

## Better Remember This

by Meg Sullivan (Kenya 1992-94)

You'd better remember this. Because people will ask you. Whether you want them to or not, they'll ask you how Africa was. And though you won't know where to start, you're going to have to have something to tell them. A shrug of the shoulders and "Good" won't be enough. So you'd better remember this. Open the parts of your mind you need, and work them over until you've got them just right. Then put what you know in a place that will be easy for you to get to. Deep, but not too deep. Just enough so that even though no one else can see it, you know it's there, and you can see it and feel it, and you know it makes up part of who you are now, as well as who you were then, and it will be there for you when you need to speak of Africa.

Remember things like the clarity of the light of the Equator after a five o'clock rain shower, cold and temperamental as broken glass. The bark and thorns of an acacia tree, so long and sharp your own forehead feels sticky from commiseration with Jesus. Tell them of the sound you hear only in Africa. The rattle of a crate of empty soda bottles strapped to the back of a bicycle. Or, the moans of a very pregnant woman in a reed chair on the back of another bicycle as she's pushed toward the maternity ward. The different sounds drums make. The light beats of the tightly stretched skins, and the louder, deeper sounds of the loose ones. Time beaten out to the movements of even the tiniest kids, fluid as the elephant grass in the breeze of the inland trade winds. The way you can hear the neighbor's boy no matter where he is, always drumming on his empty water jug. The Max Roache of the bush. Tell them that just two days before, these same people had sung with such exalted majesty you thought God Himself had made his Second Coming right then to join in.

But don't forget how the stillness can surprise you at times. The quiet of early morning when the children run to school. Their legs long and bony, feet splayed wide across, toes clutching the earth, guiding them down dirt tracks and paths. Picturing them stalking the hyena and leopard that come around here sometimes. For, though they run fast, they are silent . . . silent as a whisper.

Or as the women balancing pots on their heads, disappearing into the banana groves, green and yellow. Remember that, so you can tell them how the women who can balance full pots of water and carry them home from the river without using their hands or spilling a drop are ready for marriage. The little girls begin practicing as soon as they can walk. Tell them about one you know, a good friend of yours, who has progressed from a single matchbox, to a small basin, to these days, a tiny jerrican of her own. Burn her image into your brain like a brand, or the scars on the faces of the old people, and remember what she was like when she was two, since you won't know her when she's ten or eighteen, and everyone should have someone who remembers what they once were.

And when they ask you, you can tell them of the shambas dug in anticipation of the afternoon rain. Furrowed in the morning before it gets too hot. The earth rich and black. Heavy. Smelling of decay. And generation. Riding your bike past fields of maize and cassava, and cane so tall and sweet the bees hover around it for months before it's cut. And, of course, the countless dirty-faced kids who come out of nowhere to watch you pass. Pointing, yelling, chasing you with shouts of Mzunguuuu! Like a password, or a war cry. Floating through the air to the next manyatta where the next group of kids does the same. Staring with big, big eyes as you pass. And you thinking Hey, kid. Didn't your mother ever tell you not to stare don't point don't pick your nose don't talk to strangers? Well, I'm telling you now.

Remember simple, unaffected pleasures. Teaching a grown woman how to ride a bike. And trying to teach another who was afraid of falling and so would never pick her feet up off the

ground. The roar of a lion. The way flamingos dance together, in the scorching heat of a midday during the dry season. The innumerable cups of tea you didn't want but couldn't refuse. The ugali and sukuma you can't believe you actually crave.

Explain that to them. As well as the days and night of frustration and lonely boredom when even crying seemed like too much effort. The hours from 5 to 7 that seemed to go on forever. And how you wished the sun would set so you could go to bed and sleep through the night and wake up in the morning one day closer to the end of all of it. Tell them about the harambees, and the weddings, and the funerals held under trees where the wails of the women were as deep and loud as those of the earth itself when the Rift Valley split open. The earth couldn't possibly hurt more. Tell them about the ache at the base of your spine and down both sides of your neck after a long matatu ride. And the long, long delays at the sides of empty roads where the bus had broken down, and everyone was staring at you, and you tried to pretend you didn't notice and it didn't bother you. Sitting in the middle of all of it, rather bewildered. Watching and listening, and trying to get your bearings. Only to realize, once you finally thought you'd gotten the hang of things for good, that you just didn't get it. Any of it. At all.

But you stayed for two years. And when they ask you why, you can tell them how your students begged you not to give up their class to another teacher. How your friends took you home to meet their families. How your neighbors were always so glad to see you safely returned from a safari. How profusely everyone thanked you for the little you'd done for them, forgetting that you'd all done it together.

Remember, so when they ask you, you can tell them these things. And tell them how you stood tall and looked those others in the face as you left. Although it hurt you and them both very much. But take the gift of their pain, and yours, for that is love. And feel it as it was there, then. As you turned and left. As they stood and watched you go.

And speak of how you thanked them.

Thanked them for teaching you how easy it is to laugh in so many languages. Thanked them for letting you in.

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