



*Teenage girl's life changing experiences going from leaving school in England to life on rural farm in Kenya. Africa. Introduction to native people's customs along with first romances with young soldiers.*

**Coming of Age In Kenya**  
By Wendy Smith

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Wendy Hurley Smith

Coming Of Age

In Kenya



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## **Chapter 1:**

### **THE POSTING**

There were just the four of us that day, a couple of miles away from home, high on a hill above the lake. We had just reached a clearing in the low bushes that surrounded us when we heard a twig-snapping sound uphill. Then a similar sound came from below us. A dark head shot up and down from behind a bush, then another, and another. They had us surrounded...

But, to begin this story I must take you back to the day “Africa” became a much-used word in our family. It began in the summer of 1955, just as I started my fifteenth year. My father was in the British Army, and we were living on an army camp in Bordon, Hampshire. We had been stationed there for six years, two tours. This was home to me; a move was something I never contemplated. So when, at the dinner table, my father announced he was to be posted, my tepid appetite deserted me. My mother had a pained look on her face; my sister, sitting opposite, looked horrified. She had won

a two-year scholarship to a prestigious art school, and was still in her first year.

I should stop here to explain that my parents' generation didn't discuss "adult" matters with children. We were, it seemed, expected to take everything in stride. There was no build-up to prepare us for what was to come. They must have known a posting was near. But as teenagers, we were still treated as children.

Trying to soften the blow, my father said we could choose where we were to go, and he asked for suggestions. Bermuda won out, followed by Jamaica, Cyprus and Singapore. *In actuality, we would have no choice. The Army could send us to Timbuktu, if the spirit moved them. It would be a week or two before we learned our fate.*

The day of the announcement saw a different mood at the dinner table. We were excited. Well, excited is perhaps an exaggeration, since our world was falling apart. But the warm, white sands of Bermuda beckoned. Dad sat down, a twinkle in his eyes, as we pestered him to reveal our new home.

"Did we get Bermuda, Dad? Did we?" I remember asking repeatedly.

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He seemed to be enjoying the suspense, but finally gave in.

“No.” A long pause, and then a bit of a grin as he said, “We got Africa.”

AFRICA!

Visions of Zulus waving spears, flesh-eating lions, and snakes the length of our house flooded my brain. Africa definitely wasn't on *my* list. Was he serious? Dad was a joker. I looked at my mother, and she nodded, meaning it wasn't a joke. For once, I was at a loss for words.

My sister, arms folded across her chest, announced emphatically, “I'm not going. *I am not going!*”

“Well, you may not have to go,” Dad said. “The posting is to Kenya; we're still fighting the Mau Mau there, although things are getting better.”

Mum spoke up. “We *can* go if Dad can find a house for us in a safe zone. There is no military housing there.”

“What's going to happen to us if he can't find anywhere?” I asked.

“We can stay here,” Mum said.

I shared a happy grin with my sister. Maybe things would work out for the best. But Dad put a damper on our optimism.

“Of course I want you all there with me.” He looked at our little brother, just three-years-old and the apple of Dad’s eye. “I’ll start looking for a house as soon as I get there.”

Our father left within the month and a new normality was struck in our daily lives. Interesting letters arrived from Kenya, but no mention of finding a house. My sister continued at college. Mum, full of optimism, began the process of packing. I was asked to weed out my possessions, but everything I owned was precious. It was a conflicting time for me. Much as I loved my home, the urge to see Kenya was very strong.

I had finished my mandatory schooling and lacked any sense of direction. I wrote a short story and wanted to send it to a women’s magazine. My mother, as tactfully as possible, suggested I write more stories before thinking of submitting them. I still have that story; my mother was a wise woman.

Before long a letter arrived from Dad, saying he had found us a house. The people living in it were being posted back to the UK, and Dad would take possession as soon as they left. He added a cautionary note: it was on a farm and we were not to “expect too much.”

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The military had arranged passage for us on a ship leaving Liverpool in a few weeks. Those weeks were one of the most painful periods of my life. Apart from family, there were two loves in my life: Kevin Walker, who lived a few doors away, and my dog, Patsy; not just a dog, my best, best friend.

Shortly before we left for Africa, Kevin and I met for one last time behind the newsagent's shop. We held hands and barely said a word. Finally we managed a brief, tender kiss before parting. (Sadly, he was to die young, but I still remember him fondly.)

We tried to find a good home for Patsy. She was a lovely little Beagle and so well behaved. Over the years she and I had many adventures together, and I could count on her not to tell on me! Patsy slept with me, not *on* my bed, in it. She would lick the ointment off my scuffed up knees. My mum made sure I was away from home on the day animal control came to get her. It's still a painful memory, but I try to picture her in a nice new home.

Soon our living room filled with wooden tea boxes, still smelling somewhat of the tea they were built to transport. These same boxes had brought our possessions from Italy to this place six years before. My mother, like most military wives, was very adept at squeezing an enormous amount into each of them. Before long a military truck arrived. The boxes were

piled on, starting them on their journey to Liverpool, where a troop ship awaited.

It was during these last few days I had an experience I have carried with me all these years. School vacation ended when the school bell tolled. That would have been my signal to set off running along Station Road, past the newsagents, down the hill and skidding to a stop just in time to make it in the school door before it closed. But now all my playmates disappeared and I stood wondering what I was supposed to do. All those years of wishing myself in this situation, and now what!

There were no counselors in my school, no one to ask what plans I had. The only comment on my future was from the principal (also my teacher) scrawled on the bottom of my final report card; "Wendy will not be able to control others until she has learned to control herself."

I know what you're thinking and I could offer all kind of defenses, but maturity has shown me he was right. That doesn't alter the fact that I hated him at the time. But, much as I had railed against his authority, it was he, Thomas Gardner, who introduced me to the classics, to poetry and instilled in me a lifelong appreciation of the written word.

In retrospect, the timing of our departure was perfect. Here I was wondering what to do with my newfound

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freedom; the move to Kenya came at the right time. We were soon in Liverpool, boarding our transport; Her Majesty's Troopship Empire Halladale. As I stepped on the gangway, I wasn't to know that England would never see this free-spirited girl again. The next time I stood on that sceptered soil, I would be a young woman.

## **Chapter 2:**

# **THE TRANSPORT**

It was my first time cruising on an ocean and, as with most first-timers, I felt queasy for a couple of days. But then we hit the Bay of Biscay and I was downright sick. My sister and brother, not feeling ill, almost had the dining room to themselves. The seas finally settled down before we got to Gibraltar. I was disappointed we weren't stopping there, having always wanted to see the Barbary Apes. Under sunny skies and a smooth Mediterranean, we made good time to Malta; our first stop.

Tucked away in a corner of my purse there is a tiny Saint Christopher medallion. Its connection to Malta brings back such a pleasant memory. We'd only been onshore an hour or so when my mother was approached by a British sailor. Seeing us unsure of which direction to take, he volunteered to be our guide for the day. He was stationed in Malta and knew it well. My mother was hesitant, until he explained his motivation. "If it were my family," he said, "I would like to think someone would offer to do the same for them."

We spent all the time we had with him and got a great tour of the island; memories of sun-washed buildings, painted in pastel shades, and flowers of intense color have stayed with me. Saying goodbye before we boarded the ship, he handed each of us a St. Christopher medallion to keep us safe on our journey. He must have been clairvoyant and knew we would need the Patron Saint of Travelers at our side once we hit the Indian Ocean.

Life onboard ship was made interesting by the fact we had a group of drafted soldiers on with us. We were separated from them by a chain-link fence, but could see them. They showed great interest in my sister, who was an attractive seventeen-year-old at the time. She seemed to enjoy it, but when they vied for *my* attention I was, at first, horrified. They were *men* and I was just a girl. I had read enough sentimental love stories in my mum's weekly magazines, to know they were flirting with me. It didn't take long for their flattery to win me over. My mother, surprisingly, approved my request to begin wearing lipstick!

As the ship approached Port Said, we learned there was yet another conflict going on. The troops got to go ashore, but not the families. I remember hanging over the side to see the water inundated with Portuguese Man of War jellyfish. There was a definite unease in the

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air, something we would feel all the way through the Suez Canal.

We were delayed sailing into the canal, but finally got underway. It was suggested that all female passengers stay below decks and refrain from looking through portholes. I stayed below, but couldn't resist taking a peek. Our cabin was close to the side of the canal. On a raised embankment I saw a line of Arab men. They had raised their soiled-looking garments and were urinating in the direction of the ship, an undeniable insult aimed at Britain.

When we arrived at Aden the situation was a little better, and families were allowed onshore for just an hour. Those who chose not to go ashore were busy buying souvenirs from boats surrounding the ship. A purchase would be made, money sent down on a rope, and the item sent up on the same rope. Aden was our last stop before heading out into the Indian Ocean, on the way to our destination, Mombasa, Kenya.

I thought I would surely die in the Indian Ocean. We had already been delayed at the top of the canal, waiting for monsoons to abate. Now we were headed right into one. That poor old ship, actually on its last voyage, tossed and groaned to such an extent we felt sure pieces were falling off.

About the third time I was thrown from my top bunk, I decided I'd rather die standing up. I thought perhaps the night watchman would have some calming words. His usually ruddy face was the color of yellowing ivory as he said, "This is the worst storm I've ever been through. I just hope the old girl can take it."

*A piece of information better kept to himself, don't you think?*

The monsoon had hit us during the night. In the morning all was calm again. We were giddily happy not to have died. Chugging along the coast of Somalia, we arrived in Mombasa one week overdue. We saw the docks briefly, but not the white sand beaches, before being whisked away to a waiting train. It would take us west to Nairobi; a distance of around 300 miles. I think you'll get a feel for the caliber of the train when I tell you its speed averaged 16.6 miles per hour. We got used to the pace and to the clouds of steam ahead of us. Our compartment was toward the back of the train, close to the troops. Occasionally, one of them would jump off and run alongside our compartment, flirting with us. A shrill whistle would warn him when the sergeant was approaching. He hopped back on board to avoid being caught.

That train trip was like Disneyland on steroids. As we reached the outskirts of the city, I saw native huts in the distance. Then we left habitation and traveled mile after

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mile through an area that was flat in all directions. It was covered in tall yellowing grass and dotted with flat-topped acacia trees. Countless eyes scoured the landscape looking for life, animal life seen only in zoos and National Geographic.

When an ostrich came into view, a ripple of excitement went through the train. The ostrich ran away from the noisy contraption, as did all of the animals close to the track. We were to see many rear ends! But not with the giraffe. With legs splayed, he or she was nibbling the top of an acacia tree, totally ignoring our presence. Rather than an excited shout from all on board, this noble animal was greeted with an intake of breath, and then a reverent silence as each of us dealt with our own emotions. This was the stuff of movies, and we were experiencing it.

### Experiencing AFRICA!

All too soon our wonderful adventure ended, but another began as we approached Nairobi. Now we saw habitation going quickly from native huts to western style office buildings and hotels. The train pulled to a stop beside a platform with a line of African porters standing smartly, waiting for a chance to help with our luggage.

I had expected a much larger railway station, since Nairobi was the capital and largest city in Kenya. But in 1955 there was just one line, one platform. The flat-fronted, red brick building, sitting at the bottom of

Delamere Avenue — the main thoroughfare — had a sign that stretched from one end to the other: “Nairobi Railway Station.” I wasn’t to see it again, since we flew back to England two years later from the “interesting” Nairobi airport. But that’s another story.

While we were finding our belongings, the troops started spilling out onto the platform. It was amusing watching the sergeant try to control them; there may have been 100 of them, possibly more. They were acting like boys on a school outing. In truth, they *were* little more than boys. Most of them were from the Greater London area, and possessed the “gallows humor” of their parent’s generation. They would have finished their schooling at 15, found themselves a job, and then had to give it up when they were drafted at 18. This was likely the first time most of them had been away from home. It was all a lark to them, and would continue to be until they reached their camp.

It didn’t take long for my father and his driver, Alan Wood, to locate us. Hugs and kisses all-around. Dad paused after hugging me. His expression soured as he looked at my lips.

“What’s this?” he said pointing to the lipstick.

“Mum said I could,” I quickly replied.

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He gave a grunt, which I took to mean he would take it up with my mother, but I never heard another word on the subject.

My memories of leaving the station are a bit of a blur. It may have been because I was wide-eyed looking at the African porters scurrying about. Strange as it may seem, I had never seen black people in the flesh, only in books and movies. Now I got an up-close look when a native porter carried our luggage to a military Land-Rover. The whites of his eyes mesmerized me, along with his gorgeous white-toothed smile.

Dad introduced us to Alan Wood, our soldier driver who got behind the wheel as we piled in. Alan was anxious to leave the station before the troop transport arrived, and unruly soldiers flooded the parking area.



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