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WILLIAM BOYD

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WILLIAM BOYD

An Ice-Cream War

William Boyd's first novel, *A Good Man in Africa*, won a Whitbread Prize and a Somerset Maugham Award; his second, *An Ice-Cream War*, was awarded the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and was short-listed for the Booker; *Brazzaville Beach* won the James Tait Memorial Prize; and *The Blue Afternoon* won the Los Angeles Times Prize for Fiction. Boyd lives in London.



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For Susan

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W.B.

Oxford, 1982

... He hurried desperately, and the islands slipped and slid under his feet, the straits yawned and widened, till he found himself utterly lost in the world's fourth dimension with no hope of return. Yet only a little distance away he could see the old world with the rivers and mountain chains marked according to the Sandhurst rules of map-making.

—RUDYARD KIPLING, *The Brushwood Boy*

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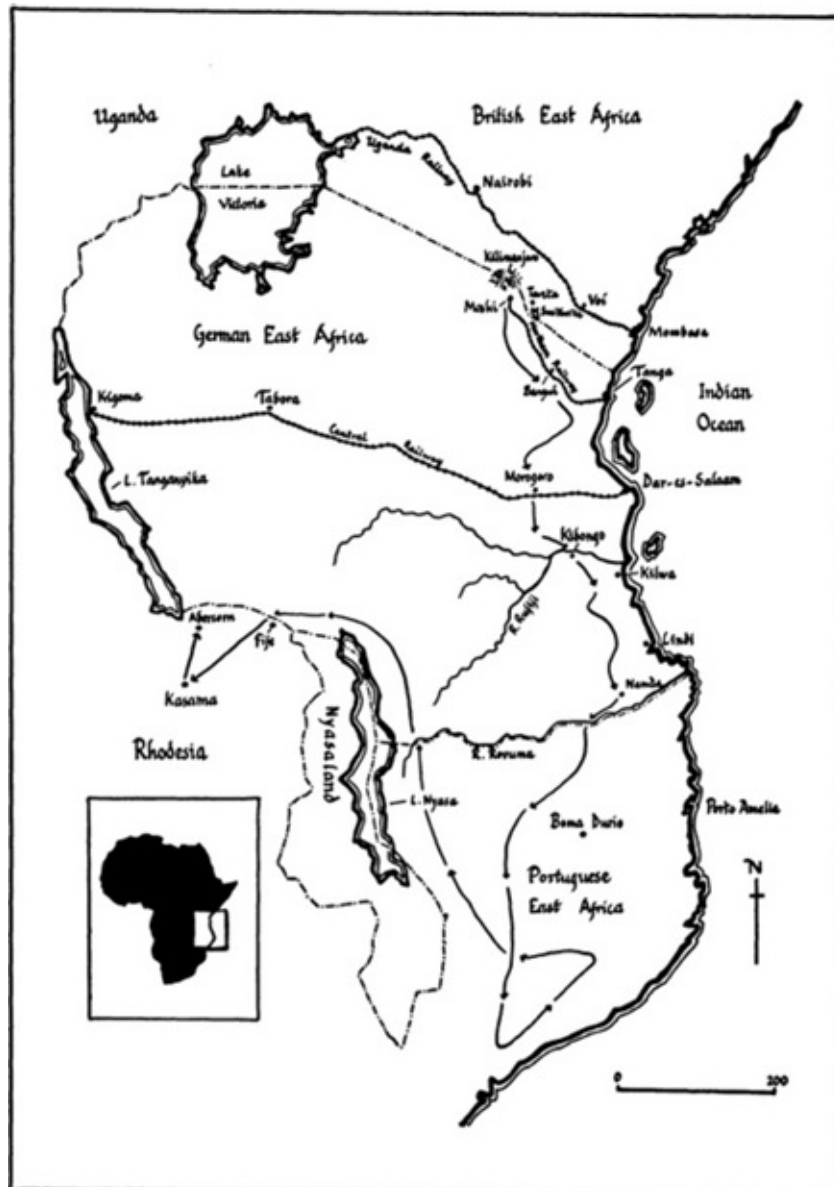
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German East Africa,
showing route taken by German forces

PART ONE

Before the War

CHAPTER ONE

6 JUNE 1914

Dar-es-Salaam • German East Africa

“**W**hat do you think would happen,” Colonel Theodore Roosevelt asked his son Kermit, “if I shot an elephant in the balls?”

“Father,” Kermit said, keeping a straight face, “I think it would hurt a great deal.”

The colonel roared with laughter.

Walter Smith smiled at this exchange as he supervised the unloading of the horses and equipment. The colonel and his son were sitting on the bench above the cowcatcher at the very front of the train. Walter couldn't see them, yet he heard their conversation as clearly as if they were standing alongside. It must be, he reflected, some trick of the atmosphere, the stillness and dryness of the air.

The train had stopped in the middle of an enormous African plain. A tall sky, a few dawdling clouds. High blond grass, badged with occasional thorn trees and outcrops of rock, stretched away to a horizon of purple-blue hills. Mr. Loring, the naturalist, thought he had seen a male oryx of a species which the hunting party had not yet bagged, and so a halt had been ordered.

Walter told the Somali grooms to lead out four Arab ponies and saddle them up. The Roosevelts, Mr. Tarlton the white hunter, and Mr. Loring the naturalist would ride out in search of the oryx. The side of the long horse-box was lowered to the ground and the first of the small ponies was led down. It paced delicately about, as if testing the earth, and flicked its head and ears in irritation at the corona of buzzing flies that constantly attended it.

Walter took off his thick solar helmet and wiped his forehead on his sleeve. The heat was slamming down on the exposed train and not the slightest breeze stirred the tremendous grass prairie.

He heard, again with astonishing clarity, Colonel Roosevelt grunting as he eased himself down from the cowcatcher and stretched and stumped on the railway ties. He seemed to see him in his mind's eye, almost as in a vision. The plump and rumped figure wore a baggy army shirt, ill-fitting khaki jodhpurs buttoned tightly from knee to ankle and sagging around his bottom, and heavy boots. He saw the avuncular bespectacled face, with its drooping walrus moustaches, squint into the baleful sun. The colonel windmilled his

arms and cracked his knuckles. “Good day for hunting,” he said, and paced stiffly up the track a few yards.

But then Walter’s view changed—miraculously—to Kermit. He saw Kermit’s small handsome features set in a thin smile. Saw him reach for his double-barrelled Rigby shotgun. Heard the oiled mechanical click as the twin hammers were cocked. Saw the barrels slowly rise to point at the colonel’s broad back.

“No!” Walter said to himself in horror, dropping the pony’s reins he was holding. He spun round and looked up the train towards the locomotive. Sure enough, the colonel stood some fifteen yards up the track, his back to the engine, staring out at the landscape. But Walter could not see Kermit. Astonished at this clairvoyant vision, he sensed that in some way it had been granted to him precisely so he could prevent the assassination of this esteemed military hero and ex-President of the United States of America.

“No!” Walter shouted again, drawing startled looks from Mr. Loring and the black handlers. “No, Mr. Roosevelt, sir, for God’s sake don’t do it!”

He began to run towards the head of the train, his feet slipping on the earth and stones of the embankment. Again, in a flash of prescient vision he saw Kermit’s aim settle between his father’s shoulder blades. Saw the knuckle of Kermit’s forefinger whiten as the first slack was taken up on the trigger.

“No!” Walter screamed. “Stop! He’s your father, for Christ’s sake!”

Boom! went the twin barrels. The colonel’s shirt erupted in a splash of blood and tattered khaki as the two-foot spread of cartridge pellets pitched him onto his face.

Walter flicked up the mosquito net and sat on the edge of the bed. He stood up and stretched. He was naked. He rubbed his shoulders and chest, slapped his buttocks and touched his cock.

Walter was a small, stocky man in his early forties, about five foot six, with a barrel chest and thick muscular legs. His once-compact frame was still just visible even under the amount of excess fat it was nowadays obliged to carry. He had a sizeable belly and there were two diagonal folds of flesh on his back, running from the nape of his neck to his kidneys. His chest and broad shoulders were covered in thick, greying, springy hair. His jawline had long ago disappeared into one of his chins. His pepper-and-salt hair was cut short and parted in the middle and he had a dark, bushy, drooping moustache that grew well over his top lip. This moustache was such a prominent feature that it was often the only personal detail that could be recalled of him. His nose was small, almost snub, and his eyes were pale and innocuous.

He walked over to the window and opened the shutters an inch or two. From his room on the top floor of the Kaiserhof Hotel he had a good view of Dar-es-Salaam’s capacious natural harbour. There, anchored a quarter of a mile offshore, lay the cruiser *Königsberg*. Her 4.1-inch guns sounded the last of her salute. The quayside was crowded with spectators, and bunting was strung from every available telegraph pole, window-ledge and balcony. With

a clash of cymbals the band of the *Schutztruppe*, the colony's army, started up *Deutschland über alles* and the guard of honour was inspected by its commander, Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck.

Walter turned away smiling, thinking about his dream. He hadn't dreamt about Roosevelt for years. He yawned. He supposed he should be grateful to the old swine, really. After all, without Roosevelt he would never have come to Africa. In 1909, as the manager of a small iron foundry in Sturgis, New Jersey, Walter had reached a stage in his life where the only prospects were increasing boredom and frustration. Then he had seen the Smithsonian Institution's advertisement for a manager to run and organise a hunting and specimen collecting trip in Africa. He had applied, got the job and had embarked with the Roosevelts and their tons of luggage two months later. It hadn't lasted long. The Roosevelts shot anything that moved. Worried about the large numbers of wounded animals they left in their wake, Walter had voiced a mild protest. At which Kermit had promptly "sacked" him, as the English said.

Walter screwed up his face. The old man was all right. It was Kermit whom he'd never gotten on with. Yet when the colonel's book—*African Game Trails*—had appeared in 1910 there hadn't been a single reference to Walter. Punishment, he assumed. He asked himself if any reader had wondered how the hunting party, with its immense paraphernalia, had moved from A to B, how trains had been loaded and unloaded? He told himself not to fret; in the long run the Roosevelts had done him a favour, and it was the long run that was important as far as he was concerned.

Walter allowed himself the luxury of a bath and then dressed in his freshly laundered clothes. The Kaiserhof was the best hotel in East Africa, in his opinion. Better than the Norfolk in Nairobi and the Grand in Mombasa. Hot and cold running water, servants drilled with Teutonic thoroughness, and within five minutes' rickshaw ride of an excellent brewery.

After breakfast, Walter stepped out of the hotel onto Arabstrasse. The Kaiserhof was in reality the railway hotel, built some six years before at the commencement of the Dar-Lake Tanganyika central railway project. It was a stone building of some size topped with fake crenellation and it stood at the corner of Arabstrasse and Bahnhofstrasse. Behind Walter lay the harbour lagoon with its newly erected pier, Port Offices and customs sheds. Before him was the festering Indian town, made up of crumbling mud houses packed together in a maze of narrow fetid lanes. If he had walked to the east, continuing up Arabstrasse, he would have come to Unter den Akazien, the main commercial thoroughfare, where evidence of German neatness and efficiency was more apparent. Unter den Akazien's narrow, flamboyant-lined avenue led to the residential areas of Dar. Wooded, spacious roads, solid two- and three-storey stone colonial houses with red tiled roofs, and a large and beautifully laid out botanical garden.

It was this last feature of the town that had brought Walter to Dar, to buy coffee seedlings. His dealings with the colony's director of agriculture, or the

Chef der Abteilung für Landeskultur und Landesvermessung to give his official title, had been brisk and satisfactory. For a reasonable price, crates of coffee seedlings were being prepared and would be ready for him to transport back to his own farm the next day.

It was a long journey back to Walter's farm, which lay near the foot of Kilimanjaro in British East Africa. First there was the coastal steamer from Dar to Tanga, and then a day's journey from Tanga to Moshi on the Northern Railway, followed by a further day's wagon ride across the border to B.E.A. and his own farm near the small town and former mission station of Taveta.

His business had been successfully completed the day before; he had some money left, so he decided to savour the carnival atmosphere that currently pervaded the town. The German colony was flourishing. The Central Railway had just been completed. It was to be officially opened in August and a huge Dar-es-Salaam Exhibition had been planned to coincide with it. Hence, Walter assumed, the arrival of the German flotilla—the *Königsberg* and several destroyers, survey ships and a fleet tender.

Walter turned and walked down Bahnhofstrasse, past the splendid new station and on to the dockside. A large crowd of several hundred people had turned out to welcome and admire the *Königsberg*. In the morning sun its slim lines and three tall funnels stood out with emphatic sharpness. Strings of flags had been run up its masts and its crew lined the decks at attention.

The crowd was carefully segregated. On either side of the Port Offices were the Indians, Arabs and natives. In front of the offices, beneath the brightly striped awnings, the German colonials gathered. A sizeable guard of immaculate askaris was lined up on the quayside. A young European officer put them through some elementary drill routines. They seemed as capable and organised as any European troops Walter had seen. On a temporary dais the *Schutztruppe* brass band blared forth martial music.

Walter looked about him. All the spectators were got up in their finery. The women all wore white dresses with lacy trims and carried parasols. The men wore formal suits with hats, collars and ties. Walter joined the crowd and watched the captain of the *Königsberg* arriving ashore. He was greeted by Von Lettow-Vorbeck, a dapper small man with a completely shaven head, and the Governor of German East Africa, Herr Schnee. They then proceeded to a bedecked and sheltered row of armchairs and there followed a succession of speeches. Walter's German was rudimentary and he understood virtually nothing of what was said. He wandered away.

Moored some distance from the *Königsberg* was the Deutsche-Ost-Afrika liner, the *Tabora*, which the cruiser had escorted for the last half of its journey from Bremerhaven. Passengers from the *Tabora* were disembarking at a jetty. Nearby, gangs of natives unloaded supplies and large numbers of cabin trunks and suitcases from a lighter.

"Hello Smith," came a voice—strangely high-pitched—in English.

Walter turned. He was surprised to hear impeccable English accents among so much German. He was even more surprised to see that it came from an

officer in the *Schutztruppe*.

“Good God,” Walter said, his American accent contrasting strongly with his interlocutor’s. “Erich von Bishop. What are you doing in that outfit? I thought you’d left the army.”

Von Bishop was Walter’s neighbour. Their farms both lay in the Kilimanjaro region, separated by a few miles and the border between German and British East Africa. Von Bishop was a tall, lean man with a melancholy, clean-shaven face. He had a large sharp nose and an unusually long upper lip which, Walter supposed, was responsible for his looking literally so down in the mouth. He was one of those men who narrowly miss being freakishly ugly; the odd features were just under control. The most surprising thing about him was his voice. It was boyishly high and reedy, full of air and sounding as if it would give out any second. Like Von Lettow-Vorbeck, his commander, his head was shaven to a prickly grey stubble. He wore the brilliant, starched white uniform of a *Schutztruppe* captain and carried a sabre by his side.

“I’m in the reserve,” he reminded Walter. “Everyone’s been summoned for the celebration; there’s a big parade later today. And besides, I’m meeting my wife. She’s arriving from Germany”—he gestured at the harbour—“on the *Tabora*.”

“Well, I won’t detain you any further,” Walter said. He had never met Von Bishop’s wife, but knew she had been away for over a year.

“No, please,” Von Bishop said. “I insist on you meeting her. After all, we are neighbours of a sort.”

“Delighted,” Walter said. He was, he had to admit, curious. He didn’t know Von Bishop well. They had met perhaps four times in the three years since Walter had settled at his farm, but he had formed sufficient opinions about the man—he thought he was extremely odd—to wonder what his wife looked like.

Von Bishop was in his early fifties and, as Walter knew, half-German and half-English. For some reason, in his youth he had gone to the German military academy at Kessel and had come out to East Africa in the nineties. He had distinguished himself in the putting down of the brutal Maji-Maji rebellion in 1907 and had been awarded the honorary title of *von* in recognition of his services. He had a large and thriving farm growing maize and bananas.

The two men moved towards the crowd that was greeting the arriving passengers. Walter saw Von Bishop stiffen with recognition as a woman walked up the steps from the lighter to the jetty. She was wearing a simple air-blue ankle-length dress with small ruffs at the end of the long sleeves. Her face was shadowed by a wide straw hat. Walter waited for Von Bishop to go forward to greet her but he didn’t move.

“Ah-ha,” he said cautiously. “There she is.”

“Who?” Walter asked. “Is that your wife?”

“My dear wife,” he said feelingly. He clasped his hands in front of him and stood his ground. Walter wondered why he didn’t step forward and welcome

her.

“Oh dear,” Von Bishop said, making his face sadder.

“What’s wrong?”

“She looks ... she looks different. What shall I say? Very healthy. Yes, healthy.”

The woman seemed in no particular hurry either. She stepped off the jetty and looked idly around. Every now and then she reached into her bag and put something into her mouth.

“Erich!” She had seen him and came over. Only then did Von Bishop go to meet her. He politely kissed her on the cheek and spoke some words in German. He offered his wife his arm and led her over to Walter.

“This is Mr. Smith, our neighbour in British East Africa. Mr. Smith, my wife Liesl.”

“How do you do,” Walter said. “I hope your trip was enjoyable.”

“Yes.” She spoke slowly in English, with a strong German accent. “It was quite tolerable, thank you. I’m happy to meet you.” They shook hands. A strong gust of peppermint came from her mouth when she spoke.

She was a well-built woman, Walter noticed, who looked to be considerably younger than Von Bishop, perhaps in her mid-thirties. She was tall, like her husband, and had broad shoulders and a heavy bosom and hips. Her skin was very pale and creamy and her face was covered in large freckles. Her nose was slightly hooked and her eyes were green. Her mouth was wide and her upper lip was the same size as her lower—if not slightly larger—which gave her a look of constantly biting back her words. From beneath her hat some strands of crinkled bright ginger hair had escaped.

Von Bishop left to supervise the loading of her luggage into a rickshaw.

“And what are you doing in Dar?” Frau von Bishop asked abruptly.

“I’ve come down to buy coffee seedlings,” Walter explained. “We have nothing like your botanical garden in British East. But, I must confess I wanted to see Dar and, um, your splendid new railway.” He wondered why he was talking in this ridiculous manner. It was something to do with the almost permanent mood of censure that seemed to emanate from the woman.

“You are not English, I think?” she said, cocking her head to one side, as if she had caught him out in some way.

“No,” Walter confessed. “I’m American. From the United States of America. I came over in oh-nine with President Roosevelt on his hunting trip. And I, ah, decided to stay on.”

“I see,” she said. There was an awkward pause. “What is Erich doing? Would you like a peppermint?” She offered Walter a paper bag.

“Why, thank you.” He put the sweet in his mouth. He didn’t like peppermint that much.

“For ... *mal de mer*. How do you say it?”

“I’m sorry? What’s maldermare?” To Walter’s surprise Frau von Bishop energetically mimed a vomiting motion, complete with noises.

“Sick,” she said. “At sea.”

“Oh. Sea-sick. Yes, mmm.”

“Sea-sick?” She seemed irritated at the simple logic of the word. “It’s for sea-sick. Peppermint.”

Walter nodded his comprehension vigorously. There was another pause. “Well,” Walter began uneasily, “it must be nice to be back.”

She seemed about to make an answer but was interrupted by the return of her husband.

“They have it all,” Von Bishop announced cheerily, referring to the luggage. “Shall we go?”

He and his wife climbed into a rickshaw.

“We are guests of the Governor,” Von Bishop said. “Can we take you anywhere?”

“No, thank you,” Walter said thankfully. “I think I’ll observe the pomp and circumstance a little longer. Then I intend to sample some of your German beer.”

“Of course. Goodbye then.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Smith,” Frau von Bishop said with impressive finality. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Goodbye,” said Walter, raising his hat.

“Wait!” squeaked Von Bishop. “When are you going back to Taveta?”

“Well ... tomorrow.”

“Excellent, excellent. We can travel together. Till tomorrow, Smith.”

As they drove off, Walter saw Frau von Bishop snapping harshly at her husband. What strange people, Walter thought. He watched the small caravan of rickshaws—the Von Bishops leading three others carrying luggage—move along the gentle arc of the harbour front, past the Catholic church, the post office and the European club towards the Governor’s palace nestling in its grove of palm and mango trees at the mouth of the lagoon. He let his gaze swing round to the crowded flotilla on the sparkling water; then he turned away. He moved through the crowd and walked to the back of the Port Offices. He called a rickshaw over and climbed in. The half-naked African pulling it looked round for instructions.

“*Die Brauerei*,” Walter said. If he was going to be travelling back with the Von Bishops he’d better make the most of his last day.

Later that same evening Walter slipped out of the Kaiserhof. It was half past ten and the moonless sky was filled with stars. Unthinkingly his eye picked out the constellations and stars as it always did: Orion’s Belt, the rest of Orion scattered vaguely about, the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, Venus. The streets around him were empty and dark. Electric light shone from the windows of the Kaiserhof, and from the lounge came the tinkling of a pianola. The night was very warm. From the warren of the Indian town sweet smells wafted and there were shouts and drum beats, as if someone were having a party. Walter walked a few yards up Unter den Akazien. He didn’t want to go into the Indian town on foot on his own. He saw a rickshaw and called it over. He