

## THE END AT THE BEGINNING

22 SEPTEMBER 2003. WHEN I GOT THE CALL ON MY ANSWERING machine, I was in shock. It was in three languages: English, Guarani, and Spanish. How do you understand a message like this even in one language? Toren greeted us in Guarani, an Indian dialect of South America where he had been working for the past six months in a tiny village. “*Mba’eichepa*,” he said. The greeting means, “How are you?” But I couldn’t reply to a recorded message. So I stood there and replayed it, just to make sure.

“Don’t worry,” he went on in Spanish. And that began a month of worrying like hell, like I had never worried before. I worried about him immediately. I worried about him in the future. I worried about him in the past, about all the mistakes we’d made in our Perfect Family.

“Mom and Dad, it’s Toren. *Estoy en Washington, D.C., No se preocupe*. I’ll call you later. *Todo esta bien. Bueno. Chao*.” All is well. Don’t worry.

Right. I’m not worrying. I don’t know what’s wrong, why he called. He’s supposed to be in South America. Now he’s suddenly in the United States, calling me in the middle of hauling groceries in from the garage. I just got home to this, the mystery message. I don’t even know what I shouldn’t be worrying about, *in any language*.

I imagine all the things possible: he’s very ill, he got into legal trouble trying to get across a border, he contracted malaria. Do they have malaria in the Chaco of South America? I run for a map.

I look up the emergency number in the parents' Peace Corps Manual called *On the Home Front: A Handbook for the Families of Volunteers*. Its offices are in Washington, D.C., and I'm in Washington State on the other side of the country, in a time zone three hours away. It tells me not to bother them unless it's very important. This must be important, but Toren said he would call back. I shouldn't overreact. He's twenty-four. He'll call. I put the rest of the groceries away. I weed our autumn garden, ripping out tired alyssum. I want to phone someone, but whom? And the next three hours stumble by.

When he finally calls again early that evening, the first thing he tells me is that his phone card might run out any second.

"Talk," I command him.

So he does. He asks what version I want. "You see, I've been real honest here and there's stuff coming down. Or should I not tell you?"

"Tell me."

And he does. "It's alcohol."

Alcoholism. It's only alcohol, I reassure myself. Not a really serious drug like crack or heroin or cocaine. I know lots of people who don't drink. They do perfectly fine.

But then I realize all his dreams are shattered—all that effort to apply to the Peace Corps, interview, train, his preparation for grad school—all down the drain, the hours of instruction in Spanish and Guarani. Shipped home from the Peace Corps in worse shape than a housewife on OxyContin. Dethroned from his roots in the jungle of South America where he was working with people he could help, people who were supposed to be worse off than he.

"Mom," he warns me, "I'm sending you some of my writing. Stuff I wrote down in South America last May, titled, '*My Drink*.' It's pretty blunt. You'll read some things about what I did in college. How I wasted it. I'm sorry. It sounds bad. And I suppose it is. I could've worked a lot harder. But I still appreciate all you did and I know it was at least partially a good experience. I hate to have you read this, but I have to be truthful about myself." He pauses, "It's time."

I'm standing in my kitchen on our state-of-the-art slate floors leaning on honed granite to keep from falling over in shock. Solid rock is the only material capable of holding me up. The phone card could expire any second. "When did this happen?" I blurt out. "It's so sudden!"

"No, it's been happening. You'll see. I wrote about it in my journal last May. And now it's September. But I couldn't take it anymore. I realized something was very wrong. I've been having bad side effects now and recently they're really horrible. I'm afraid."

"What side effects? Tell me." I can hardly breathe. We're suddenly cutting out the garnishes and serving up a plain slab of meat. Unsalted. Bland. Cold. I can't believe I'm listening to my son who I haven't seen since January, talking to me nine months later about detoxing in the boondocks of South America.

"It's been worse and worse every time I drank. I get the shakes, I can't sleep, I'm losing my memory; I have leg cramps," he explains.

"But how did you decide to get help?" I ask. I really wanted to know more, like how often he'd been feeling that way, how much he'd drunk, what he was drinking, why he was drinking, and how this could be happening?

"I went to the capital city for interim training. All the volunteers were there. We'd had a lot of meetings, and I couldn't make it through one without the shakes. So I'd go out and buy some *caña* (local liquor) to calm myself, and I hated the feelings that were coming over me. It was getting bad."

"Oh, Toren."

"And so I went to see the nurse. Remember when you told me once about Dustin?"

I remembered. It had been one of those whispered conversations between two mothers bumping into one another a year or two after their kids had graduated from high school, after huddling along the sidelines of football games, after the worries of athletic steroids, drugs, alcohol, and all the fearsome temptations of adolescence. Dustin's mother confided in me, asking me not to tell *anyone* whatsoever. She said that they'd had to pick up Dustin from college because he was having seizures, alcohol problems. But I hadn't kept

my word because, soon after, I heard my boys talking about Dustin at a party of reunited high school chums over holiday vacation, and how Dustin was out of control. So I told my boys what Dustin's mother had confided. It had scared me. And I knew they saw Dustin occasionally, had played sports with him in the past. I thought it might make an impression on them.

"Well," Toren continues, "I always remembered what you told me about Dustin. How serious it was, and I got to thinking, I'm having some of the same problems. So I confessed to Peace Corps, to get some help."

Toren had been assigned to a small village in southern South America where he lived in a whitewashed hut with a tin and straw roof and an outhouse in back. He'd formed friendships with people in his village, planted a garden, and was preparing to work with them on a mutual project. Toren adored his assignment and the South American villagers. Peace Corps allowed him the opportunity to learn languages, to interact in a new culture and, hopefully, to better others' lives. It was Toren's aspiration after college, and he had planned to use the experience as a springboard for graduate work in psychology. I pictured him in South America picking corn, digging roots for his dinner, plucking chickens.

"And what did the nurse say?" I ask him.

"She had to turn me in and a lot happened that I'll tell you later but they medic'd me outta there. Now I'm here in D.C. getting evaluated," he says thickly.

"Are you okay?"

"Well, I had people with me for three days straight, helping me detox. They gave me Valium. It's my last day of it."

Valium, the drug of the 1960s and '70s, for my son. In some remote South American backdrop. I'm holding my breath now. I don't think I can inhale one more time. *I need a drink myself.*

"Valium?!" I almost yell. "Are you sure?"

"It helps me down. Otherwise it's horrible. They didn't leave me alone. Someone was with me twenty-four hours a day."

Alone. It's my fault. I left him alone in that far-flung tangle, in the sticks. And now he's still alone in D.C., all messed up. But,

stupid me, he's been alone for years. He went off to college by himself; came home in the summers, handled his own life, did his own applications for the Peace Corps. By himself. As it should be. Alone.

"But don't worry, Mom. We're working out a plan. I've got a counselor here and we're figuring it all out. I've gotta get back to my village fast—as soon as we get this thing settled. I don't crave alcohol, really. It's just a problem when I drink; I react badly. There's some sorta abnormality there. I think they overreacted when they flew me out but it's just Peace Corps protocol. The thing they do."

"Yeah," I say as offhandedly as I can. Are there any cheap flights to D.C. from Seattle? After all, I haven't seen him in nine months. Not that I could change a thing. But just to hug him. To say it will be okay. That's what I need. And isn't this about *me*, this call to *my* kitchen?

"I've gotta go, Mom," he slurs. "I have homework. The counselor wants to see my journal writing. I'm typing it out for him. And I'll email you a copy. Right away. I'll call you tomorrow. I love you."

When I left for the market earlier today, my son was living in South America working for the Peace Corps. By the time I returned home to put the groceries away, he'd become an alcoholic headed for rehab. So what happened between the produce aisle and my driveway? Toren's father, Don, is at work. He would want to know about this situation. I could call him at the hospital. I could email him since he picks up messages in the OR between cases. The subject title should be—"Sit Down." There's no granite counter in the operating room.

So, do I start at the end or the beginning when I tell him? It's hard to know just where we are.