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Monkey Dancing: A Father, Two Kids, and a Journey to the Ends of the Earth
By Daniel Glick

INTRODUCTION

After his divorce, Daniel Glick's ex-wife moved 1,000 miles away to live with her new girlfriend. A year later, his older brother died of breast cancer. Torn by these twin losses, the embarked on his journey into single fatherhood in an admittedly unusual way: by taking his two children on a five-month, around-the-world journey. Monkey Dancing is a chronicle of the extraordinary odyssey they took together, as well as a moving and honest account of the internal voyage the author took to reach some equilibrium in his life.

PROLOGUE

In the middle of the night, after my daughter Zoe woke me for the third time because she was afraid of the snakes, I wondered, not for the first time, whether this trip had really been such an inspired idea. Earlier, Zoe had been complaining about leeches, and before that mosquitoes, and it dawned on me that unless you were raised in the rainforest, accustomed to strangler figs and spiders the size of gerbils, Borneo was a pretty forbidding environment. For a nine-year-old girl reared in suburban Colorado, this place looked downright menacing. My thirteen-year-old son Kolya, also awakened by his sister, didn't help things when he authoritatively informed Zoe that, since she was the smallest mammal among us, any predator would obviously eat her first.

I shot Kolya a venomous look that temporarily silenced him and reassured Zoe that it was unlikely that snakes could board the 55-foot houseboat (called a klotok) where we were sleeping, moored on the banks of the Sekonyer River in southern Kalimantan. She wasn't persuaded. Zoe knew the serpents were lurking. Heading upriver earlier that afternoon, past suffocating green jungle crawling from riverbanks and proboscis monkeys hanging from trees like misshapen, mischievous fruit, we'd noticed a sudden movement in the water. Peering ahead, we felt certain it was a crocodile. We were wrong. The animal's head, although almost as big as a crocodile's, belonged to a 20-foot-long python with a body circumference only slightly smaller than my thigh. We gaped with disbelief as the python disappeared into the murky water, leaving deceptively minor ripples.

As the ripples receded, we became especially attentive to other motions in the silty ribbon of river that carried us deeper into the jungle. I felt acutely aware of the reassuring diesel engine chug that muted the unfamiliar and suddenly ominous chirps and creaks and rustles emanating from the overgrown banks. We moved forward from the deck, shaded by a blue plastic canopy jerry-rigged on metal poles, and positioned ourselves on the bow like sentries. Within five minutes, we spotted another serpentine motion in the river and glimpsed a much smaller bright green reptile with a classic triangular-shaped head, slithering with startling speed toward the port-side shore: a pit viper, one of the world's most poisonous snakes.

I held Zoe's hand, tried to convey my amazement rather than fear. In the space of five minutes we had seen proboscis monkeys, with their bulbous, clown-like noses, a species that didn't live anywhere else on the planet-as well as a python and a pit viper. This was what it was all about for me, heading upriver into Heart of Darkness territory with my two children-a voyage to the headwaters of grief, loss, and-who knows?-possibly even the source of healing and grace after such momentous transitions in our lives.

Dual tragedies had propelled the three of us into orbit: my older brother's sudden death from cancer, and the departure of their mother, my wife, after our wrenching divorce. The weight of those losses accompanied us as surely as our backpacks filled with shorts, underwear, Game Boys, guidebooks, traveler's checks, portable CD players, DVDs, mosquito netting, bug spray, asthma medicine, malaria pills, antibiotics, extra passport pictures, my laptop, and Kolya's skateboard.

After a treacherous passage through the past few years, a long, open-ended journey had beckoned to me like a Siren's song. Hitting the road had always served me in times of transition as an entrée into a reflective trance, as a tool of personal reinvention, as literal and metaphorical escape. For much of my life, I had sought psychic salve in the thrill of discovery amidst wild, unfamiliar places and among unpredictable traveling companions. Borneo certainly qualified as wild and unfamiliar, and my two children effortlessly supplied the unpredictability.

Still, I feared that my reflexive tendency toward flight might somehow backfire in my current circumstances. I couldn't even be sure that my trusted traveling muse would pull me from my current chasm of the soul. I certainly couldn't predict what the wild and unfamiliar might do for my two kids in their shell-shocked state. In setting out on this journey, I knew my children and I would encounter both fear and amazement, the inevitable result of exchanging quotidian sureties and the comforts of routine for bumpy bus rides and motorcycle taxi rides and elephant-back rides and the incessant buzzing of mosquitoes in gecko-squawking tropical nights.

What I didn't know was what kind of inner journey we would all take. Here on the Sekonyer River, Kolya had descended into a withdrawn, contentious teen funk. Zoe had

entered her own Heart of Darkness territory, portentous and terrifying. For her, this part of the trip was an odyssey to the archetypes of fear, to a motherless land of poisonous snakes and voracious jungle animals that make little girls disappear without a burp.

Instead of liberating ourselves from the daily reminders of our losses, I wondered, would we all come unmoored completely in these unfamiliar and fearsome settings? Was I being selfish beyond all measure? Had I already pushed the kids too far?

That night, after Zoe had finally been coaxed to sleep by the houseboat's lapping lullaby, I worried about the kids' ability to cope with the stress of such an unfamiliar place. No matter how much grown-ups extol kids' adaptability when we change their routines to accommodate our jobs or our upwardly mobile dreams or our divorces, children are the most reactionary of all creatures. If I so much as cut up Kolya's French toast horizontally rather than diagonally when he was four, he would wail as if I had knocked him off his booster. Even entering his teens, he'd eat the same bowl of cereal every morning, spend every afternoon learning to kick-flip his skateboard, pass every weekend evening with as many friends as could gather in front of a Sony Playstation.

I knew this, knew that molding this routine—the Cheerios mornings, the Friday night popcorn and videos at home, the bedtimes and reading times and Saturday morning chores—was all-important as the three of us rearranged our lives. Traipsing around the world, then, where the unfamiliar became commonplace, suddenly seemed like folly rather than the dazzling idea I had imagined.

Here we were in Borneo, where we had come to see the orangutans of Tanjung Puting National Park, two months into our five-month around-the-world odyssey. I had constructed only the basic thread of an itinerary, which was to take the kids to visit a few of the planet's great ecological wonders that were in danger of disappearing as the consequence of human development. Already the three of us had completed a five-day "walkabout" on an Australian rainforest island, shoed five-foot-long lace monitor lizards away from our tent site, spotted several rare and endangered cassowary birds, scuba dived and snorkeled off the Great Barrier Reef, and climbed the highest mountain in Bali, among other adventures. There were months yet to come, however, including more jungle treks in Vietnam and Nepal, surreal border crossings into Cambodia, and, although we didn't know it yet, the even more surreal events of September 11, 2001, still two weeks away, that changed the tenor of the whole world.