

## **In the Choir**

Mary started yelling at me in Swahili and raised the drumstick over her head. Even without knowing what she was saying, I could tell I was in trouble. I jumped over the shin-high wooden pews to get out of her reach. Mary ran down the aisle to cut me off, so I slid over toward one of the gaping holes in the wall that served as a window, ready to jump through it if I needed to.

Seeing that she wouldn't catch me if I didn't want her to, Mary gave up the chase and returned to direct the choir. Mary, at 28, was the oldest member of the choir at St. Andrew's, and she was the choir mistress. The choir master was Edward, who was my age, and his younger sister Sarah was the reason I was in so much trouble.

I had been coming to choir practice every day since my first visit because I loved the music so much. Not even the thought of having to sing and dance with them had deterred me from showing up (and always right on time so that I had to wait an hour for the others – the local kids had a lot of quality time getting chased by me). The only problem was that despite how much I enjoyed the singing and dancing...I was terrible at it. Sarah practiced in the seat directly in front of me, and every chance she got, she glanced back at me. And every time she glanced back, she laughed. I suspect that most of the other choir members were doing the same thing, but because Sarah was the one closest to me, she was the one I noticed most often.

So every time *I* got the chance, I would do something to tease her: tip her seat, take an extra lively dance swing that would nearly catch her in the face, mutter threats to her in English (which she didn't understand), etc. When Mary caught me goofing around, she would come scold me (all in Swahili), sometimes waving the drumstick in my face. I can't remember exactly what I had done this time, but it must have been something really bad for her to have chased me all the way across the church.

But Mary had a good sense of humor too, so her scolding and chasing was just as light-hearted as my goofing around. When I rejoined the choir, we stood up and said, "Tuombe" ("We pray"). After prayer, I tried to refrain from goofing around so that the choir could practice the songs they would be performing at church. This, unfortunately, was not reciprocated by Sarah, who continued to turn and laugh every chance she got.



Joining the choir was undoubtedly the best thing I had done to help me enjoy my time in Africa. Not only did I get to listen to great worship music every night, but I also formed relationships with people close to my age and belonged to a close-knit group. I also became well-known throughout the village as one of the few Mzungu visitors who would actually walk into the village and interact with the people.

My attendance even (sort of) helped the choir because as the only choir with a Mzungu in it, they were the most popular place for kids to gather, and a few of the adults of the congregation even came by to watch a few practices. (This was only sort of helpful because the kids would often talk during the practice, making it difficult for them to concentrate.) This particular night, there was a young boy standing next to me, dancing along.

“Step, back, kick, kick,” I chanted to him. Okay, it was as much for my sake as for his...I don’t know what it was about the dance steps they performed, but my natural marching band tendency always ended up putting me on the wrong foot. I tried three times to correct myself during the song before I had to give up and stop for a moment. I rejoined the dance, noting with annoyance that my nine-year-old shadow had managed to stay on the beats just fine.

I looked up in time to see Sarah hide yet another fit of laughter.



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### Makulu Secondary School, iii

Mrs. Driscoll's high school chemistry lectures started rolling through my mind. Albert's chemistry teacher (he had shown up today) was presenting a lesson on ionic bonding. *Just relax*, I told myself. *It's been a long time since high school chemistry; I'm probably remembering something wrong.* But Mrs. Driscoll's lectures wouldn't leave me alone. I tuned out the teacher and spent the rest of the class mapping atomic particles in my mind. *Aha!* The teacher had taught something wrong. I could prove it.

"Albert, do you know why the elements of an ionic bond are attracted to each other?"

We were back in the same shop as the day before, eating jipatis and sipping chai. He didn't understand the concepts of the last lesson (although I had to rephrase the question several times and draw some diagrams before I was sure we were talking about the same thing). I gave him a brief summary of what the teacher had been trying to teach.

"This is good," Albert said. I asked him if I should teach it to the rest of the class. He thought I needed to, though I wasn't sure. Albert was one of the more proficient English speakers, and I could barely communicate with him. I wondered if trying to teach the lesson would confuse most of them more than it helped.

"How about this:" I proposed, "if the next teacher doesn't show up, I'll teach the lesson."

The next teacher didn't show up.

After I retaught the chemistry lesson (which went surprisingly well), it was time for math. I was a little disappointed that we didn't split into groups again, but the lessons turned out to be just as much fun as the day before...at least for me. The teacher got sidetracked for a minute answering one of the student's questions. He wanted to get back to the topic at hand, so he looked thoughtfully at the class and said, "Let us...step on."

I wanted to raise my hand and ask what we were going to step on. But being the mature, responsible person that I am (or at least managed to be for the rest of class), I refrained.

The next two teachers were nowhere to be found, but the students still wanted to learn. Albert asked me if I would teach them about direct and indirect quotations. I did, but I felt that I didn't do a terribly good job. And what bothered me even more was that I

couldn't imagine when the students would ever use that skill. One skill that would really be useful to them would be pronoun use. For instance, I had children in the village approach me to find out who I was by asking, "What, is my name?"

"Well, gee, kid – I don't know. Kids in America ask me that all the time, but usually I get the chance to learn their name first."

So, after a thorough overview of pronouns, I thought of an exercise to let the students practice their new English skills. I went around the room and had every student take turns standing up. When they were standing, I would tell them who they were talking to and who they were talking about. This would allow them to decide which pronouns were appropriate for which situations. I called on one of the girls named Happy (there were four of them in the class) and asked her to tell the rest of the class something about their guest teacher. Happy smiled.

"K'reg...is a handsome boy."

Apparently, the whole class knew enough English to understand that one because we all laughed for a while. Trying to hide my embarrassment with brazenness, I put her sentence on the board as a quality example of English language and wrote "SAVE" underneath.





## Riverbed Chase

I kept forgetting that I was living in the lap of luxury at the Amani Center. To me, having to boil our water before we drank it was a big deal. For everyone else in the village, boiling the water was something they did after all the *real* work was over. Had I remembered this, I would have been less surprised when I was confronted by Lucia, one of the girls from Ingadola's nursery school. Lucia was one of the first girls I learned to recognize because she had a distinct lazy eye and a perpetually large smile. This was fortunate for me because she wasn't wearing her school uniform that night, and the children all look very different when not in uniform.

I was walking home from choir practice that Tuesday, and the path to the Center crossed over a dry riverbed that was one of the main water sources for the village. Lucia was there with her family getting water out of the pits dug deep into the sand. I asked her how she was doing (which she didn't understand), and she told me several things in Swahili (which I didn't understand). Then after a few moments, we continued the "conversation" in the language that both of us understood: chasing. Just like being back at the school, I began running around after Lucia and her sisters. At least...the girls she was with might have been her sisters. In addition to being completely inept at recognizing when Tanzanian children are or aren't from the same family, I had the added difficulty that children didn't necessarily stay with their parents like American children would. Kids would go back and forth between each others' houses or along on errands with their friends' families. Often times, the children traveled without any adults at all, let alone with their own parents and siblings.

As the chase went on, I got tired of my shoes filling up with sand. I sand down on a rock along the bank and took off my shoes. By now, several other kids had seen the game and decided to come join. With my shoes off, I felt comfortable running a little faster, and the kids were confronted with the terrifying reality that I might actually catch them. Consumed with concern, they sprinted out of the sandy riverbed and onto the paths leading toward their houses.

Not nearly consumed enough with concern, I followed.

As Rev. John said throughout the trip, everything in Africa has thorns. The thick sand of the riverbed offered a nice cover over whatever hadn't been washed away by the

wet season floods, but the road offered no such comfort. I chased the kids about a hundred yards before I had to start tiptoeing after them. The problem with tiptoeing was that, although there was less chance of stepping on a thorn because less of my foot touching the ground, when I did step on one, I stepped on it harder because my weight was concentrated on a smaller area of my foot. And in Africa, even on tiptoes, there is no way to walk around without stepping on thorns.

I gingerly made my way back to the riverbed, stopping several times to pick out prickles from my soft feet, thinking as I did that the many-spiked thorns looked like they could be used as a model for frightening Hollywood monsters. My one consolation was that Lucia had dropped the little shawl that she was wearing, so I grabbed it off the ground and put it on my own head to tease her. Several of the older kids ran up to help Lucia get her shawl back, but they would only come near me if my back was turned. Whenever I heard them getting too close, I would turn around to scare them off. One of the times I turned around, I almost got slapped in the face with a stick. One of the older girls had been trying to swat the shawl off my head from a distance. I kept a close eye on that girl – she was too clever for my own good.

When I finally got back to my shoes, I put them on, cringing at the many tender spots on my feet...then the chase resumed.



Lucia



## Safari

*Honk, honk! Hooooonk, honk, honk!* In America, we would consider it rude. In Tanzania, the cyclists greatly appreciated the honking because it saved them from being clipped by our Landcruiser at 70 kilometers per hour. There were no speed limits on the larger, paved highways. Instead there were what I called “Speed Un-limits.” When the highway ran through a village, there would be a sign with the number 50 on it, indicating the speed limit through the village was 50 kilometers per hour. On the far end of the village, there would be another sign. This sign would be identical, except that the number would be crossed out, indicating that the speed limit was no longer 50 kph. Whether the speed limit for the rest of the highway was implied or non-existent, I never found out. When the government wanted to enforce a speed limit, they didn’t bother with little metal signs.

Gordon, Bibi, Juma’s family, and I were on the way to the nearest national park (about a six hour drive from the center). It would have only been a five hour drive, had it not been for the last stretch of road between the main highway and Mikumi National Park. Several accidents had happened along that road, so the government needed to find a way to slow down drivers. Instead of devoting personnel and vehicles to patrol the road, they had constructed a long stretch of road that naturally reduced drivers’ speeds: there were large speed bumps every two hundred yards.

In Swahili, the word “safari” means “tour.” So an unknowledgeable tourist could pay for an African safari only to be escorted through a historic hotel. But the Australians and I had both agreed that we wanted to go on a safari in the English sense of the word. The first week or two in Africa, I was looking forward to going on the safari, but now that I was involved with the local community, I expected that the safari would be just barely worth missing a day of choir practice and teaching. If everything had gone well, it probably would have been worth it.

Growing up, it had been my dream to go to Africa as a wildlife zoologist and study zebras. I thought my dream would be seeing wild zebras in Africa. My heart began to soar when I saw the first pair of black and white animals along the



speed-bumped road on our way to the park. But after entering the park, the experience became less exhilarating. I found out two things about myself. First, I enjoy a challenge. Zebras were easy to find. I loved seeing them, but at the same time, I felt like one of the tourists at Yellowstone who goes nuts over seeing an elk. They are neat animals, but they're everywhere. Seeing a zebra is as uneventful as finding elk in Yellowstone – it would be hard *not* to.

The second thing I found out was that I wanted to interact with the animals. After spending the past three weeks catching lizards and feeding monkeys, I wanted to be able to do more than just look out the back of the Landcruiser. Having a camera with me gave me at least a little more interaction because I could try to take the best pictures. Unfortunately, the battery recharger for my camera did not hold up well with international adapters, and my camera lasted through only about half of the safari.

Contributing further to my disappointment was my desire to see a leopard. After discovering how easy it was to see zebras, I decided that if I could see a leopard, that would be well worth the safari trip by itself. But I didn't get my hopes up...until ten minutes into the safari when our guide said, "I saw a leopard run across the road right here this morning."

We didn't see a leopard. Between that, the ease of seeing zebras, the broken camera, and a long car ride home that was too dark to write but too early to sleep, I had a pretty disappointing day. The safari itself wasn't a bad experience. But for me, it just wasn't worth the cost – not only of gas, but of missing a day at the Center.

