



Emily  
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# African Rice Heart



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*Though small, she was a big presence.*

For Dinga, my African sister,  
and for all of those who, though small, are a big presence;  
whose lives, though short, drench the world with color;  
whose hearts, though beating irregularly,  
effectively and unforgettably teach ours.

Dinga died at the age of fourteen on Wednesday, May 20, 2009,  
of a mitral valve prolapse during yet another fight with malaria.





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# African Rice Heart

I remember the first day my African host family *allowed* me to draw water for my morning bucket-shower. Before that day, they did everything for me. They didn't allow me to lift things, to stand, or to do work of any kind. One of the other volunteers told me this was their way of welcoming me and that I would offend them if I insisted too soon that I be treated like everyone else. But their kindness made me feel like a ritzy American sissy, distant and different, so after two weeks I put my foot down and said I'd get the water for my shower myself.

Going to our open-air well, which isn't lined, isn't capped, and isn't treated, I grasped the end of a very dirty rope and tossed a plastic bucket—cracked from hauling heavy loads—down into the greenish liquid. Then, peering down into the well, I waited for the bucket to fill. Instead, stubbornly, it floated. I jerked the rope right and then left, trying to catch the lip of the bucket in the water so it would fill. Eventually, it did catch, but then it submerged completely and came up too full and heavy.

I tried to pull the bucket up like my African siblings do, hand over hand and away from the dirt wall of the well, but it scraped the whole way up, scooping dirt off the wall that then became a brown layer across the water's surface.

Sucking up my fast-diminishing pride, I struggled to keep my knee-length, blue-and-white-striped bathrobe modestly tied shut while I carried the bucket across the courtyard. I leaned far to the right to counter the weight of the water, which was pulling my left arm and shoulder down, and the water sloshed against my calf and ran down my ankle. The people who were watching tried not to laugh. I was embarrassed.

As I entered the outdoor “shower room,” my stomach turned at the sight



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*My African family's shower room made of mud bricks and open to the sky. Unfortunately, it also served as the family's walk-in urinal.*

of the yellow puddles and the sweet stench of urine. The shower room was also the site of the activity described by the French verb *pisser*. Bricks were scattered on the ground, and you were supposed to be able to stay *above* whatever was *below* by standing on them. But that smell—no way to avoid it.

I set my bucket in one corner of the mud enclosure and tipped it slightly, washing some of the urine out of the drain hole. Then I did a slow, careful dance across the

bricks; draped my towel, bathrobe, and underwear over the wall; and stood there naked, wondering once again just how this shower was going to get me clean.

I'm pretty sure I've never been quite that exposed—and I'm not referring to the literal exposure: the way my body was sandwiched between the open sky and the ever-present dirt, those white birds peering down at me, and the malarial mosquitoes penetrating my personal space and landing on me rudely. No, I'm talking about the exposure to everything unfamiliar in the Chadian culture—everything I couldn't swallow. As I thought about how exposed I was, I peered over the wall and saw Dinga, my fourteen-year-old African sister, pounding rice for the evening meal.

Dinga had a lot of power in her thready biceps. Her wrists flexed as she slammed the pole down to crush the kernels that lay in the wooden bowl. Sometimes, when she'd throw the pole up, she'd let go of it, clap twice to show off her skill, and then catch the pole again—her arms reengaging with surprising force. She was working alone, and she was sweating.

We eat rice at almost every meal. "It brings force," the Chadians say, which I would translate to something more like "it fills our bellies," because white rice really has very little nutritional value. But it means survival nonetheless.

Making the rice edible is a long, hard process—something I'm not used to. My African family's patience with the demands of this lifestyle is admirable. They'll spend all afternoon and part of the evening preparing a meal, and thirty minutes after they set out the food, the children are scraping the crusty rice out of the bottom of the pot.

But the process—yikes! The ground has to be softened, the seeds have to be



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planted, the rains must come, and the family must tend to the growth. When the green stalks have finished their growth and then browned with death, the people go to the fields to harvest the grain. With their hatchets balanced on their heads, bottles filled with murky water swinging at their sides, and babies sleeping, tied hard against their backs, they—the women—work the fields.

“The women work harder than you men do,” I told my lazy African brothers. “Women—they get up early, sweep the courtyard, cook the breakfast, take care of the children, work the rice fields, come home, make dinner, and host guests. They do everything. What do you do?”

David, a lean brother with little ambition, said, “We build the houses.”

“That’s *one* thing,” I replied with a smile.

“Emily, you don’t know,” David said, defending his gender.

Well, maybe I don’t know the whole story. But I do know that the women work hard.

The women, they work those fields.

And yes, the men do too.

And the children.

Really, everyone, because this is everyone’s business.

Food in the belly is everyone’s business.



*Jolie and I cut rice in her field.*

After the stalks are cut, they’re tied in bundles and left in the sun to dry for several days. Next, they’re hauled to the center of the field, which becomes the threshing floor. There, in what may be the most physically demanding part of the process, the harvesters thresh the rice, slamming the bundles onto the ground with back-breaking effort. They call it “tapping the rice,” but really they’re beating it—almost as if they’re punishing it. This process breaks the sheathed kernels from the stalk. The harvesters sweep the freed rice kernels into piles, load them into basins, and carry them home, where they spread them out on tarps to dry some more and then pound them like Dinga was doing, stripping off the sheaths—the chaff. Sometimes two people, or even three, stand around a bowl throwing the thick wooden pole down on the rice—taking turns and

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breaks and turns again. Sometimes the pounding will go on for an hour.

Pound.

Heave.

Pass.

Next.

Blister.

Pound.

I've joined them many times, but I know they were just humoring me. I suppose they think it's *humorous* as well. I'm awkward and unpracticed—I mean, I didn't learn this as a kid. At one break, I showed my sisters the blisters on my hands, and they laughed and called Mama Jolie over. She didn't laugh at me, but instead ran her fingers over the blisters and shook her head back and forth. Those blisters that formed on my callus-free fingers were testaments to the fact that changing the state of the rice is no easy process. And the process *does* greatly change the rice.

When they think they've pounded the rice enough, they lift a bowl filled with chaff and rice kernels high and pour the mixture out, allowing the wind to blow the chaff away while the kernels—the “eyes” of rice—fall into a bowl on the ground. Sometimes, when the air is still, they'll run down the road pouring the rice and chaff from one bowl to another and letting the wind created by their running blow the chaff away. In the evenings, then, you can find thick trails of chaff in the roads alongside the huts.

At this point, they remove the impurities, shaking the eyes of the rice and scanning them carefully.

Get it all out.

All the rocks.

All the sticks.

All the bugs.

After they've gotten rid of the big stuff, they pour the rice into a bowl of water to be washed—gently. Dinga scolds me for rushing this part, for sloshing water all over the place. She washes in a way that is almost artful, and the rocks that may have been missed in the picking stage sink to the bottom of the bowl, and they pour the pure rice off.

At this point, the rice is clean and bare, stripped of all that had covered

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it. It's ready to be cooked, boiled; the last step—the softening, swelling, sterilizing step. We're plagued by *Giardia* and worms, by typhoid and amoebas. The boiling helps to prevent protruding worm bellies, persistent diarrhea, and feverish suffering.

What a variety of treatments the rice is exposed to! What a trip it goes on from the beginning of its existence to the end! One moment the stalks are being hacked down, and the next someone is picking out all the contaminants. One moment the kernels are being pounded, and the next they're being washed. But after all the pounding, sifting, and washing, the rice swells as it is being boiled. It swells to become something more than what it was, and then we're thankful for each step of the process.

And here in the midst of this sometimes-hell-sometimes-heaven place, I feel like my own heart has gone on a trip—one that has left it exposed.

It's as if someone played soccer with it,  
rubbed it against a cheese grater,  
gave it a nice warm bath,  
threw it a birthday party,  
and then made it run a marathon.

Things here in this village and hospital make me feel and think things I've never felt or thought before. I didn't know that welling-up, uncontrollable, giggly contentment could get inside me like it has, but then a baby was born into my hands, screaming and pinky-brown. I also didn't know the whirling, gut-tingling, skin-tightening, pinchy-eyed sorrow that humans can feel—until I listened to a baby's silent, still chest through my stethoscope and realized that death was certain.

We can't tell what effect exposure will have on people. Sometimes it seems to strengthen them immediately—the “rising to the challenge” effect. Other times it takes a long while for its effects to show up; and still other times the effects of exposure to life's extremes begin right away and seem never to let up. Many of our *why* questions don't get answered on this earth, which can turn our search for answers into a desperate grasp at peace—something that we'll find only when we set our gaze on Someone and someplace beyond our full comprehension.

When I bump into the walls of our shower room, dirt sticks to my wet skin. It's frustrating. I want my shower to bring equal cleanliness to my whole body, and the fact that my feet never get beyond a light shade of brown bothers me. It isn't comfortable here—there isn't enough sanitation

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nor enough privacy. But in some ways the very things that make me so uncomfortable also bring me so much comfort.

At night, when I've finished my shift, during which I've become convinced that humankind can't dodge hardships, I come home from the hospital and shower. Sometimes, I dunk my whole head in my bucket and hold it underwater for a few seconds—a silly thing to do, really, but it drowns all sounds, all noises, and something about it makes me feel like I'm sticking my head out the window of a house that's filled with smoke. It's like I'm getting a breath of fresh air.

Once I've gotten my head wet, I pour water over the rest of my body, and those bars of soap that my mom assured me I'd need come in really handy. I just want the odors to come off—the stench of the penicillin that is shot out of cheap syringes and flows into and burns the veins of the woman who, without it, will die of worse; the stench of the sweaty bodies that have gone unbathed for far too long; the odors that trigger the pictures of the patients we left at the shift's end.

In this African shower room I feel too exposed,  
but there's a part of me that,  
at night,  
when I really need to know there is something greater out there,  
wants nothing more than to be exposed to that night sky and its white  
lights,  
wants nothing more than the truth to be that the ceiling is high,  
and hope lies *there*, beyond the things seen.

And when I am done showering and still grasping my shampoo bottle, some soft, smoky scent drifts over the low shower wall, and the laugh of some wild child trickles over it too. And I'm thankful for the low walls—for that ceilingless shower.

We're exposed to the stars *and* the urine.  
The hellish *and* the holy.  
The pleasant *and* the unpleasant.  
The pounding *and* the washing.  
The sifting *and* the boiling.

What you'll read in the following pages is a collage of both.

## Part One: African Rice Heart

### **people are good**

Here I am. I'm twenty-two. I'm heading to Chad, Africa, to work for six months at a hospital in the village of Béré. I'll be filling a nursing position, though I'm not a nurse. I'm impulsive, a slight bit disorganized, have a bad memory, a big fear of dogs, a little fear of the dark, and this itch inside me to please people. Those are some of the things our Father in heaven is going to have deal with this year. Sometimes, I wonder if wanting to help is enough. Does willingness really equal usefulness?

Will He turn my weaknesses into strengths?

Will He use me *in* my weakness?

When fear of failing seeps in, will He remind me what courage feels like?

Will I somehow be brave and step up to big, tough, scary tasks?

Will He teach me to turn these anxieties into prayers?

Will He? I'm banking on it.

I said Goodbye to my parents, Joyce and Keith, and to my boyfriend, Alex, at the airport. I'd already said Goodbyes to my brothers and friends, but these last goodbyes seemed harder and more final. My mom reminded me that these were happy goodbyes because I'm beginning such a neat experience, and we'll see each other in no time—we are rather optimistic people! So, instead of crying, we smiled with puddles in our eyes.

My mom sneaked all sorts of things into my bags. I'm finding baby dolls, wooden giraffes, orange purses containing quarters, string, an emergency siren, and a million bars of soap. I never use bar soap at home, but she assured me I'd use it, and she was right.

My mom comes from this line of unique, creative, artistic, slightly wild and yet extremely capable women. She's an actor, a musician, a painter, a wood-carver, a museum docent, a seamstress, and a rock hound. As we were driving on one of our family vacations, my mom screamed, "Stop the car!" She said she'd just seen a beaver on the side of the road, roadkill, and she wanted to get its tail and have a taxidermist stuff it. Then, she said, she'd let the kids at church see a beaver's tail up close, and they could feel it! My dad said, "Joyce—" but knowing how persistent she is, he pulled over to the side of the road and told her there was a hatchet in the trunk. She did actually hack the tail off, sending beaver blubber flying all around. Do you see what I mean?

Yet despite all this seeming eclecticism, Mom's one of the most organized,

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thorough, and thoughtful people I've ever met. Her love pours itself into service to the people around her, and I felt it as she did everything she could to help me prepare for Africa and to get there.

So many other people did the same—it seems like I've had an army behind me. But as I was getting on that plane, I realized that army couldn't get on the plane with me, so I was going to have to stuff their “good courage” and “best wishes” into my pockets to pull out when I dropped into pits.

My seat was next to Courtney, a makeup artist on her way to Paris. She's created her own lip gloss, and listening to her talk passionately about the colors, ingredients, and effects of her product started me dreaming in a way that hasn't ended yet. People who do what they love are magnetic and inspiring. I want to do a lot of wondering about my career this next year. Sometimes I'm afraid that I'll end up doing what I *should* and I'll miss what *could have been*.

I arrived in Washington, D.C., at three in the afternoon, and when I checked on my flight to Africa, I found that it had been delayed. Instead of leaving at eight thirty that night, it was scheduled to depart at two in the morning. Oh dear! With so much time to kill, I decided to see something of our nation's capital. I asked about the best way to get into the city, and a chatty woman in a crisp airport uniform told me that taxis charge forty dollars one way. Yikers! She recommended that I try to bum a ride on one of the free airport shuttles. *Oooh*—resourceful and thrifty!

I lugged my huge backpack almost half a mile to the H2 station and asked Scotty, the Comfort Inn driver, when the next shuttle would leave for the hotel. He said, “Soon,” and asked me what room I was staying in. “Errr . . . ummm,” I stammered, “well, I don't exactly have a reservation. Could I please have a ride though? I'd like to leave the airport, but taxis are so expensive.”

Scotty said that he had “nice bones in his body,” and with that he opened the door and pointed me to the front passenger's seat. While we waited for the van to fill up, Scotty peppered me with questions about my trip. Then, just as we were pulling away, a woman ran up to my window and slipped me a twenty-dollar bill, saying she had heard us talking about where I was going and she wanted to give me the money because “everyone needs help once in a while.” PEOPLE are GOOD!

A whole airline crew was riding the shuttle to the hotel, and entertaining conversations soon sprouted. The slightly abrasive yet funny senior pilot asked me where I was going. As I told him what I knew about my

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destination, he began to give me a stream of reasons why I was crazy, concluding, “You are nuts, girl! There’s no way I would ever go there!”

Suddenly, I felt a bit nervous. Had I overlooked the risk? Hadn’t I given my decision to go enough thought? Debra, one of the flight attendants, rolled her eyes a bit at the pilot and reassured me. She said I was brave and that I shouldn’t listen to what the others were saying. I appreciated what she said so much; she etched her mark inside of me.

I met lots of nice people in D.C., did a variety of things, among them tripping in a crosswalk directly in front of loads of traffic, landing facedown with my huge backpack on top of me. The ground has never come at me so fast. I couldn’t do anything but laugh and wave to all the drivers, who, though sympathetic, were impatiently waiting for me to get out of the way.

When I finished wandering D.C., I made my way back to the Comfort Inn, hoping to catch Scotty and ride another shuttle back to the airport. When I asked where he was, though, I was told his shift had ended. Max, who was driving during the evening shift, asked me where I needed to go. I told him I needed to catch a plane, and he said, “All right; I’ll take you.” I felt bad, though, because I wasn’t staying at the hotel and I was going to be the only passenger on the whole ten-person shuttle. So I confessed—I told Max that I wasn’t a customer of the hotel. He smiled and said that it was no problem, that he wasn’t doing anything anyway, so he’d take me back to the airport. Once again—PEOPLE are GOOD!

I slept through most of my fifteen-hour flight to Africa. But I didn’t get to Chad right away—I spent a day and a half delayed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The airline put me up in a hotel and fed me three meals a day of good rice, veggies, eggs, soup, fresh bread, salad, yogurt, and hot cocoa. One morning, two other volunteers and I took a taxi and went all over town.

It’s a different world here. That’s all I can say for now. I can tell I’m starting to process all these things I’m seeing. I just wrote a paragraph of thoughts that have been going through my mind but found myself “backspacing” them away because they don’t make sense. *I* haven’t made sense of it yet. People who have traveled to second and third world countries know exactly what I’m talking about and what I’ll have to process. What about all these beggars? They’re not begging for money or for drugs. These are legitimately needy people who want food. What about all those sad lions we saw at the Addis zoo? They look so unhappy. What about this defensive mode of mine—this feeling that everyone is out to get me in one way or another? Should I have this attitude? Does it make me safe? It



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doesn't seem to fit with focusing on others rather than on myself.

Sort. Sort. Sort.  
File this thought here.  
Dismiss that one.  
Dwell on this one.  
Yes, this one matters.  
Oh—this is just the beginning!

### we arrive

I've arrived. When we flew to the capital, N'Djamena, and stepped off the plane, a wall of heat hit my body. The desert is trying to suck me dry already, and I found myself sipping at my Nalgene and wiping sweat droplets from my forehead with my wrist before they slid into my eyes.

Levi, a strong, confident Chadian and an employee of the hospital in Béré, was sent to make sure we found our way safely. We trusted him completely because we had no other choice—we don't speak French, and English is rare. We rode in a bus for seven hours. When the bus ride ended, we were greeted by moto drivers who surrounded us and our baggage on all sides. Each begged, saying they'd take us for a "good price" and grabbing our bags before we agreed. Levi handled everything evenly, with a calm that I will thank him for later. I imagine doing this on my own, and then I stop because it's a *baaaaaaad* thought. Finally, Levi agrees with certain drivers on a fair price, and our bags were bungeed down two high behind us on the mopeds. For the rest of our trip, we were wheeling down roads that looked like lakes—we are arriving at the end of the short wet season. After I surrendered the idea of death by moto wreck and decided to trust my driver, everything became more fun. I said to myself awfully naively, "I don't want this ever to end!"

Ansley Howe was on the moto in front of me. Ansley is an extremely brave twenty-four-year-old nurse from Maryland. She's of medium height and has brown curls that love this humid atmosphere. Our fathers went to medical school together, but while those ties already exist, they'll be cinched down this next year. I know she'll be my shoulder, and I'll try to be hers.

Ansley's moto driver seemed to be stopping to drink something from a

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small bottle that he kept in a brown paper sack. With one waft, Ansley knew her driver was drinking a fairly strong intoxicant and coupling it with driving; and while we laughed a bit at the new set of rules (or perhaps just the abandonment of all the ones we are used to), it also made us nervous.

And there were wrecks. Numerous ones left Ansley and me knee-deep in water with our skirts hiked up “hilltops,” in complete disregard of the no-knees-showing cultural faux pas. Our bags, by some grace (not granted by our drivers), stayed relatively dry.

At one point well after nightfall, we stopped briefly. When I looked down at the monster puddles in our trail, I saw that the stars were bouncing their reflections off the water, leaving white dots on the surface. Though it may sound clichéd, it was perfect.

My bum hurt wickedly as we neared our destination, and I was no longer wishing for a never-ending moto ride. All of my anticipatory nerves had wilted in those three hours; but as we arrived at the seventy-bed hospital in the village of Béré, those nerves were once again livened.

Two young men, volunteers as well, unloaded my bags, and I followed them as they dragged the bags down a dusty road and turned left into a cluster of huts. Even though it was past their bedtime, an uncountable number of quiet African children greeted me with timid stares. But their shyness was OK for now—we don’t share a language yet. A quiet woman led me to my hut and swung the tin door open for me, and I walked into the empty, dark space. The interior smelled like a musky greenhouse—that combo of hot air and wet dirt. A cot sat against one wall, and a white mosquito net haphazardly flopped in a pile at its foot—and *that was it!* And in a way—well actually, not just one way, but in most ways—I’m happy that I’ve been given such a bare beginning.

“Emptiness is a good conductor,” my good friend Trina told me that when I was at a really low point—feeling like all life had been dumped out of me. I’ve been carved and defined by a busy life, like most American twentysomethings—a life densely populated by required experiences, appointments, college years, extracurriculars, and stuff, good and bad, that *just happens*. And it all shapes us. It’s been a life that many people might call cluttered, and sometimes I think I do a lot of *RE-acting* to whatever comes my way instead of *acting* and choosing it for myself. I don’t think it’s *all* clutter, but yes, life can become so busy that those THINGS and EXPERIENCES choose who you become. So this emptiness was a new side to things.

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Emptiness is the most intentional conductor.  
Clean canvases make the most original paintings.  
And pure, straight-up water is the best thing for you anyway.

I was tired that night, and without any socialization, eating, or setting up of camp, I fell asleep on my cot, curled up in a ball. Now, as I'm writing this here in the morning, my ankles and feet, which were uncovered during the night, are peppered with mosquito bites. I'm nervous about what will fill this emptiness—nervous, with a grand attempt at courage.

### first evening

It's my first full evening in my new home, and I'm crying already. I'm usually not much of a crier, but tonight, I can't plug my eyes.

As dusk settled in, they put me in my dark mud hut to eat alone. Supposedly, it's a real honor to get to eat like this—to have your own bowl of food and not be “disturbed” by the joyous noise of happy children. They definitely don't know me yet.

The food is so unfamiliar. It's a huge ball of rice, resembling half of a volleyball. The rice is called *boule* (pronounced like *pool* but with a *b*). No one told me how to eat this. I started by using a fork to cut off chunks of this rice ball and chewing them down. Then, about halfway through the meal, I discovered a sauce in a tiny pot. When I tasted it, I could tell it was fish in a slimy liquid. Feeling queasy, I continued eating the rice plain.

They won't let me do a thing for myself. When I walk out of my hut, three sweet Africans, young and old alike, get up off of whatever they're sitting on and run it over to me. If I'm carrying something, five people come to relieve me. It's just overwhelming.

Oh, and then there's my French. I can't say anything except “thank you.” I'm rarely understood. Even when I try seven different pronunciations of the letters in the English-French dictionary and use different tones and volumes coupled with hand motions and sound effects, all I get back are blank stares and *fake* nods of understanding.

It seems I'm in this glass room all by myself. I see everything that's going on around me, but my eyes are the only sense of any use these days. These ears should come with translators.

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### family

We are nineteen in all. We're eclectic, eccentric, hectic, spastic, and mystic. Yes, mystic. I will live with this family for the next six months. I'm paying them sixty dollars a month to rent a mud hut and to eat two meals a day with them. The ones who are educated—the men and the older children—speak French. But the younger ones and Jolie, the mother, speak in a quirky dialect called Nangjere. Some of the words sound like “*booja*,” “*tumalung*,” “*di di*,” and “*oh oh*.” I stifle my laughs because I have no way to explain what I think is funny, but it's hard to take the words seriously!

I said we are mystic. I say that because I've realized there is this special mystery of family dynamics that is uniquely gifted to each family across the world. I've known lots of types of families: Families who raise their children out in the countryside and don't eat salt or mustard. Families who raise their babies in cars and who travel to foreign countries, carrying their children with them in backpacks. Families who go to high church and dress their children in matching sweaters. Families with one parent. Families who yell. And families who never really talk. The family I'm staying with has some mystery of its own, like nothing I've seen before, and I'm intrigued.

Chadian families are big for a number of reasons. They have yet to use birth control regularly, and family planning just doesn't happen. And in a country that is so dependent on the rice they grow for themselves, the more children they have, the larger the rice field they can maintain.

But this family isn't big for either of those reasons. Samedi and Jolie, the father and mother, have an advanced case of bigheartedness, and it has resulted in nineteen family members. Among them, besides their children, their children's spouses, and their grandchildren, they've taken on, adopted, four others. What a family! Eclectic, eccentric, hectic, spastic, and mystic.

Samedi and Jolie married young—when he was eighteen, and she was fifteen. Jolie told me she was “*verrrrrrrrrrry*” skinny back then. They were



*Jolie, me, and Samedi, who Jolie says—  
with pride—is big now.*

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newlyweds, and money for food didn't come easily.

Here in Africa, being skinny means you're unloved, and conversely, if you carry weight, it's because someone loves you and spends money to put food in your belly. Sometimes, even love isn't enough to make you fat, though, and Jolie and Samedi felt the pinch in their younger years. Jolie tells me Samedi is big now. She says it with pride because she loves him so much.

### the sea of the sick

The hospital's seventy beds are filled and emptied in a tidal-like flow—it's the sea of the sick. Someone is admitted at midnight and then another discharged in the morning, so another can take his place. In and out; they come and go. The hospital is always dynamic during the day—doctors improvising tactics and treatments; nurses taking notes and changing dressings, starting and restarting IVs, and scolding patients for charging their phones on the precious solar power that will last only till midnight and then all will go black. At night the hospital becomes a quieter place where family members or caretakers curl up under the beds of their sick, sleeping on concrete—illegally. Families are supposed to camp outside and leave the aisles between the beds open so the nurses can give midnight meds. But no one likes the mosquitoes, and so the healthy sneak into the sea of the sick.

Only two or three nurses work during the eighteen-hour night shifts, so the families are responsible for feeding, bathing, and walking the sick to the restrooms, which are out back and crawling with cockroaches. The nurses are responsible for changing dressings, injecting insulin, giving meds, and monitoring post-surgery patients, maternity patients, and those who are critically ill.

There is a cooking shelter where women boil water, prepare rice, and cook the meat that they will feed their sick. Yesterday, a woman asked me to try her soup. Fortunately, I'm not proficient enough in the language to ask her what was in it and just gave my nodding approval after downing the chunky liquid. If I were to know what was in it, I might not approve!

When patients arrive at the hospital, they give their small yellow *carne*—the Chadian medical record book—to the nurse and then take a seat on the skinny cement benches in front of the emergency room. They arrive early to avoid the heat that comes despite the speckled shadows under the mango tree leaves. When their names are called, their vitals will be taken. The glass thermometer is pulled out of a makeshift holder, a cylindrical

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plastic cup containing bleach and cotton balls that have probably been in there for days “cleansing” the thermometer after it has taken hundreds of axillary and rectal temperatures. Next, the pulse is found in the wrist, the breathing is observed and recorded, and then the cuff is strapped onto their skinny arms, and their blood pressure is measured.

Following this taking of their vitals, the patients will pay to have a consultation, during which their liver and stomach are palpated and they are asked many questions. How long have you had diarrhea? How many times a day? How many times have you vomited? Do you have a fever? How many weeks has this leg been infected? How long has the piece of metal been in your foot? When did the hippo attack you? Things like that. The potential illnesses are determined, and the nurse orders lab tests. Pee in a cup. Stool sample—collected in a mango leaf. Finger prick—checking hemoglobin levels and malarial concentrations. Lumbar puncture—checking for meningitis. If the case is dire, requiring hospitalization, the patient is given one of the five emergency-room beds and perhaps an IV may be started—fluids are often given. If the case isn’t pressing, then the lab tests are done and the patient waits outside on one of those skinny benches until the results come back—which could take all day.

When the lab results come back for those waiting on the skinny benches, their names are called and they are told the suggested treatment. If it’s malaria—quinine. If the test for malaria has a negative result, the patient is still told to take quinine because the lab test is so inaccurate—it’s simply a microscopic observance of malarial cells. If the lab reports worms—PZQ and mebendazole. If it’s something worse, like meningitis or tetanus—hospitalization and aggressive treatments to save the patient from those mean diseases. A nurse—one nurse—sees and treats more than fifty patients a day in the outpatient clinic.

The pediatrics ward holds babies on adult-sized beds. The mothers often sleep on the bed next to their child. Sometimes, babies cry all night, and the air is stuffy in the small ward. Long sticks are tied to the corners of each bed, and at night, the mothers tie mosquito nets to them. The families are asked to keep their child’s area clean, to sweep it and clean up spilled food or other messes. It’s a small place for so many to try to get well.

The medical-surgery ward is bigger. A cement wall divided it into two rooms—the men’s ward and women’s, giving a slight bit of privacy since the beds lie side by side with not even a curtain in-between. The patients know each other’s business—know their neighbor’s health and could probably tell

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the doctor more about the number of times they threw up or how much water they drank during that day than the nurse on duty could. Patients share water with each other, and their children play together to pass long days in that bad environment. Sickness brings them together—especially chronic sickness and its demand for long stays at the hospital.

The delivery room is small and gets crowded when too many people try to help deliver the baby. There is a metal bed in one corner of the room that is wrapped with a vinyl sort of covering. This is quite convenient because after the placenta has been fully delivered and the mother moved to a more “comfortable” place in the maternity ward, the metal bed can be drenched in bleach water in an attempt to sterilize the room for the next birth. The maternity ward is available for mothers and babies who need to recover after difficult deliveries, C-sections, or other complications.

Dr. James Appel and his operating-room team do surgeries during the day and at night in the case of emergencies. The operating room is as close to sterile as possible—and when a fly starts buzzing around the overhead



*Preemie baby: screaming, hollering—and alive!*

lights, measures are taken to get it out. The equipment is old, but the surgeries done amaze me.

At the exit, John Jac, the gate guard, sits smiling in his green army shirt. He keeps the creaky metal gate locked, regulating the tidal flow. And when one patient gets well, he opens the gate and lets him or her flow on out—out to be well in the world again, to go back to living again.