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### Peace Corps Family

The electric glow from the bars and the discos reflects off the waves, turning the ocean gray-green in the darkness. Bachata and merengue and American Top 40 bleed from big stacked speakers, out from the bars and onto the sand, each edge of music blurring into the next as we walk down the beach. The girls all wear *chanquetas*, cheap plastic sandals with bright sequins lacing the straps down to plastic-y, faux-leather soles. We order beers so cold they're almost frozen, individual bottles instead of the cheaper, *jumbo* sized bombers to share, because it's New Year's and we feel fancy. We shuffle back and forth to a bachata on the beach and sand works its way into the stitching of our sandals; weeks later, back in my community and on the way to church, I'll lift up a sandal and grains of sand will sprinkle down like rain on the concrete floor of my house.

That New Year's Eve, like all of them during our time in the Peace Corps, we spent at the beach— a little too drunk, a little too insecure and messy, but surrounded by friends and palm trees and cheap cold beer. Second only to Thanksgiving in its levels of tropical, groupthink debauchery, New Year's was a beacon, a chance for all of us to be in the same place at the same time, to catch up and hatch new drama and dance all night.

We all wake up hung over; freshly showered and still bleary eyed, we walk down the street in slow motion, buy tiny plastic cups of coffee from a vendor with an ancient plastic thermos and a wooden table. We wander our way to the tourist part of town and order coconut and fruit smoothies, multi-grain pancakes, thick mugs of coffee with cream. The morning wears into afternoon and some people head for the beach for a last gasp of vacation, but I walk to the bus station, still nursing my hangover, reluctantly headed back to El Seibo, to work and home. I sit next to a friend on the bus and we share a bag of sliced sweet oranges, their skin pre-peeled in a narrow spiral so all that's left is the pith, traced with twisting concentric circles. Within minutes I fall asleep, my forehead pressed against the cool glass of the bus window.

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Years pass. We come back to the States, scatter to homes and lives in different cities. We talk to each other in group texts and over the phone, see each other on surprise weekends or adventures, share pictures and stories online. In our separate worlds we date people and break up with them, move into and out of apartments, get jobs and leave them, start graduate programs and finish (or, occasionally, quit.) Our lives keep happening, the details lost to each other by time and distance.

And every year in early fall, an email thread starts— where will you be for New Year's? And every year at the end of December, some motley combination of Peace Corps family rolls into someone else's city or town and settles in, sleeping on the floor and the sofa and the Aerobed, eating plates of toast and eggs off our knees in the living room, exchanging scandalous Secret Santa gifts, catching each other up on our lives. This year will be my fourth New Year's in the States since leaving the

Dominican Republic for good, and tonight at 9:30 I'm headed to the airport to pick up my Peace Corps friends— friends I haven't seen since last New Year's Eve.

It's hard to explain these friendships to other people, to the community I've built around my life in the States. My Peace Corps friends are eccentric and fabulous, unlikely weirdos who I love unconditionally, because we all speak the same language— literally, the slurred, deep-throated Spanish of the island where we spent three years, but figuratively, too. There's a shared sense of ethics, of social justice and responsibility, of what it means to have fun and what it means to be a good friend. I trust these people, people who I only see once a year, who oftentimes I couldn't tell you a single contemporary fact about. I would trust them with anything.

There's something deeply reassuring about it— no matter how long it's been since we've seen each other, these friendships endure. These are the people I call when I'm in their city because I know that no matter what, I have a home where they are.

They're the people I rely on to celebrate my accomplishments with me, and the people I ask for help. These are my people. And these are the people I want to be laughing with on New Year's Eve, getting too drunk hours before midnight, waking up in the morning to leftover black eyed peas and collards and as much coffee as humanly possible.

I can't imagine a better way to launch a new year.