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Uncle Sam, Matchmaker

December 2017

by Ben East

I pictured myself in a Peace Corps-issue hammock on an island somewhere, or crossing high glaciers in the glaring Himalayan sun. Then the recruiter called and offered Malawi. Pointless to remind her what I'd written where the application asked my preference: 'Anywhere but Africa.'

Before that call, a recruiter—maybe the same recruiter—offered another would-be Volunteer a choice. Would she prefer Nepal, or Malawi? A logical thinker with a Math degree and an Indian heritage, she chose Malawi. 'I can travel to Nepal on my own any time. When will I travel to Africa outside the Peace Corps?'

So when the recruiter called me, fate was already decided.

Peace Corps brought us together in Chevy Chase for pre-service orientation. Group exercises helped us share intimate hopes and irrational fears. Peace Corps determined to put us in the same language group and for three weeks we studied Chichewa together, sweating it out in a village hut. They tried making us neighbors but I rejected that assignment near her school and was sent deep-south. In the prehistoric pre-Internet age, we stayed in touch via *postal courier*.

Uncle Sam brought us together again years later. She was working international child labor issues for the Department of Labor when I arrived in DC to start Foreign Service training. We had a summer of Screen on the Green, joyriding in my new truck, happy-hours with co-workers. Nothing serious: A-100 classmates had me pegged for Karachi by fall. And, we were just friends.

That was a bad summer for Pakistan. Terrorists attacked churches and schools with guns and bombs. On Flag Day in August, Uncle Sam pulled Karachi from the list and ordered me to Jeddah. I'd be around studying Arabic for a year. Deepa's Paris detail fell through. We got together frequently. We threw snowballs at each other outside her DC row house; I deviously reserved her company for Valentine's (just friends!); on International Women's Day in March, we put it all on the line.

I never wanted to go to Africa but when Uncle Sam sent me there I fell in love with it. There, I forged deep and lasting friendships; in the lonely quiet of the long nights I trained myself to write; I learned every form of self-sufficiency including the most important, which is to build a community of friends to help you through your need. As a friend in Africa, Deepa read my first, clumsy novel. Uncle Sam introduced me to my most trusted friend and confidant out there on the edge of the world in Africa.

This fall marks our longest stay anywhere since meeting two decades ago. In between we've made homes, together and apart, in Malawi, Paraguay, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Ghana, Mexico, Washington, New York, and our home towns in Connecticut and North Carolina.

Now we've been Stateside four years. The uncertainties of bidding season have drawn to a close. Soon we depart again, this time for Mumbai. The world keeps spinning beneath our feet but Uncle Sam has made his match and given us each other.★

Ben East is a writer and diplomat with the Foreign Service. His second novel, *Patchworks*, asks hard questions about American gun culture and the lack of sensible measures to address it. His first book, *Two Pumps for the Body Man*, examines U.S. diplomacy on the front line of the *war on terror*. Find his blog at [www.beneastbooks.com](#).

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