

ABSTRACT

KONING, PAUL EUGENE. Mapping the Interior: Memories of Africa. (Under the direction of Elaine Neil Orr.)

This thesis takes the form of a literary memoir relating my experiences in East Africa, both as the child of missionaries and as a young adult returning to teach. In crafting a memoir of my thirteen years in Africa, I hope to explore a number of issues relating to place and identity formation. Like many missionary children and others who have grown up in cultures not their own, I struggled with the sense that I belonged neither in East Africa nor in the United States, the place my parents called “home.” My relationship to East Africa remains complex. On the one hand, I came to love it with a fierceness I have yet to fully understand. Yet because of the stain of colonialism, I am forced to wonder whether or not I even have the right to do so. In an age of postmodern disorientation and postcolonial displacement, an examination of the attachment to and disengagement from *place* seems a topic worthy of consideration.

For me as a child, Africa was a place of adventure. My memories are predominantly of the frontier atmosphere, the vaguely lawless feeling of life on the edge. As a member of an elite minority, I was able to enjoy many aspects of this paradise that most of its inhabitants will never know. In retrospect, the great sadness of my time in Africa was the way in which I was almost totally isolated from the African people themselves. Tall hedges, comparatively great wealth, and a vast cultural chasm divided my family from them. While the motives of my parents and many other missionaries were genuine, the fact remained that our position was privileged and our lives relatively easy.

The memoir opens with a scene in which young African boys hurl stones at a group of white missionary children walking their bicycles along a dusty road. The flight of the

stone that struck me, the sound of my bicycle clattering to the ground, and the sight of my blood trickling into the dust have remained with me ever since. Only now am I beginning to realize the value inherent in that painful moment. This minor clash has given me a window onto the larger landscape of cultural conflict and the wounds that remain from the colonial era.

Another aspect of the project, a recurring theme that provides a kind of framing mechanism for the narrative, is an exploration of the act of mapping. Autobiographical writing and the art of mapping share a number of qualities. Each attempts to fix on paper a representation of its particular subject. Both provide for a reader a rather limited and wholly biased portrait of the place or person being described. The cartographer and the memoirist select the elements to include and, perhaps more revealingly, the elements to leave out. Because of these factors, memoir can perhaps be seen as fictional, or at best as a two-dimensional view of a life. Does this diminish its “truth”? As I relate stories from my childhood and early adulthood, I am inscribing a record of my life. Can such a record be trusted? Perhaps not, but even so it will provide both writer and reader with the opportunity to consider issues of postcolonial existence that they might otherwise have passed by.

MAPPING THE INTERIOR: MEMORIES OF AFRICA

by
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DEDICATION

For the parents who brought me to Africa

For the wife who explored its wonders with me

For the children with whom I shall one day return

BIOGRAPHY

Paul E. Koning was born in Whittier, California, in 1967. When he was four years old, his parents undertook a 10-month, around-the-world journey of discovery. The end result of this tour was a permanent relocation of the family to East Africa, where Paul's parents served as medical missionaries. Paul attended boarding school during the Africa years, and after graduating from Rift Valley Academy in 1984, he returned to the United States to attend Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. After earning a B.A. in secondary education, he returned to Kenya and joined the staff at R.V.A. There he met Carolyn Coley, and the two were married in 1994. Since then they have lived in Raleigh, North Carolina. Paul has worked primarily as an editor of educational materials while also doing graduate work at North Carolina State University. Paul and Carolyn have two children, Lily and Silas.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

~ List of Figures	v
1 Epigraphs	1
2 Tanzania, 1974.....	3
3 Musings: The Geography of a Life.....	6
4 Tanzania, 1974.....	7
5 Around the World 1971–1972	8
6 Tanzania, 1975–1976.....	17
7 Musings: Night Flight.....	24
8 Tanzania, 1976.....	27
9 Bottle-Cap Cars.....	33
10 Musings: Ruaha	34
11 Gerda Adrianna Johanna van Leeuwen Koning	38
12 Musings: Halfway?	41
13 From Michigan to the Rift, 1977	41
14 Nairobi, 1978	45
15 Musings: Ginger	48
16 Musings: The Valley.....	49
17 Musings: Identity	50
18 Rift Valley, 1979.....	50
19 Musings: Siblings	54
20 Nairobi, 1980–1981	54
21 Mombasa, 1982.....	58
22 Nairobi, 1984	62
23 First Return Trip, 1987	66
24 Kijabe, 1992.....	71
25 Kijabe, 1994.....	76
26 Musings: Introversion.....	80
27 Musings: The Future	81
~ Bibliography	82

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Map of East Africa	2
Figure 2: Paul on the path in Mvumi, 1975	7
Figure 3: The Koning House—Mvumi, Tanzania, 1975	19
Figure 4: Map of Mvumi property	21
Figure 5: Map of Mvumi mission compound	23
Figure 6: Marcel and Paul on the banks of the Great Ruaha River, 1975	37
Figure 7: The Koning House—Nairobi, Kenya, 1980	48
Figure 8: The Konings—Nairobi, 1980	55
Figure 9: Map of Nairobi property	57
Figure 10: Gerda and Paul—Amboseli, 1982	58
Figure 11: Map of Rift Valley Academy—Kijabe, Kenya	72
Figure 12: Paul and Johnson in front of Johnson’s house—Kijabe, Kenya, 1994	76
Figure 13: Paul on Mount Kenya, 1994	81

Mapping the Interior

A theodolite inscribes lines on an irregular landscape,
the dry savanna of my past—shapeless and void.
I strive to name it. I must impose order.
Reason.

The geography of a life comes clear
when the strength to endeavor is long extinct.

Africa. Still to be discovered, divined.
It beats in me, but the rhythm is fully foreign. It lies
low and tawny, obscured by *harmattan* or a downed power line;
maybe tomorrow, maybe soon.

Africa is not the lion but the chigger that burrows unseen,
unbidden into the sole;
the amoeba that lingers in the entrail
forgotten until moments least anticipated.

Years gone now, but still I shoot invisible lines,
new borders; I classify and project.

Africa has colonized me, bequeathed much that makes me
who I am. Yet it denies me my home.

Is my home.

~pk

*Weep not for the slain;
rather weep bitterly for the one who has gone away,
for he will never see his home again.*

—Jeremiah 22:10

*And it stoned me to my soul
Stoned me just like goin' home*

—Van Morrison

The stone spun in the shimmering hot air. I watched its trajectory, transfixed by the lazy arc it traced through space. It had a flat shape—probably not a stone at all, but rather a broken piece of concrete picked up from the rutted dirt road where it had been deposited as pot-hole filler. This flat shape gave it the aerodynamic qualities that enabled it to curve so gracefully, I suppose. Thrown with a sort of side-arm motion, the chunk first rose and seemed to drift slightly off to my right. Then at its apex, perhaps eight feet off the ground, it turned and began to dive down toward me. Like an approaching train, it seemed far off until, all of a sudden, it filled my field of vision.

I am not sure why the four of us were outside the hedge that day. We were usually content to stay within its confines, where life seemed safe. But for some reason we were out on the road that morning. The day was like all days, bright and hot, with white, rainless clouds marching against the pale blue sky. The road ran along the northern edge of the compound just outside the hedge. On the other side of the road lay a strip of fields in which stood dry and stunted stalks of maize and millet. And beyond these were the low, mud-brick huts of the village of Mvumi.

Down near my house there were several breaks in the hedge—the primary one being our driveway—through which we could always duck if we sensed any danger. On this day, however, we had left my place and headed around toward the main hospital entrance, a journey of several hundred yards with no point of entry. I was walking my bike because the others didn't have theirs—perhaps we were heading to collect them. Regardless, we became aware at some point that we were not alone on the road. We turned and saw three African

boys behind us. It was the moment I'd feared since my arrival in Mvumi, thanks to my fellow missionary kids. Among the MKs on the mission station, the rule was this: if it's African, you avoid it. Period. I had taken their advice to heart in the months I'd been there.

The leader of the boys behind us reached down and picked up the stone from the surface of the road. I could see the opening of my driveway away behind them. The other two picked up stones as well. At first, they just made threatening gestures, reaching back and making fake throwing motions. "*Wewe! Toka hapa! Toka!*" shouted one of my companions. "You! Get out of here! Get out!" But it soon dawned on all of us the position we were in. Our adversary had two friends with him, and there were four of us, but—without question—we were outnumbered. After all, we were in enemy territory. We were outside the hedge.

The boy drew back his arm and let fly.

I stood holding my bike. The purple one with the purple-and-white banana seat and the chopper handlebars. The one I got for my sixth birthday in Bellflower, California, and which had since been dismantled, placed tenderly in a 55-gallon drum, and shipped halfway around the world. The one that, in Mvumi's thorny terrain, required puncture repair about every two-and-a-half minutes. I don't know why I didn't move. None of us did.

By the time my brain informed me that the stone's path was likely to coincide with my position, it was too late. The spinning projectile was sinking now, below the level of my eyes. I was facing the hedge, so my left side was exposed to the attack.

The African boy who had thrown the stone wore a stained pair of khaki shorts. They had been long trousers at some point during their existence; one leg was several inches longer than the other. His shirt was light blue faded nearly to white, and it was held closed by

its one remaining button. The shirt provided insufficient coverage for his too large belly. His skin had the dry, ashy appearance of a dead person. He wore no shoes. His face, crusted with dried yellow snot, was crawling with flies.

In Mvumi, to tell the difference between a seven-year-old African boy and a seven-year-old MK, you look to see which one still swats away the flies.

The stone continued to sink. I lifted my left foot in an attempt to skip over it, but the jagged edge caught me just above the inside point of my right ankle. Pain shot up my leg. I collapsed into the dust. My bike clattered over, and I saw my three companions sprinting away toward the hospital entrance. I struggled to my feet and hobbled as fast as I could after them. I had gone maybe 20 yards when I thought of my bike. I turned, fully expecting to see the three African boys making off with my prize possession. They were not. The bike still lay where it had fallen, the chopper handlebars awkwardly twisted back on themselves. The three boys had cut across the fields toward the village; they were leaving the scene with an alacrity matched only by my erstwhile friends.

I stood for a moment in the road, blood soaking into my sock. Then I walked back to the bike, picked it up, and wheeled it slowly back toward the gash in the hedge that marked my driveway. Tears streamed down my face. I would never again be hurt in the cold war that persisted between the black and white children of Mvumi, Tanzania, but the incident sealed one thing in my mind. Going outside the *manyara* hedges of the compound was not a decision to be taken lightly.

The great sadness of my African childhood is the almost total absence of African children in it.

The geography of a life . . .

Geography. *geographia*. Drawing the world. What *is* this instinct in me? Can I trace on paper the ephemeral moment that is my life? Is the purpose of a map to tell me how to get somewhere, or is it enough for the map just to say: “Here is a place. Look at its contours, its nuanced position between earth and sky. I have shown it you. Now make of it what you will”?

Is this memoir the map I am drawing? Surely it is. But will it simply say “Here is a man, a son, a father. Make of him what you will”? Or will the act of inscribing it show me the way to go? Or, better yet, *make* me who I am destined to be?

In her poem “That the Science of Cartography Is Limited,” Irish poet Eavan Boland gazes at a map of her fair island not to see the woodlands and pathways it records but rather to notice the elements it has failed to record. In her case, it is Ireland’s famine roads that are absent. What will be missing in the story that I write? What will I leave out, either consciously or unconsciously? Surely this void, this negative space, is as much a part of who I am as the lines that finally appear on the page. And yet, even as a painting can capture the essence of a thing without rendering every detail, perhaps the elements I include on my map of memories will be a sufficient beginning.

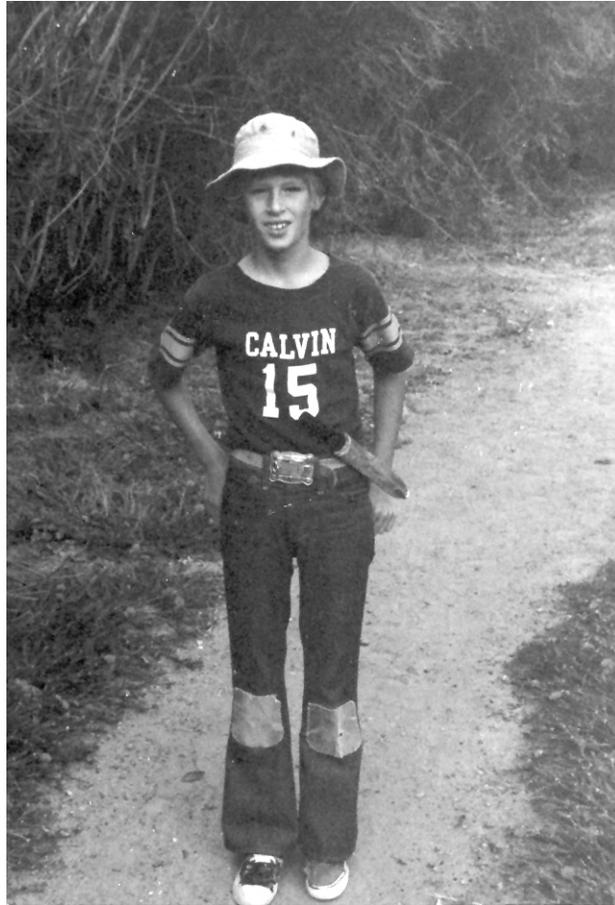


Figure 2: Paul on the path in Mvumi, 1975

– 4 –

My family arrived at Mvumi Mission, a sprawling station set on a low, red hill in central Tanzania, when I was seven years old. The year was 1974. Tanzania itself wasn't much older than I was, having stepped off into the untethered freefall of independence only thirteen years before our arrival. The beloved father of the nation, Julius K. Nyerere, was still clinging doggedly to his experiment in African socialism. His philosophy, known as *ujamaa* or "togetherness," encouraged Tanzanian subsistence farmers to relocate to central *ujamaa* villages. Their small-holdings would then be combined into collective farms which could be

run with efficiencies of scale by the village team, with the produce being distributed according to the needs of the village. One village, one tractor, one school, and so on. Nyerere, called *Mwalimu*—Teacher—by his people, believed utterly in the program and blithely stuck with it even as the economy stalled and regressed through the 1970s. During our time in Tanzania, the shelves in the shops of Dodoma, the nearest large town, were nearly empty. The few paltry goods available were generally from China—primary among them were silver metal flashlights and, luckily for me, bicycle tire repair kits. The Chinese were eager to support one of the few remaining socialist footholds on the continent, but Nyerere’s vision was always more utopian and people-friendly than that of the centralized powers of the communist world, and so he tended to keep Chinese influence at arm’s length. He did, however, allow their goods and their cash in.

For me, Tanzania was the Wild West. Mvumi was the frontier, the end of the trail, an outpost surrounded by hostile, or at least ambivalent, natives. Like a child riding on the wagon trains, I felt more than a little pride that my parents were out there pushing forward while everybody else was back home taking the easy way out. But that didn’t make it any less scary.

– 5 –

My parents, Eugene and Gerda Koning, had been working their way toward the mission field since the early days of their marriage. The whole idea certainly seemed pre-ordained. My father had been disillusioned with his Los Angeles area optometric practice for years, but he was bound to it by his bed-ridden first wife and three young daughters. My mother, a

registered nurse and college nursing instructor, was caring for her aging mother and fast approaching old-maid status. After the passing of my dad's wife, the two were introduced by a church connection, and on their first date the topic of overseas service came up. They soon became engaged and, ten days before their appointed wedding date, my mother's mother died. In my parent's view, this removed the final obstacle to missions abroad, and so planning began in earnest. My unexpected arrival in 1967 delayed things somewhat, but the process was underway.

In 1968, my parents took a six-week trip to Nigeria to visit several mission projects run by their denomination, the Christian Reformed Church. Then, in 1971, with the two oldest girls out of the house, Gene and Gerda got serious. With sixteen-year-old Bev and four-year-old Paul in tow, they embarked on a ten-month, around-the-world tour to seek out the Lord's will for their future. Their lives—and mine—would never be the same again.

By the time we got back to California, the four of us had touched down in something like 20 different countries, and I doubt we ever spent more than five dollars for a night of lodging. If you're ever planning to do Europe on the cheap, you would do well to give my dad a call. We left LAX with three suitcases, a stack of open-ended Pan Am tickets, and not a single reservation anywhere. I can clearly picture my mother, my sister, and myself sitting on our suitcases outside a train station in some European town while my dad scouted around for the cheapest available place to stay. The scene played itself out over and over again. My sister and I still laugh at the thought of our clean-cut, conservative little family sleeping on the floor of a European youth hostel surrounded by hippies cooking their beans, still in the can, over tiny camp stoves.

We spent several weeks in Europe seeing the sights, but then it was on to the real purpose of the trip. My parents had arranged to visit a number of mission stations around the world in order to scope out the “mission scene,” as it were. The first of these was in Liberia, and we were to be there nine weeks. We lived in a guest house on the ELWA compound just outside Monrovia, a compound that has since been evacuated, destroyed, and rebuilt several times during the chaos presided over by the psychopath Charles Taylor and others. ELWA stands for “Eternal Love Winning Africa,” and its primary ministry tool is a powerful radio facility which broadcasts Christian programming over much of West Africa. The compound was situated on a lovely, curving beach, and the Atlantic swells rolled shoreward in long, unbroken ranks. At either end of the beach, the dense jungle vegetation crowded out close to the water, so the spot felt completely isolated. A major shipping lane ran hard by the shore, and the giant tankers from the Nigerian oil fields would glide by like icebergs in a photo negative. They seemed motionless, but the next time you looked up, they would be gone. The beach itself was littered with their droppings, little lumps of tar, some the size of peas, others as big as your fist. The bottoms of our feet were black for the entire time we were there. So for my first nine weeks on the African continent I was myself a photo negative—a white body with black soles among black bodies with white soles.

For me the difference between East and West Africa lies in the proximity of the spirit world. In East Africa, people might talk about ancestors occasionally, or a patient might be brought to a hospital after having been “treated” by a medicine man, but in general life seemed to go on at a very practical, corporeal level. The spirit world stayed in the background. In Liberia, however, the presence of the spirit world was palpable. Perhaps it

was the encroaching, seemingly impenetrable jungle, or the stories we were told of witch doctors and secret societies, but for me, West Africa was way closer to the other side than I wanted to be. Much later, in Tanzania, the sound of drums in the night might send a chill up my spine, but it was a chill of excitement and adventure. In Liberia, however, the sound was menacing, and the chill that went up my spine was the chill of dread.

Once, while walking down the beach with our family, my father noticed an African man up on the ridge shadowing our movements as we strolled along. He had heard of the murder of a white man somewhere nearby in the recent past, so he became nervous. We turned and made our way back to the compound. When Dad later mentioned the incident to one of the missionaries, he was told that the man was most likely there to protect us. If he'd had other motives, we wouldn't have seen him.

I had my first brush with greatness while we were at ELWA. The president of Liberia, William Tubman, had died, and because of the close ties between Liberia and the United States, President Nixon sent a delegation to attend the inauguration of the new president, William Tolbert. The group was to be led by Mrs. Nixon, so the U.S. president asked Billy Graham to escort his wife on the trip. Naturally, as ELWA was the most prominent mission station in the vicinity, a visit was arranged. The reception was held at the very guest house in which we were living. Some sort of a receiving line was set up, and everyone from the compound filed by greeting Mrs. Nixon and the great man himself before heading into the guest house for coffee and cookies. I'm sure that on the rest of her trip, Mrs. Nixon was the center of attention, but stick Billy Graham on a mission station and—well, you might just as soon trot out Moses himself. Eventually our turn came. I remember shyly shaking Mrs.

Nixon's hand, but when I stood before God's messenger, I blanched. They tell me I buried my face in my mother's skirt and, despite much coaxing, refused to be touched by Billy Graham. I think my parents worried for my very soul.

Mom and Dad both did some work at the clinic, and my sister helped at the compound school for the younger MKs, but the thing that sticks with me most about our family's accomplishments at ELWA are the signs. My father took on the task of creating new signs for the entire compound. The clinic, the radio station, the offices, the guest house, everything got a new sign. The signs were fashioned from fresh, straight lumber. Each board received several coats of bright white paint, and then my dad would outline the tall capital letters in pencil—**MAIN OFFICE** or **STUDIO II**. He and my sister painstakingly brushed on the black paint within his penciled lines. The finished signs were stunning in their simple elegance, at least to a four-year-old. I was immensely proud of them at the time, but I have often wondered how long they lasted. In that humid, salt-sprayed location, they probably began to turn green with moss within a year. Some probably warped and pulled away from the walls to which they were attached. The paint on others probably flaked and fell off. Some other eager volunteer probably made a new set of signs, maybe of better materials, and pulled my dad's signs down and threw them in the trash pit or let a local worker take them home to use as firewood. And if these imagined fates failed to finish them off, surely none of them survived the havoc of Taylor's civil war, when the station was laid waste by looters and thirteen-year-old soldiers. But I still like to think that somewhere, maybe on some back building that nobody bothered with, one of my father's black-and-white signs might still hang.

Nigeria was to have been our next extended stop, but visa troubles thwarted those plans. My experiences in Africa's most populous nation were limited to twenty-four hours in the Lagos airport in early 1972. With the door barred against us in Nigeria, we flew across the continent to Ethiopia. In this ancient mountain kingdom, at that time still ruled by Ras Tafari, the Lion of Judah, the Emperor Haile Selassie himself, we would spend thirteen weeks visiting a number of missionary outposts. My memories of Ethiopia are few and fragmented, but a certain ones stand out. In an austere upstairs room at a guest house in Addis Ababa, I celebrated my fifth birthday. My only two gifts were a game that my sister created out of paper and buttons and other oddments, and a red, green, and yellow keychain with a lion on it and the word *ETHIOPIA* in silver letters, a broken piece of which I still possess. The most significant event of that day, however, was that I finally mastered the art of shoe-tying, a skill I'd been working on the entire trip.

Somewhere in the Ethiopian highlands, I lost my first tooth and then, within minutes, lost it literally. I was on the veranda of a missionary's home when the thing popped out, and, seeing my parents returning from wherever they had been, I leapt off the front steps and sprinted to show them. Inevitably I tripped and sprawled headlong, the tiny tooth flying out of my hand and into the thick, matted grass. We all looked for what seemed like hours, but the tooth was never recovered. My wife points to this incident as the first in a long line of psychologically damaging events in my African childhood, but recently our five-year-old daughter lost and subsequently *lost* a tooth, and she seems to have come through the experience unscathed. When we met, Carolyn was horrified to learn that I had never seen *The Wizard of Oz*, something she considers essential to normal childhood development. She

promptly acquired a copy and made me watch it. After seeing it, I must say that I wonder which of us was more warped by our particular childhood experiences.

Another small but significant episode that occurred during our time in Ethiopia was that I saw my dad hurt for the first time. He was invited to accompany a doctor and a shipment of supplies to a remote village beyond a nearby mountain range. No roads existed in the area, so the journey was to be accomplished by mule train—a day in and a day out. Dad eagerly joined the trek, but apparently the mount with which he was supplied was less than stellar. Throughout the day, he found himself falling farther and farther behind the rest of the train. Eventually he lost sight of the others altogether. In a desperate attempt to goad his mule to greater speeds through corporal punishment, he reached out, grabbed a cat-tail growing beside the trail, and yanked. The reed opened a deep cut across the entire width of his palm. His bag was on one of the pack animals ahead of him, so he had only his handkerchief to bind around his hand. By the time his plodding mount sauntered into the village after dark, he was near to passing out. When he returned to us the next day, he had recovered and his wound had been professionally dressed, but the incident left me uneasy and full of questions. Why hadn't the others waited for my dad? Why hadn't they gone back for him when he was late? What if a leopard . . . ? I had never before considered that we might be vulnerable in this vast, wild place.

Weeks later we arrived in Bihar Province, India, for our next planned visit. This normally arid region in the northeastern quadrant of the subcontinent had been transformed that year into a full-on desert by a fierce drought. The plan was to visit a rural hospital and to stay with an Indian couple, both of whom were doctors. The hospital, however, had been

closed due to the absence of an adequate water supply. The Drs. Williams were apologetic, and they did their best to make us welcome. [Where an Indian doctor came by the name Williams, I'll never know.] The family seemed oddly to parallel our own, with a large number of what I perceived to be older daughters and one young son. I later found out that the "daughters" were actually a visiting team of students on a mission trip. Missionaries themselves from a more Christian part of India, and quite obviously the wealthiest Indians for miles around, the Williams family lived in a two-story concrete house that was actually wired for electricity, though the power had been out for months. I remember being mildly fascinated by the refrigerator that failed to keep things cool. The family still kept foodstuffs in it, I suppose to protect them from the flies.

Bihar Province was hot. The milk we poured on our cornflakes in the morning was hot. The milk and cornflakes, incidentally, were the only two foods I recognized. Those and the ubiquitous white rice. The thick walls of the Williams' house afforded some relief from the heat, but mainly I remember playing in the dust in the shade of a large banyan tree in front of the house. At night, Bev and the "daughters" would sleep up on the flat cement roof of the house in the hope of catching any slight breeze that might disturb the superheated air. At some point we received word from my Uncle Wynand in California that my Grandma Koning had died. My dad says he cried in the glaring sunshine outside the tiny post office, the flimsy telegram in his hand, but I don't remember this. After giving some thought to cutting the trip short, he decided that he wouldn't get back in time for the funeral anyway, so we stayed on.

I fell ill. As my parents tell the story, I became lethargic and feverish. I soaked through

sheet after sheet. Bev and my mother took to plunging towels into buckets of tepid water and laying them over me. It's hard to drive down a temperature when it's 120° outside. I remember little besides the heavy, wet towels and the intermittent nightmares. In one of them, an animal comes into the room. It's too dark to see what it is, but I think it might be a baboon. I watch petrified as it approaches the foot of the bed. Over the corner of the footboard I have hung a little brass bell that I found earlier on the trip. The baboon, or whatever he is, snatches the bell and dashes out of the room. I wake up drenched with sweat. The room spins, but my bell is still there.

I also remember Dr. Williams standing at the doorway of my room, examining me from a distance. My parents think he may have been afraid of being blamed if I died. I think that, as the father of single son in a third-world culture, he also understood what my parents were facing better than they did themselves. Nobody mentioned the word typhoid, but everyone was apparently thinking it. My temperature reached dangerous levels and stayed there. My parents began to prepare for the worst.

At about this time, an itinerant salesman appeared at the door. Among his many wares was a box of drugs, prescription medications that he had acquired who knows where. The visiting students tried to send him away, but my mother, desperate as she was, insisted on looking through the box. She found a bottle of pills that she recognized. She knew that this particular drug—chloromycetin—had the potential to fight the bacterial infection that was raging in me. She also knew that general use of the drug had been banned in the United States because of its potentially harmful side-effects (a young patient at the obstetrician's office in California where my mother worked had actually died of a blood dyscrasia brought

on by chloromycetin). But she quickly decided that if God had put this bottle of pills in her hands in the middle of drought-stricken India, she was darn well going to use it. I swallowed the pills, and my fever broke that night; and, as my wife always pipes in at this point of the story, we've been dealing with the side-effects ever since. The real miracle, as we found out later from Dr. Williams, was that all the traveling salesmen had stopped coming around when the hospital had closed. This chap was the first one he had seen in months.

– 6 –

Mvumi Mission was established in 1900 among the Wagogo people in the central part of what was then German East Africa, and by the time we arrived, the station included a 280-bed hospital, an outpatient clinic, a nurses' training school, a school for Rural Medical Assistants, a nutrition center, a dispensary, and several other facilities. My father was to add an optical training program to the repertoire.

After a short initial visit to Mvumi, we left for three months of language school in Nairobi, Kenya. My parents would try to learn Kiswahili, while I would work on my correspondence courses. I had completed kindergarten and first grade in California between the world tour and our departure for Africa, and so we had brought a stack of second- and third-grade textbooks with us. These I devoured during the lonely days at the CPK Guest House in Nairobi. Two grades in three months. My parents would leave me little assignments each day, and I would do them all and plow right on. There was nothing else to do. Finally, I would stack the day's work on the desk that overlooked the jacarandas in the garden below, and allow myself to get out some toys or to go downstairs to look for a friend. If only I still

had that kind of self-discipline. I laugh now when I see the same dogged resolve in my daughter.

Upon our return to Tanzania, I was enrolled in Stockley School, a British day school in Dodoma, only twenty-five miles from Mvumi. The road between the two was so bad, however, that bringing me to school each day was out of the question. The school had no official boarding facilities, but it did maintain a house known as “The Hostel.” A single teacher, a rosy-cheeked Scot named Florence Maben, lived in The Hostel, and there were three bedrooms set aside for the likes of me—kids who lived just out of range of a daily commute. So my boarding experiences began. Every Monday morning I and two other Mvumi kids would be brought into town in one of the hospital Land Rovers. We would spend the week with Miss Maben, walking to school each day under her jolly supervision. “Come along, lads!” she’d sing. “Don’t want to be late for the schoolin’. Mr. Perini’ll have my head, he will.” Evenings were filled with learning proper manners and stamp collecting and climbing the tamarind trees beside the house. When I first heard the word *bittersweet*, the taste of the tamarind fruits came immediately to mind, and I still taste the tangy, fibrous pods whenever I hear that word.

On Friday afternoons we would be collected again by whomever was picking up the weekly grocery order from Mr. Patel’s shop, the best in town. If we were lucky, there would be time to stop for a *samosa* or an ice cream at Abji’s, probably the only ice cream establishment within a 200-mile radius. Irfan Abji, son of the proprietor, was my desk-mate at Stockley. Then we jostled and rattled among the baskets of groceries the hour it took to negotiate the rocky, washboard road home for the weekend.



Figure 3: The Koning House—Mvumi, Tanzania, 1975

Our house in Mvumi was a simple, rectangular structure built of concrete block and dark gray plaster. The corrugated tin sheets of the *mabati* roof pinged and popped in the sunshine, and roared and sang during the rare rainstorms. The smooth cement floor stayed cool even on the hottest days—I would lay my cheeks against it. My parents ordered furniture from a local craftsman, and the tables and chairs he produced were straight and plain, fashioned from *mninga*, a robust, reddish-brown local hardwood. My dad painted a mural on one wall of the living room, a watercolor savanna scene with a seven-foot giraffe stretching for a thorny branch, a herd of impala jostling and leaping across the middle distance, and a lone elephant off in the background. A vervet monkey sat on a branch up in the corner. When I made my only return to Mvumi, in 1993, I knocked on the door of our house and was greeted by a British woman with a toddler on her hip.

“Hello,” I said. “I used to live here.”

She asked me in, and I immediately looked for the mural, but it was gone. We chatted for a few minutes. She and her husband had lived in Mvumi for three years. I asked wistfully if there had been any animals on the wall when she arrived.

“Oh,” she said. “We just painted over that mural two weeks ago!”

Fifteen years later, and I missed my past by two weeks.

From the front veranda, the view from the house was limited. My parents tried to keep a pathetic little patch of creeping grass alive immediately in front of the veranda, but beyond that, bare dirt stretched away to the twenty-foot-tall *manyara* hedge. Our driveway pierced the hedge at the northeast corner of the property, and a swinging-pole gate stretched across the opening. I was never quite sure what or whom this gate was supposed to stop. People simply ducked under it or walked around between the post and the edge of the hedge. I guess anyone attempting to appropriate our sea-foam green 1967 Toyota Land Cruiser (short-wheel-base model) would have that three-inch swinging pole to contend with.

Beyond the gate, as I have mentioned, were the outer road, the fields of grain, and the village. In the distance rose a range of low hills. Somewhere we have a picture of my mother standing in the gap in the hedge facing away from the camera. She is wearing a patterned polyester dress and one hand is on her hip. She is gazing away over the village at the hills. The sky is completely red with dust. She looks small, like the dust storm could swallow her and leave no trace.

Our back yard had none of the stark, exposed feel of the front. Just outside the back door sat a baobab tree that you and four or five friends joining hands might be able to encircle. And it wasn't a particularly big specimen for the area. I say it sat, because to me

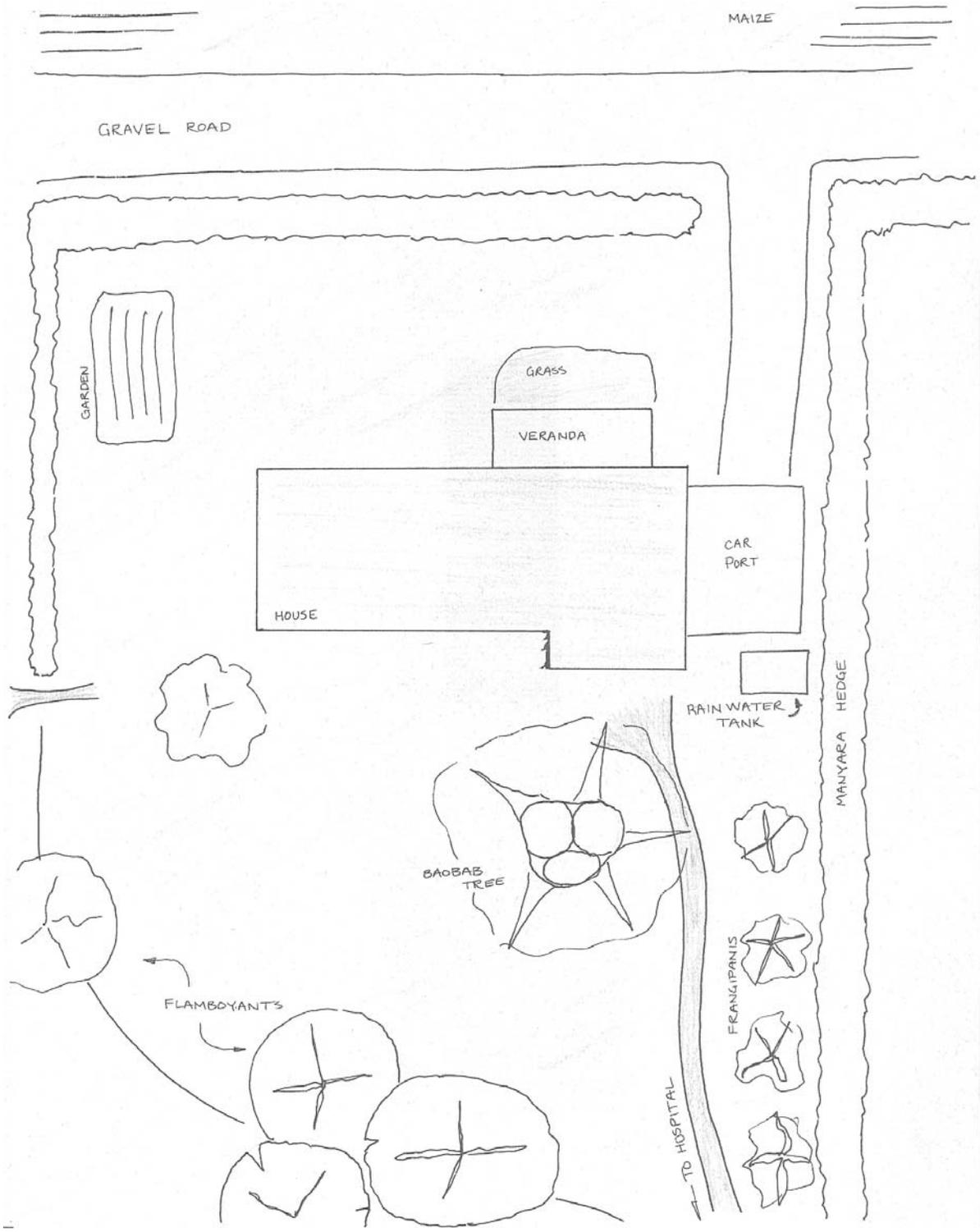


Figure 4: Map of Mvumi property

baobabs never really seemed to be standing. Ours had been a triple trunk at some point in its long life, but the trunk on the side away from the house had died, and the hollow stump had been filled with dirt. Perhaps someone had once tried to grow flowers in it, but I don't think we ever did. To the left of the baobab was the most magical part of our property, the long, curving path that stretched away toward the far end of the yard and the heart of the compound. Beaten hard by hundreds of feet, it was flanked along much of its length by frangipanis, one bursting with waxy white blossoms, the next with pink. The yard got narrower up at that end, so that if the *manyara* hadn't been trimmed in a while, the path started to feel like a tunnel. I would venture that I spent more time playing along that path than in any other part of the compound.

One night, early in our time at Mvumi, we were invited to attend an event at the Rural Medical Assistant school. I think it was the night before graduation, and the students, staff, and guests gathered in the auditorium for a meal, the presentation of awards, and various forms of entertainment. The place was a fair walk from our house, so we armed ourselves with our Chinese torches (flashlights) and headed out single file, my dad in front, my mom bringing up the rear. This was standard procedure for nighttime journeys, because you wanted to stay away from the edges of the path for fear of scorpions and puff adders.

We arrived unscathed. The fluorescent lights of the hall were dazzling after the pitch darkness of the compound. We were seated, food was served, and the festivities began. The program seemed to last forever and was horrendously boring. After some time, I heard a slight disturbance above me, so I looked up at the lights again. Circling high above the tables was something I'd never seen before. It looked to be an insect of some kind, but it was the

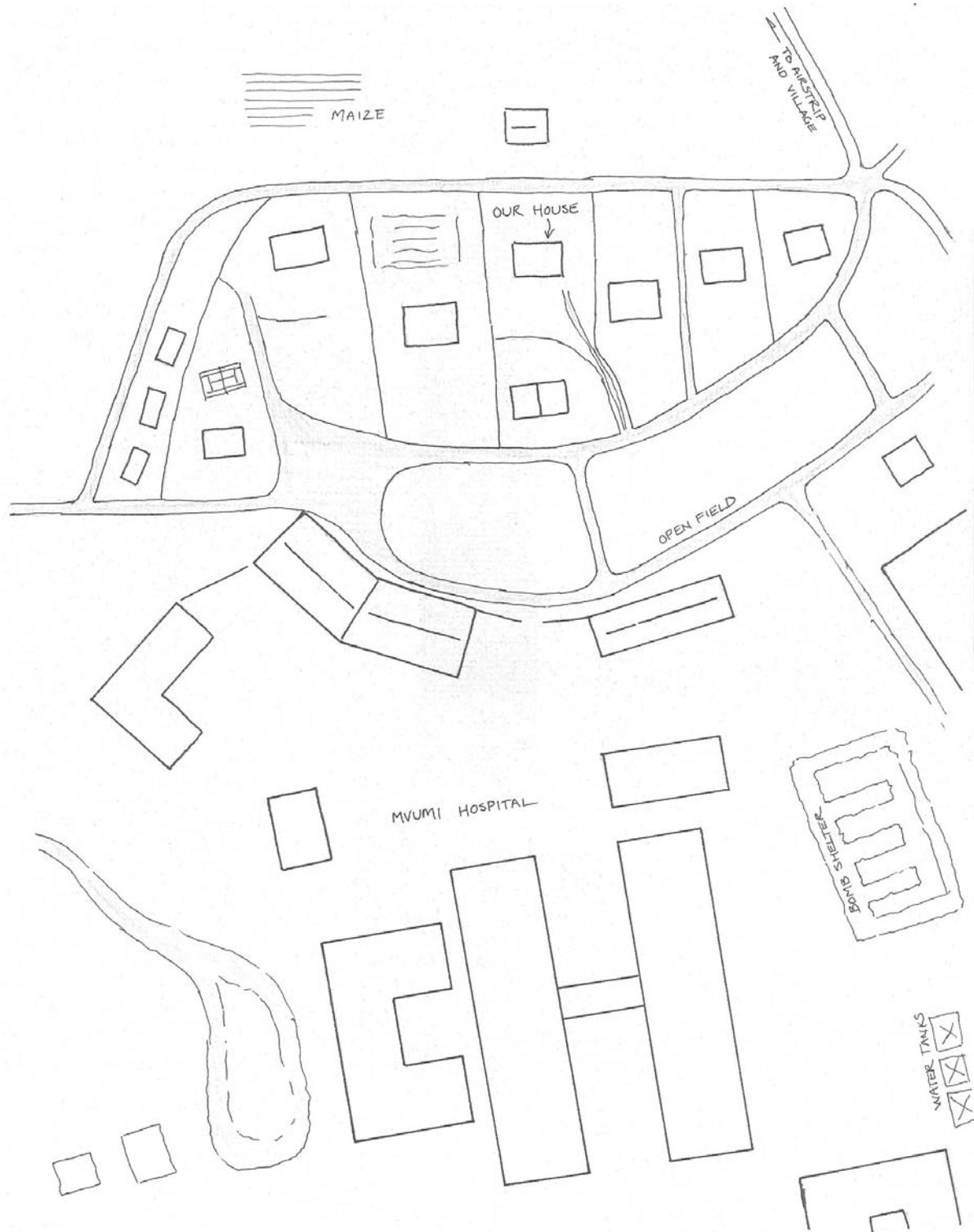


Figure 5: Map of Mvumi mission compound

size of a small bird. On stage, a young African man began tonelessly to sing a hymn. I watched the locust. The man continued his plaintive dirge. I started to obsess. This thing was going to land on me. I knew it with total certainty. Over a hundred people sat in the hall, but it would single me out for sure. The soloist entered his third mournful verse. The locust was getting lower now, slowly descending in wide circles, its wings a blur. I tried to look away but I couldn't. Finally, in one last sweeping dive, it came straight for me. I saw it come in low over the head of the man across the table from me like a dive-bomber on a strafing run. It hit me in the center of my chest. And stuck. A five-inch locust at full speed can create quite an impact. I'm not really much of a screamer, but the sound that issued from my person at that moment is one I will never forget. The poor singer stood no chance against it. I swatted frantically at the thing several times, still screaming, before I finally dislodged it. A veteran missionary in khaki shorts stood up from the table, calmly placed his napkin beside his plate, shot me a contemptuous glance, and crushed the locust under his boot. The singer was gamely trying to finish his selection, but I'm afraid his audience had been slightly distracted.

– 7 –

I last stood on East African soil in August of 1994. After a hectic day of last-minute packing and eleventh-hour flight changes, our plane lifted off the tarmac of Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta International Airport just after midnight. As we climbed into the darkness, I closed my eyes and began to trace our flight path on a map that was seared in some recess of my mind. I'd always been obsessed with maps. As a kid I would spread my old Shell Oil Road Map of Kenya and Tanzania on the floor, get down on elbows and knees, and traverse the

miles with my fingertips. What was it about maps that fascinated me so much, I wonder. Maps are a representation of place, so perhaps even then I was beginning a subconscious search for a place of my own. But that night on the plane I was looking at a standard physical chart of Kenya, the vibrant land I was leaving behind.

First we angled slightly to the west, the Ngong Hills falling away beneath us. I could recall the golden light of a hundred sunsets on those hills. Or maybe it was just a handful of sunsets, but in my nostalgic musings they were already multiplying to fill the void I was sensing. The gentle humps looked vaguely like a row of knuckles; one legend held that when *Ngai* (God) tripped over Mt. Kenya, his hand landed there.

After clearing the southern tip of the Aberdares, a fog-enshrouded mountain range ringed by bamboo forest and topped with lobelias and giant groundsel and other oddly enlarged alpine vegetation, we banked northward and began our trek up the Great Rift Valley, that massive opening in the earth over which I'd looked on so many crisp mornings. Somewhere off to our right, beyond the Aberdares, the jagged peaks of Mt. Kenya pierced the veil of clouds. If I'd had a window seat, I might have been able to catch one last glimpse of the Lewis glacier gleaming in the moonlight.

Below us, the lush Kenya highlands faltered and descended into a belt of golden savanna, which in turn gave way to scrub thorn forest and then finally to the arid, stony expanses of the Northern Frontier District. Lake Turkana, by daylight a startlingly blue-green expanse of water in the middle of harsh, unforgiving desert, slid by in the darkness, and then Kenya was behind us. Though my eyes were still closed, I had been able to see all of this

with absolute clarity. On the map in my mind, we picked up the Nile over the marshy vastness of the Sudd and winged our way toward the flight's stopover in Khartoum.

My three traveling companions were in the same plane and covering the same ground, but I suspect that the experience for them was entirely different. For them this was merely the end of a brief adventure, a short episode away from their normal lives. Carolyn, who would become my wife three months later, had just finished a two-year teaching stint; Steve, an old and loyal college friend, was wrapping up a three-month stretch as a volunteer; and Bev was at the end of a four-week vacation. As for me, I was once again suspended between my two worlds—Africa and the West. I was twenty-seven at the time and had spent exactly half my life in each place. Hanging at 35,000 feet above the middle of nowhere in the dead of night, I was acutely aware of a feeling of detachment from them both. Always the back and forth. Always the absence of home.

I grew up in East Africa as the child of missionaries. I was not really American, though my passport said I was. Between the ages of seven and seventeen, I had made four visits to the United States, only one of which lasted longer than six weeks. But I was certainly not African either, isolated as I was from the general population by tall hedges, comparatively immense wealth, and white skin. In the darkness high above the Nile, I was overwhelmed by a sense of placelessness.

There is nowhere that is mine. No hometown. No corner store.

I was on my way to, of all places, North Carolina. I had made the decision to hook up with a Raleigh girl, one who was born at the old Rex Hospital, who had lived in the same North Hills house all her life, and who had no issues of placelessness whatsoever. But as I

write this, I've got to say I'm surprised still to be here. After all, I had just spent two years teaching in Africa with this girl, so she obviously showed some willingness to step away from her comfort zone. And I thought my propensity to lead a rootless existence would surely overpower any homebound tendencies she might have. But here we are, nonetheless. And with two kids and a mortgage in North Raleigh, my prospects for further African adventure seem to grow more remote by the day.

On the other hand, being in the same place for ten years almost gives one the right to call it home. Doesn't it?

– 8 –

Something made us stop and cock our heads to listen. We were in the branches of one of the colossal flamboyant trees at the back of Margaret Clift's garden. Margaret, a nursing instructor from England and one of my mother's closest friends, lived in a duplex set aside for single missionaries, and her back yard backed up against our own. As far as I was concerned, the flamboyants were the greatest climbing trees on the compound, with long, sturdy branches that sprouted out just where you needed them, yet not so close together as to allow the little kids to climb. The long, flat seed pods made perfect swords, so the trees served often as pirate ships. Only in retrospect do I consider the dappled shade the delicate pinnate leaves cast over us, or the stunning crimson cloud of blossoms that gave them their well-known nickname, made famous by Elspeth Huxley in *The Flame Trees of Thika*.

"Mark, shush!" Jane Oldham called down to her oblivious younger brother, who was noisily rattling a seed pod.

Quiet now, we all strained our ears. A faint whine could just be heard when the breeze dropped; just the barest vibration disturbed the air.

“Is it the hospital generator?” asked Jeremy Keith, trying to eliminate the more mundane possibilities.

“No way,” Marcel van der Maal dismissed him with authority. His father was the hospital engineer, after all. “The generator is more ‘grom, grom, grom.’”

“A lorry from Dodoma, maybe?” ventured Peter Corbett-Jones, the Aussie. By now, however, the whine had grown to a dull roar and we all had a pretty good idea what we were dealing with. Those of us in the flamboyant began to swing down. I landed and sprinted out from under the cover of the trees, the others on my heels. We vaulted some scraggly bushes into the open area in my back yard and turned our eyes to the sky. We all began shouting at once.

“Who do you think it is?”

“Flying Doctors, I bet!”

“No way, they never fly in here any more!”

“Gotta be MAF. That new Cessna.”

“Yeah, or *Sight by Wings*,” I said. “I bet it’s DeSouza in Alpha Kilo Romeo.”

One of the great thrills of MK life in Mvumi was the arrival of a mission plane.

We shaded our eyes as the roar swelled to a concussive din. Then the plane burst into view, so low over the trees that it seemed sure to snag the uppermost branches, a vision in red and bright white, its registration markings standing out in stark black. One of the tires on the

landing gear was spinning lazily. We jumped up and down, waving with hysterical fervor. The pilot waggled his wings, and we could see him smile and give us a nonchalant salute.

“Sight by Wings!” I exulted.

To me, no profession existed on Earth so noble as that of bush pilot. During my early Africa years, I harbored the deep certainty that flying was my destiny, and not just flying, but flying mission planes in East Africa. The pilots I came to know all exhibited a self-assurance that I knew I wanted. They had a swagger. They did good work, sure, but more importantly they were cool doing it. Their crisp, white shirts with the epaulettes. Their aviator sunglasses. The way they would hold the plane steady with a knee while studying a ragged laminated air chart of Northern Tanzania. Or the way they could charm their way through customs at some tiny provincial airport. Or how they might look back over their shoulder at you and give a thumbs up because they knew you were just a kid and that you wouldn't be seeing your parents again for three months and that it was the least they could do.

The Cessna thundered off toward Mvumi airstrip, a fine, 1,200-foot runway of packed red murram situated three or four kilometers away beyond the village. We sprang into action.

“Peter, is your dad going?” someone shouted.

“I don't know,” said Peter, already headed for his house. “Let's check. If it's not him, we can go out to the road from there. We'll still be in time!”

We all ran after him, single file, first through the big gap into the Carmichael's yard, across the front of their house, and then through the narrow archway into the Corbett-Jones' overgrown garden. When there was no sign of Peter's parents, we dashed down the long driveway and out into the road. Scores of village children were already streaming toward the

airstrip. A plane was big news not just for us; everyone loved a good flyover. No sooner had we started up the road than the *Macho* Land Rover careened around the corner and skidded to a stop beside us. The driver was Dr. Foster, head of the hospital's Eye Unit (*Macho* means "eyes" in Kiswahili). We all scrambled aboard, some scaling the rear ladder to claim a place on the roof-rack, others piling inside. Marcel climbed onto the bonnet and nestled into the spare tire bolted there. I was usually more of a roof-rack guy, but on this day I slid into the front passenger seat next to Jonathan, Dr. Foster's three-year-old son, who moved to the middle.

"Hullo, Dr. Koning!" said Dr. Foster, his sharp face breaking into a grin. Alan Foster was a brilliant eye surgeon and one of the more reckless drivers on the compound. "Off we go, then!"

We rattled down the rutted track with abandon, and soon we were parting the river of eager spectators that flowed toward the airstrip. Smiling children leapt out of our way, and a few of the older ones tried to jump aboard when we were forced to slow down.

"It's *Sight by Wings*," said Alan. "That'll be Harold."

"Yeah," I said. "We saw him when he buzzed the hospital. I've never seen a plane come in so low!"

"Harold's a crazy one, all right."

"Is he staying over?"

"No, I don't think so. Just dropping off two patients from KCMC."¹

¹ Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Centre

I was disappointed. Harold DeSouza usually stayed with us when he did stay, and he was always good for a few wild tales. Not your typical missionary pilot, he carried a British passport but was born in Kenya of Goan heritage. With his brown skin, graying goatee, and dark, flashing eyes, he had the air of a pirate, and I always suspected that he enjoyed a few of the pleasures that most missionaries forewent. I felt a special bond with him over the other pilots because SBW was closely linked with my parents' sending organization, Christoffel Blindenmission, a German relief outfit.

We shot past the marketplace, where Wagogo women sat on their sisal mats behind their little pyramids of tomatoes. I'm sure they sold other things, but my only memory of that dusty market amongst the baobab trees is the stacks of tomatoes, three on the bottom, one perched on top. Who bought them, I wonder. We got nearly all of our groceries from the Indian grocery store in Dodoma, so I can only surmise that market day was more of a social gathering than an economic enterprise.

We skidded to a stop on the apron of the runway just in time to see Harold do a low pass to ensure that any stray goats had fair warning. He went out past the dry river bed beyond the eastern end of the strip, banked, and began his approach. By now we were all on top of the Landy to ensure ourselves of the best view, and the first wave of people from the village was beginning to arrive. Harold brought her in with his usual aplomb, bobbing and fishtailing in the hot, turbulent air, but rock solid when it mattered. He turned at the end of the runway and taxied back to our position, feathering the prop as he rolled up.

As soon as the plane stopped, the children—and more than a few adults—closed around it. Harold hopped out and strode around the plane spewing Swahili words that I did not

know. The circle of Africans broke before his onslaught and took a few paces back. Not one entered the newly established perimeter. As for us, our shining white badges afforded us immediate access. Alan led us through the crowd and, as he began to chat with Harold about the eye patients, we walked around the plane with impunity, kicking the tires and proving to each other who knew the most about ailerons and rudders and flaps.

When the two patients had been safely transferred to the back seat of the Land Rover, and Harold had chased everybody (including us) away from the plane and completed his final walkaround, he called out to Alan as he climbed into the cockpit.

“Have a look at the STOL² on this bird, OK?”

Alan waved, grinning.

The engine roared to life. Harold gave us a thumbs up and pulled closed his little side window. Instead of taxiing back up to the riverbed end of the runway as we were used to seeing, he pulled onto the airstrip at the midpoint and gunned it. A huge, violent cloud of red dust shot back in the wash of the propeller. Within the length of a soccer field, the little plane bounced skyward. Harold put her around hard, standing on a wingtip, then pointed the plane northward and thundered off toward his home base in Nairobi.

None of us had seen such a thing. African and American and European, we all clapped and then watched together until the tiny speck disappeared into the immense African sky.

² Short Take-Off and Landing

The children in Mvumi and the surrounding villages were adept at creating toys out of whatever materials happened to be at hand. Chief among these toys were the “bottle-cap cars.” These intricate little vehicles usually consisted of a stiff wire frame covered by a cardboard outer layer decorated with all manner of found objects. They often bore a striking resemblance to the garishly painted *matatus*, the overstuffed mini-buses which served as public transport. The smaller models actually did use bottle caps for wheels, though another popular choice was to cut circles out of the rubber sole of a discarded flip-flop. Some of the better cars included a long, stiff wire that extended from the front axle up through the roof to a “steering wheel,” so the owner could walk along behind the car and actually turn the front wheels.

Despite having a decent supply of “real” toys, Marcel and I often chose to follow the lead of our African neighbors and construct bottle-cap cars of our own. The first step was to collect bottle caps. The goal was to find four of the same kind, say Fanta Orange or Tanga Wizi. The areas around the nursing student dormitories were usually the most fertile ground. We also wanted to find unbent caps, ones that had popped off cleanly. Once a good set had been secured, coat-hangers, boxes, and other odds and ends were collected. When no glue was available, we would use the sticky white sap of the *manyara* hedges. This was a delicate operation, as we knew even then that the sap was a nasty skin irritant and could even cause blindness (I have since read that it also suppresses immune functions and enhances tumor growth in several diseases). We were also familiar with Kazi-Kazi, an old Tanzanian man who would walk around the compound shouting “Kazi! Kazi!” (which means Work! Work!).

He had cornered a niche market by hiring himself out as a hedge-trimmer, but he had paid a heavy price. In keeping the gigantic hedges of the compound in line, he was exposed daily to the caustic sap. The skin of his arms and legs was white and flaking, and his eyes were cloudy. Needless to say, we treated the milky latex with extreme caution.

Something about the act of creation made these homemade cars so much better than the Hot Wheels or Matchbox cars in our rooms. I remember one of Marcel's little vehicles, a truck into which he built a tiny electric motor he had cannibalized from some electronic device; it would skitter along the dusty path until it encountered some obstacle and flipped over. Or my own personal masterwork, a fire engine with working lights, in which I embedded two large hypodermic syringes I'd scavenged from the hospital garbage dump. When you depressed the plungers, water would shoot out of the hoses (surgical tubing) at fires real and imagined. I'm horrified at the thought of the time we spent in that garbage pit. There we were, not far from the birthplace of HIV, climbing around amongst discarded needles and bloody bandages. I'll give our parents the benefit of the doubt and say they had no idea we were there. But for us, the pit was a bonanza of car-building materials.

– 10 –

In November of 1994, three months after I left Africa for the last time, the Great Ruaha River stopped flowing for the first time in recorded human memory. The slight trickle that had been the final lifeline for the chain of life-giving pools sank away into the white sand of the river bed. As the weeks wore on, the pools themselves dwindled and shrank until all that

remained were stinking, shallow depressions of mud filled to overflowing with cantankerous hippopotami.

When the rains resumed in the mountains surrounding the river basin, the Great Ruaha began to flow once again. But in each dry season since '94, the cycle has been repeated. Each year the period between cessation and resumption of flow has stretched longer, drastically affecting the entire Ruaha ecosystem. Total rainfall amounts in the region have remained virtually unchanged through the years, so the blame seems almost certainly to lie with the massive agricultural projects upstream. These rice plantations siphon off so much water from the Usangu Catchment, the network of swamps that feed the river during the dry season, that the water tables are now too low to support year-round flow.

I made three trips to Ruaha, all before I reached my twelfth birthday. The actual amount of time I spent there couldn't have totaled more than fifteen days. Yet when I think of Africa, it is the image of this river that is always among the first to drift into my consciousness. I see again the eddies swirling beneath the steep bank, the blue flash of a malachite kingfisher plunging into the silty water and emerging with a silver fish. I feel the shade of the giant yellow fever trees that reach out over the watercourse. My gaze travels outward across the main channel of the river to a wide sandbar where the prehistoric figure of a Nile crocodile reposes. I watch the sedate progress of an elephant as it browses along the far bank. I can hear the crack of the branches it snaps off and the deep rumbling of its contentment.

I want my children to see this place.

To get to Ruaha National Park from Mvumi, you first take the familiar twenty-five-mile washboard track into Dodoma where you top up the petrol tank and perhaps a few jerry cans

as well, since there isn't much chance you'll find fuel along the way. You then set off southward, rattling along the main road for two or three hours toward Iringa, a pleasant little town with a few shops where you hope the electricity has been on so you can find a cold soda or two. Then it's off westward into the bush. After a few unmarked forks in the road, you begin to wonder if you are completely lost, but then, finally, you see the river below you. If you are lucky, the one-car ferry will be on your side. You ease down the bank and across the rickety planks onto the ferry, just a few boards lashed to a bunch of 55-gallon drums, really. A couple of cheerful fellows pull you across the current, their bare hands on the rough steel cable, their muscles long and beautiful. And then you spin and scramble your way up the far bank and you are there. Ruaha opens out before you. It is the size of a small European country, and you are its only inhabitants.

On our first safari in Ruaha, our family stayed at a rustic lodge on the river a few miles downstream from the ferry landing. Lodge is too grand a word, I suppose. Three or four tin huts provided spartan accommodations, and a central dining hut was made up of a thatched roof over one solid wall and three screened ones. One blistering afternoon, the entire group was lounging in the central hut waiting out the heat before an evening game drive. My friend Marcel, who was perhaps six or seven at the time, was resting alone in his family's sleeping hut. As we all watched, a large bull elephant appeared out of the trees and began to select from among the freshly cut palm fronds that were periodically spread over the tin roofs of the huts to keep off the sun. Eventually, he reached Marcel's hut and plucked up a likely frond.

At precisely the wrong moment, Marcel decided to be finished with his nap. As we looked on in horror, the little blond-headed boy came out of the hut, slammed the door

behind him, and started across the 200 feet that separated us. I will never forget the image of that tiny child—my friend—against the gray bulk of the elephant, like a helpless white sail beneath a menacing wave. At first his parents yelled “Marcel! Go back!” once or twice, but the sound died in their throats. The elephant turned toward the boy and, with trunk still aloft, flared his giant ears. Marcel never saw him. He continued on his merry way, even stooping to examine something on the ground that caught his eye. The bull finally resumed his meal, and Marcel skipped up to the dining hut. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of the crushing hug he received from his mother when he arrived.

The days at the park seemed to stretch on and on. The slow drives in search of lion or leopard or sable antelope seemed to be the true purpose of life, and finding them its greatest reward.



Figure 6: Marcel and Paul on the banks of the Great Ruaha River, 1975

The kudu bull stands in the center of the track, frozen momentarily by the sudden appearance of our Land Rover over the rise. I see the muscles of its shoulders bunch as the massive antelope wheels and takes flight toward a thicket of ebony trees just to the south of the road. That such a heavy creature can move with such grace seems beyond the realm of the possible. He is so close that I can see his eyes, wide with alarm, roll back to keep the vehicle in sight. The bull's dusty flanks are traced with thin white stripes, and he runs with his head angled upward, his great spiraled horns laid back along his flanks. I can hear his hooves clatter on the stony ground as he kicks up pebbles and tiny streamers of red dust, and then he is into the trees, a gray ghost disappearing into the mottled shadows.

I am perched on the spare tire that is chained to the roofrack; my hands are sore from hanging on to the bucking Land Rover. Ruaha stretches out to the horizon and beyond in every direction. And at the moment we startle the kudu bull, even my companions in the Land Rover beneath me disappear. I am alone, floating above the rocky terrain like one of the fish eagles over the Great Ruaha River, making minute adjustments to my position as the air rushes by, surveying the only kingdom I will ever desire.

– 11 –

My mother, Gerda Adrianna Johanna van Leeuwen Koning, was born in Zouterwoude, Holland, late in the summer of 1927. She was the sixth and youngest child of Geerlof and Petronella van Leeuwen, a modestly successful dairy-farming couple. As tensions in Europe rose through the 1930s, the family decided that prospects for continued success would be enhanced by a move to the United States. The dairy was sold, a few belongings were packed,

and the family embarked upon the trans-Atlantic voyage undertaken by so many before them. The year was 1936.

Never one to be sentimental, my mother made a clean break with her Dutch past. With a zeal typical of the immigrant, she embraced America with her whole being. Although she lived the first nine years of her life in the low country, she tells almost no stories of that time. The only one I can recall as I write is the account of the time she was fishing in the canal behind the dairy and had a fish hook go clean through her thumb, how she bounced along on the handlebars of her brother Gerrit's bicycle as he took her to the doctor so that he could clip off the barb and pull out the hook. To hear her tell it, my mother's life began on the *S.S. Volendam* as the stout ship cut through the cold waves of the Atlantic.

For Hilda, my mother's oldest sister, the departure from Holland was altogether different. She was twenty-one at the time and in a serious love relationship; she was inclined to stay in Europe. At the last minute, my grandfather struck a bargain with her: if she would come and help establish the new business in America for one year, he would pay for her return trip to Holland the following summer. She went aboard with the family and, of course, never returned. In the long run, my Tante Hilda achieved a love for the United States that was second only to that of my mother, but she retained far more of her "Dutchness" as well. Her place would become our base camp during our furloughs from Africa, and we could always count on being treated to *roggebrood*³ and *komijne kaas*⁴ and *zoute drop*⁵.

³ dense black rye bread

⁴ cheese seasoned with cumin and caraway seeds

⁵ salty Dutch licorice

My mother narrates the passage through Ellis Island and the long, cross-country journey by rail to the unknown land of California. She tells of the nice man in a business suit who put her on his knee and taught her the first word of what would become her beloved English: *dolly* for the soft, cloth doll that was the only toy she brought with her across the ocean. She recounts the establishment of the tiny cash-and-carry dairy in Norwalk and of getting up before dawn to help with the early milking. She remembers being placed in Kindergarten with children three and four years younger than she was until she managed to work her way up to grade-level in spoken English. She tells also of her first teacher, who forced her to choose between Gertrude and Gertie, because no one could pronounce the guttural *Gerda*. She chose Gertie and did not redeem her proper name until many years later.

Strangely, considering the trauma this un-naming would have caused most people, when her naturalization papers were being processed years later, my mother opted not to retain either of her given middle names. Legally she became simply Gerda van Leeuwen.

“Why?” I always cry out when she recounts this. “How could you just let go of such a link to the past? And not just one, but *two* names that your parents gave you!”⁶

“What good were they?” She shrugs. “They were just a nuisance to put on forms.”

Ever the pragmatist, my mom. She is stoic and immune to subtleties. She does not get jokes and does not pretend to. She does not lavish affection even on those closest to her—rather she shows love through unflagging acts of service. She is not given to ornamentation or excess; she is tasteful but spare. Her house is always Dutch clean, and her interior life is as uncluttered as her physical one.

⁶ I salvaged one of her lost names by naming my daughter Lily Adrianna.

Gerda Koning is a fundamentalist in the purest sense of the word. For her, there are no gray areas in life. God created the heavens and the earth, the Bible is his word written, and Jesus Christ is his word made flesh. That's all there is to it. Everything she does traces directly back to this. She is untroubled by doubt, and of that I can only be envious.

– 12 –

As I write, I stand at the statistical halfway point of my life. I am thirty-eight years old.

One of the lesser dictionary entries for “geography” defines it as “a delineation or systematic arrangement of constituent elements.” Am I *arranging* my life? Is the act of memoir an act of creation? If I were not writing down these memories—drawing my life—would my past exist at all? The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that time is a fiction. Only the present moment exists. Yet even in that statement I must resort to using a reference to time: *moment*. What an incredible leap of faith it is to say something like “I’ll meet you next Tuesday.”

Perhaps I am not just at the midpoint of my life. Rather I am at the midpoint of all creation, never getting any farther from the beginning or any closer to the end. We all are. Suddenly God’s eternal “I am the Alpha and the Omega” makes a lot more sense to me.

I *am* that little boy at the edge of the Ruaha River. Always have been. Always will be.

– 13 –

In 1977, we spent eight months back in the States, our only longish furlough, and the only one during which I actually went to school. We lived in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in the

house of a pair of professors who were away on sabbatical. I entered Sylvan Christian School when the second semester started in January, a shy fifth-grader in a class of long-standing friendship groups. I was lucky enough to be taken in by a group of nice kids, Jim Leiter and Lisa Pettinga and Pat somebody-or-other. During my freshman year at Calvin College I ran into Jim again.

“Didn’t you go to Sylvan Christian?”

“Yeah.”

“I think I was in your class for part of fifth grade.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess I remember a kid from Africa.

“Yeah.”

Jim nodded. We stood awkwardly, not sure if a few months of friendship in fifth grade qualified for anything.

“Well, see you around.”

“Yeah.”

It’s the fate of all MKs to leave behind friend after friend, place after place. Many of us become hardened by it. We avoid goodbyes at all costs, sneaking off to be sure to miss tearful departures. Many even resist the formation of close friendships altogether, because at least subconsciously we prefer to cut our losses early. If you don’t let someone into your life, you won’t have to grieve when they leave.

While in Michigan that snowy winter, my parents decided that I would not go back to Stockley upon our return to Africa. Instead, I would start sixth grade at Rift Valley Academy, an American boarding school in Kenya. I found this to be a horrible idea. Stockley went up

through Standard Seven, the British equivalent of sixth grade, so I had one year left. Besides, all my friends were there, and I would be a big fish in a small, wonderful pond. I dreaded the idea of going to RVA, a school that went up through twelfth grade and was probably rife with drugs and hazing and all manner of unpleasantness.

But my parents' minds were made up. They were not at all confident in Stockley's ability to prepare me for high school (I did find it rather easy), and as I would end up at RVA in another year anyway, why not start right away? My dad even tried to get RVA to admit me as a seventh grader, but we received a reply stating that as I was already young for my grade, they didn't think it would be advisable from a social standpoint to place me with kids two years older. They would be happy to hold a place for me in the sixth grade. So, it was settled. I would attend RVA.

Back in Tanzania, I found that my position among the other kids was already marginalized by my eight-month absence, and when I announced that I'd be going to RVA when school started up again, everyone was even less eager to include me. I spent less and less time with my old friends, and more and more with Darrell Frink, a new American MK whose family had recently arrived in Mvumi. Skip and Carol Frink were back-woods folks from the mountains of Idaho, and seemed even to us missionaries to be about the least cultured Americans we'd ever met. But it was kind of nice to finally have some other Americans around, even if they were a little eccentric. They lived in the newly built house, the only mission home outside the perimeter of the hedge.

Darrell, though three years my senior, wasn't exactly the smartest fellow, so I had no trouble keeping up with him in every way except possibly physical strength. His middle

name was coincidentally the same as mine, so we started “The Eugene Club,” a secretive organization based in a hollow Baobab tree in the middle of a field. We were, of course, the only two members, though my father had honorary membership since his first name was Eugene. The tree was full of bat guano, so most of our club activities took place in other locations.

The best part of having Darrell around was that, because of his physical size, I no longer felt afraid to walk around outside the hedge. I had told him of the stone-throwing incidents, of course, but he was not put off. This new freedom allowed us access to a much wider radius for our exploring. I don’t remember ever being harassed by village kids when Darrell was with me.

When September rolled around, Darrell and I packed our meager possessions and were driven out to the airstrip. He, too, would be starting at RVA, as an eighth grader, and this eased my anxiety somewhat. I have a picture of the two of us posing by the door of the mission plane that would fly us to Nairobi that day, two skinny kids, ten and thirteen, scared to death of what lay ahead. I am not sure I could do it to my own children, so I wonder what my mother was thinking. Did it hurt to stand there and watch her scared little boy climb into that plane? Did she watch it disappear over the horizon with tears in her eyes? Or did she just turn away and head back home to fix lunch?

Having Darrell with me didn’t prove to be any help at RVA. Because the elementary school (known by the English term “Titchie Swot”) was totally separated from the upper school, we saw little of each other. Even so, it didn’t take long for me to realize that he was having a harder time of it than I was. I made instant friends with several of the other new

fifth and sixth graders in Davis Dorm, an ancient wooden structure that was predated by only one or two buildings on the compound. Darrell, on the other hand, became a loner and the target of much teasing and abuse. Like Peter at the fire, I found it convenient to deny that I knew my friend on several occasions.

– 14 –

Part way through my seventh-grade year at RVA, my parents moved from red, dusty Mvumi to Nairobi, Kenya, the Green City in the Sun. I left for school at the beginning of term, and never went home. Instead, when the next school break rolled around, Mom and Dad picked me up in the little white Toyota Corolla they had just bought and drove me to Nairobi, only an hour's drive from Kijabe.

Our mission was building us a new house on the back half of the property on which our Kenya directors, Dieter and Ruth Opitz, lived, but true to African building practices, the house would not be ready for “some time.” In the meantime, we would live in a tiny guest cottage rented from Mr. and Mrs. Quaranta, an elderly Italian couple. Their compound was in Ruaraka, one of the outermost of Nairobi's northern suburbs, and it lay along the main road to Thika, a route made famous by Elspeth Huxley, who journeyed along it by oxcart in the 1920s. When we arrived in late 1978, it was a paved—though severely potholed—and busy highway, the primary route northward to Mount Kenya, Samburu, and, should one choose to risk the attempt, the Northern Frontier District and Ethiopia beyond.

The Quaranta's large compound was well shielded from the road by massive, shaggy hedgerows and a stand of towering eucalyptus. Trees and flowering tropical shrubs dotted the

property, but the grass was mostly left to grow wild, and over much of the grounds it waved tall and yellow. Numberless birds, lizards, and chameleons populated the compound.

The Quarantas themselves were relatively reclusive and I saw little of them except when Mrs. Q walked her eleven dogs around the compound. None of the dogs were particularly friendly either, and I kept away from them as much as I could. The couple were among the dirtiest whites I had encountered in Africa, with wild, unkempt hair and stained clothes. Neither spoke English.

Many years later, my mother disclosed to my sisters and me that Mr. Quaranta had once walked into the guest cottage while I was at school and Dad was on one of his frequent trips. After a few attempted pleasantries, he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to himself. Before she could react, the old man was kissing her on the mouth. She dealt him a few blows to the chest, managed to push him away, and he walked out without another word. I was, of course, aghast to hear this, but not really surprised, as I'd been scared to death of the old Italian all along.

At the Ruaraka house, I found myself utterly alone. I knew no other children in Nairobi that first vacation, and my isolation on the compound was total. I would wander through the tall grass and fantasize, or I would read my small collection of books, Willard Price's *Adventure* series and *The Chronicles of Narnia* foremost among them. I was at the age where boys start to feel that they should be leaving their toys behind, but with no one around, I still played furtively with my Matchbox cars and Legos.

On one of the hot, still days of that December, I was pelting the trunk of a eucalyptus with my slingshot. I was rather proud of the little weapon. I'd made it myself, another skill

picked up at a distance from the Wagogo children in Mvumi. First I found a perfect Y in a downed branch, not so dry as to be brittle, but dry enough to be worked easily. With my pocketknife, I carefully whittled the branches of the Y down to a suitable length and then worked off all the bark. When I was left with a perfectly smooth handle, I set it aside and began to cut up a discarded bicycle inner tube. I cut several half-inch strips to serve as the primary bands. Then, as I'd seen the Tanzanian kids do, I cut very narrow strips of rubber. Holding an end of the wider strip over one arm of my wooden handle, I then wound the narrow strips around the arm as tightly as I could. When it had been knotted off, the band was effectively held in place. The process was repeated on the other arm and then the two ends were threaded through holes in the ends of a small leather patch I had found. Doubling back on themselves, the bands were secured with more windings of the narrow bands. The end result was a powerful and accurate little weapon.

I had, of course, shot at birds many times before, never hitting one. On this particular hot day, I finally did. In the lower branches of a dense, many-stemmed bush I saw a small reddish bird, maybe a finch. Without a thought, I pulled back and let fly. The little bird spun down and landed in the dust under the bush.

My heart lurched. I stood in the sun for what seemed like ages. When I finally crawled under the bush, I could see a drop blood on the side of the bird's head. I felt sick.

Over the years, I became somewhat more hardened and slew other small creatures with slingshot and air rifle, but that slight sick feeling has never really left me.



Figure 7: The Koning House—Nairobi, Kenya, 1980

– 15 –

Another devastating loss that resulted from our transition from Tanzania to Kenya was leaving Ginger, our beautiful Rhodesian Ridgeback, behind. During the last weeks in Mvumi, Ginger became ill and listless. When she began bleeding heavily, Dad took her to the Indian vet in Dodoma. The diagnosis was some form of canine venereal disease. While the doctor assured Dad that Ginger had a good chance to recover with proper medications, my Dad didn't relish either the expense or the potential nuisance of transporting a dog across a border that was technically closed. He had her put to sleep on the spot. When told this weeks later, I cried and cried. I had never understood my feelings for the slim, flaxen dog; I had taken her presence for granted. Many months would pass before the anger I felt toward my father subsided.

We knew you simply as “The Valley,” that great river of air upon whose banks we perched so precariously. Our parents would bring us here to this green campus and leave us teetering on the brink in the hands of strangers, hoping against hope that we would not be swept away. The mission school, part way down the escarpment, was even named after you—Rift Valley Academy—and perhaps due to this small tribute, it has been allowed to cling to this windy spot for nearly 100 years. In 1909, an American big-game hunter took a few moments away from harvesting your bounty to climb up the hill and lay the cornerstone of *Kiambogo*, the school’s main building. “Hon. Theo. Roosevelt,” the granite block declares.

Not a day would pass without our looking out over your vastness. One cannot be outside at RVA without you dominating the scene. On clear mornings we could just make out the Mau Escarpment, your “other side.” And closer in stood the volcanoes—Suswa off to the left, low and misshapen; Kijabe Hill on the right, green and conical with its patchwork *shambas*; and finally Longonot in the middle, its jagged ridge surrounding a perfect caldera. The front rim was lower, so we could get a glimpse into the crater, but the floor remained hidden, mysterious. Sometimes the air was so clear that, despite the distance, we could make out tiny wisps of steam emanating from fissures unseen behind the rim.

By night, you were an implacable presence, a deeply felt nothingness. A valley isn’t so much a physical feature of a landscape as it is the absence of such, a negative space. Behind us rose the solid, protective escarpment, but in front of us the ground fell away into your emptiness. We could hear you breathe. The eucalyptus and the black wattle would thrash

remorselessly during the night as great thermals came rushing up the cool slopes.

Occasionally the Masai would set fires down on the valley floor to burn off the dead grasses and encourage new growth for their cattle. We would watch mesmerized as these tendrils of fire swept across your flat expanses and up the slopes of your children, the volcanoes.

Even now you are the yawning blackness I go to in my dreams, the void into which I pour my longings. Do you hold them for my return? Or do they merely sink into your powdery dust and disappear?

– 17 –

Some time ago, before I was married or became a father, someone asked me this question: If you were forced to sum up your identity in a single phrase, what would it be? After much thought, I finally told her I was a Planner of Expeditions. During my two stints as a teacher at RVA, many of the other single staff-members relied heavily on my knowledge of the area. I became tour guide, driver, and logistics coordinator for countless safaris. Even now, I experience a sense of euphoria whenever I am researching the next family excursion, or compiling lists of equipment for a camping trip, or dreaming up itineraries for a long-awaited return to Africa. Of course, the flip side comes after the trips, when I often slump into a depression, a condition I have come to call my post-expedition blues.

– 18 –

“STOP!” I heard Ajit’s hysterical voice and felt his hand on my left shoulder at the same moment, restraining me. I had been looking back over my right shoulder at my drag

racer. It was actually the vertebra of a giraffe stuck onto the end of my hiking stick, but it passed very well as a dragster. Each of my three companions had one as well, and we had been dragging them along the smooth, hot sand of the streambed as we headed back to camp.

The stream was one of the many dry watercourses that cut across the flat bottom of the valley below the school. This one came down from the eastern slopes of Mount Longonot, and the plain through which it cut was a harsh moonscape of twisted black lava flows and stunted thorn trees. Shiny black shards of obsidian littered the ground, glinting in the sun. It was a perfect sort of place for eighth-grade boys to explore.

Mike Ness, Donnie Musen, Ajit Joseph, and I had set out after breakfast, one of several small groups heading off after wolfing down scrambled eggs and sausage cooked over the campfire by Aunt Helen, our dorm mother. With our canteens full and no real plans, we started toward a black lava ridge Mr. Stover had pointed out the day before. The going was tough, and we were excited when we cut the streambed. We clambered down onto the sand and headed upstream toward Longonot, and vaguely in the direction of the lava ridge. After an hour or so, we were close enough to the ridge to see that it wasn't really any more interesting than the rest of the lava flows we'd already seen. Far more enticing was the pile of bones Donnie spotted on the sand. The size of the bones and scraps of hide helped us soon identify the remains as those of a giraffe. Hyenas and various scavengers had done their jobs, and the bones were scattered widely, many of them splintered. Among the few recognizable pieces were the string of massive vertebrae.

Eighth-graders are bound, of course, to find the element of a thing that can be transformed into a means of fun. We were soon juggling the big pieces, throwing them

around, and balancing them on top of one another. Then someone stuck one of the vertebrae onto the end of his hiking stick. The stick fit perfectly into the spinal cord hole. The rest of us followed suit. The bones gave our sticks the appearance of ancient ceremonial staffs, so for a while we were druids, or ancient kings. But eventually Mike flipped his stick and began dragging the piece of bone along the sand. Instantly, we all saw the resemblance to a race car and we were off. Running back down the streambed, we revved our engines and swerved in and out of each other's paths. Occasionally a collision would knock a backbone off a stick, and we would stop for a rest and repairs.

In this manner we approached the point at which we had entered the stream. And then I heard Ajit's yell. I stopped mid-stride and looked forward. Stretched out languidly on the sand in front of us was eight feet of pale gray snake. My foot hung a few inches above its tail.

All four of us stood frozen for an instant, then backed slowly away.

After recovering from our initial shock, we watched from a safe distance as the snake, which had been sunning itself on its back, rolled over and looked back at us. On its top side it was jet black.

"What if we came into camp carrying that thing?" ventured Donnie, the outdoorsman of the group.

"Oh, yeah!" Ajit said. "That would be so cool!"

"I don't know," I said. "We'd better be careful."

"Well, we can't really get around it," Mike pointed out.

Ajit, an exceptional athlete, picked up a chunk of lava and fired it at the snake. The throw missed, but the snake reared back and spread its telltale hood.

“Watch this,” Donnie said. He lobbed a stick so that it landed on the sand a few feet in front of the cobra. Instantly, the huge snake let out a stream of venom. We could clearly see the droplets on the stick and the wet spots on the sand around it.

“Whoa! It’s a spitter.”

We had all heard tales of the deadly accuracy of spitting cobras and the devastating consequences of being hit in the eyes with the venom. We all backed up a few paces. Ajit reared back with another rock, and soon we were all raining lava down on the reptile. Or at least trying to. Hitting a snake, even a big one, with a rock from twenty-five feet away is not easy, we discovered. None of our throws hit the mark. The cobra doubled back on itself and slithered up the bank of the stream. In a few seconds it reached the rim and started to disappear into the tall, brown grass.

With the snake’s head out of sight, Ajit moved closer and launched a melon-sized rock in a last-ditch attempt. The rock hit the snake flush about two feet from the tip of its tail. We could tell it was hurt. The snake writhed, and its tail below the injury hung limp. It disappeared into the grass.

“Finish it off, Donnie!” Ajit yelled.

“What? I’m not following a wounded cobra into tall grass!”

We all saw the sense of this immediately and gave up on our dream of glory. Better to return with a good story than a dead Donnie. We resumed our hike and soon arrived back at camp.

The other night my kids fell asleep together in my daughter's bed, her seven-year-old arm across his five-year-old chest. It made me wonder if my life in Africa would have been different if I'd had a sibling there, if one of my sisters had been just two years older than I was, instead of twelve, fifteen, a hundred. What if this imagined sister hadn't let me disappear into myself? What if she had dragged me to her friends' houses and half-heartedly included me in her adventures and goaded me to be less of a scaredy-cat? Could I have somehow blossomed in a way I never did? But this is a hypothetical quagmire that has no meaning, I tell myself. I hate this kind of "what if" game, just ask my wife. Circumstances were what they were. I have to own them, right any wrongs, refuse to drown in regret.

I spent a great deal of time alone during my teen years in Nairobi. Social interaction was an all-or-nothing affair. Either I was saturated by dorm life at R.V.A., or I was totally alone at home. My parents were there, of course, and they did make some efforts to spend time with me during school breaks, but for the most part I was on my own. I rode my ten-speed a lot, exploring our little section of the Nairobi suburbs. I shot up the yard with my air rifle. I read. And I created and played endless games with myself.

The game that sticks out most clearly in my memory was known to me simply as "World Cup." It was a global soccer tournament that I conducted in my room with paper and a pair of dice, and I remember holding one or two of these events during each of my school vacations for several years. While loosely based on soccer's real World Cup, I found the



Figure 8: The Konings—Nairobi, 1980

32-team format of the FIFA event far too constricting. My tournaments usually included 128 nations and were single elimination.

To begin, I would take out my world map and start listing countries on a sheet of notebook paper. At first, I wanted to include every nation on Earth, but I soon came to the conclusion that this was an unwieldy plan and too messy. Better to stick to a nicely divisible number like 128. So I would nominate all my favorites, starting off with Tanzania (my loyalties still lay with Tanzania long after we moved), Kenya, the United States, and Holland. I also had a soft spot for England, West Germany, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. All African countries were in for sure, and Western Europe, South America, and Asia were well represented. Then I'd throw in the "enemies," a group that included the U.S.S.R., China, East Germany, and a number of other eastern bloc nations. One can't have a good soccer tournament without some bad guys.

When the 128 nations had been carefully listed, I would cut each one out and place all the slips of paper in a hat. The official draw would begin. “Game 1 will feature a match-up between...” I would reach into the hat, “... Bulgaria and ... Sierra Leone!” I would scrupulously honor the randomness of the draw, even though it absolutely killed me when two of my favorites (or two “real” soccer powers) ended up in a first-round clash. “Holland vs. Brazil! NO!”

With the draw complete and the schedule set, the games themselves would begin. Each match took only seconds, really. Each team would get one roll of the die for each half of the game, with fives and sixes representing a goal-less performance. This kept the scores at a more realistic level. So a match might go something like this: Switzerland, first half, 1. India, first half, 3. Switzerland, second half, 4. India, second half, 0. Switzerland advances 5–3. I would meticulously record this result and move on to the next match.

I experienced something like real pain when, one by one, my favorite teams were eliminated. I don’t think one of them ever came through to the final. The big game usually ended up with a match-up between the hated East Germans and some tiny nation like Mauritius. I do remember that Upper Volta (now called Burkina Faso) won it all once. Sad as it may be, winning my World Cup probably still stands as the greatest sporting achievement in that country’s history.

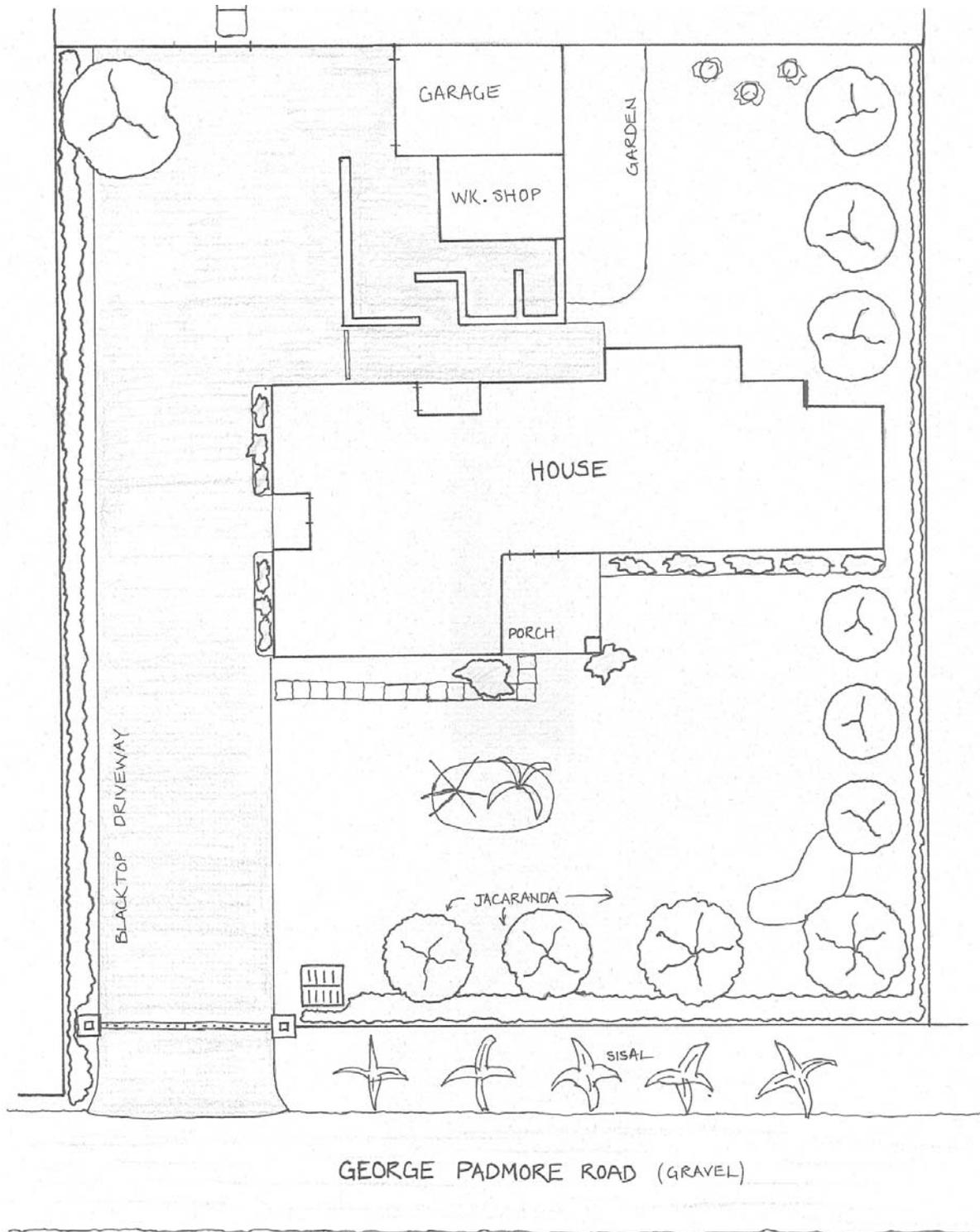


Figure 9: Map of Nairobi property



Figure 10: Gerda and Paul—Amboseli, 1982

– 21 –

I looked out through the mesh at the foot of the tent. I could see the graceful curves of several coconut palms and hear the clatter of their fronds as they conversed above us. I unzipped the flap and crawled out onto the sugary white sand, still cool in the morning shade. I stood and stretched. Out beyond the coconut grove, the placid Indian Ocean shimmered under the rising sun. I shaded my eyes and looked out at the reef, where a few plucky beachcombers were already wading through coral pools in search of shells. At low tide on Diani Beach, the waves broke on the outside of the reef rather than on the beach itself. As a result, the intervening 150-meter-wide strip of water was as calm and warm as a sandy-bottomed bathtub. As the tide rose, the reef would disappear, and the breakers would begin to roll in toward the wide, flat beach.

Behind me I could hear Mr. and Mrs. Elliston beginning to prepare breakfast in the screened food tent. Dona Dea, already in a swimsuit and a colorful *kanga* wrap, was reading in a nearby camp chair. My friend Jack emerged yawning from the tent. I had spent the week at the coast with his family as a celebration of the successful completion of our tenth grade year at RVA (and his sister's ninth). I often did things with the Ellistons during vacations because Jack was the classmate who lived closest to me during our high school years.

“Want to walk up to Jadini and back before breakfast?” asked Jack.

“Sure,” I said. “Maybe we’ll see someone we know.”

We strolled out onto the beach and turned northward toward the hotel that was a favorite hangout for RVA students on vacation. We crossed the high-water mark with its line of driftwood and slimy seaweed to get down onto the firmer sand. A few beach hawkers were beginning to lay out their wares, spider shells and animal carvings and little ebony signboards and bright *kikois*.

“Look. It’s Jackie and Heather,” said Jack. Up ahead we could make out the twin sisters, Scottish classmates of ours, walking toward us with their father. Jackie was a red-cheeked fireball, friends with everyone, her curly hair always wild and unruly. She looked like a bulldog when she walked. Heather, demure and aloof, was more graceful as she walked. She went out with Perry Brinkeback, the Swedish goalkeeper on the soccer team, so she tended to run in a social echelon several levels up from my own. Something in their stride told us they weren’t out for a morning stroll. As they came up, we could see the look of concern in Mr. Charity’s face.

“There’s something going on in Nairobi,” he said as we converged. He held up the little short wave radio he was carrying. “I’ve been on the BBC, and they say there’s no communication to or from Kenya. They are speculating that Moi’s been overthrown.”

We weren’t sure how to react. We talked for a few minutes and then the Charitys headed down the beach to inform other friends of the news. Jack and I walked back to camp. Although my parents were in Nairobi, I didn’t feel terribly concerned at that moment. It wasn’t until later in the day, sitting at a nearby outdoor beach bar, listening to garbled radio reports with Mr. Charity, that I began to feel uneasy.

Phrases like “military coup,” “rampant looting,” “student uprising,” and “gunfire in the streets” came floating out of the little speaker. They seemed so out of place as we sat on barstools under the palm trees, sipping our Cokes and Bitter Lemons. Kenya had always been such a haven of stability on the tumultuous African continent. Wars and famine and violence were foreign to us. Could it actually be happening here? Being separated from my parents, I felt particularly helpless.

That evening at Jadini we ran into Laurie Erickson, a willowy Californian and another RVA classmate. She had been in the air with her father on an Alitalia flight from Rome when the captain had announced that, due to a coup, Nairobi’s airport was closed. They would be diverting to Mombasa on the coast. Laurie had looked down at the city as they circled, wondering about her mother and brothers somewhere below. Now she was suddenly at the beach, and we did not have much news to offer her. None of us knew quite how to feel or what to do. Laurie told me recently that her main concern at the time had been that she was at Jadini without a bathing suit.

The next day, the manager at Nomad's—the outfit that owned the campground, the beach bar, and a small fleet of deep-sea fishing boats—let me use the phone in his office to try to reach my parents. On about the fourth attempt, I heard my father's voice crackling at the other end of the line. They were OK. He said they had been hearing a lot of shooting, so they were laying low, but our neighborhood had not yet been directly affected. They had filled both bathtubs with water in case the water system stopped, and they had enough food in the house to hold out for several days. I took a deep breath. A huge weight had been lifted from my chest.

By the third day, news began to come through that forces loyal to President Moi had reestablished control of the capital. Apparently, the Air Force officers who had attempted to take over had no real backing. They had briefly held the airport and the Voice of Kenya radio station, but their momentum quickly petered out. The real danger had come from the rampaging university students and the harsh crackdown by loyalist Moi forces. Official reports estimated the death toll in Nairobi to be around 150, but unofficial estimates put the number closer to 1,000.

A day or two before the coup, the Elliston's vehicle had developed a crack in its frame. It had been decided that Jack and I would return to Nairobi on the overnight train with all the camping equipment while the rest of the group limped home in the disabled vehicle. With the developments in Nairobi, Jack's parents decided we should extend our stay at the coast for a few days and get the truck fixed in Mombasa. The train Jack and I would have been on was stopped in the bush twenty-five miles outside Nairobi. All of the passengers were turned out,

and many were mugged and relieved of their belongings as they tried to get into town by other means.

When we did pull back into Nairobi a few days later, life had returned to something like normalcy. Traffic was light, but people seemed to be going about their business. That evening, my parents and I took a quick drive around the downtown area. Very few windows had survived the week. Broken glass and brass shell casings were scattered across the surface of every street. Dried puddles of black blood were still visible on the sidewalks. No longer would we be able to think of Nairobi as our peaceful city in the sun.

– 22 –

“Stupid nigger!” shouted Danny.

The Peugeot had come out of nowhere, and we had only just managed to jump out of its way. Danny, a longtime classmate, and I had been walking along a pedestrian walkway on the grounds of the Nairobi Show, Kenya’s largest annual agricultural exhibition. Each year, RVA’s twelfth-grad class took a day off from school, piled into the old Mercedes bus, and spent a raucous day at the show. In 1984, it was finally our turn.

The car skidded to a halt. I could see that the driver’s window was down, and I knew that the person in the car had heard Danny’s shout. The transmission grated, and the car spun gravel in reverse. It slid to a stop when it reached us.

A large, elegantly dressed African woman emerged, dark fury in her face.

“What did you say to me?” she screamed. “Eh? What did you say?”

I looked at my friend, but he was staring down at the ground.

“I am asking you, what did you say to me?” She was shaking with anger.

“I...,” I stammered, “I didn’t say anything, ma’am.”

“What did you say?” she screamed at us again. “You call me a nigger in my own country?”

I could tell that Danny was not going to respond. He was frozen with fear. “I’m very sorry, ma’am.”

“You call me a nigger? Eh?”

“I’m very sorry,” I said again. “My friend just reacted angrily when we were almost hit by your car.”

“I can drive where I like. Isn’t it? This is my country! Is it your country? NO!”

I knew our only chance to get out of this was abject apology. “I’m so sorry, ma’am. And my friend is sorry, too. Truly we are.” I elbowed Danny, and he nodded.

“Do you want me to fetch the police? Eh?”

“No, ma’am.”

“I will fetch the police and have you arrested.”

“Please, ma’am...”

“Call me a nigger in my own country. I will fetch the police.”

I took a deep breath. “Ma’am, please. My friend reacted in anger and said something he should not have said. We have apologized. Can you accept our apology?”

The woman stood silent for a few moments, looking at one and then the other of us. Finally, she said, “Alright. But next time, be careful how you speak to Kenyans, or you will not be welcome here any more.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. “Thank you, ma’am.”

She climbed into the Peugeot and careened away down the walkway toward the center of the showground. I turned to Danny. We were both trembling. “Geez, man, why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I couldn’t talk.”

We walked on. Neither of us felt much like participating in any of the activities, or viewing any of the exhibits. We just walked.

About twenty minutes later, we realized we were no longer alone. Two men had come up from behind and were walking beside us. They wore long, navy blue coats. One of them touched my elbow and said, “You will walk with us now, please.”

They turned us onto a side path. We didn’t have time to think. We were ushered into a small wooden structure, a temporary office of sorts. A man sat behind a desk, writing on some papers. He did not look up as we came in. Our escorts told us to wait; then they left.

After a minute or so—though it seemed like hours—the man looked up.

“I am Lieutenant Kamau of the CID. I am in charge of security for the show.” His voice was level and calm. He seemed too sophisticated for the bare wood office. His blue uniform shirt was crisply pressed, and there were gold epaulets at his shoulders. “You have been accused of a very serious offense.”

Neither of us spoke.

“Stand here,” he said and motioned toward the front of the desk. We sidled forward and looked at our shoes. “Do you know why you have been brought here?”

I nodded. He went on. “A lady has accused you of calling her a ‘nigger.’ Is this true?”

I could tell that Danny was freezing up again. “Yes, sir. I mean, I didn’t say anything. But my friend here did react when this lady almost ran us down with her car.”

“And this means you can call her that?”

“No, sir. It was wrong, and we apologized. She accepted our apology. We thought that would be the end of it.”

“Who are you?” I’d been dreading this question. I didn’t want to give him our names if it was at all avoidable.

“We are here with our school. It’s a class trip.”

“You know this is very serious. We could have you and your parents deported from Kenya.” I imagined the scandal, not of my parents being deported, but of the two of us not showing up for the return bus trip, of Mr. Dixon and the rest of the staff sponsors fanning out to look for us, of the embarrassment when it came out that we’d been arrested for calling some dignitary’s wife a nigger. That would be the worst of it. After all, I hadn’t done anything wrong. They couldn’t kick my family out, could they? I was sure Danny would accept the blame if it came to that.

I took another deep breath and said, “Please, sir. My friend understands that he shouldn’t have reacted the way he did. He is very sorry.”

We again stood for ages while Lt. Kamau tapped his pencil on the surface of the desk. Finally, he said, “I am going to let you go. But remember this: be careful how you speak to Kenyans. You are here as our guests. You will treat us with respect.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. It will never happen again.”

We walked out into the bright Nairobi sunshine. A breeze was waving the drooping branches of the eucalyptus trees. Neither of us spoke until we were safely on the bus.

“Holy shit,” I whispered. My heart was still racing.

“You have to promise me you will never, ever tell anyone what happened today,” whispered Danny.

“I won’t,” I said, and meant it.

– 23 –

At some point during my junior year at Calvin, I became aware that a good number of my closest high school friends were planning trips back to Kenya for the upcoming summer. Most still had parents in East Africa, and several had younger siblings graduating from R.V.A. that year. After considerable badgering, my parents, who had returned to Michigan, agreed to loan me enough money for plane tickets if I would promise to do something useful with the portion of the summer not covered by the trip. I agreed and enrolled in a summer class that would cover one of the required core courses I’d avoided thus far.

In late June of 1987, I flew out to Kenya alone. I had no real plan other than to meet up with my friends at R.V.A.’s Alumni Weekend and go from there. I knew I had a place to stay in Nairobi, but beyond that, I would play it by ear. The problem was that I arrived almost four weeks before the scheduled weekend and had no real way of getting around in Kenya other than public transportation and my own two feet.

I stayed at the house of a family we had come to know fairly well during the year or so our times in Kenya had overlapped. Richard Homeier had worked with my Dad and taken

over his position when we left in 1984. The Homeiers were out of the country during my trip, but they'd said I was welcome to use their place as a base camp. But days dragged into boring weeks on the outskirts of Nairobi. The Homeier's house worker, James, would make me a small breakfast of toast and maybe a poached egg, and then I'd spend the day reading mediocre thrillers I found on the bookcase. Now and then I'd stroll around the neighborhood in the sunshine, and I caught a rugby game or two at the RFUEA grounds, but generally I couldn't find the gumption to set out on any of the adventures I'd spent the last several months dreaming of. The only classmate I managed to track down was Peggy—a bubbly blonde who would later marry the well-known Kiwi rally driver Possum Bourne—and we spent a few hours together at the International School of Kenya's July 4th celebration. But despite her invitation to go out sometime, I was at the nadir of my confidence with girls, and I never called her again.

Finally reaching a point of near-depression, I resolved to strike out on my own. I had brought my camping things with me, after all. It was time to bloody well use them. I started laying out my stuff and formulating a plan. I instantly felt better. I had a small dome tent, a backpack, a canteen, some fishing equipment, and a ratty old sleeping bag. I needed food and the means to cook it. After rounding up a few useful implements around the Homeier's house, I walked the four or so blocks to Adam's Arcade, a small shopping area that had been a boyhood haunt of mine. At the general merchant's, I bought a few cans of food, some sugar, tea bags, a little aluminum kettle, and a few other items. As I walked back to the house, all the ennui of the past weeks fell away. I was myself again.

The phone rang, an oddly jangling sound I hadn't heard before in this house.

Answering machines were not common in Kenya in 1987, so I thought it might be prudent to answer it in case there was an important message to relay to the Homeiers.

"Hello?"

"Is this Richard Homeier?"

"No, sorry. He's away at the moment. He'll be back in a few weeks."

"Oh, I see."

There was a pause. "Can I give him a message?" I asked.

"No, thanks. You see, I'm recruiting extras for a film, and his name came up. But I need someone soon," said the voice. "Say, you don't happen to be a white male, do you?"

"Yeah, I'm a white male."

"How'd you like to be in a movie with Sigourney Weaver?"

"Um, sure, I guess," I said. "What's it about?"

"It's the story of Dian Fossey. Know who that is?"

"The gorilla lady who got killed by poachers?"

"Right. It's called *Gorillas in the Mist*."

"What do I need to do?"

"Well, we're doing a restaurant scene downtown. Sort of an open café, see, and we want a mixed-race crowd at the tables surrounding the main conversation. So you'd probably sit around drinking Cokes at a table for a couple hours. Sound OK?"

"Sure. When do I show up and where?"

"We're planning to shoot on Saturday morning."

Saturday? Damn! This was Thursday and I was planning to leave the next day on my solo camping excursion. Maybe I could put it off, but I'd been so excited about it...

"Um, I think I'm going to have to pass. I have plans to be away this weekend."

"Oh. Alright, no problem. Know of any other white males in the area?"

"Sorry, no."

"Well, good luck to you"

The line went dead, and with it, my Hollywood career.

I caught a city bus the next morning, awkwardly mounting the steps with my pack. We headed down Ngong Road past my old neighborhood and along eucalyptus-lined avenues toward the taller buildings of the downtown area. Nairobi has an arresting beauty on clear mornings like that one. Everything is green, bougainvillea blossoms burst with color, and the people are all headed for work. Optimism seems to permeate the warm air. Of course, just over the ridge you'd find Kibera or Mathare Valley or another shantytown crowded with hundreds of thousands of people who have left their villages to look for jobs in the city. Not finding them, they huddle in these muddy, cardboard slums, living in fear of muggers and packs of glue-sniffing boys and an unsympathetic government whose agents—the police—shake them down regularly for bribes. I have only been on the edges of these slums, but I've read of the "flying toilets," plastic bags full of night filth that are flung into the alleyways because people are too afraid to leave their hovels after dark.

But on that particular Friday, I was not thinking of Kibera but rather of Lake Naivasha, the modest target I'd selected for my mini-safari. I had camped there as a kid many times, so I knew the area, and I'd be able to fish for bass. Going to one of the big national parks would

have been nice, but without a vehicle there was no way. I'd considered the coast as well, but I assumed I would probably get to the beach once I joined up with my friends.

I hopped off the bus on Kenyatta Avenue near the old post office and hoisted my pack. I headed north toward River Road, a notoriously crowded and dangerous part of town and the location of the "country" bus station. This dusty, two-square block area is a daily mayhem of commerce and the nation's transportation hub. It resembles a demolition derby with hundreds of people thrown in for good measure. Old buses and gaudily painted *matatus* gun their engines while their touts call out destinations loudly, enticing riders with assurances of the best fares and the earliest departure times.

"Limuru, Limuru, Limuru! Best price! *Haraka!*"

"Machakos! Leaving just now!"

I arrived at the edge of the frenzy, not quite sure how to proceed. I stood for a few moments under the awning of a bicycle repair shop across the street. Then a young man in a puffy winter jacket came up beside me and said, "Where would you like to go, sir?"

"Naivasha," I said.

"Let me show you."

He motioned for me to follow him and started across the street. I hesitated momentarily, but then followed. He weaved his way into the mass of vehicles and bodies. I caught up with my guide. We passed an orange bus with several reed cages full of chickens tied onto the roofrack. The conductor leaned out of the bus's door and shouted to me.

"Hey, *Mzungu!* Where are you going? Eh? To climb a mountain? Come on this bus for Mt. Kenya!"

My puffy-jacketed friend waved him off, and we continued. More shouts and calls. Athi River! Mombasa! Thika! Nyeri! A small boy darted out and thrust a dirty hand at me.

“Give me one shilling!”

I brushed past, not wanting to lose my guide in the crowd. Finally, on the far side of the lot, he stopped next to a decent-looking bus. There were only a handful of people aboard and no driver.

“This bus stops in Naivasha on the way to Nakuru. It leaves at ten. It’s a bit more money than a matatu, but you will be not so crowded.”

“That’s perfect,” I said. The conductor sauntered up, and my friend spoke to him briefly. He told me the price for the Naivasha leg, and I fished out a few bills. He climbed up a ladder welded onto the side of the bus and reached down for my pack. I hesitated, but Puffy told me it was OK. I passed the pack up and it disappeared somewhere beneath the rim of the roofrack.

I thanked my guide for his help. We chatted for a bit longer, and then he said he had to catch a matatu. I made as if to give him a tip, but he just waved and said, “I helped you to help you, not for money.” And he ducked into the crowd.

– 24 –

I woke up early on Christmas morning in 1992. After rolling out of the narrow, steel-framed twin bed the school had provided for me, I walked across my sisal mat to the bathroom. Travis, the Canadian graphic arts teacher with whom I shared the little cinder-block house, was still asleep and would be for some time. He liked his sleep. So did I, for

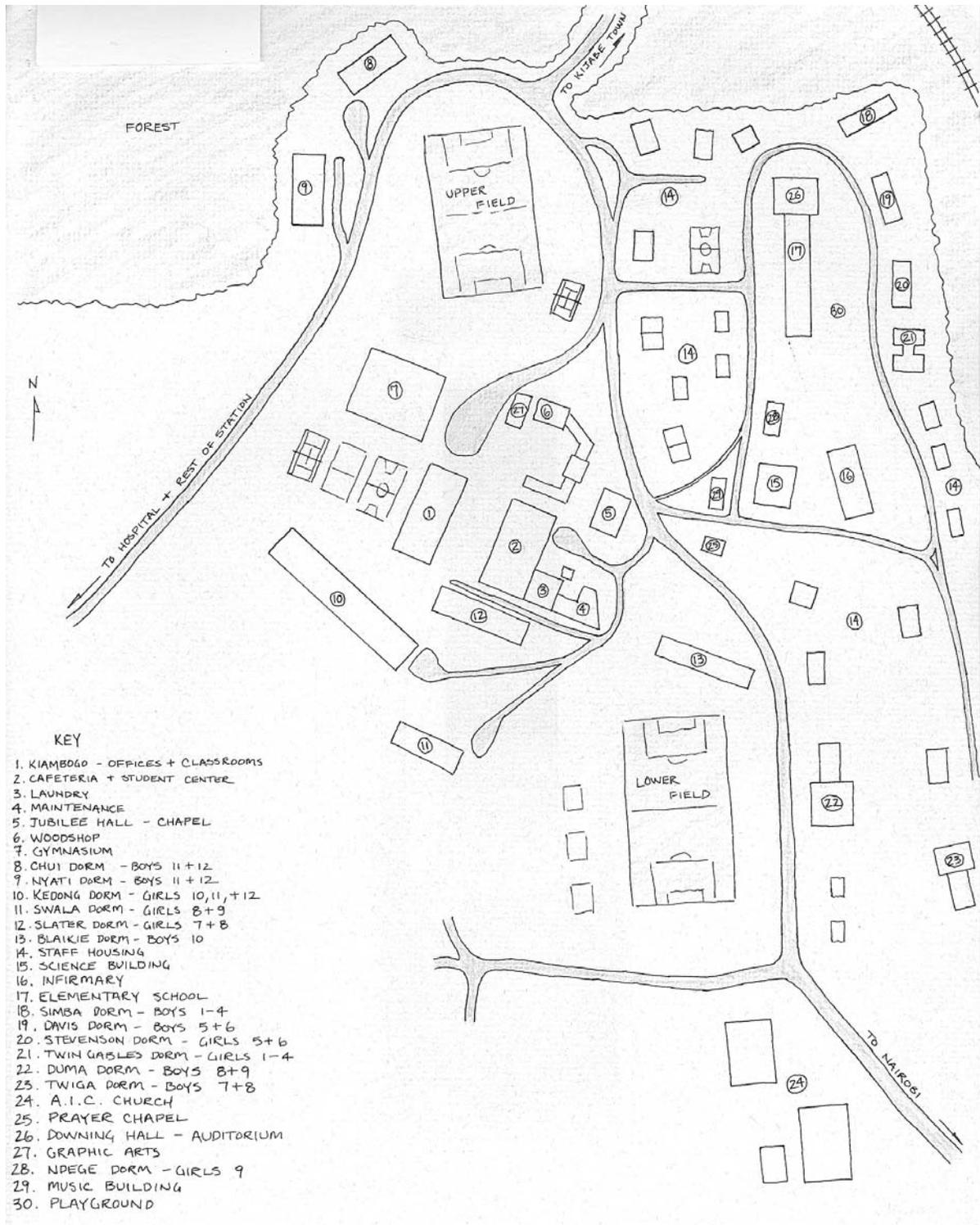


Figure 11: Map of Rift Valley Academy—Kijabe, Kenya

that matter, but I had business to attend to. I was a key cog in a great African Christmas happening.

An Kenyan friend of mine, Johnson Gitau Mwangi, had weeks before invited us up to his in-laws' place for Christmas. Not having any plans, Travis and I had said we would go. Johnson is a cook in the RVA kitchen, and he and his family live out past Kijabe Town, a six-mile jaunt downhill from the campus. His wife's parents, however, have a farm up in the Kikuyu reserve, way up beyond the rim of the escarpment, past the pine forests. So part of the deal was that I would provide transport for the Kijabe Town folks up to the farm. I hadn't yet purchased a vehicle of my own at the time, but a teacher who had gone back to the States for a short furlough had left with Travis and me his tiny Suzuki 4WD—you know, the one that can hold about two-and-a-half people. So Christmas morning I drove out to Kijabe Town knowing that it would probably take two trips to get Johnson, his wife Susan, his four kids, Travis, and myself up the hill. First I took Susan and the kids, as well as several baskets of stuff for the party. No problem.

But after we left the main road, we just kept driving and driving into who knows where. I was really beginning to think Susan had forgotten the way, when we finally came out on this windswept hilltop with two or three houses and a stunning view back over the forest. We unloaded the stuff, and I headed back through the woods, down the escarpment, through the RVA campus, and back out to K Town. It was by then about noon, which was when the party was supposed to begin. I picked up Johnson, a random cousin, and the goat. Beautiful, fat, glossy specimen. No problem. Travis and I had even paid for it earlier. We drove back up to

RVA to pick up Travis. Four adult males and a large goat was stretching it for ol' Suzi. Up the hill and through the woods we went once again.

Finally we arrived, and the feast began almost immediately since we were about two hours late by that time. As guests of honor, we were positioned in the main room of the main house on a low couch with Johnson, Susan's father, and Susan's uncle. Christmas dinner started with a round of warm Cokes. All of the adult women of the family (ten or so) came in and stood around the walls as we took on each course. So we chatted and drank the Cokes. Out went the women. Back they came with some sort of carrot stew, sickly sweet stuff. We ate politely while the men told us stories and the women watched and discussed us amongst themselves. Several more courses came and went. Always one at a time. Travis and I were stuffed by then. At some point Johnson asked me if I'd brought a good knife like he had asked me to. Yes, I said. Good, because you will need it for the next course, said Johnson. It was the specialty of the house apparently. In came a tray containing a big, gray lump of something. Turned out to be goat stomach stuffed with sundry goat parts. No problem. I'll try anything once. Johnson said to get out my knife. So I pulled out my very nice pocket knife and opened the two-inch blade. The ten Kikuyu mamas fell out laughing. Grinning, Johnson produced a knife more akin to a machete than to my little buck knife. He took a long strip of goat stomach, gripped one end in his teeth, pulled it tight and—sching!—whacked it off a couple of millimeters from his nose.

So I played along. Grabbed up a strip and got a good grip. Started sawing away with my little knife. The mamas absolutely loved it. Took several minutes. Turns out goat stomach is like shoe leather. Well, finally, after forcing down more goat parts than we could ever

imagine eating, and loosening our belts a notch or two, we heard Johnson say: “Now we are ready for the main course, which we men cook.” Travis and I looked at each other in absolute disbelief. My stomach was already stretched to double capacity. He led us outside, and there stood our goat, alive and kicking. I asked Johnson what we’d been eating. Oh, he said. My father-in-law liked this one so much that he killed one of his own and he’s going to keep this one. No problem. We walked behind one of the outbuildings and there we found this wonderful barbecue contraption made out of a 55-gallon drum cut in half longways. The coals were glowing, and the butchered goat was skinned and lying on a tarp. The women and children were banished. This was obviously Susan’s father’s den. Nobody but the fellas came back here. It was cold outside; I’m guessing the farm was above 9,000 feet, and the hilltop was unprotected. We stood around the warmth of the fire. Each of us got to hack off pieces of meat and grill them ourselves. The flavor was incredible. Too bad I was about to throw up. I had never eaten so much in my life before or since. They wouldn’t let us stop eating. Travis and I both resorted to whipping hunks of cooked meat over the nearby fence when the men weren’t looking. After even they started slowing down, they began calling the kids over and sending in chunks of grilled meat for the women.

When the feast finally ended, it took hours to ferry everybody back down the hill. But what a great day. I’ll never forget it. I bet those Kikuyu mamas still tell the story of the tall white guy who tried to cut the goat stomach with his tiny little pocket knife!

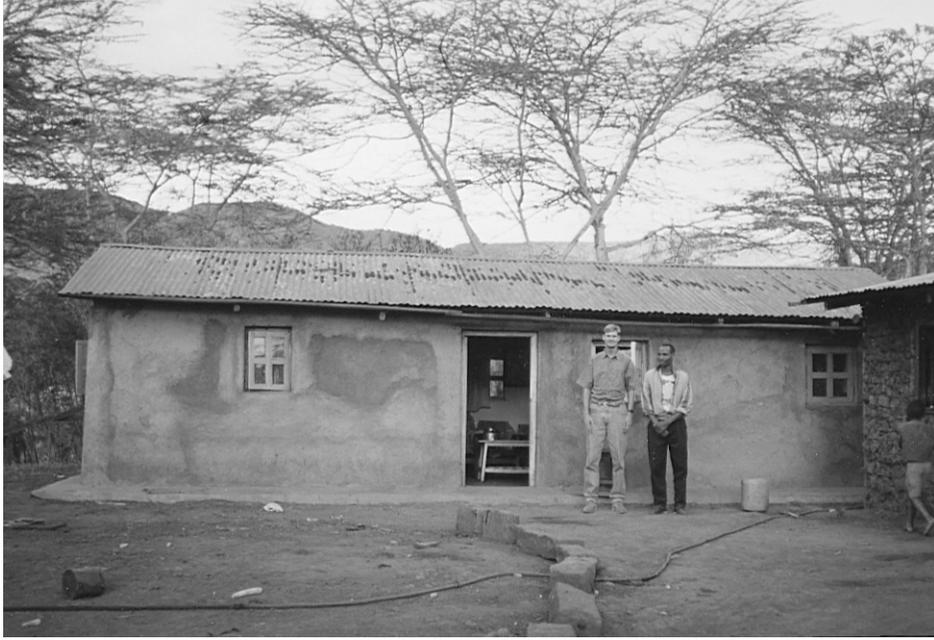


Figure 12: Paul and Johnson in front of Johnson's house—Kijabe, Kenya, 1994

– 25 –

On the morning of April 7, 1994, my twenty-seventh birthday, I awoke on my thin foam-rubber mattress. April is a vacation month for the school, so I had no responsibilities to worry about. I lounged for a while, then pulled on some jeans and a T-shirt and walked outside. The campus was empty and quiet as I strolled downhill toward *Kiambogo*, the main administrative building. I crossed the Titchie soccer field, angled past the science building and Jubilee Hall, and cut between the dining hall and the library. A few friends and I were planning to make the one-hour drive into Nairobi that afternoon for a birthday dinner at a favorite restaurant, but in the meantime I had a beautiful morning to pass in the crisp air of Kijabe.

I was headed for the mailroom, the nexus of school activity during breaks. You could usually count on running into someone there with whom to shoot the breeze, and even if you didn't, announcements regarding activities were always taped to the mailroom door. My plan was to grab my copy of the *Daily Nation* and then head over to scrounge some breakfast at the duplex where several of the single female teachers lived. Certain advantages came with being one of only three single male staff members at a school with thirty-three single females on staff. The mailroom was empty, so I pulled the newspaper out of my mailbox and found a sunny spot on a bench in the courtyard outside. The paper's headline read: **PRESIDENTS KILLED IN CRASH**. The story went on to tell of a plane crash that had claimed the lives of the presidents of both Rwanda and Burundi the previous evening. Details were sketchy, but it seemed likely that the crash had not been an accident.

Even with my relative geographic proximity to these countries, I was at that time only vaguely aware of the troubles that threatened to engulf them. Like many, I knew that there had been tension between the Hutu and the Tutsi in both places, but recent news had actually seemed somewhat hopeful. Burundi had apparently recovered from the assassination of its first popularly elected president only five months before, and the accords signed in Arusha in 1993 seemed to have secured some form of peaceful power-sharing for Rwanda. Certainly the ethnic unrest that had been rumbling in Kenya since the introduction of multiparty politics in 1992 seemed just as serious, if not more so. And so on that sunny April morning I remember thinking to myself that this incident was just a bump in the road. Surely cooler heads would prevail. I folded up my newspaper and went off in search of breakfast.

Within a few days we heard more news, but it was sporadic and without the conviction of truth. The ten Belgian UN soldiers had been killed, and there was talk of evacuating all foreigners from Kigali. We knew this would affect a handful of our students, and we prepared to host their families if evacuation became necessary. A few bodies were discovered on the Ugandan and Tanzanian shores of Lake Victoria, presumably having floated down rivers from Rwanda. But nowhere do I remember reading of mass organized killings.

By about the tenth day of the crisis, the picture became clearer. Bodies in the hundreds were now clogging the rivers. News reports began to explicitly state that marauding Hutu gangs were systematically killing Tutsis in Rwanda. Expatriate families began to arrive at Nairobi airport, and some of them took up residence on our campus. One student told of two Tutsis he had known who had been killed, one an employee of his parents' mission and the other a boy his own age whom he had played with as a child. A subtle but palpable sense of fear began to be noticeable among the expatriate community in Kenya. Life continued for us as normal, but many were thinking that if such a thing could happen in Rwanda, why couldn't it happen where we were? The perception was that tribal relations were at an all-time low in Kenya in 1994. So if a Hutu would take up a machete against a Tutsi, what was to prevent a Luo from taking up a machete against a Kikuyu?

School started up for us again in May, and there was less and less time available to worry about ethnic clashes two countries away. Our Rwanda families settled here and there to wait things out, and no more tribal violence occurred in Kenya than the usual; "so-and-so, a Kalenjin, was yesterday beaten by youths with sticks when he strayed into a predominantly Kamba section of South C, Nairobi." So genocide faded from my consciousness, and in July

my two-year teaching commitment was complete. The 100 days of slaughter were over, the RPF had liberated Kigali, and a new administration was in place. After a final, month-long expedition to see all of my favorite places in Kenya once more, I boarded that night flight bound for Khartoum and Cairo.

A couple of years ago, as I was reading Philip Gourevitch's book *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*, I came to the point where Kofi Annan told the UN peacekeeping troops in Kigali to lay low, thus signing a death warrant for hundreds of thousands of people. My daughter was sprawled at the foot of my bed watching Sesame Street. There on the screen was Kofi Annan in the middle of a bunch of Muppets singing a song about things being better if we all work together. The irony was arresting.

Gourevitch humanizes an otherwise abstract horror. His witnesses present a story that cannot be ignored. Although these witnesses rely on their memories, and although memory is inevitably filtered by circumstance and motivation, the picture that emerges demands to be recognized for what it is. Memory has legitimacy and meaning even if it is not 100-percent accurate. Too often reporting on Africa has massed people into a faceless conglomeration—a sweating, black monolith. Individual stories or sides are lost in this sea of indistinguishable humanity. Gourevitch reverses this trend with his collection of very personal and individual accounts. He refuses to allow the Rwandan genocide to fade from our collective memory. And rightly so. His book does us the service of firmly ranking the Rwandan genocide in its rightful place as one of the great horrors of the twentieth century. He refuses to allow Western readers to dismiss Rwanda as just another ethnic massacre in an endless procession

of African crises. That such a horrific act of corporate violence could occur *anywhere* is a wake-up call for humanity. It cannot be forgotten.

I am reminded of a passage in one of Frederick Buechner's books in which he imagines the hypothetical beating and murder of a child. He says that atheists must content themselves with calling such an atrocity wrong with a small *w*, wrong because it is illegal, or inhuman, or sickening, or at odds with the social contract. A believer in God, on the other hand, has the luxury of categorizing such a crime as Wrong with a capital *W*, wrong because there exists an absolute standard, a universal moral law. "What makes it hard to be an atheist is the feeling you sometimes get in the pit of your stomach that there must be after all, mad as it seems, an absolute good in terms of which such an act as this can be denounced as absolutely evil" (*Wishful Thinking* 4). It seems to me that the Rwandan genocide is just such a case.

– 26 –

I am by nature an introvert. I generally need to be drawn into conversations. I enjoy social interaction, but I find it difficult to insert myself into, say, a knot of people talking at a party. I've long ago stopped worrying about this or thinking of it as a character flaw, but it's amazing how many still do. I can't even count the number of times I've been asked "Why are you so quiet?" I can see Carolyn cringe whenever somebody asks this. I always smile and shrug and clam up even tighter, while inside I'm gritting my teeth and screaming "What's wrong with being quiet, DAMN IT?! It's not a DISEASE!" I think Carolyn believes that one of these days I'm going to bite the head off of some innocent extrovert who can't understand why words aren't constantly flowing out of every mouth in the room. So, to all you

extroverts out there: Beware. And think of a better question; we quiet folks will be glad to talk if you just engage us.

– 27 –

I read not long ago that the glacier atop Mount Kilimanjaro is receding at an alarming rate, that the white cap of the monumental mountain will quite likely disappear altogether by the year 2015. I felt as if a knife had been slipped between my ribs. Not many days later I received a copy of a report detailing the security measures that have been put into place recently at RVA. A high fence surrounds the entire campus, access is limited to missionaries and employees, buses are parked inside the gates to prevent a crash-through by potential truck-bomb terrorists. The station has been designated a “soft target” by the U.S. embassy (the embassy that replaced the one which was itself pulverized by a bomb in 1998). Car-jackings are in the Kenyan news reports almost daily.

I mourn for what is no more, but still I long for what remains. Much can still be salvaged. Kenya and RVA have gone through trials before. I recall the stories we were told



Figure 13: Paul on Mount Kenya, 1994

of the Mau Mau insurrection of the 1950s, of how the campus was guarded by British soldiers in a sand-bagged machine-gun emplacement.

Yet peace returned.

New memories can be made, of that I am certain.

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