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Circle of Life Brings Volunteer Back to Zaire

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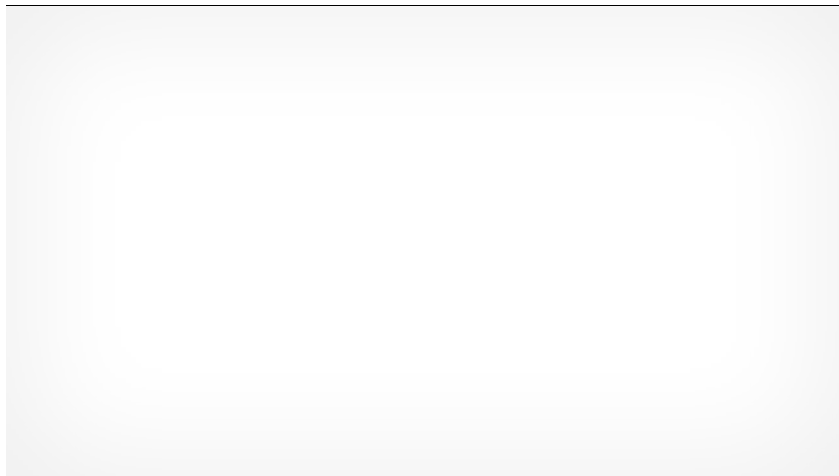
KAMPONDE, Zaire — It is 4 o'clock on a Sunday morning, and the village is sleeping. No one knows I have returned.

At daybreak, I step into the red-brick church and follow the tiny toeprints of barefoot children down the dirt aisle. As I begin to speak, I am greeted by astonished eyes.

“I came back to tell you that I never forgot you and how you took care of me when I was really just a girl.”

Pinpricks of sunlight dart like fireflies through the crumbling brick walls. There are whispers: “Miss Elizabeth? Mamu Elizabeth?”

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“I know you didn’t believe me when I said I’d come back. But here I am, to see how your children and fields have grown, to listen to your stories and to tell you a few of mine.”

Crow’s feet deepen around the weather-beaten eyes of the women whose children I once taught, as they smile and gently ululate to welcome me home.

Kamponde, a sleepy, mud-hut village of 2,500 people, is much like any other village in central Zaire. But to me, it is like no place on earth.

Kamponde is where bamboo-clacking breezes and salmon-pink sunsets are savored with calabashes of palm wine, as women with babies strapped to their backs return from the manioc fields to light the supper fires.

Kamponde is where I saw my first dead body, played my first guitar duet, laughed off my first marriage proposal.

It is where I taught English for two years to hundreds of young men and women and sent them off to struggle with poverty, corruption and a mysterious virus not yet named AIDS.

I was the last Peace Corps volunteer in Kamponde. In 1981, I was pulled out of the village because the school administration had become unbearably corrupt. I carried a lot of guilt with me when I rode out of the village in a Land Rover, knowing I was heading back to the land of plenty.

I vowed then that I would keep the people of Kamponde in my heart, and that I would return.

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Now I was back to keep that promise, to see if the people of Kamponde remembered me as a teacher and a friend, and to learn whether I had made a difference.

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My Ethiopian Airways jet landed at bat-infested Ndjili airport in Kinshasa, Zaire’s deteriorating capital of 6 million people. Here, residents try to sprout greens in the cracked sidewalks that once lined colonial boulevards.

Inflation has risen 8,000% in two years. One U.S. dollar will bring 40,000 zaires--paper money printed with pictures of President Mobutu in his famous leopard-skin hat.

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The Peace Corps pulled out of the country completely in 1991 when unpaid soldiers rampaged through the country killing hundreds of people, and civilians went on massive looting sprees.

Today, sullen bureaucrats extort pathetic bribes from travelers. At the airport, an immigration official grilled me about my visit and said my documents weren't in order. He insisted I have them signed by a government minister.

He settled, instead, for 50,000 zaires--about \$1.25.

From Kinshasa, I flew to the provincial city of Kananga. As I walked onto the tarmac to catch the plane, soldiers with rubber batons were beating back panicked crowds trying to drag sacks of trading goods onto cargo planes.

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I remembered Kananga as one of the most romantic cities I had ever known: dancing at Fat Albert's, colorful cloth prints on the huge rumps of market mamas, the air alive with the loopy xylophones of Zairian music.

Instead, I found a pitiful shell. Stores gutted during the riots were still boarded up. The banks had shut down. Streets once jammed with traders were empty.

Here, I learned that a Toyota 4x4 would be ferrying a family and a load of supplies to the Catholic mission in Kamponde. The Catholic procurer offered me a one-way lift if I would pay \$50 for a barrel of gas.

The 100-mile trip used to take three or four hours, but the road was so rutted now that we inched along at 10 mph.

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It was dark when three ragtag soldiers appeared and ordered us to stop. I heard them patting their AK-47s, and I smelled the cinq-cent--the corn whiskey travelers often use as bribes.

The guns didn't scare me. It had been years since the soldiers had bullets. But I quickly slipped my gold wedding ring into my jeans and wriggled my toes to assure myself of the dollars stuffed in my boots.

The soldiers demanded to see the driver's registration papers. They settled for a few biscuits.

It took eight hours to drive the last 80 miles. We bumped along in silence under brilliant stars. Around us, the savannah was burning, the fires set to corner rats and snakes for dry-season protein.

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As we crossed the train tracks into the outskirts of Kamponde, I was startled by an owl perched on a bullet-pocked crossing sign. Its golden eyes peered at me as it fled the headlights.

I looked around at the others, wondering if anyone else had seen the Zairian omen of doom.

In church four hours later, several hundred faces looked at me with pleasure. But I also saw hope in their eyes that perhaps I had brought them some sort of relief.

My chest tightened with the familiar fear that my presence here does more harm than good.

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My village had become so ragged that, after an absence of 15 years, I still recognized some of the hand-me-down dresses the little girls had worn to the service.

As I walked from the church, children grasping each of my hands, people rushed to hug me. The lone church bell clanged.

Outside, in the shade of the mango, palm and eucalyptus trees, I looked for a man I had prayed would still be alive. And there he was, returning my grin.

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“Mamu Elizabeth, I heard you were here, but I couldn’t believe it,” Tshinyama Mwananzoi whispered as we folded our arms around each other in an awkward embrace.

For seven years, Tshinyama cooked for the Peace Corps volunteers in Kamponde. When the post closed down, he moved to Kananga and cooked for Peace Corps volunteers there for another 10 years. After the volunteers fled the 1991 riots, he waited in Kananga for a year, hoping they would return.

Finally, he returned to his fields in Kamponde and tried to put 17 years of feeding and fathering young Americans behind him. His own father, a cook for Belgian missionaries, once told him God had chosen them to nourish the white man.

As we walked toward his family compound, we began to plan the menu for the party I would throw the village.

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The packed-dirt compounds were still neatly swept. Little stick fences protected the bougainvillea and wildflowers from the goats.

Some of the Tshiluba language came back to me as women straightened from their wooden mortars and pestles to greet me.

“Mamu moyo, malu kayi?” Hello ma’am, how are you?

“Malu bimpe, amu wewe?” I’m just fine, and you?

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At the family compound, Mamu Tshinyama came grinning out of the square mud hut. She was only 37, but the average life span here is 47. A life of working in the fields, mothering six children and losing three had left her looking twice her age.

She accepted my traditional gift of cloth, took my face in her hands and said, “You don’t look a day older than when you left here.”

She called for her two girls, only babies when I left. Teenagers with their mother’s dimples appeared, infants at their breasts.

Everything is family here, as it must be when family is all there is. So they had to ask: Was I one of those Western women they'd heard about who are too busy for the sacred duties of motherhood?

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Chris and I have tried to have children, but for reasons the doctors cannot explain, we haven't been able to, I told them.

The fact that we were trying earned me relieved sighs, followed by promises of prayers and magic spells.

We were joined by Tshinyama's younger brother, Kabunda Mayombo, who had been one of my students. He had some hilarious memories of me slamming rulers, throwing chalk, and making farceurs--class clowns like him--stand with their noses to the back wall.

Kabunda was a deacon at the church now, and a French teacher with an associate degree from a community college in Kananga. He wanted to talk politics--about the national election scheduled for May, about how bad things were for his wife and six children.

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"If Mobutu wins," he said, "it'll be the death of us all."

Every mud hut used to have a picture of Mobutu.

Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Bana. Mobutu Himself Forever, Powerful Warrior Who Leaves Fire in His Wake.

Mobutu the billionaire, who has skimmed riches from nationalized diamond, copper and cobalt mines though many of his people can only feed their children every other day.

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Mobutu the prostate cancer patient, who travels to Switzerland for treatment though patients at Mama Yemo Hospital, named after his mother, must bring their own syringes and aspirin.

When I lived in Kamponde, few would speak his name for fear that his dark powers would strike them dead.

Now there were many like Kabunda who openly blame him for their woes, and who pin their hopes on elections Mobutu has postponed three times since 1990.

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My first day back in Kamponde ended with a dinner of fish heads in palm oil, boiled matamba (manioc leaves) and a gooey, piping hot bread called bidi. Foreheads glowed in the light of the kerosene lantern as we dug our right hands into the communal bowls.

A cot had been set up in a storage room of the old church. Lying there, I thought I could see spiders and scorpions in the flickering candlelight.

The wonders of the day suddenly seemed lost in loneliness and longing for Chris. I asked myself how I had ever lived like this--with no running water and no one to share my thoughts with in English at the end of the day.

I blew out the candle and turned my face to the wall, but I could not sleep. I kept seeing the face of a silver-haired man in a Belgian legionnaire's hat.

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He had approached me that afternoon as I raced to keep the many invitations to cradle a newborn, examine schoolwork or share beer and roasted peanuts. With trembling hands, he handed me an identity card the Belgian colonialists had given to native workers. It identified this man as a "Boy Domestic."

He also showed me a copper medal bearing the likeness of Belgium's King Leopold II, who had amassed a personal fortune here in what was once the Belgian Congo, and who had ordered hands and heads cut off when native mine workers did not meet quotas.

What did this old man want of me? An apology for the atrocities of the white man? A commendation for serving the white man well? Or was he just asking for money?

"I'm not asking you for anything," he said. "You have already given much to our children here. But perhaps somebody in the West will read your story. Perhaps somebody will send me some medicine for my eyes."

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As I tossed and turned on my squeaky cot, I knew that readers would want to send medicine for the old man and dresses for the little girls I had seen in church. But there is no postal system to deliver them and no more Peace Corps volunteers to encourage an old man's false hope.

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In the morning, I jogged down the red dirt road to Institute Untu, where I hoped to find evidence of my legacy as a teacher. Walking through the ankle-high dried grass of the campus courtyard, I kept saying, “Mon dieu, mon dieu, my God, my God.”

The dormitory was boarded up. The dining hall had burned down. Many classroom windows were broken. Others, through which I once watched antelope and gazelle graze the silent savannah, were sealed with brick.

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Seniors, many in their early 20s, were cramming for college boards. But most of the students had left for winter break, and many classrooms were empty.

I took a seat in the silent room where I once taught my favorite class, a dozen junior literature majors so bright and beautiful that I often felt drunk with joy after class.

In the three weeks I spent in Zaire, I learned that at least four of my former students were dead of AIDS. There were probably many more, but no one could say for sure in a country that keeps no statistics on the disease.

When I taught here, I was ignorant of the virus all around me. Although AIDS is believed to have originated in Zaire, it wasn't until the mid-1980s that news of the virus reached the village. Today, the country still has no AIDS prevention program and condoms are still frowned upon by the men.

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“There was a farmer, had a dog, and Bingo was his name-oh, B-I-N-G-O.”

I turned toward the voice and saw the smiling face of Marceline Kanimushimbi, who had been one of my few freshman girls. She had forgotten most of her English, but she remembered that idiotic song.

Marceline, 31, proudly told me that she had graduated. Now she was the mother of four and was married to another of my former students, Kamulombo Mutang, an economics teacher at the institute. Like other teachers here, he hadn't been paid in months.

In Kamponde, and also in Kinshasa and Kananga, I managed to find 25 of my former students. Among them were more teachers, a mining consultant, a construction engineer, and my pride and joy, Kamanga Mutond, the most popular radio journalist in the country.

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They all told me the Peace Corps volunteers who taught them English, biology and chemistry had helped get them into the university and opened their minds to ways of life outside Zaire.

Zairian men are famous for their flattery, but my skepticism about their sincerity weakened one day in Kananga when a beefy man started running alongside our truck.

“Miss Elizabeth! Miss Elizabeth! Don't you know me? It's Tshibuabua Kasolo from your senior biology class.”

In his hand was one of my old passport photos, a keepsake he had carried with him all these years.

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He was a black-market money changer now, he told me. It was with some embarrassment that he asked, "Could I have a new photo for my wallet?"

Now, in this ruin of an institute, I was meeting today's students. I taught several classes, and passed along some books donated by the Peace Corps, but their needs were great and basic.

"Didn't you bring us some bread, ma'am?" one skinny senior asked.

All I had was some hard candies I carried for small children. I was nervous this would offend these 20-year-olds, but they all lined up with their hands out. Some said this might be their only meal of the day.

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Their English was atrocious. None would be able to pass the English portion of their final exam. Even if they passed, getting into a university would require trading in family connections, bribery and sexual favors.

Here is the future of Zaire, I told myself: a generation lost in a haze of hunger and corruption.

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Planning a party in Kamponde was easy; everyone pitched in and did the work.

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I handed Tshinyama a stack of zaires, about \$50, and he oversaw the preparations. Palm wine was ordered from neighboring villages, a fat female goat was butchered, sacks of corn and manioc were taken to the mill. Tshinyama

and his cooks sweated over a half-dozen black caldrons.

Several hundred people gathered to pass the wine and share the meal. Dancing teenagers pounded the dirt around the fire to dust. In one of their songs that evening, I heard my name.

I was caught off guard when asked to give a speech.

I told them this meal was my way of thanking them for everything they once did for me: for giving me a kitten when they learned my brother had died, for protecting me when drunken soldiers wandered into the village, for leaving baskets of eggs and fruit at my door.

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I didn't tell them I knew that a morsel of my party goat would be the only taste of meat most of them would have this year. I didn't tell them I knew times were so hard that gatherings like this were now held only around funeral fires.

Long after midnight, as I drifted off to sleep, I could still hear the singing of the children and the pounding of the drums.

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

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This had been the sentimental mission of a lifetime--a chance to thank the people who had unknowingly given me the strength to undertake such a journey.

But as I waved goodbye and stopped to shake hands along the road to the train station, I discovered that my tears were tempered by the pull of a hot shower, a glass of red wine, and the sound of Chris' voice.

Kananga was 13 hours away by freight train. I slumped in a corner of the car and pulled my knees to my chest to avoid a little girl scratching her head lice. As the train lurched out of the station, I smiled in the dark.

I'll never be sure what good I did here.

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But I do know there is a village in the heart of Africa where Sunday morning prayers call on the gods to bless me with a family of my own, and where "Miss Elizabeth" are words in a song.

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