

The Quarterback by Maggie Stephens

There's a bar in Pittsburg, Kansas that seems to attract all the co-eds, and not just the Greeks or the philosophy majors or the student council, but really, all college students. I guess that's why I was there. Not that I fall into any of those three categories, but I *am* a college student.

I was home for Christmas and sitting at the bar with a few old friends from high school. It was something like a Wednesday night, so we seemed to be four of the eight people there. Around ten o'clock, a tall, built, blond man walked in. He was older than me; he even graduated high school before I got there. But I knew who he was. Everyone knew who he was. He walked right up to the bar, sat down next to me and ordered a beer. I sat next to him in silence for a few seconds, not sure whether or not to say anything. There's no way he remembers me right? He did.

"Hey Maggie, how's K-State?" he said.

"Oh, hey, Dylan. State is great, but you would know that," I said.

He chuckled. "I suppose I would."

Dylan Meier is Pittsburg bred. His parents, Dennis and Valerie Meier, raised four, blond, football-player-sized boys. And that's what they did—played football. In Pittsburg, playing football is equivalent to being the star of the latest summer blockbuster. You have the ability to be a god, if you so choose. All the boys want to be you, all the girls want to date you, and all those girls' parents will gladly *let* their daughters date you. You are an exception to all of the rules. Dylan, along with his three brothers, never chose that. They were good-grade-getting, curfew making, pleasant and mannerly football players. The Meiers were a breed of their own. Dylan used his mature decision making skills to get him the quarterback spot at Kansas State University, where I was studying.

"I assume you are in Pittsburg to celebrate the holidays. Where are you headed after that?" I asked.

"Well, I've got a few places I want to see, but I plan on going to South Korea in the spring," he replied.

"South Korea? What are you going to do there?"

"Teach English to children."

Dylan played football, but he did a lot more than that. He believed that, in order to understand our complex world and the people in it, you have to experience cultures, environments, and ideas outside of what you know and are comfortable with. Thus, he set out to find those niches and expose himself to all that he could. He traveled the world in hopes to find all that there is to find, opening his eyes wider and wider with each adventure.

"That's admirable. I envy your travels...and your ambition," I said.

"Who's to say it's mine? It's just as much yours. Do you want to stay in Pittsburg?"

"No."

"Then don't. Get busy livin'."

Those were the last words I ever heard Dylan Meier speak. And they were powerful words: Those words would become the phrase that exuded Dylan Meier. On

April 19, 2010, Dylan Meier fell to his death while hiking with his family in Arkansas. It was a tragic and painfully unexpected death. Pittsburg took the hit hard. We had lost a town gem, one who could always be regarded as an inspiration to our kids and a point of pride to our parents. Dylan would forever be remembered as the man who was always busy livin'.

A year had passed since Dylan's death. Time had healed much of our grief, but he still lived on in the spirit of the town and those who lived there. It was May 18, 2011, and I was saying my goodbyes to my parents as I boarded a plane for Brazil. I hugged my father and then my mother. They instructed me to be safe, but always have fun. I turned around to walk away and my mother shouted out, "Get busy livin'!" And so I did.

Our first night in Brazil was spent in Manaus. We had spent about a day and a half in airports and airplanes before finally landing in Manaus on the evening of May 19. Once we were split into groups and settled into our rooms, we headed to dinner. By nature, I'm not an extrovert, but I'm not shy. Once I become comfortable with a person, I would assume it would be fairly easy for them to guess whom I voted for in the last presidential election and what genre of music I'm partial too. The issue is that initial meet-and-greet. I'm horrible at making new friends, so the idea of going to a foreign country with a group of people I don't know unnerved me.

Naturally, dinner had me worried. This was the first time I would be in a relaxed setting with my peers and not having to worry about turbulence or if the tiny bathroom will ever be unoccupied. It was time to get down to business and know these people. My greatest concern was not being able to relate to the younger students. A majority of the group were enough years my junior, and for most of my life, my friends and family have told me I'm an old soul, always feeling more comfortable at the grown-up table rather than the kid's table during holidays. Predictably, I sat next to the professors supervising the trip.

As the night carried on, my anxiety dissipated. In fact, I'm not sure what I was nervous about in the first place. I soon realized that all of these people, professors and students, were here to experience. Experience what? I'm not sure. But I made a mental note to find those answers before our two short weeks were up.

For dinner, Martha, the biology professor, and I shared a vegetarian plate and caipirinhas, the national drink of Brazil, were passed around. Conversations of music, family, and just pure fun filled the humid Brazilian air and before long I was laughing. Two men (from Colombia possibly) strutted to the patio where we were dining and began to play the guitar and ukulele while singing songs in Spanish.

It was a superb way to spend my first evening in Brazil. A sense of community had brought the table together. Our long table suddenly felt closer, shorter even. Our conversation spread to each end of the table. We passed around food and drinks were shared amongst each other, all while the (possibly) Colombian musicians provided our soundtrack. Our "Brazilian family" had begun to form.

I took a deep breath and let what was happening around me filter through my body. Laughing, drinking, music, and soon to be friends surrounded me. Chris

McCandleless' thoughts during his "Into the Wild" journey poured into my head, "True happiness is only real when shared." One traveler led me to think of another traveler.

Dylan understood true happiness and he definitely understood how to share that happiness with others. He shared that happiness with me on that Wednesday night in the local bar. He encouraged me to leave my comfort zone and discover how little I know about this world. I considered his words and what he had shared with the community during his travels abroad. In that moment, I decided I would get lost on this trip. Get lost in order to find myself.

This thought subsided and a rare and refreshing breeze blew our direction. I found it odd that on a night and in a climate where a breeze is hard to come by, one would grace me with its presence while my mind was wrapped around such a stirring message. I would later learn that this was not the last of Dylan Meier during my journey in Brazil. He would be back.

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After a long day saturated with watching the sunrise, forest trekking, walking the boardwalks of Ariau, piranha fishing, and caiman catching, I couldn't imagine anything making it more fulfilling. Our night was coming to a close on a boat on the Ariau River. It was most likely around eight o'clock and dark as pitch on the water. We had just witnessed a man jump into the river and come up with a live alligator (without a shirt or shoes on, mind you). I felt as if I was on a Discovery Channel television show. Maybe I'd even have to eat some sort of insect next? But no, we began a peaceful boat ride back to our accommodations instead.

Riding back to the hotel turned out to be a sobering experience in comparison to the day's activities. My surroundings were black. I could see nothing, only hear faint whispers of the wildlife that refused to retire for the night. Our group had reached a numbing and comfortable low volume level. That is, until we looked up.

One by one, the stars emerged, the North Star, the big dipper (upside down!), and many other notable constellations. Ultimately, the entire night sky was lit. There were more stars than I had ever seen. So dense and compacted that it gave the impression of a milky canvas, swirled together in intricate loops and circles.

I thought about the vastness of up above, and the endlessness of the surrounding forest and realized the greatness of the world. And believe it or not, I was in it, under it, and all around it. My mind began to consider the implications this moment had, the balance and equilibrium that the planet and universe required in order to display such an image. Despite its limitless proportions, creation and space has the ability to share itself with one another. You can imagine in what direction my next thought went: Dylan.

I knew he had somehow allowed me to witness this. His desire for perception and experience would definitely have wanted me to witness this. I looked back up at the sky and imagined Dylan painting it, taking all of his travels and personal stories, painting an illuminated heaven, and then presenting it just like this for the entire world to see.

And then it trickled into my head again, "happiness is only real when shared." It was no longer advice—it was reality. I was busy living.

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Our last days in Brazil were spent in a small town named Soure on Marajó Island. It seemed hard to believe that the trip was coming to an end and we all desperately tried to make the last days count. The professors had scheduled a trip to a nearby water buffalo farm for us to tour and explore. As we walked almost 7 kilometers around the farm, I did my best to observe and learn all that the tour guide offered us. The wildlife was rich, even on agricultural land. Every step you take there are more plants to be discovered.

We began to trek back to the road that brought us into the farm when dark, ominous clouds loomed ahead. At first, a slow and sinister wall wiped the clear, blue sky with tall and full clouds out of sight and lay stagnant, warning us of what was to come. Then, the clouds began to rotate, picking up speed with every revolution. Each loop was smaller than the next, making what looked like, to us Kansans, a funnel cloud. The cloud was circling faster and faster and soon more began to form.

Droplets began to fall out of the sky. They were large droplets, splashing against my skin in large puddles. Despite the heavy drops, the rain was light and could even be described as a sprinkle. After five minutes of only slightly getting wet, it stopped. And it seemed as if the worst was over.

We were then met with the wind—a wind of such ferocity that it even impressed a girl from the plains. It pushed against us at what could have been 48 kilometers per hour at a complete and impressive 90-degree angle. Walking became difficult. Our group began to stumble in all directions, hoping we were still on the correct path back to the dirt road.

I felt something pierce my skin, like a sharp stick blown into my arm. And then another, and another, and soon a fury of pricks perforating the flesh. The droplets became even larger and harder. It felt like a shower of hail. The hail-like rain became so dense that our vision was impaired. I reached my hand in front of me but saw nothing. We lost sight of the road and no longer knew if we were headed in the right direction.

The others fought the rain. They began to run, attempting to protect themselves with rain jackets and ponchos. After only three minutes of torrential downpour, I was completely soaking wet, from my head to my socks. I stood in the rain and opened my arms to the sky and accepted nature's acupuncture. What appeared to be a violent and vicious storm brought me absolute joy. I let it all, literally, soak in.

I continued to play in the rain, running frantically to keep up with our guide. The rain continued for 20 more minutes, as did my smile. It felt like a privilege to be graced with such a storm, a real Amazonian rainstorm. Never again will I experience a downpour to that degree. And, for that, I have Dylan to thank.

His persistence in making my trip to Brazil a more than memorable one was incessant. As the two weeks carried on, I allowed myself to open up to the experiences I was presented with as well as the people I shared them with. In the raging yet blissful storm, it came to me that this was my reward—a reward from him for my belief. I believed in his credo and his worth.

After we found shelter and settled down, I let the water run off of my body, letting the last of what Dylan had to teach me seep into my flesh and my soul. I no longer needed someone like him to guide me. I knew in that moment what I could find meaning in for the future and decided to let him set a precedent for my forthcoming resolutions. His need for knowledge and passion for experience will always be with me.

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I was standing at baggage claim nervously waiting for my luggage when I heard my mother's voice.

"Maggie! You're home!"

I greeted my parents and introduced them to some of the friends I had made on the trip as well as the professors leading us on our excursion. As we said our goodbyes and walked away, my mother asked me,

"Did you get busy livin'?"

I replied, "Mom, I did *so* much living."