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A Road in Africa

By Jason Stevenson

The dry season was ending as I drove along the high shelf of the Great Rift Valley in Tanzania. The valley wall lay a dozen miles behind me, a steep cliff descending to a wide crease of rivers, canyons and lakes stretching north to Egypt and south to Zimbabwe. The landscape visible beyond my windshield, however, was not the Africa of lush and towering rainforests but a rusty and rock-strewn plain like the old photographs of Mars. Even the atmosphere seemed extraterrestrial, with hazy pink sky and breezeless air smothering all life like hot exhaust. Nothing moved or grew on this barren ground. The only evidence that I was still on Earth was an occasional village of tin shacks announced by Coca Cola signs.

Normally, the roads of dirt or buckled and cratered asphalt force one to drive sideways almost as much as forward. But these poor roads are also the good roads—they prevent speeding. Local residents claim, with some pride, that the deadliest stretch of road in the world lay between the northern Tanzanian cities of Arusha and Moshi. Overloaded minibuses, speeding, inexperienced drivers, and the road's many plunging ravines combine to create a tragically high death toll. The most dangerous choice you can make in East Africa, my guidebook tells me, is to enter any kind of vehicle, or even stand close to a road. My current route, however, stretched flat and clear for miles, a bad road for safety but one good enough to sink me into the robotic stupor of highway driving. It was the appearance of the boy that startled me awake.

I first saw him as a bright, black dot against the distant horizon. He stood on the dirt berm overlooking the road, a fuzzy and shimmering figure still a great distance away. Waves of rising heat made him sway as if he was dancing to stay warm. His gyrations reminded me of how I would shiver violently in my too-thin tennis shoes while waiting for the school bus in winterish Ohio. But here in Tanzania, just three hours south of the earth's burning midriff, his movements could only be the tricks of the skin-tingling sun.

The boy became clearer as I drew closer, outlined against the harsh and limitless backdrop. Soon I recognized the pattern of a school uniform in his clothes: a gleaming white shirt, a scarf, and high socks all contrasting to his dark skin. Somehow the prim school uniforms of the colonizers remained long after the other paternalistic links dissolved.

I looked around for others with him but saw no one. Groups of young boys herding weary cattle and goats are a common sight along rural roads. They move across the open land between villages, searching for grass and water while driving their animals with long poles. But this boy was no herdsman wearing a dirty smock . He wore his best clothes as he waited alone among the rocks and stunted trees.

I slowed down as I came closer, not wanting to drown him in the plumes of dust streaming behind my car. After weeks without rain, the constant dry winds lifted the loose, red-chalk soil to coat everything exposed. The dust helped to define the region's class divisions. The wealthy were producers of dust, and the poor were its consumers. When I drove along any unpaved road, the people walking along the edge scrambled up the embankments and covered their mouths to escape my passage. I watched through the rearview mirror as they disappeared in a haze that deadened their brightly colored clothes. They stared after me with that patient look that I had come to recognize but could not understand.

Suddenly the boy loomed beside me. We had only a second to study each other. He might have been eight or nine years old, with a child's hollow chest and a round, shaved scalp. Red dust stained his white socks and shorts, while his bare knees showed as a dark band in between. A small school bag hung loosely from his shoulder. He stood relaxed and unmoving except to turn his head to watch me. Glancing in the rearview mirror I saw on his face the same inscrutably calm expression before the dust overtook him.

I had not passed a village. In fact, I had not seen a house for many miles before or after I saw the boy. The dead landscape rushing by was unchanged. The boy, whose appearance had initially only provoked my curiosity, suddenly jarred my conscience. Where did he come from? Could he have walked to the road from a village over the horizon? How long would he wait for his ride? Finally I asked myself the question that most bothered me: should I have stopped?

Soon after arriving to Tanzania I realized that this part of the world operates in mysterious ways that I would never understand. The missionaries and expats I met illustrated this lesson with a compact acronym: AWA, meaning Africa Wins Always. If you are trying to catch a bus to a distant town and it does not show up on schedule, AWA tells you that yelling at the man in the tiny stall who sold you tickets will not speed its arrival or gain you assistance. Simply put, AWA implies that if you attempt to live your western life in Africa, you will be continually frustrated and likely ignored.

I could never fully adjust to AWA, however, because situations kept arising in which the consequences were far greater than a missed bus or lost pocket change. If you see children torturing a stray dog, do you call out and stop them? Is a mob beating a captured thief engaging in street justice or attempted murder? What do you say to a policeman who leans through your car window and demands a "birthday gift" to pass a checkpoint?

These questions defy simple answers, because they not only cross cultural norms but also inspire strong moral reactions. An easy response is to retreat behind the wall of one's separate culture and claim the safety of ignorance, the shrug of AWA. But is AWA just a convenient excuse to remain detached from new surroundings, a cultural cop-out? The decision "to become involved" is difficult in a familiar place like home, but much more so thousands of miles away in a strange country. What is the balance between practicing sensitivity and maintaining personal beliefs when confronting scenes that short-circuit one's natural reaction?

Hours later when I reached my destination, I had convinced myself that the boy was fine. He had probably walked to the road from a village lying unseen over the horizon. He was waiting for a ride to carry him to boarding school in Tanga or Dar es Salaam. With few cars and wide spaces between cities, walking many miles to meet a ride is routine for rural Africans, even if the rocks of Tanzania are just as hard on the feet as the cold ground of Ohio.

But I also realized I reached a cultural barrier in that brief encounter. In my long approach to the boy, I never felt the impulse to stop. Had that desolate road cut through the rural Midwest of my childhood instead of the dusty plateaus of East Africa, would I have stopped? And had the boy's skin color been the same as mine, would I have stopped? No matter how many facets of this event I rotate and analyze, I realize that I drove on because I did not dare risk learning what existed beyond my wall and within his world.

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