> Hello hello hello!!!

I am - as the most clever amongst you might surmise, given that you are receiving this email - presently enjoying a brief respite in Alotau, for a week-ish, and am already luxuriating in the modern conveniences. And speaking of modern and convenient, since I was here last Alotau got broadband! Woo-hoo! No hotspot at my guesthouse, but I only have to mosey down to the International Hotel to get connected. SO excited! When I arrived, I took about a 30 minute shower, plugged up my laptop, and enjoyed LIGHT that doesn't come from a kerosene lamp or flashlight. I can text message! Downstairs there is a STOVE and a FRIDGE. I can buy milk. I can cook pasta. I can use the bathroom without having to clamour through the bush, dodging spider webs, to dig a hole each time I need to do my business (particularly unpleasant when it happens to be pissing rain, which it seems is most of the time).

But theriouthly, folkth. I jest, but I'm loving the Trobs. Yes, there are things I live without there, but I don't actually miss them when I'm there. I love my little hut, my village, my family. I love playing cards by lamplight in the evening. I like learning new things constantly and I enjoy the friendly nosiness of everyone whenever you go anywhere, and all and sundry simply have to know where and why. I love how everyone knows my clan name all the way from Okaiboma to Kabwaku, and how they always ask me about my doba. It's an amazing experience, and I feel immensely privileged that I have such a rare and special opportunity to learn another way of life.

What can I tell you? Some of you will have already read letters I've sent, describing the minutiae of my daily life in rather excruciating detail. Others haven't heard a peep since I left Alotau over two months ago. So I risk boring the letter-readers with redundancy, and giving a very sketchy picture to those I haven't written letters to (or who haven't received the letters I tried to send!). So I'll just write a bunch of shit and you can read it or no, how's that? This message will be about what it's like; the next about what I do. Wait though, before I go any further, I have to give props to the dear ones who took the time to find paper or even a card or postcard, thought of something to say to me, tracked down a writing implement, addressed the note and actually managed to get a stamp on the thing and get it in the post. You rock! Besides my mum, who writes me faithfully every single week (six letters so far! Love you, Mum!), biggest prize goes to the ever-amusing and clever Tom, whose three gorgeous postcards are decorating the walls of my hut. Thank you, Tom! But I don't have your address in Welly, so please email it to me this week, OK? Andy, your card and Mara's lovely moai postcard are likewise adding a splash pizzazz to my otherwise, ahem, minimalist decor. Aunties Elinor and Lorena also deserve my thanks, and Tara wins for first letter (besides Mum's) to reach me, and on such gorgeous paper, too! Thanks,sweets! If I haven't mentioned you, but you did write me, it's likely your note is en route or even at the post office already, as I wasn't able to check last week. It really does mean a lot to me that so many of you took the time and effort to get in touch the ol' fashioned way. So thanks again.

Well then. Me in Trobriand Islands. The trip over was a marathon boat ride, departing FINALLY after 4 days delay late on a Wednesday morning and arriving mid to late afternoon the next day, with an overnight pitstop along the way. I soon settled in to the decrepit and decaying lodge called Bweka, presided over by the chief of Yalumgwa District, John Kasaipwalova, and his two wives. The senior wife, Mary, is a 60ish, Hong Kong born businesswoman who always seems to be short on cash and trying to borrow money, trying to pay off her old debts by establishing new ones. She's a good cook, she screams a lot, and she's reputed to be an alcoholic. The junior wife, Vanna, is a "commoner" (the Trobs are a bit elitist), probably no older than 30, a local woman who was working at Bweka some years ago when she got preggo with John's baby. As a chief, he's entitled to have more than one wife, but apparently knocking up the kitchen help isn't the preferred way

to go about it, so it was all a bit scandalous. John is a character and a half - a published poet, Australian educated, and a dreamer. The lodge was built for a government meeting 15 years ago and is a termite eaten calamity; the floor is rotting (a full story drop, if you were to go through it), and the roof is caving in. But the price was right, at K150 per week including three massive meals per day (that's about NZD100, CAD75, USD? - I'm a bit out of the loop with exchange rates). The room had a real mattress, a desk, and a bathroom with a toilet (that you flushed with a bucket of water, as no running water or electricity). There is a cave just outside with a clean freshwater pool for bathing, if the scoop and slop method of washing gets tiresome.

I stayed for two and a half weeks, but I was anxious to get out and into village life. The lodge is set a bit away from things; most of the time I was there it was only with Mary and Vanna's young son Nicky, as John was often in Alotau and Vanna was away with her sick sister (who sadly died). Though in Trobs now nearly 20 years, Mary still doesn't speak the language, so I learned very little Kilivila while there, and was anxious to get settled in to a village. It was my very good luck that a lovely woman named Veronica was working for Mary while I was staying there. Vero's English is quite good (she spent part of her childhood in Moresby), and she lives in a village just 10-15 minutes walk from Bweka. She and her husband offered to build me a house in the village, Modawosi, and to "take care of me," if it suited. Indeed it did. Though only a few years older than me, Vero and her husband Matadoya have taken the role of my Kiriwina "parents." Mata bestowed upon me a clan name, Gimilabwita, which identifies me to people all over the island as a member of that clan, and even when I'm walking an hour or more from home, people call out to me, "Bwena kwaiai, Bwita! Ambesa bukula?" (Good afternoon, Bwita! Where are you going?).. They have two adopted sons, Emmanuel (born to Mata's sister, about 8 years old) and Reuben (born to Vero's sister, about 6), who are my "little brothers." Modawosi is three hamlets, one of which is mostly the church (called Four Square, some kind of Pentecostal number I reckon) and the pastor, one of about half a dozen huts, and mine the biggest, with about a dozen huts in a roughly L-shaped pattern. If you consider all the hamlets, the village is a sort of very big U. Nearly a couple hundred people, believe it or not - though small, some of the huts house families of 10 or more individuals.

My house was quickly but sturdily built, all of bush materials - posts, roof, walls, floor. It's raised about 50cm off the ground, for ventilation and cleanliness - they used to build on the ground, but the Australian health officials made them change it up about a hundred years ago. It's maybe 2m by 3m in size, and I sleep on a thin piece of foam on a woven mat on the floor. Since Mata fixed my leaky roof, I haven't had a drop of water inside, though I do share my home with geckos and lizards, spiders, beetles, crickets, and the odd millipede. Oh, and plenty flies and mosquitos, but my mozzie net keeps the creepy crawlies off me while I sleep, at least. My verandah remains unfinished - perhaps indefinitely - but I have a dandy little enclosure behind the house for my shower room (bucket and cup). Our water comes from a pump well in the neighbouring village of Oluweta, donated by the Catholic mission. My district is predominantly Catholic, though this Four Square crowd did some fancy convertin' in Modawosi - my inquiries revealed that about 80% of the households in the village made the switcheroo to the feet stomping, guitar strumming, hand clapping, swaying, "Can you FEEL the LORD!" approach when this church set up shop in 2006. Vero and Mata stuck with the staid prayers, sombre hymns and English-services-delivered-by-foreign-priests approach of the Catholics, but the kids go to Four Square and sing the church ditties day and night.

Despite the influence of the churches - the other ones represented on the islands are United, Rhema, and Seventh Day Adventist, and virtually everyone affiliates themselves with one of these - magic, sorcery, and witches are still strongly believed in in most places. I have been advised how to look out for witches, who Kiriwina people tell you are especially prevalent on the outer islands like Kitava. I have seen Mata speak magic spells into some herbs tucked inside a leaf, to try to cure the stomach problem of an old man. Most deaths are attributed to sorcery or "bad magic," usually, they will say, because of jealousy. Only rarely is a death considered "natural," as in old age, as most diseases or sicknesses are likely to have been conjured by a sorcerer. There is also "good magic," as in the healing magic, or love magic, or that for yam gardening, fishing, or canoe making. Spells can be bought or else passed to a nephew, but even then they must be earned by bringing gifts to the magician.

The yam harvest has just wrapped up in most places; it was considerably earlier than I had anticipated, and earlier than in the "old days." In some villages, it started as early as April. Despite yams being the prestige

crop, with far and away the most symbolic importance of any of the garden foods, they are only plentiful for eating for a few months of the year, around the time of the harvest. Now that the yams have been brought to the village, sorted into seed yams and eating yams, and food yams mostly given away to the appropriate party, we don't have too many to eat anymore. For most of April and May, it was yam-o-rama; the tantalizing tuber would appear on my plate three times a day, and many days it was ALL I would eat except for maybe the addition of some greens at one meal (all meals are essentially the same, and you're as likely to eat fish and greens for breakfast as dinner). Now that the harvest itself is over, already the yams are getting a bit scarce, and we have to rely on the lesser foods (sweet potato, cassava, green bananas, and taro) as the staples of the diet. I expect now that yams are few, I'll have to step up with rice a few times a week. The threat that there would be no fish once the southeast winds came turned out to be overblown (lame pun intended), as I still eat fish 2-4 times per week, same as always. Being a bit inland - the beach is about a 45 minute walk, but I've never actually been to the one closest to my village, as every time I plan to go the weather is poor or something else comes up - we have to go buy fish in other villages, but the kids often like to go to Tukwaukwa, about 1 1/2 hrs walking each way, to buy some. They are small, but tasty enough. They are always cooked whole, either "burned" - just put directly on the fire - smoked, or fried if oil is available. Mary has a lemon tree, we have a chili plant in the village, and I brought some soy sauce, so we can get a little variety in flavours from time to time. It usually costs K2 for a string of small fish, maybe 6 or 8 of them depending on the size - I guess that's less than one US dollar at current exchange rates. Sometimes we get a big fish, but once I got a little touch of ciguatera fish poisoning (I think - self-diagnosis of course) from one so I am careful about these.

My "yam cookbook," suggested by several of you, is not really developing, as yams, too, are only cooked a couple of ways: most often boiled (sometimes with the decadent addition of coconut cream), which is how we eat them more than 90% of the time. The other ways are called kabwasi, or "burning," like they do with the fish, or else they can be cooked in the kumkumla (mumu, or earth oven). If I eat lunch in the garden, as sometimes happens, we might have kabwasi. Mumu tends to be more a special occasion cooking method. I did make a nice yam curry one night, using some dried chick peas I had brought from Alotau; curry powder is available in the shops in Losuia. We were also lucky at that time to get some eggplant, which is grown, but not plentiful, on the island. I tried to collect some seeds from it to plant, but they didn't germinate - I think they got mouldy from too much rain. Pumpkin is grown by some people, but not by anyone in my village and not easy to find in the market, either - I'm hoping to find some seeds here in Alotau. Corn (maize) is the other one I'm eager to plant, which is fairly common in it's season, but lately not in my village, though I had it plenty when I went to visit the island of Kitava last week. For a while, we had plenty beans, but they're finished now. The staple non-kaula vegetable is greens - either one that grows in the garden called nononi which is a bit like kale, long and dark in colour, but less strong in flavour, or lokwai, which comes from the bush (lawodina) and is a small leaf; you eat only the tender, light green new growth.

Fruits are not as plentiful as I might have hoped. We have some banana trees behind the village, but this doesn't produce a constant supply - rather times of plenty and times of scarcity. A few weeks ago, Mata cut me a HUGE bunch of bananas and tied it up in my house, so I had more than I could eat and gave plenty away. They are incredibly sweet and delicious, these small eating bananas; we also have longer ones you cook while green and eat as a vegetable. I just missed watermelon season, and mangos should be ripe in September I think Pineapples have been very rare - I've only seen one since on Trobs, which Mary got somewhere. I've had a few pomelos (similar to grapefruit), one custard apple, and that's about it. And of course, there are usually plenty coconuts, the young ones for drinking (bwebwai) having soft, tasty meat inside. In our district of Yalumgwa, all coconut trees have been in tabu for the last month, so we can't harvest any until they have a chance to grow and the tabu is lifted, and so we have to buy them. But often if you're walking along the road somewhere, someone who is cutting bwebwai will offer you one to drink, which is very refreshing on a hot day!

I now have two gardens, and am about to plant a third. The first is my taro garden, where I've also got some healthy looking tomato plants, broad beans, and a few struggling carrots. I planted onions, too, but they hadn't amounted to anything last I looked. I gave seeds away, and my little brother Emmanuel managed to get an onion going, but a damed bunukwa (pig) got into the garden and rooted it up. My second garden is mostly sweet potato, which is planted where the yams were dug up. I also have a few just-planted tomatoes there,

and some "snake beans," a really weird huge bean whose seeds I got from one of the nuns at the Catholic Mission. These gardens are about a 15 minute and a 20 minute walk from the village, respectively. The third garden Mata has just been clearing the last few days, and is directly behind my house. I will plant it when I get back, with seeds I get here in Alotau. I wanted a few things close to the house for convenience, so Mata has cleared the plot and will burn just before I plant.

I eat with my family; Vero usually cooks, though I often help with peeling vegetables, preparing greens, or making a sauce for the fish. Most of the time I eat on their verandah, although sometimes, especially if really bad rain, I'll eat in my house. Sometimes, if there isn't much food, I'll just make instant oatmeal for my breakfast, but usually Vero cooks kaula (literally translated as food, it refers collectively to yams, taro, sweet potato, and tapiokwa (cassava)). We always eat together for lunch and dinner, usually at the house but sometimes we have our lunch in the garden. I give them some small amount of money each week in return for their feeding of me, and also give them sometimes rice, salt, sugar, tea, or other trade store goods. Every now and again, I trot out some of the ingredients I brought from Alotau (especially dried beans), and manage to make some "dimdim food," but the ingredients don't go very far, because when I cook, half the village turns out to see what I'm up to, and they all want to try it. Vero is always really happy when I cook, and mentioned several times before I left to make sure I got "lots of ingredients" when in Alotau to bring back! We eat sitting on a mat, from plates bought at a store; they have forks, but more often than not we all eat with our hands. Cooking is always done on an open fire, so wood has to be constantly collected, but there is plenty now, as they use last year's yam poles to burn. If rainy, Vero cooks inside the house, where a corner is reserved for the job; if nice weather, the fire is made outside in a new spot every time, with no permanent hearth. Seeing the cooking and the physical evidence left behind has given me a whole new understanding of hearth features as recorded archaeologically (yes, there is still a healthy dose of archaeology nerd left in this convert to social anth! I am always on the lookout for pot sherds and obsidian flakes when I garden!), and I have a new appreciation for the merits of ethnoarchaeology.

People get really obsessed sometimes about protein, since there is a general lack of it, and fish is mostly the only source. Since harvesting started, it has been a time of feasting, which means PIG. So I have had it a few times (4 times I think), but to be honest, I can take it or leave it. There are chickens, but not too many, so chicken, too, is a special occasion food, which I've only had twice since I moved to the village (Mary fed me protein up the yingyang when I was staying at Bweka). People don't collect and eat the eggs, but I'm thinking to buy a few chickens myself and try to do so. Crabs are sometimes available: big mud crabs from the mangroves in one part of the island, and smaller crabs from the sea, but we rarely have them in my village. Crayfish or lobster is a real rarity, which I only had once when I was on Kaileuna Island (it looks COMPLETELY different from our Atlantic Lobsters back home, and though I generally don't care for them much at home, I did scarf up that fellah with gusto, and he was tasty indeed). I hear about people eating octopus, but I haven't seen any. There are also a variety of shells: hardshelled clams a bit like our quahogs back in the Maritimes, some curly ones, and small ones more like snails that come from leaves rather than the sea. And finally, kids especially will collect frogs, crickets, and ants to eat - none of which I've yet had to choke down.

Geez Louise, I just wrote like two pages just about food. But like everywhere, food is a central concern for people. The question in the Trobs isn't, what will we have for dinner?, because that much is obvious. It's more, do we have enough food for dinner? People really don't have much access to kina (cash), so for the most part, you eat what you can grow, collect, or catch; otherwise, you might exchange yams or banana leaves for fish. People always want and need cash, but unless they or their relatives have an actual job (there are a few people in Losuia who work at the district office, medical centre, or trade stores, for example, and many people send relatives money from Alotau, Port Moresby, or Cairns), there isn't a very steady flow of it. Probably 95% of Trobrianders are subsistence gardeners and/or part time fishermen, and the best they can hope for is to sell a little of the surplus at the market. It makes buying kerosene, fabric or clothing, and trade store goods very difficult for the average Trobriand Islander. What is more, the population on Kiriwina Island is growing too fast, with now over 30,000 people on the island (it's 40km long and from 3 to 13km wide). This is putting a lot of pressure on gardening lands, which today don't stay fallow for more than 2-3 years (in the old days, it was 5-10 years). People have less land to garden, and the soil is less productive. The result is much smaller yam harvests, general food shortages, and stealing. In the past, stealing food was big-time tabu, but today it is happening all the time. In fact, instead of paying people to carry yams from the garden to the

village, as used to be the case, a number of people this year opted to transport the yams by truck, because they feared the carriers would pinch half the crop for themselves. People generally do lock their doors when they go to the gardens or to the station, and I keep my valuables locked inside a pelican case, which is locked inside a patrol box chained to the post of my house, and then the door to the house is locked. I am sure it's overkill, but no need to take chances! In general, though, I feel extremely safe there, although you do hear quite a lot about sorcery when people get sick, and jealousy can be a big problem.

It's hot and humid most of the time, although a little cooler and windier now that it's "winter" in the southern hemisphere. It's supposed to be the dry season, but it's been raining pretty much incessantly lately. The southeast winds tend to rile up the sea, and my trip to Kitava last week (more on that later) by dinghy was a bit dicey, but the voyage back to Alotau was fine. Mould is a problem, because inside the house is nearly always damp. Fortunately, so far my electronic equipment is coping, but it spends most of its life locked inside a patrol box with silica gel, since charging batteries is a real problem. My solar panel isn't that big, and one of the things I need to do in Alotau is check my inverter, which I might have exploded by mistake, and sort out if I need a new one, because so far all I can charge with it is my cell phone (which, of course, doesn't work in Trobs). So I use the laptop rarely (just for archiving photos, mostly) and am glad I have a couple of cameras, so I can switch if one runs out of juice. If I need to charge batteries, I can take them to the nearby guesthouse, Butia Lodge, IF they have guests, because otherwise they don't run the generator, or else I can leave them overnight in Losuia where the generator runs nightly from 6 to 9pm. the latter is a bit inconvenient, as it requires two trips to Losuia and PMVs are highly erratic and unreliable. The roads are in a shocking state, and the few trucks are constantly breaking down. To meet the boat to come to Alotau, I wasn't able to get a truck because the two that had been running that day broke down, so I ended up walking two hours, in the rain, in the dark to Losuia. Fortunately my "parents" accompanied me and helped to carry my things. The one thing I am glad I invested in is my waterproof notebooks - it is ALWAYS raining, and if I had normal notebooks they would be trashed.

OK, that's a whole lot about what it's like living in the Trobs, although I have only scratched the surface. Next time, I'll tell you more about the things I've been doing and learning. But I think I'd better leave this note as I'm already at 5 pages and you might be asleep by now. Email/facebook me this week with YOUR news and gossip, I've missed it! And thanks to those of you who already did, and to my darling Mira for calling me, what a treat! Love to you all.

Your dedicated field reporter, Michelle

P.S. - news hot off the wire: I just got mugged. Yep. In broad daylight, when I happened to be carrying my laptop to send this message. I heard steps coming fast behind me; before I could turn around, I felt a tug on my bag. I turned and a young man, 20ish, was standing next to me pressing something - box cutter? Not sure - his hand was over it, but not a gun or a big knife, in any case - into my shoulder. "drop the bag." What, what?? I was too surprised to react. My LAPTOP! AND my flash drives! I COULDN'T lose them! I debated fighting him - he wasn't that big. But bigger than me. And with some kind of makeshift weapon. I let go the bag. He ran, Just then, a truck came by - I was just outside town, on a kinda empty stretch of road. I waved my arms like a lunatic. The truck swerved at the guy; he panicked and dropped the bag. The people in the truck had just gone by the other way, saw this guy walking behind me and felt something was wrong, so they turned to come back to check on me. They picked me up - shaking and disoriented - and gave me a lift. And my laptop was fine, and my wallet was still in it, and I came out of it all no worse for wear. But I'll be more vigilant from now on - I guess Alotau isn't quite as safe as it's cracked up to be. But I'm OK.

Date: Sunday, June 14, 2009, 10:53 PM

Hi again,

I have so many more tales from the field to regale you with... and since I only have a short window when I can tell you all about it, you're getting another marathon missive, and then I'll be keeping quiet for another couple of months, back in the land where communication is based on word of mouth and notes written on paper and delivered hand to hand. I am going to stay in Alotau a little longer than I originally planned, though - a boat left on Saturday, but I still have a lot of errands left to run. Including (today) taking my saviours in the white truck out for lunch at the swishest place in town! I tried to do it on Thursday, but the guy had gone to Moresby for a couple of days. I've recovered from my frightening incident - the guy was obviously an amateur, and I think he was almost as scared holding me up and I was being robbed. AND, the really important things are

a) I wasn't hurt and b) I didn't lose anything. It was just a strong warning to watch myself, carry as little as possible, and not stray from the busy areas of town, even in the middle of the day.

Anyway. Life in the Trobriands. What do I actually DO with myself all day, what with no world wide web to surf, no TV to watch, no car to drive around, nowhere to shop or go for coffee or go to the pub? HOW does a person manage to amuse herself, you may well be asking yourself? Fair enough - I wondered, too, before I went there and saw for myself.

One thing I rarely am in the Trobs is bored. There is plenty of activity, just of a different sort than I was used to before. Right now, since the harvest has just finished, it is sagali city. A sagali is a mortuary feast, held some time (months or years) after a death to thank and release the mourners and others who contributed to aiding the person while sick as well as in the days after death, during the yawali (burial feast). The reason it is held a while after the death is that it needs to be held in a time of plenty - the relatives have to amass pigs, yams, betelnut, and doba.

Doba is a kind of currency, made only by women, out of banana leaves. There are two types: noku, or grass skirts, used mainly in sagali distributions and worn by women (and sometimes men) doing traditional dance; and nununiga, small bundles of banana leaves that have been cut into strips, scraped and incised with a design carved onto a wooden board, then dried in the sun, sorted by length, smoothed, bundled, and tied. It has no actual purpose; like cash, it exists only to exchange with things, and works because people agree to accept that it has a certain value. Doba should look fresh and clean, and older bundles are cut apart, the dirty or tattered leaves removed, and new ones are added to the outside to spruce them up. There are two ways to get nununiga: you can make it, using the process described above; or you can exchange things for it, a process called valova. This is most often done at sagali. Many women, who may not be directly related to the deceased, go to sagali just to do valova. They take things like kerosene, smoked fish, vegetables, an edible seaweed called yeya, candies/lollies, balloons, tobacco, betelnut, earrings made from turtleshell, - you name it. So while the main event at sagali involves distributions of doba, lengths of fabric, woven mats, kina, etc to relatives of the deceased (it's complicated, I won't even TRY to explain, b/c I still get confused about who gives what to who when), on the sidelines a thriving market is taking place - the closest Trobriand equivalent to a shopping mall!

I went to my first sagali shortly after I moved to the village, with my friend Nicola, John K's daughter, who lives in Alotau but recently spent 3 weeks in Yalumgwa, preparing to make sagali for her adopted grandmother who passed away last year. Nicola had some dyes, used for making grass skirts and mats, that she wanted to valova to obtain doba for sagali. She explained many things to me, and gave me a few bundles of her banana leaves so I could make a few small purchases (the bundles can ONLY be used in lots of 5, and the Trobriand counting system is likewise based around the number 5). She suggested I might also collect doba, and I realized that this would no doubt be the best way for me to learn about how it all works.

A few days later, there was another sagali in another village. Nicola, Veronica, and my "auntie" Ruth, as well as some other ladies from my village, would all go. I bought a packet of flour, some cooking oil, and took a frying pan and walked with the women to Tukwaukwa village. There, Ruth helped me build a fire, make dough, and fry it to make the little doughnutty balls of flour called pwarawa. These exchange at a set rate of 5 bundles for 5 doughballs. I was encouraged to make them small, so I could get as many (and as much doba) as possible! Of course, the sight of a dimdim frying flour and doing valova was enough to draw a sizeable crowd, and I had no trouble finding buyers for all my pwarawa. Lo and behold, my very first doba! It was a fair pile, so Veronica and Ruth had to help me carry it home - on our heads, of course (but I still have to use one hand for balance)!

As it happened, the very next day, an "auntie" in another village passed away, and I went with my family to the yawali following the burial. Since I now had my own doba, I made contributions to the mourners, placing my doba on the distribution piles. People were really happy with me that I was honouring my clan obligations, and I was given keimeilou (payment in the form of yams) in return. I used about half of the doba I had collected the previous day.

A couple of weeks later, I went on an excursion with some women from my village to a part of the island where the right kind of banana leaves are plentiful. Ruth again helped me to conduct my transactions and I got a large bundle of green leaves, at a cost of a few kina. Later, Veronica and Ruth and some other ladies showed me how to scrape, dry, sort, flatten, and bundle them. A grass skirt is being made for me, but later I hope to learn how to make those, too. And last week I did valova at a sagali in Kapwapu village with some little keychain flashlights/torches I brought, and they were a massive hit. A few days later, I was in Okaiboma village, an hour and a half walk away from home, and the women there were all talking about my torches and insisting I come to do valova at the sagali they would have on Saturday - unfortunately, it poured rain all day on Saturday so it was canceled, and I left for Alotau the next day.

All of this has been really good for me in terms of my standing on the island - people seem very happy with my eagerness to participate in these things,and comment that I'm becoming a "good Kiriwina woman." It's helped to offset a bit the problem of my thickheadedness in learning Kilivila, which people also comment on (less favourably). I am obviously compared to Sergio, who chatters away like he's been speaking Kilivila all his life, and I simply don't weigh up, so unfortunately some people have assumed that I must be "less clever" than he is (matona sena tokabitam, mitaga minana gala makawala nakabitam - means, he is a clever man, but she isn't as clever) . But at least I am applauded for my doba and for my gardening, so that's something.

Another little skill I picked up is how to make mona. Mona is a sort of pudding, usually made from taro (though it's possible to use yams, too). It is a lengthy and laborious process, so is generally only made at special occasions, like sagali, though in this case we made it for Mother's Day. It requires a dozen coconuts to make a pot of mona, and as I mentioned, coconuts are scarce in my district these days, but luckily they were plentiful and cheap in the village of Kaisiga, on Kaileuna Island, so when I was there in early May I bought 20 and brought them back.

First step is peeling and boiling the taro.. Taro has to be peeled carefully, as there is an inner rind beneath the skin that can irritate the throat or "bite you" if not fully removed. Once boiled, the taro must be "smashed," a process called tututu. A chunk of taro is placed on a wooden board, and pounded with a wooden paddle until soft. With three of us smashing (only women do this), it took over 2 hours to get through the whole pot of taro. Meanwhile, the men cut a large pile of firewood, and scraped and creamed the coconut into a large clay pot. A large, hot fire was made, and the coconut cream brought to a boil, and a little salt was added. The smashed lumps of taro were added to the pot and Mata - this can only be done by men - stirred the pot with a huge paddle.

Once cooked, the large pot was lifted using banana stems and placed in a tub, supported by coconut husks, as the pots are rounded at the bottom and don't have real handles (these pots aren't made in the Trobs, as they have no clay; they must be bought or traded for from other islands). The pot was set on my verandah to cool, and to give time "for the spirits to have their share." After 15 minutes or so, we served it up - this is fresh mona. What we didn't eat or give away - there was plenty - we then prepared for the mumu. This means taking a few scoops of the pudding, folding it inside some large leaves, tying the bundle, and cooking it in the ground. This makes the mona even better! These little parcels of incredibly fattening yumminess we had with dinner and breakfast next day, and gave the rest away.

Hmm, still talking about food! Always seems to be my main topic. Feasts, feasts, feasts. All of the sagalis I mentioned above are of a type more specifically called lisaladabu, which are "women's" sagalis, because doba and other women's wealth, like mats, are central to the distributions. But there is also a rarer but bigger type of sagali called rigabwa - a "men's" sagali, where the distributions are instead all man things - pigs, clay pots, stone axe blades, and, of course, yams. Also massive, massive amounts of betelnut, and some kina. There was a very big such sagali held a few weeks back, hosted by none other than Paramount Chief Pulayasi himself (hopefully I remember to attach his pic, in which he's wearing the hat and Canadian flag pin I gave him!) in his village, Omarakana. It was a really big deal, being the first one hosted by this Paramount Chief (who has been installed for about 20 years); in general, this type of feast is only held every 4-5 years (it takes that long to secure enough pigs - the count I heard was 32 killed at this particular event).

One major contributor to the distributions/feast was Dr Mark Mosko, yet another anthropologist, this one a senior academic at the Australian National University in Canberra. Mark has been going to the Trobs for a few

months each year since 2005 I think. He works closely with the Paramount Chief, and is considered a member of his clan. Although my initial communications with Mark had been a bit frosty, I ended up running in to him fairly often while he was in Kiriwina, and he was always very friendly - even when he stopped by while I was chatting on the verandah of one of his informants! Unfortunately, he got malaria during his relatively short visit and also a really bad sore on his foot that got infected and swollen. My "parents" were also both in the hospital (using the term loosely - a couple of rooms with some rusty beds with no mattresses, packed cheek by jowl) with malaria a couple of weeks ago, and a nice old man from my village died from it (or sorcery) recently. I'm taking my doxycycline religiously. Actually, Vero and Mata's illness was directly related to the old man's death - they were sinavalam (supporting the mourners) by cooking, chopping firewood, etc all hours of the day and night, and ended up getting so run down from work and lack of sleep that they got sick themselves. When someone dies, people come to the village to cry with the widow, and they stay up wailing - I mean literally, WAILING - the whole night after the death, and the next night, up until the yawali takes place. The crying is interspersed with singing (some church songs, some traditional sort of chants). Some people have to tend to the mourners, who are too busy wailing to go to the gardens or cook. The mourners swap out, they kinda take shifts, but it seemed like Vero and Mata were always on duty to look after them - they are, it should be noted, both VERY hard workers and dedicated gardeners. When they were in the hospital, my "auntie" Ruth, who lives on the other side of my hut (Vero and Mata on the one side), took over as my caretaker and food provider. It's not that I would mind cooking for myself, but I don't have much to work with, since the food I planted isn't ready for harvest and I can't be arsed going to Losuia to the trade stores more than once a week at most. And to be honest, I'd rather eat yams and sweet potato than rice and tinned fish, or worse, tinned corned beef. That shit is baaaaad.

Oh yes, and then there's my actual RESEARCH. I do that, too. There have only been a handful of tourists visit the Trobs since I arrived, but it's easy for me to keep an eye on arrivals and departures and when someone arrives, I always find them and talk to them. There was a young American guy there the other week with an interest in setting up a cultural tourism business - taking a sailboat around the kula ring. Probably won't materialize, but interesting to me that he's considering it! I have a good relationship with the folks at Butia Lodge, which is where the vast majority of guests stay, and those who don't stay there are often with John K, also very close; he's alright in his way. I have a cordial but not-too-close relationship with John K, which seems about right. He's related to half the island, so it's best to remain on good terms!

Just the other week, I went over to Kitava Island for a few days. This anthro lecturer at UPNG who is from the Trobriands, Linus, came last Sunday and would be traveling by dinghy to Kitava to work with a film crew over there. I was presumptuous enough to meet him at the airstrip with my backpack ready and asked if I could tag along. He agreed, and next thing Sergio was joining us too. The trip over was a bit hairy - the southeast winds can make the water very choppy, and I spent most of the 1 + hr trip wiping salt water from my face as waves continuously battered me. My hand was being gripped fiercely by a young local women, and another man was up the front saying his prayers aloud. At one point, Linus told the operator to turn back, but he said it would be OK... OK being a relative term. We made it, in any case. The reason I was keen to go was that a crew was there filming a reality show for BBC2 called "Tribal Wives." Another crew had been on Kiriwina just a couple of weeks before I arrived, and this other reality show was filmed in Kiriwina in 2006. I'm thinking I might be able to write up something about all this - something about popular representations of Trobs in "reality" TV. The crew was really helpful and I also got in touch with the producer from the last crew to film on the islands. Linus always seems to be involved in these things, so he's a good source of info. Kitava was BEAUTIFUL - gorgeous beaches, clear water, clean villages (they all have latrines, unlike Kiriwina where it's all bush toilet), and ample fish and gardening land. The only thing they DON'T have plenty of is betelnut and mustard. And yes, I did learn how to chew betelnut. Not like a true Trobriander - Linus himself is among the great chewers I've met - but I can chew now. And I try to keep my supplies up so I have plenty to give away as social lubricant - it really does help to set the right tone when you begin a conversation with someone by chewing together.

So I've now already been to three of the five inhabited Trobriand Islands. Sergio and I had planned an excursion to Tuma Islands as well, back in late April, but were thwarted. Tuma is the place where people go when they die in the Trobs - the place of the spirits of the dead. People didn't used to LIVE there - just be dead there - but recently a few villages have been established, because the fishing there is apparently incredible, and the land fertile. People tell all kinds of creepy stories about Tuma, and those who have been there

swear up and down you can hear and see evidence of the spirits, and feel their presence. It's said to be very eerie and everyone who has been has some freaky tale to tell about their visit there. We tried to arrange for a dinghy and operator to take us there - I met a woman who offered me the use of the engine she owned, attached to the boat owned by her relative, who lives in Tuma. But wires got crossed and the boat didn't show up on the day we went to meet it. And even if it had, we'd not have gotten too far, because the petrol station ran out of zoom (diesel fuel premixed with oil), so the trip was aborted. We had hoped to reschedule before the southeast winds came up and made the seas too rough, but we couldn't manage it. So we (Sergio, his "dad" Camillus, Veronica, and me) settled for a little "beach holiday" in Kaisiga, a Seventh Day Adventist village on Kaileuna Island. This, too, is a land of plenty compared to overpopulated Kiriwina. The village of Kaisiga is built in a linear fashion along a gorgeous stretch of white sand beach, raked clean every day except Saturday (the sabbath). Like in Kitava, they also have loos - only theirs are little huts built out over the sea (so swimming is best done AWAYYY from the village!), but these are supposed to be only for men - women use the bush. SDAs observe the same dietary laws as Jews, so even though their seas are rich with shells, lobster, and crabs, they don't eat any (but they fed plenty to us!), and pig is likewise off the menu. Nor do they chew betelnut (at least not with lime, which is what makes it "kick") or smoke - at least, not in public ;) Westayed with relatives of Lydia, who runs one of the trade stores in Losuia (and is a sister to both John K and Serah, the woman who owns Butia Lodge). Likewise, in Kitava, we stayed with the brother of my friend/informant Toku, manager of Butia Lodge. There aren't any established guesthouses on the outer islands (I love how they refer to Kiriwina as "the mainland!"), but it's never a problem to find a place to sleep - someone will ALWAYS take you in and feed you.

And what about the evenings? What to do when it gets dark just after 6pm all year round? Well, we eat our dinner (more yams, please!) by kerosene lamp, and then we either sit around talking - either on Vero andMata's verandah, or else I go over and visit with Sergio and his family sometimes - and at least a few nights a week, we play cards. Trobrianders looooove cards! Of course I brought Wizard, and everyone loves it - the favorite. It has been rechristened guyau, which means chief. We also play 500, or crazy eights, or more rarely, cribbage (I brought my board!). Vero really enjoys cards, as does my little brother Emmanuel, and though Sergio didn't fancy himself much of a card player before, he's a sucker for the guyau. It doesn't require much complicated language, and everyone knows the numbers in English, and I can say, "your turn," "my deal," and "how many cards" in Kilivila, at least! Some evenings, I retire early and read or write under my mosquito net by lamplight before turning in. Some days, if I've walked a lot or talked/listened/written a lot (or both), I'm struggling to keep my eyes open much past 9pm. Other times, there's activity in the village, or I read on my own, until midnight or later. But always I'm up with the roosters shortly after 6 in the morning.

So, there you have it. I spend my days variously gardening, eating, reading, writing, chasing tourists, visiting film sets, making money out of banana leaves, frying doughballs, walking places, hanging out at the air strip, playing cards, learning new words, attending feasts, taking photos, and asking questions. Seems it's enough to keep me outta trouble! And I must confess, though I probably make it sound like I'm a whirling dervish of activity all the time, some days I do bugger all. There are days I can't be arsed going anywhere, or really talking much, or taking any notes. Sometimes its too hot. Sometimes too rainy. Sometimes I'm just LAZY. I sit around reading novels or writing letters. So don't go getting the idea that I'm SOOO productive all the time.

And there you have it. That pretty much sums up my first two months of fieldwork. Oh, and one last piece of good news - I think the dude at Rural Power Supply sorted me out with my solar panel/battery/inverter problem - I plugged up my laptop to check it, and it had enough juice to run it! This should make recharging camera batteries a whole lot easier. Anyway, Thanks to those of you who wrote back already with your kind words and encouragement! As mentioned, I will be in Alotau for a few more days yet - not sure exactly when the boat will go, this being PNG after all - and should make my next visit to Alotau and/or Moresby by the end of August, I think. So you'll get the next major report in another couple of months!

Kagutoki pela kukwalawasi thanks-my for you (pl) read - (Thanks for reading),
Michelle

Hello, hello, my dearest ones!

I've once again emerged from my hut in the small coral atoll I now call home, and not only am I able to communicate once again with the world, but I'm very likely on my way to a country near you soon (unless you happen to be one of my sweet ones in Europe or South America, in which case I won't be anywhere near you - boo hoo!). Of course, I'll only get to see a fraction of you, but some is better than none. I needed to make a decision on when I would take my "field break" - not that I really need a break, as life in the village suits me fine - and decided on sooner rather than later. I realized that whenever I go, I'm bound to miss SOMETHING, so I may as well make my move since I have some software issues to sort out and a great list of goodies my friends, neighbours, and adopted family have kindly asked me to look for on their behalf. What's more, my other option was to go in November-Jan, and I suffered some weeks of Canadian winter last year so wasn't that keen to head for the Great White North at that time of year - would far rather get in some quality cottage time with the whole whanau. Of course, I could have just skipped the visit with the fam, but I kind of like them for some reason, and reckoned my grant could spring for a trip - I'm sure I can justify it somehow! So I'll be in Halifax on the 27th of August for two weeks or so. Then, on to Auckers to reconnect with my wonderful friends there, before heading back to PNG in early November.

Life continues to be a treat in Modawosi Village. Everything is just trucking along hunky dory. I'm still lame at the language, but that is just going to be my constant refrain over the next year and a half - and I'm terrified that in the few months I'll be away, I'll lose what little progress I managed to make in the first 4 months or so. My concern with that is one of the reasons I'll trim my hiatus from the 4-6 months I'd originally planned down to about a three month absence from the Trobs, with a little time in Alotau and Moresby around the edges.

Although it's not such a long absence, it was sad to leave yesterday. Everyone is so lovely - Christ knows why, but these people really seem to like me! My "grandma" gave me a carving and stood wailing as though for a death as I left. My friend Martha gave me a grass skirt as a gift to take home. My "parents" got lime gourds for me to take as gifts for family and friends, and mumu'd food for me to eat on my voyage. Vero and Mata, as well as my Auntie Ruth and my "cousin-sister" Sanamu, accompanied me on the nearly 2 hr walk to Losuia to get the boat. They insisted on carrying my things and seeing me off as I boarded the ship for the 16 hr trip to Alotau.. I will never be able to adequately repay these people for the kindnesses and generosity they have shown me. I cannot believe how genuinely caring they are, and my affection for them runs deep - especially for my little brother Emmanuel, who I adore to bits, he's smart as a whip and is always looking out for his big sister!

I've had a busy last couple of weeks, as we were rather inundated with visitors. All at once, we had 22 dimdims on the island. 16 were geriatrics from Canada and the US on an Eldertreks tour of PNG; they stayed for three days and were accompanied by their guide Nitten from India (of all places) as well as their "local" guide Rex, a highlander. On the same day, an American working at the US Embassy in Moresby, a writer for the Italian version of Vanity Fair magazine, and an Aussie photojournalist based in Vanuatu all arrived as well. And the next day, when I accompanied the oldies to Kaibola beach on the northern end of the island, I met two Aussie fellahs in a yacht who had just anchored and stayed for a few days. So I had my hands full interviewing and participant-observing as they all traversed the island! I will unfortunately miss a German film crew coming to take footage for a documentary, who are due to arrive on September 8. But luckily Sergio has agreed to chase them up and get contact details from them so I can contact them later. He'll keep an eye on comings and goings in my absence, so I'm grateful to have an extra set of eyes and ears to keep track of doings while I'm away.

The Ugwabwena Festival (yam party!) was a rousing success, with all lodges full to overflowing and lots of people in village stays. There was much dancing and carrying on, and the visitors and locals alike enjoyed the bash. The downside of all this jubilation and money flowing to the island is jealousy. People living on other parts of the island resent that my ward (and a few other places) get so much - although most of the dancers participating only earned between 5 and 15 kina (15 kina will be about 5 USD), plus about one yam per house, a bit of rice, and a miniscule piece of pork. Despite not having an easily accessible beach, my district gets a very high proportion of the tourist dollars spent because of the presence of the main tourist lodge - when guests come, dance performances are usually organized for their entertainment, from the nearby villages. The

other primary destination, the beach at Kaibola on the northern end of the island, is very popular for village stays but has a reputation on the rest of the island for its "money-faced" people - and my own experience shows this to be true. I went there with the fogies last week, and committed the cardinal sin of losing sight of my notebook. I was a bit PANICKED. I only realized just before we left that I didn't have it in my bag. I asked a guy I know there to check around for me, and the next day his brother came to my ward and I was hoping he'd bring it, but he didn't know anything about it. So the next day I hired a truck and a driver to go back there to track it down. I started asking around, and my "father," who came with me, gave a speech in the village to ask whoever had the notebook to please give it to the pastor to return it to me. Instead, one man came to him and said he had "just found" the book and did Mata think I'd like to pay him 20 kina to get it back? The bastard wanted to hold my notebook for ransom! Mata gave him a guilt trip about how I was a student and had lived with his family for a long time, and deserved to be treated as yakidasi ("us"). Meanwhile, I had been paddled in an outrigger to visit a yacht anchored near the beach, so I missed the conversation. When I got back to the beach, the man with the book approached me and, I guess a bit shamed by Mata's speech, only asked me "to help him a little for his kerosene" in return for the book. I handed him K2 (the cost of a beer bottle full of kero) and he returned the precious data. Lesson learned - NEVER, EVER let the notebook out of my sight!!

The rush of sagalis has now finished, so my days of racking up doba are on pause for now. It's now time for cutting new gardens, so the festive post-harvest season is coming to a close and the hard work of making new gardens is beginning. I've been eating yams lately only because people have been cooking them specially for me - we went to visit Vero's relatives up north, and it was the first time they met me, so they had to cook yams for me, and because I was leaving people were dipping in to the storehouse. Most of the yams still left should be used as seeds for next year's harvest. I sent for some tobacco to be used to exchange for some extra yam seeds for my family, but I'm not sure if it arrived. Apparently, you can get a lot more bang for your buck by exchanging tobacco for yam seed than you can with cash. This time of year, the main staple is sweet potato, supplemented by tapioca and tula or giant taro, and to a lesser degree by regular taro, breadfruit, and green bananas.

Hopefully, I'll have one more garden (#4!) by the time I get back. I have a young fellow working for me, a Grade 9 student at Kiriwina High School who lives in my village. Roland is a smart kid and really likes school, but had been out of classes for a week because he couldn't pay his school fees. His Dad was in Alotau trying to sell carvings to make the fees, but hadn't been able to send any money. I heard about this and wanted to help this kid, because I know him and I know how much he likes school. So I made an agreement to advance K100 towards his fees, enough to get him back in class, and he would earn the money by helping me with my gardens and by doing some errands for me like posting letters or delivering messages. When he earns this money, if he still needs help with his fees, I will help him again - IF he holds up his end of the bargain. I went with him to the school to see the headmaster, who I know, and paid the fees directly myself so I knew half of it wouldn't disappear for rice, tobacco, and betelnut! The kid was very happy to get back in class and has promised to cut me one more garden where he will plant my corn, watermelon, and pumpkin.

Meanwhile, I'm once again readapting to town life. I'll be in Alotau until Friday, in Port Moresby for the weekend, and in Sydney early next week. Then on to Halifax via LA. I'm hoping my third visit to Alotau's a charm - I had the dog bite the first time I was here, and second visit the attempted mugging. I'm gonna try to stay out of trouble this time! There are tons of Trobrianders here, and it's nice how they all know me now - whenever I walk around town, people I don't even recognize (or only vaguely) call out to me using my village name and speak to me in Kilivila language, ask me to chew with them, and "tell stories." I am always amazed by how many people know me by name! I've also really expanded my social circle in Moresby, as I met quite a few Aussies living there who have come to visit the Trobs, especially during the festival. My main mission there is to collect my passport, which has been sitting at the National Research Institute since I arrived in the country on April 1! So, from here on I'll be connected to the world for the next almost three months before I once again leave the grid. It will be a nice treat to be able to talk with as many of you as possible while I'm in Canada and/or New Zealand, where internet is everywhere and calls are cheap. I know I've missed weddings, birthdays, festivities, pregnancies, and all sorts, which is the one down side to my seclusion - at least with the internet, I can follow along with your lives, even if I can't be there in person! Please fill me in on

all I've missed in the last few months...

Love and best wishes to all,

Michelle ("Bwita")

Hello my dear ones,

So, here I am again, soon (I hope) to set sail for the enchanting, fascinating, and friendly Trobriand Islands and return to my little hut in the village for the next phase of my research, pretty much a full year this time around. I am excited and eager to get back to my adopted family there and my village life - will have to check on my taro and tapioca in my gardens! The apprehension (OK, terror) I had when I went the first time is completely dissolved, thanks to the incredibly warm hospitality I experienced in my first 5 months on Kiriwina Island. Can't wait to pick up where I left off, and my only fear this time is for the language I may have lost in the 3 months since I left, which was so hard-fought to acquire. But I reckon it'll come back and continue to improve as I spend more and more time practicing.

I got to Port Moresby on Wednesday of last week for a quick pass-through before heading down to Alotau on Friday to take in the Canoe Festival. This festival is now in its 6th year, and involves people from coastal villages on the mainland and from a number of the islands in the region (including my own Kiriwina) bringing their traditional canoes - for fishing, trading, or war - for display and racing as well dancing and performances in the traditional dress distinctive to each place. It was a very well-organized event and quite well attended, by locals and dimdims alike.

Now that the festival is over, I've got some running around town to do picking up a bunch more stuff to take with me back to the island, and will try to hunt up a boat to go back on. The big Starships boats aren't running until further notice - mechanical difficulties, I think - so will ask around for a work boat maybe heading over next weekend. The winds are quite strong and the seas rough right now, so it will have to be a good sturdy boat, otherwise I might bite the bullet and buy a plane ticket - so far, I've never flown over and now just might be the time! I'm happy that my bike, which I packed up and brought from New Zealand, seems to have made it this far unscathed, so I am looking forward to improved mobility when I get back - I can peddle myself all over Kiriwina now! That is, until it breaks down... I need to invest in a pump, some spare tire tubes and a puncture kit before I leave town!

I mostly wanted to send this email to make sure anyone who might have cause to use it has my postal address. Cards, letters, postcards, carrier pigeons - all are welcome connections to loved ones at home, and will be greatly appreciated! My weekly trip to the post office in the government station is always met with great anticipation - what little treasures, in the form of the written word from people I adore, will Lorna the post lady have for me this time? The cards and postcards that have arrived also serve to brighten up the otherwise rather spartan decor of my bush-materials hut. Please contact me at:

Michelle MacCarthy (or, use my local name if you like: Bwita)
PO Box 42 District Treasury Office
Losuia, Kiriwina
Trobriand Islands
Milne Bay Province
PAPUA NEW GUINEA

And should you inadvertently delete this message and lose my address, please note that it is also posted on my profile page on Facebook, in the "about me" box.

I'll be checking in on emails until I go back to the island, and will likely be back again sometime in the new year. In the meantime, my little cubby at the post office awaits your post!

Love and early Happy Holiday greetings to all,

Michelle

January 12, 2010
Hello friends, and Happy Belated New Year!

Back in touch with the world, and with new tales to relate. Another two-ish months into my fieldwork – now seven Trobriand months under my belt. I'm still a bit dazed from the two-day odyssey by cargo boat to get back here to Alotau just now, but I'll get to that… better to do things in some kind of order, so let's go back to where I left you last.

After an extended wait, par for the PNG course, to get a boat back to the Trobs after the canoe festival, Sergio and I hit the jackpot – we ended up essentially taking a luxury cruise! OK, maybe not luxury by some peoples' standards, but compared to most of the boats making the run, we travelled in major style. For a start, the trip began with a few cold beers, and that's a good start for any voyage in my books. We ended up going on a "dimdim boat" – owned by a long-time grizzly expat who's had a couple of Trobriand wives and now bases himself in Samarai Island. This boat was well kitted out – fridges/freezers stocked with food, a clean head with a HOT shower, and comfy bunks. The boat had been chartered, but the guys who chartered it let us come along for 100 kina each. The other random passenger headed back to Kiriwina was Father Sonny, the Filipino Catholic priest. We finally set sail about 9pm, on a clear night with calm seas. We arrived back at Losuia wharf around 10pm the following night, but getting transport at such an hour is a no-go, so we all just spent another night on board. The following morning, Father walked to the closest mission station, Gusaweta, to collect the church truck. He came back to the wharf to pick up his cargo, along with an Italian anthropologist (Scoditti) who has been coming to the Trobs since the 70s and who was staying at the mission during his 2-month or so visit. We hitched a ride, enjoyed a nice brekkie with Father and the sisters, then got dropped off back in Yalumgwa.

There was no time to tarry, however – the Kiriwina Culture Show, in its inaugural year, was starting that very day, and this eager little scholar had to get there to see what it was all about. So I greeted my family – happy to see me back safe and sound – dropped my bag, and then headed back to Losuia on foot this time with Vero, Emmanuel, and Ruben. The next few days were filled with more dancing and feasting than you could shake a stick at – and speech after speech from politicians promising money for various projects and initiatives, most significantly the first million kina of 3 million promised towards alleviating the food security problem on the Trobs. This festival was the brainchild of the president of our Local Level Government, one Jennifer Rudd, a hefty, robust figure (I reckon she could plow through a helluva plate of yams), though a greenhorn to politics. She grew up in the Trobs, and she speaks the language, but she's not yakidasi – Trobriand for "us" – her father is a long-time dimdim resident of Kiriwina, her mother from elsewhere in PNG. She talks the tourism talk, but this festival was not advertised publicly at all – it was essentially an excuse to make some distributions (and hence a bigger name for herself), and to bring some politicians to the island to see the situation and write checks. However, as with all things in the Trobriands, it was not without controversy. It was meant to include all 33 wards of the Trobriand Islands (including groups from each of the four main islands), but some didn't take part in the end – either because they had no dance to perform, no dress to wear, no food to contribute, or they just didn't want to support the President's initiative. Some groups, especially in villages near the government station, did perform, but doing "modern" dances (church-influenced, to guitar or cassette tape rather than to kundu drums) in western clothing (i.e. t-shirts and skirts/shorts), eliciting some grumbles about dying culture. The primary complaint in the lead-up to the festival was about timing – November is a time of real shortage of yams, as the most prestigious tubers (teytu yams) are all but gone at this time of year, and not many of the alternative yams (kui or kuvi), which aren't as tasty (although they do come in a long variety that you don't really eat, but use for presentations and which keep for a long time, and can grow as much as 10 or 12 feet long) are ready yet. The main food at this time of year is semoy (sweet potato). Indeed, the diet is more monotonous than usual this time of year, especially now that the corn is mostly finished, and there is little tapioca or taro ready in the gardens just now. Semoy is mostly grown by women for the kitchen, unlike yams which are primarily grown by men for feasting. Although a hugely important food in the Trobriand diet, sweet potato lacks status – the semoy is the edible equivalent of the Honda Civic: a sturdy workhorse that gets you where you need to go, efficiently and without fanfare, day in and day out; the yam is the flashy sports car that requires a big investment and that you save for special occasions to show how cool you are. I heard the refrain repeatedly over the several days of the festival that

"you can't paka (feast) with semoy." Our Jenny was unperturbed – she insisted that this was NOT a Milamala (harvest) festival, just a showcase of Trobriand culture, and there were (in her opinion) plenty of things one could feast with if one had a mind that could get beyond its unwavering obsession with yams. Indeed, November/December is a time of bountiful corn (maize) and watermelon, and Madame President also had some unfathomable number of bags of rice to give to participants, as well as pigs. There were the inevitable complaints about the distribution in the end – each group got cash, even those wards who didn't perform got money, but a bit less than those who did – and some food to be distributed throughout the community. Still, it was generally considered a successful event, and cash has already been committed by the Governor of the province and the Minister for Culture and Tourism for a repeat performance next year.

Only three dimdim visitors made it for the event – as I said, the event was not at all advertised. One came because I told him about it – an American who owns a tour company and is working on a video project about canoes in the Pacific. I had met him at the Canoe Festival in Alotau and mentioned the Culture Show, so he came over and did some filming. Another was a German dude who had rocked up on the Trobes and decided to stay in one of the villages near Losuia for a month, and whose hosts had obviously quickly improvised a "traditional" costume for him to wear for the occasion; he embraced the opportunity to participate and paraded around proudly in his mimiyeyo (pandanus wrap to cover the genitals). The timing of his visit was pure coincidence. And the third was a Brit who is working as a volunteer in Moresby with a Trobriand lady, with whom he travelled to the island for the event. So I had some "work" running around talking to these folks, and also just taking notes on all the rhetoric being spouted in speeches, the gossip and bitching about how things were done, and the nature of the performances themselves. All very interesting and good fodder for the thesis!

I also now have a new "job." I was asked, despite my lack of linguistic acumen, to serve as chairwoman of the Parents and Citizen's Committee for our local elementary school. Given my obsession with education, I could hardly refuse. However, it meant two FULL DAYS of meetings in my first weeks back, as we tried to devise a three-year plan for the school. These people have stamina when it comes to meetings – they can last 5,6, even 8 hours. It's a struggle for me to maintain my attention for such an extended period, as people go on and on saying nothing, but I try…and it's nice to be involved in the community in a concrete way.

There was also a bit of very sad news shortly after my return to the island. A man both Sergio and I knew quite well, who with his wife had hosted us when we stayed in Okaiboma village on our way to and from Kitava Island last year, passed away from renal failure. He had been staying in Moresby for a few months with his brother, who I also know well, and who is head of the Anthropology department of the University of Papua New Guinea. A week or so after his death, they flew the body back for burial. Both of us were really saddened and wanted to show our support for the family by giving keymeylu, a gift of food. Since neither of us have yams, we had to give rice and tinned fish. We went with our "mothers" to the airport when they brought the body, and then to Okaiboma village to give our keymeylu. The next day was the burial and the yawali, the first distribution of doba and other material goods after a death. Luckily, I still had some doba from before, and some of the ladies in my village helped me pad out my supply by giving me 5 or 10 bundles, a gesture called vakabiyamla , so I was able to make contributions to the distributions; Sergio was given a clay pot to contribute (men's wealth, as opposed to banana leaf money which is women's wealth) by his "uncle." In return, we were given cooked food to take home and share with those who helped us make our contributions.

Even though I've been around for half a year and Sergio for over a year, we still draw a lot of attention when we move around to different parts of the island. People crowd around to hear us speak in "language," – they are inevitably delighted and amused by his proficiency, and disappointed by my lack, but it is getting better and better. I still struggle, and when I first got back after not speaking/hearing Kilivila for 3 months I felt totally depressed about it, but now I can see that I am more and more able to communicate, though certainly with plenty of mistakes. Still, I'm much for frequently now hearing, "Oh, Bwita, bokupas!" meaning I pass the test when people pepper me with questions (I thought I was supposed to be the one asking questions?). I'm also slowly getting a bit more confidence, which has been the biggest barrier of all – I feel so shy to speak, as I know I make so many errors, but people are usually really happy to hear me make the effort. I do sometimes feel like a trained monkey, though, when large groups crowd around, ask questions, and then laugh with delight when I answer. I've never been a circus sideshow before…

I have also added another of the Trobriand Islands to my list of islands visited - the southernmost island of Vakuta, renowned by people on my island as a place of yoyowa, or witches. I was warned to be very careful, and if any old women complimented me or asked me for anything, to give it without hesitation! The island is in fact lovely, but we had a harrowing trip there - we left just at nightfall in a dinghy for a trip that should take 2 hrs, and ended up taking 4, because the dummy operator didn't know the way and got lost. Those damn witches! We stayed with a very nice - perhaps TOO nice - lady there, who micromanaged every moment of our stay, but it was a sweet spot. There is a huge, amazing fresh water cave for swimming and great beaches, and the waters are rich with fish and shellfish. We had a fab picnic on the beach one day, our host Freida laying out a lavish spread. Now, the only inhabited island I have left to visit is Tuma, where the spirits of the dead live in a hedonistic paradise. Looking forward to it!

Other than that, I've been trying to overcome the inertia and laziness that often overcomes me in the heat of the day – sometimes leaving the village seems like far, far too much effort. Which is OK, I guess, so long as I do something constructive with my day – Trobriand women, if they feel lazy to go to the garden, have to busy themselves with village work like making mats or doba so they don't get gossiped about. But some days it would be a stretch to say I did anything particularly useful. I've done minimal gardening, though I did feel pride the day I collected the first harvest from my sweet potato garden. Mostly I've been working at the little garden just behind my house, which is now producing carrots, eggplant, tomatoes, green peppers/capsicum, leaf cabbage, and it even looks like the ginger and garlic I planted are making headway. I also have a few herbs: basil, dill, and coriander. But really, it doesn't take much of my time. There have been very few tourists in the last couple of months, so I am trying to force myself to do some work on other topics which I can use as background for some papers or something. But I feel like my work with Trobrianders is still inhibited a bit because my comprehension is still spotty – even though I interview only English speakers at this point, there are inevitably backseat drivers wanting to give their two cents, and I feel like I miss out on a lot as not everything gets translated. I think in another few months, though, I'll be able to get a lot more out of these interjections, and pick up on more of the general background noise which at this point I only get in snatches here and there. To be fair, although I constantly berate myself for my slow rate of language acquisition, at the same time I realize that it's really not fair for me (or others) to compare my fluency with someone who has a 6 month jump on me, and is simply tacking one more language on to the four he already speaks like a native. I look at some of the people who have been there much longer than me – some of the nuns, government workers in Losuia, John K's Hong Kong-born wife – and realize I actually speak more of the language than they do, so I shouldn't give myself TOO hard a time!

Hmm, I suspect those of you who are still with me are getting bleary-eyed and fatigued by my typically voluminous report, so I'll leave you there and continue with the rest of my update in a few days' time: I still have to cover my Trobriand Christmas experience, as well as a story about a not-so-fun aspect of Trobriand life – domestic violence. In the meantime, I'll enjoy the little luxuries of "town" and a break from the sweet potatoes. As usual, I come to Alotau starved most of all for news from friends and loved ones –a HUGE thanks to all of those who took the time to send a Christmas card and/or letter, each of which was a delight not only for me but for the whole family, who crowded around to see the pictures!

Oh, just one other thing: some family and friends back home have enquired about what they might be able to give that would help people in the Trobs. My answer is: school fees. My mum (jimaccar@nb.sympatico.ca) is organizing to collect some donations and put them into a Canadian bank account, which I will draw to take back and distribute with the assistance of the headmaster and teachers at Kiriwina High School – classes are back in the end of the month, and people are really scrambling right now to come up with the fees for their children. If anyone back home would like to make a contribution, please contact my mum, and know that even $10 or $20 makes a big difference to a family with virtually no income! And as for New Zealand friends, if you are interested to give something, you can donate it to my Westpac Account (please put "school fees" in the description, though I will assume any money that comes in in the next few weeks is for that purpose!). The account number is 03 0296 028 3467. It is always hard to know exactly how long I will be in town, as it depends on boats, but assume that I will leave the weekend of the 23rd. Whatever money comes in before then I will take back with me, and any overflow I will collect on my next trip to Alotau to take back. Sorry, I'm not a registered charity, so no tax receipts, but you will have the assurance that 100% of what you give goes straight to the intended purpose – no overheads! Thanks from me and from the good people of Kiriwina for

any and all contributions, and NO PRESSURE – I know not everyone has money to give, especially right after Xmas!

With best wishes for a joyous, prosperous, and stimulating 2010 to all,

Bwita

PART II

Hello again, and time to pick up where we left off, for those of you who manage to stick with me through all my excruciating detail. Now, where were we?

Oh yes, Christmas, I think. Hope you all enjoyed yours, whether in frigid Canada, summery New Zealand, or elsewhere. Xmas in the Trobs was quite a different experience from what I'm used to. The weather was the least of it – the main difference, to me, is the fact that there is ZERO commercialism. Imagine! No lights, no tinsel, no piped in carols; no santa suits, no turkey dinner, no fa la la; no stockings hung by the chimney, with care or otherwise; no buy now free layaway sale this week only! Indeed, Xmas day itself could virtually have passed unnoticed. I was the sole dimdim, as Sergio had scored an invitation (boys only, apparently) to Woodlark Island with some people we know from there, and will stay through the beginning of February.

Some years, I was told, there is a community feast for Xmas, but not this year. The only way the occasion was really marked was with singing on Xmas Eve. I had been invited to dinner with John K and Mary (you'll remember our local chief!), and made a banana cake to contribute – I've been experimenting with baking cakes on the open fire, with considerable success if I do say so myself. They had a nice spread, with chicken, fish, yams (John has been experimenting with planting yams at the wrong time of year, a venture that has so far met limited success, but did produce some yams out of season), and other goodies. They had also managed to procure a bottle of sweetish sparkling wine, a rare treat and although I don't really favour sweet wines, beggars cannot be choosers! I had been told to expect some groups to visit my verandah to sing throughout the night, and had a few small goodies on hand as instructed – betelnuts, small coins, lollies for the kiddies – to give as thanks. So before I went for dinner, I collected the lamps (well, OK, I sent my little bro Emmanuel and his mate around) of every house in the village – about 16 or 18? – and gave some kerosene to everyone, to ensure no house would be in the dark on Xmas Eve. A small gesture that only cost me a few kina, but people were truly appreciative. I reckoned it would help the carolers in their getting around as well! When I got home from dinner I indeed had a number of groups, both from my village and from others, kids and adults alike, come round to sing – not Xmas carols as we know them, but church songs, some in English, some in Kilivila. One particularly professional outfit came equipped with guitars and a keyboard! Some of the singers have truly beautiful voices, so it was really lovely. I went to bed around midnight, but the last group came round at 2 or 3 am I was told!

On Xmas morning, I had a few small presents to give to my family – toys and books for the kids, a radio for Vero and Mata, a skirt for Grandma, etc – and rice, salt, sugar, and/or tea for our nearest and most helpful neighbours. Although the Trobriands is a society in which giving things is a daily occurrence and part of the very fabric of life, there is no particular tradition of giving Xmas gifts, so people thought it quite a treat to receive something. I made pancakes with bananas for brekkie as an additional treat for the family. In what was *my* best gift of the day, Vero told me she felt like a "rich woman" this Xmas!

A few days after Xmas, Vero, Mata, the boys and I headed to the beach. Mata had recently cut himself a new dugout canoe, and was keen to do some fishing. Me, I'm always game to head seaward! We took a supply of sweet potatoes and some jugs of water – the one thing lacking at our local beach, called Yakiva, is a source of fresh water – and made the 45-ish minute hike over the rough (and, in places, very steep) coral path. We stayed two nights, sleeping out under the natural rock overhang, though luckily the rain held off until the morning we walked home. Mata was very successful in his new canoe, and we feasted on fish three meals a day. Usually the fish just gets boiled or, if it comes in late at night, smoked, but since we had such abundance I made some fish cakes. As usual, they were gobbled up eagerly by all except little Ruben, who has not yet developed a very adventurous palate! We all made good use of my mask and snorkel – there are some moderately decent reefs not too far from shore, and the sea was much calmer than when we last went

in June, so I spent a lot of time staring at the colourful fish and coral, but with only one mask between us, I had to share – I will be taking an extra one or two back with me from Alotau for next time, as I've been promised more picnics in the near future!

New Year's Eve was also a low-key affair. Vero had mentioned that Mata wished, but was too shy to ask himself, that I would buy him a beer at Butia Lodge for the holidays. Beer is a luxury few can afford in the Trobs; luckily, most people have enough sense not to spend what little money they can get their hands on on alcohol, and I have never seen alcohol being drunk in my own village. New Year's Eve seemed like the right occasion for a little splurge, so Vero, Mata and I trotted up to the Lodge for a bevy. Not exactly ice cold, but cool-ish…Vero doesn't like the taste, but happily munched on some peanuts and was happy to get "out," such as it is in the Trobs! We just had a few, as I didn't want Mata getting too "spark" as they say in the Trobs and behaving like this one teacher who we saw there who was acting an absolute embarrassment! We rang in the new year on the walk home, and no headaches the next day.

On New Year's Day, Mata wanted us to have a big talk on the verandah – him, Vero, and me – and reflect on the old year, assess the new. He wanted to make sure I was happy with how things were, that I didn't feel that either they or other people in the village were burdening me too much with requests, to remind me to make sure that when people ask me to give them things, they at least sometimes give me something – a betelnut, some greens, firewood, a piece of fruit – in return. They also apologized that they haven't been buying kerosene with the "kitchen money" I give them each week, instead coming to me when they need kero, and asked if I minded that they sometimes had to spend that money on things not exactly for the kitchen, for example for things to contribute to mortuary feasts when a relative dies. They are so sweet! I told them of course they could spend it on whatever they needed, it was their money. It is the total opposite of the family Sergio lives with, who try to squeeze money out of him at every turn. Vero and Mata treat me SO WELL, which makes what happened just after that so hard for me to reconcile…

I had gone to Losuia on my bicycle in the morning, to collect my mail and do some errands. I'd have been back a little earlier, but it started raining just as I'd gone to the medic's house to deliver some meds that had been sent in my care by an American lady who visited the island last year, so I just hung out with him on his verandah until the rain stopped. When I got back to the village, the first thing I noticed was that there was a big crowd gathered in front of my house and V&M's. Then I saw Vero, with a dazed look on her face, in soaking wet clothes, being attended to by several women. They were pulling a dry skirt over her head, and removed the wet clothes. I must have looked totally puzzled, and then when I noticed blood dripping from her nose, I got a sinking feeling like I knew what happened, but didn't want to know. Vero said to me, "I'm sorry, my daughter. I'm leaving. Your auntie Ruth and nakakau (the widow, Mata's mother) will take care of you. I am divorcing Mata and going to live with my relatives." He had beaten her, severely, over a stupid tiff about a phone call to Mata's younger brother. He had wanted her to come with when he went to the mission phone to ring, taking her away from her work at home, and then wouldn't let her speak to the brother when she asked. She got pissed and stormed off ahead of him; I'm not sure if she tarried on the way or what, I got the impression that he ended up getting back first, and then accused her of going off with a man on her way home (which I am sure she didn't). I think he was in a bad mood because the brother, who is studying in Moresby, had said he'd be coming home in Dec or Jan, and Mata had already built him a house; when they rang, the brother said he couldn't come after all. When Vero denied his accusations and complained about him not letting her use the phone, he lost it and hit her with the flat (thank god not the blade) of his bush knife on the back, then grabbed the metal digging stick leaning next to the house and belted her in the chest and face. She said she was lying semi-conscious on the ground and the neighbor ladies had to dump a bucket of water over her to revive her. All of this happened just minutes before I rolled up on the bike.

Unfortunately, domestic violence is all too common throughout PNG, and the Trobs is no exception, although women do have a better lot there than they do in some part of the country. Certainly the fact that it's a regular occurrence in no way excuses such monstrous behavior, and this was a pretty severe beating. I could hardly think – I was so mad at Mata, I couldn't even look at him, let alone speak to him. I dumped my packages and the bike, hugged Vero and cried for her pain and for our family. She said she was going to the hospital and then to her relatives; I said, I'm going with you. We had to walk back to Losuia, as there were no trucks. The boys, Emmanuel and Ruben, came too. We went to Vero's sister's place in a village just near the station and spent the night. I had taken nothing, not my toothbrush, lens case or solution, malaria pills, or a change of

undies, so I had to go back the next day. Emmanuel, my dear sweet 10-yr old brother, insisted that where I went, he would go. We went to the airport first, to meet the plane and see if any new dimdims arrived, and Mata was there. I tried to hide, but he saw me and came over to apologize. I had some very "hard words" for him, and told him IF Vero decided to go back to him – which she had eventually said she would, because last year they had a formal church marriage and she didn't want to break her "promise to God" – that it must never, ever, EVER happen again. If it did, he'd be on his own – I wouldn't stay, and nor would Vero or the kids. He was very contrite – easy to be so after the fact – and said he was going to apologize to Vero that afternoon. I told him that was all well and good, but it was up to HER if she was willing to forgive him and come back, and would do so on her own terms and on her own time. He insisted it was the first time he'd ever beat her so severely; she says it's happened twice before in the 10 or 12 years they've been together (I know which side of the story I favour).

On the walk to Losuia on the day of the beating, I had told Vero that if she wanted to come with me to Alotau when I went the next weekend, I'd pay her boat fare. She said yes, she wanted to, as she has relatives here she wanted to visit, and she wanted to give Mata time to really realize how much he needs her, and how serious she is about not taking any more of his shit. She said she'd stay with her sister until the boat left, but that she wanted us both to come back together, and then we'd return together to the village. At her insistence, I didn't tell Mata, but the day before we left she told him herself. After the first night, I went back to my own house, because the sister's place was a tight squeeze for all of us; auntie and grandma cooked for me and I maintained a certain coolness towards Mata, who as always was bending over backwards to make sure I was accommodated. When time to catch my boat, he as usual insisted on helping me get my things to the wharf. By this time, Vero had accepted his apology, but told him how it was gonna be, that she would come with me and we'd return together in a few weeks (though I think he was worried she was planning to bolt for good!). We all stayed together overnight in Losuia at a relative's house when the boat (typically!) didn't leave on Saturday as scheduled but instead early Sunday morning, and by this time, it was starting to seem believable that we would all eventually be able to resume our peaceful life together in the village. It is very, very hard to know what to do in these situations; I don't want Vero to go back to an abusive husband, but living as a divorcee is no picnic, and if she remarries, she's very likely to meet the same situation. She takes her church marriage seriously, and feels that on the balance, going back to him is probably the best of her options. I am fairly confident that if I'm THERE, he won't lift a finger against her again; once I leave, however, it's another story. At first, I was just livid, but as days passed I started to feel really conflicted, because this man has been so incredibly caring, generous, genuine, and helpful to me. And prior to this incident, I saw him generally treating Vero well. Anyway, I am glad at least Vero is making him suffer in solitude a bit – and he was suffering, I do believe that when he found himself abandoned and alone, he realized that he had fucked up big time!

So Vero and I boarded the cargo boat MV John Vincent, a sturdy wooden vessel, in the early hours on Sunday and spent 12 hours on gentle seas before arriving at Dobu, which will likely ring bells for the anthropologists in the crowd – lots of sorcery! Some of the boat's crew had rellies there, and that's where the boat would overnight, but some passengers insisted on being dropped off at nearby Esa'ala (on Normanby Island), either because they knew people there to stay with, or else because they were scared of Dobu. I misunderstood – not a language barrier, the crew was speaking English, they just weren't clear when they said the boat would go drop people at Esa'ala and then come back later – I thought they meant that night! I might have figured it out, but Vero was desperate for the toilet (and refused to use the one on the boat), so as soon as we docked, we were off to find a place for such business. When we came back, the boat was gone and I finally realized it wouldn't return until the next morning. I wasn't that happy, as I would have preferred to stay with the boat, but never mind – we slept under the cover a sort of market stall – think bus shelter, but longer – wooden table and bench, with corrugated iron roof. Lucky I had my sarong/laplap to wrap around me to offer a little protection from the mozzies – I stupidly forgot to pack my repellent! After a rough sleep, the boat finally returned around 8 the next morning, leaving the dock an hour later and finally getting us in to Alotau just before nightfall, around 6pm.

And here I am. Phew! Damn, too bad I can't just turn in these emails as my thesis – I might have already reached my word quota! All good in Alotau, enjoying electricity and eating food other than sweet potatoes, and keeping very busy running around trying to meet up with people for both work and play. The newest dimdim addition to the Trobriand fold has just arrived – Andy, an anthro-turned-historian from the States, doing

his PhD at the ANU. And then there were three! We researchers are soon gonna outnumber the locals!

Will leave you there with the mass/massive missive and will do my best to write a more personal note as time permits for those of you who get a chance to fill me in on what's going on in your OWN lives – I want to hear your stories, too!

Cheers,

Michelle