

# Sweet Blue

## Adrienne Lindholm

The idea was simply to travel; it didn't matter where. Details like which country and for how long, details that I would have obsessed over before, now seemed unimportant after losing my three-year-old daughter, Avery, to brain cancer.

The idea to travel was conceived during the first Thanksgiving after she died. Our closest friends filled our house with food and bottles of warm red wine. They hoped that laughter and friendship would carry us through the holidays and buoy us through the darkest part of the Alaskan winter.

"Cuba!" My friend, Matt, proposed with a wave of his hand.

I said, why not.

Matt had traveled internationally each of the sixteen years I'd known him and was continually searching for the next intriguing wintertime escape. He rubbed the side of his beard, thinking.

"We could travel by bike." He knew how to sway me. He knew I loved biking too much to turn down that sort of trip.

I watched his eyes brighten as he sensed my interest. "Wouldn't it be great to give the bikes to Cubans at the end of the trip?"

"Like, find used bikes here in Alaska, fly them down, bike



tour, and then leave the bikes in Cuba?”

“Exactly,” Matt’s eyes crinkled into a smile. “This is going to be sweet. We have to get there before Obama makes it legal and everyone goes.”

He swiped the screen on his iPhone. “Let’s see if we can get mileage tickets to Cancun.”

That conversation constituted the majority of our planning. Like what to eat for dinner and what to do on the weekend, planning this trip was done through a lens of loss. Awash in grief, I didn’t feel like the details mattered much.

I’d seen people cope with loss by consuming themselves with work, numbing their pain with drugs, becoming fanatically religious, or slinking into their internal darkness.

“I’m afraid of where my grief might take me,” I told my husband, JT. I was afraid of becoming mired in the dark sticky quagmire of sadness and not being able to pull myself out. So, I employed the same strategy I’d used with Avery—distraction.

During that Thanksgiving weekend, I lay a calendar on the floor and plotted trips every month: Hawaii for Christmas, Cuba bike adventure in January, snow biking outings in February, dog mushing in Denali in March, a spring triathlon in Nevada, backpacking in southern Utah in April, rafting in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in June, as well as family reunions and work trips into the national parks of Alaska.

Avery’s absence left me with time. Too much free time was worrisome; I imagined myself crying endlessly and never leaving the house. But time coupled with accumulated airline miles and a boss who felt so sorry for me that he told me to take all the time off I needed, enabled my distraction strategy. It was a year of preposterous travel brought forth by



preposterous circumstances.

“You’re like the *Eat, Pray, Love* girl!” a friend said upon hearing my list.

“I’m not trying to be like her at all,” I countered. I couldn’t imagine upheaving my life and spending years traveling around the world redefining myself. Who had that kind of energy after losing a child? I could barely get through the day. “I just need to do something that makes me interested in life again.”

Azul Dulce is what I called her. Sweet Blue. She was assembled from bicycles that were collecting dust in friends’ garages. Matt drove around Anchorage collecting the bicycles and took them to a bike mechanic who offered to build her from the most functional parts—a shifter from a 1995 Specialized Hard Rock, a derailleur from a 2000 Cannondale, a rear rack from a retired commuter bike. Matt and I would travel to Cuba, and for two weeks Azul Dulce would carry me and my modest load: one small sack of clothes, water and snacks, bike tools and a bike lock, snorkel and mask, flip flops, stickers and crayons for kids, a small towel, minimal toiletries, a journal, a camera, and one of Avery’s crib sheets to drape over a dirty bed.

We stuffed our belongings alongside our disassembled mountain bikes into cardboard boxes and taped them up. After the trip, we would gift the bikes to Cubans and feel less guilty about being privileged White travelers snooping into the lives of people imprisoned in their own country. The bikes may as well also serve as a small apology for the imminent Americanization of Cuban culture, now that we were about to be allowed to visit freely and our country’s business ventures were soon to be welcomed into their country.



In Havana Vieja, the cobblestone streets bustled with young Cubans and European tourists. Children squatted in doorways while dark-skinned men with sweaty shoulders gathered around street vendors selling fresh guava juice. Colonial Spanish apartments with narrow balconies lined the street in pastel colors. One block over, cement Soviet era buildings crumbled around the people living inside them. We pedaled through mud and dog poop and swerved to avoid the bicycle taxis and 1950's classic cars.

Matt and I found a restaurant with a seven-member band wielding a flute, bass guitar, bongos, and an assortment of gourd instruments. We ordered beer and fried plantains and were mesmerized by the joyful energy of the musicians. The rhythm was so spicy I couldn't stop dancing in my chair.

Captivated by the fast drumming, Matt bobbed his head to the beat and flashed a triumphant smile. "This is like no other place!"

Back at the *casa particular*, the house where we were staying, Matt asked the owner, Raquel, what she thought about more Americans coming to Cuba.

"More tourists is a good thing," she said in Spanish. "Otherwise I cannot pay the mortgage."

Raquel, who was 65 years old, explained that to get a license to run a *casa particular*, the rooms had to meet certain standards. She'd had to finance extensive renovations. "If I don't fill these rooms," she shrugged and fiddled with a button on her blouse.

"Are you concerned about losing aspects of Cuban culture as American businesses come in?" Matt asked.

She wasn't. And neither was anyone else we asked. We learned that a doctor makes about \$30 per month. We peered



into government stores that were nearly empty of food and heard stories of rations of rice and plantains that were supposed to last a month, but rarely lasted a week. I suppose it's hard to be too concerned with culture when you're hungry.

Steep limestone *mogotes*, like shaggy sentinels, towered over the wide flat valley as we biked through the rural western shoulder of the country. Vultures spun in updrafts around the *mogotes*, and vines twirled down the limestone cliffs like waterfalls. We biked to a café in the mountains and watched curtains of rain wash over the valley. It was a rain so warm and thick it turned the *mogotes* into shadows. Patrons sat shoulder to shoulder palming cups of tea and juice, swaying to the guitar and drum beats. As the rain quieted, rainbows streamed across the sky and bathed the *mogotes* in a colorful alpenglow. Once again, vultures took to the sky and began circling.

That evening on a quiet paved street, neighbors gathered to admire our American made bicycles. Locals leaned on their own bikes, rusted and jury-rigged with hand made parts.

Matt turned to one of the young men with a buzz cut and goatee who had introduced himself as Alejandro. "With all these changes happening in Cuba, what do you think about the future?"

Alejandro squinted. "I hope to see my brother again."

His family was broken. Everyone we talked to that night had parents, children, siblings, or cousins who had fled to the United States, Europe, or Canada who they rarely, if ever, saw. Or who died trying.

Alejandro talked openly about his disdain for Castro and the government, even though he could be hauled off by the



Communist neighborhood patrol for saying such things.

“It’s not fair we can’t leave the country.”

“Sure, now we can start a business but the taxes are so high, the government takes all the money.”

That night Matt and I reflected on how everyone we met was educated, everyone had access to health care, the arts and music flourished. But it seemed like those things had come at a price, in a currency of freedoms.

In the coastal town of Santa Lucia, we stayed with a woman named Cusi. She was our age and looked like us, with fair skin. She pinned her frizzy hair to the top of her head and took a seat at the table in her courtyard. I sat across from her and admired the fruit trees and flowers while she neatly transcribed our personal information into a notebook. She, like all the *casa* owners, was required to submit to the government our names, addresses, and passport numbers, information they would use to calculate the tax she owed.

In Spanish, I asked if she lived with her family.

“Yes,” she said. “With my sister.”

She took a deep breath before continuing. “My husband and son are in Miami. They have been trying to get home for six months, but they are not allowed to leave.”

I thought of her helplessness in this dirt road town, her little boy just ninety miles away but she couldn’t touch him.

“You must miss him,” I said, and then I started sobbing.

“Yes, of course,” she responded, but I could tell what she was noticing most was my dramatic reaction.

“Do you have kids?”

I nodded but couldn’t speak. Finally I said yes and added *es triste*, as if she couldn’t already tell there was a sad story involved. Eventually I told her the truth. *Una hija. Se*



*fallecio.*

She put her hand on top of mine and we sat for a minute not saying anything. It could have been awkward, but it didn't feel that way. Missing our children didn't need a cultural interpretation.

A week later I woke in a *casa* in the cool mountains of Topes de Collantes. Ants traced the floorboards, and I stared at paint peeling from the ceiling. Outside, large dark birds wailed into the fog. I was feeling melancholy too. It was the four-month anniversary of Avery's death, and it felt like time was pulling her farther away, as if I was looking at her through the wrong end of binoculars.

As the fog began to lift, Matt and I set out biking along the deserted mountain road. Soon, I found myself peering ahead, looking for the next vista. I smiled at the wind tugging my hair, the exhilaration of flying through tall lush forest, wondering what was around the next curve.

We pedaled up and down steep hills for hours before passing through a quiet village. A little girl, four or so, and her grandmother were walking toward us. They waved and we stopped. I pulled out a pencil and some stickers for the little girl who said her name was Melani. She accepted the gifts with a smile and looked up at her grandmother for guidance, just like Avery would. Her grandmother nudged her and whispered *besito*, and she bravely stepped forward and kissed us both on the cheek. They invited us to their house for coffee, and before Matt could say, "sure!" I declined, said we had to go. I immediately regretted turning them down, but I could foresee the question that was coming, the question that I didn't know how to answer without making them feel terrible for asking it.



Our trip was winding down. Sunrise quilted the sky bright pink. We said goodbye to the *casa* owners in Playa Giron, the site of the Bay of Pigs invasion, as flocks of birds caught light on their wings.

As Matt and I cycled thirty-three kilometers north along the coast, I found myself lost in the turquoise color of the sea and the calm that it brought me. What a contrast to how I'd been feeling at home; the trauma of Avery's death had made my internal system incapable of handling stress. I struggled to process incoming texts, emails, weekend plans, scenes from a TV show, my responsibilities at work, house chores, and social engagements. I couldn't figure out what to do first and collapsed onto the couch in tears. I used to be a person who could manage it all; now I had become a person paralyzed by having more than one thing to do at a time.

It occurred to me now how much I was going to miss our simple travel routine: breakfast of papaya, pineapple, bread, and eggs at the *casa*; biking until early afternoon; leisurely strolling through a new town; dinner at the *casa* and in to bed early. On this trip, where I brought next to nothing and traveled at the speed of a bicycle with no phone or email, only one thing was put before me at a time. My world once again moved at a pace that made sense.

As we pedaled past a group preparing for a diving expedition to explore the coral reefs along the coast, I thought about Avery and her curiosity, how excited she used to get about a lady bug, a slice of watermelon, finding the moon in the sky, and I had a deep sense that what will keep me alive is a similar sense of wonder.

Travel is my crutch. A slow paced, deliberate lifestyle is my best chance at staying present and excited about life. It's



my way of stacking the deck.

I admit, it's a cheap strategy. Wonder is easy traveling to exotic countries and through spectacular landscapes. Wonder is harder from my bedroom window, during my commute to the office, while I stare longingly at a photograph of my daughter.

I know that to carry this grief through the rest of my life, I'm going to need to be mesmerized by the mundane, astonished by the details, in awe of daily beauty. I'm not there yet.

After two weeks of traveling we arrived at the final town of our trip, Playa Larga, in the middle of the day. We settled in to a *casa* and began sorting our gear with a sense of urgency. We had only one thing left to do, and one afternoon in which to do it.

I lay our spare bike tubes on the patio and began gluing patches over the holes. Matt flipped the bikes upside down and filled a pail with water.

"I want to give my bike to someone deserving, someone whose life might be changed for the better by having a bicycle," said Matt as he scrubbed sand and mud from the frame of his bike.

Knowing that each bike was worth about a half year's salary, we wanted to make sure we gave them to the right people. Matt and I set out pushing our clean bicycles through the streets looking for someone hard working and kind.

Trying for a glimpse of the family inside, we lingered too long in front of people's houses. We attempted to make eye contact with everyone. We hoped someone would start talking to us. Our lame strategy was to let the universe steer us into a Hollywood story.

Of course, that didn't happen. Instead, we felt gawky and



decidedly foreign for the first time on the journey.

Demoralized, we went to the beach mid-afternoon to take a break from our quest. Matt swam in the sea while I sat at the fringe, sunk into the sand, and let warm water run over the tops of my legs. I thought about Avery and tears ran down my chest. *Little girl, I miss you so much*, I told her. *Can you please help me find someone to give the bike to?* As the waves lapped at my legs, there was a feeling that came to me that my bike was meant for a mom with a young child. I couldn't explain it; I just had a peculiar sense that it was going to be okay.

Once again, Matt and I set out on our awkward adventure.

"Should I just go up to someone and start talking to them?" Matt wondered. He started to approach an old man, then stopped and came back. "This just feels too weird."

When we saw someone approaching, we said tauntingly under our breath, "If you look at us and are nice, you'll get a bicycle."

If they looked at us at all it was a look of indifference; of course they had things to do, and we no doubt looked shady—the sheepish way we were stalking townspeople and peering into windows.

We slowly patrolled the dirt streets, sometimes several times, looking for someone deserving, looking for a mother.

"What are we going to say when we find someone?" asked Matt. "Do you want a bicycle? That sounds creepy."

"I don't know," I replied. "I think when it's the right person it's just going to come out."

We walked the bikes to the very end of a narrow dirt road, one we had been down before. There was a humble house with no front door. This time, I peered inside and saw



rubble piled on the floor and a broken chair leaning into a pile of gravel. A woman in her thirties came around the side of the house. She was hauling a five-gallon water bucket with her son who looked to be about five years old. She looked up and smiled at me, and I knew.

“Excuse me,” I said as politely as I could in Spanish. “I have a question.”

Patient and composed, she looked me in the eye. Her black hair was pulled up in a messy pony tail, and large silver hoop earrings hung to her shoulders. She looked like someone I might be friends with under different circumstances.

“Um, do you have a bicycle?”

She cocked her head to the side, “No.”

I smiled. “Hi, I’m Adrienne from Alaska. I’ve been traveling in Cuba for two weeks by bicycle and now I am looking for someone to give my bike to.”

She looked a little confused and put the bucket down. Her son leaned into her and tried to follow what I was saying.

“Would you like this bicycle?”

Her brow furrowed, she paused, then she asked, “*Regalar o dar?*” She needed me to clarify that it was a gift and I wasn’t asking for anything in return.

“My friend gave me this bicycle to give to a woman with children in Cuba.” This was a little spin on the truth but I hoped it would reinforce the idea of a gift. She stepped toward me with an incredulous smile and extended her hand. “My name is Gualquidia. Oye!” she excitedly called to a little boy playing in the street. Her son scurried to her side. He looked to be almost three, the same age Avery was when she died. The little boy had the same shaved head as his older brother and together they reached out to touch the bicycle.



Gualquidia gripped the handlebars and looked it over in disbelief. “Thank you,” she said, looking up. She stepped forward and hugged me while the little boys stood still and wide-eyed.

We stood facing one another and I opened my mouth to say something else. I wanted to tell her that I had a three-year-old daughter who loved bicycles too. I wanted to tell her that she died and that I miss her so much. I wanted to ask her to think of Avery when she rides this bike. I started to tear up, started to devise what to say first, but I stopped. *Avery would want this to be a true gift, unburdened by my grief.*

I looked at Gualquidia and thought, *your government promises you one thing while taking something else. We Americans are on our way to your town offering hope and opportunity, but there’s a price tag you can’t see yet. Too many things with strings attached. This doesn’t need to be one of them.*

I quickly blinked the tears back and mustered a smile. “It was a pleasure to meet you,” I said. “I hope you enjoy the bike.”

