

## The Writing on the Wall

At Navava camp, vandalism is encouraged. A small campsite on the eastern coast of Vanua Levu, Fiji, the camp comprises of seven buildings: five huts, one dining hall, a meeting hall and restrooms, all of which rest atop a sloping hill, overlooking the vast Pacific Ocean. Apart from its size and location what makes this camp different is that the interior walls and most of the furniture are covered in handwriting. Scrolled over every inch of wall space, are the names of everyone who has ever attended the camp and the year that they attended. Some names date back to the camp's founding in 1969. Going over the names there is one that sticks out. It can be found in every hut; on every wall, window, post and door. In various fonts, sizes and styles, sometimes accompanied by an illegible doodle. The name is Chelsea Simpson.

I remember when they first brought her home from the hospital. It was about a week after the eleventh of July 1998, in the capital of Fiji, Suva. I had just turned five and was ready to assume my role as a big sister or more accurately, small aunty (Chelsea being the daughter of my first cousin). Everything about this tiny human fascinated me and at night I would climb into the mosquito net with them and try to figure out how she worked. "Why does she keep sticking her tongue out?" I asked her mother. "She looks like a lizard."

They stayed with us for about a month before returning to their home in Nadi, which is a three-hour drive from where I lived. I was sad as I was back to being the youngest in the house. My disappointment was short-lived though, and from the time she began walking, Chelsea's mother would either send her to Suva during my school break to keep me company or I would be sent to Nadi to be her playmate. A week before the holidays began she could be counted on to call us up, announcing her arrival. I soon discovered that being a big sister was not all it

was cracked up to be. I attribute my stunted growth to all the times I spent giving that child, who was more than half my weight, piggy back rides.

Chelsea-Doo, as she had been nicknamed, was a force to be reckoned with. Even as a toddler I could not keep up with her. For someone so small she had enough energy for five adults. When we played I would have to run away from her at her regular intervals to re-energize before returning for another round. And if being hyperactive was not bad enough, she could talk the hind legs off of a donkey.

Although a member of the next generation and more than four years our junior, Chelsea expected to hang out with her young aunts and uncles rather than cousins her own age. She became our mascot and would tag along with us on all our adventures. As she got older (which in her case was the ripe old age of 6) her status evolved from mascot to dictator. A natural in the art of vesu mona, (which loosely translated means to con) she had a knack for getting you to do exactly what she wanted without you realizing it. This ability would especially manifest itself during chore times. "Man I tell you something," she would say, then launch into an epic tale of her own invention, actions and sound effects included. By the time she was done, I would have completed both our chores and somehow agreed to do hers for the next week. But no matter how annoying she was, and she could be pretty annoying, it was impossible to stay mad at her. Oh, you could try, but once she started laughing, you had to join in. She was one of those people whose laugh was funnier than the joke, which is saying something since her jokes were hilarious.

Despite our age differences, Chelsea and I were a lot alike. For starters, we both had the same thick untamable hair that caused us grief to no end and large round eyes. We liked the same music and movies, had the same sense of humor,

were both absent-minded and shared the same enthusiasm for food, especially pizza. That is where the similarities ended though. Where I was always on the shorter side, by the age of eight it was apparent that Chelsea was destined for greater heights. When she was ten she joined the netball team, playing the position of goal shooter. Being as energetic as she was, she could not be confined indoors. She spent most of her days going surfing, swimming, playing sports or going island hopping on her uncle's yacht. If you were going somewhere, whether it was to the corner shop or out of town for a weekend getaway (especially if it was out of town), you had to take her with you. Trying to get her to sit still was like trying to get a cat to bath, you would end up exhausting yourself and earn yourself a few scratches in the process.

When she was ten years old, Chelsea became a big sister. At the time, I was a bit concerned for the sake of small Mariah, well because, Chelsea was extremely impatient when it came to small kids. When required to babysit the younger kids she would tell them, "Ok kids let's play hide and seek, I'll count to one hundred then you gang go hide forever". My misgivings were for naught though and she fell into the role of doting big sister with such ease she could have fooled you into thinking she had been doing it all her life. Mariah became Chelsea's little shadow, following her everywhere she went and copying everything she did. She absolutely adored her big sister. Only Chelsea was allowed to brush her hair or choose her clothes and only Chelsea could make her stop crying (though a lot of the time it was Chelsea who had made her cry in the first place). Often when she played with other kids, we would overhear Mariah saying, "but my sister said," or "but Chelsea does it like this," or even "that's not how Chelsea does it."

The summer break of 2011-2012 (summer in Fiji runs from October to February) was the last I spent with Chelsea. As usual, we all traveled to the family estate in Savusavu to

spend the festive season with our Nanna and Pa. The place was crawling with kids as my older cousins had also sent their children over for the holidays. Being the eldest in their generation and much to her despair, Chelsea was expected to babysit the kids and keep them out of trouble. "Man! Very soon to these kids," she complained. "They just never listen. Make my head sore!" She soon had them under her spell though. Marching around the yard with a trail of kids behind her she would shout out commands, "rake that," "pick that up," and "someone get me some water," and the kids would obey her. Nights were when she was off duty so she would run away from her grandmother's house on the hill, down to where we stayed. We would spend the evening playing cards, watching movies or making lip sync videos to Nicki Minaj's songs.

While we usually spent new years in Savusavu, that year our mothers decided that we would spend it at Chelsea's place in Nadi. We were ecstatic. "Moce Jo!" Chelsea exclaimed (a slang used to express delight). "This means we won't have to spend New Years Eve in church, us two can go watch the fireworks." On the day of, we made a special trip to Lautoka to buy hair-relaxing cream. It being quite a long trip, over an hour by bus, we decided to make a day of it. First, we went to the theatre to watch Alvin and Chipmunks then to lunch at Chinese Palace, who according to the locals served the best wonton soup. After window-shopping for a bit, we returned home to work on our hair. After a grueling four-hour struggle in an attempt to get our hair to look like Beyonce's, we gave up. It was an impossible feat.

Our spirits already dampened, our mothers then informed us that we would be spending New Years Eve at church and not at the beach as we had hoped. "Slack," Chelsea said with a sigh. "Well good thing too eh since our hair is bushy." Later, as we lay on her bed listening to the sound of

fireworks and the shouts of New Years cheers, we began planning for the next year.

“Make sure eh,” she said to me, “next year us two have to go see the fireworks.”

“Next year definitely,” I promised.

I returned to Suva the next day.

On Saturday, the third of March 2012, we got a call telling us that Chelsea had gone missing. She and a couple of friends had gone swimming that day at Sabeto river, a well known swimming spot, when a flash flood had suddenly swept her away. A large group was immediately dispatched from Suva to Nadi to join in the search. The wait was terrible. Those of us who could not go, stood by the phone waiting for news and trying not to assume the worst. At around six pm we got the call. They had found her but it was too late. There were four of us in the room at that moment and to say we were in shock is an understatement. No one said a word, no one cried, we did not console each other; we could not even be in the same room with each other. Over and over again I just kept thinking, “not Chelsea, not Chelsea, not Chelsea”.

Her funeral was held five days later and a temporary shed was erected in her front yard for the service. More than 400 people showed up. There were people from her school, from church, the neighborhood, friends and family from around the country and abroad. One by one they stood up and shared their experiences of Chelsea. Most of them told stories about her funny antics and comical behavior. I could not help but think, “trust Chelsea to make people laugh, even at her funeral.” It was amazing to hear what people had to say. In her short time on earth, this fourteen-year-old had touched more lives than most people do in their entire lifetime. I cannot say I

was surprised though. That is just the way she was. Later, when the last of mourners had left and it was just the closest family members, we gathered in the living room. Someone had put together a slideshow of all Chelsea’s home videos and pictures for us to watch. Hearing that laugh was all that it took to bring me to tears.

The last time I went to Navava was about a month after Chelsea had passed, for the Easter family camp. Quite a large number of our family made the trip, her mother and sister included. It was the first time that Chelsea would not be there with us. One evening, as I leaned against a wooden column staring out to sea, unbidden, memories of Chelsea began replaying in my head. I remembered when she first started coming to camp. Normally, the age requirement for campers was twelve but Chelsea was an exception (as she was in most things) because her grandmother was one of the camp’s cooks. So at seven she became an honorary camper. Also, unlike the other campers that got assigned to a hut, it went without saying that she would be in whatever hut I was in. It was impossible to be in this place and not think about her.

A child's voice shattered the silence.

“Ay look, thing here again,” said a young boy pointing to a post.

“What is?” I asked him.

“This name here, Chelsea, I’ve seen the thing in all the huts and in the kitchen, thing even behind the doors for the toilet, she must of come here a lot eh?”

“io, she used to come every year since she was seven.”

“Trues up. Boyyy, no wonder her name is everywhere eh. Ay borrow mada one pen, I want to write my name.”

At that moment I realized that this was the first time since her funeral that I had spoken about her. I went into all the huts, in search of her name. In some places, it was just her name and the year she had been there. In others, she had written a message or drawn stick figures. I began to read all the names on the walls, not just hers. A lot of these people I realized had also passed on. “Who were they?” I wondered. “What were they like?” While I had also written my name on the walls multiple times, I had done it without a second thought. It dawned on me that in years to come, even after I had gone, when people came to this camp they would probably wonder the same thing. It was an oddly comforting thought.

By writing her name on the wall, Chelsea had ensured that as long as the camp stood, she would not be forgotten. Sure, future generations might not know exactly who Chelsea Simpson was or what she was like. But just from a few letters scribbled on the wall they would know that she had been there, that she had terrible handwriting and that she had lived.

### **Authors Note**

I come from a very large, very close-knit family. While Chelsea’s mother was actually my first cousin, I considered her my older sister. And though she was actually my niece, we were close enough in age that I thought of Chelsea as my small sister. This was something that I had been trying to write for a while now but was not sure where to begin. I wanted to focus on the person that she was and capture the essence of her character rather than the tragic accident that ended her life. I wanted her to be remembered for her life and not the way she died. The dialogue depicted is how people normally converse in Fiji. While people are taught to read and write proper English in school, everyday conversation is a lot less formal. The word “thing” is used instead of “it” or “its”.