ABSTRACT

REBECCA E. COREY
Lay Down Your Heart: A Travel Memoir
Under the Direction of REGINALD MCKNIGHT

This travel memoir is based on a journal kept by Rebecca Corey over her ten-week stay in Tanzania, Africa in the summer of 2007. The author describes her experiences as a primary school teacher at a center for orphaned and impoverished youth, her travel around the country, her reflections on tourism, the volunteer experience, and African culture, and her research on Tanzanian proverbs. This multi-media creative non-fiction piece includes illustrations, photographs, and narrative writing. In her work, Corey addresses the private aspects of travel and self-discovery as well as the broader realms of tourism and global service initiatives in a developing country. She places her experiences in the wider context of travel and service in Africa, ruminating on the joy, fear, and discovery that characterized her stay in Tanzania. She illustrates the sense of fulfillment created by civic engagement and humanitarian work while also discussing the challenges and frustrations those activities often entail. Corey's work is informed by her concurrent research on the existing body of creative non-fiction and travel writing, as well as her research on the proverbs of Tanzania conducted in June and July of 2007.

INDEX WORDS: Travel Writing, Creative Non-fiction, Memoir, Tanzania, Tourism, Proverbs, Volunteerism, African Culture

LAY DOWN YOUR HEART: A TRAVEL MEMOIR

by

REBECCA E. COREY

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DEDICATION

For my parents, Stephen and Mary Corey, my sister Catherine, and Dylan Camp. I could not have completed this memoir without your love and support. Also, for the many volunteers, NGO workers, and Tanzanians I met during my stay in Bagamoyo in 2007. I was and remain profoundly inspired by your compassion, spirit, and commitment. Finally, I dedicate this work to Temela and Rajabu Hassan, the Kunjombe Family, and the teachers and children at the African Child Care Center in Bagamoyo, Tanzania. Asante, rafiki zangu. Nawapenda sana. Mungu ibariki Afrika.

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PREFACE

My first day at the school was hard. The kids climbed over me yelling, “Madam, madam, please! Watah, we are thirsty! Do you have some watah?” I didn't have enough arms to hold them all as they cried or fought or laughed. Temela, with gentle hands, removed a fruit fly and egg sac from the heel of a five-year old with a sharpened stick. I said firmly, “Socksi. You need to wear socksi,” as I pointed to my own and mimed putting them on. “No socksi. No have socksi” he said, wobbling on one foot while I put a band-aid on the other one.

After a few days I knew all of their names: Rama, Abduri, Yona, Jasmini, Alexi, Suomo... Forty names and faces, eighty small, grasping hands and tiny calloused feet. In the mornings we sang songs, practiced Swahili and English, and ate “uji,” a watery porridge served scalding hot in green plastic cups. In the afternoon they napped on the concrete floor of the classroom and I'd lean against the wall with a small one in my lap, my eyes closed but not sleeping.

I rode a rented bicycle home each day. Omari would jump on the back and shout with joy as I'd speed down the path away from the school. “Fasta, fasta, Madam Rebecca!” he'd yell. At the end of the road I'd coast to a stop and let him off despite his daily protests. “No! No, Madam Rebecca! Keep goh-eeng, keep goh-eeng teecha!” he'd say as I slowed down. As soon the wheels stopped, though, he'd hop off and turn back toward the school, walking slowly and tugging at the faded yellow t-shirt he wore every day.

After five weeks here I would not want to leave. My heart was bound to their hearts. My soul, to this place. Bagamoyo.

CHAPTER 1
“Kuelekeza si kifuma.”

The night I got to Tanzania I lay awake under my mosquito net, too hot to fall asleep. The foam mattress was wrapped in a thick plastic that stuck to my elbows and calves. Every time I moved, the mesh net would break free from the mattress and I'd crawl around in the dark to tuck it back under. A few mosquitoes must have sneaked in though, because the next morning I had thirteen red bites dotting my arms and legs. So this was Africa.

I wandered down the dirt road of Mikocheni, in search of an alternative to boiled eggs for breakfast. I could already feel my skin burning under the seven o'clock sun. A heavy, sweating man in black slacks and a Hawaiian-print shirt made eye-contact with me from fifteen yards away, then headed in my direction. By the time he got to me he was slightly out of breath.

“Habari. Hello. My name is Juma. Would you like to go on safari? I will offer a very good rate. Even Kilimanjaro, you can do. I have the good price. You can come with me now? You need to exchange money? I can exchange your money. Very good rate, rafiki.”

His wide grin was bright against dark lips. He opened his hands in a welcoming gesture, blocking my way around him. A goat trotted across the road next to us, kicking up short bursts of dust. As I tried to smile at him and walk away, I'd never felt so far from home.

The days before were blurry, a litany of goodbyes, folded tray-tables, aching ears, ribbons of Farsi strange to my eyes and ears in the Dubai airport, and then, the abrupt wall of heat that engulfed me as I stepped off of the plane in Dar es Salaam. *Haven of peace*. Dar es Salaam. For a

few moments of panic, I stood and turned a tight circle, looking for someone bearing my name, offering a hand, a smile. I felt the four thousand miles I'd traveled leap from the tightness in my limbs and expand all around me, materialize from a vague feeling of airsickness and fatigue into this crowded airport and every mile behind me. I thought about how strange it was to have come this far having taken only a few hundred steps, how roaring engines and gasoline had done the rest.

I lurched forward having finally spotted my name in black ink on a curling piece of cardboard. The man holding it was no taller than five foot two or three, a couple inches shorter than myself. As I approached him he smiled. I noticed his eyes were golden and bright, striking against his dark bronze skin. He was wearing business clothes, several sizes too big.

“Hello! Are you Rah-beckah?” he asked.

I nodded. He hoisted my huge bag from the floor and swung it onto his back, tottering for a moment and grinning at me. He beckoned me on, speaking quickly and looking back every few seconds to make sure I was still with him.

“Do you have tourist visa? There is a line, you can get them there, 50 U.S. Dollars. Did you travel well? There are other volunteers waiting at the hostel. You are signed up for one week of cultural awareness program? I am the teacher. I am Yoctan Ludas.”

He said it “teecha,” and slung my bag to the ground as he fished keys from his pocket. We were standing at a maroon van with a sliding door and tinted windows. I was still thinking about the one hundred and fifty dollars I'd spend getting my tourist visa from the Tanzanian embassy from back in the United States.

“Do you have Tanzanian shillings?” he asked. I had exchanged about a hundred dollars in the Dubai airport. “You can give me 70,000 shillings now, for today.”

“I thought everything was covered by the program cost,” I told him. “I paid extra for the first week, and it said on the website that for the first seven days there would be no other charges.” I spoke slowly so he could understand me. He paused, then took out a cell phone, dialing a number from memory. He spoke rapidly in Swahili, a lilting accent that tended to end each sentence on the upswing rather than sinking down. He hung up after listening intently for a while to the voice on the line.

“Yes, Yotam, he is the program director, he says that this is not the first day. This is day zero.” I handed him the money, which he folded with one hand and slipped into his back pocket. “Asante. Thank you.”

If the journey to Tanzania had seemed surreal, mind-numbing, and short, then the hour-long ride to the volunteer hostel was the opposite. I settled into the back seat by the window and leaned my forehead against the plastic window frame. The van sped away from the airport, gliding around cars that all looked like models from five years ago or more. Mini-buses painted in bright colors and with sayings like “God is great” or “Numba 1 Big Time” bounced along the uneven roads next to us. Inside them dozens of people were jammed against the sides, standing between seats, and leaning out of the windows. Car horns kept an off-beat time to the song playing on the radio. Beside the road short cement buildings painted bright blue contrasted sharply with the sienna dirt that touched the asphalt of the road. Men biking with nine or ten large plastic jugs strapped to their bicycles tottered unsteadily next to us, and women bearing large branches and sagging plastic bags shuffled through the dust, inches away from the passing cars.

They wore bright patterned fabrics wrapped around their waists and shoulders. But also hurrying, jostling across the roads and hailing white cabs were business men and women, their sharp, dark suits like the skyscrapers in the distance against the dazzling azure of the sky.

The song on the radio changed to another with a similar hip-hop beat and simple refrain. This music seemed comfortable with itself, smooth, sensual, a mixture of pure melody and strong rhythm. It felt like music that didn't struggle to be or mean, but existed for its own sake. It was liberated by its lack of existential angst, resolute it its happiness. Later I realized this characterization fit the Tanzanian people themselves. I started picking out words painted on the sides of buildings signs. The blue buildings I had noticed before read *Vodafone* and *Celtel.* Coca-cola advertisements dashed streaks of red into the scene. A week later a volunteer would tell me that in Tanzania the infrastructure is mainly financed by large corporations in exchange for advertising space, rather than by the government for its own credibility. For a while we rode alongside a tall transport truck carrying bushels of pineapples. Seven men rode on top of the load. Their limbs were thin and sinewy and tight. Like many Tanzanians I would meet, they looked healthy but hungry, strong but somehow fragile from years of exercise and work and a spare diet and never a trip to the doctor and never a Big Mac or fries. One of them waved at me and smiled as the truck passed us and went on.

The tremble in my hands and shoulders had melted away in the twenty-minute ride from the airport to the Mikocheni suburb of Dar. Something about the vibrancy of Africa's hues, my own anonymity and unimportance in the lives of everyone around me, the heavy heat that reminded me of childhood Georgia summers, even Yoctan's bright lion eyes calmed me. The

burden of my identity, my life at home, disappeared like a shadow at noon under the Tanzanian sun. That it might be the same sun as always was a thought that didn't cross my mind.

Eventually we turned off of the paved road and bounced along a stretch of dirt pocked with holes and puddles. When we reached the volunteer hostel, Yoctan hopped out of the van and unlocked a big iron gate. He coasted into the driveway, and said, “Karibu! This means welcome!” I followed him inside, passing three emaciated chickens pecking in the dirt. A tan dog with a black nose approached. He had sweet eyes but strange bumps on his hide. I patted his head gingerly and kept going. We walked along a short walkway against the white cement building. Next to the door were two folding lawn chairs and clothes drying on a line hung from the window to a tree. An even smaller man than Yoctan shuffled out wearing flip-flops five sizes too big for his calloused feet. He wore a faded baseball cap and a goofy smile. He looked to be about fifty years old.

“Babu!” said Yoctan, and gestured to me. “Rebecca from America.”

Babu threw up his hands and made a clucking sound. He grinned mischievously. He walked and gestured like a cartoon character, the ornery old man with a kind heart who grumbles and groans and plays tricks on the kids from the neighborhood. Without saying a word to me he grabbed my purse from me, took my hand, and pulled me inside, mumbling things I couldn't understand. I followed his lead into a large common room with a ten inch T.V. at one end, two couches, and a coffee table. To the right was a small space with a fridge and a kitchen table. Four people sat at the table playing cards and eating sliced fruit. Two more were on one of the couches thumbing through magazines. They looked up as I entered.

“Hello!” said the girl on the couch. “I'm Sarah.” The introductions went all the way around and I tried to keep their names in my head. Within a day I knew something about each one of them. There was Sarah from Minnesota who had lived in Spain for six months and had several love affairs, Amanda who goes to Rhodes College in Memphis and wants to go to Sudan to “be 'in the shit,' like in Vietnam where everything is too real,” Ara from Orange County, California where someone sorts your recycling from your trash for you and who likes to race lobsters into the sea with his buddies, Deepa, an Indian-Canadian who speaks English, Hindi, and French fluently, Hannah from London who has the most beautiful accent I've ever heard but is haughty and cold, and Suhk, an Indian-American who's fiancée adores her but who has fallen in love with Antonio, a Mexican scuba instructor whom she met on Safari last week. These small histories were for later though, and for the moment unknown. I followed Babu down a hall to our left and into a room. He presented the room with a wave of his arm, set my purse down, and shuffled out. There were two beds, each draped in a mesh mosquito net. I noticed something almost romantic about the stark room with its low beds and bare walls. The long canopies of the nets were shrouds around each mattress, their function eclipsed by a resemblance to the beds of fairy-tale princesses. The next morning, after discovering their prettiness no match for the mosquitoes, I would not look upon them with such affection.

I realized suddenly that I was hungry and my was mouth dry and sticky. I could hear the chickens clucking and scratching outside of the open but screened and barred window. Back in the eating area the card game had ended and all of the voices had congregated around the couches. I came out into the room and sat next to Suhk after she'd scooted over and patted a place for me.

“The women at WOFATA want us to come over and learn dances with them,” said Hannah. She was wearing a turquoise and pink cloth wrapped around her waist and a spaghetti strap tank top. Two thin pale lines formed a triangle on her tan chest, made from the straps of a bikini top. She was at ease in this place, and spoke with authority. All of the other girls listened intently whenever she spoke. “Severin will meet us at the Shabaan Robert dalla-dalla stop tomorrow for anyone who wants to come. “Suhk, don't forget to bring the kangas.”

“What is a kanga?” I asked.

“Oh, they're the cloth that all the women wear around their hips and shoulders—the ones with the different patterns and the words on the top,” Deepa told me. “I think the words are proverbs. Angel! Angel, njoo!” From a door in the back a tall, beautiful, voluptuous woman entered. Her skin had a creamy and warm tone. “Eh, nini?” she asked as she walked over and leaned against the back of the couch. Her eyes were tired and she looked bored but not unhappy.

“This is Rebecca,” Deepa said, pointing to me. “Show her your kanga.” Angel looked at me and smiled.

“Hello.” Her accent was thick and pleasing. She came around the front of the couch and did a small spin, laughing at herself. The kanga she wore was yellow with blue dots and a black border. The moment of her happiness was brief. I told her I liked her kanga and she nodded, tilted her head to the side, and then turned and walked out.

“Who is she?” I asked, still a little stunned by her striking beauty and her indifferent nature.

“She's the cook.” Ara told me. I could tell he was captivated too, even after a full week in

the hostel. “She likes to laugh at us whenever we play cards or wear anything African, but she doesn't really ever try to talk to us. Usually she's either cooking or flipping through a magazine.”

Amanda was deep in conversation with Suhk, who was listening politely. Amanda gestured with her arms and leaned in too close to her companion's face. She had pale skin tinged with sunburn, a big nose, and the manic intensity of a Southern preacher but all she wanted to talk about was social justice in Africa.

“Ya know, there are child soldiers all over Africa, thousands of them. And women are being raped every day by rebels. And tortured! That's still happening, ya know. At Rhodes I'm studying international affairs and I took this class on genocide and it was really interesting, and we watched 'Blood Diamond'... I know this sounds crazy but I want to be in a place like that. I was thinking of sneaking into Sudan without a visa and trying to find a refugee camp to work in. Ya know, hands on. Really there.” Her disgust at the injustice and cruelty in the world seemed to be only matched by her fascination with it. All of us were voyeurs of sorts, excited to embark on the adventure of someone else's misery. But then again, I was impressed by her bravado. I had it too, the grand idea that I was there to save lives and bring relief to Africa, that all my privilege was justified because I cared about the suffering.

I wandered the dusty streets that first morning looking for breakfast, but returned to the hostel empty-handed and sunburned. I joined the others for a breakfast of eggs and plain white bread. That night we walked in the tight cluster of our foreignness to the video store a few blocks away. We rented “The Last King of Scotland” and a British romantic comedy. Forrest Whitaker's portrayal of the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin left me laughing at first and then silent with grief. I went to sleep with my heart pounding.

Beside the street in Dar es Salaam

CHAPTER 2

“Baada ya kisa, mkasa. Baada ya chanzo, kitendo.”

I gasped as the trickle of cold water hit my back. Dirty water pooled around my feet in the shower as I watched my toe nails become visible again. I hadn't found much around the neighborhood—only a thatched-roof shack with a sign that read “HAIR” and two women laughing and talking inside with their feet stretched out through the door. Otherwise, I'd seen only tall walls and iron gates surrounding large houses like the hostel, the video store from the night before, and the paved road in the distance. Even at eight in the morning, the sun had been harsh. I could already feel the skin on my shoulders and cheeks tightening and prickling with sunburn.

Yoctan arrived at eleven to take us around for our first day of “Cultural Awareness,” an optional week-long program advertised on the volunteer website as “a week of intensive language and cultural instruction that will acquaint you with the Tanzanian way of life.” Sarah, Ara and I were the only three enrolled—all of the other volunteers had been in country for several weeks at that point. We slathered on creamy white sunscreen and then coated it with a layer of spray-on bug repellent, donned baseball caps, and followed Yoctan down the street. In my shoulder bag I had my camera, Tanzanian guide book, a water bottle, my wallet, and the small pill bottle with my malaria medicine that rattled each time the bag slapped against my thigh. If Yoctan disdained our shamefully obvious tourist bent, he didn't let on. His short legs moved so quickly that we had to jog a couple of steps every once in a while to catch back up with

him. Like the day before, he was wearing business slacks, a collared shirt, and business shoes. Over the next few days he'd ask us several times a day, “How do you find Tanzania?” A strange question to our ears, we'd answer that we found it nice, good, beautiful, any of a handful of adjectives completely inadequate to the size of their job. No matter the answer, Yoctan would make the combination clucking-tsking sound followed by a clipped “ah!” that I soon found to be the standard verbal indication of acknowledgment or comprehension for Tanzanians, men and women alike.

We walked for about twenty minutes, mostly silent in observation. All three of us snapped pictures every fifteen feet or so. Anything different was captured. We were making a record, cataloging in pixels the images our lazy, over-saturated minds might not hold. Sometimes we'd all stop and take pictures of the same thing—a plate-sized orange hibiscus flower, a starving three-legged dog, a tree I couldn't name, the left side of a small child peeking from behind an open door. Yoctan would wait for us each time we paused, standing several feet away as if giving us space to steal these sights without interference.

I caught up with him toward the end of our walk. “Yoctan, where are you from? Here? Dar es Salaam?”

“Ah! No, I am from Tanga. But I meet Yotam and he gives me a job here in Dar to teach Swahili and take you on Cultural Awareness.”

I pressed a little more. “Do you like it here?”

“Yes, I like.” He smiled, and I noticed the gap between his front teeth. There were flecks of bronze in his eyes and dust in his lashes. I wanted to ask him the history of his life, his favorite food and color and game. A few days later when I asked him these questions, he'd tilt his head to

the side and laugh as if these were the strangest and silliest questions he'd ever been asked. They probably were, but I thought knowing those answers would bring me closer to knowing him. Sarah asked him if he had a girlfriend. He said yes, and grew bashful and giggly. He told us he had not seen her in six months because he had to be in Dar to work and make money. He told us he missed her. We joked and poked him in the ribs, awing and oohing. He laughed and smiled with us. But as we walked on I felt a shiver of guilt that he was there with us and had to be.

I thought about what else I carried along with my pure white anti-malarial pills and ten-megapixel digital camera: the assumption that everyone I met would be thrilled I had come to Tanzania, grateful even. Wasn't I there to “help” Africa? I was surprised to feel a sharp pang of doubt, shadows already blurring the simple structures of “giver” and “receiver” I had expected. “Wewe! Utaumiza roho yako!” I heard someone shout.

“What does that mean, Yoctan?” I asked.

“It means... 'You! You will hurt your soul!' This is a Tanzanian proverb. A warning to not act wrongly.”

It was almost as though this caution had been directed straight at me. Poetry is a way of describing something so evocatively and honestly that you wonder how a symbol can make you shake. I felt the word—soul—solidify somewhere in the center of my chest, and flutter softly. I wrote this proverb down, and every one I heard after it. Proverbs and sayings soon lined the margins of my journal and the edges of the tickets, food wrappers, and beer labels that I tucked between the pages. Yoctan grinned at me when he saw me scribbling.

“You like proverbs?”

“Yes, I'm going to collect them while I'm here... for a professor back home. For credit.”

“You will learn from these much wisdom. My grandfather could speak for three hours only in proverbs. He used to even say, 'when you see a mzungu, you must run away. Hide under the bed until he has gone away.'” We laughed, and he laughed even harder when I wrote that one down, too.

Soon we were sitting crushed into the back seat of a *dalla-dalla*, one of the mini-buses I'd seen on the ride to Mikocheni. I tried to count the number of heads—I think there were about thirty three. My legs stuck to the plastic covered seats. In the front row, three ahead of us, a woman wrestled a live chicken back into her bag. The musky smell of body odor and fresh fish mingled in the air. The large woman next to me held a full bag of greens and fruit in her lap. Our arms touched from shoulder to elbow and our legs jostled against each other. Everyone in the bus swayed in unison at turns, popped up into the air at pot-holes, leaned against each other to keep from tumbling over. A man stood in the opened sliding door of the van and rapped his knuckles against the metal frame to signal the driver to stop or go. He'd jump down lightly at stops to let passengers off and collect money from those getting on. He clutched coins and bills with large, dirty hands, counting change meticulously and guarding his stash by turning his shoulder against the bus-stop crowds.

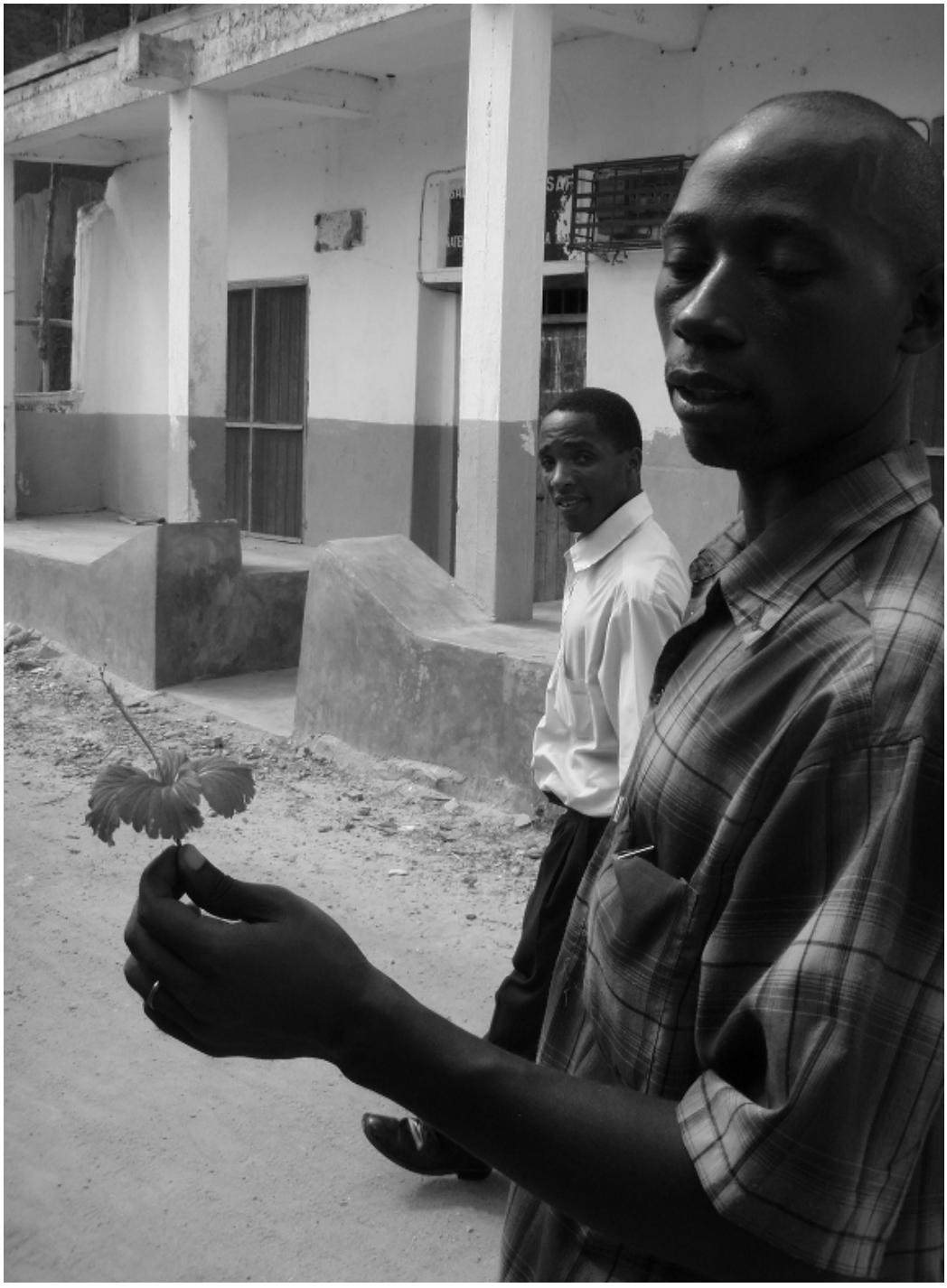
Finally Yoctan signaled for us to get off with a quick wave of two fingers. He slipped through the riders with ease, leaving me to peel my damp arm from the arm of the woman next to me and shove through the tight mass of people. Yoctan gathered us together like a small flock of sheep, making sure we were all alright and we'd stepped off with everything we had started with. I was sweaty and frazzled and disheveled and satisfied. I'd been surrounded by Tanzania and survived. I had entered the fray and emerged feeling a part of it, this joyful chaos of human

existence. Giddy from my first immersion, I felt like a diver clutching a pearl as she breaches the water and swallows lung-fulls of air.

Sea gulls rose and dove through the air around us. I saw, for the first time since my flight's descent, the sea. The Dar es Salaam fish market spanned three city blocks right next to the water. Men leaped from boat to dock, slung nets full of flopping fish to the ground, crouched over splayed squid and octopus carcasses and arranged them into shiny rows. The pavement glistened and shone with thousands of scales and discarded skins. We walked to the edge of the concrete ledge jutting over the ocean. Salty, wet wind lifted the hair from my shoulders. The Indian Ocean was a deep aquamarine blue. We turned and wandered over to a great stone pavilion. People crowded around tables, shouting out bids for the day's catch. My eye lingered over a woman wearing a pastel orange dress with light blue accents. Her head was wrapped in a matching scarf, and slung around her back was a wide piece of cloth that curved into a comma, a little child hammocked against her. The child's tiny dark head peeked up from the hem of the cloth and as we got closer I saw four small fingers wrapped tightly around the taut edge. I snapped a picture as a breeze caught her skirt and swept it away from her ankles. Hypnotized by the image, I almost missed hearing a man shouting at me gesturing for me to put down my camera. When I finally noticed him I dropped my arm immediately and shoved the camera into the bottom of my bag.

“Yoctan! Yoctan, how do I say 'sorry'?”

The rest of the day I snapped pictures secretly from my waist, not looking at the screen. Later I flipped through them, each one tilted or a little blurry or off-subject; the series played like a dream recalled just after waking.



Mr. Smat, a tour guide, in the foreground, and Yoctan behind him

CHAPTER 3

“Angenda juu kipungu, hafikilii mbinguni.”

Salam. Greetings. The most important part of Swahili conversation. The first five minutes of any encounter consist of exhausting a long list of greetings and salutations. I cataloged these in my journal, noting correct usages and circumstances where each would be appropriate. It took me weeks to begin to get them right in conversation. Tanzanians we would meet seemed to delight in testing us with greetings. If we got the sequence right and remembered the rules the would smile and nod vigorously at the end of it. *Habari za asubuhi! Nzuri tu.* If we mixed them up they would usually laugh or cluck in mock-disapproval. This was not for amusement alone—it was the measurement of foreignness, of how high a merchant could jack up his price or how much a shopkeeper could say about you in Swahili knowing you wouldn't understand her jibes at your ugly clothes and skinny chicken legs. It also measured how hard you were trying, and this seemed to mean something, too. *Mambo! Poa!* What's up? Cool! The straight translations didn't always make sense, but the inherent structure of etiquette and friendliness resonated. There were greetings reserved for showing respect: *Shikamoo.* I am at your feet, a borrowed Arabic greeting. The response was always *Marahaba,* I am delighted. For an elder greeting someone younger there was *Hujambo?* Literally, “There is no matter?” The response, *sijambo*. Nothing is the matter. *Habari* means news. Tanzanians ask each other the news of everything: the morning, the afternoon, the evening, the day, the journey, the family, the home, the work. And the answer is

always *nzuri*, which means good, beautiful, and nice. Or else it is one of a couple other positive words like *safi* or *salama.* Great or peaceful.

A few weeks later in Bagamoyo, where I ended up to volunteer at a primary school for orphans, we tried to teach the children to answer if they were feeling bad. We found the word in the dictionary, and had them repeat that they were not in fact *nzuri*, but *mbaya*—"*Mbaya, mimi ni mbaya,"* we told them to say when we asked them *habari yako?,* what is your news? Nothing registered in their upturned faces at this practical lesson from the enthusiastic Americans. They mumbled the words or sat silent and unsure. "Well, shouldn't they tell us if they're not good?" I asked another volunteer. "Why don't they get this?" We moved on to another lesson, but as it turned out, the answer to the question "how are you?" in Tanzania is always "good." It's a matter of politeness. It would be rude to burden someone immediately with your bad news. It is also a matter of self-respect, the cheerful hardiness of a people that has suffered much but rejoiced as well. Later in the conversation you might reveal that your cow has starved to death and your uncle has just died and your mother-in-law has moved in for good, but the news is good, the news is good. This was not a land tolerant or even aware of self-pity.

"Cultural Awareness" week was almost done. I had been introduced to the greetings, and could now tell people my name, age, and nation of origin, as well as say "thank you" and "excuse me." I practiced these sentences in my head. *Jina lako ni Rebecca. Nina miaka kumi na tisa. Ninatoka Marekani.* At every meal either Babu or Angel would give us a big bowl full of buttery spaghetti with beans or *ugali*, a thick cornmeal gruel, usually served with vegetables. *Asante, asante sana*. Thank you, thank you very much, we'd say. *Eh, karibu sana.* You're very welcome. One evening Babu brought out a plate of tough, stringy chicken. I pictured the tough, stringy

chickens that ran around outside the hostel, grimaced, and grabbed a leg. I was exhausted and starving at the end of each day of copying Swahili verbs and vocabulary into my notebook, walking through markets, waving down *dalla-dallas.* It was as if the seeing of unfamiliar sights and the constant stream of an unknown language through my mind called ranks of weary foot-soldier neurons marching along where just days before they'd lounged and languished in the familiar crevices of a still brain.

Hannah had masterminded a weekend trip to Zanzibar before Sarah, Ara and I headed our separate ways to volunteer projects across the country. They were going far north and I was to head up the coast just about sixty kilometers to a place called Bagamoyo. When I received my assignment by email a month before leaving the States, I researched the place on the Internet, and found virtually nothing. This was good. After a few days in the huge cityscape of Dar, as I now called it, I was ready to experience “the real Africa.” I wanted away from the skyscrapers and traffic, the frenetic city pace. It was an odd contrast—the laziness of our days becoming “aware” and the feeling that despite the cultural differences, Dar was at heart a modern metropolis, if a shabby, imitative one. I was especially ready to leave after I met Yotam, the mastermind who charged me for “day zero” and was running the same volunteer program for two not-for-profit organizations, neither of which new he was double-dipping.

We were visiting a beach just outside the Dar city limits. “Coco beachi,” Yoctan called it. He brought us beers in twenty-two ounce bottles. These, it turned out, were the same price as the twelve-ounce ones. The logic of it seemed clear. Why waste more bottles on less beer? Tanzanian beers are named for Tanzanian animals or symbols. As we lounged in plastic chairs twenty yards from the waves, we sipped *Safari Lager, Kilimanjaro, Tusker,* and *Serengheti.* When I asked

Yoctan which is the best, he told me, “it depends on what you like! If you like elephant, you drink *Tusker*, if you want to go on safari, you drink *Safari*!” They all did taste about the same. Signs and tee-shirts advertising *Kilimanjaro* beer read “If you can't climb it, drink it!” We also learned early that beer is served warm at room temperature unless you specify you want it cold, *baridi. Bia baridi.* Many words, like 'beer' or 'sweater', were borrowed from English but became *bia* and *sweta*. 'Taxi' was *teksi* and 'driver' was *dereva*. I also noticed that Tanzanians dropped the long “e” sound from many English words that had it, such as 'biology', or 'technology'. Yoctan told us he would like to study “computer technolodge” and that he was “very happ” to see us finding Tanzania *nzuri*. The “y” disappeared as the word ground to a halt on his tongue. But words that had no “y” on the end, like 'right' or 'left' or 'internet', suddenly acquired them. We asked a stranger for directions to the internet cafe and he looked at us blankly. “Internet! Internet!” we said, miming typing on invisible keyboards. Still no comprehension. “Internet-i...?” I tried. “Ah, yes yes! Interneti! Ova there! Take righty and then righty!”

So when Yotam arrived, Sarah and I were laughing at the recollection of this moment. I heard his deep, guttural laugh before I saw him.

“Ah, you like Kiswahili!” he said to us, and slapped his big hand down on my shoulder. “I am Yotam, program directa. How are you finding Tanzania?” We all smiled and said *nzuri, nzuri.* “Ver good!” he bellowed, beaming at us. He was a tall man with a bulging belly and a big smile. “And now you know about Swahili Time,” he continued, “Africa Time! We live in the moment, yes?” We nodded in agreement. Nothing that week had gone according to plan. We never met when we said we would, or arrived when we expected. I had been told for three days in a row that I would go to Bagamoyo that day, or the next. Yotam laughed out loud. He was wearing a

black short-sleeved collared shirt and khaki slacks. His shirt was Hawaiian print—large, pale-yellow flowers bloomed across it. He was a force. I thought of a mafia boss. He was charming, larger-than-life, and dangerous. I was already biased against him from the quiet complaints that floated around the hostel. The volunteers spoke about him with wry contempt and annoyed amusement. “Scam artist” and “damn bastard” had been uttered, but almost affectionately. I hadn't yet known what to make of it. Now I was beginning to understand. The great grin never left his face, even when he beckoned Yoctan and ordered him to bring a beer or whispered quietly to his silent and grim driver.

At the table in front of us, two men were passing back and forth pornographic color drawings depicting busty women spreading their legs, bending over, and the last one, having intercourse with a rhinoceros. We giggled and eventually they moved away, casting annoyed looks back at us as we trembled with laughter. Soon after, a grizzled, thin, and shirtless man with a graying beard and faded camouflage cargo pants came and stood in front of us. He didn't say a word, but got out a clip board, piece of paper, and pencil from the bag slung from his sandy shoulder. He started sketching intently, there not four feet away from us, looking up every now and again as the pencil scratched along. I couldn't tell which one of us he was drawing. We stared at him for a few minutes, then went back to talking. About fifteen minutes later he handed the piece of white paper to Ara. A rough caricature of Ara's spiky dark hair, bushy eyebrows and big nose looked back at him. In block letters he had written “INDEPENDENT GLOBAL MAN.” The lines were thick and shaky, as if they'd been made by a second-grader.

“Thank you,” Ara stammered, as Sarah and I turned our heads to the side and gulped beer to stifle our laughs. “And, um, how much do you want for it?”

“How much do you value yourself?” The man finally spoke. Ara stuttered again, laughing awkwardly.

“Well, uh, how about ten dollars? Is that okay?”

“Yes, okay,” the man replied solemnly. Ara fished bills from his pocket and handed the man 12,000 Tanzanian shillings, about ten dollars. “I can't believe that just happened,” Ara said after the man departed. We all snapped pictures of his portrait.

“Frame it,” Sarah said, smiling.

The sun was beginning to set beyond the waves. A few naked children jumped over waves in the shallows. Two older boys ran down the beach rolling a car tire. Yotam came up to our table carrying three paper plates with a food I'd never seen on them.

“Chipsi mayai!” he declared. He put them down on the table and I saw three round patties that resembled an omelet. “Try them,” he told us. “I will get tomato sauce.” I tore a piece off with my hand. I could tell now it was egg with chunks of something else cooked into it. French fries. It was delicious. The tomato sauce, as it turned out, was thin, pinkish ketchup. After I'd eaten my meal, I looked around for Yotam. He was standing apart from us, talking on his cell phone in rapid Swahili. I waited for him to hang up, then walked over to him.

“Yotam, I am supposed to go to my volunteer program in Bagamoyo,” I said firmly. “At the hostel they keep telling me to wait. I want to get to work, though.”

“Ah, but I thought you will stay in Dar and work at WOFATA, Women Fighting Aids in Tanzania. Very good program! And Hannah and Suhk already are there to help you work,” he told me, smiling.

“But I was assigned to go to Bagamoyo. I want to go there,” I responded.

He folded his arms across his chest and shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

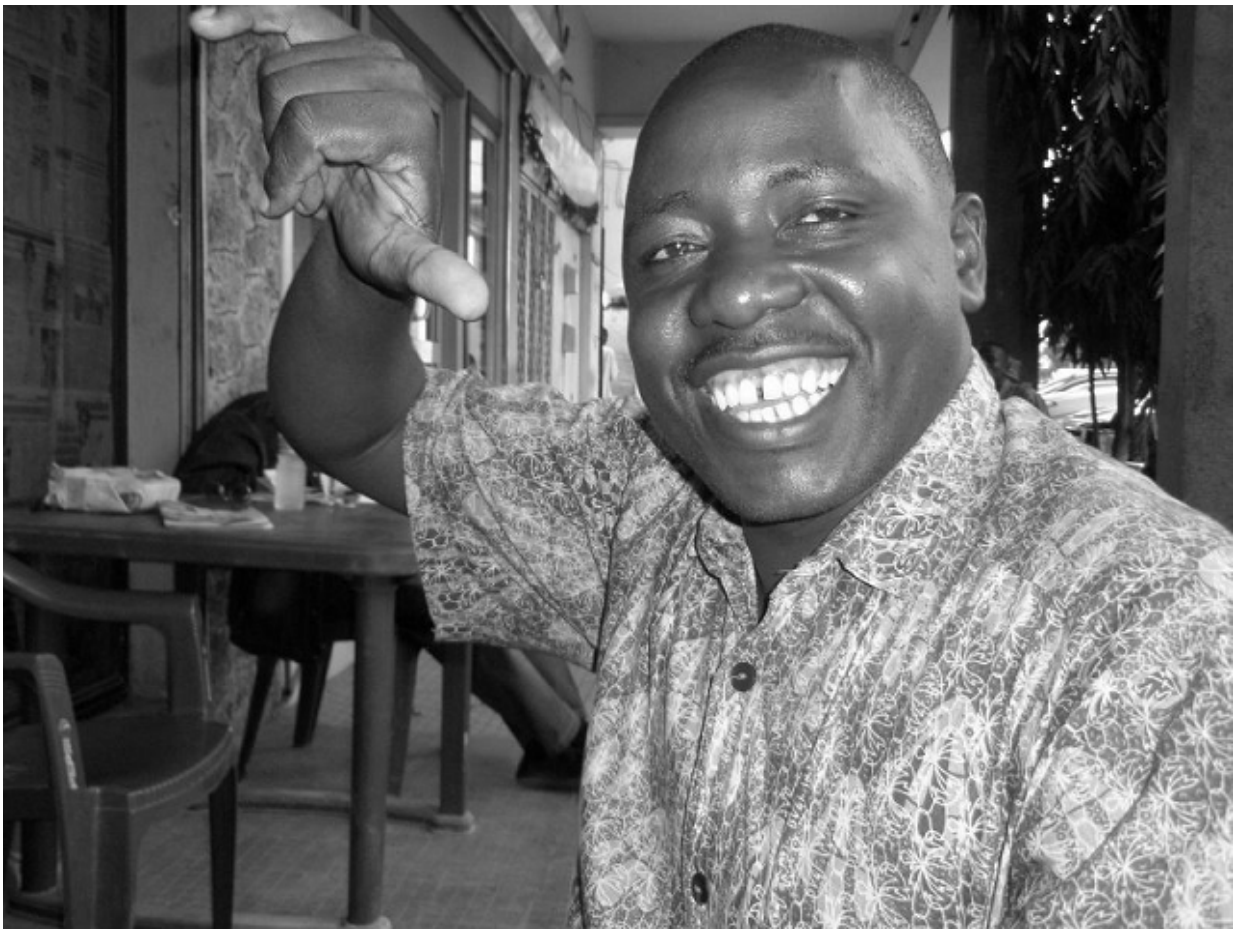
“WOFATA is very nice, I would like you to work there.” He towered above me, and I thought I saw his grin falter. I considered giving in, but decided to summon every bit of courage and resolve I could muster, and insisted, “no, I was told I could go to Bagamoyo and work in an orphanage or school. Yotam, this is very important to me.”

Maybe I had imagined the grin leaving his face. “Ah, okay, okay! But it may be some trouble for me... Maybe you could give me... It will cost me some money. You know, this is business...” I pretended not to understand.

“What?” I said. “I'm glad you will help me.”

“Ah, *hakuna matata*, it's nothing. You will go to Bagamoyo tomorrow, unless you want to go to Zanzibar with Hannah and the others. Then you can go after that. It is only about two hours away, by *dalla-dalla*.” Had he tried to bribe me? The exchange had been uncomfortable. He hadn't said anything wrong, really, but I felt like we had been talking about a dirty deal.

“Thanks, Yotam,” I said quickly. “I'll talk to you soon.” I hurried back to the table but didn't say anything to the others. That night we all packed our bags for Zanzibar. I also packed the rest of my things so they would be ready to go to Bagamoyo when I got back. As I tried to fall asleep I couldn't say I blamed Yotam for his “business sense,” if you could call it that. I realized it was more my pride hurting that I'd seemed like an easy target. Yes, I'd be glad to leave Dar es Salaam behind.



Yotam, director of the volunteer program

CHAPTER 4
“La kuvunda halian ubari.”

Ara had convinced Yoctan to take us out drinking on our last night in Dar. He arrived at the hostel at about nine with a loud, good-looking Tanzanian called Maleh who was wearing a straw cowboy hat and had clearly been working on his “American” accent for a while.

“How-dee, how are you dew-ing?” he asked, sounding more Chinese than country, and he belly-laughed at his own hilarity.

We drove the maroon van about twenty minutes, stopping for *chipsi mayai* on the way. It was the strangest drive-through fast food I'd ever eaten—we stopped the van beside a small unmarked building, a young boy ran out with steaming food and a bottle of ketchup which we poured over the food and then handed back to him with about two dollars in Tanzanian shillings. While we sat eating in the car, three women came to the windows with handfuls of bootlegged DVD's, and loitered around even though we weren't buying.

When we got to the club, Maleh turned to look at us from the front seat. “Don't talk to the women,” he instructed. “They are prostitutes, and they all have AIDS. Big serious. Oh-kay. Res go!” We followed the cowboy into the dim, nearly empty bar. Yoctan scurried along next to us, looking nervous and uncomfortable. He grabbed my purse from my arm.

“Let me carry, okay?” he said. He put it over his shoulder and covered the zipper with two hands. When we found a table, he put my purse on his lap and kept a hand on it the whole night. We ordered beers for everyone, but Yoctan would only drink Mirinda, a syrupy red soda.

“You don't drink alcohol, man?” Ara asked him, “not even a beer? I'll buy it for you, come on. Lemme buy you one!” Yoctan shook his head.

“Ah! No. No thanks.” When we stumbled out later, drunkenly chanting words he'd taught us, he arched his brows and smiled uncertainly. I don't think he knew the words he wanted to say, only the vague feeling that we were not the ones who could bring to Africa a single notion of peace.

A thin, large-eyed woman came and sat between Ara and me. She had on heavy eye make-up and tight white pants. Ara almost immediately got up under the pretense of getting more drinks, leaving me alone with this young, languishing beauty. I vaguely remember seeing Ara and Deepa laughing at me from the other end of the table, Yoctan sliding away, a group of Tanzanian women staring at us across the room. Her voice was slow and slanted. I asked her name and age and where she was from.

“Isha,” she told me. “I come from Kenya. I won't tell you my age. I don't tell anyone that.”

“Why? I won't tell anyone,” I slurred, leaning in as if to prove my confidentiality. “Don't you trust me?”

“No, you are judging me.” she said, matter-of-factly.

“No! I'm not.” And I really wasn't. I'd forgotten Maleh's warning. I was drunk and just wanted to talk, and I didn't realize she was a prostitute. “You should trust people. You should really trust people because I think people are good. And they aren't trying to hurt you.” It seemed like sound advice at the time.

“I only trust me and my mum. They are the only two in the world I trust,” she told me. I fumbled a cigarette out of the box in front of me. She lit it for me.

“I don't smoke,” I confessed. “Would you trust a doctor? I do, I trust them. But I'm in Africa. So it's fine. I'm in Africa...”

I guess she realized Ara wasn't coming back so she got up and left. I let the cigarette burn down to the cotton without knowing it until my fingers got hot. I was drunkenly morose and couldn't remember why I felt ashamed. When Sarah grabbed my arm and told me we were going, I followed, dropping the cigarette butt on the ground. “American garbage,” Isha's friend by the door spat at me as I passed. Amanda told her to shut up, but at that moment, inarticulate and numb, I felt the woman was right.

Tanzanian beers by the beach

CHAPTER 5
"Jambo usilolijua ni kama usiku wa kiza."

Ugali na kuku. Chipsi mayai. Jumamosi, Alhamisi. Moji, mbili, tatu. Marahaba. I am delighted... Amka! Wake up.

"I am going to Africa," I had told my friends and family. I was nonchalant about it all, as if this were the most natural thing for me to do, like grocery shopping or walking the dog. Where would I be? Oh, Tanzania. Where was that? In the east somewhere. What would I be doing? Working in an orphanage and maybe some AIDS education. Is it, you know, *safe* over there? Yes, I think so, at least relatively. I'd left the size of it unsaid. It was more dramatic that way, understated and grand. Just like the "dark" continent itself. *Africa*. This word that contains in just six letters multitudes. Not a place like Europe or America or Asia with countries inked into shapes on a map in our minds. This *Africa* didn't have countries, only stretching plains, big red skies, dark people who could dance and sing and die like no other, their lives elemental, stark, and raw. *Africa* had adventure and beauty, elephants and safaris, genocides and voiceless wide-eyed starving children who needed saving. The heart of darkness. The paradox of these offerings lured me like a lovely, fang-toothed siren. At the time I didn't think about the fact that Tanzania and Ghana were as different as France and Uzbekistan. That a third of the world's languages, at least, twist and jump from the singing tongues of Africa.

Learning the names of a few foods, the days of the week, how to count to ten, how to greet an elder, I had believed these specificities had filled in the lines and colors of that great

void. *Wake up*. The ferry to Zanzibar swayed on the tall blue waves. My stomach tossed around, churning like my thoughts, like the water around the old boat. Sleep wouldn't come.

An Israeli named Ami came and sat next to our motley group. He had been traveling for five months through Eastern Africa with one medium-sized backpack. The constant sun had browned his legs and shoulders and bleached their fine blond hairs. He had green eyes.

“Want some water?” he asked me, in a soft, clipped accent. I nodded and clutched the back of my seat as we lurched against a wave. I whispered “thank you.” He propped one foot on the opposite knee and picked pieces of wool off of his thick socks. After a few minutes and most of the water from his bottle, I felt a little better. I eased myself into a sitting position.

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” I said, with a burp. He smiled and nodded.

“Glad to be of help.”

For the rest of the two-hour ride we talked about books, backpacking, and whether or not it was safe to drink tap water. He said, matter-of-factly, that he'd been drinking it since the first day he arrived and had not gotten sick yet, except for one time, but that he blamed on some bad meat. He procured an orange from his bag and peeled it deftly into one long strand with a pocket knife and his thumb.

“When I crossed into Kenya,” he recalled, “I didn't have the right visa to pass. But when the border guards saw that I am from Israel, they let me in for free. They were very friendly. They gave me a deck of cards also. They remember when Israel helped them with money for infrastructure and other projects. I was grateful.”

“Hah, well, being American we usually don't get the same reception,” I said, a little wistfully. He smiled but didn't deny it. I knew I was in the company of a true professional

backpacker. His boots were thick-soled and his gear was packed tightly in order. The sleeping bag was rolled into a compact bundle and strapped to the bottom of the pack. Carribeaners hooked a flashlight, small lantern, and mesh bag to the sides.

“Are you staying in hostels?” I asked him.

“No, not really. I have camped out for most of the time, unless I meet someone who offers to take me in for a night. Usually I can ask someone to set up my tent in their back yard for a night or two, and then I move on. The Kenyans and Ugandans were very kind to me. They would often bring me buckets of water to wash and fresh fruit.”

His quiet confidence stirred envy and awe in my so-recently bruised ego. He didn't seem scared or unsure. I made mental notes of his clipped fingernails and how they ran through his shoulder length hair when he talked, his low voice and slow speech, how he still he sat when he listened. He noticed the growing tear in my cloth bag and quickly located a miniature sewing kit in a compartment of his pack.

“Can I fix this?” he asked.

He leaned over while he stitched, his nose not more than six inches from the seam. A lock of hair kept falling from behind his ears and he'd sweep it away each time with the back of his hand.

“There,” he said when he was finished. We had pulled into the dock. Deepa was searching under cushions looking for a lost earring while everyone else gathered their sandals and sunglasses from around the seats.

“Thank you.” We joined the queue forming at the exit. Soon we were being shoved and jostled through a tight doorway, and then we were outside in a swarm of people.

“Where are you going now that we're off that awful boat?” I asked. I hoped he would say Nungwi, my group's destination.

“I am going to meet a friend at a place called Kendwa. I think it is to the South. And you? You could join me.”

His green eyes were like water, tempting me in. But the tides were already moving. The crowd swelled around us and then pulled us apart. I smiled, and Ami already understood. He jumped up from a few yards away and waved. I lifted my hand and then hurried after the group that was trailing away after Hannah. I never saw him again.

At a small booth we got our passports stamped.

“Karibu Zanzibar!” the man before us declared, and pointed us to a waiting line of taxis and minibuses. “Ova there! They take you where you want to go.” We were headed to the northern shores of the fifty-mile long island. All I knew about Zanzibar to this point had been from guidebooks and word of mouth. Every source raved about this island, for its narrow streets and intricately-carved Arabic wooden doors, its spices, and its white-sand perfect beaches. This was where the famous missionary and explorer Doctor David Livingstone lived just before his last safari into the dark center of the continent. This was where Arab traders seized control of the island as a major port for Arab traders in between Arabia, Africa and India. In the early 18th century, Zanzibar's three main goods were spice, cash crops, ivory, and slaves. This was where 50,000 slaves per year once spent their last days on African soil before being sold across the sea.

I had to look carefully in the tourist guide books to catch these succinct historical tidbits. They were hidden in small boxes of text between long passages about the sparkling clarity of the aquamarine waters, the romantic resorts sprinkled along the coast, and the magic of seeing a

dhow boat silhouetted against the Zanzibari sunset at dusk. But I managed to piece together a short history. After the Arabs, the Portuguese took control for some two hundred years, then the Sultanate of Oman gained power. Eventually, the British Empire came to be in charge of the island. The Shortest War in History occurred here on August 27, 1896 when the British bombarded the Zanzibari Sultan's palace for approximately 38 minutes. About 500 of the Sultan's army was killed, the royal yacht sunk, and one British sailor was wounded.

Zanzibar gained independence from Britain in 1963, but power passed from one oppressor to an older one. The wealthy, land-owning Arabs were back in control. A month after independence, a rather small force of African revolutionaries stormed the capital, killing thousands of Arabs and Indians. The Sultan was overthrown. Soon after, the new republic merged with the former colony Tanganyika. This union was renamed “The United Republic of Tanzania.” Today, Zanzibaris rely almost completely on the tourism industry. Tanning on beaches, tourists flip past the pages in their guide books that allude to the island's bloody colonial history.

I did the same as I looked for the names of the streets around me. It was about twelve thirty. As we walked past the ferry loading docks we saw dozens of men wearing white *thawbs*, the Islamic ankle length, long-sleeved garments, and *taqiyahs*, the round prayer caps sometimes called *kufi*. They were in rows, bowing for *Salatu-z-Zuhr*, the noon prayer. Sarah had taken a class on Islam. She slowed to take in the image of the men, legs folded under, foreheads to the ground, their backs rounded like seashells.

“This must be the third prayer of the day,” she whispered to me. “It has to start anytime after the sun has begun to descend from its highest point and before it's midway down.” The pale bottoms of the worshipers feet and toes peeked out from behind them. Sandals were strewn

around each man on his prayer mat as if they'd been kicked off hastily as soon as the sun began to dip in the sky.

Two Masai walking on the beach, Zanzibar

CHAPTER 6
“Maji hufuata mkondo.”

All of us, Ara, Deepa, Amanda, Hannah, Sarah, Suhk, and I, piled into an unsmiling man's taxi van.

“Where going?” he asked, looking at Ara, the only male in the group.

Ara didn't know. He had just followed along after the promise of clear blue water and blinding white sands.

“Nungwi!” Hannah told the driver. I watched in the small rectangle of the rear-view mirror as he examined her critically, silently, only for a moment. Then he looked away, shifted the vehicle into drive so that it vibrated and hummed, and we were off.

The two-hour ride to Nungwi was along the one paved road that went north, a two-lane straight shot. We got only a glimpse of Stone Town as we left the city. Soon the road was flanked by jungle. Big, waxy leaves hung from banana trees and other plants I couldn't identify. The driver went fast, and seemed to have no brakes. For most of the ride, the scenery was a deep green blur punctuated every now and then with straw-roofed huts and the white head wraps of school-girls walking along the side of the road. Their dark skin and navy blue school uniforms contrasted beautifully with the white, billowy fabric of their head scarves. We also saw boys. Their uniforms were green shorts and white shirts with green sweaters. Some of them had their sweaters tied around their thin waists, others wore them as if the temperature weren't somewhere in the nineties. They walked as if they'd been walking for a long time, slowly, sometimes

dragging their feet against the pavement, heads rolling from side to side. But when the van got close, the kids jumped out of the way quickly, grabbing each other's arms and pulling friends from the path of the speeding vehicle. Our driver mumbled under his breath when the smaller children didn't move fast enough or the older ones acted devil-may-care and only sauntered out of his way. When there was a banana truck in his way or an open wagon with a few dozen people riding in the back, he would grab the wheel with both hands and swerve around them. But he never slowed down. He pushed radio buttons impatiently, changing the channel before he even had time to be unhappy with whichever song tumbled from the speakers.

The paved road ended abruptly. It disappeared into a pile of sand and weeds. Our driver grunted and turned us on to the dirt road to our left. Immediately, one tire dropped into a hole, and we slid into each other toward the window. He must have jammed his foot to the gas pedal, because we shot from the hole and went bouncing down the bumpy road, clouds of dust billowing from under the tires around both sides of the van.

When we stopped I threw open the sliding door and stumbled out, dropped my hands to my knees, and threw my head forward, ready to be sick. Deepa put a hand on my back and I stared at my hair until the ground stopped spinning below me.

“Wow,” she said. “Look at that beach.”

I lifted my head slowly. A hammock was strung between two palm trees a few feet away, and beyond that, fifty yards away, a strip of bright blue shone in the mid-afternoon glare of the sun. Behind me, the rest of the group had piled out of our taxi. Everyone was looking toward the water. Suhk counted out money to give to our sullen driver, and Ara took a few measured steps toward the beach before he slung his bag around his shoulder and ran. Sarah looked at Deepa and

Amanda, and they too were off, laughing and shouting. Still feeling sick to my stomach, I waited for Suhk and Hannah.

As we walked toward the water, I said to them, “Can you believe that Yoctan has never been to Zanzibar? He told me that he can't even swim!” I recalled his honest eyes and slight smile when he confided this to me one day as I journaled in the hostel in Dar.

“I'm not surprised,” Hannah said. “A lot of people from the mainland, even the ones from Dar, have never been. It's only about ten dollars for a citizen to go, but that's still very expensive *to them*. I have heard of taking the small fishing boats to get here, but that's very dangerous. Cheaper though.”

“When we get back to Dar, I want to teach him how to swim!” I said. Suhk smiled,but Hannah looked at me, her oval face serious, and asked, “Why?”

“Oh... I don't know. It would be fun?” She had the ability, with her cool British accent and unblinking eyes, to make me question my best intentions. She didn't say anything back. We dropped our bags next to our friends' things on the beach. I headed for the waves.

The next two days passed in a haze of sunbathing alternated with cooling down in the sea. The Indian Ocean had clear, warm water so salty that it allowed even me, a notoriously bad floater, to relax on the water as if held magically afloat. Deepa jokingly referred to the weekend as “Spring Break Zanzibar: 2006.” During the day we played beach volleyball, tanned, swam, and drank beer. At night we played pool, piled into hammocks together, ate rich, cheap seafood, and yes, drank beer. We met other vacationers: Dennis from Russia, Antonio from Mexico, Bruce and Sean from South Africa. Bruce and Sean had been living in Dar for two years, working for an Australian company that operated safaris for Western tourists. They didn't know any Swahili,

except for the words to order food and drinks. Dennis and Antonio had drinking contests at night, their accents heavier the drunker they became.

“In Ruuuusssia, we drink Vodka!” Dennis would shout, his shot glass raised high in the air.

“And in Meh-hi-coh, only Tequuuiiill-yah!” Antonio would reply. “I will take you one for one, mi amigo!” And they would clink their drinks together, then put bottoms up and pour the next one.

On the second night we took a water-taxi to another part of the island. The stars were crowded together in the sky, vibrant against the black expanse of space. I lay on the top platform and looked up at them. Dennis sat next to me.

“I am sad because I haf no girfriend,” he mentioned, hopefully.

“I'm sorry, don't be sad,” I told him, smiling into the dark.

“But I cannot but help thees. You are very pretty,” he reached for me and touched my hand.

“Dennis, you will find someone. I'm sure.”

This conversation went on in the same fashion until finally we docked on a small beach. With a final, “I'm sorry, but I just want to be your friend,” we jumped off of the boat into the shallows and walked up the beach.

The bar was right on the shore, no more than forty feet from the water. Dennis and Antonio went shot for shot, Deepa and I sneaked off more than once into the bushes to pee, Hannah and Suhk sat pretty and aloof on some swinging bar stools, and Amanda forgot the suffering in Sudan long enough to sink low in a booth with Bruce the South African for the better

part of an hour. We met two U.N. diplomats—fat men with pale, sagging skin and balding heads. They clutched their flabby arms around two prostitutes who sat silent and pouting in high-heels. The U.N. men would not talk about their work. Instead, they took shot after shot of rum.

When I got tired I sat on the beach alone, waiting for the water-taxi to come back to pick us up. A tall, thin man walked up and down the length of the small beach. He was draped in heavy red cloth and carried a long, polished stick with a rounded knot at one end. I watched him walk back and forth in front of me. He swung the stick in front of himself, switching hands every time. Finally I called out to him.

“Hey! Mambo!”

He looked up, found my small form sitting in the sand, and came toward me.

“Poa sana. Habari za usiku?” His accent sounded different than the one I'd become accustomed to.

“Nzuri. What is your name?” I asked.

“My name is Kalekeori.”

I knew he was a Maasai, one of the warrior tribe of Northern Tanzania. The Maasai had maintained more of their traditional heritage than any other tribe in the region. They were famous cattle herders and hunters. For hundreds of years they lived primarily off of the cattle the raised. They ate the meat and marrow, used the hides, drank the milk, and also the blood of their animals. Only recently had the begun to incorporate any other foods into their diet. And later, Kalekeori would tell me that many of his friends and family were now being hired as security guards and watchmen all around the country. They were fighters by nature.

I admired the beaded jewelry he wore on both wrists and around his neck. His ears were pierced and laden with earrings that made his lobes stretch down like putty. I laughed to see a glowing digital watch mixed with the traditional bracelets on his left forearm, and a cellphone clipped to his robes.

“We Maasai,” he told me, “are proud people. We keep our tradition. But I want to talk with my wives, especially my first wife. And I must know when to arrive at work so I am being paid.”

We sat in silence listening to the waves break and roll away. As it approached three in the morning the rest of the people began to leave the bar. They came to stand on the beach and wait for the water-taxis to bear us away. No one spoke much, just stood facing the water. How strange we must have looked then, quietly gathered together, gazing outward as if waiting for an answer from the depths we could not see.

The morning we left Zanzibar Deepa and I met a Zanzibari fisherman on the beach named Castro. He helped us look for seashells to take home. When we were about to leave, I asked him to take a picture with us. He beamed.

“Of coursi, of coursi! But wait,” he told us. He pulled off his t-shirt to reveal a sculpted, muscular chest. “OK, ready,” he said. The picture shows us on either side of him, wrapped one under each arm, cheeks pressed to his pectorals and still laughing from this show of male pride.

We decided to walk the rough dirt road to the main one this time, and we prayed for a driver who valued his life and ours more than the last one had. Luckily, we made it back to Stone Town intact. We ate at an Indian restaurant there, and then boarded the ferry back to Dar. On the

TV in first-class an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie played with Swahili overdubbing. This ferry was smaller than the first one, and skipped across the waves like a flat stone.

That evening I played an African board game called “Bao” with Yoctan in the kitchen at the hostel. The wooden board had carved-out spaces for small, round wooden beads. We moved the pieces around the board with our fingers, scooping up a pile and putting one into each concave depression, going clockwise. The beads went click-click-click as they dropped and Yoctan hummed a tune as he figured out his next move. His legs were folded up to his chest and he rested his chin on his knees. Sitting on the floor in this position, he looked like a child. Babu shuffled in from outside holding a dead chicken by the feet. “Dinna,” he said, and grinned happily.

“Yoctan, how will I get to Bagamoyo tomorrow? Will you drive me in the van?” I asked.

“Ah, no. I must take the van to the airport tomorrow to pick up more volunteers,” he replied.

“Oh... okay.”

He looked up at me.

“I will take you to the dalla-dalla station. I will help you get on the right one.”

We played the rest of the game in silence, except for the beads falling and Babu talking to himself as he plucked the dirty white chicken in the doorway behind us. I had been in Tanzania for just one week, and already I was preparing to say goodbye.

Myself, Amanda, Hannah, Suhk, Deepa, and Sarah, Nugnwi Beach, Zanzibar

CHAPTER 7
“Hapana marefu yasiyo nambu.”

Would the “goodbyes” be as exuberant and optimistic as the “hellos” in this country I was learning slowly and soaking up like sun? I was golden brown now but at night when I undressed the pale lines left from tank-tops and bikini strings reminded me of the skin I used to wear. I woke up before my alarm the next morning and crept out of the room I shared with Sarah. I could make out the curve of her back through the mosquito net in the dim pre-dawn light. I sat on the big couch in the living room flipping through my journal until Yoctan arrived. There were quick, inexpert sketches, email addresses given to me by new friends, lists of Swahili words copied down during Yoctan's lessons, jokes I wanted to remember, a calendar with eleven days slashed out, and between all this, my earnest but wobbling attempts to record moments and memories still spinning on the wheel like slick clay.

I heard the van pull up and Yoctan's quick, shuffling step. He paused outside the door, his shoes slapped against the pavement on the porch as he kicked them off, and he swung the door open.

“Ah! Rebecca, you are already awake! You are ready now?” He grabbed my backpacker's bag and heaved it onto his shoulders, staggering under the weight. I gave Babu a quick hug, waved to Angel who was standing in the door frame of the kitchen, and followed Yoctan out of the hostel. I didn't say goodbye to any of the Americans or Canadians or Brits. They were still sleeping, and I didn't know what I would say.

We drove to the dalla-dalla station in the heart of Dar, the New Posta terminal on Maktaba Street. Yoctan sat me down on a bench and made sure my bag was zipped closed and safely under the bench, behind my legs. Then he disappeared into the bulging crowds around the minibuses. He came back a few minutes later, out of breath.

“I spoke to the driver of the bus to Bagamoyo. He will give you the seat in the front. He will take your bag and put it in the back so do not worry. It is safe.”

“Asante sana, Yoctan.” I smiled and touched his shoulder.

Behind him I saw a few groups of uniformed school children attempting to climb onto one of the buses. A grown man guarding the door was shoving them away, and pulling in adults toward him. One of the children stumbled back and fell, only to jump up and try with even more ferocity to claw his way onto the vehicle.

“Why won't they let those children get on?” I asked, completely aghast.

“Oh, because they are students they only have to pay a lower rate. One hundred fifty shillings instead of two hundred fifty. The driver wants to make more money but the children want to go home.”

I nodded and watched as the bus drove away, children still clambering to climb on.

“I must go now. Kwa heri, Rebecca. I will see you when you come back to Dar to go home to America.” He smiled widely and nodded a few times at me, grabbed my hand, and then jogged off toward the van. His too-big dress shirt had come untucked from his belt, and flapped in the wind. He navigated the crowd with ease. Then I lost sight of him.

I waited tensely for about twenty minutes. I thought about how Yoctan had been the first person to greet me in Tanzania, and my first friend. His care for me and the other volunteers had

been so automatic, so earnest. Buses arrived and groups of children in school uniforms rushed out and away, holding hands and shouting to one another. There didn't seem to be a departure or arrival schedule. A bus left when it was full—and full didn't just mean each seat was occupied. It meant each seat had three occupants, and maybe a chicken, goat, or sack of produce. It meant there were people standing but crouched, legs spread awkwardly or torsos leaning across seat-backs. Weary heads leaned against the glass windows, and faces peered out to talk to people passing or to buy small cups of roasted corn from vendors that meandered between the buses.

Eventually, a tall, very dark man with a red baseball cap approached me. He gestured to my bag, which I let him take after a moment's hesitation, and I followed him to a dirty white dalla-dalla. A red stripe ran down its side, and “Bayamoyo” was written in permanent marker on a piece of corrugated cardboard on the dash. He opened the passenger door for me and I climbed up. I watched him in the rear view mirror as he walked to the back of the vehicle, opened the back, and tossed in my bag, which by now was coated heavily with dust. The man with the cap walked back toward the front of the bus, but rather than getting in the driver's seat he went to the sliding back passenger door, hopped up, and stood at the open door with his arm propped on top of the bus. A couple minutes later a fat man with a short beard got into the driver's seat with a grunt, and told me to move toward him on the seat. Before I had time to wonder why, my door flew open and a heavy woman handed me a small child. I took the spindly thing and pulled him onto my lap. His round egg head smelled like earth and bread. The woman heaved herself and several bulging sacks of grain in next to me, and the driver started the engine. The man who had escorted me to the van made people shove together to fit three more stragglers into the dalla-dalla. After that, he slammed the door shut, and we were off.

So I was headed to Bagamoyo, sixty kilometers up the coast. I watched Dar go by, and held on to the toddler in my arms. His mother—I assumed that's who she was—seemed happy enough to let him stay on my lap and give her some relief from the furnace of his compact body. She let her arm hang out of the window, her palm toward the sky. She watched her fingers curl and uncurl as the wind whistled between her hand and the side mirror. The other hand she held behind her own neck as if pulling the stiffness from it. The child rested against my collar bone, eyes partly closed. Every so often, the man who collected money at the door would rap his knuckles against the metal door-frame and the dalla-dalla would lurch to a stop at the side of the road. A few people would get off, drive livestock from underneath a seat, and walk slowly to the small groupings of huts that stood thirty yards from the dirt road. The dalla-dalla would then take off again before the recent departures could get far enough away to escape the cloud of dust that would fly from behind the wheels of the bus. After an hour down the straight two-lane road, the mother shouted at the driver and he swung the bus to the shoulder. She opened the door, climbed down carefully, sweeping her patterned skirt away from her ankles, and then turned to take her son from me. I lifted him toward her extended arms. She smiled gratefully, wearily. Before she took him to her breast, she touched my hands with hers.

“Asante, rafiki,” she said, hoisted the child to her hip, and closed the door with the other hand. I slid toward the door, and soon we were speeding down the road once again.

The two-lane highway eventually turned into a dirt road. We pulled into a fenced area where two other dalla-dallas idled, waiting for passengers. As I got out I eased my sweaty legs from the cracked plastic seat. I waited by the door as the few remaining passengers got out. The last one, to my dismay, took with him a plastic bucket filled halfway with sloshing gasoline.

Finally, the driver helped me collect my bag from the back, I paid him in shillings, and dragged my luggage to the fence. I looked around.

This was my destination. In the distance I could see two men walking toward me. One was tall and muscular with broad shoulders and long legs. The other was shorter with thin, wiry limbs and a light step. He carried himself like a dancer. The taller man was wearing a black t-shirt with the iconic “I Love New York” splashed across it in white. “Love” was, of course, represented by a big red heart. He was wearing jeans, too, and sleek Italian shoes.

“Hello! You must be Lebeckah,” he said to me, offering his hand. I shook it.

“Yes, I am Rebecca. Nice to meet you. And you are Jimmy, the director of the orphanage?”

He motioned for the other man to take my bag, never breaking eye-contact with me.

“Yes, I am Jimmy Kunjombe. It's a pleasha to meet you.”

Jimmy had a trendy bag strapped over his shoulder. He slipped a cell phone from a small pocket on the side of the bag. He could have been any hip New Yorker with a nice 401K in the bank as he stood there, weight shifted to one leg and his cell to his ear. The only inconsistency was the dirt road behind him and a row of cement shacks gray against the green banana trees.

“I am telling my wife you are here,” he told me. I nodded, and remembered the thick white envelope that Yoctan had handed me that morning.

“This,” Yoctan had said quickly, “is the money from Yotam for your stay in Bagamoyo. This you will give to Jimmy when you get there.”

I rifled through my purse until I found it, then waited for Jimmy to hang up the phone. When he did, I handed him the envelope.

“This is from Yotam. For you.”

Jimmy took it eagerly, and slid his finger under the sealed flap. He counted the bills inside, then counted them again.

“This is all he gave you?” he asked me.

“Yes, it is for my homestay and for the donation to the orphanage from my program fee. Is it not the right amount?”

“Ah!” Jimmy said. “Yotam is never paying me the right amount! He sends volunteers here and only gives me a little. He is keeping the rest for himself. All the volunteers are telling me that Yotam is a bad man.”

Jimmy kept shaking his head, saying tch-tch-tch with his tongue through clenched teeth. He opened the bag, slipped the envelope into it, and put his hand on my shoulder. The sun glistened off of his close-shaven head. Beads of sweat slipped down his temples.

"Let's go. Labeckah, this is Temela. He is the best teecha at the child care centa! He is the very best one. Always working, working so hard. He is never tired or hungry!"

Temela smiled and shook his head. His laugh was both gravel and song in his throat. He had a wide grin and perfect teeth. When he smiled his eyes closed. In those few moments, before I knew he would become my dear friend, I took note of his grace. He was thin but muscular, toned and lithe.

Jimmy, I didn't know what to think of yet, and I never really would. I followed him out of the bus lot and down the street. We walked by a thatched roof building with tables out front.

"That is Top Life," Jimmy told me. "Do not go there if you are a vegetarian. They will not let you in the door. They will send the dogs for you."

I looked up at him, trying to measure him. He was half-smiling, still taking long, confident strides down the road. I had to skip every few steps to keep up.

"You are very quiet, Labeckah. You are hungry or just tired?" Jimmy laughed. "I am joking. Do not be afraid for they will not send the dogs. We will go to Top Life in the morning for chapati. Breakfast!"

I laughed. There was something amusing and absurd about Jimmy--his Western clothing and tall, strong body, his deep voice paired with his strange diction and sense of humor. As we walked along, several people waved or shouted to him, saying "Teecha Jimmy, habari!" and "Teecha Jimmy, hello! I see you, sir. Good day!" Temela was quiet, deferent to him.

"Do you teach all of these people, Jimmy?" I asked.

"Ah, yes! I teach them all English. They have been my good students. That one back there, though, he was not. He was problem child. Hahah!"

We walked down what seemed to be the main road, a two-lane paved street that forked into two dirt ones. We took the right fork, walked past a few small shops, and then turned up another dirt road. This one was pock-marked with holes. We passed a large tree where several small children were playing.

"Mzungu, mzungu!" they cried out, pointing at me, and ran after us. They got within ten feet and stopped.

"What are they calling me?" I asked.

"They are calling you 'white person.' This is the meaning of 'mzungu.'"

"Me? White? I'm Asian. In America, I am not called white."

"Well, it means... what is the word... 'foreigner,' too.

"We are here," Jimmy interjected.

We stood in front of a row of low shrubs and two high lines of clothes drying in the sun.

"Our house. Nyumbani," Jimmy said, pointing me through a gap in the shrubs.

The trees talked to me in bird voices. They asked me, *will you call this place your home?*

Jimmy Kunjombe, my host father

CHAPTER 8
“Angurumapo simba, mcheza nani?”

I ducked under the clothes line and straightened up to see a small cement house with a tin roof. The door was on the right side with a small patio in front. Two women were sitting on it, laughing. When they saw me, they stopped. A string of rapid Swahili sprung from the lips of one of them.

"Wewe, yeye ni nani? Ameolewa? Wanawake wazungu wote wa Afrika wanakuja hapa. Jimmy, mwalimu maalum. Mtch."

Her long legs extended toward me. A bright red piece of cloth was wrapped around her head. Her skin was light, and her lips were full and pouting. She had envious curves. But her eyes, under curled lashes, were narrowed at me. Her voice was derisive, quiet but veiling a louder anger. I took a step back and looked to Jimmy and Temela. Jimmy strode forward and said something in Swahili. His voice was low. The woman refused to meet his gaze. She stared intently over her right shoulder. After he stopped talking, she got up and shuffled inside.

"What did she say, Temela?"

"She asked who are you. If you have been married. She say... All of the white women in Africa come here. She call Jimmy 'the famous teacher.'" He laughed awkwardly.

"Is she angry?" I asked.

"Ech, no, no. Do not worry," he told me.

Jimmy turned.

"*That* was my wife," he said. "And this is Eva," he added, with a jerk of his thumb in her direction.

The girl on the stoop looked at me with cat eyes. She was thin and darker than Jimmy's wife, with short hair and a sneer.

"Habari?" I said to her.

"Nzuri," she replied as if bored, then got up and went inside. She flashed a wicked smile at Jimmy as she left.

"Ah, problem, big problem," Jimmy sighed to me. "I do not know what to do with my wife. I give Eva a place to stay because she has no where, no family. She is the cook. But she is big problem. She turns my wife against me. Temela, you go home now. Go."

Temela handed me my bag, smiled, and left me alone. I followed Jimmy inside. I didn't see either of the women. At the front of the house there was a small living room, about fifteen by twenty feet. It had two couches with wooden frames and a small twelve-inch TV on a short dresser. Everything was covered in pale green cloth. The floor was cement. On the right there was a closed door. Past the living room was a short hallway with a door on either side and the back entrance facing the front of the house. Jimmy pointed to the first door.

"This is my room. I share with my wife and my son."

“What is her name?”

“Mama Kenny.”

“But what is her first name?”

“Miriam, but here in Tanzania we call a woman by the name of her oldest son.”

We moved toward the back. At the next door he stopped.

"This is your room. You will share with Mee-gan. She is another volunteer. Eva stays in the other room. Outside in the back is the kitchen and the toilet and shower rooms."

I peeked into my room. Behind the screen of a mosquito net I could make out the back of a skinny white girl. She was curled up facing the wall. I put my bag down as quietly as I could, then followed Jimmy out the back door for the rest of the "tour."

Out back there was an addition to the house--one extra room--a space for oil, rice, pots and pans, plastic buckets for water and laundry, and a small oil cooker. There was also a freestanding structure. Jimmy opened the wooden door on the left. There was a red bucket and a drain. He opened the door on the right. There was a green bucket and a porcelain toilet in the ground.

"You wash your body here. You have toilet here."

"Thanks, Jimmy."

"You want to rest your body now? I will call you for dinner. Then you will meet my son, Kenny. He is next door with the neighbors, the family of Dr. Dihenga."

“I am excited to meet your son, Jimmy.”

“He looks like his mother,” was all he said in response.

I didn't end up having dinner or meeting Jimmy's son Kenny that first night in Bagamoyo. Instead, I climbed into the small bed against the far side of the wall, arranged the mosquito net around myself, and fell asleep until morning. I vaguely remember hearing the other girl get up, and the sounds of TV and talking from the living room.

When I woke up my feet were sticking out from under the net and all of the sheets were twisted beneath me. The door creaked. When I looked up I saw two wide eyes below the doorknob and a small hand wrapped around the wood.

“Hello. Are you Kenny?”

The eyes continued to stare at me.

“Come here,” I said softly.

He disappeared behind the door. I heard his feet slap against the concrete floor. A few minutes later I was still in bed and I heard the small feet approach again. They stopped at the door. I didn't look. After a few still moments, they came closer. A hand touched my hand. I turned to face him slowly.

“Mambo.”

He looked at me for a long time. He had a long face and short curled lashes like Miriam’s.

“Poa,” he whispered.

Then he turned and ran away. Jimmy was right. Kenny did look like his mother.

“Labeckah!” Jimmy's voice stopped me from drifting back into sleep. “You are sleeping all day and all night! Are you alive? Should I call the hospital? I will tell them, 'oh I am so sorry, Labeckah has died!'”

“I'm up.” I called, and shuffled out.

Jimmy was in the doorway, and Kenny was behind his left leg, clutching it with both hands.

“You have met my son Kenny. He is two yeahs old. He is a good, strong boy. He is named after an American woman. It was her second name. She came here for three months. She even taught me to drive. Eh, Kenny?”

Kenny was silent.

“Come Kenny, come around,” Jimmy said, pulling his son from behind him. Kenny wasn't wearing a shirt. His stomach was round and protruding. It made him look like an old, pot-bellied man in miniature. His short legs were plump and pigeon-toed.

“I don't think he likes me, Jimmy,” I told him.

“Ah! Kenny, be a good boy. Nenda kucheza, go play with your toys. He only likes his mother,” Jimmy said, looking at me. “Kenny is sometimes being a bad boy because he will not eat his food. He is always saying he is full. I am worried for my son.”

His round belly and puffy cheeks made it look like he was getting enough to eat, but I nodded. I didn't see Mama Kenny. From outside I heard a shriek.

“JUNI! Wewe, acha! Ha ha ha. Gracie. Gracie! Njoo!” A loud female voice interrupted Jimmy's concerns.

“Oh, it is Salma,” Jimmy said, smiling. “She lives with the neighbor. She is craze. She and Gracie—they are both working for the Dihengas—and they are so craze.”

When we walked outside I saw two young women, both large and robust. The one was still shouting, chasing around a tiny little boy wearing a sweat suit and tottering unsteadily. She had very dark skin, big eyes, and cornrow braids in her hair. She had a piece of yellow kanga cloth wrapped around her waist. The other had small features that seemed crowded in the middle of her face. She always looked like she was squinting.

“Salma! Gracie!” cried Jimmy, stopping them in their tracks. They both straightened and looked at me.

“Ooooh,” said the short one with the braids. “Mzunguuuu. Wow.”

“Ah!” the other said. “Mzuri sana! Very pretty, very pretty!” The both began to jump up and down, clapping their hands. They burst into song.

“Happy bethday to you! Happy bethday to you! Happy bethday dah friend... Happy bethday to you!” I couldn't help but laugh.

“I am Salma,” said the one with the braids, rushing over to grab my hand. She patted it with her own.

“And the other one is Gracie,” said Jimmy. I smiled at Gracie, who blushed and grinned.

“Oh, and Juni, Juni,” said Salma. “Here is Juni!”

She snatched the tiny thing from the ground. He was barely old enough to walk. He had bright eyes, far apart on his face, and a small acorn nose.

“Junior Dihenga,” Jimmy told me, placing his huge hand over the child's head. “We must go. You must leave Labeckah alone. She does not like your singing. It is not good and you will never be famous! The dogs are running away now that they hear you,” Jimmy told the girls. They laughed at him and batted their eyelashes, humming loudly. He shook his head and clucked at them. As we walked away they broke into another rousing round of “Happy Birthday to You.”

That day Jimmy took me to have chapati and chai for breakfast at Top Life. I tried to remember the paths we took, but Jimmy led me between back yards and banana trees, the shortcuts of a local.

The neighbors: Naifut, Gracie, Salma, and Junior

CHAPTER 9
“Mtaka yote hukosa yote.”

After we ate, Jimmy said he needed to buy some paint for the school. We walked through the neighborhood, greeting everyone we passed. After an hour of introductions, I was exhausted and we had still not reached the store. Jimmy teased me about my pace and drove me on. Finally we seemed to reach an end. He bought me a Coke and I sulked quietly.

"Now to the store!" Jimmy said when I'd finished my drink.

"But Jimmy, I want to go to the school. I want to start working."

"Ah, you will do that very soon. We must go to the store to buy paint for the school. I am wanting to decorate the inside classroom. Let's go."

I gave in, and followed him down the dirt road once more. The little hardware store had a few tools, cement blocks, paint, and gallon jugs of water. Jimmy picked out four big cans of paint, then approached the man sitting on a short stool at the back of the room.

"Bei gani?" he asked him.

"Shilingi elfu kumi na tano," the man replied.

Jimmy set down the paints and dug through his pockets. He pulled out two crumpled one-thousand shilling bills. He dug around for a few more seconds then looked up at me.

"Ah, Labeckah! I have forgotten my money. Do you have any money?"

I sighed and gave him the Tanzanian shillings.

"Now can we go to the school?" I asked, as we walked from the store.

Jimmy nodded. On the way he talked about improvements he wanted to make to the school. He wanted to build desks, a better toilet, an office, and a fence. If he could get the money, he told me, he wanted to expand the school to include another building and enroll more students. He rattled off prices in the hundreds of thousands of shillings.

Soon we were headed off the main road down a path surrounded by tall grass. I could see the school about twenty yards away. It had a main L-shaped building painted bright sky blue and a thatched-roof cement platform to the side. That structure was split in half by a standing wall that didn't reach the roof. In the front there was a wooden swing set with two swings. I heard voices drifting toward us, in unison, the clear pitch of children singing.

My heart beat faster and faster as we walked toward the sound. I had been waiting for this moment since I stepped off the plane in Dar es Salaam. A part of me felt I had been waiting for this moment much longer. Yotam's laughing bribes, the beautiful, booze-blurred beaches of Zanzibar, the complex innuendos and social mazes I wandered as I tried to understand the other volunteers I'd met here, even the American life of excess and ease I'd wanted to escape—all this was prologue. I hoped.

Jimmy told me to wait. As soon as he appeared around the corner of the thatched-roof classroom, the children and teachers fell silent. They waited for him to speak. In an authoritative voice he spoke some Swahili words. He gestured to me.

"Sema, watoto," he instructed.

"Good mohning, Madam. How ah you?" the children chanted solemnly.

Jimmy whispered to me my response.

"I am fine, thank you. And how are you?" I repeated.

“We are very fine, thank you,” they said in perfect unison.

Madam. I smiled at that. I noticed their red checkered uniforms of coarse, plastic-thread cloth, missing buttons and broken zippers revealing warm, brown shoulders and slender backs. The girls wore dresses or skirts and the boys had shorts and button-up shirts. A few of them didn’t have uniforms. One boy was wearing a thick winter jacket with the hood up. I stood there sweating, taking them in. They were barefoot. Their shoes were lined up next to the rail that separated the classroom from the walkway. They looked at me shyly. One had a high forehead and a gap between his teeth when he grinned. One had sparkling eyes and a tattered sweater. One had a runny nose and watermelon seed nostrils. One approached me and lifted her arms to be held. She smelled like grass and yeast and black garden soil. She rested her heavy head against my chest.

Megan, the other volunteer, sat on the floor by the blackboard looking frazzled. A little girl was trying to snatch the hair band from her short ponytail. Her face was tight and unsmiling. She wore frustration, fatigue, and, I thought, indifference on her narrow features. Something birdlike guided her movements. Her nervousness, shifting from foot to foot, frail arms meeting jutting shoulder blades held strangely at an angle, the twitch of her fingers as she tapped them on the floor—a caged animal, restless, tired. I wondered why she looked so unhappy to be in a place that already I loved.

I gazed and gazed at the small people sitting cross-legged or sprawled loosely on the floor. Their limbs were skinny twigs. Their voices and movements were childlike but their eyes were solemn and old. I watched them from the back of the platform as Temela taught words. They chanted as he pointed to the simple chalk drawings on the board.

“A dog, a dog! That is a dog! A house, a house! That is a house!”

Their words were clipped and lilting. A round-headed, round-bellied little one dozed at the back. His bald head drooped and snapped up, drooped, rolled, and snapped up.

“Eh! Leviticus. Acha!” said a sultry woman, emerging from a cluttered office behind me with a tiny boy in her arms. “Hulali!”

Leviticus bolted upright, and turned his big head toward her. He clasped his hands around his fat stomach, and tried to pay attention to Temela. The woman came up to the platform and put down the boy, who quickly tottered to Leviticus and sat next to him.

“Alexi, shhh,” the woman said. She kicked off her high platform shoes and walked to the front of the room where Temela was teaching. He handed her a long stick, which she used to point at the board as they went through the words. Jimmy stood behind me, leaning against the wooden rail.

“That is Fatumah. She has been teaching here for three month now. She is not a good teacher, not like Temela. I am liking to replace her. She is caring too much about her dress and her shoe, not about the children,” he said. “That is why I am only paying her 20,000 shillings a month and Temela I am paying 30,000.”

Fatumah had on a long, jeweled dress. It was flowing at the bottom, tight against her toned stomach and butt, and low cut revealing the curve of her small breasts but covering her shoulders. Its pale peach and mauve colors were perfect against her creamy, dark skin. She was wearing shiny lip gloss and purple eye shadow.

“She’s very beautiful,” I whispered to Jimmy.

“Ah! Do not say such to my wife. She is hating her, believing that Fatumah stole her wedding ring.”

“What?! She stole it? How did she get to it?” I asked.

“I had it with me at the school and then it disappeared. I think she took it. It was there and then it was gone. I talked to all of the teachers and children.”

“Did she admit to taking it?”

“No.”

“Then how can you be sure?”

“I have the big feeling.”

“But you don’t have any proof? You didn’t see her take it?”

“No.”

“Then, Jimmy, you have no idea. You can’t just blame her.” *Maybe you lost the ring*, I thought, *and just didn’t want to face Mama Kenny with the truth*. I remembered Mama Kenny’s strange jealous outburst when she first saw me, and looking at Fatumah I could see how she would make any wife nervous.

“All she cares about how she is looking, Labeckah. I know it was her.”

I grimaced but didn't say anything more.

I relaxed quickly around the children. They were sweet and earnest, bright and smiling. They crowded around me, touching my hair, eyes, and ears. I started to learn their names. The one with the high forehead and gap-toothed smile was Yona. He had a pale fungus on the top of his big, egg-shaped head. He didn't laugh out loud, only grinned sheepishly when I bowed to him or made funny faces. The one with the thick woolen sweater and twinkling eyes was Rama, short

for Ramadan. Jimmy claimed he was a “problem boy” but he whispered sweetly in my ear when I picked him up. He brought me a lizard from behind the outhouse. Fau, with shoulder-length braids, was crying by the swing set during nap time. Megan told me under her breath that Fau's mother had just died of AIDS the week before. I rubbed her back and pulled her onto my lap. She wouldn't speak to or look at me, but she held tight to my hand until her older brother came to take her away an hour later.

At noon about two-thirds of the children left school. They grabbed their shoes from the ground, shoved them on, and took off in groups of four or five. The older children shouted to the younger ones, gathered them, held their hands. Megan explained to me that only some of the children stayed in the afternoon. She didn't know why some stayed and others left.

“We're off for the day,” she told me. “Let's get some lunch.”

I realized suddenly how hungry I was. We walked together down the dirt road, Megan pushing her bike. She told me we could rent one for me on the way. The small path met the main road seventy-five yards from the school. At a small shop with about eight bicycles out front, Megan helped me choose one with a working bell and basket in the front.

“The basket is a must,” she said. “So is the bell if you don't want to run over anyone or have to stop and talk to people.”

Despite her awkwardness and apparent dislike of the place, Megan knew her way around. She didn't have to look as she headed down the street, weaving between people, vegetable carts, and stray dogs. We stopped at a place with two tables out front that were shaded by a straw roof. There was a counter behind the tables, a hand-painted menu on the back wall, and stacked plastic crates full of empty glass soda bottles. A black sign with white letters read: MIDNIGHT CAFE.

“I eat lunch here every day. Jimmy has a tab, so just order what you want and put it on that. I had to fight him for it. When I first got here he tried to make me pay for all my food, but since food was supposed to be included I argued him into paying. Don’t let him pull anything on you when I go,” Megan told me.

We parked our bikes by the leafy tree in front, and sat at the table on the left. It was covered in blue plastic. I examined the offerings on the menu.

“What's good?”

“I just get rice and fruit. I don't trust the meat. And the fish is fried whole.”

Megan's upper lip curled at the thought.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Three weeks. I'm leaving in a few days though. You'll be on your own. But I can't wait to get out of here.”

“Why?”

“The food. The heat. I can't wait to have a burger. Uhh. It's so damn hot here. All the Tanzanians yelling 'Mzungu! Mzungu! I can't take it anymore.”

A thin woman with smoky eyes came up to us. Megan ordered her usual and I asked for *semaki na wali,* fish with rice.

“Well, Jimmy's funny at least,” I said.

“Jimmy.” She rolled her eyes. “He's awful. He steals donations from the school and the volunteers, and he's at the bar drinking every night. He only comes to school once a week, at most, and stays for twenty minutes. The kids are supposed to get uji—that's porridge—every day

but Jimmy won't buy the ingredients all the time, so they just go hungry. And then the kids won't behave."

"I mean, he seems to care about the school," I countered. I told her about the many projects he'd mentioned that morning, how his former students all seemed so full of praise for him.

"Well, from what I've gathered he used to be an amazing teacher. He taught a lot of the people in this town to speak English, and they got jobs at the tourist resorts and such. But then he got successful enough to hire teachers so he wouldn't have to teach. He pays them next to nothing and spends the school's money on building more, painting, making the school look good on the outside so people will give him more money... But he doesn't pay the teachers or make sure the kids have food or medical treatment or that they learn anything. I mean, you've seen how he dresses. Like he thinks he's not an African. It's pathetic."

Our food came out. The fish really was whole, fins, eyes, skin and all. I didn't see any utensils, so I dug in with my hand, making sure to use only my right. The left hand, according to Muslim culture, is dirty, for bathroom use only. The food was delicious. The fish's meat fell off the bone, sweet and salty and hot. The rice was flavored with coconut. I rolled it into a ball between my fingers and palm as I had seen others do, then popped it into my mouth. We ate without speaking for a while. I thought about Jimmy's tiny house, his angry wife, and small child. I thought about Eva. The cook? I still didn't quite understand why she was there. She didn't seem to do anything except try to bother Jimmy. That morning she had woken up the house with her dying-cat singing and shuffling feet. I thought about the man offering taxi rides on the back of his bike that morning. How he looked at me and said in a sing-song voice, 'Welcome to my bicycle!',

how Jimmy laughed when I shook my head 'no,' and said I must be a vegetarian because I am so quiet all the time.

I believed what Megan told me. But I wanted to believe in Jimmy, too, that he was good and cared about the children, and just didn't know a different way of doing business. Megan and I finished eating and then we rode about thirty minutes to the beach. She advised me to only go to the beaches in front of the resorts. This one was called Millennium Beach Hotel. We threw our bikes against the wall and ran into the cool, frothy water. After sunbathing for a while, Megan went inside to the internet cafe. I stayed outside and fell asleep. My ear was pressed against the ground, and I dreamed of drums and dancing. I woke up to the sound of hooves beating against the packed sand around me. I was surrounded by a herd of goats that was passing by. They bleated and snorted, kicking clods of sand behind them onto my bare legs.

Megan came back after a while and told me she was leaving. I told her I could make it back to Jimmy's on my own. After the first day with the children I wanted to call Bagamoyo my Tanzanian home. By the time I left the beach it was dusk. Sienna and lavender streaked the sky like wide strokes of brilliant paint. I made it back to the main road fine, but soon after all the sandy streets began to look the same, the landmarks I'd chosen to guide me were echoes of other houses and trees. The calm of the day seeped away from me and my heartbeat raced. I got off of the bike to slow the blur of unfamiliar sights. The sky was blue and hazy. It was only light enough for me to see how dark it was quickly becoming.

In a shaking voice I asked person after person, “Nani Jimmy? Nani nyumbani Jimmy?” No one seemed to understand my simple question, *where is Jimmy's house?* Close to panic, I stumbled to another doorway where an old man with white hair sat smoking a cigarette.

“Jimmy. Nani. Nyumbani,” I breathed. I repeated the words, as if saying them again could make them clearer. He called over his shoulder into the house. I heard the word “mzungu,” but understood nothing else.

“Njoo, mzungu,” he told me. I followed him to the right, then to the left past the fallen tree I'd passed three times, then left again. In less than two minutes we were standing in front of Jimmy's small house. I was so glad to see it. I thanked the man over and over until he disappeared into the dim cloud of night. Once inside I collapsed onto the couch.

“Jimmy, I got lost,” I told him as he emerged from his bedroom. “And I kept asking, 'Nani Jimmy? Nani nyumbani Jimmy?”

“Ah, Labeckah,” he grinned, “You were asking them 'Who is Jimmy? Who, home, Jimmy? That is not making sense at all!”

So *nani* did not mean “where,” it meant “who.” *Wapi* was “where,” and yes, even in this new home, I was still a mzungu.

With the children in front of the school

CHAPTER 10
“Apendaye haogopi.”

Behind the veil of my mosquito net, I dashed words across the pages of my journal in dim light. *6/3/2007: Watoto wa Africa- Children of Africa... I walked home in the rain... Lala salaama means 'sleep peacefully' but I cannot with the sounds of Jimmy and Miriam arguing in the next room... Miriam will not speak to us, she hides Kenny away in their room whenever we're around... I have learned to cook ugali!... Megan leaves tomorrow, I'll be in the house alone... Tomorrow is also 'Beachi Day,' we will take the children to Millennium Beach...*

For the three days before Megan left, we woke up at eight, avoided Mama Kenny, rode our bikes to Top Life for breakfast, taught school until noon, and then went to the beach until dinner. I took Yona to the doctor to get cream for the fungus on his scalp. It was gone in two days. The other children started to play with him, and soon he was laughing. I realized how self-regulating the children were. They made sure the food was shared, and shared equally. They allowed some fights and stopped others. They looked out for the youngest ones, putting on their shoes for them and walking them home. I began to respond to “Madam” and “Teacher” without a second thought. Fatumah became my friend, first by admiring my hair, then teaching me to dance, then bringing pictures of her husband Hassan in a thin album. She blushed and giggled when I said how handsome he was.

“We met in secondary school,” she told me, her voice low and laden with accent. “I am... I am very loving him.” Her English was not good, so we spoke in gestures, smiles, and looks.

She raised her eyebrows whenever I came to school in a tank-top, unable to bear the heat in modesty. She laughed and pulled at the thin shoulder-straps. Temela floated, thin and smiling, everywhere he went. Sometimes he led stretching in the morning, bending and hopping like a gymnast. His cracking, cheerful voice led the children through songs and skits, each letter of the alphabet, and numbers up to twenty. Sometimes he would count farther, to fifty or sixty, rolling his arm forward like a bow with each number as if drawing the answer from the stretching minds of his students. Temela stayed in the afternoons after Megan and I left for lunch at the Midnight Cafe. He stopped by Jimmy's once at night after I'd gone into our room. He and Jimmy spoke in low voices in the living room. The next morning Jimmy asked me for money to pay the teachers.

With me there, Megan relaxed some. She told me how hard it had been living in Bagamoyo with no one who spoke fluent English and feeling the invisible tensions of the Kunjombe household filling the air with static and heat. I took over some of the teaching so Megan could stay in the indoor classroom with the babies, Sophie, Alexi, and Leviticus. They were all under three years old, and never spoke. They sat and watched with sad, wide eyes. Before I arrived, they were put in the dirty, cluttered classroom and left alone while Megan, Temela, and Fatumah taught the older children.

A few days after I started teaching, I went into the office to find some toys for the babies. The office had one set of shelves full of donated classroom supplies and toys, all in tremendous disarray. I spent three hours cleaning and organizing it all, and found a stack of old notebooks from before Megan arrived. In them there were children's names. I recognized nearly all of them. The last volunteers had been teaching the same letters and words I could hear the children chanting outside. The next stack was more of the same but from even earlier. I wondered how

long they had been learning the same things over and over as each new set of volunteers arrived and vowed to help them. Did no one ask Jimmy or Temela what the children already knew? Then I cleaned the inside classroom. I found open cans of paint, a machete, and boxes of rotting Jehovah's Witnesses magazines with termites scuttling through their damp spines. I carried it all to the trash pit behind the toilets.

The Friday that Megan left we had “Beachi Day,” an outing I learned occurred once a week. We gathered the children and a few soccer balls and walked for forty-five minutes to the nearest beach. On the way, the children fought to hold my hands and ride on my shoulders. We marched through Bagamoyo in a wide line, the bigger kids carrying the small ones when they got tired. At the main paved road, we waited for a gap between passing cars and then sprinted across. They laughed at the thrill of it, and grabbed each other's hands. I tried to talk to the children around me, to see how much English they knew and could understand. Jimmy had told me that to qualify for primary school at age seven they would have to pass a government test with basic English and math sections.

“Abduri, how are you today?” I said, squeezing his hand.

“We ah very fine, thank you,” he replied.

“No, say, 'I am,' not 'we'.”

“I am.”

“Good. So, how are you Abduri?”

“We ah very fine, thank you, Madam.”

I put my arm on his shoulders and pulled his wiry frame to me. He wrapped his arms around my waist.

“We'll work on it some more later,” I said. “I think we're almost to the beach.”

As soon as we could see the pearly flash of the sun on the water the children ran, stripping down as they went. The boys took off everything and the girls got down to their underwear. They splashed in the shallows. None of them knew how to swim. The boys played a game where they'd bury a stick straight up in the ground and pack a mound of sand around it. They recited a rhyme while taking turns scooping handfuls of sand away. Whoever made the stick fall would jump up and try to reach the water before the others could catch him. If they did catch him, they got to hit, kick, and dog-pile him until he could make it to the waves.

Temela and Fatumah stood by the water watching the children. Temela rolled a soccer ball expertly between his bare feet, doing quick versions of the maradonna, the scissor, the cross-over. He flicked the ball up by rolling it toward himself with the sole of his foot then scooping under it with his toes. He trapped it between his shin and the top of his foot, then juggled it twice, three times. I made my way across the beach toward him.

“Temela, you play soccer?”

“Yes, of coursi!” he said.

“Me too!”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

He passed the ball to me. I flicked it up, trapped it, and hit it back. Until then, Temela had been shy and quiet around me. I never saw him talking much to Megan. For an hour, we kicked the ball back and forth, tried to juke each other. He was quick on his feet, almost weightless. I was struggling for breath and he'd barely broken a sweat. I bent over, panting, and we laughed.

“Rebecca, you are a very good playa! Girls are not playing here in Bagamoyo.”

The rest of the day we talked about soccer. He asked me to sing the national anthem of America, so he could know what we heard before matches. I asked him if he played on a team in Bagamoyo. He said there was a league and he played every weekend.

“You can come to a game tonight? It is the Coca-Cola cup, a big tournament.” He said. “It is the... champion. The championship.”

“Are you playing?”

“No, my team is not playing. It is a tournament for the youths. It is two teams, one from the school and one is the street boys.”

That evening, while Megan packed her things, I walked with Temela to the soccer field. When we weren't talking, he hummed and played drum beats against his chest with the tips of his fingers. The field was half sand and half grass. The goal posts were tilting at a dangerous angle, and there were no nets. But lined up around all four sides of the regulation side field were dozens and dozens of people. My quick guess was that there were over two hundred people. To one side, there was a wall of cement blocks. Men perched on top of it, legs dangling over the side. I snapped quick pictures from my waist. I knew by now not to take them in the open without permission.

After a few minutes, the two teams ran down the hill next to the field. The crowds whistled and cheered. One team was wearing full uniforms and most of them had cleats. The other team was rag-tag, all wearing tattered t-shirts or long, pants with holes. Most of them were barefoot and none of the players wore shinguards. They ran and stretched, but there was only one ball. The referee carried it to the center circle and the teams took the field. A sharp whistle

marked the start of the game. The players were fast and strong, quick to turn and pass. Their technique wasn't perfect, but the crowd responded to every tackle and shot with World Cup enthusiasm. The first goal came about thirty minutes into the half. The team with the uniforms had been in control for most of the game. Their large forward received a pass from the central midfielder. He turned with the ball and passed it to the right corner of the field as a winger sprinted down the sideline toward it. He reached the ball just in time, cut it back, and sent it soaring toward the center of the field. The forward got it back near the top of the box, and struck the ball with force. It passed just by the goalkeeper's fingertips and under the top left corner of the goal. I watched with everyone in complete silence and anticipation as the play unfolded. Before the ball had landed, an eruption of exuberant cheering poured from the crowd. Nearly everyone on the sidelines rushed the field, found the goal scorer, and lifted him to their shoulders, shouting and singing. The men who had been lounging on the wall next to the field jumped off, too, and joined in the mad parade. It took almost twenty minutes before the scene calmed down enough to start the game again.

The final score was three to two, to the school kids. The game took longer than regulation because every goal celebration was as enthusiastic as the first. When Temela and I walked back to Jimmy's it was almost completely dark. Something like the feeling when you've been running for miles and overcome the stitch in your side and can't feel the blisters and the adrenaline is rushing and you don't have to tell your legs to keep going—it was coursing through my body, lighting up each nerve and filling each vein. I thought I might be shining in the dark.

On the main road back we passed a group of men playing drums and dancing. Temela shouted out to them and they called back the informal greetings I was just beginning to learn.

“Mambo vipi bwana!” Temela said.

“Poa kichizi. Wewe, mambo?”

“Safi.”

“Sema, baba.”

“Freshi.”

The words bounced around in the night and settled in my stomach like fresh mango and orange.

“Karibuni. Karibuni sana.” The group welcomed us over.

We sat and sang for what could have been ten minutes or ninety. The drummers' pale palms flashed and danced, the taut drum covers their dance floor. One of the men—young, muscled, with a square forehead and chin—pulled me to my feet. He twisted his torso in time, arms extended like flexed wings. I copied his movements, let my legs go where they wanted. The drum beat was like hooves across a plain, like thunder rolling. Temela had picked up a drum and was lost in the rhythm. His head bobbed down every time his right hand hit the hard beat on the center of the drum. The music was its own storm. It ended when it wanted. Temela took my hand, and we walked away. The one who had pulled me into the dance came with us.

“Rebecca, this is my small brother, Rajabu.”

“Hellloo Rebecca!” he said in a voice that was an extension of the music. My name was three staccato bursts of beat from his tongue.

“You are Temela's brother?”

“Yes, his small brother.”

I laughed. Rajabu was the same height as Temela, and thicker. I understood he must be younger, but it was still funny to me. Temela spoke to Rajabu in Swahili. It was very dark, and candles lit the main path of the road, shining from the carts of vendors selling fruit, dried fish, and chipsi mayai. Temela motioned to my other side, and Rajabu grabbed my other hand.

“It is very dark. We want you to be safe,” Temela told me. Their long-fingered hands covered mine completely. I let the strangeness of it go, felt my fingers relax into this easy bond.

Back at Jimmy's, Megan was packed. She was to take the earliest dalla dalla out of Bagamoyo the next morning, which would leave as early at six or as late as eight depending on when it was full. She laughed when she saw me. I was dusty and my hair was tangled into knots.

“Megan, Temela and his brother Rajabu want to take us to the beach to go swimming. Want to go?”

She looked at me and wrinkled her forehead.

“I don't know...”

“Oh, come on. It will be great. And I'm sure it's safe. It's your last night. Please?”

I saw her give in. She exhaled.

“Well, let me get my bathing suit on.”

We changed quickly, said goodbye to Jimmy, and headed down the hill by Jimmy's house. Rajabu led the way and Temela grabbed our hands. Megan scurried quickly over to my side, linking arms with me.

“I just can't get used to how they hold hands with us,” she whispered. “I know it's just a friend thing but... it's weird.” I laughed at her, and she laughed, too. I had grown to really like Megan. I would miss her.

When we got to the beach, Temela and Rajabu tore off their shirts and raced to the water, pushing each other as they went. I ran in behind them. The water was cool and calm. I rubbed sand over the bug bites that covered my arms and legs. I dove under, staying down until my lungs ached. Megan waded in to her knees but wouldn't get in. I chased her down the beach and dragged her into the water. Temela and Rajabu swam farther out than I would dare and raced back in. We played tag for a while, then floated on our backs, looking up at the stars. Now I can't recall what words we said. I can't recall needing them.

Above: Rajabu Hassan. Below: Temela pushing a wheelbarrow

CHAPTER 11
“Kupotea njia ndiko kujua njia.”

The next morning I woke to Megan crying. All of her bags were piled outside the door, and Mama Kenny and Jimmy were screaming at each other in the living room.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Someone tried to break in last night. They could only get into the room out back with all of the kitchen stuff in it but they stole a thermos and some pots and pans.”

“Why is Mama Kenny so upset?”

“She thinks robbers only come here because of us.”

I sat on the bed next to her and put my arm around her shoulder.

“Has this happened before?”

“A few times, I guess.”

I walked into the living room in time to see Mama Kenny slap Jimmy squarely across the face. She turned to me with a snarl, then ran into the bedroom and slammed the door. Jimmy started to follow her, but saw me first. He slumped into a chair. His hands unclenched slowly, fingers spreading across his forehead and scalp like roots.

“Labeckah, I am dying here. I am really dying here.”

“What do you mean, Jimmy?” I said.

“My wife, the robbers coming here, I have no money because Yotam is never paying me.” His voice trailed off and he shook his head and rubbed his palms rapidly up and down his thighs.

“Ah! Sometimes you have to just go up on the roof, Labeckah. If someone does not love you, or you are very angry, just go up on the roof. You have to do this.” He jumped to his feet and walked out of the house. When he came back a few seconds later his voice was higher, an affectation of lightness. “Labeckah, bring Megan! We must be taking her to the bus. She is leaving us to go home to America. She is leaving us so sad. Where is my son Kenny? My wife must bring him to say goodbye to Megan.” He rapped his knuckles against the bedroom door.

“Wewe! Kenny, njoo! Ondoka mama!” Kenny slipped out from a small crack and the door closed behind him immediately. He looked like he had been crying. I picked him up and stroked the back of his neck and head.

Megan emerged from our room, dragging her bags behind her. Jimmy grabbed them, and we walked her to the taxi waiting outside. She patted Kenny on the head, shook Jimmy's hand, and gave me a quick hug.

“Take care. Email me when you get home,” she said to me. “Jimmy, thanks for everything. Good luck.” She turned and slipped into the back seat of the taxi. The car bounced down the dirt road and I was there alone.

Jimmy announced he was going to the bar for the afternoon. I stayed with Kenny in the living room, pushing his toy cars back and forth in front of him on the cement floor.

“Vroom vroom!” I said, driving the car up his plump little leg and over the great hill of his belly. “Vroom vroom screeeech,” as it drove over his shoulder, did a daring leap to his chin, and rolled over his round, soft cheek. I parked the car on his head. He laughed and flapped his arms. I heard the door behind me open quietly. I was stretched out on the floor with my back to

her, but I heard Mama Kenny's feet pad across the floor. She came and sat on the couch in front of us. She rested her elegant head in her hand and folded her legs behind her.

I let the car tumble off of Kenny's peanut head. He grabbed it and rolled it across my arm, then face, saying softly “foom foom.” I heard a sound. It was Mama Kenny laughing. Kenny heard her and started laughing, too. He got up and tottered to her, then ran the car up and down her leg. “Foom foom.” She rested her hand on top of his head.

“Ah, Kenny,” she whispered. She looked up at me and gave me a half-smile, her full lips curving. I smiled at her. Ran her hands from Kenny's head to his shoulders to his arms, then got up and shuffled from the room. I could hear her out back, humming, as she prepared lunch.

The room was soon vibrating with laughter when Salma and Gracie learned that Jimmy was out for the day. They brought Junior, the tiny walnut of a child that I had met before, as well as the other two Dihenga children, Naifut and Khamis. Naifut was shy and waif-like. Her ears were pierced with two small gemstone studs. She told me she was seven. Khamis, at eleven, was the eldest brother. He was handsome and upright, with an easy grin and eyes that wrinkled at the corners. The children shook my hand, giggling to each other.

“Hello, I am Khamis Dihenga. My fatha is a dockta,” Khamis said proudly, annunciating each word. Gracie and Salma clapped for him. “I am study English in school,” he told me. Naifut took small steps toward me and touched my hair. When I smiled at Naifut and gave her a handful of it to play with, Salma took it as an open invitation. Soon all of the girls were stroking and braiding my hair. Khamis sat on the couch with Juni on his lap watching and laughing and clapping Junior's hands together.

An hour later when Eva walked in she looked at me and shrieked.

“Ah! Shh shh shh!” said Gracie, running to Eva and putting her fingers over Eva's open mouth. “Mzuri sana,” she whispered. “Very beautiful.”

Eva laughed and laughed, then called Mama Kenny in to see me, the mzungu with cornrows. When Mama Kenny saw me she bent over double, clutching her sides in hysterics. I laughed with them, stood up and mimed a fashion show, patting my hair and swaying my hips. Eva ran into her room and came back with several kangas, which they soon wrapped around me. They made me do the catwalk again, clapping and hollering. I sauntered over to Khamis and puckered my lips. He jumped back, laughing and blushing, putting his hands in front of his face to block my advances.

I became an actress in Africa. And a mime. With no mirrors to make me self-conscious, no Swahili to make me eloquent, no reputation to uphold, I gestured wildly, sang loudly, smiled widely. I imitated sounds and movements, exaggerated my own. In the mornings I took quick bucket showers, pouring cold water over my body and singing to stay warm. I squatted to use the bathroom and flushed with a cup of water. I stopped wearing my baseball cap and wore cornrows instead, left my socks and shorts buried in my suitcase and donned vibrant, patterned kangas instead. Temela taught me to respond to calls of “mzungu” or “China” with either “ndimu,” a type of rum and synonym of “China” or “hapana mzungu. Mimi ni Zaramu,” which means, “I am not mzungu,I am Zaramu,” an African tribe name.

My show of spirit that day with Mama Kenny, Eva, Salma, Gracie and the Dihenga children seemed to gain me some sort of acceptance in the Kunjombe house. I helped Eva and Mama Kenny cook, washing the rice, stirring the ugali, and putting the beans on to boil. Kenny became my shadow. He waited for me outside the shower every morning. When I got out he

would squeal and run away as I'd shake my wet hair in his direction. Mama Kenny and Eva knew hardly any English, so we never talked much. They taught me how to wash my clothes in buckets, rolling the fabric over and scrubbing it in sections against itself. Gracie and Salma came over every day, always loud and joyful. They were a constant comedy routine, rolling their eyes, shaking their fists, and shouting to one another while they cleaned fish or braided each other's hair. Mama Kenny came up to me blushing one day and grabbed her own breasts.

“How say? English, how say?”

When I stopped laughing I whispered, “boobs. No, no, no... breasts!”

She laughed and laughed at that, girlishly, and with her eyes closed tight, then went to tell Eva.

Sometimes, though, Mama Kenny was cold to me. I never knew when to expect it. She would look at me with tired eyes and frown then she'd disappear into her room. During those times I would get under my mosquito net and write in my journal until she was happy again.

Jimmy didn't seem to mind that I had befriended his wife and neighbors. He seemed relieved that she accepted me, maybe even liked me in some way. It made his life easier. Every Sunday Jimmy knocked on my door at six in the morning. He'd say, “Labeckah! Would you like to come to chech with us?”

“No thanks, Jimmy!” I'd call. “Maybe I'll go to church next week.”

“You are always tired on Sunday morning. Only on Sunday. Okay! I will invite you next week. I think you will like my chech of Jehovah.”

At school I was more in love with the children than ever. As I learned bits and pieces of Swahili I could talk to them and understand them more. I was always amazed at how bright and

kind they were. Sometimes I forgot they were kids since they took care of themselves and each other so well. But when they crowded around me for hugs and ran to meet me in the morning shouting “Madam! Madam!” I remembered that they were all only three to seven years old. From what I had seen, children weren't picked up and held after they could walk. They were never “babied” like the children in the United States. But I couldn't resist embracing, kissing, and pampering them as much as I could. One day I noticed that Rama had sores between his toes. I took him into the office and applied antibiotic cream and band-aids. Within minutes of his return to class I was swamped with children showing me their cuts, bruises, bug bites and blisters. I spent the rest of the day treating each one.

After Megan left I started staying at the school after lunch time. Temela and I would draw or play with the soccer ball while the children napped or played. Jimmy started teaching English classes to adults in the indoor classroom every afternoon to make extra money. I spent most of my spare time with Temela and Rajabu. As soon as the last child left for the day, we embarked on some adventure in Bagamoyo. They had friends all over the town: jewelry makers, musicians, dancers, builders, and soccer players.

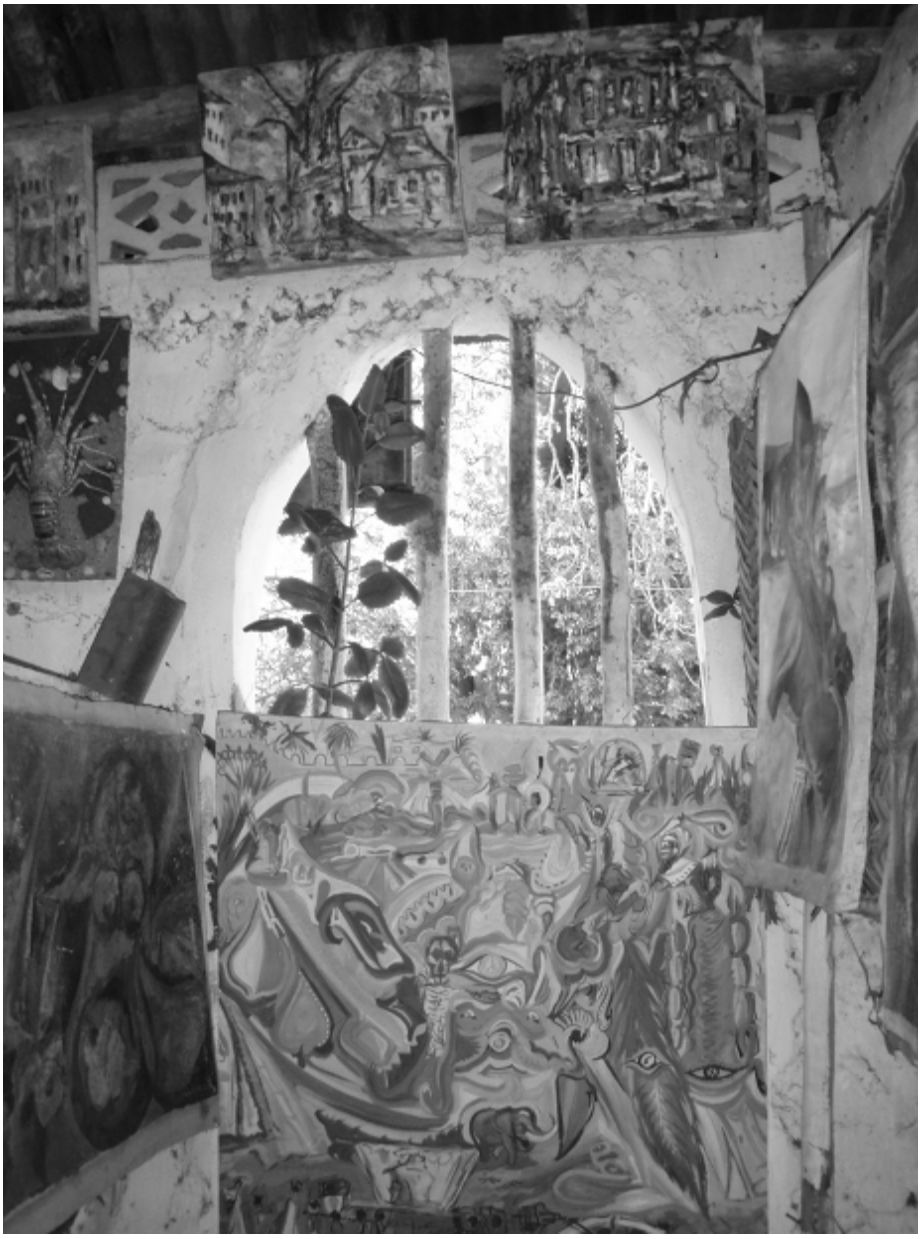
One Thursday we went to visit their friend Vincent, the master artist at Baobab Studio. The studio is named after the colossal Baobab just outside, its trunk nearly one hundred feet in circumference. It is painted in bold graffiti by all of the artists who visit and work in the studio. Wooden scaffolding embraces one side of the tree to provide a place for the artists to stand. Vincent greeted us at the door to the short, white building. He had thick, clean dreadlocks to the middle of his back and white linen pants slung low on his hips. A single cowry shell hung around his neck from a leather strap and rested on his tanned, olive chest.

“Welcome my sister and my brothers,” he said, his voice cool and soulful. His eyes turned down at the outside corners, making him look like he carried a heavy burden in the small shell that sat just over his heart. We wandered around the studio, which was one large show room and two rooms for working. Paintings lined every wall, some even hanging from the ceiling, their vivid, vital colors like clouds and wind in a dream where feelings become hues and sounds become shades. The canvases were covered with bold brush strokes in unmixed paint. The ocean, trees, animals, and people were the most popular subjects. Vincent lit a joint and followed behind us. The floor was hard-packed dirt, gritty and flat.

“These paintings are wonderful,” I said to Vincent.

He took a drag from the joint between his fingers. “Thank you, sister. They have the spirit of the Baobab. The baobab is also called 'upside-down tree' because in the beginning each animal was given one tree to plant. The hyena planted this tree upside-down.” He exhaled. “Sister, Baobab tree is special. It has no rings inside to whisper its age. It could be thousands of years old. But age don't matter to this tree. It is infinite.”

When we left, Vincent was working on a painting. His dreadlocks swished back and forth on his broad back as he stroked paint on the canvas. Bodies were taking shape at the bottom, twisted and bloody. “Our Human Family in Rwanda, 1994” was written at the top. We shouted goodbyes from the door. He didn't turn around but I heard him say, “Peace, my sister and my brothers. Peace.”



The inside of Baobab Studio

CHAPTER 12
“Dunia mti mkavu: kiumbe siulemee.”

Every morning at five-thirty, Temela came to my window and tapped his fingers against the pane. I tapped back to let him know I was awake then dressed quickly in the thin, tenuous light. Outside I ran in place to warm up, stretched quickly, and followed Temela down the dirt path. It usually took us about twenty minutes to reach the beach and I jogged another twenty before I sat down exhausted. Temela waved to me each time and kept going. After I got my breath back, I floated and relaxed in the water for about an hour until he came running back. Then he jumped in, Rajabu joined us, and we swam and played until seven-thirty, when we left for school.

Our morning runs let me pound out bad dreams with each footfall and then wash away sweat salty and musky with fear. Rajabu sang a song with one word, my name, repeated over and over, but with a different beat or tone each time. After about a week of our runs, Rajabu brought a small pouch with him. As we sat drying off on the beach, he took out a piece of cloth with some marijuana in it. He rolled a joint, lit it, and passed it to Temela. Temela took a hit, then passed it to me. This became the second part of our morning ritual. I started bringing oranges. Temela knew how to peel the rind so it left the white part intact. He would then slice the orange in half, horizontally, so we could suck the sweet fruit out of the soft, tangy bowl.

“Chungwa, ganja. Chungwa, ganja,” Rajabu laughed. Temela smiled.

“He is saying, 'soup, salad. Soup, salad.'”

My life had found a rhythm in Bagamoyo. Temela and Rajabu took care of me like they were my older brothers. I went with them everywhere. When I was at home, Mama Kenny, Eva, and Jimmy joked with me. Mealtimes were pleasant and relaxed. They all seemed to be getting along. At school, I was Madam Rebecca. The children learned the difference between “We” and “I.” I taught them songs in English and they taught me to count in Swahili and basic vocabulary. I even agreed to go to church with Jimmy.

We sat in a stuffy room for a two-hour service. Jimmy gave me two copies of the Jehovah's Witnesses Magazine, one in English and the other translated into Swahili. The preacher's sermon was taken directly from the magazine. It was called, “The Good Family: Together Under God.” I chewed the inside of my lip as I read along. *Because Eve was taken from Adam's rib, she must be obedient to him. She is a part of him. A good wife will always obey her husband. A good husband will care for his wife.* Then the preacher talked about good parenting. *Your best teacher is always the Bible. Show love. Parents must show good behavior.* Jimmy passed me notes when the preacher spoke in Swahili. *Sheteni is Satan,* he wrote. He couldn't really keep up, though, so I flipped through the English half of the Bible. Proverbs 4:23 read: “More than all else that is to be guarded, safeguard your heart, for out if it are the sources of life.” I looked over a Mama Kenny. Kenny was in her lap, and she was rocking him back and forth gently. Her eyes were cast down to the floor, her curled eyelashes fluttering. Jimmy was looking straight ahead at the preacher with rapt attention. When he finished speaking, the preacher passed a microphone around the room. Jimmy told me they were talking about problems with family they had, and how to fix them.

After the sermon, Jimmy hurried us home. He said we had to be there because two more volunteers were on their way. Mama Kenny looked at Jimmy with contempt. I didn't dare speak to her. We walked back to the house in silence. When we got to the house we saw Eva, blocking the door. Two Americans were standing awkwardly in front of her.

“Eva! Unafanya nini?” Jimmy barked. Eva blinked her cat eyes and slunk away. “Pole sana, rafiki,” he said to the Americans. “I am so sorry. That is Eva. She is big problem.”

“That's okay,” said the tall, skinny one. He looked to be about twenty. He had pale skin, blond hair, and a lopsided grin. “I'm sure she didn't know who we were. I wouldn't let some strangers in either.”

The girl at his side didn't look as forgiving. She frowned, wrinkled her freckled nose, and shrugged.

“We've only been standing here for half-an-hour,” she said sharply.

“I'm Brian, and this is my girlfriend Tash. Natasha,” Brian interjected quickly with an apologetic smile.

“Hey, I'm Rebecca. I'm from Georgia. I've been here about five weeks now. I have a little over two more to go,” I said.

“I'm glad you've been here a while. You can show us the ropes.” Brian put his hand on the small of Natasha's back.

Jimmy hauled their bags inside and showed them to Eva's room. “You will be staying here.”

“What about Eva?” I asked.

“She will be staying with you now,” Jimmy said.

“Oh, great.” I winked at Brian and Natasha. Natasha smiled slightly. She shook her brown curls, and bounced into the room.

“I'm tired, I'm going to take a nap,” I heard her say, and the door closed.

Brian sneaked out about fifteen minutes later.

“Sorry about Tash,” he said. “We've been traveling a long time.”

“No problem. It's overwhelming. I had a bit of a run-in with Eva when I got here, too,” I told him. “Where are you guys from?”

“San Francisco. I go to Berkeley. Tash goes to San Francisco State. That's where we met but I just transferred out.”

“How long are you volunteering here?”

“Only two weeks, actually. Then we're going on Safari and to Zanzibar.”

“Brian!” Jimmy called. “Brian, you need to wash your body? I must go tonight to pick up some fish from the market. You know, Brian, fish are like dead bodies! It's best to transport them at night!”

Brian laughed. “No, I'm okay Jimmy. Thanks!”

“You'll get used to it,” I said. “He's full of weird little sayings like that.”

Natasha was in a much better mood when she woke up later that afternoon, but she wasn't what I'd call friendly. She sat on the couch with her legs pressed together and her hands on her knees. She and Mama Kenny glared at each other. Mama Kenny was obviously not happy about another mzungu woman in the house. Natasha's pale skin was covered with dark brown freckles that matched her hair and eyes. The Tanzanian sun hadn't been kind to her. Her cheeks and shoulders were red and raw-looking. She was short and curvy, the opposite of Brian, who was

lanky and bony. I liked both of them. Natasha's sharp tongue was amusing, as long as it wasn't turned on me. She had choice words to describe pretty much every aspect of Jimmy's house.

“Nice furniture. Where do you get stuff like this? Hah! Those green curtains are just luh-vuh-ly.” Biting as she was, she wasn't too serious. I could tell she was uncomfortable and trying to get her bearings. Brian and Natasha's first night didn't do much to help her situation. In the middle of the night I heard a shriek and a crash. Natasha, Brian, Jimmy and I all ran into each other in the tiny hallway.

“What is the matter, Brian?” said Jimmy.

“Someone just tried to break in! I saw his hand come through the bars on the window! What the hell is going on here?” Brian was stuttering. Natasha looked like she was hyperventilating.

“It is okay, Brian!” Jimmy said, dashing back to his room. When he came back he was holding a bicycle pedal. He held it out to Brian. “If they come back, just use this.”

Brian took the pedal. The plastic foot rest spun around and stopped pointing to the ground. Brian stared at me in disbelief. Jimmy put his arm around Natasha, trying to calm her down. At that moment, Mama Kenny emerged from the bedroom to see what was going on. She saw Jimmy touching Natasha and laughed—a hollow, frightening sound.

“Jimmy...” I whispered. He looked up and dropped his arm from Natasha's shoulders.

“Nenda!” he shouted at Miriam. “Go!” She smiled a bitterly, and walked back into the bedroom.

No one tried to break in again that night. Jimmy grabbed a Coke bottle from the back, smashed the end of it against the house, and went out to patrol the neighborhood.

“If I catch them, they will pay,” he said. “We must do this in Tanzania. We cannot call to the police. They will not come.”

“What will you do if you catch them?” Natasha asked, finally calm enough to speak.

“Well, sometimes we just beat the thief. But other times we must cut off their hand or break their hand,” he said calmly. “In this neighborhood we take turns to catch a thief.”

I went back to bed. In the morning Jimmy was up boiling milk with tea leaves.

“Did you catch them?”

“No, Labeckah, they run away. Do not worry. I will put buckets inside the doors from now, so if they come in the house we will hear. Very good alarm system!”

The beginning of the week went smoothly. Brian and Natasha were great with the kids. The little boys especially liked having Brian there. They crowded around him and mimicked his every move. Omari was one of the few children that understood English as a language, not just words to repeat back to the teacher. He tried to put sentences together, puffing out his chest and holding on to Brian's hand.

“Bri! Bri, you... you, you come, coming from... Merika.”

“Yes, Omari. Very good!”

Omari strutted away like a proud rooster. “Very good!” he said. “I very good.”

Friday was another “Beachi Day.” We made it to the ocean without incident, and the day continued as usual. Brian joined Temela and me as we juggled the soccer ball. Fatumah showed her pictures of her husband Hassan to Natasha. Suddenly, we heard screaming. Before I could see what had happened, Fatumah was sprinting into the water. She grabbed a little girl who was floating face down just ten feet from the shore. The water was only a few feet deep, but Iridi had

panicked. Fatumah carried her onto the beach, laid her down, and pushed on her rounded belly. No one breathed. Finally, Iridi coughed, choking on water as it poured back out from her stomach. Fatumah made her sit up, and pounded her back until only spit dripped from the little girl's mouth. Then she hugged Iridi's shaking frame to her chest. Iridi sobbed quietly, asking for her mother.

Brian, Natasha, and I started to help the children get dressed, brushing the sand from their tough, stringy bodies. They let us dress them obediently, still subdued from Iridi's brush with death. But then we heard another wail. Omari started shouting, “Help, Madam! Help!” I ran over to where he was. I couldn't believe my eyes. He had been helping Leviticus to dress, and had accidentally zipped Leviticus' foreskin into his pants. Omari looked at me guiltily.

“It's okay, Omari. It was an accident. Temela! Temela, I need you!” Temela left Fatumah and Iridi and came over to us. He maneuvered the zipper gently until Leviticus was freed. His tears stopped almost immediately.

Needing to unwind, Brian, Natasha, and I paid a man we met at the market fifty dollars to take us to a “sand island” he said was just five minutes away by dhow. I invited Temela, but he said he was going into Dar to visit with his aunt. When we got to the spot of the island it wasn't there. We could see a shadow of sand lurking under the water like a giant white whale. After an hour, the sand island began to appear as the tides shifted. Soon it became our own private beach. Our footsteps were the first, along with the crabs who scuttled onto it with us.

That night Brian and Natasha stayed in their room with the door closed. Jimmy invited me to go to a Tanzanian wedding with him.

“Is Miriam coming?” I asked.

“No, Mama Kenny must stay home with Kenny tonight.”

I didn't want her to be angry with me for going somewhere alone with Jimmy, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to go to the wedding. I never had to face her because she stayed in her room until after we left.

Unfortunately, we'd missed the wedding ceremony, but we made it to the reception. The bride Gretchen, it turned out, was Swedish. She had come to Tanzania as a Peace Corps volunteer and fell in love with Mpoki, a fisherman from Bagamoyo. Gretchen was dressed in a long, white wedding gown. Her arms were covered in black henna. Her parents and three of her friends from Sweden had made it to the wedding. They stood in a group to the side, smiling but a little unsure of how to interact with the rowdy Tanzanian guests who were shouting and dancing with abandon. Everyone quieted down as two waiters brought out the main dish. It was a fully grown goat, cooked whole with an apple in its mouth. I could see its teeth sinking into the fruit. Its front hooves extended over the edge of the dish. The tail still had hair—it was stiff as a paintbrush. All of the guests clapped as it was set down in front of the newly married couple. They were given a long, serrated knife, which they held together, their fingers intertwined, and they cut into the flank of the goat. It rocked back and forth making it seem alive. Gretchen and Mpoki beamed as they fed each other slices of the steaming meat. The bride and groom had their first dance to a Tanzanian song, “Simba wa Afrika,” which means “The Lions of Africa.” They held each other close, and Mpoki bent his head so that his lips brushed Gretchen's neck. I wondered if Jimmy and Mama Kenny had ever seemed so happy.

Kenny Kunjombe, my little brother

CHAPTER 13
“Nyumba ya udongo haihimili vishindo.”

About a week later, we went to one of Bagamoyo's only nightclubs. It was called Hunter's Club. To get there we walked to Top Life, called a cab, and rode for twenty minutes. Brian, Natasha, Temela, Fatumah, Fatumah's husband Hassani, and I, all managed to fit into one cab. Jimmy caught a ride with a friend of his, a former student named Nassa. Friday night at Hunter's is Ladies' Night, so we got in free. The men paid a dollar. Only a few other people were in the bar, mostly middle-aged men and a few Peace Corps volunteers.

Fatumah and Hassan were like teenagers. He kissed her hand and palm and made her blush. Then he pulled her onto the dance floor. She resisted, but eventually gave in and spun around with him, laughing. Brian and Natasha were set to leave the next day. They had packed all of their things, leaving behind one large suitcase full of donations for the school. We cornered Jimmy and made him agree to pay the teachers more, to make sure the children had clean drinking water at all times, and to develop a consistent curriculum. He nodded and promised he would.

“You must be Vegetarians! Vegetarians like to make plans!” he said. We laughed and told him how much we appreciated everything he did for the school. Soon after, he walked away to talk on his phone. A while later I noticed him sitting alone on a bench near the door.

“Hey, Jimmy. Everything alright?” I asked. He shook his head and knocked his fist against the side of his head.

“Mama Kenny is very upset with me. She calls me and says an insult to my mother. Ach! She is not knowing my mother.” His voice cracked and he looked close to tears. I didn't know what to say. I had not seen him look so vulnerable. “I love my son. I do not want a separation because I am knowing this would be big harm to my life. Very big harm.”

“Why is she angry with you? Because you are at the club with us?”

“Yes, I am thinking so. She is very jealous woman. She is always accusing me. I try to be good man, but she is always accusing me.”

“Jimmy, I know you try. I'm sorry you're having these problems.”

“Ah! Is okay. You go to dance. I am fine. I am very fine.”

I left him there, looking down at the cell phone in his hands.

I found Temela and began dancing with him, so I didn't see Jimmy leave. Temela's friend Hussein grabbed my hand and pulled me into a dance. “I need you to collect me,” he said, over and over. Hassan came up to us a while later. He spoke under his breath to Temela.

“What's going on?” I asked. “Where is Jimmy?”

“Mama Kenny has called to Jimmy about a thief at the house.” Temela said.

“I hope our stuff isn't stolen,” said Brian.

“It'd better not be,” Natasha said angrily.

“She is probably just trying to get him to come home. She is mad he's here,” I said. I called Jimmy. When he answered his voice was shaking. “Jimmy, we're coming home,” I said loudly. “Tell Mama Kenny we're coming home.”

“Stay there. Do not come here,” Jimmy said. I was drunk on Konyagi, a Tanzanian rum, and didn't want to listen.

“We want to come home! Is our stuff gone?” I said.

“Labeckah, do not come here. Give the phone to Temela.”

I did. We waited for hours, until three A.M. when the bar closed. I snapped at Temela for making us stay. Fatumah and Hassan waited patiently with us. Fatumah rubbed my back as I sulked.

“You can come to our house,” she told me. But then Jimmy called to say he was on his way. When he got there sweat was dripping from his body and his eyes were bloodshot.

“Robbers have come to my neighbors. The wife, she is selling vouchers for the cell phones. She just got shipment with three and half million shillings worth of vouchers to sell. Eight men are finding this out. They come to the house and steal them. They beat her husband on his head with a machete and stole everything.”

Brian rested his hand on Jimmy's shoulder. “I'm so sorry, man.” I clutched a chair for support. Jimmy continued.

“I call to the police but they are lazy and afraid. They would not answer. So I ran to the station. They were too scared when I tell them what happened. They have guns but they make me go first in looking for the men. I had only flashlight. I could not find them. So I went to hospital with Juma. He is bleeding much. They put stitches but he is very bleeding much. I think his life is leaving.”

Guilt and horror settled in my gut like a stone. Junior, Naifut, and Khamis' faces flashed through my mind.

“It was the Dihengas?” I asked, stomach clenching.

“No. It was not the Dihengas. It is my other neighbors down the street.”

I part of me was relieved, but then I felt sick to my stomach. I hugged Fatumah, Hassan, and Temela goodnight, then Brian, Natasha, Jimmy and I got into the waiting cab. There were towels on the seat to soak up the blood.

“This is the taxi I take to the hospital with my neighbor.”

No one spoke on the way home. Jimmy dropped us off and said he was going to the hospital to check on the injured man. Brian and Natasha went to their room immediately. I sat in the living room and wrote in my journal. Jimmy walked in an hour later.

“Juma needs blood. His family members are going to give him their blood. I do not know if he will survive.” Jimmy's eyes were bloodshot and swollen. His lips were cracked and there was blood all over his white shirt.

“You're very brave, Jimmy. You are a good man.”

“Thank you, Labeckah,” he said.

I got in bed but couldn't sleep. I heard Jimmy go out back and fill a bucket of water. Then I heard it splash to the ground. I assumed he was washing away the blood had dried on his hands and body. Then he came back inside, put the bucket down inside the door, and went into his room. His room was right next to mine. I heard Mama Kenny's voice. She got louder and louder, her words tripping and stumbling over her tongue. Jimmy shouted something. Miriam snapped back. I heard Kenny's small, high voice. Then it was silent.

I heard a ball bounce. It bounced again and again and again. *Oh no. They woke up Kenny. Now I will really never be able to sleep.* I sighed. It bounced again and again, faster and faster. I listened for about a minute. Then it stopped. The house was silent. I pushed my shoulders into the

mattress and turned on my side to go to sleep. *Goodnight, little Kenny.* Before I could pull a blanket over my head, the door opened and a stream of light blinded me.

"Labeckah, I need you. I am having a problem with my wife. A big problem."

I sat up and rubbed my eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"She is sick."

"Then call a doctor."

"I need your help."

I staggered into the hall and into their bedroom. I had never been inside it before. There was a large mattress on the floor, pushed to one corner. The mosquito net hung over it. A dresser and a few piles of clothes lined the other wall. Kenny was crouching at the foot of the mattress, his small hand wrapped around his mother's toes and his eyes wide. I took all this in quickly, then looked through the net at Miriam. She was lying on her back with no shirt on, her large breasts exposed. Her head was turned to the side, toward the wall. Her legs were bent under her, twisted to the side awkwardly. I bend down next to her. Jimmy walked out of the room and came back with a cup of water. He brushed the net away and poured it on Miriam's face. She flinched. Her eyes rolled back in her head. I looked up at Jimmy. There was no expression on his face at all. He looked brutal, grotesque. I felt like I had just been punched in the stomach. It hadn't been a ball. It had been *her.* It had been Jimmy's fists and *her.* I gagged, feeling bile rise up in my stomach.

"Jimmy. Get. Out." He left without a word.

I crawled in beside her and tried to pull a kanga around her exposed body. She was unconscious.

“Look at me! Look at me! Can you see me? Shit!” I shook her shoulders, cupped her face in my hands, pulled up her lids to look at her pupils. “Miriam, please. Please, wake up.” She tried to turn away from me and pushed at me feebly with her arms. I started to breathe again. She was conscious now, at least. I stroked her cheek and head.

“Mama Kenny... Mama Kenny, did he hit you?” I asked, already knowing the answer but afraid to hear it.

She nodded. I pulled her to me and rocked her like a baby saying “pole sana, pole sana.” That is when she cried.

“Where?”

With her eyes closed and streaming tears she pointed to places all down her limp body. Her shoulder and head seemed the most tender.

“Has he hit you before?” She nodded.

I remembered Kenny. He was still at the end of the mattress. Now he was crying, too. He crawled over to me. I turned off the light and got into bed with them. I wrapped my arms around Miriam and let her cry. I could feel myself shaking. When she was quiet I got up and went into the living room. Jimmy was lying down on the couch, his hands covering his face.

“Sit up,” I said. “Jimmy, what were you thinking. What the hell were you thinking.” My voice was trembling and I had no idea what I was going to say.

“She accused me of dropping you at Hunter's Club and going to see a girlfriend. I am not having a girlfriend. She is lying. Always lying.”

I felt numb. I didn't even feel angry anymore. I sat down, ran my fingers through my hair.

“But that's not a reason. That doesn't make it okay...”

He looked at me with the eyes of a child. He shook his head.

“But Labeckah, my wife is not respecting me. She is not caring. I try to help my neighbor who is dying. She only wants to yell at me.”

I tried another angle.

“In America, you would go to jail for what you just did. You would go to jail and you wouldn't get to see Kenny again. Because it's not right. It's against the law.”

Jimmy's eyes were cloudy. He didn't say anything. I wasn't getting anywhere.

“Jimmy. Jimmy... God made Adam stronger than Eve so he could *protect* her. Never, ever hurt her.” I couldn't believe what I was saying. But I kept talking. I said the only things I could think he might accept from me.

“God wants you to act how you did earlier tonight. Trying to help that man. Satan... Satan wants you to act like this. What's worse Jimmy? What’s worse? A crime against a stranger or one against your wife?” Jimmy nodded. A few tears fell onto his cheek and he brushed them away. He just kept shaking his head from side to side, slowly. My head was pounding. *Fuck the Bible*, I thought.

“You did that in front of your son. You did that in front of Kenny!” I spat in a whisper. “Sleep out here tonight. Don't come in there.” I locked the door behind me.

Miriam was crying again. I rubbed her back until she fell asleep and pulled Kenny close to me. When I woke up in the morning she was gone. We didn't hear from her for days. Jimmy tried hard to be a bachelor but he ran out of clean clothes and Kenny refused to eat. He cried often and Jimmy couldn't make him stop.

“I do not want her to ever come back,” Jimmy said, his voice cracking as he spilled hot tea over his hand.

A week later she called my cell phone and asked to talk to Kenny. I brought him into my room and held the phone to his face. I could hear her cooing to him. He smiled and nodded in response to her questions but didn't speak. I heard her say, “Nakupenda, Kenny,” *I love you*. Kenny grinned and put his hand in his mouth. When it was silent I put the phone back to my ear.

“Miriam?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you?”

“I am coming home. I miss Kenny.”

Kenny and Miriam Kunjombe (Mama Kenny)

CHAPTER 14
"Mwanzo kokochi, mwisho nazi."

Brian and Natasha never knew what happened between Jimmy and Miriam that night. They slept through everything and left happy the next morning, sure that Jimmy was Bagamoyo's savior.

"Wow, this place was just amazing," Brian said. "I mean, Jimmy is something else. The way he went after those guys on his own! I can't wait to tell people back home about African justice. It's in the hands of the people, man."

Natasha smiled. "I know. At first I didn't like Jimmy, but he really is a hero."

I hugged them and waved until their dalla dalla was out of sight. I spent the following days trying to process what I'd seen. I couldn't find any resolve. I wanted to hate Jimmy, or thought I should, but I couldn't. As much as I wanted to judge him, or forgive him, I could do neither. Instead, I helped him with the cooking and the washing and didn't say much.

He invited me to go with him to Zambia to visit his mother. We left Kenny with Gracie and Salma, and caught a bus going south. It careened around corners with no regard for life. Monkeys darted under the wheels, and only some of them made it to safety. Giant gray baobabs lined the highway, leafless and knotted. Jimmy bounced children on his knee and played ringtones on his cell phone to entertain them. The ride lasted over sixteen hours. I asked Jimmy to tell me proverbs. He jotted them down in Swahili and explained the meanings in English. "Kidole kimja hakivunha chawa." *One finger cannot pick up lice.* We stopped overnight in a cheap hostel near the border, then rode another eight hours the next day.

At his house, I met his mother, a large, regal woman with ebony skin. She gave me an orange beaded necklace and thanked me in clipped English for helping her son. The next morning I awoke to a young man peering at my feet. He had lifted the covers off of them, and was looking at my bare legs. I sat up quickly and he jumped back, startled.

“Sorry, miss,” he said, and backed out of the room before I could say anything.

The young man's name was Robert, and he was sixteen, Jimmy's cousin. He came back after a few minutes and led me to the bathroom. He pointed to the tub, and gave me a huge bucket of steaming water. For the first time in two months, I took a hot bath.

We stayed in Zambia for two days. Jimmy visited his brothers at their late father's cement company just down the road from his mother's house. Zambia was dusty and dry with red clay. I missed the greens and grays of Bagamoyo, and the sparkling Indian Ocean in whose waves I had seen every color, even amethyst, fuchsia, and russet flames. I missed Temela, Rajabu, Kenny, and the children. I missed ducking under the bunch of green bananas that hung over the path I took to school each morning, and the shouts of *habari* and *mambo* that rode on my back wherever I went. The day we left Zambia I feigned sleep so I wouldn't have to go to church with Jimmy's family.

On the way back to Tanzania, we stopped at Lake Malawi. Jimmy bought me a roasted banana and I ate it in silence, watching the calm surface of the lake ripple. When we got back to Bagamoyo I got out Kenny's cars and rolled them over his fleshy little limbs like he loved. I called Mama Kenny to make sure she was still on her way home. She was, and Kenny laughed joyfully when he heard her voice on the phone. I had two days left in Bagamoyo, but before I could enjoy them I had to go back to Dar for a few days to withdraw money from the ATM, get

squared away with Yotam, pick up bags from the volunteer hostel, and buy a few presents for my friends in Bagamoyo. While I was there I met another set of volunteers. Two of them would go back to Bagamoyo with me and be Jimmy's next set of workers. Their names were Noell and Angela. I told them about everything that had happened and made them promise to look out for Miriam and Kenny for me after I was gone. I was scared about Miriam going back to Bagamoyo, but I knew the reality of the situation; Miriam could not leave Kenny, and Jimmy would never let her take him. She couldn't support herself without him, either.

I was happy to see Babu. Angel, and Yoctan again. They were delighted with my improved Swahili, and Babu made me walk around the neighborhood with him so I could meet his friends and call him “chizi kama ndizi” in front of each of them. This meant “crazy like a banana,” and Babu puffed out his thin chest and then doubled over in laughter every time I called him this. Angel admired the Tanzanian jewelry I'd acquired in Bagamoyo. I gave her a pair of earrings made from two Serengheti Beer bottle caps. I was happiest to see Yoctan. He asked me questions about Bagamoyo and admired each one of my pictures.

“Ah! Rebeckah, wewe si mzungu hapa.”

“I know,” I said. “I'm not mzungu now, I'm Zaramu.”

He laughed, his bronze eyes bright.

“I will miss you, Rebeckah.”

“I will miss you, too, Yoctan. When I come back I'm going to teach you how to swim.”

“I would like to learn. Asante sana.”

I went with the other volunteers to have one last beer at the bar up the street from the hostel. They introduced me to a Tanzanian named Chibby, who had lived in L.A. for five years,

going to school in mechanical engineering and working as a valet at a fancy hotel. He had never wanted to leave. He hung out with all the ex-pats who passed through Dar, but never Tanzanians, who considered him mzungu, too. Sitting at the bar, I complimented his orange polo shirt and sunglasses. I asked him why he came back to Tanzania. I was expected him to say he ran out of money or something like that.

“Well, my mother, she wrote me a letter. She wanted me to come home—she would call and call—and I always said no. So in the end she wrote me and said, 'if you do not come home I will put a curse on you.' So I had to come home.” I could tell he was serious.

The next morning, Angela, Noell and I made our way to the dalla-dalla station and found the Bagamoyo bus. I sat in the back, squished between two large women in traditional formal dresses. They were similar in pattern to kangas, but finely tailored rather than loose sheets. Their hats were pinned to their hair. When I got to the station we walked to Jimmy's house. I led the way. No one was home when we got there, so I introduced them to Salma, Gracie, and the Dihenga kids. Junior gave me a wet kiss on the cheek.

After a couple hours, Jimmy came home with Miriam and Kenny. They had just been to church. I hugged Miriam first, and she smiled at me. There seemed to be a tense peace between husband and wife. They spoke politely to one another but didn't make eye contact. I went to bed early, eager to have one last day with the children at school.

Temela came by to get me the next morning. We skipped our run and instead went straight to the school. We sat in the empty classroom until the kids arrived. How can I describe the feeling when I saw them again? Joy. They ran to me, shouting my name, grabbing my arms, yelling, “Madam! Madam!” Jimmy came to school that day. He lined the kids up and said sternly, “No

sleeping! Now I must ask you some questions. Whose father here drinks Konyagi? Whose father smokes marijuana? Whoever is bad will come up here and be beaten with this bat!" I smiled. I couldn't place him. I couldn't decide to love or hate him. A part of me cared for him and always would. Jimmy stayed to help explain to the children that it was my last day.

"Let us sing a song for Madam Labeckah," he said. The children sang, "mountains never meet, but we shall meet again." Then they came up a few at a time to give me hugs. I cried shamelessly.

After school, Temela and Rajabu took me to Dr. Livingstone's church. It stands alone in a field of tall grass, a row of palm trees behind it, and the ocean just beyond. Its white and gray stone is stained with black residue. The brothers asked if me I had heard of Livingstone. They told me legend says he spent some time in Bagamoyo before his journey inland. After he died his body was kept in the church for a while before he could be transported elsewhere to be buried. Livingstone died in Chitambo, which is in present day Zambia, looking for the source of the Nile. He had already explored more of the African continent than any other Westerner, covering some 29,000 miles. When he died of dysentery, his two African companions cut out his heart and buried it at the foot of a nearby tree. I never learned if it was a Baobab tree. Their journey back to Bagamoyo took nine months.

Peering at my reflection in a window after seven weeks in Tanzania was jarring. I saw my hair in cornrows, kangas wrapped around my waist and shoulders, no shoes, and I was eating fistfuls of ugali and prawns with their legs and shells still attached. I almost expected a pale and nervous mzungu to approach me with those famous words on his lips, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" I would greet him in Swahili, offer him food, and then send him on his way. I hadn't

sent an email home in weeks. The last one I remembered sending was to let my parents know I had crashed my bike, another volunteer I had met briefly was bitten by a rabid dog, and that the house had been the target of robbers several nights in a row but that I was supremely happy and couldn't imagine leaving this place. Was David Livingstone really driven to spend half of his life here because of a fiery missionary zeal burning in his chest? Or was it that he finally felt alive? His fervent opposition to slavery and desire to open up the continent to trade were based on his commitment to human rights, to the integrity of the African people. Yet his writings were used to justify the colonization of Africa throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

What was I doing here? I had wanted so desperately, so passionately, to do something good in Africa. I knew at heart I was no Livingstone. My round-trip ticket would send me home in days. But in my endeavor to help had I done something else instead? My dreams became dark and confusing. Friends and family were thieves trying to steal my organs for the black market. The children at school were laughing and playing, but their red uniforms turned to charred, blistering skin when I touched them. Then Jimmy or Yotam would come grab them away and sell them, shouting “Magma babies! Magma babies for cheap! Save Africa, buy a magma baby!” I woke up sweating every night, and turned on my camera to look at pictures of the children. I had to make sure their dark skin was still smooth and whole. When my heart pumped I realized that every beat—life itself—is a form of internal bleeding. Dr. Livingstone's last written words by letter were a plea for help to end the slave trade: “All I can say in my solitude is, May Heaven's rich blessing come down on every one — American, English, Turk — who will help to heal this open sore of the world.”

I ran my fingers along the side of the stone church. Temela sang, “Baby, baby, wewe rudi nyumbani.” *Baby, baby, come home.* We left the church and walked to a small area off the main road. I helped him and Rajabu haul cement blocks from there to another spot about fifty feet away.

“We are starting a new business,” Temela said. “We will paint and sell these blocks.”

I painted the blocks white and red until it got dark. Rajabu bought sugar cane and oranges, and insisted I eat twice as much as everyone else. Temela paid a man with a Polaroid camera to come take pictures of the three of us together. Then we walked back to Jimmy's, holding hands. I made them wait outside while I got their present from my room.

“Close your eyes!” I shouted. When I emerged they had their hands over their faces. “Okay open them.” I handed them the guitar I'd found in Dar. It was used and a little worn, but functional. They took it carefully, and then both wrapped their arms around me, laughing. We sat outside strumming the guitar for hours. Salma and Gracie brought the kids out to listen. Salma pulled be to the side and asked me when I would come back. I told her I would come back as soon as I could.

“But I may be dead. You will come back and they will say, 'Sorry. Salma is dead. She is in the ground.'” I hugged her and gathered them all together to give them the small gifts I'd gotten in Dar: dominoes for Khamisi, a pink shirt for Naifut, a rattle for Junior, and nail polish for Salma and Gracie. I put presents for Kenny, Miriam and Jimmy in their room, then left with Rajabu and Temela.

We walked through the old part of town with two-story buildings and faded paint. Temela told me about the history of Bagamoyo: “The Germans were here first. They built the fort by the

school. Then came the Arabic men. They built those wooden doors with the carvings I showed you last week. They are why many people here are Muslim. Then the English came here to Bagamoyo. They made this part of town."

Temela took my hand and swung it between us. I knew the feel of his fingers and palm. As we walked by a bush, he snapped a red hibiscus flower off the branch and offered it to me. I tucked it behind my ear and looked to my left at the port where the fishermen's dhow boats were pulling into shore, their white sails tilted toward the wind.

"Why is it called Bagamoyo?" I asked. "Isn't *moyo* heart?"

We headed to the beach north of the boats where the sand was free of discarded fish and nets. I kicked off my shoes and tucked them into the kanga I was wearing around my waist. Each piece of bright kanga cloth had a proverb printed across the top. The one I was wearing read *Edmbe mbivu yaliwa kwa uvumilivu*, "a ripe mango has to be eaten slowly".

"*Bagamoyo*," Temela said, "means 'lay down your heart.' When the slaves left Africa, many of them left from here." He looked down the beach to the port. The sun was slipping down, blurring with crimson the silhouettes of the boats pulled onto shore and the figures of the people sorting through the day's catch.

"This is where they said goodbye. *Kwa heri*."

There wasn't sadness in his voice. We had waded in to our waists by then. I looked at him once, then dove under, swam away from shore until I had to come up for air, then shouted back to the brothers, "Let's swim to Zanzibar!" They laughed, splashing toward me. "Ogelea, ogelea! We are swimming to the island Zanzibar!"

I had imagined bringing relief to a suffering place crowded with pleading eyes. I had pictured frail bodies fraught with flies, human postures of disease and death. I didn't expect to wander into run-down buildings and find Rasta brothers sharing steamy ugali and fish, singing songs of pure bliss. I didn't expect the children and me to laugh until we gasped for breath. I didn't expect to cherish the feel and smell of wet rice slipping through my fingers as I washed it and poured it into the pot to boil. I certainly didn't expect to want to stay after I'd satisfied my thirst for self-validation and convinced myself that America was not the trap I feared.

Where was the grief I thought could guilt me into contentment? Poverty did not inherently include despair. On the contrary, it seemed to bring the concerns of life down to living. “Africa Time” meant there was not much attention to time at all. If someone agreed to meet at noon you could expect him sometime that evening. Tomorrow could stretch into next week. I let time fall away, shedding it like a snake sheds its skin. I was crawling from my own, emerging clean and new. That ancient, translucent, dried-out shell, I left somewhere in the past. First I peeled away minutes, then hours, then days. Underneath those empty measurements I found the immeasurable—an exquisite awakening. I anticipated the questions when I went home: *How was Africa? What was it like?* It was beautiful, alive, terrifying, tragic, resilient, true. It was... falling in love. But who can explain that?

The next morning I would hold Kenny and kiss his forehead. I would hug Jimmy and Miriam goodbye, and take a dalla dalla straight to the airport in Dar es Salaam. Then I would go back to America. But that night, sitting by the dunes in the semi-darkness, I could think of no other home. Rajabu peeled an orange and handed me a half. I dug my heels into the sand.

This is where I lay down my heart.

The ocean at dusk seen from the Bagamoyo shore

APPENDIX A
PROVERB MEANINGS

The proverbs that head each chapter are written in Swahili. Here are their translations into English:

Chapter 1: Kuelekeza si kufuma. *To aim is not to hit.*
Chapter 2: Baada ya kisa, mkasa. Baada ya chanzo, kitendo. *After a reason, a happening; after a beginning, an action.*
Chapter 3: Angenda juu kipunga, hafikilii mbinguni. *Even if the hawk goes high, he does not reach the sky.*
Chapter 4: La kuvunda halia ubari. *There is no incense for something rotting.*
Chapter 5: Jambo usilolijua ni kama usiku wa kiza. *A matter of which you are ignorant is like a dark night.*
Chapter 6: Maji hufuata mkondo. *Water follows the current.*
Chapter 7: Hapana marefu yasiyo nambu. *There is no distance that has no end.*
Chapter 8: Angurumapo simba, mcheza nani? *Who dares play when the lion roars?*
Chapter 9: Mtaka yote hukosa yote. *He who desires all, misses all.*
Chapter 10: Apendaye haogopi. *The one who loves is not afraid.*
Chapter 11: Kupotea njia ndiko kujua njia. *To lose the way is to learn the way.*
Chapter 12: Dunia mti mkavu: kiumbe siulemee. *The world is like dead wood: mortal, do not trust it.*
Chapter 13: Nyumba ya udongo haihimili vishindo. *A mud hut cannot withstand great shocks.*
Chapter 14: Mwanzo kokochi, mwisho nazi. *The beginning is a bud, the end is a coconut.*