A Promise Kept

BETH DUFF-BROWN

Going back again raises questions, retrieves expectations, and reminds one of promises. It is never easy and, in many places, spans tragedy and loss.

I SAT IN A BACK PEW, LIGHTLY SWAYING TO THE BAMBOO XYLOPHONES. BUTTERY LIGHT STREAMED ACROSS THE WHITE altar from the stained-glass cross carved into the red brick church. I pretended to pray, to find a private moment, to close my eyes and reflect on what I had seen in the week since returning to this village where I had lived a lifetime ago.

As the Catholic sermon was ending and the hymns grew louder, I waved bye-bye to the bare-bottomed baby who had been making faces with me and attempted to slip unnoticed out the side door.

A vicar caught me and pulled me before the congregation, where I had stood ten years earlier, and fifteen before that. Weather-beaten eyes smiled in encouragement; several women ululated and called out "Miss Elizabeth" before a stern glance from behind me silenced them.

"I just wanted to thank you again," I said with embarrassing simplicity, as my eyes began to sting and I fumbled with the sleeves of my white cotton blouse. "Thank you for taking care of me when I was just a girl, for your prayers, for my child."

Before I could finish, I stood there in tears, unable to move, unable to speak, humiliated at my public display of emotion. I cried for having kept my promise to come back again. I cried for a young woman who lay dying alone, no longer able to walk to church. I cried for once again having built up false hopes with my return, for not having done more to help those tired faces now looking up at me.

They woke to church bells every dawn, ambled from the same mud huts in which I had sat twenty-five years ago, gathered to sweep the aisle, polish the pews and adjust the same curled posters of the Stations of the Cross in broken frames, tacked to the crumbling brick walls.

And I cried because the one man I had been looking for was not out there, looking back.

Truth be told, I also cried for my lost youth, the freckle-faced California girl who had arrived on their mud-hut doorsteps in 1979 as a Peace Corps Volunteer, so idealistic, brave and full of life.

This village in Central Africa was where I had come into my own. It's where I felt that first heady rush that comes from teaching a great class. It's where I overcame aching isolation and discovered the simple pleasure of just sitting alone.

Kamponde is where I prayed for rain so I could wash my long hair; where I danced around fires, learned to play a better guitar with a Peace Corps boyfriend who visited from time to time; where I walked behind mothers carrying babies to their graves.

The Democratic Republic of Congo—known then as Zaire—was where I wrote for hours by candlelight, preparing me to go on to write as a foreign correspondent from points around the globe.

I left Kamponde in 1981, the last Volunteer, pulled out as corruption overran the Institute Untu, where I taught English for two years with the conviction I was truly doing something good.

My job with The Associated Press allowed me to return to Kamponde in 1996, to renew my ties with the villagers and write about who we had all become over the years.

I had told the villagers then that if their prayers for me to have the child Chris and I had longed for

were finally heard, I would somehow let them know. But I knew it was unlikely my letters—filled with photos of the blue-eyed baby girl with whom we were blessed only a year after that visit—would arrive by Congo's pitiful postal system.

Now I wanted to thank them for those prayers.

The civil war breaking out during that first return in 1996 went on to devastate the Congo. It wasn't a war over ideology or religion or tribal hatred, but about which warlord would win the battle to exploit the country's vast mineral wealth. Though far surpassing the ongoing conflict in Sudan, Congo's neighbor to the northeast, the war here has largely been ignored, as its complexity eludes easy definition. There has been no Mia Farrow or George Clooney to shine that brilliant celebrity light upon the humanitarian heartbreak of Congo.

Though it officially ended in 2002, the conflict's resulting disease and starvation has gone on to claim nearly 5.4 million lives, according to the International Rescue Committee. I had followed the statistics, wondering how many of the nameless 45,000 Congolese who still die every month from the strains of that war might be from among Kamponde's 5,000 villagers.

By the time I left for my trip in the summer of 2006, with a sense of dread, I wondered if the people of Kamponde would know they had survived the deadliest conflict since World War II.

I was traveling with Claude Kamanga Mutond, one of my former students who is today one of Congo's most well-respected and best-connected journalists. We had found each other again by accident, locking eyes in disbelief as we stood amid shouting demonstrators at an election rally we were both covering in 1995. He went on to string for the AP and several big American dailies; the Internet now allows us to keep in touch.

My interviews would be conducted in French or Tshiluba, the local Bantu dialect of central Congo, and then translated into southern-accented English by Jim Mukenge of Kananga, the provincial capital of Kasai Occidental about one hundred miles north of Kamponde.

Jim graduated from Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, and then went on to be a manager at Taco Bell. "Run for the border!" is one of his favorite lines about the job he actually liked. His wife Bernadette worked down the street at a competing Wendy's.

But they missed home, gave up the American dream and returned to Kananga. She works as an administrator at the U.N. peacekeeping mission and the two of them run several small businesses. People hammer Jim about giving up life in the United States.

"Everybody has their own village and mine just happens to be here," shrugs Jim, who changed his first name when he arrived in the States, after his hero, Jimmy Carter. He speaks fluent English and French, his native Tshiluba and the Swahili of eastern Congo, which would later aid me in an interview that would leave me speechless.

I waved at children along the dirt road, some little faces frozen in fear at seeing their first white woman. My heart pounded as we crossed the rusted railroad tracks, a sign that we were near the village.

I took in the sour smell of manioc root, the smoke from brush fires set to scatter the snakes, as our jeep, lent by the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Congo, approached the church where I had spent Sunday mornings daydreaming and working out new lesson plans.

That familiar salmon sun was setting behind thatched-reed roofs, down into the green savanna where I had watched grazing gazelles from my classrooms. Barefoot women in soiled sarongs, carrying buckets of water or bundles of sweet-potato leaves on their heads, ran into the tall brush, alarmed by the grinding gears of our 4X4.

There was the dingy Peace Corps house, white with royal-blue trim, across from the church, in a compound that had once bustled with Belgian missionaries, electricity, and colorful bougainvillea.

The people of this Central African nation have been so drained by war, corruption and neglect, that I feared for the worst and hoped only for a few familiar faces. Most of all, I longed for the face of Tshinyama Mwananzoi.

Another former student in Kinshasa, the Congolese capital where I had begun my journey, told me he believed the easygoing man who had cooked for Peace Corps Volunteers for two decades had died. Though saddened, it had not surprised me. The average life span here is only fifty years, and Tshinyama would have been well past that by now.

Moments after we arrived, the village priest looked up at the darkening sky and said that the cook who had worked for the foreigners had passed. Then where was his grave, I demanded to know, with a bitterness that caught both of us by surprise.

"Life is like a circle, and you've come home," Tshinyama had said when we last met. "You haven't changed over all these years. That's because it was here that you found who you are."

Joseph was the first to emerge from the shadows cast by kerosene lanterns, barefoot and trembling in his threadbare white shirt. He clasped my hands and said: "You kept your promise."

I was stiff and weary from days of hard travel. There are only 400 miles of paved roads in a country the size of Western Europe; just one badly rutted dirt road takes you to Kamponde.

Joseph's familiar furrowed brow made me smile through my tears.

"I thank God for inspiring you to come back, Miss Elizabeth, remembering the place where you once taught our children," said Joseph, who had cleaned house for Father Paul, the old Belgian priest who, like me, was the last of his kind to live here.

Joseph and his lifelong neighbor Placide, their elderly wives and dozens of other villagers were shaking their heads, calling "Miss Elizabeth?" as they gathered at the old wooden doors of the terra cotta-roofed church, beneath the moon now rising above the mango trees.

Joseph and Placide's children had once built fires behind my house. We would often sit around together at night; I would strum my guitar, practice my Tshiluba and they would ask me questions in their broken elementary school French: How does the sun stay up in the sky? Is it true Americans have magic boxes that carry them from one floor to the next? Was your president really just a peanut farmer, like ours?

Those children were now grown—I would later learn some had already died—and I was stunned that Joseph and Placide, both in their seventies, were still alive. One in five children will not live until age five in Congo today, yet these old farmers had persevered.

But apparently not Tshinyama. Now I would put wildflowers at his grave, share stories with his grandchildren about his magical mango pudding and his belief that God had put him on Earth—and his father before him for the Belgians—to nourish the White Man.

I could see him wiping his hands on the apron fashioned from an old flour sack, his amber eyes red-rimmed from the hot coal fire and brick oven on which he would boil his *pili-pili* pepper sauce and bake sweet banana bread.

The classrooms were ghostly quiet; a gentle breeze came off the savanna, through windows that had not seen glass in years. Cursive lessons from last year still lined the black chinked chalkboards.

I sat in one of the wooden desks, carved with sweetheart initials slashed by an arrow.

I closed my eyes and could hear the wolfish laughter of the young men, some of whom had been my own age and had terrified me at first. My rowdiest twelfth graders would make smooching sounds when I turned to the board, so I had once walked out, refusing to teach. The same class later won me back after averting their eyes when a gust of wind blew open my wraparound skirt.

The concrete-and-brick school was built and once staffed by Belgians, whose country ruled the Congo for seventy-five years, until independence in 1960. Father Paul had taught history for decades at the

Institute Untu.

I never had the courage during our Sunday lunches to ask the old man with the long white beard, who still held Sunday mass, whether his lessons included King Leopold II, the Belgian monarch who amassed a personal fortune in the rubber plantations, lopping off native hands when quotas were not met.

Most of the students were now out in the fields, their backs bent as they helped teachers plant staples of peanuts, corn, manioc, and beans before the rainy season really sets in. Those teachers were on strike, demanding back pay and a long-promised wage hike.

Some of my former students are now teachers at the school. Their salary of 20,000 Congolese francs—about $45 in 2006—has not been paid in two months. The headmaster shrugged. Yes, he knew it unfair, but the burlap sacks filled with wads of government cash, typically delivered on the back of a bicycle, had yet to arrive.

Marceline Kanyi Mushimbi and Kamulombo Mutongo had been two of my favorite students. He would jump off his bench with a radiant grin, to pick the pronoun or fill in the verb. She was shy but determined to graduate with a handful of girls alongside hundreds of boys.

The two went on to marry and now, in their 40s, lament their status as unpaid teachers who must work the fields to feed their eight children.

“We are intellectuals, but our hands are all torn up from machetes, hoes and working under the sun,” said Kanyi, as she showed me her calloused palms. “Even the villagers mock us: ‘Look at you, the smart ones who went to school, but now you work with us in the fields.’”

Kamulombo laughed loudly and shrugged off my suggestion that perhaps fewer children would have eased their burden. “I’m laughing now, but I’d rather laugh than cry,” he said. “But at least we have our eight children, which makes us proud, which makes us rich.”

The next morning, after a cold bucket bath behind the rectory, Kanyi approached with a big smile and gently pushed me back into the room where I had been sleeping on a cot. She pulled a squawking chicken from beneath her orange-and-blue sarong.

I’d been telling a lie this trip, saying I was a vegetarian. As a young woman here, I tried it all: squirming grub worms, grilled python, flying termites. I no longer have the stomach.

Not wanting to offend Father Urbain Musuila, with whom we ate every night, I had brought bags of rice and beans. I used the vegetarian fib to avoid the bush meat, smoked eel, and caterpillar stew. I ate as little as possible, knowing that unless Tshinyama had prepared the food, it could lead to yet another bout with parasites.

Marie Kabuanga Mutanga’s brown eyes, made larger by her hollow cheeks, pleaded with me.

Unable to speak, too weak to eat, she tugged at the rattan mat on the dirt floor of her hut. Her mother explained that her emaciated hipbones poke painfully into the hard ground.

A tin cup with plastic rosary beads and a twig of bougainvillea made a makeshift altar near her balding head.

This beautiful young woman, twenty-eight, had cooked and cleaned for the parish priest when I last visited ten years ago. She had charmed me into leaving behind some lipstick and clothes.

I had come to speak to her mother, a funny and outspoken prostitute with whom I used to be friendly, halfheartedly pleading with her about staying away from the students. That was back when a mysterious sexually transmitted virus now believed to have originated in Congo was spreading across the country—but had yet to be called AIDS.

“We’re on our own,” said Kamilongo Kamukenji, propping up her daughter’s head. “The village has done nothing for us. People are just more concerned about struggling for a living.”

She told me her daughter was dying of a parasite. But Sister Kapinga Clementine, the dynamic

Catholic nun and registered nurse who works in the village maternity clinic, later told me Marie had an incurable case of what she called the “four-letter word.”

The priest for whom Marie worked has died, some say of AIDS, though no one can be sure.

Sister Clementine said malaria, pneumonia, parasites and tuberculosis, as well as lack of medicine and transportation made worse by the war, are much greater killers than AIDS these days.

There was little I could do for Marie. She brought back the pain I had often felt here, of feeling useless, of raising hopes that could not be met. I knew her eyes would haunt me forever, as do those of all the lost lives who have helped me tell my stories over the years.

I left her mother enough francs to buy a foam pad to soften her daughter’s final days, and the fuzzy purple poodle Caitlin had told me to cuddle when I missed her on this trip.

The night before I left Kamponde, another pretty young woman who now cooks and cleans at the mission also asked me for some lipstick.

I had heard that some Rwandan Hutus had landed in the village. Kasaians, like most Congolese, are fiercely, sometimes violently loyal to their own ethnic groups and family lines.

As each day went by, I kept asking about the Hutus, thinking their story would help illustrate the changing face of Congo.

Everyone said there was a Hutu couple there, but no one could seem to find them. I got the impression that either the villagers were hiding them or that they did not want to be found.

On my last evening in Kamponde, I had just finished playing with a bunch of kids on the sidelines of a soccer match, when a stick-thin woman with wild hair approached me. She asked if I was the “U.N. lady,” her eyes filled with fear.

When I had arrived in the U.N. emblazoned jeep, I had been wearing the U.N. press badge that helped get me past soldiers and thugs as I traveled in Congo. As soon as they heard of my arrival, Anatazi Mukaluzita and her husband had run into the bush.

They believed I was there to take them back to Rwanda to face the Tutsis, who had chased hundreds of thousands of ethnic Hutus into eastern Congo after the Rwandan genocide of 1994.

Her husband was still hiding, but she figured she had nothing left to lose.

“I told him, ‘We are already dead, so I might as well just talk to her.’”

Anatazi began to cry with relief when Jim, speaking in her native Swahili, assured her all I wanted was to hear her story. She didn’t want to say where she’s from in Rwanda as she feared for her six children, if they were still alive.

Militants from Rwanda’s Hutu ethnic minority, known as the *interahamwe*, had slaughtered half a million mostly Tutsis and moderate Hutus in the 100-day massacre of 1994. In the years that followed, some 2 million Hutus fled into Tanzania and eastern Congo as Tutsis exacted their revenge.

Anatazi, who couldn’t recall what year they were forced to flee, says she and her husband were working in the fields when Tutsi militiamen attacked. They ran into the forest, Anatazi with a bullet in her left leg and a friend whose breast had been lopped off.

Alongside thousands of Hutus, they marched thousands of miles across Congo, an escape that would take them several years, until the couple collapsed in Kamponde. After the twins she was carrying were stillborn and her friend who had lost her breast died, Anatazi said she lost her drive.

“We were so tired of running. We just decided to die here and the others left us behind.” She said the villagers took them in and allowed them to work their fields in exchange for food. Their situation is murky; some villagers told me quietly the Hutu couple is forced to work like slaves. But she was quick to say they were grateful for being allowed to live in peace.

Anatazi quickly hid beneath her sweater several packages of glucose biscuits and bars of soap that I

have given her. When asked if they would remain in Kamponde or return to Rwanda in search of their children, she replies: “My life is in the hands of God. I have no idea.”

I sheepishly watched the fat black goat being led off toward the big black cauldrons behind the church. Cooks were boiling manioc and corn flour for the hot mounds of sticky bread known as *fou-fou*. Men were coming back from the forest, balancing jugs of palm wine on sticks across their shoulders, tapped from the same trees where they get their nuts for cooking oil.

Later that evening, slowly and with great pomp, couples and their children were led into the church courtyard. Chief Jean-Baptiste Katende Kamponde—who earlier had presented me with an ancient copper cross once used as currency—and the nuns were seated near me in the best rattan chairs. The bamboo xylophones and goatskin drums warmed up the crowd.

Long wooden benches had been set in a circle. The men sat on one side, laughing and guzzling the wine and corn whiskey that would soon get them drunk. The women, as always, were off to the side. I joined them to dance, provoking cheers from the crowd and pursed smiles from the nuns.

Tshinyama’s wife, Marie, stood off in the distance and raised her chin with a timid smile when I waved. His younger brother, Kabunda, argued with other men about who they had just voted for in the first multiparty elections in forty years, now President Joseph Kabila or then-rival Jean-Pierre Bemba.

They were not convinced either former rebel leader could rise above the weapons that had brought him to power and bring the country the stability they craved. Some even miss the kleptocracy of Mobutu Sese Seko, the dictator once revered and feared by those who believed his signature leopard-skin toque held the magic that kept him in power for thirty-two years.

As the night wore on, I stood before the villagers, a few hundred by now. I thanked them again for protecting me, and told them if I could, I would one day bring Caitlin to sit and share palm wine with them.

The women sashayed to the words of an impromptu song about an Elizabeth tree whose roots had grown deep in their village. The seed of that tree, “little Caitlin Kamponde,” may have fallen far from this ground, they sang, but was still the beloved fruit of Kamponde.

On my first night in Kamponde, a man bicycled by moonlight for miles to catch me before bed.

I could not see him in the dark, but heard others greet him as he approached. I smiled to myself and tried not to cry as I listened to the elders asking him about his hunts, the grandchildren, the village where he now lived.

He came from the shadows; we stood grinning and shaking our heads in disbelief. We embraced awkwardly, a middle-aged American woman and an old African hunter with graying beard.

“Ahh-ahh-ahh, Miss Elizabeth, I can’t believe it, you kept your promise,” said Tshinyama in his sing-song voice. We asked many questions about family and other Peace Corps Volunteers, joked about who had put on or lost more weight, had the most wrinkles. He was thrilled to hear of Caitlin, looking at photos by the kerosene light.

“Maybe you can never forget me because your belly was always full?” he said in his familiar good-natured way.

Others had confused him with Father Paul’s cook, who had died several years ago.

Tshinyama had cooked for the Peace Corps for a decade. When I learned in 1981 that I would be the last Volunteer in Kamponde, I brought him up to Kananga, to the regional Peace Corps house where’d we go to get our meds and mail, and he went on to cook there for another ten years.

After the Peace Corps evacuated all its Volunteers in 1991—widespread rioting and violence had made it too dangerous—Tshinyama walked home and intended to go back to his fields. But other family members had taken over his crops. It was unclear to me whether he was ostracized or chose to leave on

his own.

"You guys spoiled me and I needed to maintain a standard of living," he said with a grin. With no one to cook for and no fields to plow, he packed up his brood at age forty-five and moved to Mfuamba Kabang, some four miles southeast of Kamponde.

By now, Marie had given birth to twelve children, but had lost at least five. Someone would later tell me Tshinyama left Kamponde in fear of sorcery, believing a spell had been cast against his family, causing their babies to die.

As we had ten years ago during my first visit back, we began to plan the village feast for which he would cook.

My last morning in Kamponde, after my humiliating scene in church, we set off on foot, my pink floppy hat shading me from the sun as we headed through the green savanna toward Tshinyama's new home.

Children gathered to see the first foreigner to ever set foot in the desolate village of a few dozen square huts. It was so grim and small compared to Kamponde; once again I had to hold back more tears.

We ate with our hands, a rich meal of *fou-fou*, chicken spiced with his trademark *pili-pili* sauce, and boiled manioc leaves. Tshinyama apologized for not having the ingredients for the mango pudding so many Peace Corps Volunteers had once craved.

He showed off his homemade rifle as I took in the antelope antlers and other animal talismans used to decorate his home. Faded magazine ads of Western food on gleaming plates were tacked to the whitewashed walls of his little mud hut.

An adopted son, a young man he took in after his parents were killed, at first cried with fear that I was there to take Tshinyama away, then serenaded us with a love song for his father on a guitar he had fashioned from an Oki peanut oil can.

After lunch, and the obligatory sip of palm wine with the village chief, I told Tshinyama that it was time to go.

I gave Indian cloth to Marie, though glaucoma has clouded her eyes and I didn't know if she could see the bright paisley patterns. There were notebooks and pens for the grandkids, a red rubber ball.

Tshinyama would not meet my eyes as I pushed an envelope with $150 in his hands, suggesting he buy a new bicycle and a cellular phone. I told him there was now a weak signal in Kamponde, that a few clever types were making money selling phone calls, hinting it might be a way for him to return home. It wasn't much, yet still more than the average annual income in his ravaged homeland.

We said our last goodbye before I headed back up the path. I hated leaving him in the bleak little village and pledged to try and return one last time.

We both knew it unlikely we would ever meet again.

"*Washala bimpe, tatu*," I choked, as we grasped each other's hands, my fair freckled ones clasped between the rough dark fingers that had cooked so many meals for hundreds of Peace Corps Volunteers. It's a simple Tshiluban farewell: Stay well, father.

Tshinyama softly replied: "*Wayi bimpe, mamu*"—Go well, mother.

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