A Change in Altitude

Anita Shreve

Published by Little, Brown

Extract

A CHANGE IN ALTITUDE

ANITA SHREVE

Little, Brown

Part One

'We're climbing Mount Kenya. Not this Saturday, but the next.'

Patrick made the announcement as he moved into the guest room of the Big House, the plumbing in their own small cottage currently disabled. Patrick spoke of the climb without fanfare, as he might a party in two weeks' time. They were young, each twenty-eight. They had been in the country three months.

Despite the heat, Patrick's shirt still held its creases. James, whose black skin shone blue in the planes of his face, washed their clothes in a bathtub, hung them to dry and pressed them with an iron that made the fabric hiss. Not even the equator could undo James's creases.

Patrick set his doctor's bag and his briefcase on the floor. He had shaved his beard as a gesture of respect, but wore his black hair longer than most.

'Arthur's arranging it. It takes four days to reach the top. Porters will carry the provisions.'

When Margaret and Patrick's toilet in the cottage had ceased to function, they'd temporarily moved in with their landlords, Arthur and Diana, who lived two hundred feet away in the Big House.

'We'll camp?' Margaret asked.

'There are huts.'

In a few minutes, Margaret would dress for dinner.

Under her palm, she could feel the distinctive stitching of the white coverlet. 'I'd better buy hiking boots,' she said.

Beyond the casement window there was birdsong, noisy until early evening when the day would be snuffed out, at the same hour, every day, summer or winter. In Africa, Margaret often felt dazed, as if something shiny had hurt her eyes.

'Who will go?' she asked.

'Arthur and Diana. You and me. Arthur mentioned another couple, but I forget their names.'

'You can take the days off?'

Patrick shrugged his shoulders, indicating a flexible schedule. He moved to the bed and sat beside Margaret, making a deep V in the soft mattress. Despite the heat, he wore long trousers, another gesture of respect. In Kenya, African men emerged from mud and wattle huts in suits to drive matatus or to sell metal scraps or to cut meat. To dress casually was to flaunt the ability to do so as well as to advertise oneself as an American. Only American and German tourists dressed like children.

'You OK?' Patrick asked.

Patrick's eyes were light blue, sensitive to the sun. When outdoors, he always wore dark glasses.

'I'm fine,' Margaret said.

'You seem quiet.'

'How was your day?'

'I was mostly at the hospital. What time is dinner?'

The house ran with the precision of a father's watch. They had been guests of Diana and Arthur for five days, a decent plumber apparently difficult to obtain. First a message had to be sent – the plumber didn't own a telephone – and the problem described. A fee would have to be negotiated, and then transportation sorted. The particular plumber Diana liked

was said to be visiting his wife in Limuru. It was unclear when he would return.

Margaret had wanted to ask if another plumber could be found, but to do so would be to seem ungrateful for the hospitality. Patrick and Margaret were, after all, being housed and fed.

'Seven,' Margaret said of dinner.

Patrick asked her if she had ever climbed a mountain. As he did so, he took her hand. He often took Margaret's hand, in public as well as in private. It meant, *I am suddenly thinking of you*.

Though Patrick and Margaret had been together for two years – married five months – entire landscapes of their individual pasts were unknown to each other. Margaret told Patrick that she had once climbed Mount Monadnock, a lesser New England peak. Patrick said that he hadn't, being a city boy from Chicago.

The smell of boiling horsemeat made its way into the bedroom. It was an awful smell, and Margaret was certain she would never get used to it. The meat was for the dogs.

'Do we need, I don't know, instruction?' Margaret asked.

'I'm sure Arthur will have it all in hand.'

The meat would be something James had purchased at the duka earlier in the day, the blood soaking the *Kenya Morning Tribune* used to wrap it. It would not be any different from the beef Margaret bought for Patrick and herself; the steaks too fresh, not aged, and therefore tough, tasting of animal. 'How tall is Mount Kenya?'

'Seventeen thousand feet, give or take.'

'That's over three miles high.'

'We're already a mile above sea level just sitting here. And I think we probably gain some altitude driving to the mountain.'

'So Kilimanjaro is higher?' Margaret asked.

'Higher, but easier. I think you simply walk to the top. In large circles. It takes a while, but most amateurs can handle it. It's supposed to be fairly boring.'

Patrick changed out of his brown leather everyday shoes, which were covered with mud. If he left the shoes outside the door in the evening, they would be clean in the morning.

'We don't walk?'

'We climb. We hike. Parts of it will be rough.'

Margaret imagined Diana's Land Rover, packed with gear, journeying through the shimmering lime-green tea plantations she'd seen only from a distance.

The guest room seemed to have been designed for a writer or a scholar. Margaret sometimes sat at the heavy carved desk on which an antique typewriter had been placed. She'd tried it once, wincing at the hard thwacks the keys made, as if something delicate and tentative were being announced with a tattoo.

The desk chair had carved arms and a nearly silver patina. On the walls were photographs of people she could not identify, a wooden shield that had perhaps been used in battle and a sunburst design of spears. The books were leather-bound and uniform and, to judge from their condition, often read. Margaret imagined an early settler, the books all there was available to him of the printed word in Nairobi, reading and re-reading them by lantern light. She sometimes held one in her hands.

On the other side of the room was a skirted dressing table of the sort one used to see in old movies. On its glass surface were cut-crystal jars with silver tops. Perhaps the room had belonged to Diana's parents when they built the house in the late 1940s. They'd come out from England after the war to try their hand with horses. Margaret picked up a picture of the couple, extravagantly dressed, looking as though they were about to head off to a party at the Muthaiga Club. The

father's face was weathered; the mother had a small, sweet smile. Diana, as a child, would constantly have heard that she resembled her father.

Margaret thought about the story of the young Masai who'd been invited by an American benefactor to use his wit and innate intelligence to make a go of it in New York City. Two months after the young man's arrival, he jumped to his death from his tenth-story apartment window. She thought the Masai's heart must have grieved for the Rift Valley or that his senses had been violated by the city's gray geometry. The anecdote was meant to be a cautionary tale, though Margaret was never quite sure what exactly was being cautioned. One shouldn't be taken out of one's environment? Or if so, might one, at any moment, be subject to dangerous derangement?

Already there seemed to be an inability to adapt. Once, when Patrick and Margaret left town for a long weekend to travel to the Serengeti, they returned to a cottage from which the contents of their bedroom had been emptied. The only thing not touched was Margaret's underwear drawer, in which she had kept their passports. This proved a lesson they'd been taught at the beginning of their stay: keep your valuables in your underwear drawer; no African man would touch a woman's underthings. The police came, looked at the bedroom, pointed to a broken window and said, Aha. It wasn't an inside job. Did anyone dislike them? Wish them harm? The case was never solved.

Patrick and Margaret bought a new bed and had a lock installed between the bedroom and the living room. They later learned from the inspector that nearly everyone had those sorts of locks; hadn't anyone ever mentioned them to the couple before? It was their third theft in six weeks. Margaret's wallet had been stolen from her straw bag at the market and, one morning, as Patrick had walked out of the

cottage on his way to the hospital, he'd found their second-hand Peugeot on cement blocks. All four tires had been taken during the night.

Margaret understood the thieving in a purely intellectual way. The distance between those who were comfortable and those who were not was a precipice an expatriate stood upon, the ground beneath subject at any moment to erosion. In her body, she knew fear; morally, the thieving felt like reparation. She had learned to tuck her purse under her arm and disliked herself for doing it. She tipped James generously for washing their clothes. She was fairly certain this was not the custom, but it made her feel better. James never refused the money.

Patrick wouldn't ask Margaret what she had done that day, the question a prickly one because she hadn't yet found a job. He didn't seem to mind, but she did. If he *had* asked her though, she'd have told him that she had walked the dirt roads of Langata with her camera, taking photographs of the askaris in their long greatcoats, their pangas at the ready, or of the signs that read *Mbwa Kali*, Fierce Dog, at the gates of large houses. She also snapped pictures of the delicate falling branches of the jacaranda and of the scarlet-orange-pink bursts of color in the bougainvillea, a plant that grew like a weed and covered stone walls and rooftops. The other doctors at the hospital, she knew, viewed Patrick's residence in Langata, an expatriate haven, as suspect. But Margaret had fallen in love with the cottage in Langata quite by accident.

The Peugeot had stopped along a paved road as she was on her way to view a flat. Arthur, finishing his work day, had slowed down to inquire if she was all right. She might have guessed at his motives – a mixture of protectiveness and perhaps opportunity: a young, white woman in a skirt, stranded at the side of the road behind a white Peugeot,

newly purchased, but decidedly second-hand; perhaps a lemon. The Peugeot had simply ceased to move, giving no warning.

Arthur rolled down his window and called across the front seat. 'You all right?'

Margaret walked to the place where he had parked, white face trusting white face. Had he been an African, she wondered later, would she have waved the man away? Arthur would not take no for an answer, and she was grateful for the help. He tried to start the car in case the problem was simply a lack of petrol; Margaret was, after all, a woman. He would call from his house, he said; he was headed home. He knew of a mechanic who would take care of her. He used those words. *Take care of you*.

Margaret studied the man. He had mud-brown hair and dark eyes, a cleft in his chin and white teeth inside an easy smile. The bottom half of his face didn't seem to match the top.

In Arthur's Mercedes, Margaret was introduced to the sudden beauty of the manicured gardens and the tall hedges of Langata, a kind of suburb of Nairobi. He turned and stopped at the bottom of a long drive. An askari, greatcoat over his bare legs, hopped up to open Arthur's gate. Arthur never acknowledged the man. The path to the house was lined with jacaranda petals that made a purple carpet to the front door. The two-story house was made of stone with mullioned windows. All around her was a busy foreground of bright blossoms Margaret didn't know the names of. Beyond the garden was a striking expanse of cornflower sky, as saturated a color as she had ever seen. It must have to do, she thought, with the equatorial sun, a distinctive angle of light.

Arthur, offering Margaret a drink, made the appropriate calls. The car was being towed to a garage where mechanics

would repair it. Margaret became aware of her own bare legs, particularly when Arthur's wife, Diana, clearly disconcerted to see a visitor she hadn't been told about, entered the room. The wife took note, she saw, of the drink. Arthur explained, and Margaret was treated to Diana's first smile: a sudden, sharp surprise. Margaret called Patrick at the hospital to tell him that they'd been invited to dinner in Langata. She had to make the call with Arthur in the room and so sounded more enthusiastic than she actually felt, perhaps even a little breathless. Margaret could hear Patrick's gentle complaint at the other end.

At dinner the first night, another invitation was extended. A guest house on the property was vacant. Arthur named a sum less than the one Patrick and Margaret had been prepared to pay for the flat she'd intended to view. Diana suggested that Margaret and Patrick, who'd taken a bus out from Nairobi, stay the night and view the cottage in the morning when they would be able to see it in the daylight. In bed that night, Patrick was wary – perhaps he had heard, before Margaret had, the faint tumble of a lock. They held each other tightly on the foreign mattress as if re-establishing themselves as a couple, as if an act of resistance were called for.

In the morning, they viewed the guest house, a white stucco cottage with a red-tiled roof, surrounded by pink and orange bougainvillea. The cottage had a sitting room with a small table swathed in a vermilion and yellow khanga. The kitchen had a Dutch door; the bedroom had a bathroom. The floor was polished wood in an intricate parquet pattern. The walls were white; the windows mullioned glass. Even in America – or especially in America – Patrick and Margaret had never lived in such a beautiful place. Before the car had given out, they had been living over a nightclub at the Ngong Road

Hotel. Prior to that, they had endured a grim stay at the Hotel Nairobi, where the sink and toilet had been encrusted with filth, where cockroaches had fled whenever Margaret had opened the bathroom door. She thought that Patrick must have seen, that morning, her desire for the cottage, and so he gave up his mild political objections.

The guest house was far enough away from Arthur and Diana's house to suggest a measure of autonomy. Diana insisted that the two couples would hardly ever see each other: Arthur worked all the hours of the day as head of sales at Colgate-Palmolive; Diana bred Rhodesian Ridgebacks in a kennel a good distance from the house and had little time for people. All this seemed fine. Or Margaret made it so.

That afternoon, James had taken a photograph of Margaret and Patrick. The picture was of Margaret in a chair just beyond the Dutch door of their new cottage in Africa. She had on a white sundress. Her skin was a deep red – an Indian red, her mother used to call it. Margaret's hair was a dishwater blond, though dishwater didn't really resemble her hair color, a light brown with hints of brass. Her skin seemed painted on and shiny.

Behind her, Patrick was standing in a short-sleeved white shirt with a tie. He had a healthy-looking tan and hair that might or might not have been washed in several days. In the picture, it looked lank. His face was in shadow, sunglasses shading his eyes.

James was serious when working Margaret's Nikon, but he grinned as he handed the camera back to her.

At the Big House, James cooked the meals, set the table, served the food, cleared the dishes away and then washed them. Patrick and Margaret didn't have servants. Only recently had Diana sent James over to the cottage to wash their clothes. Though Margaret had been advised early on to hire someone to do the chore, the task seemed too intimate

to farm out. She had tried to wash the clothes in the bathtub, but she hadn't been able to get all the soap out. When Patrick developed a rash around his neck, Margaret capitulated. She cooked and served their dinners, however, and Patrick did the dishes. It seemed a straw victory. Not to employ a servant was to deny an African a job.

At dinner on the evening of that first mention of the climb, Arthur, his wet hair still grooved from his comb, spoke of hypoxia.

'The lungs fill up with blood,' he said, setting Patrick and Margaret straight. 'Typically, four or five people a year die climbing Mount Kenya. Usually it's the fit German climbers who hop off the plane in Nairobi, head straight for the mountain and practically run up it. They often get into trouble because they haven't allowed their bodies to acclimate to the height and the thinner air. The slower you climb and the longer it takes, the better off you are.'

'I should do really well, then,' Margaret said.

Arthur ignored the joke. 'As we climb, we'll come across park rangers. They'll be in pairs, and they'll go right up to your face. They'll fire a series of questions at you: What's the date? What time is it? Where do you live? And if you can't fire answers back at them, they'll each take an elbow and run you straight down the mountain, whether you want to go or not. It's the only cure.'

Margaret was thinking that Arthur, by nature, wasn't an alarmist. Though he could be condescending – she sometimes thought he viewed condescension as a minor sport – he and Patrick had had lively discussions that had lasted late into the night. Patrick would not concede a point if he had facts to back it up.

'We'll leave Nairobi mid-morning,' Arthur continued. He had on a white shirt, the sleeves rolled to the elbows, a

striped tie. He had a pallor that seemed unusual in Africa, a perpetual five-o'clock shadow emerging from his skin.

Diana had on a blue cotton sundress. Her skin had the patina of an outdoorswoman. She had recently cut her bright, blond hair, a practical gesture that lent her a gamine look.

'We'll take the Thika Road and have a comfortable night, I should think, at the lodge in Naro Moru,' Arthur said. 'Then we'll make our way to the park gate, where we'll leave the Land Rover. At the gate, we hire the guide and the porters who will carry the food and gear. They're meant to be very good, by the way. Then it's straight up to Point Lenana. It's one of the steepest and fastest ways up, but an amateur can make it. It'll take four days, three nights, not including our stay at the lodge.'

The meal was lamb with mint sauce. The table was elaborately set in the English mode. Beneath Margaret's place was a mat depicting Westminster Abbey. Patrick had St. Paul's. Each diner had his own silver salt-cellar and tiny spoon. Arthur was generous with the wine, which he poured into cut-crystal goblets. The dinner plates might have been Wedgwood or Staffordshire. The ones in the cottage were mismatched and had chips in them.

Two children appeared from behind a door. Edward and Philippa, nine and seven, were being raised by an ayah named Adhiambo. The children came and went in school uniforms as if they lived in Kent and not just one road removed from a forest with antelope and lion and buffalo. Diana believed in bringing up children the British way, without excessive praise.

Adhiambo stepped from behind the door as well. She had a red headscarf over her hair and a pink sweater that might once have been part of a twinset. Her hips were wide, but she was young. Twenty-three, twenty-four, Margaret

thought, though she was hopeless at decoding African ages. Adhiambo had a deep scar on her chin and a shy smile that revealed a row of gapped teeth. In her eyes, though, there was something Margaret couldn't identify – something resilient, or simply persistent.

'Say goodnight to Mummy,' Adhiambo said to the children.

In their pajamas, they went to their mother for hugs and kisses that looked real and needy, small blots on a stoic ledger. Arthur demanded kisses and hugs as well. Margaret knew this already to be the evening ritual. Philippa looked like her father, with her long brown hair; Edward, a tow-head, resembled Diana before the weathering. At first, Margaret had found the gender mismatch disconcerting. Diana mentioned riding; Arthur tennis. Within minutes, the children and their ayah were gone.

'Bring gaiters for the vertical bog,' Arthur continued. 'Hats and gloves and parkas for the cold.'

'What bog?' Patrick asked.

'Bog.' Arthur seemed uncharacteristically at a loss for words. He held his arms wide. 'You know . . . mud.'

'Sunglasses to avoid snow-blindness,' Diana added. She seemed distracted by activity in the kitchen. Earlier, she had gotten up from the table. James and Adhiambo weren't the only servants. There were several men who worked in the kennels, as well as the askari at the gate. 'And be sure to break in your boots.'

Patrick shot a glance at Margaret.

'I don't have boots,' she said. 'I'm going to buy some tomorrow.'

Arthur calculated. 'You've got ten, eleven days. That should be sufficient if you work at breaking them in. Wear two pairs of socks.'

'I might have boots that will fit you,' Diana offered,

stealing a glance at Margaret's feet in her sandals. She frowned. 'Maybe not.'

In the doorway, Margaret saw James, patiently waiting to clear the plates.

After-dinner drinks were offered in a room Diana called the drawing room. Margaret had a brandy while trying to describe to Arthur a drink called a 'rusty nail,' Scotch laced with Drambuie. Diana sat across from Margaret on an oversized chintz sofa and appeared to be impatient to *get going*, though going where Margaret wasn't certain. It seemed Diana's natural state. She lived not for the moment, but in the one anticipated. Diana wasn't beautiful, but she was pretty. Margaret had guessed Arthur and Diana to be in their early to mid-thirties.

'How did you two meet?' Margaret asked.

Arthur, at the drinks table, answered without hesitation, as if repeating a marital legend. 'We met at a party in London. Within five minutes, we'd worked out that each of us secretly yearned to go to Africa. In Diana's case, to return to Kenya, where she'd been raised as a child. In my case, to get as far away from bloody London as possible.'

Margaret noted that neither Arthur nor Diana looked at the other while Arthur told his brief story. Perhaps Diana wasn't listening. Perhaps she rued confessing that yearning.

Arthur raised his glass. All present raised theirs as well, though a toast had hardly been offered. Arthur, also, seemed a man on the move, having to harness an energy too great for the occasion.

On the marital balance sheet, Margaret guessed that Diana thought herself from better stock than Arthur. Margaret wondered if this counted for a lot. In her own marriage, Patrick was third-generation Irish, his distinctive gene pool noted for its fondness for medicine, the pointed chin,

the black hair that didn't gray until well into the sixties, and the surprise of the pale blue eyes. Beauty depended upon how these features had been arranged, and Patrick seemed to have gotten a goodly share. Patrick's father, a gynecologist, still had a brogue, a lovely accent that put all of his patients at ease.

As for Margaret, she came from a middle-class, suburb-north-of-Boston, Unitarian background with some history. A distant relative of hers had been commissioned as an officer during the American Revolution. Her mother had a plaque attesting to this fact hanging behind her bedroom door, though she was a rabid Democrat and had been since FDR.

Arthur turned his attention to Patrick. 'So what's going to happen to all of us when Kenyatta dies?'

'I'm very surprised we haven't had this conversation already,' Patrick answered.

The British seemed to have an unquestioning sense of legitimacy in Kenya. Americans did not. Margaret guessed the difference to be Vietnam.

Idly, while Kenyatta was being dispensed with, Margaret counted seventeen different patterns on the various fabrics and dishware. She looked around her at the room; the windows were casements, like those in Margaret's cottage, but there the resemblance between the two buildings ended. The furniture in the drawing room had carved legs and ornate surfaces, mass as well as decoration. 'Who's the other couple?' Margaret asked.

'On the climb? Saartje and Willem van Buskirk. I didn't tell you?' Diana seemed puzzled at this omission.

'He's part of the Hilton Group,' Arthur said. No mention was made of what Saartje did. 'We'll have them over this week for a planning session. You'll like them. No nonsense. Very down-to-earth. I should think Willem has done Mount Kenya before.'

'I don't remember that,' Diana said.

'He used to climb in Switzerland before they went out to Bombay.'

Diana nodded, and Margaret worried about the pace of the climb if one of their party was experienced.

'In addition to the hypoxia,' Arthur continued, 'almost everyone gets AMS of some form or another. Acute Mountain Sickness. Headache. Fatigue. Vomiting. Dizziness.'

'This is supposed to be fun?' Margaret asked.

'I'm telling you all this because we're going to have to diagnose each other,' Arthur said, a touch sternly. 'Watch for signs.'

Margaret nodded, suitably chastened.

'The huts fit between ten and thirty,' Arthur continued. 'One usually sleeps on cots. There are latrines, if you want to call them that. Not a trip for the squeamish.'

'The Kikuyu think the mountain sacred,' Patrick offered, and Margaret was glad for the respite from the images of misery. 'Their god, Ngai, is said to reside there. They call the mountain Kirinyaga.'

Margaret had been taking a photograph of a physician, a man who had recently set up a series of free clinics for babies and toddlers to receive vaccinations and medical care in Roxbury, Boston's poorest neighborhood, not least because it was almost entirely black. Her paper, a Boston alternative weekly, had given Margaret the assignment that morning. She was having trouble presenting the doctor in a flattering pose: his glasses were magnifying lenses, and the overhead hospital light was too bright. Finally getting enough shots to ensure at least one her editor could use, Margaret realized that there was another doctor standing in the doorway, watching the shoot. When Margaret asked her subject where she might get a Tab and a sandwich, the man

in the doorway answered first. 'Come with me,' he said. 'I'll take you to the cafeteria. I'm headed that way myself.'

Margaret packed up her equipment while the two physicians conferred about a matter she wasn't privy to. Then she followed the second doctor out the door and along a hospital corridor. 'Patrick,' the man said, turning and putting out his hand.

'Margaret,' she said.

Patrick told Margaret over tuna on rye that he was completing a fellowship in equatorial medicine. He'd become interested in tropical diseases in medical school and had visited Africa twice. She thought he was a beautiful man, and she was fascinated by the unusual planes of his long face. Perhaps, she thought, she had fallen in love with those planes before she'd fallen in love with the man. Before coming to Africa, Margaret had photographed his face at least a hundred times. At first, Patrick was intrigued, then merely patient, and then mildly annoyed, as one might be with a child who wants to play the same game again and again.

When Patrick asked Margaret if she wanted to go to Kenya with him, she said yes with enthusiasm. Her job at the alternative paper wasn't progressing, and she was tired of photographing congressional meetings and folk singers in Cambridge coffee houses. Patrick had attached himself to Nairobi Hospital, which he could use as a resource for as long as he wanted in exchange for conducting free clinics around the country when asked to do so.

Margaret and Patrick were hastily wed in a backyard in Cambridge. Margaret wore a long white cotton dress and had wound her hair into a French twist. After the ceremony, they and their guests drank champagne on plastic deck chairs and an ornate sofa brought outside for the occasion. Patrick and Margaret sat in the sofa's plush center, fending off witty barbs and occasionally gazing at the stars.

At a goodbye dinner at her parents' house the night before Patrick and she were to fly out of Logan to Nairobi, Margaret couldn't imagine how she could go a year without seeing either them or her twelve-year-old brother, Timmy, born sixteen years after Margaret – a happy accident, her mother had explained. She pleaded with them to come visit her in Africa. No one in the family had ever used the word *love* before, though the connection among them was fierce.

On the plane, Margaret was mildly homesick. During the flight across the alien continent, the sun rising, her face pressed to the window, her breath fogging her vision, Patrick held her hand. If he was apprehensive, he didn't say so.

From the plane, she saw all the places she had read about in preparation for the trip: the Nile river, long and brown; Lake Turkana, once Lake Rudolph; the Rift Valley, vast and barren and unearthly, and then, suddenly, the Ngong Hills and the plateau on which Nairobi had been settled. In the distance, Margaret could see, rising above the clouds, Mount Kenya, and even, to the south, Mount Kilimanjaro. Before the plane set down, Patrick presented her with a silver ring, a small diamond at its center, something he hadn't been able to manage before the wedding. They landed on Margaret's birthday.