

Peeg and Brie (opening of a teen novel)

by shelby hiatt

BRIE TO VICKY

This sucks! Sorry for the teen-speak Vicky, but it does. You saw me in the hospital. It's just as bad at home. They still don't know what to do for my smashed voice box. I probably won't ever speak again. (Maybe with a mechanical thing like the vet in South Park!!!) For now, texting only. Leg and hip STILL in a V-shape cast braced up and out at an angle. Only my arms and chest are okay. I'm tweaked by a drunk driving crash and I don't drink!

Jarrett's without a scratch. Says he feels awful about it. I can see he does. He came to visit and fumbled around, didn't know what to say. I thumbed in text and held up my cell for him to read. That's how we talked. It made him really uncomfortable. Good. I guess I should feel sorry for him. He's going to have to live with this guilt for life. Serves him right. No telling what I'LL have to live with for life. OR WITHOUT. AND I DON'T DRINK!

Oh, yeah, I'm valedictorian. Found out today. Useless achievement. I can't address my fellow grads. No voice. Can't stand. Can't sit with this cast up to my ribs. Didn't Harold Pinter accept the Nobel from his cancer bed? Yeah, he did. Taped his acceptance speech and it was shown on a big screen in Stockholm. I saw it on youtube. It can be done but I've got no voice. First ever TM valedictory address maybe? Should I start thumbing in wise words of advice? My niece calls it valley dick tor-yan. She adores me. Wants to be like me. Not anymore, I'm pretty sure. She hasn't seen me like this. My brother doesn't want to shock her. Pain pills keep me happy. I don't feel high or anything. I just don't feel pain.

I'm going to the Andes now. Really I am. I'm reading a journal kept by my great-grandmother Pearl in 1914. She was about 18 and

hiking the Andes with her dad. He worked on the Panama Canal then her mom died so they went on this big hiking adventure. Pearl Gray Hailey is her name but her dad called her P.G. He put it together, Peeg. Cute, huh? I hate cute usually but this is different. Come see me when you can. I'm a mute invalid so I don't blame you if you don't want to. Keep texting at least. Adios. I'm going back to the Andes.

PEEG TO HER JOURNAL

4/20/14 On board the Royal Mail steamer out of Panama now and it's pandemonium. West Indians are bunched around us with their tin trunks and pet monkeys and battered phonographs and Bibles. They whisper and keep pointing at us and giving us sidelong looks.

"De la Zona!" they say.

Yes, we're from the Zone and we're Gringos. The canal is built. It's open. Vessels are paying 90 cents a ton, day and night, to shortcut through the continents but Daddy's job is done and we're on our adventure hike. That's what he calls it.

Guess this is where I should write about mother; Dr. Lasher said it would help. I can't see how. Still can't believe she's gone after all the danger and death in canal construction. He said she caught it in the zone. Well of course she did and I bet it's because she just had to have a taste from every single street vendor's cart in Culebra.

"Mustn't miss a thing," I can hear her saying it and writing about it isn't helping a bit. And what does it matter? She's gone and Daddy has to get over it. Me too. He's fighting to stay grounded although I'm doing pretty well.

I can see he feels better in his hiking clothes and I love being back in my favorite jodhpurs and high top shoes. This Andes hike is a good idea. He's earned it and I'm looking forward to it. Have to stop writing. The crush of West Indian bodies is too much.

BRIE

Hey Vic. Peeg wears jodhpurs and high top shoes. Her favorite gear. Is that like me or what? I was always the odd ball wearing that kind of stuff. Turns out it's in my genes! I love this girl. She's me 100

years ago.

PEEG

Off the boat and on our way to the hotel. Sitting on my big pack taking a rest. Daddy says we should have taken one of the rickety cabs but it's too late now. There are none along the way. Boys following us keep offering to carry our packs for 'wan sheeling.' They think all Gringos are British. Daddy turns them down because he's determined to do everything like true adventurers. Our packs are heavy though and he's concerned for me so I keep reminding him I'm as tough as he is. This heat is even more oppressive than Panama.

Later: The hotel is awful. The beds are strips of canvas like the ones for diggers on the canal. No mattresses or sheets and the food is awful. Everybody's dirt poor. I don't know what I expected but not this. A waif of a kid brought a Barranquilla newspaper to our room and Daddy gave him a dollar. The boy's never seen that much money. His family will live on it for a month, maybe longer. (That was the idea.) The paper turned out to be 20 days old and that soured Daddy. Sad looking girls came offering to wash clothes for us and daddy gave them a dollar and sent them on their way.

"Can't have that," he said. He means the deception.

The hotel owner dropped by to talk about the Zone and practice his fractured English.

"Mosquitoes bite here like in Panama," he said. (I'm smoothing out his English.) "But nobody gets sick. Those foolish Zoners think insects carry disease. If we get sick we go to the plaster saint in the fortress church and pray."

He means the church up on La Popa, the Gibraltar-like hill above the harbor. It's massive, a church and fortress combined. We climbed up later for the view. Trees and mountains as far as the eye can see with an arching blue sky over us. Made me feel something deep. Sad and conflicted about Mother I think. And humbled.

Next morning: We've left Cartagena and had to cross the river. The guide's horse usually pulled the raft across but the water was much higher. The horse had to swim out to a sand-bar first and got stuck there because the current got so much stronger so quickly he wouldn't budge. The guide shouted and threw rocks at him until he started off again but he didn't want to, you could see that. The water was a swirling torrent and the horse kept struggling to get to the other side but it was too much and he was swept away. It looked like he just gave up, his head swinging round and round with the current until he was out of sight. It was awful but the guide just shrugged. Then he put his men to work fighting for dear life with paddles against the current to get us across and the whole time the men were calling out to the virgin for help. The guide would probably have just shrugged again if none of us had made it.

That was scary and unpleasant and I hope not what this whole adventure is going to be. I'm tough but I didn't like that and I hated the guide. Daddy says things are different everywhere and that's the value of travel. They're different here all right.

BRIE

Sorry to keep texting you but this journal is amazing. I was expecting a sweet old-timey day to day thing but no. First days out and great-gran Peeg was nearly swept away in a river! No kidding. The Magdalena I think it is. I'm following her journey on a map of the area. She and her pop could have been killed. I know she survived because we have her journal. Although, wait. The journal could have been found with their dead bones. Oooo. But I would have heard about that wouldn't I. Am I being a little dramatic? Yeah, I am. I'm not going to text you again until I've read more.

PEEG

Dry and safe in the only quiet spot we could find in this poor village. Daddy didn't like the horse business any more than I did and promises things will be more fun as we get farther along. I'm not so sure. Neither is he but he's got to keep my spirits up. (And his.)

He's studying some local maps now and says they're not very good. I told him not to worry. "I'm no puny Ohio school girl, not after Panama. I can go anywhere you can."

I cut my hair short before we left so now it's just below my ears. With a cap I pass for a boy which I think is practical and Daddy says is cute. It's curly in back but the front is boyish bangs that I have to keep pushing out of my eyes.

Still later: I can't sleep. I close my eyes and see that horse struggling. It gives me chills. It's like a foreboding, a portent. Never thought I'd use that word but that's what it feels like. I don't believe in spooky things so why is it keeping me awake?

Daddy's over there writing in his own journal and I know it's an even-handed account. He's just putting down what happened. Good for him but it's more than I can do. I'm even feeling bad for the poor people who offered us this spot behind their little house which is only a hovel. And the spot is only a spot, just large enough for our camping gear. Daddy gave them a dollar and their eyes lit up. Daddy's helping the poor one dollar at a time. They want us to stay longer of course, permanently, I think. I have to sleep.

Looking up in the sky I realize I've never in my life seen so many stars. No wonder they call it the heavens.

Two days later: On another boat, the Alicia this time taking us to Bogota. Food is twice a day and it's a tub of rice and plantains and mystery meat cooked together. Everybody on board gathers round. We use the same spoon or a broken coconut shell.

For drinking we have the Magdalena's chocolate colored water filtered through a porous stone. The shower bath is only available certain hours but it takes all morning for somebody to find the misplaced key. We've claimed the two rocking chairs on the foredeck and sit up there and watch the yellow bank slowly rolling by. Very slowly.

Philosophical Daddy: "No man journeys up to Bogota hastily."

Humorous Daddy: "It's like being on a log raft towed by a sunfish."

He's definitely feeling better.

This morning somebody shouted out 'caiman' and alligators along the banks slithered into the water. This is the adventure I was hoping for. The horse incident isn't on my mind anymore. On this upper deck we have our meals brought to us but they are only marginally more tasty.

BRIE

Peeg's adventure is primitive, Vic. Caiman! I just watched a Nat Geo show about caiman dying mysteriously somewhere. They're gators. Or crocs. One or the other and they're slithering around the banks of the river Peeg is on. Were people less afraid back then? Or is it just Peeg and her dad? I would not like to be on any boat in any river with crocs. But actually I have relatives in Florida. They talk about seeing gators cruising down at lake or canal once in a while. The wildlife people come and catch them. Take them to the Everglades. I'm going back to Peeg. Best real life adventure I've read in a long time.

PEEG

New passenger. American. He seems badly shaken and after hearing his story I understand why.

"We went to the interior, Opone country," he said. "A tribe in the tributaries of the Magdalena, absolutely primitive. They attack with bows and arrows that have barbs both way so they can't be pushed through or pulled out--horrible. They're cannibals. They captured us but I escaped. They killed my friend." (He shuddered saying all this.) "We saw a Columbian woman of good family being fattened in a bamboo cage."

I could hardly believe this but he swore it's true. They must have talked to her to know about her good family.

"The Opones hadn't eaten this woman because they were suspicious of a sore on her leg," he said. (Health cautious cannibals?) "I won't be coming here again. I can't wait to get back to Baltimore."

Don't blame him. He was shivering in the heat. He's badly damaged and cured of adventure for life. Daddy and I won't be going to Opone country.

A large balsa just passed us, one of the huge rafts made of hundreds of cedar logs. It has a Colombian flag at the prow and the crew camps aft with mat beds and primitive kitchens. Their women and children are with them. Where are they going I wonder. Do they live on those rafts? They could, they're so large they're like a village.

A bunch of parakeets just went screaming over head, the noisiest birds here. We've passed sheer sand banks and gigantic trees perched on the edge of what look like miniature Culebra slides. Reminds me of Panama.

BRIE

News flash Vic: The Andes is definitely more interesting than the Palisades. Great-gran's story is freaky stuff. I guess I should ask about things at school but I really don't care. Let me know if anything interesting happens.

Reading Peeg was interrupted by my acceptance letter from Harvard but I won't be able to go.

Mom says not to worry, I'll be fine by September. Right. I'll be up and hopping around in six months. No chance. And will I be speaking? No. I'm the student phenom. None of this is supposed to be happening.

Mom cries a lot but doesn't let me see. Proof I'm not going to be up any time soon. Big complications with pelvic damage. Not likely to ever procreate and nothing hopeful for the smashed voice box but Mom is cheerful.

Notice how wordy my texts are getting? I have nothing better to do than read and text. Oh, yeah, I watch Simpsons repeats on tv, the only show I like. And I have alllll daaaaay loooong.

I'm thankful for touch screen. Won't wear down my thumbs. I text Mom and Dad for everything on special phones with only their numbers and mine. If it rings they know it's me. And if there's a fire? They'd have to carry me out, elevate me cast and all and remove me. Sounds like a Marx brothers movie. Oh yeah, I've gotten into old movies lying here. I've been Netflixing tons of them. Poor Mom and Dad, trying so hard to make things better for me and it's impossible.

This is the nightmare you don't want to happen to anybody you know Vic so thanks for replying to these long TMs.

Here's an idea. Use them as an extra credit paper. Really. Save them and do something with them. I shouldn't be talking like this I guess. It's not funny. Maybe the pain pills take the edge off of everything even my judgment. I'm going back to Peeg.

