

I think I have been dreaming of Tanzania.

I very infrequently dream. When I do, I almost never remember them. Never. But lately I've been waking in the winter mornings with vivid images in my head, of a place that is real but so often feels like a fleeting dream. The truth is that I flew there, alone, from across the world, and my feet came to rest on her red earth. My hair was blown into disarray by winds traveling all the way from Dar es Salaam, from the Indian Ocean. I trekked across her hills and plains, wandered her roads and rivers. I hiked her very backbone, and stood in the shadow of the great heights of Kilimanjaro as an entire continent spread away before me. I fell in love with her people: their joy, their kindness, their perseverance and resilient spirits. "Hakuna matata." Yes. I had no worries there. Only hope, and purpose.

After six years, so much remains to be said.

I often think of the Tanzania I knew during the most inane parts of my day. At the grocery store, I see 24-packs of Diet Coke and remember walking to the store on the corner in Karanga Village—with its walls of cardboard, held together with wire—and ordering a Coke, glass bottle, slightly warm... and then returning the bottle for the next customer.

I sit and read my latest novel-of-choice, and remember how at Kiwodea, the village school where I taught pre-K English lessons, the children loved the handful of worn books that dotted the library room shelves; how we'd spend time sitting on the frayed rug and looking at picture books with English words, and their little voices would try to echo mine as I would recite the name of the object on the page:

Cat. "Kaht!"

Blue. "Broo!"

Giraffe. "Twiga! Twiga!"

Juh-*raff*. "Juh-*raff*-eeeeee!"

I remember the boys fighting over one book with pictures of cars and trains and airplanes in it. There just might be a universal boy code, it seems.

I sip a glass of wine on my couch in the evening, and listen to the steady rush of cars on Main Street. Suddenly I remember the sounds and smells of the sultry Tanzanian night: the air filled with cooking fire smoke and the humid mist slithering down from Kilimanjaro's jungle foothills; the sounds of bush babies jabbering to each other in the trees overhead, eerily mimicking the laughter of small children.

I fill my fancy Whirlpool washer with a load of laundry and press the button that auto-detects the load size, and I remember how the laundry room was our backyard, and my "washing machine" was a hose, a bucket and my two hands.

The other day, taking my dog for a walk through my small-town neighborhood, I remembered walking the dusty washboard roads between Karanga Village and Kiwodea School: balancing across the precarious metal bridge dangling 30 feet over the Karanga River, stepping over the gaps in the floor.

I don't think I'll ever be able to listen to Shakira without picturing children in dusty clothes and bare feet, singing and dancing along to her theme song of the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup, in the gravel road just outside the CCS home base gates. They knew every single word. In English and Spanish.

I see them all, my little loves: Ivone, dancing with her baby sister Regina clinging on her back; Brenda, creating goggles out of a discarded plastic bottle and bossing everyone around in her four-year-old way; Yasiri and his wise little face, an old man in a toddler's pudgy body; the older boys playing soccer on the uneven dirt road with a deflated rubber ball; little Goodlight, tugging on my hand (a silent plea for me to spin her around and around and around to the music); Raziki's smile, with a gap of missing teeth so huge he could stick his tongue out at me with his jaws clenched; little Peter, shouting "Mzungu!" every day, because every day he'd forgotten my name; Lulu and Severina, teen girls who giggled at everything. I see them all.

When I go anywhere with friends lately, I find myself thinking of the friends who are now scattered across the country, to Canada, to Europe, to Australia... and who are probably still remembering the same things I do. I find myself thinking of the friends I left behind, who remain in Karanga and Moshi.

I am terrified to forget them.

My last week in-country was a blur, only further obscured by the passage of the last six years. Going through the last days' notes in my journal leaves much to be desired. I regret not writing more down when I should have. There were memories in those potential pages I can never get back now, and I feel the panic rise as I realize that snapshots are all I have.

That last week, I presented Mama Nancy, the headmistress of Kiwodea, with the finished mural I painted in the special education classroom. Being Mama Nancy, she was slightly mysterious with her praise, although I do think she liked it.

That last week, I met up with my friends from the Pristine Safari company: Mussa, Adam, Hussein. We sat around a bonfire and sipped Konyagi gin to warm ourselves against the chill of the evening. Once the Konyagi kicked in, the cameras came out, and much dancing and picture taking and celebrating ensued. It was good to see them and say goodbye. We've since kept in contact across the distance, through the Internet, and I consider them dear friends. At that time, through the blur of the gin and the camera flashes, it was simply yet another series of goodbyes.

Some of my volunteer friends and I took a walk on one of those last days, from our village to a local restaurant for some breakfast; retracing our steps along the now-familiar washboard roads, waving to the children sitting in doorways calling "Mzungu! Mzungu!", avoiding the mangy dogs prowling the fringes; passing the carpenter carving bed frames and tables out of avocado tree trunks in his open-air

workshop; passing women in their colorful kanga skirts with baskets of produce on their heads; passing time too quickly. We sat on the banks of the Karanga River and ate ugali and Tanzanian pancakes, and drank coffee brewed from beans grown on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro.

These are the things I never want to forget.

On my last night in country, I ate dinner at home with my host family. My eyes were flooding and red-rimmed but I was trying desperately not to embarrass myself. My host father had told me several times that day that there was no need to cry; "My daughter, you are not leaving us, merely postponing your stay." But how much time had to pass before my stay could begin again?

I left Tanzania six years ago. The sadness emerges from the unknown.

My host father drove me to the airport after dinner. It was a very quiet ride. I managed to make it through security and customs before breaking down yet again. Several tourists sitting near the gate stole uncomfortable glances in my direction. They couldn't even begin to understand. They didn't know there are so few places I've encountered, in my relatively limited experience of the world, that have gotten under my skin and into my heart so deeply and profoundly. They didn't understand the depth of the journey I had undertaken, or how it had altered me. They didn't see how I had rebuilt myself in this place, nor could they see all of the pieces of myself I was leaving behind.

I left Tanzania six years ago. Through that prism, the long passage of time, it can seem impossible that I was ever there at all. But more impossible is the thought that I will never go back. In the instant I wake up in the morning, with the vividness of these dreams lingering, perhaps I unconsciously realize I never truly left. Perhaps I *am* merely postponing my stay.

Nakupenda, Tanzania wangu... you call to me still, and though time has quieted your voice, I hear it as keenly as when I listened the first time. I remember standing on the slopes of the mountain, just beneath the roof of the world; standing on the streets of Moshi Town; on the Karanga River Road; and I remember how I heard you sing.

I heard your song in the laughter of your children, in the rustle of the banana leaves, in the drums and the music and the gracious words of your people:

"Karibu, dada wangu. Hapa, wewe ni nyumbani."

*Welcome, my sister.*

*Here, you are home.*

Home.

And to this home, may you always return.