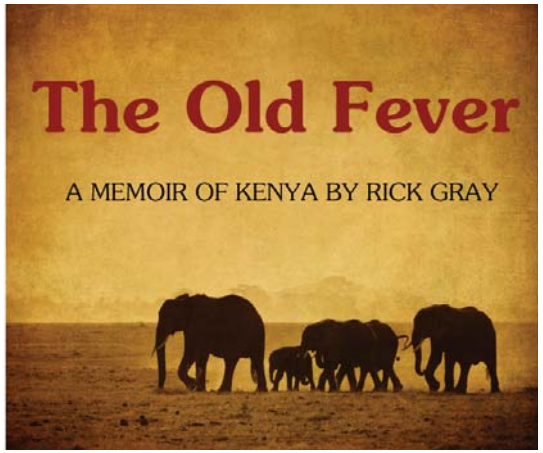

Wordrunner e-chapbooks | December 2012

Exerpts from a Memoir

by Rick Gray

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"That is not a place to visit unless one chooses to be an exile ever afterwards....."

— Doris Lessing, *This Was the Old Chief's Country* (Preface)

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Yellow Moon

The first night I spent in Kenya a child was born in the hotel room above mine. I woke to the sound of running, a chattering of voices like nesting birds, then singing. When I tried to gather more details the next morning, the Kenyan hotel staff grew nervous and encouraged me to focus on the Peace Corps breakfast buffet. The birth stayed with me throughout the three months of in-country training that followed, and when I finally waved goodbye and headed off alone into Kenya, I sensed there might be no turning back. After arriving at my post in the highland town of Ol Kalou I collapsed into my sleeping bag and felt as if I had fallen into a place that had been waiting for me since the day I was born.

On that first dawn the cry of roosters scratched me out of strange dreams, disturbed by malaria preventatives. Then came the sound of deep voices through my wall, none of them speaking the Swahili I was taught, but a tribal language I didn't understand. I spotted a boy standing in my open doorway, holding a basket of eggs. A bottle of milk, a corncob stuck into its opening as a cork, rested on the ground near his bare feet. I lifted my head and motioned him into the room. He stepped back further, rested the basket on the ground beside the bottle of milk, and sprinted away. I rose from my sleeping bag and walked out into the light.

Ol Kalou had been Maasailand before the British arrived and civilized it with their fences and wheat. After independence in 1963, Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first president, parceled out the land in this area as gifts to his Kikuyu tribesmen. But the Kikuyu I came to know there weren't grateful. They all dreamed of returning to the real Kikuyuland on the other side of the Abedare Mountains that hung over Ol Kalou's valley. The rolling green hills that called to them over these mountains were filled with old relatives and trees. Ol Kalou was treeless and open to the cold night winds that often left the ground frozen in the mornings. The school kept holding tree planting ceremonies, to raise Kikuyu morale. Their hearts weren't in it. They wanted the old trees.

But I loved it from the beginning. Its stark highland moors stirred something tribal in my blood, and I could feel my Celtic ancestors stirring as I wandered in my gumboots through its bleak, soggy fields. I loved the strange shapes of its rocky crevices that looked stabbed into the rugged curves of its moors. I loved the shade of blue that blazed from its sky like something out of a child's joyous paintings. I even loved the solitude that came down on you like the rains as you moved through the black chill of its nights. I should have known from the beginning there would be trouble ever leaving the place behind.

On that first morning, after a breakfast of boiled eggs, I turned my attention to the problem of work. I taught English, an assignment for which I had no qualifications beyond my three months of in- country training, and my substitute teaching work in Brooklyn, New York. We covered none of the course material in my classes back in Brooklyn, where I had bribed my students into a state of calm with stories of growing up in white suburbia. They listened as if the stories were coming from another land as far away as Africa. Now, as I peeked out of my faculty housing window and saw the Kenyan students beginning to appear, walking solemnly up the rocky driveway with their parents, some with goats in tow as an alternative to cash tuition payments, I felt completely out of my depth, and a fraud. Despite what I had planned on paper during training, there were no supplies at the school, not even chalk, and it soon became clear I would need to throw myself in front of these students as I had done in Bed-Stuy in Brooklyn.

On the first day of classes I was paraded before a ragged line of students by a headmaster with whiskey on his breath at eight o'clock in the morning. The students did their best to keep straight faces at the sight of our little parade, but there were a few whose hand-me-down school uniforms shook with wild laughter. I joined the other faculty at the head of the parade after I was introduced and the Kenyan flag was raised. We were over eight-thousand feet above sea level and could see our steaming breath as we sang the national anthem. On Kenyan government radio and television, the national anthem sounds forceful and full of hearty, military cheer. At our school, the students had managed to shift the anthem into a minor key, which gave it a mournful, haunting quality

that seemed to better match the morning fog and their future prospects in a one- party state. I spent the first few weeks in my classroom entertaining them with tales from New York City. They ate it up the way they devoured their lunch of potatoes and beans, for many their only meal of the day.

This is why I was very concerned when I was handed a letter, after I had only begun to develop a rhythm to my classes, that I had been selected for the Nyandarua District In-Service Teacher Training. I needed to report to the town of Nyeri, where I would be lodged at the Pastoral Centre during the intensive, week-long session. The letter was from the British Council in Kenya.

Our headmaster let me know I needed to attend the training, or they would all be in trouble. He stood not over five feet two, and looked behind his desk like an overgrown boy playing the big boss. But it was a disturbed child, not an innocent charmer. In the manner of the semi-functioning drunk, he dressed impeccably well when sober enough to appear in public, but I could see his hands shaking at the ends of his gold-cuffed sleeves, and his polished black shoes tapped the floor beneath his desk as he spoke, as if already moving for the drink he needed so badly. He stared me down with his bloodshot eyes, letting me know I could not refuse, or he would find a way to send me home. I thought of arriving penniless and sunburned at my parent's doorstep back in the First World, and agreed.

The Nyeri Pastoral Centre, in the bouncing green hills of Kenya's Central Highlands, brought back dark memories of my Catholic education. As I entered its gates I felt the same wave of dread that washed over me as I was dropped off at my high school, where I would spend the next four years under the authority of Benedictine monks. I expected an audition table lined with British Council officials in white linen suits and clipboards seated below a hanging crucifix and a Union Jack, taking notes as I presented my sample English lesson. When it was over, a man would slowly rise from behind the table and remove an envelope from his jacket and silently hand it to me. When I opened it, I would find a one-way ticket to Newark as the room burst into cruel, dry laughter.

"Goodbye, my boy," he would wave as I fled the room, "and never come back to our Keeeeenya."

I found a room filled with Nyandarua District secondary school English teachers, around fifty of them, unpacking their bags and claiming their spaces on the bunk beds that had been arranged for our lodging. The space boomed with the deep rumblings of the Kikuyu tongue. As I stepped into the space with my olive-green U.S. Army duffel bag, the room fell silent. In the short time I had been in Kenya, I had learned not to attempt to break the awkwardness of these types of moments, but to take them even further. I removed a small tape player I carried around with me during this time, and pressed the play button. The sound of Bob Dylan's harmonica moaned through the space like the arrival of an alien spacecraft.

"You are knowing Don Williams," one of the teachers finally asked, approaching.

"Is he Peace Corps?" I shrugged, now setting up my bunk.

"American cowboy music," another teacher explained, "it is very beautiful." The mention of Don Williams had broken the ice, and soon there was a crowd around me, some of them waving cassette tapes, urging me to experience the genius of Don Williams. I had heard this kind of music being played on matatus, or communal taxis, everywhere I rode in Kenya. Squeezed into these vehicles, I would scan the faces around me hidden behind bags of maize, or live chickens, and would see many of them with their eyes shut blissfully, mouthing the words to a Glenn Campbell song, or soulfully swaying their heads to Dolly Parton. But Don Williams ruled. Pop in a Don Williams cassette in a Kikuyu matatu and everyone sighs as if there was suddenly air- conditioning. I never got a clear answer when I tried to identify the source of this music in Kenya, but I had no doubt it was brought in by American evangelical missionaries. If there had been an influx of hippies in the sixties would everyone be listening to the Grateful Dead? No, there was something about this music, like Christianity itself, that seemed to take to the up-country soil. I finally understood that I needed to surrender to it. At the Nyeri Pastoral Centre I gave in to the demands to turn off the Bob Dylan, and replaced it with Yellow Moon, which many of the teachers told me was Don Williams' most important album.

And what happened over the next week saved me. The British Council training made me understand that my storytelling in the classroom was, in fact, teaching English. But the training held other surprises. I couldn't hide and isolate myself in our communal lodging, but was forced to spend my nights perched on my bunk explaining myself to an audience of Kenyan male colleagues whose curiosity about American women was endless. They wanted white girlfriends, but would settle for a one-night stand, preferably with a blonde. I explained to them I had lost contact with white women, and could not even offer the phone numbers they were requesting, their Bic pens poised over their open palms, ready to write. But when I confessed a similar interest in the exotic, they listened closely, and whispered together below me in the bunk beds, plotting.

It happened the next night in a nun's room, with a crucifix mounted on the wall above a Spartan bed. Under the influence of many bottles of complimentary Tuskers, I believed it would have been culturally insensitive to refuse such a gift. There was also the deeper question of race. All of my late-night reveries about the magic of Kenya were nice, I observed my colleagues thinking, but could I pass their truer, African test? My colleagues led me down the pastoral center hallway and pointed to a door, slapping my back like encouraging teammates. I made sure to show no hesitation as I opened the door. Inside I saw a very large Kenyan woman already under the sheets, looking bored, and slightly sad, as if the post-coital depression had already begun.

"Can I come in?" I asked. She studied me for a moment, then began laughing. She bore a striking resemblance to the barmaid who had served us drinks earlier that evening. I had failed at everything else in my life, I rallied myself, then stepped into the room, stripped off my ruined khakis, and went to work as an ambassador of good will.

Somali Women

The paved road ended in the town of Isiolo, in the shadow of Mount Kenya. When we rolled over its lip, the music of the languages spoken in the bus quickened in the blazing heat outside our cracked windows. I had seen flatlands in the American Midwest, but this was a flatness unbroken by strip malls, or anything else except swirling yellow dust and the occasional acacia tree. The first dirt pothole hit us like a roadside bomb. Live chickens, rolls of khat, boom-boxes, one newborn lamb, tin suitcases, and fluoresecent plastic water containers came crashing down onto our heads. One women was knocked unconscious by the blow. Her friends lifted away their black veils and crowded around her, tipping back her head and pouring water down her throat. These women never veiled themselves again after this first pothole, and slowly stripped off the rest of their Arab covering throughout the dusty trip, letting their African colors fly. I rode my seat as if on the rolling prow of a pirate schooner, marveling at their beauty.

I understood early on in Kenya I had a problem with Somali women. The first time I saw one I was almost hit by a moped when she happened to let her veil fall from her face as we passed on Kenyatta Avenue in Nairobi. Their combination of Arab and African features, flowing desert clothing, and most effective of all, Islamic modesty, seemed designed to seduce. These women floated in their desert robes in my imagination during the long nights in my faculty housing space in Ol Kalou. Eventually I turned to my maps, searching for the road to Somalia.

When the town of Wajir began wavering on the horizon, I thought it was a mirage. I had been chewing khat furiously the entire ride with the other male passengers. I stepped with them out into Wajir's sand, my eyes darting around like a lizard's. How the town floated, and with such a steady vibration of well-being below it all. The many legless beggars around the bus, also chewing khat, seemed to agree. The sun was beginning to set, but the colors were so pretty, and the people of Wajir so nice, I didn't care about time. I cared about khat. I bought more bundles from

the many dealers that had gathered around the sighing bus, then made my way from the station and searched for a room where I could keep chewing.

I didn't sleep that night. I sat chewing on my hotel bed listening to the buzz of mosquitoes and the moaning of prayers from a nearby mosque. My hunger had disappeared since I had started chewing earlier that day, as had my desire for anything but more khat. I didn't even think about Somali women. Yet as relaxing as this sensation was, and how rare, I knew I was cheating. Drug trips had been done to death by another generation, not mine. Worse, getting high seemed to confirm the unspoken accusation I had read in the eyes of both friends and family before I had left the United States. I was going to Africa, they hinted, to run away from real life. I went down on shaky knees in the hotel room in Wajir and swore off khat. By noon I was starving again and searching for a Somali girlfriend.

Abdi, my guide, never stopped chewing khat the entire time I spent with him in Wajir. His face looked frozen into a mask of astonishment, and his eyes were bloodshot and yellowed and stared on the world as if it were a stem of khat he wished to get his teeth into. He never once ate solid food during our time together, and only took sips of milk, to ease the flow of khat into his bloodstream, he explained. When I raised the issue of dependency, Abdi admitted he was an addict, but being a khat addict meant you got to chew it all day, every day, and why, his bloodshot eyes pleaded, would anyone want anything else? As he spoke he clutched the khat stems in his bony hands and plucked away their leaves with a crazy, bird-like quickness. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead as if his brain were leaking khat juice.

Abdi led me down the main street of Wajir and out to the town well, displaying me to the residents like a trophy kill. A group of Somali women were gathered around watering their camels. At least half of the faces would not have seemed out of place on a Paris cat walk. The women showed no interest in the white man standing a few feet away, trying not to look like a pervert as he watched them dropping their black-rubber pouches into the well. Camels groaned around us in pleasure, sucking gallons of well water up into their twitching bodies. Eventually I turned back to Abdi and asked for help.

He pulled me aside and tried to break the bad news lightly. "You could offer them a Toyota Pajero, a big house, millions of American dollars, a mountain of khat, but they would never accept. It is not your fault. It is the way they are. These women prefer the bush."

I wouldn't accept it. A life of constant movement across a burning moonscape under the threat of drought and starvation and unending clan warfare was something I had been trained to believe anyone would flee at the first opportunity. And here I was, an American, and willing to buy dinner, and they would have nothing to do with me. I convinced Abdi to ask them if anyone was unhappy with her lot, and would like to be my girlfriend, if only for one night. (Their men had gone to the town to buy khat.) When Abdi reluctantly translated my message, they broke their cool and shook with laughter, some of them even dropping their sacks of water in the hilarity. They looked even better when they did this, their pearly teeth shining and their huge, Arab eyes dancing with delight. It was painful to watch, and I turned away from them and headed back to town. The next day in Wajir was no better, or the next, and I finally said goodbye to Abdi and hopped the bus further north, to the town of Mandera, located on the Kenyan border of both Ethiopia and Somalia.

When Mandera finally began to appear in the setting sun the next day, I thought of the French Foreign Legion. There was something Saharan about the flat rooftops, and the low, mean way the buildings seemed to cling to the sand. The town looked like it was burrowing into the earth like a cold-blooded reptile. Before we reached the main street, soldiers carrying AK-47s boarded the bus and wanted papers from anyone who seemed vulnerable to intimidation. When their eyes fell on me, they leaned with their mirrored sunglasses towards my face like they were discovering an unexploded desert mine. They escorted me off the bus and placed me into a battered Land-Rover. We then sped off to the District Commisioner's office for questioning.

"What is the purpose of your visit to Mandera?" the commissioner asked, still not fully believing what had been dragged into his office.

"I want a Somali woman," I almost croaked. I needed a Tusker beer and a bar of soap. A small cloud of red dust rose as I shifted in my seat. "Tourism," I told him. The commissioner studied me closely after I had spoken. He had seen my kind before, he told me with his sharp, watchful eyes, and was hip to the joke. I silently assured him that this was indeed no joke and flashed him my Peace Corps ID. He stared down at this with wonder, as if it contained a secret truth he had long suspected, but never completely believed. This is how I probably looked when watching elephants in the wild. The ID seemed to cheer him, and when he looked up at me again I offered him a hearty American smile. His expression coiled back into suspicion at this sight. The falcon eyes let me know he thought I was a disgraceful outcast. He reached over to a pile of census reports on his desk and lifted a rubber stamp and slammed it down on my permission letter, then told me to get out of his office.

As I walked down the dusty main street with my pack, the residents of the town ducked into alleyways and yanked away their gawking children. When I tried to check into a hotel, the man I greeted in the dingy reception area disappeared into a courtyard behind the building and never returned. That is when the thinnest man I have ever seen slipped out of the shadows behind me. I flinched when he approached. He lifted his stick-figure arms above his head as if telling me not to shoot him. We stood frozen in our positions for a few seconds. He then slowly lowered his arms and let his face move toward me on his long, stretching Somali neck, as if mimicking a snake.

"It is too Issssssslamic here," he hissed, then reached his hand out and clamped down on my wrist and began leading me away.

He had learned his act from Hollywood action films, I later understood. The pirated versions did brisk business in Mandera's video houses, along with Asian martial art releases and Bollywood soft-porn. I had seen the influence of these action films throughout Kenya, but never developed into such a convincing performance. He had internalized the American version of the black, Third World bad guy to a point where his acting appeared organic. It was a Mandera version of Method Acting, and he relished his role with conviction as he led me through the streets by the wrist, slinking ahead of me like an evil slave-trader and leering at the shocked townspeople. I'll call him Brando.

He told me right away that he had valium, and access to other drugs, including opium. When I brought up the subject of Somali women, he suggested he bring them to the infidel hotel he had found me, where he would drug their Fantas. That way, he explained, his accent a Somali tangle of Chuck Norris and Stallone, there would be no language issues. I agreed to the women, but told him I didn't want any drugs. I then slipped him some cash and he slinked away, checking for heat, before he slid on his mirrored sunglasses and flowed back into the streets. I ordered a spaghetti and goat meat and gave it a 50/50 I would ever see him again.

He returned in less than an hour with two girls. They were not Somali, or fifteen. Brando went to the counter and ordered orange Fantas as the girls took their seats at my table and lowered their large, frightened eyes. They looked to me like fourteen year old Boran girls. The colorful African khangas wrapped around their heads were not their own, and were tied in a way I have never seen in Africa, before or since. These girls didn't need me. They needed school fees, steady rains, and some clean luck. After an attempt to make conversation, I asked Brando if he had any of the valium he had mentioned earlier. I decided to drug myself to sleep. He told me that he had already crushed the drugs into the Fantas the girls were drinking. I went to my room and locked the door, popped my Mefloquine, and tried not to jerk off before I finally slept.

Brando was waiting for me in the tea house when I walked in the next morning. There was a pile of spent khat leaves on the table. His eyes sparkled with the drug in the sunlight blazing into the room like the flash of an explosion. The calendar over his shaved head advertised farming machinery. A Rambo decal was stuck to a greasy mirror on the tea house wall. The flies were already swarming.

We failed for the rest of the day to find a Somali woman willing to even talk, and so decided we would cross the border into Somalia. Brando told me to tell them I was going to buy a TV. When we returned empty handed, I was to tell them the TV was too expensive. But we never even got within fifty yards of Somalia before a soldier emerged from a tin shack border post and started shouting at us and waving a rifle.

"I want TV!" I shouted back at him, drawing a large square in the burning air around my head. I then made a peace sign with my fingers, to indicate the television antenna, which worsened the Somali's mood. When he disappeared into his shack and re-emerged with another armed soldier, Brando grabbed my shirt and began running with me back into Kenya. The faces of Somali women returning to their homes, many of them laughing, flew by me like beautiful demons as I sprinted with Brando back to the shelter of my hotel. I locked myself into my room and refused to come out. Eventually, I surrendered to Brando's continuous knocking,and joined him back in the Rambo room for tea.

I needed to get out of town. The Somalis would be coming for me, he explained, and everyone in Mandera knew where I was staying. I had done nothing wrong, I protested, and had a permission letter. Brando grinned at me as if I were an innocent child and urged me to get my pack from my room, now, and follow him to the air strip, where he would negotiate a seat back to Nairobi on a khat-running Cessna. I had heard the plane buzz over the town while hiding in my room, and there was something in Brando's dilated pupils that looked serious about his warnings. I downed my tea and allowed him to wrap my head in an Arab kaffiyeh, covering even my face, and accepted his mirrored sunglasses and slid them over my eyes. I saw no indication that anyone was trailing us, and the townspeople of Mandera, however polite, could not hold back their laughter at our sight as Brando and I crept with our backs against their buildings down the narrow alleyways and peered around corners as we made our way across town. I felt as if I had entered into one of the cheap action flicks playing in a Mandera video house.

The Cessna waited at the end of the dirt air strip at the edge of Mandera's booming khat market. As we approached I saw the pilot seated in the cockpit and counting a pile of cash. He had the pot-belly of a Kenyan politician, and the slow, lazy movement of a hippo basking in hot mud. He kept the plane doors open, for the breeze. I followed Brando up to the metal fencing that blocked access to the air strip. A crowd of people were waving money and begging for a flight to Nairobi. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my emergency fund, a one-hundred dollar bill. Brando took

the money. I tightened my muscles, preparing to chase. But he slithered through the crowd skillfully and waved me over in less than a minute. A Kenyan police officer, conspiring with Brando for his cut, quickly opened the metal fencing. Before I could say goodbye to Brando he shouted for me to run for the plane before someone else has claimed my seat. I aimed for the open Cessna door and sprinted through the dust.

It was only when I saw the blue shadow of Mount Kenya and the highlands appear below us, on the horizon, when I finally peeked over at the pilot's face. He looked over at me next to him, in the co-pilot's seat. Somali women had made a fool out of me, and he knew it. But I didn't look away, only grinned back at him, exhausted. His heavy, scarred cheeks widened in approval as he turned back to the controls, chuckling. I joined him, not knowing exactly what I was laughing about. Below us, the northern desert dissolved against the green edge of the highlands like the foaming wave of a burning brown sea.

The Notebooks

There was knocking, an edgy rhythm. I gripped my lantern and was rising from the pile of student notebooks when the door flew open. They say there are no second acts in American lives, but I could see my ex-girlfriend believed this did not apply if you were out of country. Her backpack burst with supplies, as if she planned to stay a long time, or forever.

It was my fault. During the dark days of Peace Corps training, I had composed long love letters, to numb my loneliness. After I had been posted to the Kenyan highlands, I romantically described my life, hoping she would share the letters with those in New York skeptical of my going to Africa. It was cheap vanity, I knew even as I wrote it, never thinking she would appear at my doorstep. Yet here she was. I let her in.

Our parting had not been smooth. We were at David Mamet's Speed-The-Plow on Broadway. Like every unemployed actress in New York, she was offended by the casting of Madonna in the only female role. She grimaced and squirmed in the darkness beside me throughout the first act. So when the theater lights came up during the intermission and I turned and told her I was moving to Kenya, she stormed from the theater. I stayed on for the second act. It was fucking Mamet. When I returned to her Village apartment I found her on the floor with her wrist slashed. It wasn't a deep cut, just a scratch below the surface to draw blood, probably a ketchup mixture. I played our game, rushed around, attended her wounds, and she revived.

Now, as I stared into the flame of my lantern dancing in her green eyes, I could feel the old craziness returning. She had dyed jet-black hair, cut short and pulled tightly on her head, with a nod toward punk. Though this was 1988, in a time just before heroin chic, she had the sharp cheekbones and the ennui rehearsed to perfection. She dumped her backpack on the floor and lit up a Marlboro, her smeared lipstick leaving a red stain on her cigarette that looked like blood, or dangerous sex. Her arrival set off days of turbulent fucking and fiery arguments, great entertainment to

the Kenyan school community, who clucked their tongues in disapproval. What was heard through the cardboard walls of the faculty housing spaces was never mentioned in the staff room, but the long silence that greeted my morning arrival let me understand I would be asked to leave if I continued. Yet I couldn't stop myself, and by the end of the second week I was on my knees, proposing.

"Will you marry me, Dana?" I asked, peering up from my filthy cement floor. She accepted. I headed off to the local Catholic mission to find a priest. Kenyans hid themselves as I bounded by their compounds like the village idiot.

"I'd like to get married," I told the Italian nun who greeted me. She sighed and looked upwards with a tired face and whispered what sounded like "Christ." She knew who I was. The Italian missionaries would visit our school on Friday afternoons for catechism classes, and seemed at first confused, and then irritated, by the presence of a white person living with Africans. Bored, I would sometimes visit their classes and sit with my students. The missionaries never smiled back at me.

"She's an African?" the nun asked.

"American. She's from New York."

Her shoulders sagged, her black, Italian shawl now hanging in the way I had seen in the Italian Film Festivals back in New York. I felt sorry for her. She had come to bring Jesus to the African bush, and now she had me. She let a long, nun pause pass, I knew them well. She told me to think it over for a few more days. As I thanked her for her help, she pierced me with a Mona Lisa smile. I had seen this before, an intuitive feminine warning, and it always intimates trouble. Walking back, the dread grew. The Kenyans now nodded with me in solidarity as I crept by their compounds.

When I opened the door to my space I found her sprawled on the floor and thought, oh no, not the wrist again. I wanted to kneel down beside her and explain that people don't cry out for help in Africa. Africans suffer silently and die. But then I noticed the notebooks scattered around the floor and knew it was over. While I sat with the nun, my girlfriend had been rifling my journals. And in those journals was something I had never mentioned in the letters to New York.

It started with the books. Not long after I arrived at the school I volunteered as the librarian and began to stock the library with the Heinemann African Writers Series. The problem was, nobody wanted to read the African Writers Series. What they wanted was another series of trashy African soft-porn with titles like Mwangi's Last Affair. I had thrown a few of these books into my African Writers Series choices, as a joke. They quickly spread through the student body like a tropical disease. There were lines outside the library to check one of them out, and I had to threaten many students for their return. Word of these books went even beyond our school, into the local villages. There were adults I recognized from the vegetable market turning up at the library door. Though written in English, they spoke to the community with a Nairobi version of slang that was irresistible. Mwangi's Last Affair was our most popular book.

> "She was a devil of the Nairobi streets, an alcoholic and a bhang addict, and she felt a savage pleasure burn like a paraffin lamp through her black perspiring body. In the dark hotel room on the wrong side of River Road, Mwangi's posh wedding ring sparkled like the eyes of a spitting cobra of India as he pounded into her like the Ashanti drums."

During the rains, the students stretched thick plastic coverings over the books, to protect them. They looked like stiffened condoms on the library shelf. I signed them out with the shame of a porn peddler.

Certain female students began to visit the library after school, asking if Gichuru's Last Taboo was available, or if Kimani's Anguish had finally been recovered. It was always the one I had a crush on at the time, and she always came alone. Africans are never alone. Everything is done communally, even naps. The students would nap on top of each other, in mounds, during the lunch recess. Basking, they called it. I would stroll over to a pile of girls, their breasts rising and falling in group rhythm beneath their school uniform shirt and ties. Their eyelids would open slowly before they gazed up at me with pity and concern. It was a look I often saw from Kenyans. To be alone in Africa is to be in trouble. Solitude is for the outcast, and is considered painful and shaming. But I

couldn't hide from them. They saw me every day up in front of their class, unprepared, unqualified, and riffing off an improvised syllabus. And they saw my lustful glances, which grew less and less subtle as the solitary nights grew longer.

The girls began wearing lipstick, which was banned at the school, along with smoking and jewelry and speaking tribal languages. But these rules were all interpreted freely, in the African way. It went beyond rebellion, beyond lipstick and the occasional earring. It came from the core of who they were, their bodies, their walks, and the African rhythm that swung against and even ripped its way through the cheap thread. They cocked their skirts into impossible angles, tied complicated tribal knotting into their white button-down shirts, and introduced lacework into their socks, which they would bleach into an immaculate white to create the maximum erotic tension against their long, dark legs. After a night of maps and secret drinking the sight of the socks was like a kick to the groin. Some of the girls even tried to get away with rubber gumboots, which appeared to my eyes, bloodshot from insomnia and bad brandy, like high- fashion, African kink. I sent them back to the dorms and told them to wear the standard shoe.

One afternoon a student famous for speaking in tongues appeared at the library door. I feared her power and considered locking her out. Before I could stand she had stepped through the doorway and, her lipstick glistening, asked, "Mr. Gray, why don't you enjoy us?"

She had been sent as a spokeswoman, and I quickly peered out of the library window for others. A few grazing goats lifted their heads from the grass, but otherwise the school compound looked empty. I turned back to her, hoping her eyelids wouldn't start fluttering, the sign of another trance coming on. Her voices would draw a crowd, the last thing I wanted at that moment. I caught myself staring at her socks and tore my eyes away and focused on the flapping Congo on the Africa map on the library wall. Yet I couldn't play dumb with her. She knew I had been around Ol Kalou long enough to know what the word "enjoy" meant, and she had psychic powers, and could read my thoughts as easily as one of the trashy books on the shelf.

"You don't like Africans?" she teased.

"No, it's not that---" I began to explain. A group of screaming, leaping students ran by the library window tossing a volleyball. The student who spoke in tongues turned away and rushed out the door. When I looked out of the window I saw her toss a fierce grin over her shoulder, then she turned away and became a schoolgirl again, racing with her classmates for the volleyball net. The library smelled like perfume. That night I wrote the first long, graphic sexual fantasy, inspired by this incident, into my journal. Within a month a pile of dirty notebooks lay beneath my bed.

These were the open notebooks now spread around my American fiancé. They peered up from the cement floor like the knowing African faces of my students. I did not truly love this woman I had asked to marry me, they laughed, and she did not love me. My proposal was only part of the sick act of our old life. I looked down straight into her green eyes and refused to apologize. She came at me with a Swiss Army knife before it was finally over, then grabbed her backpack and stormed away. I followed her out into the tall grass and watched until her tight black clothing had disappeared into the valley, and knew all of my old dreams were dead. I was glad no one could see me smiling. And when I turned back to my space, I saw I was wrong. Some of the Kenyan faculty had witnessed the scene. I think this was the first time we truly saw each other. They were grinning too.

Somehow Peeling

I would always find him seated calmly in my home, reading one of my books. I would slip off my muddy gumboots and step barefoot across the cold cement floor. I reached below the bed, quickly, to startle any wildlife, then slid out a bottle of Kenyan Bond 7 brandy. Pouring a drink (Maina never accepted one in the two years I spent with him), I sat down on my bed and leaned back against the growing collection of African maps on my wall. Now that I was settled, Mr. Maina recognized my presence, and lifted his face from his reading. He wore a green knit hat pulled down to the edge of his heavy-lidded, frog-like eyes.

"Mr. Gray," he began our session, "haba na haba hujaza kibaba."

"Little by little fills the cup," I answered. Maina, our school Swahili teacher, enjoyed quizzing me on proverbs, which he used to begin our discussion, like a Zen master with a koan. His eyes softened after my translation as he approved my answer. He lifted his huge hands from the pages of my book and adjusted the lime-green hat, grinning at a private joke that swam up from behind his eyes, then dropped his attention back to the page, wrinkling his brow and prepping me for a question.

"This man, this Paul Ther…"

"Theroux," I volunteered.

"He is riding the iron rooster, isn't it?"

"Yeah. The guy likes to ride trains."

"This is the book?" he asked, baffled.

"Yep. He cruises all over China on trains."

"But why?"

"Curiosity," I countered, and leaned back into my giant Michelen 746, Central and Southern Africa.

"I think you are cheating me," Maina said. Riding trains around China could not be the true subject of a book. He studied my face for signs of deception. "He is a spy," Maina concluded, waving the book as if he had captured its author, "he is an agent of your CIA."

"You always say that when you don't understand. You're paranoid. This is why people don't take Africa seriously."

"Your people are not serious?"

"About Africa. They think it's just….."

"Primitive?" Maina suggested, lifting his eyebrows in accusation, then glancing down at my dirty bare feet.

This would go on for another hour or so before, the pleasantries now over, he would move on to the real subject of his visit. This was always about our futures. Maina believed they were connected, in the African way, by fate.

"Mr. Gray," he would begin, waving away the offer of another drink, "have you ever been thinking of buying a plot?"

"With what?" I laughed, gesturing around the bare cement space. Our faculty housing space had once been a storage shed of a white, colonial farmer, and had been divided into tiny apartment by cardboard walls. Even the slightest movements could be heard by the other teachers.

"You cannot cheat me. You people always have money. How much is a ticket from New York to Kenya?"

"The Peace Corps paid for it."

"You see? Your money is always growing. You people only need to scratch the ground." He made a Kikuyu gesture with his right arm, as if hoeing cabbages on his farm.

"And what would I do with a plot?" I asked, not bothering to argue that I had no money, which was not really true. There was always my government, the most powerful in the world, who would bail me out and evacuate me if I ever got into real trouble. There was also my American family who, from an African point-of-view, lived like royalty, or at least corrupt national leaders. It was a ridiculous argument, claiming poverty to Mr. Maina, who shared a similar living space to my own with three other teachers. His salary, even lower than mine, was shared with an extended family who considered him lucky to not have to wake up in the morning and scratch a living out of the hard, frosted dirt of Ol Kalou.

"You settle here," Maina answered, "and write about the people."

Now it was my turn to study his face for signs of lying. Even his use of the word settle seemed suspicious to me, so close to settler, one of the code words in Africa for the white man. But Maina never showed his hand, only stared into my eyes, waiting

for my next move. This was a deeper game than I had ever known, I understood, and Mr. Maina played it like chess.

On other nights, the conversation would turn back to his dreams, which he was always careful to protect. It usually began with his delicate fingering of another one of the books that appeared in the growing pile on my desk. Maina would handle the books as if they were newborns. His huge, dark hands could envelop even the Russians. He had heard of these novels from Kenyans who had received Cold War scholarships from the Soviets. One night I came in from another midnight stroll across the cold highland moors and found him shaking his head and clucking his tongue in disbelief as he read War and Peace at my desk.

"These people are very intelligent, Mr. Gray," Maina warned.

"No one else can touch them," I agreed, settling in with my drink.

"Not even American?" Maina lifted his eyes from the page, teasing.

"Not really. Not the depth."

"Depth?" Maina mangled the word, so alien to the African tongue.

"They go deep," I said, pointing downwards as if explaining a new vocabulary word to a student. His frog eyes followed my finger below my bed, where I stored my journals. Mr. Maina knew about these hidden journals, and probably read many of them while I was wandering the African moors. On this night he leaned slightly forward and peered into the darkness, widening his eyes with exaggerated curiosity. We exploded with laughter, howling like fenced-in wolves. Maina slapped his knees and did the slow, African roll of the upper body, letting the pleasure seep deeply into every cell. Happiness is an oasis, and you must enjoy every drop of it before the next drought of boredom, or worse, that is surely waiting at the edge of the next dry season. Maina was teaching me this in his own, African way.

"I want to open a bookstore," he announced on this night, once our laughter had faded. He had turned back to War and Peace before he had spoken, and now kept his eyes down on the page, frightened about the reaction to such a moment of exposure. It was as if he were expecting to be beaten for saying it, or worse, cursed. The darkness was thick outside the window on this moonless night. The silence was broken only by the sound of far-off

wild dogs fighting over a snatched chicken, and the sprinkle of passing rain in the tall grass. We sat still together under the hiss of my pressure lamp.

"A bookstore?" I asked carefully.

"The people are needing to read," Maina said, his eyes remaining on the page. There was now a defiant tightening of the muscles in his jaw. He clutched the book harder. "I would have everyone available, Mr. Gray. Even Russians. And Paul Ther--- "

"Theroux."

"You are knowing Sidney Sheldon?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah?"

"I'll be selling Sheldon and…." Maina now rifled through the books on my desk, his eyes shining in the hot yellow light of my pressure lamp. "Who is this Bukowski?"

"American. Lots of cursing."

"And Things Fall Apart. This I will be placing in my window, for attraction."

"It'll work like a charm"

"Like a butcher's goat, hanging." Mr. Maina lifted Chinua Achebe's novel and dangled it above his head like a bloody goat carcass in the market. We were both very hungry for meat, and leered up at it like wolves. The book looked delicious.

"You will sponsor me?" I heard Maina quietly ask.

When I lowered my eyes I saw Maina staring at me. It was a look I had seen many times before in Kenya, but never so intimately. I felt cornered. I shifted on my bed, wanting to crawl below my filthy sleeping bag.

"I told you, I have no money," I said. Mr. Maina held his stare, waiting for me to get over my poverty act and cough up the American dough.

"Call your Peace Corps," he told me, when it was clear I didn't know what to say next, "tell them it is for helping."

"We can't do profit projects," I said.

"Then call the Embassy."

"They only handle emergencies."

"Mr. Gray," Maina said, gesturing at his second-hand rags, and his cracked, plastic shoes, which were somehow never muddy, "this is an emergency. The people are needing."

"The embassy doesn't do bookstores."

"Call your family. They are rich, isn't it?"

"I told you. My family is not rich."

"You are cheating me, Mr. Gray."

"I'm not," I told him, looking straight into his eyes, "I really don't have the money. Look at me." And now it was my turn to gesture at myself. I waved my glass of brandy down toward my dirty bare feet. They looked like something out of Dickens.

"But you are only playing," Maina said. "For you, this is only adventure."

"It is not!" I snapped, rising out of my bed and pacing the cement floor. "I am sick and tired of everyone thinking I'm rich! I can't even afford meat!"

"Because you are buying too many big books!" Maina argued, waving my War and Peace. I would buy these books at a store next to the Thorn Tree Café, next to the New Stanley Hotel in Nairobi, a hub for the traveling circus of tourists, aid workers, journalists, and raconteurs passing through town. The price of even a coffee at this café would buy a decent bag of rice, or sugar, and its food, so great a temptation after months of maize meal and rice gruel, would put a dangerous dent in a Peace Corps monthly salary. Yet I went anyway, and nursed my coffee for hours as I leafed through my new book. "Look," Maina went on, pulling V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr. Biswas out of the pile and pressing his accusing index fingers against the price on the back cover, "it is twelve pounds! This is better than my cousin's pay, and he is police!"

"Then ask him for money!"

"He is having a family. You are alone, Mr. Gray. You are nothing. You are….."

"I'm what? White? That's what you were going to say, isn't it? White!"

Maina turned away, acting hurt. He was a very bad actor, and had the African weakness for melodrama. I could see his broad shoulders begin to shake beneath the worn edges of his drab sports jacket.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"You are not white, Mr. Gray."

"And what am I?"

"You are red, and somehow peeling. The students are saying your face is looking like your Africa map. Hahahahahaha!"

I stood bewildered by the comparison of my face to a map. I looked over at my Michelen 746 and tried to see myself in it, but came up blank. Then I remembered the tattered National Geographic map I had recently hung in the library. There were sections of the Congo and Angola that flapped out from the wall like, yes, peeling skin.

In the Darkness

I had received an early warning about Kenya at the age of four, when I saw Born Free on a television at a neighbor's house in Hillside, New Jersey. I don't remember how I got inside their home, or where my parents were, but what I do remember is the lions. They stayed with me for many days afterwards, and nights, roaring through my dreams. The lions in Born Free were the greatest things I had ever seen. When I first saw them for real a few years later, at the Ringling Brothers Circus in Madison Square Garden, it was not the same. In Born Free, the lions were in the wild in Africa, and even then I understood this was better than cartoon fantasies or the circus. I decided that I too wanted to be released into the wild, like the lions in Born Free. My explorations of my Hillside, New Jersey surroundings were discouraging. Eventually I let the lions go, understanding they were even further from my world than God, who seemed vaguely connected to my own through the intercession of fierce nuns. I turned away from lions in Africa and focused on my own survival.

But in Kenya it all came roaring back. Against all the odds, a sense of wonder with the natural world had somehow survived in my heart despite my many years of education. Unlikelier still, I had landed in the country where the forgotten creatures of childhood dreams still roamed in the darkness that lay just outside the glow of my lantern.

The students began appearing at my door as I dressed in the freezing dawn to tell me there was a leopard sleeping on the paved road in front of our school. Within seconds they were treated to the sight of a white man racing through the tall grass, sometimes shirtless, with my pants unzipped and my peeling neck craning as I peered through the fog for the spots of a leopard. I blamed the laughter behind me for scaring away the animal. The forest of the Abedare Mountains above the school hosted one of the densest leopard populations in the world, yet I never saw a leopard in the two years I spent in their shadow. But they were out there, watching. During my night walks, there were times when the darkness

purred with their sly presence. My students were out there too, enjoying my doomed searches. On many of my hunts I heard their sly laughter quickly squelched against the cold, wet earth not far from where I crept with my flashlight.

Undeterred, I turned to the maps and went for lion. The biggest obstacle was Meru National Park, part of the official tourist circuit in Kenya, which meant gate-fees and expensive rooms at a luxurious, colonial-themed guest lodge. The area would also be heavily patrolled and fenced, making illegal entry impossible. An end run around the park could be done by skirting the border areas of Somalia. This would take days on foot, lots of water, and was, I accepted, crazy. Yet when I began to look for other options, I soon learned the park at this time was infested with heavily-armed poachers. They had driven away the tour companies and park organization. When I telephoned the park lodge from a Nairobi call center, no one answered. There were no recent reports on Meru in the latest editions of both the Lonely Planet and the Rough Guide to Kenya. I couldn't believe my luck. The place was wide open for trespassing.

Mike, a fellow Peace Corps volunteer, agreed to come along on my safari. The situation at Meru was even worse than I imagined when I arrived. At the park entrance, we found a dozing guard curled on the floor of a hut, a green park authority hat covering his face as if he were dead. Flies buzzed around him, and his gun leaned against the wall like a theatrical prop from a long-closed production. We simply walked past the entrance gate and far into the park, where I stopped beneath the shade of an acacia tree and waited to hitch a ride.

A few hours later, I could see that Mike was beginning to doubt his decision to join me. Mike had stumbled through training with a look of bewilderment, as if he had been drugged by his parents, who had grown tired of raising him, and dumped onto a plane headed for Africa. I think Mike agreed to go to Meru because he was so happy someone had spoken to him. It was wrong of me to ask him on such a poorly planned trip, but I couldn't help liking Mike, with his strange silences and his bone-deep eccentricity, and knew there was no one else foolish enough to join me.

Below the acacia tree, I tried to lighten the situation with small talk. Mike wasn't talking. The stillness of the African bush,

which slowly envelops you like salty air as you approach an ocean, steadily shrank the sound of my voice until I could no longer speak. We stood in silence and growing awe as we began to understand where we were. Things we hadn't noticed began to appear around us in the landscape: a large, dead snake on the dirt road not far ahead of us, a troop of baboons observing us from a distance, the circling vultures overhead. "We'll give it ten more minutes," I said, and the burning air around me seemed to swallow up my words before they reached Mike. His face now looked like that of a little boy who knew he had done something very bad.

The vehicle that finally appeared was driven by a British couple who peered out at us as if they were seeing a new species of ape. As we climbed into their Land-Rover, heaving with relief, I could see they were amused in that British way.

"American?" the driver began, with mock-surprise. I prepared to return his serve, but Mike jumped in, his voice quivering with gratitude and heat exhaustion.

"Yeah! We're American Peace Corps volunteers! I'm from Wisconsin!"

"Out for a stroll, are we?" His wife in the passenger seat tightened her shoulders, trying to suffocate her snicker.

"We're going to see animals," Mike informed the couple.

"Is that so? And where are you staying?"

"We're just taking it as it comes. Peace Corps, ya know? Hahahahaha!" Mike had never spoken so much since I had known him, and was clearly maddened by the sun.

"So where are you guys from?" I asked, now that we were all good friends.

"England," the woman's voice rang through the Land-Rover as if someone had struck a cold bell.

"Little island off the coast of Europe. You might have heard of it," her husband followed up, savoring his words as if they were sips of his local, bitter ale. They were having a blast.

"But England is Europe, isn't it?" Mike asked.

"Look," I said, "just drop us off at the lodge."

All management at the lodge had fled long ago. A group of men in faded uniforms was gathered outside playing checkers with Tusker bottle caps. As Mike and I moved through the abandoned bar, with dusty buffalo horns mounted on the wall, no one came to serve us, or even ask what we were doing there. After looking for a beer, or any kind of food, Mike and I shuffled out onto the verandah, where I was hit by my first sight of wild elephants.

The image struck me like an enormous African fist, and I stood dumb in its long shadow. I don't think I ever really believed such a thing could still exist in our time. What I was witnessing disproved everything I had sadly come to accept as the truth. One of them nodded its huge grey head and swing its truck up over its back. As it sprayed itself with warm muddy water, a primal smirk seemed to rise from the bundle of tough, tear-stained wrinkles beside its mouth. I couldn't stop gasping. These animals existed in opposition to everything that is compromised, cynical, and most of all, small, in our world. The elephant is not of the world, but of the earth and its creation, and it's impossible to observe them in the wild without thinking of the mystery of these things. I wanted to cheer them on, to scream with joy, to jump up and down and wave my arms and let them know how important it was they were still around.

Mike finally shook me out of my reverie and broached the issue of food and shelter. We approached the employees of the lodge, still playing checkers, and attempted some Swahili before we reverted to hand gestures. We soon had our eyes shut and were fake snoring. We were led by one of the uniformed men down a dirt track before we saw a group of decaying safari huts standing in the tall grass. Our host led us inside and showed us the simple cots and the washroom. Mike and I were both too grateful for the bed to bring up the subject of food, and our host wasn't mentioning money for the hut. We decided not to push our luck and kept quiet. As soon as he left, Mike and I both collapsed onto the beds and tried to sleep.

"Hey Rick," I soon heard.

"I know," I told him. We needed to eat. It was the kind of hunger that comes from being outdoors. We climbed out of the beds and out into the red light of the sunset and began walking down the dirt track back to the lodge. We were about halfway there when we saw the paw print.

It was fresh, and very large. There was no question it was a lion. As I stood over it, my heart was beating so hard my ears felt like

they were shaking to its rhythm. I turned to Mike, beaming with happiness. I then began following the prints, motioning for him to join me. He held out for a while, then said he thought it was wise to return to the hut, and left me.

It was only later that night, after returning from the lodge with six boiled eggs and some water, when I understood the recklessness of my actions. But guilt paled against the lion. Though I never spotted a lion on this trip, the prints were enough for me. So was the roaring that woke us up that night. Everything I had ever thought was swept aside by the deep vibrations that ripped open the humming darkness around us. This was the sound of the earth's old strength defying everything trying to kill it, even the lurking poachers. I lay still on the cot, dizzy with a strange kind of remembering.

Checking into the Pig

It wasn't long after Meru when a student raised his hand in class and asked me if I had a fever. The entire class nodded, and urged me to seek help. I thought it may be another prank, and so ignored them and continued my grammar lesson until the bell rang. When I walked back to my space and looked in my dusty mirror, I saw what looked like a psychotic clown staring back at me, with dark purple circles painted around his eyes. Grabbing my pack, I ran down to the road to catch the bus to Nairobi. I had to sit down in the grass before the bus arrived, and by the time we pulled into the city three hours later I thought I was going to die.

The Peace Corps medical office took a blood sample and confirmed it was malaria, then put me up at the Hotel Pigale, known among volunteers as The Pig. It was here where you came back into contact with the people you knew from training, and where the effects of Kenya were most clearly observed. You learned at The Pig that it wasn't the longer, greasier hair, the lost fifty pounds, or the sun-damaged skin that were the most striking changes. The transformations came from deeper within.

There was the volunteer from San Francisco, a pitch-perfect Bay Area hipster when he arrived at training, with the slow, stoned-sounding way he had of making everything he said sound like a sarcastic question. Now, seated at the downstairs bar, you could see his cool had been deeply shaken. His eyes looked startled behind the ravaged lenses of his ironic nerd glasses. I sat down slowly beside him at the bar. He turned to me and stared into my eyes.

"So?" I asked, when it started turning weird, "what's up, Dave?"

He had dropped out of the Peace Corps, he informed me, after he had been hired by the World Food Program. He had just returned from southern Sudan. His job there was to take the hands of those refugees who had received food rations and press their index fingers into a purple liquid, to mark them, so they wouldn't return and horde supplies. As he narrated his story, he kept reenacting the dipping of the fingers, and the others in the bar slowly gathered around him to listen. He described how some of the recipient's would try

to cheat the system, scraping skin off their hands, in order to return for more food. At one point his job was to put babies on hanging scales, like butcher's meat, to check on their weight. "The flies," his voice trailed off, "there were so many flies….." He waved the smoky air around him, as if waving away the clouds of flies away from the starving, hanging babies. This was not the same person I had known from training, but for all his tics and trauma, I preferred this version to the one I knew before. My generation's cheap mask of irony had shriveled in him under the Sudanese sun.

And there were others who appeared at The Pig with stories of the harsher Africa beyond Kenya. There were the three travelling women volunteers from Mauritania who almost started crying when the waiter brought us complimentary glasses of water. I can still see their hands shaking as they clutched the glasses and moved them closer to their hearts, as if protecting their own babies. The Weird Sisters, they were nicknamed by the other volunteers during their stay in Kenya. Whenever I tried to gather information about Mauritania they went quiet and quickly peeked at each other like abused siblings keeping a family secret. It was not until I visited Mauritania, over a decade later, that I finally understood their silence. Mauritania remains the strangest place I have ever been. Even today, when the subject of Mauritania comes up, I am struck silent in much the same way as these women at The Pig.

Many of the people I saw in The Pig had already begun to resemble nineteenth-century versions of their former selves, tougher and bonier and more in tune with their ethnicity. The quality of their storytelling reflected this as well. We lived with no TV, no Internet, no cell phones, and not even a steady supply of good books (though these were traded like smuggled diamonds behind closed doors of the shabby rooms upstairs). The audience of volunteers, for the most part still malarial and under the influence of highly toxic drugs, sat captivated and nodding in recognition and delight as the stories unfolded, sometimes even bursting into applause. No one ever listened to the Peace Corps nurse, who urged us stay out of the bar until we were fully recovered. We knew our stories were as necessary as the medicine, and were treating ourselves in the Pig to much more than mere survival.

One night during my recovery I saw a beaten Triumph motorcycle roar up to the Pig's doorway. After the machine had come to a heaving rest, a couple rose together from a cloud of dust and exhaust and, yanking away their helmets, peered wide-eyed into the bar. Sweaty hair stood straight off their heads as if they were being electrocuted by their sudden contact with civilization.

They were holding hands as they staggered inside, ducking their heads in the doorway as if stepping through the entrance of another woven hut. They were British, I soon discovered, and had no connection to the Peace Corps, or any other organization, and had ridden the motorcycle across Africa. They began their journey in Cameroon, but had little to say of West Africa, stuttering and finally falling silent when they tried to describe it. But when their story reached Zaire, as the Congo was still called at this time, their eyes narrowed and the hint of wicked grins appeared on their faces.

The Ituru Forest, located deep within the jungle of Africa's heart, and home of the pygmies, has occupied a place in my imagination almost as far back as the lions of Born Free. To hear tales from those who had stood beneath its ancient trees was a thrill that burned straight through my malaria. The pygmies, as amazed at this British couple's appearance in their forest home as I was by their arrival at The Pig, would set up an area for them every night after their dinner around a fire. There they were offered joints of the most powerful marijuana they had ever smoked. It's possible the joints were spiked with Ibogaine, a hallucinogen found in areas of West Africa and used in initiation ceremonies, or another less known plant used locally. Whatever the case, the couple could only laugh till tears came and, as they tried to explain to us seated in the bar, "wrestle with all the beautiful colors." The pygmies, now satisfied with their hospitality, and the comfort of their happy alien guests, would then pepper them with questions. Their answers were then translated by a tribe member who had travelled beyond the edges of the forest and had picked up some English from aid workers in Kisangani.

It would go on for hours and hours around the fire, every night for the five days they spent in the village. The Ituru forest listeners never ran out of questions, and never tired of listening to another

stoned description of London. As the English couple's words were translated, they gasped with surprise and sometimes even broke into chants, clapping along with sophisticated polyrhythms and offering more of their mysterious pot.

"Sometimes we would just make shit up," the Englishman said, "just to keep it going. Best time I ever had in my bloody life. I think I'll always see London now in the way I told it to the pygmies. It'll be my curse." Lots of nods from the audience. This wasn't a joke, we now understood, and it was a relief to hear the word from someone outside our diseased circle.

The Peace Corps nurse came to my room later that night at the Pig to check on me. A tall redhead, she had lived for years in Africa and had worked for the Flying Doctors, bringing emergency medical aid to the most remote areas of the continent. For her first appearance, she strode into our Swahili language training hut and scanned her eyes over us like a bird of prey. She then crossed her ankles with the elegance of a desert nomad and folded her long, freckled arms, hooped with Maasai jewelry, over her braless breasts. Any questions, she asked. Even her khaki dress looked glamorous. She had a keen understanding of the level of sexual frustration in the hut, and toyed with it in her answers, practically winking at the clued-in listeners. "I always sleep under a mosquito net," she purred, brushing her swirling red hair away from her sparkling green eyes, "and I've slept in many kinds of beds." I wanted to whistle.

Now she was knocking on my hotel room door. To hell with malaria, I thought, and threw off the sweaty sheet and lifted myself out of bed. I still had on the khakis I was teaching with when I left Ol Kalou, and was shirtless. In my state, I thought this might look dashing, and so remained bare-chested as I cracked open the door.

"Just checking on you," she cooed, peering in from the dark hallway, only inches from my dried lips. She was wearing the khaki dress again. Still addled with medication, this felt like a scene in a spy drama, the secret rendezvous at the safe house.

"Would you like to come in?" I asked, opening the door further. She smiled again, but remained still in the hallway. I interpreted this at the time as her struggle to remain professional, despite a burning desire to make love to me, and considered reaching out and taking her hand. "Are you married," I asked instead, whispering the famous British line into the dark hallway, "or do you live in Kenya?"

She looked concerned, rather than charmed, by my question. I felt another wave of nausea move through me and gripped the doorknob for balance. The nurse urged me to get some rest, and to stay out of the bar, before she disappeared down the dark hallway. The bitterness that followed tasted even worse than the Aralen I was taking. I fell back onto my bed.

I knew I had to get back to Ol Kalou. As comforting as the companionship at The Pig was, its charms began to fade under the effects of modern medicine. I missed the cool highland air. I missed my rice gruel and the drone of the BBC cricket scores on the shortwave. I missed the midnight chats with Mr. Maina. I missed the students. I missed elephants and lions. I even missed the invisible leopards. And so I slipped away from the Pig one morning at dawn, not yet fully recovered, and with a tingling in the blood that felt something like the gladness of going home.

The Curse

There were two students in Ol Kalou who were Luo, a tribe now famous for their relation to Barack Obama, whose father hailed from Luoland. How these poor kids ever ended up in the Kikuyu highlands was a mystery I never solved, but during my solitary walks I often passed them like another lost sheep on the moors. They cornered me one afternoon in the library after school. One of them, the quieter one, crouched near the window, peering outside for any listeners, as the front man stepped toward my desk.

"You are going to Kisumu tomorrow?" he whispered.

"How did you know?" I didn't remember telling anyone about my trip. The two exchanged a quick look and stared down at their flip flops, their show of defiance and Luo solidarity among the shoe-wearing Kikuyu. Their broad, calloused feet were often frozen into a shade of light grey, and caked with dried mud, like the thick hide of elephants. Another awkward moment of cross-cultural stalemate passed. I quickly let it go without explanation. I was learning. And it was a relief to talk to boys for once. The library visits from the girls during this period were charged with feminine intrigue, and left me horny and sullen. "What d'ya need?" I grinned.

"Samaki!" they both hissed. It was as if they were asking for food itself, rather than just fish, to relieve the pain they suffered under a Kikuyu diet of corn and beans and potatoes. The front man dug his hand into his school uniform shorts and pulled out a faded bandanna, in which lay a heavy Kenyan coin. It looked ancient, a relic from the Kenyatta administration, and was a dark bronze from oxidation.

"Now wait a minute," I said, waving away the coin. "I can't transport samaki. It'll go bad on the bus."

"Bad?" they asked. They couldn't associate this word with their beloved fish. I searched my Swahili for the word for rotten, then gave up and wrinkled my peeling nose to indicate the smell of spoiled samaki. They both hunched over to stifle their belly laughs, their school uniforms ties swinging down from their shaking, half-starved bodies.

"No, no, mwalimu," the talker told me, once he had caught his breath, "you bring the dry one."

"They sell those everywhere. You can find them down in Gilgil."

"They are no good," the kid at the window spoke up, then peered again out into the school compound for Kikuyu spies.

"They must be coming from Kisumu," the talker agreed, "those others are cheating."

"They're the same. I've seen the trucks. They ship them in fresh from the lake."

"They are not same," the student at the window said, his voice rising slightly.

"We want Kisumu samaki," the other joined, standing straighter, as if speaking now for many more than the two in the library. This was a matter of taste, and tribal honor, and I thought of my own distant homeland, and what a Rueben would have meant to me at that moment, dripping with Russian dressing. Turning my face away from these students, I lowered my voice and told them I would do my best to smuggle some Kisumu samaki into the school compound. It was as if I had announced that our school had been shut down, and they were going home. They almost wept with gratitude, and after I told them to go away and leave me alone, I watched them dance away across the fields, their flip-flops waving and snapping below their calloused heels. Though I tried to share in their Luo victory, I couldn't stop thinking about my Rueben.

My favorite point of the trip from Ol Kalou to Kisumu came at a bend in the road in the Kalenjin highlands where the forest dropped away and, down below, western Kenya opened before you. Even more than in the vastness of Kenya's northern deserts, it was here where I first understood the continent's enormity. This was the furthest eastern edge of Africa's massive heart that stretched into the deepest jungles of the Congo. People walked differently down there, and even its humidity seemed to vibrate with a slow, heavy rhythm that was not from the east. Standing on the muddy shore of Lake Victoria in Kisumu, I felt the Indian Ocean was a million miles away. I don't know what would have happened to me if I had been sent to this area to teach, but it made me love Ol Kalou even more, and offered a glimpse into another Africa that probably would have killed me if I had been sent there instead of the highlands.

Everyone in the west believed in magic. Not good magic, as advertised in the safari brochures, but magic that led respected teachers and judges to wander off into the swamps and offer themselves to hippos. You couldn't even get an open bottle of beer in a bar there, but had to wait for the barkeep to circulate with the one opener and wave her down, or bring your own, or use your teeth, which was the most popular choice. The fear of poisoning was too rampant for open bottles, and even bathroom breaks were awkward and filled with suspicion. Some carried their bottles with them, though this was considered slightly rude. Others recapped the bottle and slammed it down tightly with their open palm, as a warning to the other magicians not to spike their beer with their evil potions. Most just held it in, and held their bottles close to their chest, like a poker hand.

I am almost sure I was dosed one night at a bar near Busia. True, I had been drinking African gin, but my drinking on this night was not excessive, and I had eaten well at the home of the Peace Corps volunteer from the area who had invited me out west for a visit. Not long after I had returned from a bathroom break, I found my attention kept returning to a man in the corner who was studying me in a way that looked like he was plotting my murder. I tried looking away from him, but I felt his eyes pulling me back to his menacing face, which began to take on the abstract appearance of an African mask. I don't know how it passed from the stare into the hand gestures, but I remember him pointing to me like hypnotist, and then waving me over. The Peace Corps people I was with noticed something was wrong, and told me to mellow out. I couldn't stop myself from staring at the strange man, who had now risen from his chair and was puffing out his cheeks like a twisted Dizzy Gillespie blowing a tune. I rose too, and the Peace Corps contingent jumped up and tried to restrain me. I rushed at this man like a rabid dog, and the outdoor bar area was filled with the sound of breaking glass and fleeing customers. It all seemed to me to be happening in slow motion, and there was part of me that continued to observe the entire incident with ironic detachment. But something else had been numbed into a thuggish stupidity, and I grunted and flailed as I was tackled and dragged out of the area. I never found my glasses, and spent weeks after this incident squinting with both blurred vision and shame into Kenya's brightness, waiting for a new pair from Nairobi. It didn't occur to me then that I may have been the victim of bad magic. I was too worried about getting kicked out of the Peace Corps, and African magic was something in which I still didn't believe.

Yet there were reports of it from Peace Corps volunteers who had been posted out west, as well as the Machakos area, the turf of the Kamba people, a tribe known throughout East Africa for the power of their magic. The general belief holds this is how the Kamba were able to survive the Maasai on the open grasslands of Kenya. Whether it was simply their reputation for magic, which intimidated the Maasai, or the actual magic itself, depends on your belief. The fact remains that they were wide open to attack and surrounded on all sides by one of the most feared tribes on the continent. Yet the quiet Kamba survived, and even thrived. Even so, I treated reports from these areas as nothing more than ghost stories. But as the volunteers posted to Kambaland began to disappear (there were a number of "psychovacs," or psychological evacuations from this area), I began to listen more closely, and eventually visited Chris, a volunteer who taught English near Machakos. It was during this trip when my attitude about magic began to shift.

Chris had written for a small-town newspaper in Southern Illinois before Kenya, and had confided in me during training that he dreamed of moving to Chicago after Peace Corps and becoming an investigative journalist. But when I greeted him in Machakos there was something now in his shining blue eyes below long tangled hair that had nothing to do with journalism, or a successful American career. We toured the village, which reminded me of Ol Kalou in some ways, though it was poorer, and dustier. His classroom also looked similar to my own, and did almost all classrooms in rural Kenyan schools. That is to say it looked like a Third World prison cell, with nothing on its walls but crumbling cement and maybe a coat of paint, always faded. The only object on the wall, besides the battered blackboard, was a photograph of President Moi, a former schoolteacher, now looking down on his humble past with a sneer. The misery of these classrooms seemed to amplify, rather than crush, any sign of humanity that happened

within their spaces. The eruptions of student laughter, and even the subtle grins and the muffled giggles, took on a subversive, even political dimension in such a dismal environment. I learned how to work a mock-frightened look up at the photo of President Moi into my classroom act, which was always good for a laugh, though there was nothing humorous about what Moi was doing to the country. My students knew this too, even more than I, which made it funnier, in the sick way we all loved to share.

And I missed this humor as the sun began to set on Kambaland. After the roaring Kikuyu, the Kamba were too quiet, and I had a creeping sense that something was going on behind my back. Something is always going on behind the back of an outsider in Africa, especially a white one, but it is mostly benign, and springs from curiosity and raw friendliness. But in Machakos it felt more complex, and strange. We had toured all there was to see in the village, and the school compound, and were walking together back to Chris' hut when I was drawn to porch area of an old, decaying colonial-era home. A woman was seated on a chair. She wore a long, light blue gown, and a head scarf of the same color. As I continued walking I noticed her stillness. I could only see her from the right side at this point, and thought for a moment it might be some kind of shrine, or an African version of a Virgin Mary statue. That's when I spotted the orange glow of a pumpkin sitting in her lap.

"She's cursed," I heard Chris comment next to me. When I turned back to him, he had already stopped, and was standing in the road behind me and looking back at the porch. "She's stuck to that pumpkin," he whispered, still staring over at the darkening home.

One of the ways curses are cast in this area is through contact with a charmed object, which is activated through potions and chanted spells. It helps if this is a living object, such as a fruit or vegetable, but even a dead animal or strands of hair can work well as a conductor, as long as the material is organic. Chris' own brush had disappeared from his hut within weeks of his arrival, he had told me earlier in the day, which helped explain his mop of uncombed hair. Many of the western volunteers had the same hair style, and I wondered if the source of this look was stolen brushes

used for witchcraft. He motioned me over, urging me to take a closer look. When I crept forward I saw her right hand pressed against the pumpkin's flesh. I found the nerve to follow him even closer to the home, to get a look at her face. It was paralyzed into a smile, or a grimace of pain. I ran like hell.

We called it an early night back at his hut and doused the flame of his lantern. I crawled into my sleeping bag on the floor. We lay for a long time in the eerie quiet of Kambaland before Chris finally spoke.

"No one's gonna believe this shit," he said.

"It's probably just us," I offered. Another long silence passed, as we considered this.

"Fuckin' Africa."

I grunted my agreement, and we both burst into nervous laughter. The whole village probably heard it, as it went on and on, howling in the darkness like hyenas. My face was wet with salty tears before it was over, and my stomach ached, but oh, how good it was to be with a brother American! A curse in Africa is always about separation from one's tribe, and loneliness, and I had felt its sting many times up in Ol Kalou. On some nights I was no better off than the women on the porch, stuck to my maps, or my bottle. Africa has a way of making you understand the only antidote for such a powerful curse are life's simplest, best things, such as tribal camaraderie, or food from home.

Of course the Luo students already knew this. I still don't believe there was any difference between the fish available at markets throughout Kenya, and the dried tilapia, wrapped in a Kenyan newspaper, I would deliver to them in the school library. But this didn't matter to these two boys, hungry and isolated up in the Kikuyu hills. They were sure that the fish I handed off to them had come directly from the muddy waters of their home. And when I received a letter from the States at the Ol Kalou post office, I handled the object in the same, secretive manner I watched these boys accept their sacred fish. I always needed to be alone before I read one, as these two did before they ate their samaki, and can think of little else in this world that has ever given me so much pleasure.

About the Author

Photo of Rick Gray at a cafe in Essaouira, Morocco.

RICK GRAY served in the Peace Corps in Kenya and has traveled widely throughout Africa. He teaches at the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul, where he was recently named the Spring 2013 Research Fellow for his current book of poems in progress, *Christmas in Iraq,* set in military zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. His novel, *Amongst Monks,* was a finalist for the Bakeless Prize for Fiction. He received the Editor's Award for poetry at MARGIE. In addition to the book of poems, he is completing his African memoir, *The Old Fever.* He attended the Squaw Valley Writer's Conference in 2012.