A DEAD BAT
IN PARAGUAY

a memoir

Roosh Vörek
To my travel buddies
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A DEAD BAT
IN PARAGUAY
My stomach was killing me. If I fed myself a drop of alcohol or grease it would grumble and twist with pain, the result of infections with giardia, salmonella, and whatever I currently had, yet to be officially diagnosed. I was sluggish, beat up, and tired of the foam hostel mattresses, bedbug bites, illnesses, allergic reactions, bad sleep, and hundreds of hours of rough bus rides. I’m convinced the only reason travel is glamorized is because people rarely do it for more than a week or two at a time.

I stared at Delirio Tropical’s café menu. Out of the dozen of salads waiting to be scooped by the young woman in the paper cone hat, I could only pick three. I hemmed and hawed at all the choices and held up the line until I could finally decide on something that I thought my new stomach would agree with. I remembered a conversation I had with a gringo where I declared that choice leads to unhappiness. With too many choices, I argued, you will be less satisfied with the ones you make because you’ll wonder what would have happened if you chose something else. But unfortunately you’ll never know.

I sat down at a counter facing a busy intersection. It would be only two more days until I returned home and this adventure would come to an end. A few hours ago I said my final goodbye to Mariana, but it didn’t feel quite right. It was stiff, done early in the morning after breakfast. I took out my prepaid cell phone from my pocket, wondering what I should do.

I stared out the window and thought of how I was returning home poorer, carless, jobless, and unsure of what to do next. I tried to put together some meaning to the past six months and what it had done to me. What my bad travel luck had done to me. Just a month ago I was certain I was going to die.
I had known Bobby since college. He had an all-American look that girls loved and perfectly sculpted hair coated in big dollops of pomade wax. He was so desired by girls (he resembled Matt Damon) that I would get residual attention just by standing next to him. It was a nice little perk that came with the friendship.

One night, I followed him to a Georgetown University dorm party to meet with a friend of ours who knew a group of female undergrads. The girls Bobby and I had been meeting at clubs were difficult and flakey, so we were excited about the prospect of meeting easy college chicks, one year after we graduated with bachelor degrees from the University of Maryland.

At the party Claire stood out the most. She’d let out a hearty, belly laugh to our jokes, shaking the curly blonde hair that lent her the nickname Golden Curl. Her two girlfriends weren’t interested in either of us—they didn’t ask us anything beyond what we did and what school we went to, and even that seemed forced.

The one from Switzerland thought American culture was sorely lacking, particularly in cocoa and computers. Her Swiss-made computer, she claimed, ran cooler and faster than all other known computers made in the world. She had a bourgeoisie quality about her that wasn’t so different from the average Georgetown student, sent there in the first place to build connections for a successful high-profile career in law, finance, or politics. Her other friend was a cute Russian girl whose sweet and kind boyfriend stuck on her like an amoeba
digesting a meal.

The night went on and it became clear what would happen with a quick look at the couch. Bobby and Claire’s heads were just inches apart. I distracted the Swiss girl before she could intrude (or cockblock, as we learned to call it).

Dating is different in college. Things are more about hanging out around campus in large groups than scheduling a two hour block of deep conversation at a local bar or expensive restaurant. Bobby couldn’t do it alone—he needed a wingman. For the next month I would go with him to Georgetown as he tried to get in Claire’s pants, but after our fifth red cup college party featuring Milwaukee Best beer, I noticed the relationship between them barely progressed beyond light petting. Bobby had some doubts about her.

“I like her, but she’s too much of a nice girl. I feel like she’s the younger sister I never had,” he said on a car ride home.

“Yeah, the younger sister you kiss and grope!” I said.

“Shutup. We haven’t had sex. It won’t happen. I need to let her down easy because I don’t want to hurt her.”

But how can you not hurt someone who is falling for you?

Claire knew something was wrong and asked me if Bobby said anything about her. I could only speak in vague generalities like a palm reader. As much as I sympathized with her, I did not want to betray a friend. I hinted that Bobby is a player and it’d be best if she forgot about him. In fact he already moved on, falling deeply in love with a girl he met at work. I rarely saw Bobby after that and it gave me a glimpse of how most of my adult friendships would come to an anti-climatic end.

No one was surprised when Claire and I became good friends. She invited me to parties and there I pursued her space cadet roommates, until a year later when she graduated and moved back home to New York. She was my Georgetown connection and the sole surviving link to a youthful scene that I didn’t get to experience much of myself.

My college days, which I hope to soon forget just like my high school days, were mostly spent memorizing facts and playing video games and poker. I like to tell people that I didn’t party much in college because I was too busy studying, but the truth is I was an introverted
mess with no self-esteem. I couldn’t say hello to a cute girl to save my life and the few friends I had were either just like me or bringers of horrible dating advice.

“If you want to have sex with a girl, you have to be best friends with her first,” my buddy Prad would say. I tried that with a girl I met in my organic chemistry class, but after several months of friendship all that happened was she let me give her shoulder rubs. She never returned the favor. Every month there was a new guy she was fucking and I got to hear all about it in painful detail.

My dad never taught me anything about girls so my mom stepped up to the plate, telling me to “Be a gentleman” and “Never let a woman pay.” I tried that with an Albanian girl I met in genetics class. We’d hang out and whether for snacks, coffee breaks, or fast-food meals I would pay. She invited me back to her place once, but told me I couldn’t stay long because her boyfriend was on the way.

There was Kate, a cute girl in my advanced Biology class. I combined techniques from Prad and my mom by being both a friend and a gentleman, but in the end I was deemed so harmless by her boyfriend that he actually encouraged her to hang out with me more often. It seemed like everyone in college was getting laid except me, and I didn’t know what to do about it.

After college I had had enough and began learning the art of seduction (“game”) from an internet website that I discovered by chance. My sole goal was sexual thrills to make up for lost time.

All my newfound science knowledge would come in handy. I methodically broke down every reaction and every result. I tested dozens of opening lines to see which ones hooked a girl’s attention the most, even getting into seemingly inconsequential details like if “Hey” or “Hi” is a better way to start an opening line (I can confidently say that “Hey” is better). To quickly show girls I was a cool guy, I practiced short anecdotes called routines, like an interesting opinion on nightlife culture or a funny story about when I attempted to sail on the Potomac River. Since girls didn’t do much talking until they feel comfortable with a guy, I learned to ramble on and on in the early stages of a conversation to avoid awkward pauses that would surely kill the interaction. I developed physical moves for getting to intimacy
much faster, such as walking arm-in-arm with a girl on the street or putting my hand on her waist while she spoke. If I tried something five or six times and it didn’t appear to help me in the overall goal of getting her in bed, I tossed it out and tried something new.

My new strategy was the opposite of what I used to do, and after two years and a couple hundred approaches, I was getting laid. I no longer saw meeting a girl as this magical, chance-driven act. Instead it was a mechanical process that could be explained on the molecular level. I know I overcompensated, but I didn’t mind because I was finally getting what I wanted.

II

I did not declare a major when I started college at the University of Maryland because I had no idea what I wanted to be, unlike everyone else I knew who seemed to have their minds made up.

“"I want to be an electrical engineer.”"

“"I want to be a journalist.”"

“I want to be an ear, nose, and throat surgeon.”"

I took a test to match my personality to a career. Because I liked working with my hands and things instead of people, I scored high in manual labor. The test destined me to a future in carpentry, but in high school woodshop class I was incompetent at the most basic tasks of measuring and cutting pieces of wood. For a year-end assignment the class had to mass produce a single high-quality item and I picked a stool—two pieces of wood as support and one piece on top. My teacher would shake his head in disgust every time I asked him to cut rectangles of wood on the table saw.

It took me a year to settle on a major. Art History interested me the most, but I didn’t know how I could make money from that. I disliked reading, couldn’t write or draw, and wasn’t a fan of problem solving. But my memory was good and in the life sciences all you have to do is memorize. As a kid I bought a science kit from Sears and I remember it entertaining me until the chemicals corroded through the box and my
mom threw it in the trash. I knew I would only eke out an unglamorous life doing generic lab work, but it was better than the prospect of being an incompetent carpenter.

After college my first job was at a company that helped sequence the human genome. For the first two years I was a mindless lab monkey pipetting DNA solutions for several hours a day into little test tubes and welled plates. But I was never embarrassed about my job. Whenever a girl asked me what I did I could state with confidence that I was a microbiologist at a biotech firm. That suggested I was an intelligent person.

I wound up in the Process Development department where I became a specialist in fermentation. I grew yeast and E. coli bacteria in huge tanks, causing the lab to either smell like bread or shit, respectively. When we “harvested” a tank we trashed the cells and kept the antibody they produced, one that we genetically engineered into them.

I had to do endless series of experiments to determine the optimal temperature, pH, mixing speed, feeding schedule, mineral content, and so on to get these cells to produce the highest concentration of antibody. The cells were fickle and experiments often failed, so it was common for me to repeat weeks of work. Even if they didn’t fail, the new experiments were barely different from the ones that preceded it. I could imagine curing a major disease (technically I could say I was curing cancer and AIDS), but I was such a minor cog in the machine and so easily replaceable that I never saw my work as important. Another tank to clean, another spreadsheet to plug and chug numbers into, another meeting to present data to. The ideas came from above and I just followed orders. It wasn’t much different than listening to my mom tell me to clean my room as a kid.

My social life was lively and fun while I was still in the middle of mastering my game. I was so distracted by the girls I was chasing that I never stopped to think that I was spending eight hours a day, a third of my waking life, in a job that I did not care about.
A DEAD BAT IN PARAGUAY

III

I received a mass email from Claire one year after she graduated from college. I was in my fourth year at work. She wrote it in the third person to be funny.

Subject: TOP SECRET MEMORANDUM

Claire began interning at the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See three weeks ago. She lives in an apartment by herself located in Trastevere. There are two beds; she welcomes visitors…

I jumped at the chance. The only time I had been out of the country was when I was eight years old and my mom took me to her childhood home in Turkey to spend a two month summer vacation with her family. All I remember from that trip is setting off all sorts of fireworks that were illegal back home and taking showers in bathrooms that had small drains on the floor instead of bathtubs. I was unable to communicate with anyone besides my mom because I didn’t speak Turkish, but vaguely remember having a nice time nonetheless.

Another travel opportunity came up at about the same time. My college buddy Prad, who was now getting an Indian restaurant off the ground, tried to convince me to come with him to Venezuela for two weeks. I drank at his bar after closing one night as he sold me the idea.

“I know a girl there who always used to come into the restaurant,” he said. “She told me about Venezuelan women and we just have to go. I’ll be able to get off around Christmas so start researching ticket prices.”

“What are we going to do there? Does she have friends?”

“Of course she has friends. We’ll visit them in the city, party, smoke some ganja, and see some nature.”

“Isn’t South America dangerous?” I asked, concerned.

“No more dangerous than Baltimore or the shady parts of D.C. But yeah, Venezuela is not the safest country in the world.”

Prad had changed over the years. He went from twice monthly visits to the barber for buzz cuts in Hugo Boss sweaters to becoming a long-
haired, bearded businessman eager to talk about art and the absurdity of life. He no longer believed in the “friends first” strategy with girls and after a few drinks we’d laugh about how little we knew in college. If only we were sent back there with what we know now.

Two weeks later he continued his pitch, saying Venezuela is an exotic, semi-tropical land that was rarely visited by Americans because of political “instability.” Their loud-mouthed leader Hugo Chavez gave a lot of travelers pause before stepping foot into the country.

“If we go we’ll do what most others will never do,” Prad said.

“We’ll almost be like pioneers,” I joked.

“And you know how beautiful the women are down there. Per capita they have the most beauty queens out of anywhere in the world.”

He was telling the truth. I was easily sold on traveling with a best friend who shared the same carnal interests as I did, and besides, I had a large pile of money sitting around from not having taken a single serious vacation in my adult life. I told him I’d go. But soon he began to stall when it came time to setting the date. I had bought a ticket to see Claire in Italy for one week in November and was hoping a trip to Venezuela would end the year on a high note.

Eventually I confronted Prad about his stalling and he backed out completely, saying he couldn’t get off work. He didn’t trust any of his staff to run the restaurant while he was gone. I was disappointed. I debated going alone, without the benefit of knowing a Venezuelan woman who lived in the capital city. I still had to take off another week of vacation from work or I’d lose it, and I didn’t want to do what I did the year before when I took off days just to stay at home and watch movies.

Except for the safety issue, I couldn’t come up with a reason not to go to Venezuela. I booked the round-trip ticket to Caracas, departing only four weeks after I was to return from Rome. My international travel experience was lacking and I wanted to “catch up.”
IV

I was 13 years old the last time I was on an airplane for longer than three hours. I’ve grown over a foot since then and my 6’2” frame complained during the overnight flight to Italy in steerage class. I took out all the magazines and safety cards in the front pocket and placed them on the floor for two heavenly extra inches of legroom.

I only stayed with Claire in Rome for two nights because each day was a race to see as many cities as possible. I quickly traveled through Rome, Venice, Sienna, Florence, Naples, and Bologna. I saw the best of what these cities had to offer, their most magnificent monuments and sights, taking hundreds of photos in the process. I completed a sort of short attention span travelling theater where each sight had to be high-impact and only briefly experienced. I treated each city like an amusement park and returned home with only basic observations about the culture and people: cafes everywhere sell smooth espresso; girls are beautiful but snobby; Italian history is very rich; cars are small and fuel-efficient; drivers are insane and will kill you if you don’t pay attention, etc.

The American travel strategy must be flawed because it felt shallow to pack each day’s schedule full of activities in an attempt to see everything important in the shortest amount of time. I focused too heavily on historical sites and museums and staying busy rather than on soaking up the day-to-day life of the people, the culture. Yet it wasn’t all bad. I was fascinated how the simplest tasks back at home like catching a bus or ordering food was a full-on struggle when you don’t speak the language. I was amused at feeling like an illiterate when I had to carefully look at the pictures on bathroom doors instead of the words. How long would it take living in Italy until I felt comfortable with the new language and culture? Many months, most likely years, but definitely not seven days.

If Rome is like adult Disneyland, Caracas is like an abandoned warehouse with busted windows. The first thing I saw when I left the airport terminal was a shanty town just a couple hundred meters away, composed of little shacks that were constructed of red-brown mud bricks and metal sheeting. Like all the other shanty towns in Caracas, I
saw clothes hanging out to dry from the distance but never any real people. Only when it was night and the hills lit up like Christmas trees was I sure that human beings actually lived there. The shacks are packed in so tightly that there is no public space besides narrow dirt alleys wide enough only for motorcycles and small carts.

During the day most of the shantytown inhabitants came down from the hills to loiter or sell imported Chinese merchandise on makeshift stands at subway station exits. Where pools of fetid black water collected on the street there was the faint smell of raw sewage. Mountains flanking both sides of the city acted as river banks to trap in exhaust put out by vintage American automobiles kept on life support by necessity. It didn’t help matters that rush hour lasted half the day thanks to 10-cents a gallon gas subsidized by the government. (The concept of fuel efficiency doesn’t exist in Venezuela because of their abundant oil reserves.) Roads had craters the size of men and even sidewalks had their own holes large enough to swallow little kids.

The first time I took out my camera in the city center a handful of men in ragged clothing eyed me up and down, looking for an opportunity to relieve me of my property. I quickly learned that I was no longer in Rome taking pictures of the Pantheon. Caracas was a rough introduction to South America and I cursed Prada under my breath whenever I strayed from the beaten path and found myself being watched carefully by groups of idle young men sitting on milk crates. I thanked my Middle Eastern heritage for giving me a darker skin tone that fit in with the Venezuelan appearance. I don’t think I was suspected as a gringo, but I still did my best to put on a confident walk, a don’t-fuck-with-me swagger that would make anyone else but me a more appealing target.

Most taxis were unmarked and unlicensed. They looked like any other car except they had a tiny eight-inch long plastic sign with neon TAXI lettering taped on the front windshield. I saw these exact same signs on sale at a handful of street markets. You could wait at an intersection all day and night before an official cab came by. I calculated that my odds of survival were higher taking a chance with the fake cabs than walking, even though I knew the driver could take me wherever he wanted and do as he pleased, alone or with his waiting
gang. And I know what they think when they rob or steal: “You’re a rich tourist, you can afford to lose a couple hundred dollars.” Though it doesn’t make theft right, it’s true for the most part. All I could do to stop it was hold my head high, speak like I was sure, and pretend I wasn’t afraid. You can’t get by in a foreign country without trusting some people some of the time.

I compared the amount of mental energy I was putting in Caracas trying to stay safe to sitting in my office cubicle reading emails and making line graphs. I was not used to planning secure routes and exit strategies, observing crowds, watching my back, and protecting my pockets. Never before did I wonder why a particular car made a U-turn or how much blood I would lose if stabbed in an extremity after fighting off an armed attacker. It was nerve-racking and stimulating at the same time, and I was working my brain in ways it wasn’t used to. I was being challenged. Being reminded of my survival told me things could be much different than what I’m used to. They didn’t have to be so comfortable and seemingly pre-programmed.

I had a feeling of withdrawal after coming home from Italy. I missed their espresso and nightlife and wished I had more time to be able to bang my first Italian girl. They were tough, those girls. But I didn’t miss Venezuela. There were plenty of good moments, like making new friends in my Caracas hotel and lounging on a small white beach in Margarita Island, but the shock to my system was too strong. There was no urge to return anytime soon.

V

I started developing doubts about my specialty in fermentation. My job was only being done within a few areas of the United States: Raleigh, San Francisco, San Diego, Newark, Boston, and Montgomery County, Maryland. If I wanted to move to a place like Miami or New York, I would have to get used to pipetting again for basic lab jobs that could be found anywhere. I thought things should be the other way around, that developing a valuable skill should give me more options to
live the life I wanted instead of less. Maybe I should have gone into business or marketing instead. Even carpentry could be practiced anywhere.

At the same time I became increasingly annoyed at the petty politics that were married to large corporations. In the lunch room there were posted signs ordering me to clean up after myself and not to eat someone’s apple. There were more signs in the lab ordering me to wash my hands and wipe my feet. It reminded me of my passive aggressive former roommate who would leave Post It notes everywhere (“Please don’t leave the cabinets open!! Thanks!!!”).

Human resources would nag me in weekly emails about new regulations that must be followed: no short shorts, halter tops, unnecessary color photocopying, or sexual harassment. There were the mandatory one hour seminars that taught us to say “red light” if someone was inappropriately flirting with us. There was the eight hour safety course on radiation even though I didn’t work with radiation. There was the series of “training modules” with Standard Operating Protocols that read like manuals for television sets. And of course there were the irritating phrases that everyone copied from management, like “going forward” and “due diligence.”

Last minute decisions frequently meant my dough-faced colleagues and I would end up staying late or coming in on weekends. Management could stay home. (Having a family and children was a more worthy excuse than having a happy hour to go to.) I had the privilege of training new employees with fancy degrees who earned much more than I did. I was nominated for a working group on how to fix the company’s cafeteria lunch program. We met every week in catered two-hour meetings for two months. By the end, none of our suggestions were implemented.

Every month management held a huge cheerleader meeting with Krispy Kreme donuts. They told us that the company was about to turn the corner any month now and pull in massive profits, but failed to include useful information about how the company was actually performing. I stayed away from the employee stock purchase plan because I had less information about my own company than day traders who gathered on internet message boards.
Management required all peons to itemize the monthly work they did. After submitting my four or five sentence summaries, I spied on coworker reports averaging 2,000 words and chock full of colorful graphs, tables and fonts, with consistent abuse of bold typeface. The reports took them a full day to create while mine took ten minutes. I figured I was doing the company a favor for not wasting so much time on something so meaningless, but eventually I was pulled aside and told to put more work into them because it looked “kind of bad.”

My coworkers competed with each other by announcing every little trivial task they did in meetings or emails that were carbon copied to everyone. They would perk up whenever management was around and follow them to lunch, including to restaurants they told me they hated. I remember the brown-noser who organized the lab supply stockroom in alphabetical order and then was praised by the big boss for her “initiative.” She set a “good example for others to follow,” though her example wasn’t making the company money. I refused to play that game because I believed that my work in the lab should speak for itself, but even then it barely mattered. Every year like clockwork Human Resources would say times were tough and raises would be lower than usual, though still “above the national average,” whatever that was. I calculated that doing only what was assigned and not organizing stockrooms or posting signs in the lab was costing me at most $60 a month. I believed I was a competent worker, but eventually my motivation and drive was being discussed behind management doors.

The way I was rated was through a bell curve. Management would always drive home that we were all working for the greater goal in making money for the company, but once a year I was ranked against my co-workers, including those on my team, to determine who received the highest raise and bonus. My boss was pleased with my work but his boss perceived me as an underachiever who needed a fire lit under his ass. I was put on the bottom of the curve and didn’t get a raise for the first time in my five years at the company. My boss implied that if there was another round of layoffs, a very real possibility with the company hemorrhaging hundreds of millions of dollars a year, I would be one of the first to go. By then I was coming to work in my favorite pair of jeans that had holes in the knees.
WASHINGTON D.C.

Secretly I hoped to be fired. I wanted to be put into such a tough situation that I would be forced to use everything I had to work my way out. I wanted to see what I was made of. But when I finally received the company letterhead that had the big fat zero where my raise was supposed to be, I panicked. If I was fired then I would have to dip into my savings to pay rent. A smaller savings meant smaller vacations. I couldn’t let that money stop coming in.

Living in a capitalist country taught me to have the mindset of a free agent. I’m only as loyal as my options. I fixed up my resume and sent it to a recruiter who was extra motivated to help because she’d get a large percentage of my first year’s salary. Within only a month she landed me an interview at the only company in the United States licensed to make the anthrax vaccine for the military. One week after the interview, they offered me $10,000 a year more than what I was already making. The company was smaller, older and more conservative, but I immediately took the offer.

I couldn’t hide the smirk on my face when I quit. They thought they could change or mold me? Fuck them! I’ll go work somewhere else! My company was like a girlfriend setting the stage to dump me but I beat her to the punch by finding a hotter girl at the club. Unfortunately I didn’t bother to notice how low the lights were. When I got her out during the day I noticed she was far uglier.

VI

Job interviews are bizarre. It’s impossible for a company to find out if you’re fit and qualified for a position based on 30-minute blocks of structured chat that always includes the question of where you see yourself in five years. It’s even harder for an applicant to see if they’d get along with their future company and boss. I mean it’s not like I could ask my future boss if he’s an asshole or sadist, if his jokes are lame but he expects me to laugh anyway, if he’s a micromanager whose forearm will be halfway up my ass during work hours, or if his English is so poor that I won’t be able to understand his reports. Because if I
could I would, but that’s not how job interviews work.

I didn’t get along with Dr. Wang, a 66 year old scientist from Taiwan whose dark hair was so thick I convinced myself it was a wig. The problem was that he passed by my cubicle at least ten times a day to give me comments and assignments in drip-drop fashion. Instead of one daily meeting like I was used to, it was several small meetings in the lab, in his office, in my office, in the lunch room, during lunch, during breaks, and after regular meetings with his boss. Sometimes he came by to inform me he just sent me an email and would like a reply soon. My title was Associate Scientist but I felt like Associate Child.

The sourness from my first job only got worse. Dr. Wang wasn’t going to turn anything around. It bothered me that a large part of getting a good boss is based on luck of the draw. With bad luck you are stuck eight hours a day in a place that makes you unhappy, forcing you to search again for another job, but not too soon or else jumping around quickly would look bad on your resume. And what a shame it would be if you threw away a good job to go somewhere else that was much worse! Too late to change your mind now.

I didn’t like the idea that I could do everything right, researching companies and asking respectful questions, but still end up unhappy through no obvious fault of my own. The problem must be with the system. The problem is having to depend on someone else for a paycheck. The problem is spending a third of my waking life in the company of a man like Dr. Wang. I purchased a book about taking a gap year, but before I could open it I was in Spain for a two week vacation.

In Spain I got sucked into the nonstop drinking party with a constantly rotating cast of international travelers. I forgot about getting to know the locals or experiencing the culture like I had planned. Drinking espresso in cafes or visiting museums couldn’t compare with chasing girls with sexy accents while under the influence of sangria or overpriced cocktails. The hacking cough I developed halfway through the trip barely slowed me down. Even the messy La Tomatina tomato festival, attended by more Australians than Spaniards, was just filler before the night’s partying. There were no long, deep conversations in Spanish with a local who told me his concerns of the world. There was
no love affair with a beautiful Spanish girl who took me to her family’s house and fed me seafood paella. I learned less about Spain than Italy or Venezuela even though I stayed there longest, but I didn’t care because I was having the time of my life. I could hop on a bus or train to any city and spend time with beautiful girls from countries I may never see before I die. I was completely free from responsibility and being tied to the same place. The only decisions that affected me were my own, not someone else sitting in an office one floor above me. This was how I’d rather live my life.

I couldn’t focus on work when I got back. Dr. Wang’s requests went in one ear and out the other until the matter became urgent. I did the bare minimum of work like at my previous job, but I played along and made it seem like I wanted to stay with the company until I turned gray. Dr. Wang, surprisingly pleased with the work I did do, was looking for me to step up.

“Have you considered going to graduate school,” he asked me one day. “Johns Hopkins has a master’s program in biotechnology with night classes.” I never got used to his thick accent and had to pay extra attention to understand what he was saying because when he talked it sounded like he had marbles in his mouth.

“I know several coworkers at my old company that completed the program. They had very good things to say about it,” I replied.

“You need to start thinking long-term with the company. You’re doing a decent job but to advance they would like to see more education.”

The all-knowing, all-seeing they, pushing and controlling me through a proxy in the form of a Taiwanese scientist with a thick accent and lush black hair. The only way the tone would be more ominous is if he substituted “He” instead of “they.”

“No, I understand. I’m not sure why I’ve hesitated so far, but this fall I’m going to register.”

I lied through my teeth. I told Dr. Wang whatever he wanted to hear so the paychecks could keep coming and my upcoming bonus was at fat as it could be. I was already calculating how much more money I needed to take at least a year off. I wanted to travel for a long time, abuse my liver, and meet exotic women. Then after I tire of boozing I
wanted to find some answers to what I should do for the rest of my life. Time off would help put me on a fulfilling path, because the answer obviously wasn’t working as a microbiologist. Only a long trip could lead to my eventual happiness.

While Dr. Wang was urging me to attend graduate school, I went into poverty mode and put myself on a tight budget. I was six years into my professional career, a scientist with his own extra glossy business cards, but I was ready to put it on hold.

On hold. Like pausing a movie. You grab a soda and continue right where you left off without missing anything. If only that’s how life worked. Too many things change, and by the time you come back you’ll wonder why you picked this sorry movie in the first place.

I’d be lying if I said that it wasn’t hard to quit my job, to “throw it all away” like my mom put it, but it was just one step out of many. It got lost in everything else like selling my car, buying travel gear, straightening out paperwork, getting vaccination shots, researching travel sites, purchasing travel insurance, setting up credit card PIN numbers, moving into my dad’s house, buying the airline ticket, deciding on a route, and so on. Each step insulated me from what I was really doing, which, definitely, was throwing it all away. That way of life, anyway.

Once the unlikely choice to leave is made, the only thing more unlikely is returning to the same thing. Otherwise it would mean everything I felt before the moment I quit was a fraud, that the unhappiness and the misery were make-believe, just a brief glitch in the concentrations of neurotransmitters in my brain. Or maybe a boredom spell from not having enough hobbies to take my mind off work. I refused to accept those possibilities. The third of my waking life was real. And it was suffering. The job was destroying my mind and soul. It was suffocating me and if I didn’t get out I’d be permanently damaged.

VII

I had trouble deciding when to quit because each month I stayed
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would add at least an extra thousand dollars to my savings account. I kept thinking of how much more I would have if I could hang in just a bit longer, but rolling out of bed was becoming impossible and I loathed Dr. Wang and his shit-smelling bacterial cells with a passion. Plus the lab was much less enjoyable to work in than the one at my old company. It had ancient equipment that was like a museum for fermentation. I imagined doing a tour of my lab for young scientists: “In the 1970’s, before fermentation’s golden age and the introduction of automation, you had to adjust everything manually, like the old car radios that had jumpy dials instead of digital read-outs. Imagine that!”

The best thing I have done in life is save money. While my peers were buying new clothes, bottle service at the club, and luxury automobiles, I was frugal and kept a monthly budget to watch every single dollar that left my pocket. If they spent $100 at a bar, I spent $30. If their rent was $800 a month, mine was $500. I owned my Honda Civic and had no intention of ever upgrading unless the wheels fell off. I left my first company with $15,000 earning 3.5% interest and saved $13,000 more after only nine months working for Dr. Wang. A pile of cash is a pile of freedom. If I moved into my dad’s basement it would last me half a decade, and if I traveled to somewhere inexpensive maybe two or three. I decided to only work long enough to achieve a randomly selected goal of $35,000 that would be crossed when I sold my car.

The closer I got to giving Dr. Wang my two weeks notice, the more insolent I became. I started coming in extra late to minimize the time I would see him. I went home for lunches so he couldn’t find me. I took walks to the convenience store nearby instead of hanging out in the break room. Just a bit longer, my wall calendar told me, and I could go, until finally the day arrived.

I asked Dr. Wang if he could talk for a minute. He knew something was wrong because I never asked him for a private conversation. I just came out with it.

“Dr. Wang I’d like to put in my two weeks notice.”

“Whaaaaaaaaat?”

“Yeah, umm, it’s just time for me to move on. I want to take some time off.”
“But I thought you were so happy here. You were going to start working on getting your masters degree. Why would you want to leave?”

“I just want to take a long vacation I guess. I’m not sure, but I want to take a break.”

“If there is a problem, we can fix it. Is it your pay? Tell me.”

I wanted to tell him all the reasons I hated him and the work. I wanted to tell him why working for a corporation is a one way path to a stale, monotonous life where the only thing to look forward to are increasingly dull weekends. But what would be the point? I would just waste my energy on a man who believed in the system. There was nothing he could do to change my mind. I already told my roommate I’d be moving out. I believed in this decision too much to be convinced otherwise, and if my mom couldn’t talk me out of it then definitely not him.

Now Dr. Wang had to do all the lab work himself because I was the only person on his team who was trained on the equipment. A part of me felt bad for the old man. I should thank him, really, for putting me on this path. Without him who knows how many more years I would have waited. I would have hesitated to leave the comfortable middle-class lifestyle. The Taiwanese scientist with a thick accent and lush black hair gave me unhappiness. He gave me the motivation to make a big change.

VIII

I moved into my dad’s basement. I played with my little brothers during the day and ate my stepmother’s delicious Persian food every night—her kookoo potato patties, her abgoosht lamb stews, and my favorite, her ghormeh sabzi meat dish full of fresh garden herbs. In between I’d have deep conversations with my dad about life, business, and politics. Later in the evening I’d go out, either on dates or to prospect for future dates.

At first I was worried that moving in with my dad would cut off the
flow of girls, that they wouldn’t respect a 28-year-old man who lived in his father’s basement, but I got more dates than I ever had before, all because I now had unlimited time to get them. I was enjoying my life, working on pet projects here and there at my leisure, waking up at noon every day with no pressure to do anything. I was living the dream and having such a good time that after three months I had to remind myself why I moved in with my dad in the first place: to prepare for travel to faraway lands and have my doubts and concerns about my place in the world answered, all while having sex with women who had accents. I had almost forgotten.

But where would I travel to? Since I was on a budget there were three regions on the table: Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and South America. Eastern Europe was a little expensive considering the strengthening Euro, and for some reason I had no interest in traveling to Asia. That left South America, a place I was already familiar with. It’s cheap, the girls are pretty, and only two languages are needed to get around. Plus I had heard amazing things about the sensual girls of Brazil, the nightlife of Argentina, and the rich archeological sites of Peru. It was an easy decision.

I looked over South American travel guides in the bookstore to construct a list of countries I should visit. They were of little help, offering only names of lodging and eating establishments instead of pointed descriptions of what a man at my stage of life would like. It’d be quite the adventure if I visited all the countries and found out for myself. It’s not like I didn’t have the time, and judging by maps the continent was not much bigger than the United States. I looked at Chile, a tiny sliver of a country, and Paraguay and Uruguay, each the size of small U.S. states. It was decided then. I’d visit every country in South America, partying and chasing the local girls along the way just like I did in Spain, but also absorbing the culture, making deep observations, and learning Spanish. I couldn’t stop thinking about how I’d visit thirteen new countries, bringing my total up from four to seventeen. What a cultured and experienced man of the world I’d become! Maybe I could even write a guidebook after the trip is done: *Roosh’s South America Travel Guides For Men*. I could share advice on where to find the prettiest and nicest girls (without having to pay).
Not only did I conveniently forget about my rough experience in Venezuela, but I developed the expectation that traveling through South America would be like Spain and my dad’s basement rolled up into one exotic party train. I ignored people who questioned my decision by mentioning how dangerous and poor South America was. I figured they have just been overly influenced by the news.

I decided to start the trip in Ecuador. I knew little about it besides the fact that there was a group of islands off the coast that helped Darwin construct his theory of evolution. I figured that as the trip went on and I made my way down south and east towards Argentina and Brazil, the dial would turn from possibly dull and sketchy to spicy and hedonistic. After Brazil I would travel back up north through the three small countries that no one visits, then Venezuela, then finally end it all in Colombia. It should be safe from tourist kidnappings by then. I estimated it would take 6-12 months.

I patted myself on the back for developing a great plan, one that could only be hatched by someone who thought things through carefully and deliberately. But no matter how careful and deliberate I was, I could not make up for the fact that I had only a tiny amount of international travel experience under my belt. I vastly underestimated the amount of energy and health it would take to get through third world countries.

Two weeks before my plane left for Ecuador, my friends threw me a nice little goodbye party at a bar. They must have seen how excited and eager I was, but on the inside I was nervous. I think my brain was trying to tell me both my expectations and plan were no good.

IX

My sister was born seven years after me and one year before my parents split up. By the time I was in the eighth grade I had to pick her up every day from the bus stop and watch her for three hours until my mom came home from her seamstress job. There was no way she could afford a babysitter. I resented my sister because my friends could go
out and play whenever they wanted while I had to either stay in or, when she got a little older, check on her every thirty minutes. Eventually we worked out a system where every so often she would come out on the balcony and yell to show me she was still alive, but I still hated the responsibility and would rip the heads off her Barbie dolls anyway. (Putting the heads back on gave them an unnatural fat-face appearance.) I’d make her give me weeks of “beverage service” at a time, treating her like my own personal servant. There was also the night that I gave her a piggyback ride from hell and smashed her completely through the hallway drywall. I covered it with a red plaid blanket, thinking my mom would appreciate my creativity and never notice the two by three foot hole left by my sister’s torso, but she eventually found out and beat me with a broom.

In spite of the beverage service and doll mutilation, we were very close. We developed identical senses of humor, insulting but self-deprecating, in a format we mimicked from watching The Simpsons and Seinfeld. We’d often think of the same joke at the same time and get mad that we couldn’t say ours fast enough. We farted on each other’s faces. We put dirty socks in each other’s mouths. When she wasn’t paying attention I rubbed her face in the “pizza,” a small circular rug that our cat Furball loved to throw up on. Months or even years after a joke was said we’d remix it into new forms to keep the laughs going. Our whole relationship is based upon layers of recalled humor that means nothing to the average person.

To this day if you put us in the same room the back-and-forth is relentless. Anyone else in our company fades into the background as we regress back to our childhood, on our own in that apartment when our mother did her best to keep a roof over our heads. Like most people I like to think that I grew up fast because of a tough childhood, but I think in the end my sister grew up faster than I did.

I said goodbye to my mom first. My flight was leaving in only a few hours but she still tried to talk me out of the trip. “Are you sure you want to do this? You can always cancel it,” she said.

“Mom I’m not going to cancel it.”

“I just don’t agree with what you’re doing. I don’t believe you quit your job. I didn’t come to this country and work so hard raising you so
you could do something like this. Where’s your brain?”

“Mom, please,” I pleaded. “I’ll only be gone for a couple months and then I’ll come back and get another car and go back to work. Just think of it as a long vacation. I need to see what else is out there.” I hated lying to my mom about how long I’d be gone but she’d just feel worse if I told her the truth.

“I want you to call me every week and don’t get with any bad people.” I assumed that by bad people she meant drug users.

Back at my dad’s I gave a hug to my little brothers before they went to bed, the smallest one at only four years old not understanding that I’d be away for a while. My dad put his arm on my shoulder and said to be careful. My stepmom lit a special candle and recited a Muslim prayer in Farsi under her breathe. They slept while I finished packing.

My sister drove me to the airport at four in the morning. Up to then she kept everything breezy, telling me to “wrap it up” and not bring back any diseases. When she pulled into the arrival gate I gave her $20 for gas and she reluctantly accepted. I got out of the car and struggled to pull my 50-pound backpack out of the trunk. I set it on the ground and looked at her. She was already crying.

It’s always been that if one of us cries the other will cry too. This is true even if we’re on the phone. I fought back tears while giving her a big hug goodbye. She told me to be careful and watch my back. I promised her I’d be safe and send her a postcard from every country I visited. She got in her car and drove off.

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