

1

The Move

Most of us have spent our lives assuming that if we work hard, we will achieve our goals, that we will lead comfortable, meaningful lives. We start out with big dreams about what we want to accomplish in life, the kind of person we want to be, how we want to change the world. At least, that was how I started out. But despite my successes in life, I found myself in a place where both my career and my marriage were falling apart, where my three boys knew their dad better than me. On the brink of turning fifty, I had been presuming fulfillment, or at least incremental progress, but over time, I had let stress, disappointment, and the pressure of expectations blind me to the fact that I wasn't making the changes—the choices—that would deliver those expectations. Everyday life has a way of clouding our thinking and calling into question the things we were once most sure of about ourselves.

Which was why my family and I—my husband, Bill, and our three sons Sam, Eli, and Kai—landed in Kigali, Rwanda, one night in August 2012. As the five of us descended from the plane, the warm air smelled of smoke and appeared hazy, as if hundreds of families living nearby had just cooked their evening meal over an open fire. Our exhaustion masked any nerves we were feeling about our arrival and what it meant. It had been a relatively smooth travel day, all things considered, as smooth as it can be traveling with your husband, a tween, and two teenage boys, and with the bulk of our personal belongings crammed into ten assorted duffels and suitcases.

The experience stood in stark contrast to how I normally traveled in the field: light and solo. It felt new and strange being there with my family, with the boys. The country office sent two drivers to help with all the luggage and deposit us at the hotel where we were staying for the first couple of days. The boys opened their car windows to the warm breeze and view, eager for their first glimpse of Kigali. Kai, who'd asked me about twenty-five times if we were "there yet" seemed especially curious. I pointed out the bullet-riddled parliament building and other landmarks as we drove through the city's dim streets.

I'd been to Rwanda many times before but had never looked at it through the lens of a potential resident or through the lens of motherhood. This was Bill's second time in the city. We had met in Kigali three months earlier to explore housing options, tour the boys' new school, and more generally assess the lay of the land. There had been tension between us then—so much was not being said—but we were on the same page about Rwanda as a place to live.

There was good reason for the tension. For weeks now my family had been walking on eggshells around me because my bid to become CEO of Women for Women International, an organization that helps women survivors of war rebuild their lives, had failed.

I had worked there for nearly a decade. As a woman, I'd been leaning in hard from an early age, traveling all over the world for work, which often meant being away from my husband and sons for weeks at a time. Like so many people in our modern, success-driven society, the job defined me. But this work was much more than a job. Helping women who had survived war move from crisis and poverty to stability and self-sufficiency resonated powerfully with me, given my background and experiences. It felt right, like what I was supposed to be doing. This failure felt personal. It was devastating.

And then, while we were all in the car on the way to the airport to visit my brother and his family in Boston, I blurted out: "I think we should move to Rwanda," as if I'd just thought of it. As if I were saying, "I think we should go out for pizza tonight"!

Nobody said anything. It took a few minutes for everybody to understand that I was being serious.

Rwanda? As in Africa?

Yes, that's the one. *Rwanda.*

Bill kept his eyes fixed on the windshield, trying to maintain his concentration on the road ahead, but I could tell he was fuming. After all I'd put Bill and the kids through over the past months, I had just thrown out this crazy idea in front of the boys without even bothering to discuss it with him first.

The idea of a move had actually begun to percolate a few days before. Though I didn't have a clear plan at first, I had been mentally cataloguing the places where I had traveled for work: Iraq, Nigeria, Congo, South Sudan, Rwanda, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most were off the table from a security standpoint. Bosnia was a possibility. The country was almost twenty years post-conflict and now relatively stable, albeit dysfunctional, and Bosnian women, close to half of whom were unemployed, critically needed economic-development support. It was one of Europe's poorest countries. *I could make that work*, I thought.

There was another option, though a bolder one, a place where, not so long ago, the rivers had run with blood during the genocide of nearly one million Tutsi. Rwanda, a landlocked country in East Africa, slightly smaller than the state of Maryland, was now beautiful, dynamic, and safe.

Once I'd put the idea out there, without a thought for any of the specifics, I was frantically trying to line up arguments in favor of the move. Bill and I had talked off and on over the years about living abroad with the kids, but it never seemed to be a good time. Our fourteen-year-old fraternal twins Sam and Eli were about to start high school, and Kai, our eleven-year-old, was going into his final year of elementary school. The boys were growing up so fast, I told myself, that this was my chance to spend more time with them. Rwanda was a place where I could still do my job and be more an actual parent than a virtual one. Living in Africa would be an important cross-cultural experience for them, a chance to develop greater humility and global citizenship. I convinced myself this was not just about me, but could I convince them? Could I convince Bill?

The fight started building silently between us, each of us knowing what the other would say.

Bill was biting the hairs on his forearm—a longtime nervous quirk and a clear sign that he was having a hard time processing this, that he felt ambushed by me raising this in front of the boys. I kept at it anyway.

The boys were chattering away in the back, more positive than I expected. Kai loved the idea of life in a warm climate, wearing shorts every day. Sam and Eli

calculated how much their social capital would rise from a year in Africa. “Why are you being so defensive, Dad?” they pressed. The boys couldn’t have known how important this move was to me—I didn’t yet know it myself, but the love for them that swelled within me in this moment boosted my confidence.

At the check-in counter, in the security line, at the departure gate, during the short flight to Boston, I spoon-fed the conversation to Bill, giving him space to digest it. We talked about it on the drive to the hotel where we were staying the next three nights. By the time we were out taking our first stroll along the Charles River, Bill was beginning to warm to the idea. Rwanda. Africa. Move. Maybe it wasn’t so crazy after all?

I had yet to sell the idea to the organization, but there was a strong case to be made for it. They were transitioning leadership in three of the four African countries where they worked, about to close down a program and set up a new base in South Sudan. They were also knee-deep in a large-scale construction project, building the first-of-its-kind Women’s Opportunity Center in Rwanda. The project had gotten off to a late start after more than a year of bureaucratic delays and was already behind schedule for a planned June 2013 opening. With huge challenges ahead, they needed more heels on the ground in Africa. Having me there could be helpful.

When we got back from Boston, I quietly broached the idea with the board chair over coffee, and then approached my colleagues with a proposal. I would relocate to Rwanda with my family for one year to oversee construction of the Women’s Opportunity Center and run point on other operations in Africa. What I didn’t say was how I desperately needed an escape from my present life and time to figure things out, how I needed to be somewhere else.

My plan was approved within one week, and my head spun. Ecstatic, I called Bill to share the good news. “That’s great,” he said. “Let’s talk more about it tonight.” I could sense him being careful, trying to be supportive yet noncommittal.

I came home gushing, full of verve. It had been a long time since I’d felt such eagerness about anything. Bill, as usual, was more focused on the practicalities. Where would the boys go to school? Did we have to pay taxes in both countries? Could we get residency and work permits in-country or would we need to arrange them beforehand? He was raising all the right questions. All of them would need to be answered in good time. But for right now, for just a few moments, couldn’t we simply savor the idea of moving to Rwanda without getting mired in the details of how we would actually live there?

It was then that I realized something about all this upheaval. I was at the midpoint of my life. The boys were growing up and would be going off to college in a few short years. They would be on their own before we knew it. Bill and I would, too. Empty nesting could be traumatic for any number of reasons, but the thought of it filled me with a particular sense of dread and doubt. Now that I wasn't so consumed by my career goals, I could see that my work, and the kids, had often served as a distraction from the problems in our marriage. Was Bill the person I was prepared to spend the rest of my life with?

I'd known other women whose marriages had fallen apart for one reason or another: one partner too driven by work or lust, or both partners too busy to find time for each other. Or it was a hundred little annoyances that had festered and become insurmountable. People change, they grow apart—it happens. I had prided myself on striking some sort of chaotic life balance between the demands of a high-level job, my marriage, and contemporary parenting. But I was fooling myself. Bill had been sleeping in another bedroom for months now. I was at a loss as to what made me happy anymore.

"Karen, what are we talking about here?" Bill asked that night when I told him I thought just the boys and I should go. "Are you saying you *want* to go without me?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." It was all happening so fast. "I just know that *I* need to go," I said after a fraught silence. "And I want the boys to come with me."

I'd barely formalized the thought in my own mind until that moment, but I knew it to be true. What I was asking for without saying it was almost a trial separation. Bill looked surprised, and hurt, but he said little.

Over the next week, we fought, discussed, and debated the move. Just when I thought we'd landed somewhere, Bill would raise a new strand of argument, and another late-night yelling match would erupt. He and two partners had recently acquired the communications firm where he'd worked for many years and was the new CEO. He needed to focus on managing his consulting practice, he'd said. We didn't talk about our marriage, our fights, but my last, best argument clinched it: after all these years of me commuting for work around the globe and him being in charge at home, it was his turn to do the travel and I would run the household.

So it was agreed: the boys and I would move, and Bill every so often would "commute" to Kigali.

I was thrilled, elated that Bill had agreed. But moments later, the reality of it struck hard. What the hell was I doing? What was I trying to prove? I'd been in a near-constant state of anxiety—barely able to eat or rest—for months now, as a result of the CEO search-and-hire process, which had dragged on for close to a year. Near the end, it had become unbearable. I had fought hard for the role, a position I felt I had earned, but the process had shaken me, shattered my confidence.

The board said they wanted me to stay, but with another restructuring on the horizon, I knew my time there would be limited.

Much of the following weeks had been a blur. I sulked around like a jilted lover.

Bill and the boys waited for me to get over it, to move on. "Come on, you're Karen Fucking Sherman," Bill said, more from annoyance than support, as we were clearing the dinner dishes one night. That was his way of rousing me whenever I got stuck or down on myself. But I couldn't seem to let it go.

I was ashamed to admit it, but I had slipped back into a version my adolescent self, into the girl who feared her father's condemnation, his evident disappointment in her failing, once again, to live up to his expectations. From an early age, I had poured all of my passion and energy into work. I had built myself up, fortified myself with my career. It was a form of escape—at first from the turbulence of my childhood home and later from my problems in general.

I had grasped wildly for some kind of a solution. For Rwanda. Deep down I knew this was about more than a job. I had lost something, something essential that I couldn't quite name but could feel in its startling absence. But with so many women suffering around the world, it felt self-indulgent to be anything less than grateful for my lot, for the myriad of personal and professional choices at my disposal, for the life of privilege and abundance. But the truth was staring me in the face: I had lost my sense of joy, my sense of self. Everything, it seemed, was coming apart, my career, my marriage, my life.

But standing in our bedroom that night, having just convinced Bill that moving to Rwanda was the right thing for our family to do, all I felt was panic. What if this wasn't a crossroad at all, but my life as I knew it—everything I had worked so hard for—coming to a screeching halt?

And now, here we were in Rwanda, fractured and yet willing to try to engender some kind of fresh start, to do something big, something life changing even, whatever that meant.