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Suitcase Full of Grief, Map Full of Stars

Exiled by betrayal, I left to survive and learned I was stronger than I knew.

by Tanya Fraser

I finally hauled my arse up the hill and onto the levada. My lungs burned, my legs ached, and I gulped air like it might run out. By the time I reached the top, I sounded like a donkey with asthma. On one side, mountains rose in folds of deep green, damp with morning mist. On the other, the Atlantic stretched forever, sunlight throwing diamonds across the water. The path was slick from last night's rain. I moved slowly, trying to catch my breath while taking in a view that stopped me in my

tracks. Alone on an island in the middle of the ocean, I felt that rare kind of small where the world goes huge and you can't help but lean closer.

What no one else on that trail knew was that, months earlier, my life had collapsed. A sixteen-year marriage ended in betrayal. The home I thought we'd grow old in was gone. The career I'd been building for years ended in a matter of weeks. Everything I knew was stripped away, leaving me staring at the wreckage, wondering who I was without it. To the people passing me on the trail, I probably looked like a woman enjoying a scenic hike, not someone internally auditioning for a part in a Shakespearean tragedy. Offstage, the curtain had fallen, and I had no idea what the next act would be.

I didn't travel to "find myself." I travelled because I couldn't stay. Two weeks after I caught my husband cheating—on our home security camera, no less—he suggested we separate, and I should "go travel" while he "took care of the house." Eighteen years together, and suddenly I was the one exiled. Home security, it turned out, secured everyone but me. The air in that house felt sour, every room echoing with what I couldn't unknow. Staying meant living inside the walls where the betrayal happened, with him still working alongside her, the affair breathing down the street. I couldn't breathe there. Friends and family said he should have been the one to leave, and they were right. But he didn't. So I packed a suitcase, pulled my savings, and bought a ticket. Booking that first flight to Peru felt like stepping into both a dream and an escape hatch: bucket-list wonder mixed with disbelief.

When I was a little girl and adults asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I always had the same answer: *"I want to travel the world and write a book about my adventures."* That little girl was stirring again, pushing to the surface. Even if I couldn't name it then, some part of me knew getting on those planes was exactly what I needed to do.

My first stop was Peru. I landed in Lima and joined a group of digital nomads who would be spending the month together, strangers at first, quickly becoming my makeshift travel family. We worked in cafés, wandered markets fragrant with sizzling meat skewers and piles of citrus, the air buzzing with bargaining and bursts of laughter. We swapped stories over pisco sours and signed up for experiences on a whim. One evening, a few of us took a cajón lesson in a hot little basement studio in Miraflores. My teacher, a wiry man with amber eyes, grinned like he already knew I was about to make a complete fool of myself. And I did. My rhythm was somewhere between "washing machine on spin cycle" and "two raccoons fighting over a garbage can". Then, like a car coughing into life on the third desperate turn of the key, something clicked. We laughed, we played, we found a groove.

Days later, in a sweaty club full of locals, I spotted him again. He waved me over, and suddenly I was swept into a circle of friends, dancing until our calves burned, the drumbeat replaced by the thrum of music and the heat of bodies moving together. Random, ridiculous, and one of the first moments in months when joy bubbled up without permission, along with the kind of sweat that could fill a small bucket.

From Peru, I flew to Thailand. The climate hit hard, and my immune system surrendered almost immediately. Sick, jet-lagged, and questioning every decision

that brought me there—including thinking street food was a good first meal—I ended up in a temple speaking with a monk who invited me to spend the day in meditation. We spoke in words and in silence about impermanence, kindness, and letting go. His voice was steady, like a metronome keeping time against the chaos in my head. By sunset, something I'd been clinging to loosened its grip. My shoulders dropped for the first time in months. I still felt like a wilted lettuce, but at least now I had a bit more crunch.

Then came Madeira, a floating green jewel in the Atlantic, where I stayed in a co-living house perched on the edge of Ponta do Sol. Within days, our group fell into a rhythm: shared meals by the beach, late-night conversations over poncha, and a growing obsession with astrocartography. We pored over our star maps like kids with treasure charts, tracing zodiac lines across the globe, dreaming aloud about where we might live, love, and feel most alive. We treated our star charts with the seriousness of scientists, as if the universe had actually hired us. Conversations bounced from practical (*apparently, I should never live in Berlin*) to wildly romantic (*move to Lisbon and destiny delivers the love of my life*). We were connected not only by where we had been but by the possibility of where we might go next.

Looking back, the drumbeats in Peru, the stillness in Thailand, and the star maps in Madeira had more in common than I realized. They were anchors in the middle of my storm. Each place pulled me closer to people I might never have met otherwise, people who reminded me that connection is still possible when your life feels unrecognizable.

Travel during personal turbulence forces you into the present. You can't spiral about your divorce when you're trying to keep a beat in a hot little studio in Lima. You can't rehearse old arguments when a monk is teaching you to let your thoughts drift by like clouds. You can't feel completely alone when you're sprawled on a beach with new friends, mapping imaginary lives in cities you've never seen.

It also gives you strength and courage you might not recognize until later. At the time, I didn't consider myself brave. I was trying to keep going, and to avoid becoming the kind of person who spends all day in pyjamas eating ice cream out of the tub and cereal for dinner. Now, with distance, I see it clearly: my life had fallen apart, yet I went out into the world with a suitcase in hand, no plan beyond the next plane ticket, and an open heart for whatever might happen. That was the bravest thing I've ever done, even if it didn't feel like it then.

Travel has connected me, in these turbulent times, to other people, to myself, and to the truth of how strong I am.

I left home with a suitcase full of grief and uncertainty. I haven't returned home exactly. I don't have a permanent address, and I'm not entirely sure I want one.

But I carry something better: the sound of laughter in a Peruvian dance club, the memory of monks chanting in Thailand, and the echo of late-night conversations under the stars of Madeira.

Home may not be a fixed point on a map. Maybe it's the place where you can exhale, where the people around you see you for who you are and let you be exactly that.

For now, I'm happy to keep looking for those places: one drumbeat, one quiet breath, one star chart at a time, lungs still burning, but at least now I know they'll hold.

Fraser