

In Africa

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In Africa, everything is an emergency. Your radiator blows out and as you solder a repair job, Lango kids emerge from the bush, belonging to a village that you'll never see, and reachable by a path you hadn't noticed. Though one of them has a Kalashnikov, they aren't threatening, only hungry. Eight or ten of them, aged eight or ten, they don't expect to be fed by you or any other strange adult. Although you know some Swahili, you can't converse, not knowing Lango, but because there is plenty of water in the streams roundabout, they are fascinated that you choose to drink instead from bottles you have brought. Gradually growing bold enough to peer into the open windows of your Land Cruiser, they don't attempt to fiddle with the door or reach inside, seeing no food or curious mechanical delectables. The boxes packed there white-man-style are cryptically uninformative. Meningitis and polio vaccines, malaria meds, deworming pills, Ringer's solution, folic acid, Vitamin A and similar famine-fighters. However, they will remain as long as you do, and you don't dare leave to take a leak because this fabric of politesse would tear if you did, as it would have already if they were five years older.

You wish you could ask them if mines have been laid in the road recently by either the rebels or the government forces. Their fathers, the men of the village, haven't emerged because they're probably off with the guerrillas, and the women would not in time of war anyway—even the nun whom you are going to visit (a lay sister, although to all the Africans, a nun) has been raped, judging from what her radio message to the Order's little villa in suburban Nairobi appeared to convey. That's why the footpath to their tukls is maintained indecipherably. The problem is your diarrhea. To pee in front of the children would be no big deal; the boys themselves pee in front of you. But diarrhea might amuse them enough to demystify you. They could open the car and loot it if you did that, or disappeared for a few minutes to relieve yourself. It's a balance you must maintain as you work on the engine: friendliness and mystery.

Disasters can swallow you in Africa, and yet the disasters too get swallowed up: which may be why we rolling stones roll there. Visas are fairly informal and the hotels wildly variant, so you can live a while on almost nothing if you need to, as your troubles seem to piffle in the face of whatever else is going on. To shuffle tourists around on a safari route or manage a bunch of Kikuyu truck drivers who shuttle loads from Mombasa up to Nairobi or on to Kisumu and Kampala takes no special skill. I'm nominally a teacher (if I haven't had some kind of contretemps with an individual on the school board), and originally came over from America on the Salvation Army's nickel to work in one of their schools for the blind. It went well. Needless to say, I cared for the kids, and supervisors who live beyond their selfish interests I don't quibble with. But I did feel, over time, as if I might be going blind too, which becomes a bit absurd when you are under these skies, in the midst of landscapes such as Africa's. I went to Alexandria on a business venture, but returned.

Tourists want to be good guys in roughing it, and I can cook over an open fire, chauffeur a Bedford lorry, and recognize the planets or make a rainy evening more interesting by telling yarns, while keeping the Samburu from taking advantage of the Ohioans, and vice versa. Good will is not the problem; mainly just incomprehension. The former are living on a dollar a day. But expats in a stew like Nairobi's may also barter for their daily bread—clerk in a store that caters to Europeans, selling fabrics, carvings, baskets, masks, with a crash pad in the back for that extra pair of hands boasting New England English and a whitely reassuring smile, who's been hired for a stretch. Helps discourage robbers, in fact, to have a lug like me bunking in the place. Then there's always the blond Norwegian girl who arrived on an international internship of some sort but is staying on for an indeterminate number of months because an Ismaili merchant of advancing years but local wealth (gas stations, an auto agency, an office building and adjoining mart) is loaning her his garden house for the pleasure of her company occasionally at the dinner table, presided over by a portrait of the Aga Khan. The gent just likes to see her beauty in the room. He has a plump, swarthy wife as old as himself, so doesn't intrude upon her privacy after supper, or object if she accepts within the villa's high brick walls a presentable Western freeloader of her own for fleeting visits. The Masai watchman has been clued in—it's Kukuyu thieves he is hired to deter—but of course will turn away a *mzungu* like me, as well, if her nod turns to a frown.

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