

MY DREAM OF AFRICA

Three slender men walk single file throwing shadows on the matted lush grass at dusk. They are coming to say goodbye.

This is my dream of Africa. This is my dream from a life I've forgotten in 1938. The window is raised. I lean on my arms and stare across the great fields. Today the air is very dry. It moans as it prickles my skin and shivers the windowpanes. Dry air gives me nosebleeds, but I can bear the small discomfort if it means that I can breathe the beauty of Kenya.

In the distance swirled with pink haze, I see uneven lines of acacia trees hugging the river. Clusters of white and yellow blossoms seem like a necklace for the strong running river. I know the herds of zebra and eland are coming to the red sandy shallows to drink while keeping eyes and ears alert for the lion and hyena slinking through the cover of bramble bushes and stunted fig trees.

This is my dream of Africa where an unlikely indigo-eyed eland nibbles cornmeal from my hand, and where the zebra follows me shyly as I go down to the coffee fields to check the progress of my crop.

This is my dream of Africa where the tamed hyena stretches by my kitchen door and waits for me to bring a treat after midnight. A boiled chicken leg. A slice of angelfood cake. My friend waits to run with me the mile to the stone well behind the long sheds where from daybreak to late in the afternoon the Maasai workers sort and clean the coffee beans. They press against the narrow troughs with the sliding screens over a half inch of pure spring water that gleams like diamonds in blue shadows under the straw roofs of the open sheds.

This is my sad dream of Africa. Endless fields scorched by a spring and summer with only a few drops of rain. For more than four months it feels like tears must be squeezed from the gods

who watch over Kenya. They must be stone blind to the suffering of the children. Hugging their ankles all night outside the huts. Trembling with fever in the heat that never relents. I swear you can hear the ribs of the little ones clacking together and against thin skin -- keeping the beat with their chattering, rotting teeth. Eyes huge as black panic moons. Cheeks caved in. Hair falling out. Their nervous stick fingers drum bloated bellies. They are mesmerized by mothers boiling big pots with water drawn from the deepest cisterns. Stagnant but precious. Even cooked the water carries the risk of influenza. The mothers show blank faces as they toss in a few greens and chicken feet. It will never be enough to stifle the hunger of the little ones who passively accept their fate. The mothers and fathers share the same quiet dignity. They know they are visitors not owners in this life. The earth will give as much or as little as she pleases. The sky can be stingy or generous with moisture in any season. The natives can never control the ways of nature and would never be proud enough to try.

This is my bitter-sweet dream of Africa about the miracle that came a week too late. I can see the crates piled on the platform in Nairobi where the train passes through on Wednesdays on the long journey down to Capetown or Kaapstad as they say in Afrikaans. The crates are stamped RED CROSS. Rice and powered eggs. Boiled potatoes and sweet young peas. Sardines in tins. Tea and tapioca.

The supplies are loaded on big trucks with high open backs and steel roll bars covered by khaki canvas -- mostly used to transport British soldiers. A crowd gathers for the uncommon spectacle of food arriving from half a world away. A few at the edge of the circle are Somali. Awed by the smallest events. They have heard the strange word: America. That's where the angels live who sent the food. One or two of the luckiest Somali possess an even stranger word: Newyorkcity. When they dare to speak it, they feel the tickle and burn of the dark lesser gods under their tongues.

The crowd cheers as the convoy pulls out. Huge black wheels kick up storms of yellow dust and the sky is blood red in the early evening of the 87th day without rain. Everyone is hopeful tomorrow will bring a change. A torrent of grace from heaven and a small flood for the parched fields.

Another wide-eyed crowd runs to greet the trucks. The food comes too late to save 19 children but 48 will recover. Four mothers and a young warrior are gone. Multiply these numbers ten fold to cover the villages within a radius of fifty miles.

Tonight this village will rejoice and build a bonfire to the gods who are smiling as the crescent moon rises. White as ivory. The blood of suffering has burned off. There will be a feast and dancing until close to dawn. Even after the Masai drop sweating and exhausted, they will continue to chant in low melodious tones -- smooth currents in a secret ebony river that will never change course or be devoured by the cruel leopard named drought. Until first light through the trees, the skin drums will keep the tempo of 117 hearts ecstatic to be spared by another hard summer.

I've lived in my dreams of Kenya for seven years, and it feels like I arrived yesterday. It's too soon to say farewell.

Down in the spacious kitchen the pretty Masai woman kicks off her straw shoes as a quiet act of rebellion. She glares at the squatty icebox and tells him the farm wants me to stay. She knows the flowering myrtle under my bedroom window will miss me. Next spring she won't bare blossoms. She might lose her will and grow cankers. Even the yellow stray with the crooked tail will stare in the open kitchen door and whine sensing something's wrong. He will long for the courage to come in and help. The Masai woman feeds him from the battered tin basin. The cur trusts no other creature on earth. Every day the woman gives him what would only spoil in the heat after supper. Tomorrow and every day to follow the basin will be empty. The yellow dog will haunt the farm. Whimpering and moaning. Heartbroken and never guessing the Masai has gone back to her village.

The woman pads in smooth bare feet from pantry to propane stove and out the swinging door to the mahogany table and the single chair with a cracked leg. Everything else was moved on Saturday. Upstairs I have only a mattress on the floor and three big rooms echoing with restless spirits. It's time to go and I don't want to go. The woman carries coffee in a blue mug and a small white plate with toast and two boiled eggs. A simple last supper.

Coming down the steps, I catch my lovely Masai telling the coffee mug how much he will miss my hand. The woman asks for the mug and plate as a memory of me. Two of the last things I touched at the farm.

This is my dream of Africa. I'm sipping the coffee I've grown for the last time in a safe place that can never feel like home. Dreams are filled with mystery and contradiction. My green trunk waits on the cool stone floor by the front door. I'm making a great mistake in going, but can't change what was done and regretted long ago. I've put 600 moons and two forgotten lifetimes between myself and my dreams of strange, exotic Kenya. I was always afraid of hepatitis and small pox. Bad water and spoiled meat. Snakes in my bed. Leopards crazed by famine leaping through my window screens.

Three slender men are walking single file across my lawn. They are smiling at their bare feet and already enjoying the cool sensation of the smooth pebbles in the driveway they will cross before climbing the three cedar steps to my front door. They come to say goodbye and to wish me the gifts of fortune health and modesty from the great gods of Africa. They say they will keep a bonfire for me for seven days and nights to protect me from lions and other dangers in unknown places.

The men will walk this way again to meet the new man in my place, but they know it can never be the same. The grass will hiss and the pebbles clatter with different voices. Even the cedar steps will crack and creak to tell them I'm gone, and the one who's living on my farm has a dream of Africa I could never imagine. Who knows if I could, it might frighten me with changes.

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