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Kenya Memoir: Introduction--Where the Story Begins

This story begins at the moment when day and night intersect, as the last rays of the sun slide behind the rolling hills of the horizon and the darkness of the sky gradually settles into place. Outside my bedroom I hear the preparations for nightfall: the thud of the wooden plank hitting the ground as it's placed across the family well, the melodic voice of Mama Patience calling her children inside from a hut flanking our compound, and the soft patter of bare feet steadily treading along the hard packed soil beside the house, pausing to swing shut the metal shutters protecting each window with a rusty clang. I take one last look at the first handful of stars to appear overhead and shut and latch the shutters.

As I lie on my bed the blackness surrounds me, enveloping me until there is nothing but unending absence. It's a space so natural and yet so unfamiliar to the majority of Americans; their nights filled with lit-up signs and piercing car headlights, street lamps filtering in through the shades. This

blackness is not the kind you flip off with a switch, the darkness replaced instantaneously by a garish bulb of light, and all in the flick of a finger. Not in this house. Not in this village.

It's the type of darkness one might equate with standing deep inside a cave; lost, the paranoia creeping in, the blackness stealing away the air. But here, in this bedroom, everything is in order and the blackness is tranquil and inviting. My sandals are at the edge of the bed, the flashlight is on the windowsill and the plastic chamber pot is beside the desk, ready for use during the long night ahead. I wave my hand in front of my face but my hand is nonexistent. The only thing that exists is the simple rhythmic chatter of the bats, like hammers gently tapping tin. Tink-tink, tink.

I stretch out and feel the thin mosquito net catch along my rough, calloused feet. I am reminded that I am not alone in this room. In the blackness scorpions, hissing cockroaches, spiders, mosquitoes, geckos and other various reptiles and insects parade unseen. The netting falls from up high, its sheer walls tucked tightly under the mattress. It is my oasis. It would be hard to sleep without it.

But I do sleep, and the night passes.

Let's paint a simple picture. Kenya is a country in East Africa, bordering the turquoise waters of the Indian Ocean to the east. The equator runs through its center, nearly passing through the ice-covered peaks of Mt. Kenya, the second tallest mountain in Africa. Kenya has five neighbors: Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania. The people of Kenya are Kenyans, and in general terms can be called Africans, such as people from Italy can be called Europeans. Yet just as an Italian would be offended to be categorized so broadly (as if being labeled European could hope to encapsulate all that is Italian), such holds true for Kenyans. Indeed, to be called a Kenyan is to try and encapsulate more than forty-two tribes that make up the country. For most of the people in this story, the true identity of who they are and how they interact with the world lies in the tribe which they were born into and the community in which they live.

This is a story not of Africa, but of Kenya.

It's possible to break down Kenya's more than 42 tribes into three generalized groups based on shared root languages: Bantu, Nilote and Cushite. Each of these groups has their own set of stereotypes. The Bantu, people say, are agriculturalists and businesspeople, the Nilotes are cattle herders and warriors,

and the Cushites are nomads who traverse the northern deserts with camels. Each of these generalized groups can be subdivided into clusters of tribes that share a regional dialect, for example all of the Bantu tribes that live around Mount Kenya (Central Bantu). These clusters separate further into the more specific language of each tribe. The Central Bantu consisting of Embu, Kamba, Kikuyu, and Meru tribes. For many tribes, however, language doesn't remain static, varying as dialects arise within the tribe due to distance and lifestyle changes in a continual process of evolution.

Kenya is a place that is known in this world: the noble Maasai warriors adorned with colorful beads, large spears by their sides; the tropical beaches of Mombasa where traditional wooden *dhow* boats sail along the horizon; the dry savannahs where umbrella-like acacia trees provide shade to some of the greatest concentrations of wild animals in the world. Hemingway went on a big game safari here. So did Teddy Roosevelt. The Leakey family has helped identify remains that place some of the earliest humans in Kenya; giving it its nickname *The Cradle of Mankind*.

President Obama is half Kenyan, certainly a part of what makes his personal heritage so compelling. Even as a child he had daydreams of his father as a strong chief of warriors, the Luo, ruling in an exotic land.

Kenya is a place where the imagination soars, where romantic visions of what it means to be human play out as one cruises past animals, peoples and landscapes that often seem unchanged over the millennia.

Yet beneath the glamorized ideals that the world paints on Kenya, the majority of the population struggles to survive. Most Kenyans, contained as they are in the bubble of their existence, can't comprehend the uniqueness of their situation. For them, the day is full of work, hardship, worry, and more work. Yet somehow, from these very same people, we have learned the catchphrase, "hakuna matata" ("no worries").

Kenya is a country of contrasts, of modern and traditional ways of life meshed together. From photos of the zebras of Nairobi National Park with the city skyline in the background, to images of the donkey-pulled cart traveling through the heavily congested traffic of motor vehicles and *matatus* in Nairobi, Kenya is not a country of simple explanations. It is the only headquarters of the United Nations

in Africa, the city-center full of skyscrapers and modern conveniences, yet the town is surrounded by the rooftops of rusted tin that often run as far as the eye can see; the slums of Nairobi, where an estimated three million people live. The contrast between the political elite and those living in poverty is severe, and the divide seems to be growing.

Many Kenyans, like so many of us, are people who daydream that the pasture is greener somewhere else. They flock to the larger cities, searching for something better. I, in turn, flee the city, driven by the same impulse, but different circumstances, until I find myself in the village.

Some people writing about Africa would begin with poverty:

I stare out at the rows of tin-roofed houses that stretch off into the horizon—the slums of Nairobi. Shoeless children play in the dirt trails, breathing in a mixture of burning trash and car exhaust that burns my sinuses.

Others would begin with wild animals:

From the vehicle we spot zebras loafing on the plains. Far off in the distance giraffes amble along, hard to spot amongst the acacia trees. We press our noses against the windows eagerly; it is the start of our great safari.

To begin this story with poverty is to miss something primary about how life unfolds here; is to impose definitions and descriptions of life upon a people instead of becoming participants in their lives and discovering the truth of their reality.

Wild animals, like poverty, are an easy to see part of the Kenyan landscape, and yet animals do not play an important role in the lives of most Kenyans. Indeed, the divide between Kenyans and animals is as wide as the Great Rift Valley and most often entwined in conflict over land and dwindling resources. Tourism is a major source of funding for the government, though the money rarely funnels its way down to the local communities most affected by land and wildlife conflicts.

Beginning this story in blackness is subjective; it's an idea and feeling that I hold inside that says, *Blackness is fundamental to this story and where it should begin.*

Throughout literary history, from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Stanley's *Through the Dark Continent* to Paul Theroux' *Dark Star Safari*, Africa has been seen as a place of darkness, where darkness is pejorative; peoples and environments too often seen as dangerous (and in Conrad's and Stanley's case,

downright savage), a continent waiting to swallow up those traveling through. What people miss is the aspect of blackness that exists but is clouded over by history and culture; blackness as an integral part of existence, something to be embraced rather than feared. A place, in the end, to find calm.