

Simple Gifts from Guyana

Certain lessons of a non-throwaway society have never left me.

By KATHERINE JAMIESON

Traveling in the back of a pickup truck in the remote interior of Guyana, South America, I stopped in a small Amerindian town near the border of Brazil. The savannah stretched before me, dotted with straw huts and bony cows, the Kanuku Mountains rising up in massive peaks at the edge of the horizon. Villagers offered cups of piwari, an alcoholic drink made from fermented cassava, but I drank little, mindful of the sun beating down and the half-empty canteen swinging from my backpack.

As we were pulling away, I saw a young girl running toward the truck. Her thin, tan legs kicked up a cloud of red dust as she flew by the town's one church, its whitewashed cross glowing against the clear blue sky. Breathless, she reached the cab of the truck, and the driver slowed, rolled down his window. "Sir, you could take this to Aloma?" she asked between gasps, "in Lethem?" Her outstretched palm held a folded piece of

phone while elbowing my way through crowded streets, I feel lonely. I want the well-chosen words of a friend written on paper instead. I want the delight of a letter delivered without postman or stamp or electronic chime. I want the intimacy, the simplicity of those days; the time in my life that did not seem bracketed by demands, ruled by an unforgiving clock, cluttered with meaningless messages.

For two years, I had this simplicity.

I had been warned of the poverty in Guyana, and I braced myself to live without air-conditioning and hot water, with uncertain electricity and swarming mosquitoes. It was amplified when many of my possessions—flashlights, water purifiers, shoes—succumbed to the tropical rust and mold. I had no car or bicycle, and depended on the speeding minibuses for transportation. A pipe jutting from a cement cell was my shower.

But these privations were minor compared to those of the families living in makeshift shacks in the squatter areas, crowding two or three in a bed. Their real destitution shamed me. The teenage girls at the vocational school where I taught barely had money for uniforms, yet they managed to keep them bleached and ironed every day. Often one of them would come running after me, yelling,

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white paper, already tinged pink from the sweat of her hand. "Yes, girl," he said, smiling, "she'll have it by nighttime." The child stood back as we pulled off, jouncing down the one-lane, unpaved highway for the next five-hour stretch of our journey.

The image of this girl returns to me now, ten years later, and I see her squinting against the harsh light, waving and waving. In the driver's hand, the faint outline of her childish handwriting is visible through the thin paper. I marvel at her faith in a stranger to deliver her message; then Aloma, I must imagine, pressing another precious note into another driver's palm—carefully inscribed words journeying hand to hand across the miles.

Today, as I scroll through hundreds of e-mails or switch to call-waiting on my cell



HAUNTING MEMORIES *Amid natural beauty I had been blessed by few possessions, few distractions.*

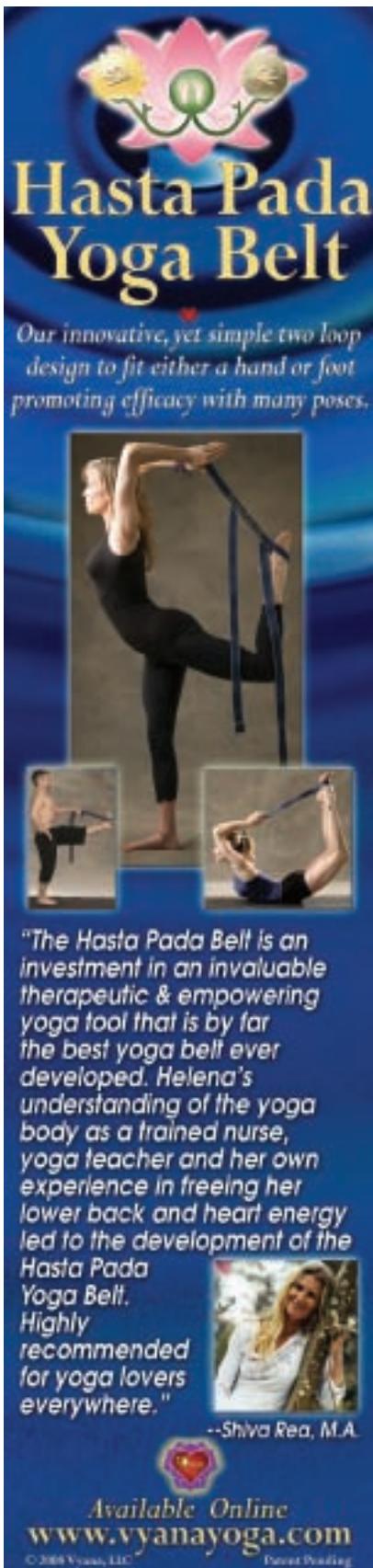
Miss! Miss! You forgot, Miss! waving my ballpoint pen in the air. For two years I studied under the tutelage of a non-throw-away economy. A place where my host mother dug my empty toothpaste tube out of the trash, cleaned and transformed it into a kitchen appliance. A place where people did wash by hand, tubs and tubs of sheets and towels, shirts and pants, all soaked, scrubbed, and hung to dry on a line under the sun. A country where everyone knows how to clear a drain with a straightened wire hanger, and any trash is picked through over and again for scrap metal, roofing, the missing piece needed to resurrect a radio, a car.

What I had not realized is what a relief simplicity can be. Yes, life in Guyana was harder sometimes, less convenient, and much slower. I was forced to be patient. The birthday checks my mother sent took three months to clear in the bank, which at the time seemed completely reasonable. I began to enjoy the freedom of my limited and unchanging wardrobe (style was not an issue where people washed so carefully they were able to wear clothes from the '70s). I had no computer, no newspaper subscription, only the books I had lugged with me. And my salary, though well below the U.S. poverty line, was more than enough for food and housing and entertainment.

The gift of Guyana was the gift of limited options. One movie playing in town, well that was the one that you saw. One dinner plate at the rum shop on the corner, well that was what you had to eat that night. One beer, one kind of cheese, no apples, two radio stations. Before Guyana I had always imagined that more choices were better. I had never expected to find relief in what I couldn't have.

AMID EXCESS, A DESIRE FOR LESS

My return to the States was rocky. Plastic metro cards strewn about the New York City subway platform seemed a wild extravagance. Why couldn't they be re-used; where would all this excess go? I remembered the story of a Guyanese friend's uncle who, when he first moved to the U.S., had supported himself by pulling electrical equipment off the curbside, refurb-



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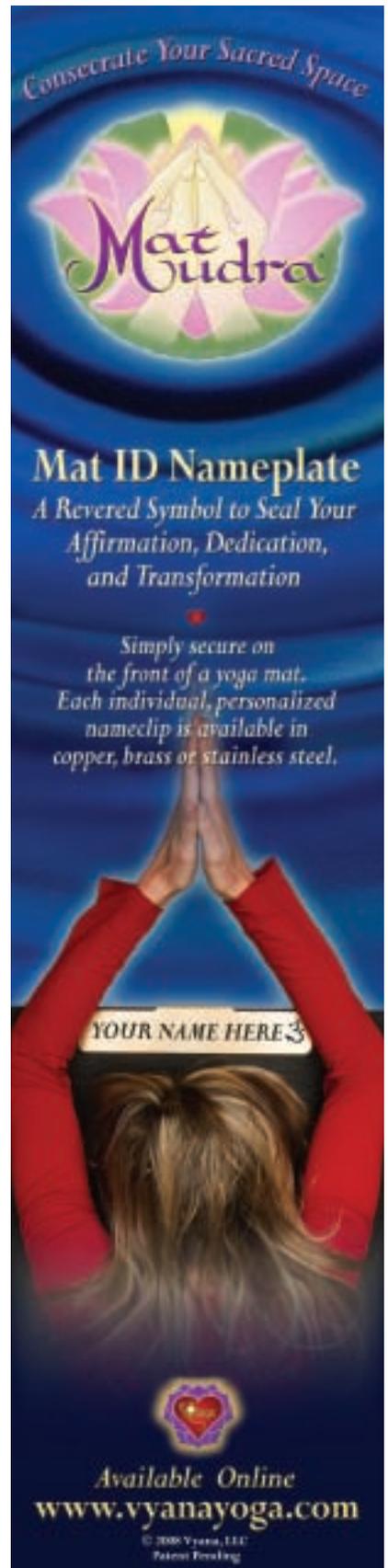
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bishing and reselling it. For years I could not stop myself from picking through similar piles for perfectly good books and discarded clothes that would have been preserved for decades in Guyana.

I tolerated the windowless office cubicles and the high cost of living and the people who sold me groceries without looking at my face because this was the cost of life in the States. Though I had access to everything I had been “missing” for two years, I found that I did not need or even enjoy much of it. Instead I felt a yearning for the quiet years I had spent in the developing world. It was impossible to explain this longing to anyone here, in a country where less is rarely good, never better.

SEARCHING FOR SIMPLICITY

I began to search harder and harder for that elusive “simple.” It was no longer just a matter of walking down the dirt road to the open-air market, answering the cries of the countrywomen, *What ya shopping, sis-tah?* and accepting a ripe mango from the

same sinewy hand that had picked it that very morning. I became a follower of Voluntary Simplicity, the lifestyle component of the environmental movement. But I soon realized that the philosophy was missing the point of the real simplicity I had seen in Guyana. I was paring down material things to feel better about myself, to reject the consumerist society, but what I craved so deeply was simplicity of mind: I wanted to regain the stillness and silence of those long, hot Guyana days, days where nothing was needed and nothing was extra.

Ultimately, the search for simplicity led me back to myself: I went to a meditation center thinking I might find an escape there. In the hours of silence I tried to quiet my thoughts, and Guyana returned to me. But what I realized was that it was not so much the country itself I missed, but the kind of mind this landscape had allowed me to develop. For the two years I lived in Guyana, I had had the blessing of few possessions and dis-

tractions, and so I dwelled in the natural beauty, dwelled in my friendships, dwelled in my life. It was this dwelling that I was so painfully missing when I came home. Meditation allowed me a return to the mind of those days, showed me how to recreate some of that simplicity in the midst of my now busy life.

Guyana haunts me still. The girl on the road, her little note in the driver’s hand, haunts me. But my meditation practice has shown me that simplicity is always available, though now I must consciously choose it where once it was granted to me by circumstance. Each morning I light a candle, I burn incense, I lower my eyes. In my mind, I wait for the girl’s note to be delivered, I wait to be able to grasp its meaning. *Stop waiting, her words whisper from the page, you choose your life.* +

Katherine Jamieson is a fellow in the University of Iowa Nonfiction Writing Program and has been a certified yoga teacher since 2001. A longer version of this essay won the Lantern Books Essay Contest.

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