

This is a story about education. Despite the fact that I am a stranger to you, I hope you will read it

I was born in Africa, in the red earth country between the Aberdares and Mount Kenya, born to a 19 year old girl who should have known better. We had rhino in our garden, a pet buffalo, vast herds of elephant that we would watch in the valley below, colobus monkeys which ate the blood red berries from the coffee trees, swarms of locusts that brought nothing but destruction and devastation, siafu (motheringly savage soldier ants) such that we had to surround our house with white hot ash to keep them out, trees bearing oranges and lemons and black peppercorns and figs, the thunderstorms of your dreams, butterflies so beautiful it was as if God Himself was dancing on the flowers, and this was only part of what we had. Believe me when I tell you it was thrilling.

When I was six, my parents decided to send me to school; there was only one, a boarding school. The day came. I was excited. We walked around the school. I was shown my dormitory. Then came the act of betrayal as they said goodbye: *you don't mean you're going to leave me here?* I had no idea that the two pillars for six years (an eternity) of my life were to abandon me. I don't think I wept. But lots did; at night the sobbing was relentless. As it happens, my mother became Brown Owl, so, once a week, I was allowed to join the Brownies for roasted marshmallows and other stuff. I am the only male Brownie in existence! Thus began my education. I learnt to read and write, and add up, and carve out of the grey dead wood, and play cricket and rounders. At weekends we took to the long grass, learning to avoid the puff adders, building tunnels, hiding

And we grew up bye and bye. The young girl who should have known better fell in love with a man who was not my father and moved away. We moved with her, to a place so cold, so cold that from my dormitory I never saw the Severn flowing, not for January, nor February, nor March; not until the summer term such was the cruelty of that winter. They called me Wog Marrian, those boys, as they devoured the sports pages of the tabloids. But I outran them with my long African legs. I became school captain of running, and head of house and I learnt Latin. Because I knew something that those boys didn't know. I had watched the lines of children walking, running, scampering and scurrying to their African schools, impatient to get ahead, embedded in their belief that what lay inside their schools was better than what lay outside them, that poverty and drudgery and hunger and disease did not have to be put up with. Those children, poor and humble as they were, did not drag themselves to school, did not put one leaden foot in front of another, but skipped and danced and sang, instinctively recognizing that their lives would be immeasurably richer for the partaking of that gift.

I also knew something else: that the young girl who should have known better had sacrificed a place at Oxford for her African adventure and, despite the thrills and excitement, and the bearing of three sons, not a day has gone by in the decades of her life when she has not regretted the exchange she made. She swapped the gift of education for the immediacy of adventure, and the trade was not a worthy one. She came to realise that education is not about what she was running from: exams and tests, and evaluation, and assessment and appraisal. She came to understand that education is exactly what Einstein said it was: *education is what remains after one has forgotten everything one learned in school*. That is wisdom and that is what she did not get. She did not get the ideas, the debate, the thrust of argument and counter-argument, the learning, the realisation of things not yet properly understood, the gradual acquisition from all those minds of truth and loyalty and

dedication and integrity. No lights sparked in her brain, no wonder came upon her, no attainment or fulfilment came her way.

Helena, you don't need my advice; you will do what you will do. But you do need to absorb this story. Education is a slippery little thing – much praised by many who have something different in mind. I reckon you need to approach it like a chess player. I remember one particularly brilliant grandmaster being asked how many moves he thought ahead. A little disingenuously he said "one", and then went on to explain that there are certain squares on the chess board which favour certain pieces. Get those pieces on to those squares and the strength of that positioning, while not immediately predictable, gradually reveals itself as the game progresses. A combination of wisdom and instinct will allow you to position yourself on the right squares