

Notes from Africa #7 — Ruth and Rose, Women's Lives the World Over

Rose and her daughter, Ruth, were standing under the spreading limbs of the Catalpa tree when I arrived at work. I knew instinctively that they were waiting for me. My guess was that they were seeking support for school fees. Although Rose is a volunteer at Reach Out I did not know her well. My only encounter with her had been to listen to her tell her witch doctor story. One jumped out from behind a curtain while she was doing a home visit to one of Reach Out's patients. This frightened her badly and she asked to transfer this person's care to another worker. Her daughter, Ruth, still on the child side of puberty at twelve, is shyly hanging back as Rose asks if she might have a word with me.

We stay under the tree's protection from the hot white sun. Rose takes a deep breath wringing her hands nervously. Silence.

"Rose, you have been with Reach Out almost since it started three years ago haven't you? Tell me how you came to be a client here." I said to crack open the story.

"I never thought I could have HIV. You know I fell in love with Paul, my husband, when I was 15. We were only with each other. After we married we had three children, a bit soon. They were all girls. But he still loved me anyway. One Valentine's Day he told me if he were a rich man he would get me a house, but since he was a poor man he could only give me a red rose. It was wrapped in the beautiful shiny paper. I had never had been given a rose from a store. I still have the red dust of that rose."

"You know, mummy Torkin, in Africa if a man does not have a son, it is considered very bad. Bad. His ancestors do not rest in peace, as his line will die out. The spirits can make things hard for the living. Paul's relatives urged him to take another wife, one who would give him a son. We talked about this a lot. In the end we agreed that he should get another wife and hope for a son. He found someone else and soon she got pregnant and delivered a son. But the baby died in a week. My co-wife was not very strong. But she did get pregnant again and this time another boy was born. Everyone was very happy...but it was a bit bad because that son also died in the first year. And soon after the wife died too."

"Paul and I decided that we did not want him to get yet another wife. But God blessed us when we had our own son, which we named after his father."

Ah, a bit of good fortune in a difficult situation. This necessity to have a son plagues so many people, both men and women, I thought.

"When the baby was only 6 months old, Paul was killed on a boda-boda." (motorcycle taxi) Pause. Regaining her composure, she went on.

"I was left with no money, no home, and no way to feed the children. I spent days walking the streets looking down at the ground hoping I would find a stray coin that might somehow have dropped. I looked in garbage cans for scraps. We were all starving. For two years I was desperate to feed my family. My own health was failing. I was having headaches and skin rashes. White stuff was growing in my mouth. When I felt really bad I would beg one aspirin and carefully grind it up into powder and put my tongue gently on it so that I would take just a little to ease the pain. That way the one aspirin would last me several days, maybe a week."

"Then I heard that if I would go to a place called Reach Out and have an HIV test, I could get emergency food. I knew I did not have HIV since Paul and I had loved only each other, except for the co-wife. So I was not afraid to take the test. I needed the food. I convinced a girlfriend to go with me. When the results came back, both of us were positive. I could not believe it. How had I gotten this disease? I knew almost nothing about AIDS."

"I did come home with food and my family ate their first real meal in two years. From that day on I have been doing nothing but working for Reach Out: to help people stay free from AIDS or to get help if they already have it. Now I am a CATTs." (Community AIDS TB Treatment Supporter)

Rose stopped to smile broadly to acknowledge her success within Reach Out. Then a cloud descended over her open face as she looked towards Ruth who was steadily looking at her hands. Her voice cracked. "You tell what happened." she said to her daughter.

In a small child's voice that beckoned me to lean forward to hear, Ruth said "Last week I was coming home from Girl Guides (Scouts). I had no money for the matatu (minibus) so I had to walk home. As I was walking a big car pulled up with a businessman in it. He said that it was dangerous for me to be walking alone, that the neighborhood was not a good place for a little girl to be alone. He asked me where I lived and said he lived there too. He would gladly take me home. I said no. My mamma told me never to get in a car with someone I did not know."

Ruth is speaking in barely a whisper and our heads are touching. "The man showed me his business card, said that he was an educated man and that I had nothing to fear. He told me it was so dangerous for me to be alone. He kept insisting. So I got in with him."

There was a long pause. I did not know if I was going to hear the end of this story. Big tears were forming in both mother and daughter's eyes.

"He drove me quickly in the wrong direction. I told him this was not the way home but he would not speak to me. He took me behind the slaughter house and...and...and..."

"Rape" said Rose quietly folding her arms around her child. "Then he threw her out of the car and sped away."

Stunned at hearing this awful story we just sat together and cried.

"I was afraid to tell mamma. For three days I just lay in bed crying, saying I had the flu. Finally, I told her and she brought me here to the clinic."

Rose picked up the story.

"We went to the police because Ruth, being a smart girl, had memorized the man's phone number when he showed her his business card. So we could identify him. Later in the week the police came to Ruth's school. They came right into the classroom and took her to the station to identify the man. She said she needed her mother to come too but they refused to come get me."

"She was told by the police to identify a man in gray pants, a blue tee shirt, and with a mole on his forehead. As Ruth walked down the line of men she did not recognize any of them. But there was a man with a mole on his forehead in blue and grey so she said he was the one, the one the police had told her to identify. As soon as she pointed to him, he burst out that he was innocent. He could see by her school uniform where she went to school and yelled at her he would come and get her."

Rose's voice climbed in crescendo with fear. Apparently, the businessman rapist had bribed the police and they set up an innocent man. His response to this injustice was to threaten Ruth. Since that trauma Ruth had been afraid to leave the house to go back to school.

Could we please help with a bit of money (\$100) to allow Ruth to move into the dorm at her school so she would not have to walk each day? Rose could manage the school fee if we could manage the room and board. Then Rose would escort her daughter home on the weekends. We felt this was a very good expenditure of some of the funds many of you are all sending us and we agreed immediately.

When we went to collect Rose and her family to take Ruth to school we unexpectedly met Brian, a 12 year old AIDS orphan, the child of a dead friend. We could hardly believe that this woman who had suffered so much, who lived in poverty, in a shack without electricity or running water, without a spare dime, and four children of her own, had found the generosity of spirit to adopt a child in need. Generosity

amongst the poor is common. I am grateful for the feelings of humility I have in the presence of this generosity.

What a burden of horrible life problems....AIDS and TB, starvation, the death of a spouse, utter destitution, and a child's rape and terror. And yet look below at Rose. The inner light is still burning brightly. The Ugandans' spiritual stamina makes it a blessing for us to work here.

With love, Torkin

When Torkin told me about Ruth and Rose I felt rage. I plotted how to "get" him, the rapist. "Call his wife, his boss, even the newspapers and 'out' him as a child rapist. Castrate him. Get our patient who is a policeman on the case. Blackmail him and give the money to Ruth and her mom. Or....."

What is wrong with some men here? A patient told her husband she tested HIV positive; she was beaten and thrown out of the house with the kids. Another asks her husband to use a condom, and is beaten. A woman who says "no" to sex may face a beating.

Like many places, including North America, some husbands don't grow old with their wives. In Uganda where polygamy is not uncommon, some men take a second, even third, younger wife. Some men fail to take care of their wives when they are sick. Their neglect hastens death. In our 3rd "Notes" I told you about the successful treatment of Mary's meningitis and the promise antiretrovirals held for her. My delight in this was shattered when I heard from the central volunteer that Mary died. Her husband drank each day and forgot to give her the medications or anything to eat.

I have Ugandan men friends. They don't do these things. But when I ask about neglect, forced sex and abuse, they shrug and say this is how it is. Stephen Lewis, the UN Special Ambassador to Africa for AIDS, talks about "male predatory sexual behavior."

Yes, I wanted to "get" Ruth's rapist. Torkin was offering love and healing and I was plotting revenge. All I could offer was an apology to Ruth and Rose. "I'm so sorry for what this man did." Rose's beautiful smile I share with you below.

Love Charles

If you want to add or subtract from the mailing list, write ben@dimensional.com. You can reach Torkin at torkin@charlesandtorkin.com and Charles at, yup, charles@charlesandtorkin.com. Previous newsletters and more images at <http://www.charlesandtorkin.org>.

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