

It was not my finest hour

by Linda Meyers Donelson (Cameroon 1965–66, Ghana 1966–67)

East Cameroon

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Dear Mom,

I'm making Valentines as the sun goes down. I've drawn a picture of myself in a cannibal's stewpot, waving an American flag. I'm working by candlelight. I broke the mantle of my kerosene lantern again with too much vigorous pumping.

The sun is setting over a small cornfield below my house — built for the Directeur of our school who found the house too small. From the école secondaire you can see the town of M'Balmayo across the valley. After dark, charcoal fires spring up along the main road, and you can hear drums. Now that the students have left for the day, the nearest human being is a quarter of a mile away from me.

One of my students died over the weekend, of malaria. I'm twenty-one years old, and this is the first time someone close to me has died.

It's four months since I began teaching with almost no experience. Thankfully, I'm not struggling so much now with classroom discipline. I think I've found my sense of humor, which helps.

My French is improving, but speaking to the students is still humiliating. I babysat with the Directeur's three-year-old daughter last night, who corrected my French as I read her a story.

My favorite fellow teacher is Mr. Djilo, a Bamileke, from Foumban, near the border with West Cameroon. His people are famous as entrepreneurs. I particularly like his youngest wife, a handsome woman with a baby son. She jokes with me as if we'd known each other for years.

I bought some steak today. The butcher works in a covered area in the center of the outdoor market, with carcasses hanging from the ceiling. You point to the part you want, and he slices it off with his panga and wraps it for you in a banana leaf. You should see the black vultures lined up along the roof of the shelter, waiting for the day's leavings!

There's a huge avocado tree shading the market. You can get really nice avocados, big enough for a whole lunch. When I'm traveling in a lorry, I eat them like a banana, peeling them as I go.

My kerosene refrigerator went out again; there's something wrong with the wick. I don't like to go in the kitchen after dark because the cockroaches are as big as mice! Some of the grounds workers put up a mosquito net around my bed. There are no mosquitoes, but I've been terrified of flying roaches

landing on me during the night. Anytime you sit down on the toilet, you hear them skitter under the seat.

I'm teaching some English classes now at the forestry school. This is to give me more to do, since there isn't enough work for me. I was sent here because the President of the country comes from this area, but they don't really need another English teacher.

Gail and Sally visited me last week. They took the train to the capital, Yaounde, then came south half an hour by lorry. We went to Mass on Sunday at the Catholic Mission and were invited to breakfast with the bishop. He is the first African bishop ever ordained. He invited us to go with him on his rounds of the villages. We rode in the back of his black Mercedes, and huge crowds of people greeted us.

This afternoon I met a young man walking on the path near my house. His name is Albert. He was reading a textbook as he strolled. He offered to teach me some pigeon English (which is spoken in West Cameroun). This should be fun and will make the evenings less lonely.

Last week we had an unexpected day of no classes on a national holiday. A strange thing happened. My house was so quiet that I nearly got hysterical. I grabbed my bicycle and rode to Mr. Djilo's house. After a couple hours of conversation, I felt better.

I learned my lesson about not keeping pets in Africa. I've finished my series of fourteen rabies shots in the stomach. I never should have accepted a puppy from the students, even though they were just trying to keep me from being lonely.

I haven't had as much trouble with back pains this week, but now I have a dry cough that won't stop. There is a kind of worm that moves through your lungs, climbs over your windpipe and falls into your stomach. I hope I don't have it!

I can hear an owl now and some shrieking from the forest behind the house — probably the tree hyrax. I don't walk outside after dark because of snakes in the grass. A mamba actually got into the privy of one of the Volunteers, but fortunately it didn't hurt her.

Gail's house in Obala opens right onto the main street. A few weeks ago I came inside, put my purse on the table, and someone reached right in and took it! When I went to the embassy to get a new passport, a stern official asked, "Do you know what American passports sell for in Cairo?"

Thanks for the news about the draftees from my high school class. I sent President Johnson a letter, telling him to stop sending troops to Vietnam! Hundreds have been killed on both sides; to me, it's like murdering them. (I hope this letter isn't intercepted! A Peace Corps Volunteer was sent home recently for writing a postcard that criticized U.S. foreign policy.)

Please don't worry about visits from Peace Corps boys! I bought an extra straw mattress in the market, which is fine for them — unless a big rainstorm comes up in the night — in which case, water blows through the wooden louvers over my windows. At least it's never really too hot. We don't have much humidity in these beautiful Cameroonian highlands.

For the Easter holiday we're attending a conference in West Cameroon, where there are lots of Peace Corps Volunteers. The hotel in Buea serves spumoni ice cream. Technically, we are Cameroon VI, but our group is the first ever in East Cameroon. The fifteen of us will never forget each other. I'm sending Valentines to all of them!

Love, Linda