

# Excess Baggage

## *Synopsis*

By Tracey Carisch

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One spring evening, I left my three daughters with my husband and went out to enjoy a fun night with girlfriends. A few hours later I returned home, knee deep in a midlife crisis that would change our family forever. My unexpected revelation (read: panic attack) in a wine bar led to serious conversations with my husband, BRIAN, about the life we'd created for our family. We'd worked hard to build an income and lifestyle which we thought would put our girls on the path to happiness and success. However, after my panic over pinot noir, Brian and I realized our life was passing by in an obligation-filled blur, and our hectic schedule could be grooming our girls for lives as stressed out, struggling adults. EMILY, our ten-year-old, had turned into a borderline dysfunctional perfectionist, and she was in tears on a regular basis over mean girl drama at school. LIV, our gifted seven-year-old, battled anxiety and struggled through social situations. ALI, our youngest at five, vied for attention by being the constant entertainer and mischief maker, often landing herself big trouble. Our life seemed perfect on the outside, but Brian and I knew we were flirting with disaster.

So, we did something our family and friends never would have expected from us. Two career-driven, over-achieving yuppies decided to make our exit from the rat race. We sold almost everything we owned, pulled our daughters out of school, and launched our family into an around-the-world expedition. It started off as a break from our chaotic life, but as the months went by, our travels became much more than that. Through the comedy and tragedy of our trials and tribulations, our journey transformed into a spiritual evolution.

We began our adventure in Europe and drove our way around the continent, living for a month at a time in different countries. As we adjusted to 24/7 togetherness, our family stumbled through the travel learning curve. Language barriers and cultural differences led to some hilarious situations, and major life revelations popped up in the most unexpected places.

When we left the modernized comforts of Europe to volunteer in Ethiopia, the tone of our journey shifted dramatically. Instead of adjusting to each other, we were adjusting to a very different view of the world. Seeing the suffering of humanity firsthand left our family pondering important questions about happiness, disparity and social responsibility. Everything in Ethiopia was a learning experience, from waking up one night with a rat in my hair to washing dishes at an orphanage for a cranky cook. While camping in the Ethiopian countryside, I sat under a sky filled with stars and felt the restless beginnings of my personal awakening take hold.

As our travels continued through Thailand and Cambodia, I tried to use my newfound yoga and meditation ritual to reach enlightenment, but the ups and downs of our nomadic life kept pulling me back. After a series of missteps and frustrations, Brian and I wondered if we should call it quits on this adventure and return to the easy comforts of home. Luckily, one afternoon I stumbled upon a tiny sliver of spiritual connection, and it gave me the confidence to push our family forward.

Soon every new challenge transformed into an opportunity. Brian's psychedelic drug episode and my heart-pounding drama with Thai airport police wound up improving our marriage. The fascinating people we met opened our minds to the different ways the human life can be lived. We found ourselves in ridiculous situations that left us feeling like idiots, but these moments pushed us to a new level of self-awareness and acceptance. We started to see the changes this journey was creating in each of us. Emily showed us a calm and wise side of her

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soul, and Liv began to embrace life's uncertainties. We watched Ali transform into a kind and helpful little girl, while Brian and I found a renewed partnership in guiding our family through the developing world.

We spent a month living in Fiji with our old friends, REUBEN and DIANA, and it felt as though we'd found paradise, both on the beautiful beaches and in our relationships with one another. Our weeks with Reuben, Diana and their two children took us on thrilling adventures and cemented our lifelong friendship with them. By the time we'd made our way through New Zealand and up through South America, we were a very different family. While volunteering on the urban streets of Bolivia, I met a little girl who helped me understand an important truth I'd been missing. My brief glimpse into her life helped me better understand my own, crystallizing the lessons of our journey into an enlightened view of the world.

But then tragedy struck. Our friend Reuben died, killed by a careless driver while he biked the curvy roads of Fiji. As our family reeled into grief, all those enlightening lessons stopped making sense. We arrived in Peru under a curtain of sorrow, uncertain of what lay ahead for us. Could we return to life in United States without falling back into the rat race we'd run away from? Did the precious insights we'd discovered on our adventure still have meaning after the senseless tragedy of losing Reuben? As we hiked up the terraces of Machu Picchu and visited the indigenous tribes in Lake Titicaca, I searched for answers that seemed impossible to find.

Then one night, as I lay on a bathroom floor suffering from a terrifying case of food poisoning, I suddenly found those answers. In my delirious, dehydrated state, I connected to a divine understanding that would change me forever and bring our family back home to a life very different from the one we'd left.