ADJUSTMENTS



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*a memoir of healing*

CHERIE KEPHART



BAZZ  
PUBLISHING



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For Alex



## AUTHOR'S NOTES

This is a true story. At least the way I remember it.

Most of the names and any distinguishing characteristics of the persons included in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

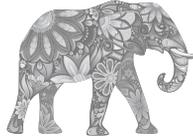
If you learn anything from this book and decide to abruptly change your life, it is not my fault. But any laughter you experience, I'll take credit for that.

*“If you’re going through hell, keep going.”*

—Winston Churchill



## chapter one



# ENTERING THE UNKNOWN

APRIL 2004, PART I – SAN DIEGO

Hard water hit my breasts. The musty odor of old pipes filled my nostrils. I coughed and turned in circles in my shower, observing the cracked tiles beneath my feet, stepping carefully around them because I had been cut before. I avoided the large patches of mold covering the rusty handles and walls. No matter how much I scrubbed, this cottage was run-down and full of spores.

*Damn landlord never fixes a thing.*

I lathered my skin with soap, breathing in the scent of citrus as I scoured the crevices that had collected sand from playing beach volleyball earlier that evening. The image of Alex entered my mind; his short brown hair, crystal-blue eyes, full ruby lips, and olive skin. I envisioned his tall, lean, and muscular body pressing up against me as we made love. I had only known him for a few months, but we were enamored with one another. We met while I was working as a technical writer at a software company. We became friends, sharing our adoration for animals, love for exercise, thirst for intellectual conversation, and desire to spend quiet time in nature. My thirty-third birthday was in a few weeks and I wondered what we would do to celebrate.

I turned to rinse the soap from my back and felt a sharp biting pain in my neck. I dropped to the hard tile floor. Water pounded over my head. I tried to stand, to move my neck, but the pain intensified like a saw ripping my flesh and muscles apart. I screamed.



I crawled out of the shower and across the floor.

*Focus. Get to the phone. Call for help.*

I inched across the living room floor, one arm limp by my side, the other forcing me along like an oar wading through sand. I reached the phone and dialed.

*Pick up. Please.*

“Hello?”

“Alex?” My voice felt shallow. My wet hand gripped the receiver.

“Cherie. You all right?”

“No.” I strained to speak. “Intense pain. I collapsed.” I forced words into the air between breaths. “My neck feels—broken. I don’t know how, but I can’t feel my left arm. I’m scared, Alex.”

“Hang on, CK, I’ll come right over.”

I dropped the phone. I had suffered chronic throbbing neck pain for years from a car accident when I was twenty-one, but this felt as if a lion had ripped apart my neck with its teeth. I inched from the kitchen back to the bathroom. Heard the water still running from the shower. I pushed along the rough hardwood floor. Long, sopping hair covered my face.

My concentration weakened. Heat radiated from my neck into my limbs. My legs burned.

*Just get to the bathroom.*

My arms and legs quivered. I pushed myself up using both sides of the door jamb. I entered the cramped, steamy shower. Turned the handle enough to halt most of the flowing water. The shower head continued to drip, but I didn’t care.

I groaned, forcing myself down the corridor to my bedroom. Holding my neck with my right hand, I climbed wet and naked onto the mattress. My neck stiffened as if my muscles were filled with cement. From the corner of my eye I saw my digital alarm clock on the nightstand, but the numbers looked hazy: 8, 4, 5. 8:45 p.m. The drive from Alex’s studio apartment would be at least thirty minutes. Would I make it that long?

Goose bumps prickled across my arms and legs. I wrapped myself in a golden throw that hung over the edge of the bed. The dampness

of my skin made me tremble. I swayed back and forth in tiny movements and started to cry.

A tidal wave of tension rushed through me. I grimaced and turned toward the clock. 8:52. *Please hurry, Alex* echoed in my head like a mantra.

I thought back to my visit to the hospital two weeks earlier. The ER smelled like bleach and fear. Fluorescent lights shone brightly overhead. I sat on a gurney in a busy hallway and watched the flurry of activity. My knee ached and my heart pounded like an elephant stampeding after too much Red Bull and cocaine. Something was wrong with me and I trusted that the medical system would agree and offer me an efficient way to heal.

A red-haired doctor with bushy eyebrows rushed up to me. "What did you find?" I asked him.

He paused, shaking his head. "Your EKG's a bit, well, unusual," said Dr. Unsure, as I had come to think of him.

*Just say it, I can take it.*

"It's your heart. Your EKG readings are reversed." He fiddled with his stethoscope.

"What's that mean?"

"I'm not sure," said Dr. Unsure. "Very unusual." He scratched his head, thought for a moment. "I've never seen this before, but I don't believe there's anything to worry about right now."

*So, the time to worry would be when?*

"I need you to do a follow-up with your primary doctor, a cardiologist, and a neurologist. You seem stable enough for now."

*Stable enough?*

I drove home with fifty less dollars in my checking account and a thousand more worries.

Sharp stinging sensations crept up my neck to the base of my head, bringing me back to the moment. Still in my cottage. 9:01. My hands shook as I propped myself up. The wet blanket fell to the floor. I



stumbled toward my closet, panting as I shoved clothes aside with my right arm, searching for a loose T-shirt and sweatpants. I situated the shirt around my neck and torso; the cotton fabric stuck to my damp breasts. I struggled, pulling down the shirt, still crying, still shaking.

I bent over to lift my sweatpants, fumbled with my left leg, then dropped my right leg gingerly into the hole, and finally pulled the pants up around my waist.

Shoes. Easy shoes. I slid my feet into my sandy flip flops.

*What else? ID. Insurance card. Purse.*

I turned toward the hallway, and a bolt of pain sledgehammered my neck. I grabbed my head and fell to the floor.

Red numbers glowed out of the corner of my eye. 9:15. The clock mocked me. I dragged myself toward the living room. My purse dangled on the edge of a chair. I stretched out toward the bag, grabbed it, and crumpled onto the carpet. I tried to inhale but could only produce curt, shallow breaths.

*Please, someone help me!*

I heard a car door slam. Harnessing strength, I pushed myself up from the floor and limped to the door.

Alex's voice sounded muffled through the thick wooden door. "Cherie. Open up."

I wanted to scream out to him, but my voice was a breathless rasp. I cried as I unlocked and pulled the door open.

Alex towered over me. His luminous blue eyes sparkled between his thick eyelashes, and a hazy white cloud highlighted his body. He looked like a savior. He stretched out his arms and gently wrapped them around me. I shook and sobbed. "What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"I've got you, CK. Hang on." He lifted me into his arms and carried me to the car.

In the waiting room, Alex held me close and consoled me. The masculine aroma of perspiration and shampoo filled my nostrils as I

nestled in his arms. I could feel the compassion in his touch. A serious man, Alex was a software engineer who had worked his way up to vice-president of a Fortune 500 company. A self-proclaimed “unforgiving bastard,” but I had come to know his softer side. He often spent weekends volunteering at animal shelters, rescuing stray cats and finding them homes.

The emergency room bustled with activity. Nurses scurried from one side of the waiting area to the other. I surveyed the people around me and noticed a faint scent of blood. A disheveled, burly man with a stab wound sat alone staring at the floor, holding a blood-soaked wash cloth on the side of his stomach. Was it a bar fight, gang related, or some form of fatal attraction?

A quiet middle-aged Hispanic couple sat across from me. I couldn’t discern the reason for their visit to the ER, or which one of them was sick. They watched me periodically, perhaps wondering what pathogen I had, and what, if anything, I infected their air with.

Was I contagious?

Alex kept his eyes on me, occasionally running his hand along my back or across my leg. His presence kept me sane.

We sat for hours in our awkward plastic waiting-room chairs. I focused on wanting to live, yet the pangs radiating from my neck and head raged as if a savage battle were being fought over my every muscle, sinew, and bone.

“Why’s it taking so long? I can’t stand this anymore.”

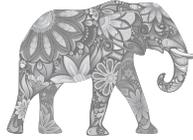
“I know. This is awful. I’ll ask the nurse again. You’ve got to hang on, CK.”

Although Alex sat next to me, I somehow felt alone. He knew about the two other times I’d endured pain so overpowering that, unlike this day when I fought to live, I asked to die.

My heart rate accelerated as I recalled those times of despair and what I had survived. Did those two episodes give me the strength to overcome this new trial, or had they depleted my reservoir of endurance? Had they contributed to my current unknown condition?

I didn’t know.

## chapter two



# PIONEERING FOR PEACE

JANUARY 1994 – ZAMBIA

I was twenty-three years old the first time I wished for death. I was serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia. Twelve of us became the first group of volunteers. We would learn to speak the Bantu language, Bemba. We called ourselves the *Kalapashi*, meaning “the pioneers.”

Before traveling to Africa, I absorbed the Peace Corps medical spokesperson’s lecture on a multitude of precautions, preventive measures, consequences, and statistics. She described several diseases, emergencies, injuries, and accidents we were bound to encounter throughout our two-year service.

Each year millions of people around the world were infected with malaria. Between one and three million people died from this parasitic infection. Ninety percent of these deaths occurred in Africa. Besides the high risk of contracting malaria, HIV was prevalent. Statistics showed that approximately eighty-five percent of Peace Corps volunteers had sexual relations while in their host country. Heterosexual transmission of HIV in the United States represented eight percent. In Africa, it was eighty percent. There were thirteen million cases of HIV in the world. Eight million of those were in Africa. Fifty percent of hospital patients there had HIV. Hospitals and medical clinics commonly reused needles for immunizations



and blood drawing because supplies were low. Instead of sterilizing, they washed the needles in hot water.

Aside from warning us about venomous snakes, crocodiles, and spiders, they warned us about dysentery, giardia, hepatitis, and a wide variety of water-borne diseases like schistosomiasis. Equipped with all of this staggering information, I assured myself that for the duration of my service I would always boil and treat my drinking water (even before brushing my teeth), consistently take my prophylactic medications, sleep in a chemically treated mosquito net, stay current on my immunizations, abstain from sex, keep out of hospitals and medical clinics, and avoid swimming in any body of water.

Being young, unhampered, and idealistic, I decided I would remain healthy by adhering to the rules and guidelines and remain conscious of everything I did. My young mind propelled me forward without fear. I joined the Peace Corps because I aspired to make my life mean something. I needed to believe I was imperishable. I kept thinking of a quote from Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

I wanted to be a part of that change. Never did I imagine that most of the change would be within me.

My first three months, from January to April, were with my eleven fellow volunteers in the south of Zambia, participating in language, technical, and cultural training. Each of us lived with a host family. Since Zambia had been a British colony, many of the locals in the larger cities spoke English. At the end of our three-month training we would be relocated to remote villages where almost only Bemba would be spoken.

During our training, we lived in Kabwe, an old zinc and lead mining town. Home to 200,000 residents, it offered few amenities. The middle of town had a large marketplace where hundreds of local vendors sold their agricultural and homemade goods. It smelled like charcoal and dust, surrounded by a steady stream of flies constantly circling and landing on the makeshift tables, food, and people. The

training site, where we studied and gathered for Peace Corps events, was on the outskirts.

We were trained to orchestrate water and sanitation/health education projects; to build wells and latrines; and to educate the locals about good health practices to prevent disease. When I arrived, people bathed in, drank out of, urinated, and defecated near and in the same slow moving river that ran through the village. The degree of illness and death from contaminated water sources was alarming. Combined with deaths from malaria, HIV, and other causes, the average life expectancy of Zambians was around thirty-two years.

Despite my cautious intentions, illness managed to find me in interesting ways. In addition to changes in diet, such as fried caterpillars that tasted similar to burnt French fries, and newly found bowel functions that all of the volunteers enjoyed, I noticed three red sores, one on the inside of my right arm and two on my behind. At first they looked like pimples, so I ignored them, but after a few weeks, they grew bigger, darker red, and became so piercing it was difficult to sit.

The Peace Corps medical staff, a doctor and nurse who were both in Zambia for the first time, brought me into a small unused dorm room on the Peace Corps training campus to investigate the sores. The room smelled musty, had cold concrete floors and one window that was painted shut.

“Cherie, lie down on that cot and we’ll take a look at you,” Dr. Enthusiasm said, pointing to a child-sized mattress in the corner. He was a brown-haired Jerry Garcia look-a-like from Alabama. I wondered if he had ever been to a Grateful Dead concert. The nurse, a petite and naturally beautiful dark-haired woman from Alaska, smiled at me.

I positioned myself on the bed, lying backside up, and lowered my pants and underwear so they could see the two bright red sores on my butt. The two medical professionals rubbed, poked, and picked at the sores, chatting back and forth while I kept from fidgeting.



“We aren’t certain, but we think you’ve contracted a Putzi fly or Tumbu fly infection. This is exciting.” The doctor’s voice cracked. “I’ve never seen it before, but I just read about it. It’s native to Africa. The flies lay eggs in damp clothes hanging outside to dry. Once the clothes come into contact with human skin, the eggs hatch. The larvae burrow into the skin and, if left untreated, morph into adult maggots.”

“Whoa. Did you say maggots?”

“Yes, maggots.”

The muscles in my stomach tightened. “I have maggots in my butt?”

“It’s been a few weeks since you first noticed them, correct?”

“Yes. But, oh gosh, how do we get them out?”

“We’ll have to cut them out. It may be a little painful. You’ll have to remain quite still, all right?”

I reached my arms up to grasp the thin metal frame of the bed. I shut my eyes. “Okay.”

While the doctor rubbed the areas with a cold, wet antiseptic wipe, I braced myself. They used an X-Acto blade and a pair of tweezers, medical instruments resembling those included with the board game Operation.

The sharp blade cut into my flesh. Lying face down, I couldn’t see what they were doing with these elementary tools, but it sounded like an archaeological investigation being conducted on my butt cheeks.

“That’s interesting. Wait, I have it. Nope, I lost it. Wait, I have it. No, it burrowed back in again. We’ve got to cut a little more. Okay, now dig.” Their less than comforting dialogue, coupled with their probing and cutting, continued for almost forty-five minutes, during which I thought so many things. What was I doing here? Maybe I made a mistake? Who was I kidding? Get these things out of me! Was I strong enough for this? Was I prepared? How does one prepare for getting maggots in her butt? I knew that the Peace Corps experience was not for the weak hearted, but I didn’t know

it was going to be this tough. I was not in a hospital or a medical clinic (which I wanted to avoid, so how could I complain?), but in a random, non-sterile room with no pain medication in sight. Just me, two perplexed medical staff with tools from their portable first-aid kit, and three determined worms.

“We’ve got it!” they exclaimed when they finally extracted the first maggot from my aching ass. “Do you want to see it?”

I was not in the mood for show and tell. But they showed me a cream-colored worm about a half an inch long wriggling on the end of the tweezers before I had a chance to respond. It looked about as happy as I did.

“Do you need to take a break or should we continue?”

My glute muscles ached as if they had been stung by a swarm of wasps. “No break, let’s get the other two out of me.” I closed my eyes and waited for the cold, sharp blade to once again cut into the fatty flesh on my behind.

The second one didn’t take as long, perhaps ten minutes total.

“Not too much blood. That wasn’t bad,” they said to me with mild excitement.

My butt cheeks didn’t agree, but with only one worm left in my body, I felt relieved. After they cleaned the areas and placed bandages on the two holes, I pulled up my underwear and pants and turned onto my side so they could address the last worm in my arm. I felt nauseated and fidgeted.

The nurse held my arm as the doctor picked at my flesh with the small, shiny blade. “Okay, hold still.”

“I’m trying.”

“Sorry, Cherie, not you, the worm.”

“Oh.”

“I have it,” Dr. Enthusiasm said. “Oh no. That’s not good.”

I looked at my bicep where the freeloading worm vacationed, but the nurse and doctor hovered over me, and I couldn’t see what they were doing. “What happened?”



“Ah. I grabbed a hold of it, but I think it broke in half. See?” The lifeless half worm sprinkled in blood drooped on the tweezers.

“Where’s the other half?”

The nurse swallowed and with a sheepish expression said, “I think it went back in your arm.”

Having half of a worm inside me felt worse than having the whole thing. What if it couldn’t be retrieved? What would happen then?

I felt beads of sweat form on my back. I wanted Dorothy’s ruby slippers to click me back to the time before maggots invaded my flesh. After more excavating and tweezing, the other half of the worm eventually came out of my arm.

The next day, the nurse explained that she had researched further into Putzi fly infections.

“It turns out they are easily prevented and treated,” the nurse said with a proud voice. “To prevent them, you must iron all of your clothes. The heat kills the eggs and stops them from making their way into your skin. To remove a worm, spread Vaseline on the infected area. It cuts off the air supply to the maggot. In order not to suffocate, it comes out on its own.”

“Wait. If we had simply spread a dollop of Vaseline on my skin, the maggots would have come out on their own?”

“It seems so. Well, at least now we know.” The nurse sported a half grin.

Just call me Guinea, last name Pig.

My encounter with these little scrounging creatures prevented others from suffering the same fate. John, one of my fellow volunteers, was a twenty-three-year-old New Yorker who was deaf since a young age, had wavy brown hair, clear-rimmed glasses and hearing aids, and always wore long pants, long-sleeved shirts, and sweat-shirts with hoods. He often removed his hearing aids, covered his head with his hood, and tuned out the world.

John’s words came soft, lower than a whisper. “Cherie, what did the nurse say?”

I mouthed, “Iron all clothes.”

He looked confused. “Really?”

“Yup. Another item to add to the must-do list.” I giggled.

He smiled and gave me a warm, comforting hug.

It was a lesson I only needed to learn once, but without electricity, this was not an easy task. After hand-washing and line-drying my clothes, I used a coal iron over each article, including socks, bras, underwear, and even shoelaces. Laundry day became an all-day event, but it was worth the effort. My clothes looked nicely pressed, and more importantly, I was maggot-free.

By April, I had completed my three-month training and felt ready to apply what I had learned. Eager to help improve the water and waste management of the villagers I had yet to meet, my impassioned enthusiasm clouded the details of what lay ahead. I didn’t envision living in an isolated village, not knowing anyone, digging wells and latrines in the hot African sun surrounded by disease and death. I envisioned hope, friendship, peace, and health.

## chapter three



# LIVING THE DREAM

APRIL 1994 – ZAMBIA

My new place in the world would be a little village in northern Zambia called Mulundu. I pledged to help however I could.

Mulundu, located in an area called Luapula, sat between the main road and the Luapula River, which flowed from north to south. This river, the main water source for the entire province, was warm from the sun, contaminated with disease, and inhabited by crocodiles. Less than twenty miles west of it was politically unstable Zaire. The Peace Corps told me not to go there under any circumstances. Another thing to add to the do-not-do list.

I began wondering what it was I *could* do here.

Numerous mud-brick huts with thatched roofs lined the village and spread out amongst miles of open land. Row after row, anemic brown color and similar shapes blended together with the dry landscape. Tall, barren bushes lined the vicinity of the village. Sparse trees with wide-arching branches grew throughout the area, most prominently by the river.

There were no modern amenities. No paved roads, grocery stores, post offices, telephones, restaurants, hospitals, or shops of any kind. People had barely enough food to feed themselves.

The majority of the villagers had no private transportation. Most of them ventured no farther than they could travel by foot. The only public transportation was an unreliable bus system that ran along the main dirt road and had no schedules. If I wanted to catch one



of the rundown buses, I had to wait, usually for hours. Often night came and I had to try again the next day. Although the Peace Corps discouraged us from doing so, I came to learn that hitchhiking was the easiest way to travel.

I lived in a thatched-roof mud hut with a family of three while a brick house was being built for me. I was told the construction could take at least four to six months depending on supplies and the availability of labor, so I remained living with my host family, the Chipilis.

Agnes, the wife and mother, was in her late twenties. She had toffee-colored skin, a broad nose, a long neck, and short dark hair always hidden beneath an indigo-and-coral scarf wrapped around her head. The husband and father, Fewdays Chipili, had recently turned thirty, yet had the innocent eyes of a child. His skin looked at least five shades darker than Agnes's. His full black beard and mustache contrasted with his bright white teeth. Their son, Cadbury, was only two. He had a smooth complexion, wide, deep brown eyes, and pouty lips. Weeks before he was born, the Chipilis were given a gift from a British missionary passing through the village: a small box of Cadbury chocolates. This was the first time either of them had ever tasted chocolate. They were so impressed by the delicious and unique flavor they named their only child after the gift.

Fewdays was a slender man, five-feet-ten inches tall and only one-hundred-and-twenty pounds. His father, the eldest of the living Chipilis, called Ba Chipili (Ba is a sign of respect), was in his late fifties. One evening over dinner, he told me the story of how he had given his son that name.

"My son was born almost dead," Ba Chipili said in Bemba. "We saw he wouldn't live long. Maybe a few days. So, why not give him that name?" His mouth opened wide into a toothless smile. "But he lived. The name reminds us to give thanks he is still here."

It was not uncommon for several children in a family to die before the age of five from disease or malnourishment. Fewdays was the sixth child in their family, and only the second to survive.

The first time I met the Chipilis, I tumbled out of the Peace Corps Land Cruiser and saw Fewdays grinning, his eyes wide open. He stood tall in front of his modest mud hut with his hands clasped together. Agnes huddled next to him, holding Cadbury in her arms. Agnes smiled only slightly, exhibiting her bashfulness. Cadbury stared straight at me, watching my every move. He never smiled. This was the first time he had ever seen a white person.

Less than ten minutes after my arrival, my two duffel bags of belongings were inside the mud hut, and the Peace Corps vehicle maneuvered down the decrepit road kicking up auburn dust in its tracks.

Upon entering the hut with the Chipilis for the first time, I panicked.

A little voice inside my head said: *Crap. This is real. This is the next two years of my life.* I swallowed hard and ignored the uneasiness building in my chest. *You wanted adventure. Well, you've got it.*

I didn't yet know just how right that little voice would be.

Fewdays, Agnes, and Cadbury all slept in one room on an old mattress covered with a cotton sheet and frayed, thick gray blanket, all of which rested on a dirt floor. I slept in the other room on a similar mattress on the same dirt floor, with similar bedding covered by a large white mosquito net I had bought in Kabwe. The doors to the two bedrooms were made of splintered wood that did not reach the ceiling or floor. The third room in the house served as an entryway. It had three rickety wooden chairs and a square table. There was no kitchen, bathroom, or any other rooms. The toilet was something for me to build, outside, and the kitchen was a cleared dirt area with coals in the ground behind the hut.

With no electricity, or running water, I ate what they ate, and slept when and how they slept—except for my mosquito repellent and netting. Mr. Chipili, as I called him at first, was the only one who could speak English and cheerfully helped me practice speaking Bemba.



On my first solo trek around the village, I waved at women working with crops and caring for their children as they cooked and swept around their huts. Some children played in the dirt, ran, laughed, and smiled. They had no toys, only sticks and rocks, but their imaginations were intact. One group of kids used a stick as a cricket bat and a rock as the ball. A few kids even built small structures as if they were using Legos. I noticed other children sitting on rocks, near the edge of the river, their emaciated bodies circled by flies, their eyes sunken, some even missing limbs. A few men gathered in an open area and drank the locally brewed beer.

As I searched for possible sites to build a communal latrine, I noticed much more than I ever thought I would see. The people of Mulundu had deep, dark skin that glistened in the sunlight. They were slender yet muscular from hauling water from the river, and growing crops such as millet. Most walked barefoot, adorned by tattered and worn clothes, but some wore old suits, sports T-shirts, or old 1970s style floral blouses donated from overseas charities. One man wore a complete 1980s navy-blue McDonald's uniform, equipped with matching hat and belt. He walked proud in his polyester garb, strutting through the center of the village, even in 110 degree heat. I doubted he was lost for work. The nearest McDonald's restaurant was at least a full-day drive and an airplane ride away.

When I walked closer to the outskirts of the village, I noticed illness more. Several children had malnourished bodies, untreated lesions, and protruding stomachs swollen from disease. Their eyes appeared weary, their bodies folded over in limp, almost lifeless positions. When they saw me, they stared and smiled, and for a moment I could see resilience in their eyes.

A cascade of new sights, sounds, and scents flooded me. Varied voices speaking Bemba, long stretches of inhospitable landscape, and the bitter aroma of the locally fermented alcohol mixed with the smell of burning charcoal. Taken aback by the people and the magnitude of suffering, I soon became absorbed in self-doubt. Could I possibly make any difference?

I thought I was prepared to live alone in this unfamiliar and secluded place, but the isolation and distant way of life felt overwhelming. A few thousand people lived in the village of Mulundu, yet the remoteness of this strange place induced loneliness. My upbringing near the beach in Southern California felt like a dream. I believed living in the United States was a privilege. But experiencing this contrast felt heavy.

As I made my way back to the other side of the village toward my hut, a bell clanged. I tracked the sound and stumbled upon a church, located in the south end of the village. The beauty of the bell gave me hope that indeed serenity existed somewhere in Mulundu.

At dinner that evening, I told Fewdays about my first trek around the village.

“I am so glad you are finding your way around. Now, please eat, Miss Cherie.” Fewdays motioned to the food in the center of the table.

“Thank you.” I reached for a handful of *ubwali*, the local staple of boiled millet. I rolled it backward and forward in my palm, shaping the warm blob into a ball, a motion I copied from the locals back in Kabwe. They used it as a utensil to scoop up the rest of the food. I didn’t know it then, but we would eat *ubwali* at every meal for the remainder of my stay. It tasted bland, and felt soft and comforting in a funny sort of way.

“Fewdays, I want to ask you, earlier today I saw a church....”

“Oh yes. We go. Maybe sometime you will join us?”

“That would be nice. So, I heard the bell ring. Was there church service today?”

“No, Miss Cherie, not today. Only on Sundays.”

“Then why was it ringing?”

“We use the bell to alert the villagers when someone has died. It is our way of communicating, but also, respecting the dead.”

My heart skipped. “Who died?”

“A man from the east part of the village was attacked by a crocodile down by the river. May he rest in peace.”



"I'm so sorry, Fewdays. Did you know him?"

"Yes." Fewdays bowed his head. "A good man."

After that night, the bell no longer sounded beautiful and inviting; its noise felt haunting.

It rang almost every day.

I was not innocent enough to believe that death was not a part of life, but in my new African home, the ending of life was much more prevalent, much more inevitable. Death still evoked sadness and bereavement, but it was not unusual.

Even though I had only met a handful of people besides the Chipilis, many recognized me. Since there were no other non-Africans in the area, news journeyed fast about the blue-eyed blonde, young Caucasian woman from the United States living in Mulundu. A phenomenon the Peace Corps calls "the fishbowl effect." Many Zambians, especially children, stared, snickered, and followed me for long periods of time without uttering a word.

One day, a group of four children followed me on my early morning walk. They never spoke to me, they only giggled and pointed.

"Hello and good morning," I said, as we walked through the village. They stayed silent, surprised that I spoke Bemba.

With a smile I said, "How are you today?"

When I turned around and stepped forward, they whispered among themselves, covering their mouths with their hands.

They followed me through the narrow pathways around the village and back to my hut, waiting outside as I changed and prepared to bathe using a plastic bucket, a rag, and a bar of soap. I expected them to be gone when I came back out, but they were patient.

I prepared my sponge bath, which I took only two to three times a week because of the difficulty hauling water from the river. The children watched as I lifted a large plastic bucket filled with water over to a four-foot area surrounded by a flimsy wall of thatch that Fewdays and I had assembled to protect my privacy. Inside my open-air bath, I set down my soap, sponge, and towel. I needed to pee before bathing.

I walked out into the bush, hoping the children would realize I was going to relieve myself, but these children were curious and never strayed more than ten feet away from me. I had no choice, so I squatted behind an area of tall brush. The kids placed their hands on their faces only half covering their eyes and laughed.

All four children ambled behind me back to the bath area and loitered outside while I bathed. Once clean and dressed, I emptied the water and cleaned the area. I smiled at the children, but they only ogled me as if I was some type of white-skinned alien.

Day turned into night, and the children returned to their homes. They had spent the entire day watching me plod through my mundane daily tasks, such as ironing clothes and writing in my journal. As I helped Agnes prepare dinner that night, I asked her about the children in my limited Bemba.

“Did you see those children following me today?”

“Yes, Miss Cherie.” Agnes continued to stir the millet with her brawny yet graceful arms.

“Why did they do that?”

Her voice came soft. Her bright smile and kind disposition matched her husband’s. “They like you.”

“They do? They didn’t talk to me.”

She glanced down at Cadbury, playing in the dirt next to us. “They like you, but are scared of you too.”

I remembered the first time I met Cadbury. He stared at me from in between his mother’s arms. I thought he was a bashful boy, but perhaps he was just shy around me.

“Why?”

“You are different.”

“How can I get them to talk with me?”

Agnes paused, unsure of what I meant. Fewdays walked up behind me, hearing my question, “Patience is a virtue. They will get to know you, as we are. They need time.”

I learned to expect these activities, to smile, and continue doing what I needed, but I stood out in a crowd. Once while traveling



through a neighboring village, I met a man who knew of me, yet I did not know him.

“Miss, will you be so kind to deliver a message to my friend in Mulundu?” He nodded his head as if to answer for me.

“Okay, but my Bemba is very, ah, small.” I didn’t know the word for limited.

“Tell her that her brother told me the child to Cynthia is dead,” he said without much expression.

Whoa. “Did you say Cynthia’s child is dead?”

“Yes. Please tell her.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Yes. So you deliver the message?”

“Maybe it would be better if you wrote it down.” I pretended to scribble something.

“Please, deliver the message, yes?”

“I will.”

After the man departed, I realized I did not even know the child’s name. It took me hours of deliberation to decide how I would convey this grim news, and what of my limited Bemba vocabulary would soften what I needed to say. The woman I gave the message to was bereaved, but not surprised. She asked no questions of me, she just cried.

No matter how much illness and death surrounded me in Zambia, I viewed the passing of a human being as neither prosaic nor expected. Each time I attended a funeral, witnessed a loved one mourn, heard the bell in my village echo, or looked upon the eyes of a mother caring for her fragile and ailing child, I felt overwhelmed with a trembling fury of emotions, from anger, depression, shock, and denial, to a towering sense of compassion and duty. Unwilling to look away, I longed to live up to my ideals: to help those in need.

Even though I was young, resilient, and healthy, I was not naive enough to believe I could cure diseases and stop the multitude of deaths from bombarding these people, but I did believe I could stay healthy and make a small difference, if not in my entire village, at

least in a few individuals' lives. I trusted that would be enough to keep me motivated for the next two years.

I was wrong.

It was a typical night in my village, "typical" meaning nothing much happened in Mulundu at night. Most activities occurred during the daytime, and I never strayed far away from my mud hut after dark since only the stars and the moon illuminated this secluded area.

The Chipilis and I ate pumpkin leaf, okra, and millet for dinner, the same food I had almost every day. Once we finished our food and our conversations ceased, the Chipilis headed off to their room, and I sought refuge underneath my mosquito netting with my journal, a tattered copy of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, a red flashlight, and a half bottle of warm, boiled, iodine-treated water.

As I switched between reading and writing in my journal, I scratched at my arms, neck, and legs. My skin looked like inflamed Swiss cheese from the hundreds of mosquitoes which had been feasting on me. To no avail, I used special mosquito repellents, coils, candles, and netting. I wore long-sleeved shirts, pants, and thick socks, even when it was 110 degrees in a place without fans, much less air conditioning. The persistent flies were also annoying. They circled until I tired of waving my hands, and then landed once again to do whatever they do besides transport disease.

Thumbing through the pages of my book, I heard something in the thatch roof above me move. I shined my flashlight up and saw nothing, so I tricked myself into believing it was my old friends, whom I called Fred and Ethel.

During my time in Kabwe, my host family had provided me with a cozy room in their house, much bigger than my room in Mulundu. This room came equipped with one cot, one sheet, one blanket, one pillow, one cupboard to place my belongings in, and two sizable spiders, seemingly mounted on the ceiling. They were brown, with



eight long, skeletal legs, and bulbous abdomens the size and shape of an apricot pit.

I never saw them move. Each night before I went to sleep, I checked that they were in their normal location. In the morning, I looked again to make certain they had stayed where I determined they should, in the farthest corner away from my bed. The family told me they were good to have in my room as they killed most other insects. I was instructed not to bother them. Disturbing them was the last thing I intended.

Although I am not arachnophobic, I did not want spiders as roommates, particularly ones that dwarfed baby rodents, but I decided if I had to live with them, I would give them names, so I called one Fred and the other Ethel.

I chose to believe that Fred and Ethel had somehow made the long trip north from Kabwe to join me in my village and had taken up residence in my new roof, watching over me while awaiting their next prey. That was the only way I would ever get any sleep.

Because I was focused on the clattery thatch above me, it took a while to notice the subtle sounds my stomach made. Soon, I could concentrate on nothing except my body, as I became lightheaded, nauseated, and dizzy. Without warning, I had what many of the volunteers called “The Big D.” Having diarrhea is uncomfortable enough with a clean, private toilet, an abundance of double-ply toilet paper, an exhaust fan, a potent air freshener, soap, a large hand towel, and a sink with ample running water. All I had was a smelly hole in the ground located between a large rock and a scrawny shrub.

The Peace Corps did provide us with toilet paper, one rudimentary difference in the way I lived and the locals’ lifestyle, which included neither toilet paper nor eating utensils. They used their left hands to wipe themselves and their right hands to eat. As one would expect, it was insulting to eat with or shake hands with the left hand. Being left-handed and not knowing this piece of useful information, I had obtained one of my first cultural lessons by reaching into the common serving dish with my left hand for

some millet. Everyone stopped eating and gave me disapproving stares. Someone finally communicated that I had ruined dinner and offended the entire gathering. Following that incident, I sat on my left hand during mealtimes so I would not make that mistake twice.

Toilet paper could only be purchased in a few of the larger towns a couple of hours away, so I learned to ration it. With the forceful diarrhea I had that night, rationing it became impossible. Making it to my funky-smelling, fly-infested hole in the ground was my only priority.

Clutching my stomach, I climbed out from under my mosquito net, remembering to bring my flashlight and my trusty roll of rough toilet paper. I shook my hiking boots upside down to ensure no insects had crawled into them, slipped them on, and walked into the darkness and to the hole. The silence in that area impressed me. The Chipilis and all of the neighbors could hear every sound I made. I grunted and groaned only in my head as I made my way out into the bush, hoping to avoid any black mambas—one of Africa's most dangerous and feared snakes.

Months prior, back in Kabwe, I had almost run into a mamba—literally. While jogging early one morning, a long, fierce-looking snake slithered a few paces in front of me on the narrow dirt road. A nearby watchman for the local training facility leaped forward and cut it in half with his machete. He told me I should not be running in the morning, since it is the time when the snakes come out. Enough said. I never ran in the morning on that road again.

Thankfully, I found my way safely to the squalid hole. Once I finished, I staggered back to my hut, removed my boots, crawled back into my netting and collapsed on my mattress. Not more than three minutes passed before nature ordered me back out to the bush once again.

I repeated this routine for at least four hours. Sometimes I lasted thirty minutes between trips, and other times only five. I was running out of toilet paper, and my quadriceps ached. I became dehydrated. I had to keep my fluid intake up but I only had eight ounces of water to last me through the night. I planned to fetch



some the following day and boil and treat it since my supply was low, but clean drinking water, or any water for that matter, was not easy to come by.

The main water source was the filthy river inhabited by crocodiles that can grow up to sixteen feet in length and weigh up to twenty-five hundred pounds. They sunbathe to aid their digestion and have at least two sets of teeth. Within the first month in my village, two locals were killed by them. I had every intention of limiting my time near the river to avoid disease as well as these human-eating animals. Unfortunately, I learned that crocodiles also travel up to a few miles on land, primarily at night. I hoped they weren't traveling near my hole. Most nights I tried to hold my bodily functions until daybreak, but on this night, there was no holding of anything.

On each of my treks out into the bush, I gripped the toilet paper, protecting it like gold. Although coarse, it was better than nothing at all and reminded me of something one of the other volunteers used to say, "Give me toilet paper or die!" I came to believe this as a valid threat, something I could see myself saying one day, if needed.

As the night progressed, I was faced with the likelihood that what remained of the puny roll would not be enough to sustain me through the rest of the night.

Back in my hut, underneath my mosquito net, I whispered into the night, "Please, make this stop."

I began to hallucinate, seeing black spiders the size of gorillas wearing bibs and drooling blood as they lunged at my neck. I squirmed and cowered underneath my blanket. I could no longer muster the energy to get outside, or even out of my room. I swallowed a packet of orange Gatorade powder, thirsted for a glass of ice-cold water, then blacked out.

The next morning, after repeated knocks on my door, Fewdays peered inside and found me half dressed, passed out on my mattress. A pile of clothes covered with spots of dried blood and a puddle of diarrhea sat next to me.

By coincidence or serendipity, another Peace Corps volunteer visited me that same day. When he found out what had happened, he hitched a ride to the nearest town and contacted the Peace Corps office. The next morning, I was medevacked to Lusaka, the capital of Zambia. The Peace Corps version of a medical evacuation included a three-hour ride in a dilapidated pickup truck filled with chickens, dodging herds of goats, a five-hour wait at the local air strip, and a turbulent ride in a rickety plane.

I recalled mumbling to Fewdays about the moving thatch ceiling in my room. He told me not to worry, and reassured me it was just some bats. He mentioned he had seen them before and would get rid of them before I returned.

Instead of spiders, I had bats. But if Fewdays said he was going to take care of something, he would, so I didn't worry about the bats. I was worried about what would happen to me. Dysentery could be fatal if not treated. I did not want to die—at least not yet, but that day was getting closer.

I arrived in southern Zambia, at the Lusaka airport. I was greeted by a driver named Boniface who wore a dirt-colored outfit and by a nurse named Delia sporting short, mousy brown hair and a pale complexion that mirrored her white shorts. She pushed a haggard assembly of rusted metal and torn cloth named Mr. Wheelchair. I was delighted to see them all.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raised in Venice, California, Cherie longed to travel and experience the way other people lived. After serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Zambia on a water sanitation and health education project, Cherie returned to the United States with an African souvenir she didn't expect: a mysterious illness. She fell severely ill and almost died, leaving her with several symptoms that went undiagnosed for many years. This inspired Cherie to write her memoir, *A Few Minor Adjustments: A Memoir of Healing*, taking the reader on a powerful but entertaining journey through her adventures and search for life-saving answers.

Her memoir has won several awards and received an outpouring of heartfelt responses, motivating Cherie to write a companion book, *The Healing 100: A Practical Guide to Transforming Your Body, Mind, and Spirit*.

Cherie has earned a Masters in Medical and Cultural Anthropology and has been celebrated for her holistic approach to healing and her willingness to examine her life lessons in her writing.

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