

Without a Prayer

By Maggie Robbins

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When I started studying Swahili in the early 1980s, it never occurred to me that I would end up in psychoanalytic training. It never occurred to me that I would end up in Africa either. I took Swahili for the credits (extra were given for beginning languages at my university). Plus, the professor had developed his own method: attendance was mandatory, but there was no reading or writing. Instead we bantered and bartered, covering our seminar table with potatoes, earrings, forks and baby dolls. As he said, “The word you need jumps into your mind before you know you need it.” Second-year Swahili led to a group Fulbright: eight weeks spent along the coast of Kenya, visiting the small communities of Muslims who speak Swahili as their first language.

Seven weeks in, the trip had fallen to pieces. (*Safari imepasua*: “the journey, it has blown apart.”) There was a water shortage on Lamu, our island home, which clogged the open-air sewers. Our instructors discussed politics on the porch of the hotel, which could have landed them in jail. The female students were sick of living under traditional coverings. I had run out of money.

At one point the group visited Pate, a tiny island of ancient coral-brick ruins. There, cowering from the sun, we endured a lecture riddled with obscure Swahili vocabulary while mangy monkeys bared their teeth at one another. Little boys in dirty white robes and skullcaps spied on us. Back at the shore we learned we’d missed the tide for the boat ride home.

As we settled in to wait, I was accosted by one of the junior spies. His name, he said, was Saidi Bwanamkuu. *Bwana mkuu*: “man/gentleman big/important.” As my important gentleman and I chatted, his friends ran away. We decided to take a walk. He was 10, he said; I would have guessed 7, though his eyes looked 70. Saidi admired my shoes, beat-up canvas pull-ons from Kmart that I’d been using to protect my feet from reefs. He told me that if he had shoes like that, every boy on his team would respect him. His team? Soccer. He was captain. He showed me 11 one-inch-square scraps of paper. On each he’d written in pencil the name of a player, for planning strategy. When I asked why the names had been erased and rewritten so many times, he explained that players changed and that these were the only papers he had. Again Saidi admired my shoes, asking if I had other shoes as well. Yes, I said. Then maybe I could spare these? I told him no. Besides, I thought, they were years too big for his feet.

Saidi suggested we become pen pals. I told him that I thought it was a fine idea and that I’d give him my address. He waved me away. “What is your father’s name?” he asked. “Rex,” I said. “That is enough,” he said. “I will write to you using your father’s name.”



Holly Wales

I explained to him that America was a very big place and that he'd need more information on the envelope than that. His face fell. "Your father is not known?" he said. "I cannot believe this."

"My father is known!" I cried. "Then that is all right," Saidi said. "I will just write your name and 'daughter of Rex.'"

When we returned to shore, Saidi disappeared. Then he was sitting beside me, silent. He placed one of his scraps on my knee and handed me a stub of pencil. "*Nifundishe*," he said. Teach me.

"Teach you what?" I asked.

"Teach me," he repeated. "You are from America."

The developed world flashed before my eyes. Teach me about modern waste disposal, refrigeration, Dante. *Nifundishe*.

For the next half-hour I taught Saidi French. Then the boat came around the point, and he was gone. The group boarded and pushed off. I saw him walk out of the brush with a toddler on his hip. He was making his way down the slope into the water. Once he got within earshot, he looked straight at me. "*Au revoir*," he said perfectly, both arms steadying the baby.

I first considered beginning to pray not long ago. In one of his books, the theologian Anthony Bloom suggests writing your own prayers, so I picked out a notebook at the Mount Sinai Medical Center bookstore. On the first page, I sketched a burning bush. My book sat otherwise empty. I put off writing prayers till I'd cleaned house and arranged my books in alphabetical order by author, then size, then by color instead. I took up yoga. Finally I tried writing prayers. They sounded stupid. So I copied other people's prayers for a while.

And then one night I heard a prayer of my own in a language I'd forgotten; the voice belonged to someone who had by now certainly outgrown the ripped red canvas shoes I had sent him from the Lamu post office, stuffed with folded sheets of loose-leaf paper. The voice was small and determined, and it said, "*Nifundishe*."

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