

**When We  
Were Young  
in Africa**

**Carol Claxon Polsgrove**

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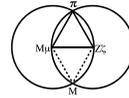
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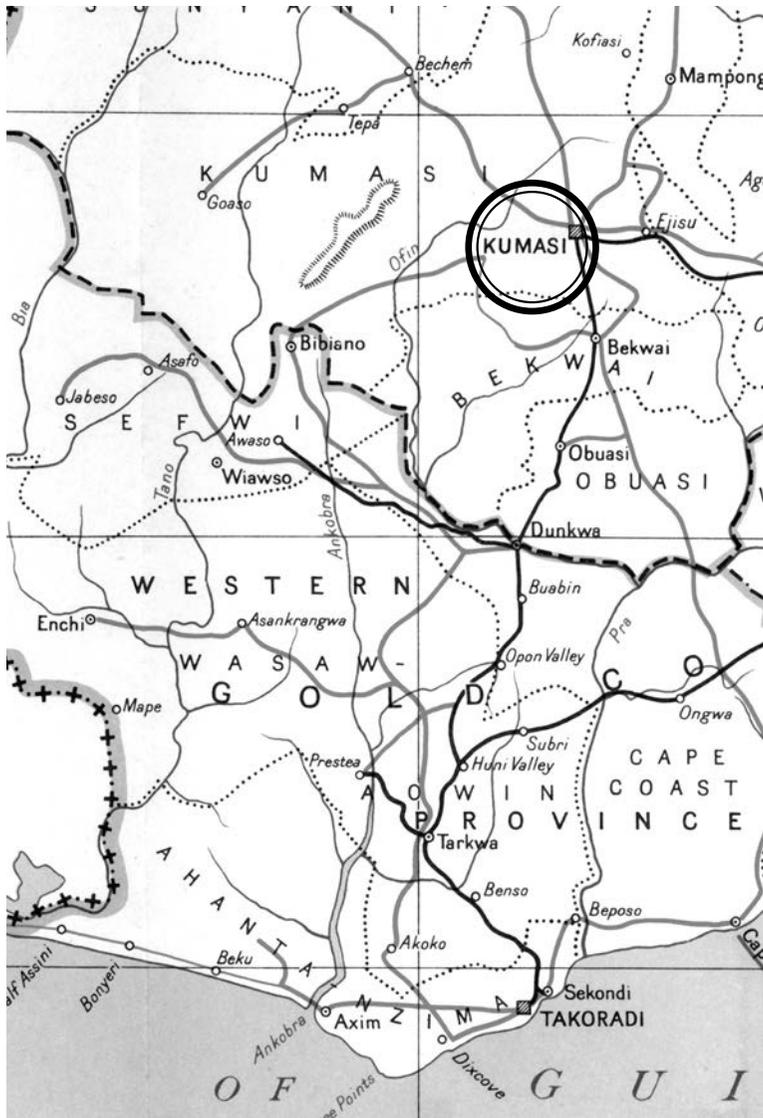
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*Imagine* you are watching a movie and suddenly the action stops and the credits begin to roll. Leaving Africa was like that. I had been going along in my African story, full of its sights and sounds and smells—children balancing kerosene tins on their heads, drums rumbling at night, air scented by smoke from charcoal and wood fires. . . And then: Cut. It was over.

After twelve years of growing up mostly in West Africa, I was back in the United States, where people thought growing up in Africa was strange and growing up the daughter of missionaries was even stranger. I learned to avoid mentioning that part of my life at all, because if I did, I would feel the stereotypes close round me. I did my best to pass as American without ever quite succeeding. When my mother asked me in her last days, “Do you appreciate your African childhood?” I replied with cruel honesty, “Yes, but now I don’t belong in America.”

Just weeks after her death at the age of ninety-six, I sat myself down in a state of survivor’s freedom to explore the childhood I had tried to put behind me. I poured out memories across a yellow notepad and began reading the letters Mother had passed on to me—intimate letters she and Daddy had written back to family in Kentucky, letters I myself had written from my boarding school in Nigeria. As a historian I already understood the richness of life told in letters: the way secrets spring from their pages. Thus innocently (if any historian can be said to be innocent) I began—and found myself tangled up in a story I had not just forgotten but had never known.



Gold Coast, 1948

*(Modified detail of a map published by the Directorate of Colonial Surveys and printed by the War Office of the United Kingdom)*

# That Is What the Matter Is

**H**ardly any travellers now realize what I learned at the age of three: how vast is the expanse of water that separates the world's continents. My daughter and her friends have flown from one continent to another. None has yet taken a ship from the United States to Europe, much less from the United States to Africa—days on the blue sea with its distant horizon and the ship itself nearly always alone.

I can scare myself now just thinking about that little ship by itself on the great Atlantic and little me on that little ship, though at the time, to judge from the letters Mother and Daddy wrote home, I did not seem worried at all. I was the only child on board; everyone watched over me. Mother made a harness for me so I would not fall overboard. The first mate hung up a swing for me. The chief engineer gave me a doll. The chief steward gave me cookies and fruit. The nurse gave me candy. Daddy made a hypodermic needle out of modeling clay and I—remembering all the shots we'd had before we started out—gave him a shot.

While Mother suffered seasickness for the first few days on board and Daddy thought about storms that would send us to our deaths were it not for God watching over us, the only thing that bothered me was the loud blast of the foghorn at a distant ship our first night. I remember the foghorn, and I remember the little dog on the ship that jumped into the sea and how the first mate stopped the ship so we could all look for the dog in the great sea of choppy water and how someone saw him and a sailor jumped in and brought him back to the ship and put him into a bucket lowered down from the deck and climbed up a rope ladder himself to safety.

And I remember the very day I came to shore in the Gold Coast.

The ship had docked outside the port of Takoradi, where there was no room for us yet in the harbor. My parents went ashore on a launch to go through customs, leaving me behind with a fellow passenger for what they thought would be a few hours. When the captain discovered they were gone, he was furious. It would be the next day or longer before the ship could get into port and the sea had turned too rough for Mother and Daddy to get back to the ship.

And so he himself carried me down a swaying gangplank and with a great leap landed us both in a little boat rising and falling with each swell of the wave. I remember the leap, the little boat rising up and down on the dark water below us, how the captain jumped and nearly fell—but how safe I was in his arms.



From Takoradi, the Gold Coast port where we landed on June 9, 1948, we rode a train through a deep forest, accompanied by the Yoruba pastor of the Baptist church in Kumasi, our destination. In the three years of my life in segregated Kentucky, I had possibly never met a black person, though surely I had seen black people in Louisville, where we'd lived at the Southern Baptist seminary. Now, everyone around us was black, even our fellow Baptists who met us at the train station in Kumasi, and I wanted to know why, and when Mother said God made them that way, I wanted to know why he made so many.

We saw no other white person the next day when we walked to church among the crowds—barbers plying their trade, women wearing colorful headties and babies on their backs. At the Baptist Church, started by Yorubas from Nigeria, we were the only white people there, too, except for the albino man who walked around with a stick taking whacks at noisy children. I remember him well, how he looked like me, but not—his fuzzy hair murky yellow. He frightened me, and so did the big mean-looking vultures perched on the walls around the courtyard where we sat, their long necks raw pink, their bulging eyes peering down at the crowd looking for prey, ready to pounce, especially on the one small blonde girl wearing glasses—me.

We went to church twice that day, once in the morning and again in the afternoon. Daddy prayed for the dedication of two babies and in the afternoon service, preached. An interpreter from Nigeria translated his English words into Yoruba, sentence by sentence. “This has been a great day,” Daddy wrote home.

It was not as hard as a day at Long Lick, a country church he had pastored in Kentucky, and it was not uncomfortably hot. Already picking up the patois, he pronounced our new town “a good city plenty native good.” When Mother visited the homes of the local Baptist school teachers and the pastor in the afternoon, though, she confessed she was “shocked” at what she called the “nativeness” of it—the open fire outside where everyone did their cooking, the plain rooms with one table, no chairs.

Yet a church reception a couple of days later was, she wrote, “lovely” and “mostly in English.” We were served tea, cookies, and candy. In the evening, hearing drums in the distance, Mother remembered an Assembly of God missionary’s talk of Ashanti headhunting (we would learn to take “missionary stories” with bushels of salt)—and the heads they were said to hunt were the heads of Yorubas from Nigeria, the people who had given us such a warm welcome. But when I asked her one night why people were drumming, she told me they were dancing, and I wanted to dance with them.



In our European-style Kumasi house with proper windows and doors, Mother set about making us a Kentucky home. She remade her old college bedspreads into draperies; she painted and cleaned with the help of a cook (Rafael) and a steward (Jimah). I helped Jimah dust or made gingerbread boys with Rafael, or pattered around the bare-dirt backyard, talking

to the man who had a garden there and called me “honey” because that is what Mother called me. Or I sat on the concrete cistern that held our rainwater, admiring the paw-paw tree with its big globes of yellow fruit or watching red-headed long-tailed lizards bask in the sun. One day, perched on the cistern, I had a thought—oddly associated, in my memory, with a purple cocoa tin lying against the house wall: does God really exist? One day at bedtime, I asked, “Is God here in my bed?” “Is he there on the floor?” I was full of questions. “Why does the mosquito net have holes in it?” Why are Africans happy?” “Why can’t we just go back to America?”

I was only three years old, and my suitcase of expectations was not large, yet there were some things I expected. I expected to see my Aunt Eleanor, who taught first grade in Frankfort and wore bright red lipstick and stylish clothes and hats she made for herself, and I wanted to grow up to be just like her. I stood in front of her picture on a little table in the living room and cried my heart out. “I’m sad because I want to see Aunt Eleanor,” I wailed. “That is what the matter is all the time.”

I made Mother pretend to be Aunt Eleanor for a whole day and nearly loved her to death. I pretended to be Grandmother Claxon and cooked in the backyard like the Kumasi women. I drew a picture of Grandmother Claxon’s house in Frankfort with Grandmother in the window and Aunt Eleanor and me out front holding hands. On my pretend piano, the table, I played “Mammy had a speckled hen,” which Aunt Eleanor had taught me to plunk out on the black notes of Grandmother Claxon’s upright piano.

Mother had an idea: I could say my own letter to Aunt Eleanor, and Mother would type the words:

There are black people at Africa. They walk without any shoes. They carry things on their heads. . . . We love them. We have toilets at Africa. We have bathrooms at Africa. The boy comes around with the bucket on his head. The bucket is to empty our toilet. He hates to walk around in the toilet, that old smelly toilet. . . . There is a little black girl named Sade. There is a little black boy named Bee. There's a sister that's named Mary. They come to see me every day. And we have a cook named Rafael and Rafael has a brother and he is named Jimah. And he cleans the house up. And he dusts the floor.

I told Aunt Eleanor I loved her. I asked if she would play the piano if I saw her. Would she let me hang up some clothes? I assured her: "I'm going to soon be back." I was struggling to connect my two worlds: the Kentucky world I knew for the first three years of my life and the African world my parents had brought me to.



Back in Kentucky, Grandmother Claxon worried about my not having white children to play with. "I don't like to think of her going through the hardships of life there, not knowing



*With Sade in Kumasi*



*With Alice in our yard*



*With my kitten, Ginger*



*A rare instance of me in local dress, shown here with church ladies and a child from another mission*

the pleasure of living with white children,” she wrote. Daddy asked Eleanor to tell her not to worry. He said they would make a special effort to get me together with white children. And in fact, at first I did play with an American missionary girl next door. But when she moved away and I had no one to play with, Mother thought of Sade, the daughter of Pastor and Mrs. J. A. Idowu.

Brother Idowu was a Yoruba Baptist fieldworker from Nigeria who traveled with Daddy to visit churches around the country and taught Mother and Daddy Yoruba. His wife, herself a fieldworker for the Women’s Missionary Union, took Mother visiting and told her how they did things here in the Gold Coast, like having babies at home on the floor. The first day that Sade came for a visit, I stood out front in a frilly dress waiting for forty-five minutes until she arrived. Although I could not speak her language and she could speak only “small-small” of mine, I chattered away and got mad if she didn’t do what I said.

Daddy reported home that I was “beginning not to feel as queer with Africans.” He had integrationist ideas that would have made it hard for him to get along as pastor of a white Kentucky Baptist church. He wrote his mother that some whites’ un-Christian attitude toward Negroes in America was affecting mission work among Africans. He told the children he taught at the Kumasi church’s primary school the story of the African-American singer Marian Anderson, who broke a racial barrier by singing spirituals at the Lincoln Memorial.

In no time, I was holding hands with Sade in church, and Mother told Daddy’s family, “I think soon, she will be loving the African children just as much as the white ones.” As

Mother typed her letter, Alice, who was fourteen and Yoruba, was reading a story to me and Sade and Bee—all black, Mother noted, but me. One evening after my new friends left, I prayed, "Thank you for my little friends and I hope they will be back again." They were—though after fourteen showed up one day, Mother told Mr. Idowu we could have only two at a time; it was too hard to keep an eye on them all.

A month after my fourth birthday party, Mother and Daddy were commenting on my "cosmopolitan" friendships. I had gone to a Scotch lassies' party and met Scottish children. I had been playing with a Syrian boy next door and with a couple of girls who were a mix of West African, West Indian, and white (all of unidentified nationalities). Ethnicity had never been this fluid in Kentucky, nor had we ever encountered such varieties of it. After the American mission family moved out of the other side of the house, an Englishman who worked for a drug company moved in. He did fine embroidery, borrowed mother's sewing machine to work on his draperies, and read Mother's *Good Housekeeping*, trying out new recipes on his many guests. He had a fat cat and gave me a marmalade colored Persian kitten he named "Ginger."

When he moved out, a young English couple named Elsie and Jack took his place, and soon we were all having afternoon tea together. Elsie and Jack played with me so much that Daddy said maybe I had the wrong parents. Jack made me airplanes and we sailed them in the yard. He worried when he saw me with teenage Alice bouncing on my big seesaw with our arms out, not holding on, and bumping hard. When I swung, I pumped my legs till I was almost at the top of the nine-foot frame. Daddy said I would break my neck. Mother (who had

been a tree-climber herself in her youth) said I might as well break it that way as any other; I had to do something.

I was, in fact, Daddy wrote, “as busy as a bird dog.” Once when he called me down from the top of the garden where I was out of their sight, I appeared, bare chested in my panties, covered with mud, and crying over the interruption as if my heart would break. “But Daddy, I was setting out a paw-paw leaf,” I sobbed. “I had the little round hole all ready.” Sometimes, Mother said, it was all they could do to hold in their laughter.

They were clearly proud, though—proud when I sang my one Yoruba song to the children at church, proud when someone said I talked like a dictionary, using words like “muttered” and “wept.” I “read,” turning the pages of books as if I understood the words—and would have read more if my parents had let me. My eyes had been badly crossed since about the age of two, and though I had glasses with prisms in an attempt to straighten my vision, one eye still turned sharply in. Following doctor’s orders, my parents put a patch on the “good” eye for two hours a day and tried to restrict the time I spent looking at books, but once after Mother put away my little picture books, she found me with a stack of Daddy’s theology books, turning the pages of one about the crucifixion. Clearly, I had a mind of my own. Once when Elsie next door read a story to me one way, I insisted it should be read another way. “Aunt Elsie, I’m *telling* you,” I said.

I had a new aunt, a new life. In the journal he kept that year, Daddy wrote, “Carol Ann was out on road with tricycle today. Never before. I felt funny—she was perfectly at peace. ‘B’ Idowu with her.”

Reading Daddy's journal, I see how he whose father died when he was six years old reveled in his own fatherhood. He played with me, read to me, dressed me, rocked me to sleep. He worried about me—about my health, my character. He and I both had tempers. He lost his at our cook, Rafael. I threw a "jiminy fit" over not getting my way. When I sassed him, he spanked me, and then I would ask, "Do you love me?" or would say it didn't hurt much, which could provoke harder licks. "I whipped her much," Daddy wrote once after I cried forty-five minutes when Mother went off to teach.

Mother, too, sometimes switched my legs (though she hated it when the headmaster beat the children at school), and when she was very old sometimes asked me, "Do you think we abused you when you were little?"—not, I think, seriously considering the possibility. They were, I believe, carrying on the punishment traditions of their own families; whatever emotional scars I carry, I know I was loved. "C.A. & I took a walk before supper," Daddy wrote in his journal. "C.A. said, 'I like this beautiful world.'"

Daddy had never kept a journal before and he had trouble making time for it. Still, most days he managed to jot down a small page of notes; if he missed a few days he tried to catch up from memory. He wrote about the vegetables he planted in the garden and about the books and magazines he was reading—*The Babe Ruth Story*, *Life*. He wrote about missing tennis and how happy he was when he joined the African tennis club, less expensive and easier to get to than the European club. He described telling moments, as when a European truck driver demonstrated "the spirit of overlordship" by not moving

Friday, Oct. 8, 1948

282nd day — 84 days follow

Up at 6:30 - Slept like a log. After breakfast, began copying Jg. U. articles. Copied one - C.A. had patch - needed rest from books - so I pushed her swing a bit. Then copied other article. Noon caught me. Afterward, typed part of article - rocked C.A. to sleep, rested very briefly. Then finished typing the lesson. Emma copied last one. (She did 3) I was ready at language time to mail them, I went on & Rev. I down taught Emma <sup>3</sup> track, we studied 4 pages (new). Finished we showed him Christmas play - He liked it. Dinner was ready 5:20 - Cap had needs more work. Too early dinner. Afterward, we played badminton - Mr. Isak had asked Emma to see his flowers. She did - (We). Pain came - We had to stop. C.A. & I played dominos. She does real well. I wrote Mether. - Day - Read Bible - I am so tired. I must go to bed.

This has been a good day but a hard day. So much wgt. off my shoulders even though not too pleased about the workmanship.

Goodnight -  
Tomorrow is coming.

Entry in my father's 1948-49 journal, now in  
the Lilly Library, Indiana University