

One

In January 2013, my newlywed wife, Melissa, and I visit the Bolivian town of Suraqueta, where we discover a beautiful piece of land that's for sale. Five acres of rolling hillside, a tadpole-filled creek, and a grove of wild *guapurú* fruit trees, whose tangy-sweet purple fruits grow out of their velvety trunks. We spend hours walking the land. "It feels like we're in the country," Melissa says from the property's main hillock. "And yet that's town-center, a stroll away."

I gaze out over Suraqueta's clay roofs and white colonial façades, the green hills cupping it, framing a scene that could be Tuscany if not for the sparks of green-and-red parrots flaring over our heads. Strong notes from mariachi trumpets drift upward from a wedding somewhere below, and I catch the invigorating scent of eucalyptus. Higher mountains loom to the north, and there lie cloud forests of rare giant fern trees in the biodiversity-rich Amboró National Park bordering the town. Over my shoulder is a massive jaguar-shaped Inca ruin. A breeze releases soft static from the yellow-flowering *carnaval* tree overhead as my half-Bolivian daughter, Amaya, swings from its branches, yellow petals snowing down.

Amaya lives with her mom and maternal grandmother in the nearby city of Santa Cruz, two and a half hours away. Melissa and I have come here on vacation from our home in New York City to visit her and to scout out properties. Eight-year-old Amaya, whose name means "beloved first daughter" in Quechua and "spirit" in Aymara, announces where "our house" would be, and I notice the joy she exudes by inserting herself in that *our*.

She climbs down from the *carnaval* and begins plucking purple *guapurú* fruit, popping the grape-size morsels into her mouth.

We follow Amaya's lead. The juice warm on my cheek, I imagine ditching my American life for a simpler one abroad. We could build a custom adobe house on this very hillock and grow much of our own food on these acres — mandarins, pomegranates, bananas, vegetables of all sorts. We'd reforest the agriculturally degraded flatter portions of it to create more habitat for the native guinea pigs and iguanas I hear rustling in the *quiñe* shrubs, and re-channel the creek through the land to create fishponds. I imagine rising with the sun, working part time via laptop and Wi-Fi, opening abundant time to raise my family in community.

Melissa and I try to conceal some of our enthusiasm for the land as we begin negotiations with the property's owner. He inhabits a concept of time different than our own. He's in no rush to sell, and no, he won't divide the acreage. We make an offer. He counters. It's still too high. By US standards, his price for five perfect acres would be reasonable, but for us, it would mean going deep into debt, which we're determined to avoid. We stay up late huddled over the table in our rental cabin, offering the calculator multiple scenarios, trying to figure out how we might afford the property.

One afternoon we visit the Suraqueta (pronounced: Soo-rah-QUE-tah) Refuge, a halfway house for wild animals that started life as pets. Surrendered to the refuge as adults, the creatures wait for release into Amboró National Park. Habituated to humans, several animals roam free. Nuño, a thirty-pound, ginger-haired howler monkey rests on my shoulders, his leathery tail wrapped around my neck. Cheetah, another howler, arranges herself on Melissa's shoulders. Amaya and some of her friends feed papaya to giant tortoises, while Melissa stroke's Cheetah's head.

"It's gorgeous here," my wife says, her hand dropping from Cheetah to her belly's bulge. Melissa is six months pregnant. I feel calm in Suraqueta, and I imagine our baby would, too, but I'm

conflicted. Giant fern trees rise into blue skies, but so do the support struts of the George Washington Bridge in Manhattan. The gleam of the river feeding nearby Cuevas waterfall is the Hudson River's gleam. "Yes, it's gorgeous," I counter, "but so is New York."

"Sandy wasn't so gorgeous," Melissa says.

A few months ago, in October 2012, Hurricane Sandy smashed our Manhattan neighborhood. It left behind boarded-up restaurants and drowned subways and closed offices for weeks. We waited twelve days for electricity. Sandy, dubbed by the media as a "Frankenstorm," caused \$65 billion in damage and left a hundred people dead.

Like many New Yorkers, we roamed the debris-filled sidewalks, none of us very happy. We felt helpless and unproductive without the electricity that supports every aspect of modern life. I hit an emotional low as I envisioned an umbilical cord connecting me to OPEC wells. Petroleum as amniotic fluid. I felt ashamed to be an oil-dependent, overconsuming human and ambivalent about bringing another of my kind into the world.

On a gray afternoon atop Tar Beach, our name for our downtown apartment building's rooftop, I improvised for Melissa a bit of a grim stand-up routine from Doug Stanhope. The comedian cites an Oregon State University study, which found that the greenhouse gas legacy of one child dwarfs — by twenty times — the impact of employing environmentally sensitive practices, like recycling or using energy-efficient appliances for one's entire life. Stanhope then jabs cynically about the decision to have kids. Melissa laughed, a laugh tinted with sadness that unfortunately has become habitual to us. A laugh, at root, of antipathy toward ourselves.

Contemplating a new life in Bolivia, we are well aware of our privilege. Melissa has a permanent post as an expert on women's political participation at the United Nations' headquarters. I teach sustainable development to grad students at New York University, write, and give speeches around the country. So why do

we feel discontent in the global hub where you live when you've made it? We talk about how we're umbilically attached to a kind of Franken*Dream*: Work-and-spend. Drill, baby, drill. Buy, baby, buy. Our attempts to go minimalist and Slow in New York have begun to feel not enough for us, and we know we face a major choice. We can remain in our society's Dream of more-is-better — find a bigger apartment, deploy our social capital toward career advancement, synch our offspring to the addictive viscous fluid of competition. Or we can wager it all for something richer ...and cut the cord.

THE DAY AFTER BONDING with howler monkeys at the Suraqueta Refuge, we meet up with a longtime Bolivian friend, a thirty-three-year-old backcountry scout and wild-horse tamer named Kusi. She's beautiful, with a thin frame and deep large eyes. She likes to “go *macha*” — tough girl, with loose-fitting military khakis and short hair. A decade ago, on a conservation project I managed in Amboró National Park, Kusi worked as an Andean bear and jaguar tracker on a wildlife census. Now, at Posada del Sol — a Suraqueta café owned by Trent, originally from Texas — Melissa, Kusi, and I pass around a wooden cup of yerba maté and discuss our stay-or-go conundrum.

Adjusting her red bandana, Kusi says, “*Aca existe la vida dulce*” — It's the Sweet Life here. She adds that *la vida dulce* is not about hedonism, as the phrase might initially conjure; it doesn't mean pleasure all the time with an aversion to struggle. The Sweet Life is another way of expressing *vivir bien* (living well), an idea with ancient roots that is being freshly reinvented in modern Bolivia. She boasts that the country's new constitution and also its “Law of Mother Earth,” the highest decree of the land, endow Pachamama — Mother Earth, sometimes called Gaia in the West, a feminine omnipresence or the planet as a living body — with “Earth rights” similar to human rights, like the right to not have her vital systems interrupted by big development projects.

Kusi's enthusiastic talk reminds me of Bolivian philosopher Javier Medina's important contrast between the Western "Better Life" — steeped in individualism and progress, what I call the Dream — and the Amerindian "Sweet Life," which emphasizes "the sufficiency of the good" and respect for diversity. Medina writes, "The Western worldview puts natural resources at humanity's disposal, whereas in the Amerindian worldview humankind is understood as '(s)he who helps Mother Earth give birth.'"

Kusi explains, in her lispy colloquial Spanish, that, in keeping with the Sweet Life vision, Suraqueta — her hometown and "the place to which of course you should move" — has been designated as one of Bolivia's twenty-four "eco-municipalities." This designation anchors the lofty concept of Earth rights to specific places through government support of organic agriculture, clean energy, and community-based ecotourism.

This discussion inspires me, relieving the murky mood I experienced in New York. In contrast to America's dark and divided political climate, Kusi describes how Earth-care is now enshrined in Bolivia's constitution, how a broad-based citizens' movement brought the current indigenous-socialist government to power, creating a welcoming context for foreigners like ourselves. Suraqueta, it's dawning on me, is *glocal*, a contraction of "global" and "local." Should we move here, Melissa and I would join a small but vibrant group of expatriates (3 percent of the town's population of five thousand): Dream-skeptical, revillaging foreigners from thirty countries, along with Bolivian urban refugees from less-than-Slow Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, and La Paz. We've already met some of these people. A detethered Parisian runs the French bistro Latina Café with his Suraqueteña wife; erstwhile Istanbulites have just inaugurated the Turkish La Cocina; an Australian couple tends bar at Republika. There's a doctor from Cochabamba and a sculptor from La Paz. In the plaza, we've overheard conversations about fledgling meditation retreats,

Brazilian massage therapy, and at least ten organic farm start-ups. And there's not a chain store within a two-hour drive.

Suraqueta features communal work parties and *pasanaqus* (or community savings mechanisms), and 90 percent of perishable food is locally produced. Many of the expats, predominantly Europeans and other South Americans, blend into the dominant Bolivian milieu by joining these cooperative social structures with an enthusiasm I've not seen in other expat havens — like San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, or Vilcabamba, Ecuador, which tend toward bubble colonies of gated wealth.

Further, Kusi says, people are talking about making Suraqueta Bolivia's first "Transition Town." Worldwide, about sixteen hundred Transition initiatives currently exist, part of a global Transition Network, in which local communities foster "glocal" low-carbon economies through alternative energy, local consumption, organic agriculture, and more. Size doesn't matter; "Transition Streets" encompass a single city block. All Suraqueta needs to do to join the Transition movement is to get a core group of community members to declare their intention to form a local chapter working toward the movement's goals, then take practical steps to achieve them.

Trent swaggers over, sits down, and inserts his perspective into Kusi's sales pitch. An émigré from hospital middle management, Trent is one of only two Americans living here. On Christmas Day, 2004 — fifty-two years old, divorced, and fed up in West Texas — he met a woman from Cochabamba, Bolivia, online, flew to a country he'd never seen, and got hitched. The couple moved to Suraqueta, and with very little initial capital, founded what is now a flourishing backpacker hostel and café. "Bolivia was the best thing that ever happened to me," Trent says, a faint echo of Texas in his drawl. "I haven't been back to the US once in ten years. My advice? Cut the umbilical cord."

AFTER ONE MONTH IN COUNTRY, our real estate negotiations stall. The landowner asserts his *oferta final*. Our vacation ends in a few days. My new semester starts next week. Melissa's boss expects her back at the UN in three days. She's so pregnant that this is the last week she can safely fly. Decision time.

During one of our last Suraqueta nights, Melissa and I swing in hammocks outside our rental cabin, gazing out at the silhouettes of banana trees and vines heavy with passionfruit. Salsa music from a nearby party reverberates softly from hard surfaces; frogs peep from the stream trickling below the nearby bamboo grove. We sway to and fro in our indecision but lean toward taking out a loan.

"Let's gamble the known," Melissa affirms.

I mutter inwardly: Gamble steady jobs? Gamble abandoning our families and friends? Expose our newborn to inferior rural health care in one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere? And Kusi's enthusiasm aside, how welcome will we really be — privileged gringos buying land, driving up prices, and helping to "gentrify" Suraqueta to foreign tastes? Is it really wise to go into debt to buy this land and build a house within a political context that has recently been threatening for foreigners?

Yes, threatening. The country's popular indigenous president, Evo Morales — simply called "Evo" by most Bolivians — used to end his speeches with the crowd-rousing cry, "Death to the Yankees!" The United States has a sketchy sixty-year résumé in Bolivia, with a history of unwelcome intervention that overshadows, in the eyes of many Bolivian citizens, any counterbalancing do-good efforts.

I weigh this history against our personal desires. When Evo came to power as the victorious MAS (Movement Toward Socialism) candidate in 2006, Bolivia made a choice to cut its own umbilical cord to the United States, in the form of dollars, in the

wake of a tumultuous half century. In 1953, Bolivia enacted significant land reform that broke up the enormous haciendas owned by descendants of Europeans in the western part of the country, and the government distributed ample terrain to indigenous farmers. However, this failed to address the deep-seated racism of lighter-skinned, Spanish and other European elites toward the country's indigenous people, who until the 1950s were not even allowed to walk into Plaza Murillo, the main square in La Paz. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, a series of Dream-friendly, neoliberal presidents privatized many of Bolivia's national resources, angering many ordinary Bolivians who wished to keep those resources in local hands.

Evo, the country's first indigenous-descendant president, proceeded to enact strong antidiscrimination laws, and he nationalized the hydrocarbon, telecom, and aviation industries. He also went after the United States. The US Agency for International Development? Morales kicked it out of Bolivia. The US Drug Enforcement Agency? Ditto. Peace Corps? The United States pulled them out after its volunteers were accused of spying. Even the US ambassador was booted. By settling here, Melissa and I would leave behind the known certainties of our relatively privileged status up north for the unknown and, yes, potentially hazardous status of foreigners in Bolivia.

That night, barely able to articulate what this change to our lives might mean, I stuff these uneasy thoughts somewhere deep. I assure myself that Melissa and I are both experienced citizens of the world. We will gamble the known.

In the light of day, buoyed by our love of Amaya, of Suraqueta, and of the exciting post-Dream paradigm emerging in this eco-municipality, we accept the *oferta final*.

Melissa flies back to work, and I stay on to navigate the bureaucracy of Bolivian land tenure, teaching my first classes at NYU remotely via Skype. I consult with a land rights lawyer, track down papers, and queue up with Bolivians in administrative

offices. We take out the loan, do the bank transfer, and finally receive an embossed document: the deed to our five acres in Bolivia.

SEVERAL WEEKS FROM HER DUE DATE, Melissa's pregnant belly seems particularly huge on her thin frame as we shuffle together arm-in-arm down Manhattan's Sixth Avenue. The baby has been pushing up against Melissa's sciatic nerve, so each step causes pain to shoot up her left side and through her lower back. Sweating in my wool coat, I act as a crutch.

We're both nervous about the natural birth we've planned — with midwives, without comforting doctors or equipment — and the flared sciatic makes us more apprehensive about safely bringing our baby into the world.

Now that we're close to leaving New York, I'm nostalgic. All the familiar background scenery is fresh again, like the first kelly-green daffodil shoots pushing up through Washington Square Park's thawing soil. As Melissa leans into me, saying her back feels a lot better, I imagine us as an elderly Greenwich Village couple, shuffling through these same streets. Melissa holds a Slow City calm; she gazes upward, out of the buy-o-sphere and into the biosphere, and points out a third-story gargoyle. I notice the waning moon. An indignant heat rises in me. I do not want to leave New York. Manhattan is our life. Now that an expiration date threatens that life, I cling tight, white-knuckled.

Greenwich Village is our neighborhood; the Hudson is our river. These subways and buses belong to us, and I am not ready to go. I love Small Liberia's palm butter and Murray's bagels; I love the Met's Chinese decorative arts and fire-lit Jones Street jazz. I love teaching at NYU, riding a yellow ten-speed bike along the Hudson. I'm happy on Tar Beach, I've adapted to our tiny flat, and maybe our baby could, too.

Inertia grips me, that blurry psychological state that keeps people doing what they're already doing. Maybe the Sweet Life

will sour. Maybe the socialist government will take our land away. Maybe we'll just shift from being privileged Manhattanites to privileged expatriates. Maybe we'll deprofessionalize. Maybe we'll be lonely.

We can still change our minds and stay in the winner's circle instead of migrating to the tenuous. New York is our habitat. Will we really cut the umbilical cord to *this*?

“PUSH!” I shout.

It's a month later, in the birthing center. And it's time.

Melissa pushes, howling.

To bond with my offspring from the get-go, I, the “natural-birth father,” assist the nurse and midwife at each step. I massage her hands, her lower back. I help move her from the bed into a tub of warm water.

After sunset, the midwife flips off the light and asks me to light candles. The nurse floats a flashlight sealed in a plastic bag on the water. Melissa's beautiful face glows in the flicker of candles and from the bobbing flashlight.

I'm anxious. Melissa pushes. And pushes.

Nothing. It's taking too long.

I get up from where I kneel by the tub to play the mantras. Sat Nam. *My path is truth*. I realize Melissa is mirroring the mantra in slow drawn-out guttural sounds. The primal sounds of a mother on the perilous edge of bringing life. I kneel again beside her. She grips my arm. I notice something wrong in the illuminated water. Our baby's been crowning for a half hour, but now, in the dim light, I'm certain I see a tiny eye. A tiny nose.

She's too small.

My heart ticks faster. I'm imagining a tiny preemie.

But all at once, after a final loud grand push, our baby — Clea Luz — arrives on a wave.

The midwife guides her to Melissa's chest, where she splays in all her purple splendor, not yet oxygenated to pink. Clea is large and healthy. Eight pounds of moist, weeping love on her mom's chest. She's got a hint of my red hair. Melissa's green-blue eyes. My heart pounds joy. And what I'm feeling most acutely, inexorable from the love, is my own heightened *wildness*.

Melissa's happy, primordial tears, the salt of ancient oceans, fall onto our screaming mammal. Life, uncaged, whispers to my heart.

It says *move*.

There must be life beyond the Dream. We can smother inertia. Gamble the known. Venture into the Global South to join a community's resurging Sweet Life, with both Clea *and* Amaya at our side.

My hands shake as I receive the surgical scissors. I know what this father must do. Steadying myself, I cut the umbilical cord.