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Kristy Maher  
*Furman University*

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# A life together, worlds apart

By Kristy Maher

**Commuter marriages aren't that unusual these days — unless the commute requires travel to another continent.**

It is mid-June of 2008, and my fiancé Paul and I have decided to go to Savuti for the weekend. Savuti is about four to five hours north of Maun, Botswana (the village we live in), in Chobe National Park. It is one of the most pristine, unspoiled natural wildlife areas in the world. Much of the area consists of vast fields of dry marsh areas with a few rocky hills here and there, such as Leopard Hill and “rock painting hill,” where you can see 5,000-year-old paintings done by the Bushmen, the indigenous people of southern Africa.

I had visited this area before with a group of Furman students in 2007, but that was during the “wet” season. It is now the “dry” season, and it seems like a very different place. This time of year the mud of the wet season is replaced with deep sand. Paul has decided that, since I'll soon be spending much of my life in Africa, this is a good time for me to learn to drive in the bush.

Driving in Botswana is, in general, quite challenging. Not only am I on what feels like

the wrong side of the car and the wrong side of the road, but there are donkeys, goats, cows, pedestrians and taxi cabs going every which way.

On this particular morning in the bush, however, I'm doing pretty well, trundling along and thinking, “I'm driving and there are giraffes outside the window! This is pretty cool.” Even the deep sand isn't throwing me too much; I just shift into four-wheel drive and motor through it. We make our way over hills and through some deep, sandy turns, watching for “head-banger” holes that could send Paul flying out of the car as he stands, taking pictures, with half his body out the sunroof (almost lost him once!).

We head up to Zwei zwei Pan to find elephants. We've seen impalas, giraffes, wart hogs, wildebeests and an amazing array of birds (lilac-breasted rollers, horn bills, bee eaters, tawny eagles, franklins, starlings, cape turtle doves). But no “ellies” — our pet name for elephants — so we go looking.



Eventually we come across a herd of mothers and babies. But within seconds my excitement turns to panic as the large matriarch of the herd takes one look at us, shakes her head angrily and, flapping her large ears, trumpets loudly. Then she starts running — full out, right for us. This behavior is out of the ordinary, as she gave very little warning. She simply moved off, looking at us warily, then circled, tucked her trunk in, folded her ears back — indicating she was going for a serious charge — lowered her head, and charged toward us. Since we had stumbled across a breeding herd with young calves, perhaps she was feeling nervous and protective.

Paul immediately shouts, “Put it in reverse and go, go, go!” After one false shift into low gear, I quickly correct, find reverse and drive as fast as I can backwards down a two-tracked dirt path. All I can hear is the trumpeting of the elephant and Paul’s urgent shouts of “Go! Go! Go! Go!” So I punch it and keep navigating backwards through the bush, hoping not to run into a tree or stump or to get stuck in the sand.

I navigate as best I can through the twists and turns and thorny bushes. The chase seems to go on forever. Finally Paul signals that it’s OK to stop — at which point I realize that my heart is racing, and I think I’m going to throw up. There was no time for fear when it was actually happening, but now the fear sets in. We could have died. Who would have found us out here in the bush?

I didn’t really get to see the elephant since I was looking in the other direction, but Paul reports that she came within about three feet of the front left bumper. With her trunk tucked, ears back and head down, she fully intended to ram us.

Later that night, when I ask how scary the incident was on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being “terrifying”), he says it’s hard to say. He was too busy “making a plan” about what to do when she rolled us over, because he was sure she would. He claims that we came about as close as we could to disaster without being hit, and rates the event an 8.5.



The good news is that I didn’t panic, and I’m apparently a pretty good driver, particularly when going backwards in the bush while being chased by an elephant. Who knew?

### The teacher and the tour guide

For as long as I could remember, I’d wanted to go to Africa. In the winter of 2007, I got my chance when, while on sabbatical, I tagged along with a Furman study away group to conduct research on tuberculosis. Little did I know what a life-changing trip it would be.

My research had, until this point, focused on health inequalities. Specifically, I was interested in the ways that race, ethnicity, social class and gender affected people’s health, especially in regard to access to health care. I decided to study TB cross-culturally because it is a disease of poverty that affects not only homeless people in the United States but millions in the developing world, especially those with HIV/AIDS. Getting patients to comply with and finish the months of treatment is often a challenge, and I was particularly interested in incentive programs designed to encourage patients to complete their full course of treatment.

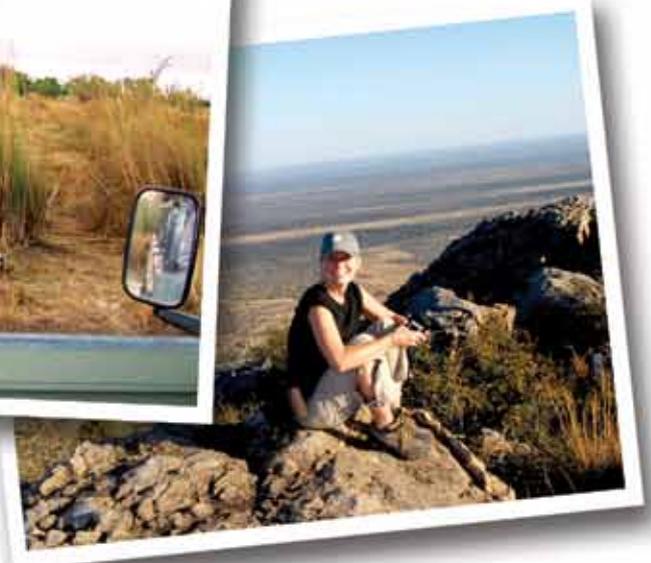
Paul and I met on a 10-day photographic safari to Botswana that was part of the Furman group’s six-week trip. He was one of the guides.

People often ask, “Was it love at first sight?” Perhaps if it was it would make for a better story, but the truth is the first time we set eyes on each

other was in a hot dusty parking lot in middle of nowhere Botswana.

Our group had left Namibia before sunrise by coach, only to wait two hours in a parking lot for our guides to show up. We were hot, tired and annoyed. Paul says his first impression of me was that I looked like I had just sucked on a lemon. My first impression of him? I thought, “Who’s the overgrown kid with the funny accent?” Over the trip, however, we warmed to each other, but as you might imagine, with 30 students, three faculty members (and one spouse), six guides and two cooks, there weren’t many opportunities for private conversations.

Still, what started as a couple of casual chats during the trip continued via e-mail and Skype when I returned to the States. I found him fascinating. Born in the United States, raised primarily in Europe (Germany and Austria — his father worked for the U.S. government), he had been in Botswana for years, having joined the Peace Corps as a Bushmen development officer back in the 1970s. Since then he’d had a variety of jobs. He’d worked in conservation to prevent the dredging of the Okavango Delta by DeBeers, the diamond manufacturer. He’d also coordinated a five-month motorcycle trip across the country, lived in the national parks of Botswana for two years gathering data via GPS to create maps of the park system, and been part of an anti-poaching effort to prevent the unlawful killing of rhinos and elephants for the trade of their horns and tusks. Was this guy for real?



Soon both of us realized we wanted to explore this relationship further, so we agreed that he should come to the States for a couple of weeks. Impulsively, after that visit, I decided to return with him to Botswana for the summer. Family and friends who have known me for years found this a bit shocking — I am not an impulsive person. But sometimes the heart trumps the head, and I'm very thankful that it did in this case.

My students are often curious about how Paul and I decided to marry. I guess they find it a bit funny that, although we have always lived and worked on different continents, the long commute and lengthy separations never crossed my mind as deterrents to marriage.

Within months of our first meeting, Paul asked me to marry him. My response was that he needed to know me better before I could give him an answer. Several months later, on a camping trip to the Trans-Kalahari Park, in the midst of the hottest weather I have ever experienced, I evidently did something that led Paul to exclaim in exasperation, "You are a stubborn and difficult woman!" The man rarely, if ever, gets flustered, so this was a remarkable comment coming from him. I don't remember what I did to cause such an outburst, but I remember my reply: "OK, now you can ask me to marry you!"

We were married in July 2008 in the *kgotla*, the sacred space of the local tribe in Botswana. It was an extremely cold winter morning — I was wearing long johns under my obligatory skirt. The ceremony started before sunrise, with the full moon still shining. We were joined by three friends — two of whom served as the required witnesses and one who took pictures — under the large thatched roof of the open shelter,

which was filled with 12 African couples and their families and friends. We exchanged our vows to the "ululating" of women wearing brightly colored shawls, a local wedding tradition.

## Making it work

People often ask me if it is hard to live on two continents. I tell them that, wherever I am, I try to enjoy the moment.

When I'm in Africa, I love spending time with my husband, camping in the bush and absorbing the natural beauty and wildlife of Botswana. When I'm in the States, I enjoy spending time with family and friends (and my dog) and the ease of everyday living so contrary to where I live the other half of my life. (Have a flat tire? Call AAA. Need something for dinner? Pick up Thai takeout on the way home.) Living on two continents has made me appreciate many of the things I've taken for granted for years. When I turn on the tap in my kitchen in Greenville and clean, potable water comes out, I am grateful in a way that I never was before.

We try to see each other as often as possible, and despite the prolonged separations, we've found ways to make things work. When I'm on campus teaching during fall semester, Paul typically visits for a month. I go to Africa at Christmas break. In the spring, although Paul is unable to travel with our study away group in South Africa and Namibia because of his business obligations (he owns an office block, runs his own Geographic Information System mapping business, and is a part owner of a safari company and an Internet company), he joins us when we are in Botswana. On occasion he'll

visit me for a weekend when we are in Namibia — a drive that can take as long as 13 hours, one way. After Furman's graduation ceremony in May, I head back to Botswana for the summer to continue my research into cultural factors that contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS in Botswana, which has the second highest rates in the world.

Living on two continents offers other benefits, especially professionally. With Furman's new curriculum and change to the semester system, I have had the opportunity to develop a first-year seminar on global health called "Curses, Cures and Clinics" that allows me to use my firsthand knowledge of Africa in the classroom. Talking about beliefs in witchcraft, for example, using conversations I've had with locals in Botswana, makes a rather unbelievable topic more believable. A recent survey in Botswana actually found that 28 percent of the population believes that HIV/AIDS is caused by witchcraft.

Furman's new calendar has also allowed for the expansion of the Africa study away program, which I have been fortunate to direct for the last three years (including this semester). The program features courses from four disciplines: sociology (which I teach), history, psychology, religion (in 2009 and 2010) and, this year, economics.

We begin with three weeks of preparatory work on campus, then travel to South Africa, Namibia and Botswana for approximately nine

weeks. In April we return to campus for three more weeks of classes. As director, I travel with the students the entire time, and faculty representing the other courses “parachute” in for two weeks each. We are a traveling seminar that doesn’t stay anywhere for more than a week. We travel by plane, bus, van and safari vehicle, and we sleep in hotels, guest houses and tents. On several occasions during the trip, the students enjoy “home stays” with local families.

We visit diamond mines, hospitals and non-profit organizations, and engage people at community organizations and orphanages. We go to some of the best known tourist locations on the continent, including historic Robben Island (where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 26 years) and the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. We travel to the Drakensburg Mountains and climb Table Mountain in Cape Town and the infamous Dune 7 in Namibia. We see some of the most beautiful natural areas in the world — the Okavango Delta, Kalahari Desert, Victoria Falls.

It is an amazing experience. I love teaching in the real world, with all the spontaneity and creativity it affords. I love that I am constantly learning, right alongside my students. It is one thing for me to lecture on global health

disparities. It is quite another to visit a rural public hospital in northern Namibia and contrast its lack of staff and supplies to the private clinic in Swakopmund, Namibia, where Angelina Jolie gave birth to her daughter, Shiloh.

And without question, the extra time I spend in Africa makes me a better teacher. The knowledge I share with my students is firsthand and not just gleaned from what I’ve read, but what I’ve lived. I have become adept at handling all that one faces when coordinating such a trip. I have a better understanding of the difficulties that arise despite one’s best efforts to plan. I know how to improvise when the plan you devised months in advance goes awry. I have a feel for how Africa works that would not be possible if I visited only on occasion, and I’ve developed incredible patience for the process that is Africa.

I feel fortunate to work at a university that recognizes that this knowledge and skill set are unique, and that allows me to put these skills to work by directing the Africa program. It is potentially a life-changing experience for our students. The intellectual and emotional growth I observe in them each year is incredibly rewarding.

Of course, my marital arrangement does have its own set of challenges. It is especially hard to be halfway across the world when your husband is suffering from his ninth bout of malaria. Because we experience separations that last as long as 10 weeks, it is difficult not to count the days until we are reunited.

But despite the unconventional nature of my intercontinental marriage, I really love my life. I feel as if I’ve finally found the balance between the side of me that needs stability and order, and the side that craves adventure and excitement. As odd as it seems, it suits me, and I feel fortunate to have arrived at this point while working at a university that appreciates my talents — and lifestyle.

I love my husband. I love my career. I love my life on two continents. [F]

*Kristy Maher has taught sociology at Furman since 1993. She is a graduate of St. Michael’s College and earned her master’s and Ph.D. degrees from Yale University. Read more about her life at <http://muddyhyena.blogspot.com>. Photos courtesy Kristy Maher.*

