"Swim Champ"

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Listen: I was trying to beat the heat, not become the best female swimmer in Tanzania. During the fall of my senior year of college, I crossed the equator and edged down the Indian Ocean coast to the University of Dar es Salaam. For four months I walked along the most rounded part of the earth where its crust bulged out and hoisted me towards the sun. To say it simply, it was hot. Upon our arrival to the University, my small group of American friends and I found ourselves on a three-hour mid-afternoon campus tour. This consisted of trudging uphill along trails packed with loose red dirt and rocks, noting the location of various academic buildings which had seen their prime 40 years ago and dodging barbed wire that strongly discouraged students from straying onto the grass.

After the first hour in the skin-melting heat, my attention had switched from figuring out the locations of my classes to towing my stunted shadow from shade patch to shade patch. I watched my classmates jump one by one over a deep cement gutter meant to catch the runoff of the rainy season and wondered which of us was most likely to faint first. Our group walked through a barren field where soldiers ran drills with fake wooden guns. They trotted past us with the play weapons on their shoulders, stirring up a dirt cloud that lapped at our shoulders. That's when I saw the swimming pool. I know I wasn't in a desert, or dying of thirst. But from where I stood with my shirt to my mouth, the glint of water through dust looked like sanctuary to me.

And so began my relationship with the University of Dar es Salaam pool. As I waited for the Tanzanian students to return from their summer break, I occupied my days with Swahili lessons in the morning and swimming in the afternoon. I walked through the locker room, which the caretaker had deliberately flooded to ensure no one tracked dirt into the unchlorinated pool and agonized over where to stow my bag. The director of my program, Ken from Kenya, spent most of orientation telling us the horrors that would befall us from being white in Tanzania. Being robbed at machete-point, abducted for ransom and taken as a Tanzanian bride seemed all to be likely fates. I didn't want to appear to distrust my Tanzanian co-swimmers by keeping my bag within eyesight on the pool deck instead of leaving it in the locker room like everyone else. However, the image of a Tanzanian girl sifting through the contents of my duffel stuck in my mind, so I plopped it down in a patch of grass near the side of the pool and covered it with a towel as if to make it less conspicuous.

The word for foreigner or white person in Swahili is *mzungu*. This is highly preferable to the initial word the Maasai tribe used to call Europeans, which translates roughly to "those who trap their farts in their pants." As you can imagine, being a *mzungu* in Africa gets you noticed. It's strange to have men drop to their knees to beg you for marriage, small children shriek in surprise upon spotting you on a crowded *daladala* and people on the street approach you and ask if you'd like to buy a new goat. My friends and I burst to tell each other about the funny exchanges our whiteness generates. But for every person who serenades me in Swahili from a motorcycle, there

are twenty more that just stare at me. I am not Kelly here, but *mzungu*. The other day one of my classmates strode up to me and asked, "*Mzungu*, what are you doing here?" Why would I leave the promised land of America for the University of Dar es Salaam in all its crumbling glory?

I had wanted to return to Africa ever since a short trip to Ghana my sophomore year had left me fascinated with the continent. I left with beautiful scenes of Africa seared into my mind: plates heaped high with coconut rice, monkeys that scampered across my path with the commonality of squirrels, women who spent their afternoons washing clothes in the river and laid them out to dry on the rocks. Most of all, I loved the stories that Africa seemed to conjure with such ease. I delighted in recounting to my family how our bus had broken down for three hours and the children from the village down the road took us to see their waterfall. The absence of order in Africa coupled with the friendliness of the people seems to breed spontaneous interactions that lead to true adventure. I wanted not just to pass on the tale of an afternoon's exploit in Africa, but to fully live inside the story. It doesn't take long for the days I spend at the pool to become the story I tell my friends first when we sit down to rice and beans at night.

The Tanzanians are equally unabashed about approaching me inside and outside the water. Each time I swim at the pool, it's guaranteed that someone will tap me on the head mid-stroke or slide up next to me as I adjust my goggle at the wall. "Where did you learn to swim like that?" they ask. "How do you move your arms in that way?" Don't get me wrong; I'm no swimming prodigy. I always hovered in the second string in competitions, never quite able to edge out the other girls or willing to abandon running for year-round swim practices. Since joining my first swim team at age five I have mastered all the strokes, but never found myself on the winner's podium no matter how hard I practiced. After high school ended, I abandoned competitive swimming for running. I'm only back in the pool because the thought of exercising out of water sounds unbearable. I didn't plan on doing much swimming in Tanzania and only brought a two-piece for the occasional dip at tourist beaches where the usual African standard of modesty does not apply. I certainly did not plan on joining the swim team.

The University of Dar es Salaam pool boasts no better resources than the school. It has a lifeguard stand that remains perpetually unoccupied. Some swimmers can't make it the full length of the pool so they thrash their way across horizontally, creating unseen hazards for those following the stripes. There are no flags marking the final five meters of the pool, compelling us backstrokers to count out our strokes using the purple flowering bush instead. It comes as no surprise that lane lines are not features of the UDSM pool. But as I set my bag down on the grass, I see rope has been tied from one wall to another to partition the pool between the serious swimmers and those around to cool off. I slide into the water and watch the lap swimmers. They wear Speedo bathing suits and goggles and swim two across in perfect synchronization. Kick boards, pull buoys and flippers are piled at the end of the lane. Where did they come from?

After the next pair of swimmers flips at the wall, I jump in the water and start after them. They swim strongly, but slowly and I long to pass them. In America, you swim the way you drive a car: down in the right lane and back in the left. If someone wants to go faster than you, they can pull out into oncoming traffic and go around you. This logic does not apply in the UDSM lap lanes. I spend most of the hour tapping the

pink soles of the other swimmer's feet in an attempt to replace them at the front, but they continue to swim two abreast. Frustrated, I stop at the end of the lane and toy with my goggles. They stop swimming too. A man with a bright smile named Lameck compliments me on my stroke. I thank him and compliment him on his. Then I ask if the University has a swim team.

"We are the swim team," says Lameck.

I feel instantly embarrassed. I had unwittingly crashed swim team practice. Lameck doesn't seem too phased by my intrusion. Rather, he asks, "Want to race?"

I agree and the team shrieks with laughter. As we walk down to the deep end, I am introduced to the twenty odd members of the swim team. Lameck, who acts as the group leader, has graduated from the University last year and sells insurance now. I meet Stephen, a big, loud Tanzania who sings as he swims down the pool on his back. There is Josephine, who defies gender stereotypes by not only being the only other girl swimming, but also by studying computer engineering. After much animated arguing, two teams are formed. I am assigned to go second on Stephen's team. By the time we take our places at the end of the two lanes, I notice that the other swimmers are standing in the shallow end to watch us.

I'm not usually a paranoid person, but I get the feeling everyone in Tanzania is staring at me. Eighteen thousand students attend UDSM. About 40 of them are *wazungu*. Simply by being white, we are items of interest. For the most part, my friends and I understand that attention is a natural consequence of being so different. When I walk into the crowded cafeteria, I set my plate of rice down on the table so that flies rise up and I sit down. Before I start eating, my friends make me guess how many Tanzanians are staring at me on the other side of the table. It's easy to jest about being somewhat of an attraction. But it's the other, more speculative kind of attention that gets me. While it's fine for Tanzanians to gawk at me in the lunch line, it becomes uncomfortable when they project all of their conceptions about America upon me. In America, everyone can go to school for free. In America, everyone has a big house and a car. In America, a man from Kenya can become president. America is the dream destination of the majority of Tanzanians I have encountered. They don't even have to wait for me to swivel around to greet their stares in the cafeteria to know I am rich, educated and endowed with opportunity.

Everyone I meet seems to have high expectations of me. Although women are clearly not as respected as men in Tanzanian society, that standard does not apply to me as a *mzungu*. It is the ultimate status symbol for a Tanzanian man to be seen with a white girl. It is the ultimate status symbol for a Tanzanian man to be seen with a white girl. Men are impressed with me because they perceive that I am wealthy, fluent in English and intelligent. The crowd lined up along the lanes clearly expects me to be an excellent athlete as well. I wonder if I'll disappoint them as I dive into the water as my teammate touches the wall. My bathing suit bottom promptly sinks to my knees. I do a creative maneuver that would have surely earned my disqualification in a meet to yank it back over my very white behind. After regaining some semblance of respectability, I try to remember what it is like to race. Lameck is slightly ahead of me. I thrust my arms through the water and kick hard, refusing to pause to breathe. I am screaming underwater,

driving bubbles from my lungs so hard. I may not be in prime swimming shape, but I manage to keep up, earning hoots from my team and the crowd.

"You had some trouble with your swimming costume," says Lameck. I smile in embarrassment and nod. The team seems more impressed that I kept pace despite my wardrobe malfunction than horrified by their exposure to the whitest bottom they've undoubtedly ever seen. Much to Stephen's dismay, our team loses. He calls a rematch and we swim four more races. When pool hours end, the team circles around me. Again, there is much animated arguing in Swahili. Lameck asks me how long I have been practicing and what other strokes I know. He translates my answers into Swahili and the team nods.

"Ok, you can join the swim team," announces Lameck. "You are better than all the other girls. You will teach them."

I just nod and follow Josephine into the girl's locker room.

My American friends are highly amused that I'm on the swim team. To add to the absurdity of the situation, I discover that the Dar es Salaam Sharks are not the University team, but the national team. You know, the one that sends athletes to the Olympics. And I do meet one Olympian, the team captain, Hamid. He works for a non-profit in Kampala, Uganda but flies down on weekends to swim with the team. As you might imagine of an Olympian, Hamid is tall, muscular and good-looking. He spares no occasion to wear his Bejjing 2008 t-shirt and show off grainy candids of Michael Phelps on his phone. Most Tanzanian students aren't like Hamid. The University of Dar es Salaam, in all its dilapidated glory, is one of the most reputable universities in Africa. When a student somehow passes their examinations in the top of their class and scrounges up enough money to pay school fees each year, they do it with the objective of reaching the university. Making it to UDSM is like getting into Harvard. The students here would be shocked to see the drunken shenanigans that go on every weekend at my university. Weekends are reserved for studying, not partying. The only thing better than going to the University is going to America.

The extreme economic differences and cultural gap makes me wonder if it's possible to form genuine friendships here. Everyone seems to want something from me. I am taking a drawing class that requires me to arrive at the art building a half an hour early to reserve an easel. For a class of twenty, there are five working easels and a few more that are missing legs that one must lean against a table to stabilize. The rest of the students draw up against the wall. One morning as I wait for class to begin, I read a treasured month-old issue of *The Economist* my parents sent from America. My friend Niko says, "Give me your magazine."

Taken aback, I automatically refuse. Niko asks, "Why?" Why shouldn't I give him my magazine? I could certainly buy a new one. I anticipate being asked for things outside the university, but I'm shocked when my peers will lean over to me in class and demand my pencils, notebooks or that I buy them lunch after class. I want to explain to them that I really don't have that much money, just what I've earned from working summer jobs as a waitress. Later I regret not handing over the magazine. Niko has always been kind to me, walking me to my next class and translating the jokes his classmates made together in Swahili into English for my inclusion. If he had asked for the magazine after class, I'm almost certain I would have given it to him. It was the public demand that

angered me: the sense that Niko is entitled to my possessions because he is poorer than I am. At the same time, if I had turned over the magazine to Niko, where would the giving stop? My meager bank account alone cannot tilt global distributions of wealth.

On the swim team, all anyone asks of me is help with swimming. Soon after I become a member, Lameck suggests that I share my "swimming program" with the team. It doesn't take long to figure out this means to coach practice. I give them a set alternating 200 freestyle and individual medleys, pull, kick, swim. Lameck translates my instructions into Swahili so everyone can understand and the team swims my sets. I even get to say, "ready, go." As I swim, I wrack my brain for the workouts my coaches used to dictate to me. I hesitate at the end of the lane instead of launching into a flip turn and watch the team attempting to swim catch-up freestyle. This is a drill in which one keeps one arm out in front of them as they pull. I see Josephine and Lameck touching their hands together deliberately before moving them apart. Clarence is struggling, putting his feet down at the bottom of the pool when he needs air. Other members of the team have stopped and are idly chatting in the shallow end. I contemplate swimming back to them and asking if they need help. I'm not a swim coach. My only apparent qualification for the position is being American. Although my workout is clearly not working, my teammates continue to follow each other down the pool, dragging their arms through the water and kicking furiously so as not to sink.

After my promotion to coach, I find my attendance at swim team practice dropping. Lameck has been pressuring me to stay longer because the most important, and only, meet of the year is coming up and the team needs work. It's not only my discomfort with my role as swim expert that keeps me away from the pool; I'm also one busy *mzungu*. Classes have started, some of which overlap with swim team practice. I've also begun to travel on the weekends. It's hard to stay rooted at the crumbling university when there is so much to see. Instead of going to practice, I've been at the mountains of Morogoro, caves of Tanga and beaches of Jangwani. The team has a vague understanding that white people like to go on safari, flop around under the burning sun in small bathing suits and frantically snap photographs of "real Tanzanians" wearing any kind of tribal dress in their villages. As much as I want to fit in, I am not ready to give up my adventures to boss around the swim team.

Despite, or perhaps to right my swimming negligence, I turn up bright and early for the meet. Hamid drives the other girls, Josephine, Michaela, Aza, and me to the meet. I wasn't quite sure what to expect, but it wasn't this. The meet is held at Our Haven of Peace Academy where all the children of NGO workers and ambassadors go to school. The compound is surrounded by fences crowned by barbed wire and is accessible only by guarded gate. Inside, Western-style classrooms encircle a fat baobab tree. This is quite a contrast from UDSM, where I have to carefully examine my chair before class to ensure the fold-down table is not broken off or the seat cover hasn't been stripped away leaving a metal frame. I see some students lugging their own seats to class sometimes. Our Haven of Peace's grounds have a basketball court, soccer field, and of course, a swimming pool. The pool is decorated with blue and white flags provided by Vodacom, one of the only successful companies in Tanzania. The Voda banner reads "Swim Championships of Mainland Tanzania."

I've barely put my swim cap on when a white woman with short blonde hair and a headset approaches me. "You're with the university? You're late. Take the team to the basketball court and follow the instructions for the procession."

I tell Hamid and we line up like we're supposed to. While the team talks about our entrance in Swahili, I eye up the other swimmers. There are three teams of children from private primary and secondary schools. With the exception of a few Indian students, they are all white. No *wazungu* children stay in Dar es Salaam after graduating high school. Where would they go, the University of Dar es Salaam? There isn't a single white student there who's not just there for a semester of exchange. Our competition is limited to a few black or Indians swimmers who are somehow affiliated with these private schools. When the blonde woman comes back to get us, she addresses me again. She briskly apologizes for not speaking any Swahili. Never mind that the national language of Tanzania is Swahili. Never mind that all classes at the university are taught in English.

As a *mzungu* in Africa, it is part of your job to brutally criticize other white people. Upon passing bands of *wazungu* in the market, my friends and I speculate wildly to as their reason for being in Tanzania and their level of assimilation. We judge the group in the carver's market who are probably stopping through Dar on the way to the airport; the couple occupying an eight seater safari vehicle who probably bought their package through the mall travel agent; the girl wrapped head to toe in *kitenge* fabric with a Rasta boyfriend in tow; or the table of young professionals who probably get paid huge salaries by the American government to endure Tanzania. At the same time, to a Tanzanian, I could be any of these people.

It pains me to admit that I can only tell apart many of the students at UDSM by their clothes. I've passed my own roommate on the way to class before and not recognized her. This works both ways too. I've been approached by Tanzanian students numerous times who say something like, "Hi Susie. Why haven't you been in class?" White people all look the same. However, the swim team can pick me out from a mile away. Many of my teammates delight in telling me how they saw me getting harassed by a *daladala* driver or tripping over a monkey on campus. It's a custom in Tanzanian culture to stop and greet everyone you see. I'm the girl who likes to blow past everyone on her bike with her headphones in, so asking the cleaning woman about her children on the way to class has been a stretch for me. But when I run into the swim team, I genuinely want to steer them towards a shady patch and ask them about their classes and their families. When I walk away from these exchanges, more often than not I'll hear my teammates' friends ask, "How do you know a *mzungu*?"

After the opening ceremony, which primarily involves the blonde woman talking into her headset, I flip through Hamid's program. Today I'll be swimming the 100 meter backstroke, the 50 backstroke, the 200 freestyle, … and the 100 freestyle …. and the 200 individual medley… and all the relays. In all, I'm scheduled to swim ten events. In America, a swimmer is only allowed to compete in a maximum of four per meet. This is going to be exhausting. I pelt Hamid with protests and only manage to knock off the 200 meter butterfly from my roster. He insists that the team needs me to win, that I'm the best female swimmer here. I look around at the scant competition and concede that he may

very well be right. Due to the shortage of swimmers in my age group, my races are combined with younger swimmers' and males' today.

I don't have time to argue with Hamid because my first race, the 200 meter freestyle, is about to start. . I dive in lightly to avoid another suit mishap. The water is so cloudy that I can't discern where the wall lays until it's hovering right in front of my face. The temperature is reminiscent of a water bottle one might find under their car seat during the summer that actually may be just on the urge of boiling. As I slog along, I imagine the heat particles lodging onto anything with friction – my suit, the hairs on my forearms – and dragging me down. The mantras my coaches hammered into my head are still there. Never take a breath right off the wall. Keep your elbows high out of the water. Cup your hands in an S as you pull. But the heat floats under my cap into my ears and I am too weak to execute them. When I touch the wall for the final time and jerk my head out of the water, UDSM goes crazy. I won.

And I continue to win. I win the 100 freestyle and the 200 backstroke. I win the 50 butterfly and the 100 individual medley. I swim, hoist myself out of the pool, and then line up again. The girls I sit with on the lineup bench tell me they're afraid of me. I assure them I haven't competed in *years*, since my high school days. Then I kick their butts. UDSM seems to take more delight in my victory than I do. Each time I return to my spot on the stands after a race, I am greeted with shrieking, fist-bumps and high fives. Josephine's sisters hug me and ask to sit next to me. They don't seem to mind that my competition is limited to high school girls and two Tanzanians who don't seem to have taken to swimming. My victory is theirs.

My teammates delight most in my accumulation of gold metals. Every three events or so, the swim team fathers haul out a wooden three-step podium and a medals ceremony begins. Each time the blonde announcer calls my name I pick my way through rows of children and mount the winner's podium. I'm not sure how to look. Is it worse to be nonchalant or feign excitement? An indifferent look could be interpreted as standoffish and above the whole competition that UDSM takes very seriously. But if I appear pleased with myself, I risk becoming a joke. The *wazungu* know that I'm no champion; I just have no competition. So I thrust the role of the fool back upon them, stepping quickly onto the podium and keeping a dull stare on the crowd even when they cheer for me. I thank the woman who has hung the gold medal around my neck with a tight-lipped nod and swiftly rejoin the crowd that I'll never blend into.

By the time my American friends arrive, I've done a few more shifts on the winner's podium. We stand outside the pool in the shade of the baobab and marvel at the niceness of Our Haven of Peace compared with the university. My friend Elise's eyes bulge at all the *wazungu*. "Did you ever think there were this many white people in Tanzania?" I show them my medals, cheap gold ovals etched with tiny white swimmers. They snap pictures of me on the podium, and chant my name in the hush at the start of races. I can't help but feel like we're making a mockery of this meet. As I lay in the shade of the stands in between races, I contemplate the ethics of my participation in this competition. Is it fair that I've strutted in here and joined the competition? Who am I taking the honor of winning away from?

In between events, my friends and I sit at the top of the bleachers and commence our *wazungu* hating. We develop elaborate backstories for the white people that move

about the pool. The timer definitely works farming out Tanzania's natural resources, probably in the gold mines. The woman squalling into her headset is most likely got chased out of South Africa after post-apartheid society didn't suit her. The father sitting in front of us could be a missionary or an NGO worker. He seems that nice. We laugh, but I grapple for reassurance. Who's to say my teammates a few rows down from us aren't speculating to whether we have summer homes on the Cape or in France? I struggle to differentiate myself from the typical tourist. I speak broken Swahili. I carry around tissues for the squatters. I eat *ugali* with my hands. But if I had the same business success as these people, would I still test my luck with food poisoning in the cafeteria or ride smushed up against the back window of a *daladala*? These things have added to the adventure of my experience, but honestly, if I had money, I doubt I would be sharing such solidarity with the African people.

Since our arrival in Dar, my *wazungu* friends and I have prided ourselves on not being like the other white people. Today my friends took two sweltering *daladalas* with people hanging out the windows to get to my swim meet. Each ride costs 250 shillings, or about 20 cents. The trip took them two hours. For 2,000 shillings or less than $2 each, they could have hired an air-conditioned cab from the university and arrived in 30 minutes. This is how cheap my friends strive to be. The poverty around us is so crushing that we have to create our own system of morality out of it. Depriving ourselves in Dar is how we avoid being overwhelmed by guilt.

But sometimes our pledge to authenticity comes undone. Elise will say shyly, "Does anyone want to take a *bajaji* downtown instead of a *daladala*? Does anyone want to go to Swahili Café today instead of the cafeteria?" We all have our own system of rationalization. When I spend 10,000 shillings on a delicious Thai dinner, I try to think it's only $8 rather than it could feed a family of four for a week.

I share certain moments with my fellow students because we live in the same community. We look at each other and roll our eyes when our professors forget that we have a midterm, or that the school couldn't afford the Internet bill this month. But in the end, Tanzanians and I are not in the same situation. My life here is temporary. I have means of escape: a passport, a card that summons money from nowhere, a return ticket. When I will go home months later, I am astonished by the reactions to my impending departure. People will adamantly try to persuade me not to go, as if having an American around will makes things better for them. When I make it clear that I will in fact return home, they ask for phone numbers, e-mail addresses. It's not just students that do this, but professors too, educated professionals who have supposedly made it in the world.

I think of this as I swim. The water has grown so hot that it's almost syrupy. It clings to my arms and feet as I strain to raise them out of the water. The liquids I drink in between races leak right back out my pores and I'm dizzy with dehydration. I breathe every other stroke to the right side, which is exactly what I'm not supposed to do. I linger at the wall after I push off, hoping that my momentum will carry me along to the next side. I struggle. I still win. After the race I push past my teammates and walk beyond the pool gates. I lay underneath the baobab tree with my chest heaving. The sun has pinned me to the ground and the air is stickier than the water now. I cannot stop winning.

When the meet finally concludes, I have nine gold medals. I hang a few around my friend's necks and stuff them into the pockets of my bag. The accomplishment they

represent – dominating high school girls and non-swimmers – fails to inspire the sort of enthusiasm in me that my team feels. I lean on Josephine on the bench and watch the children do some sort of manic dance to celebrate the conclusion of the meet. The blonde announcer comes over to our section and implores us to throw out our rubbish, instead of using the grounds as a trash can as we usually do. Then the final results are announced. One of the fancy schools wins first prize, eliciting many shrieks. The UDSM team is awarded some kinds of large trophies for winning their age group overall. I am called to the winner's podium one more time as the most valuable girl's swimmer. When I'm securely up on the #1 block, I read the inscription on the trophy: Best Senior Female Swimmer in Mainland Tanzania.

My American friends have loaded back into the daladala to start their two hour, twenty cent journey home, so I look to my UDSM teammates to share in my disbelief. Hamid fist-bumps Stephen and they raise their hands to wave me on. Aza and Josephine grip each other and scream. The parents applaud politely while their children stare up at me with something like admiration. I don't want to look back at them anymore. Gripping my trophy, I turn my head away from the crowd. I scan past the blue and white flags, past the baobab and the guard poised at the barbed wire fence, until my eyes catch the glint of water. I never noticed it before, but from my vantage point on the tallest block, I can see the Indian Ocean.