

Why Go:  
A Narrative of Nursing in Mozambique

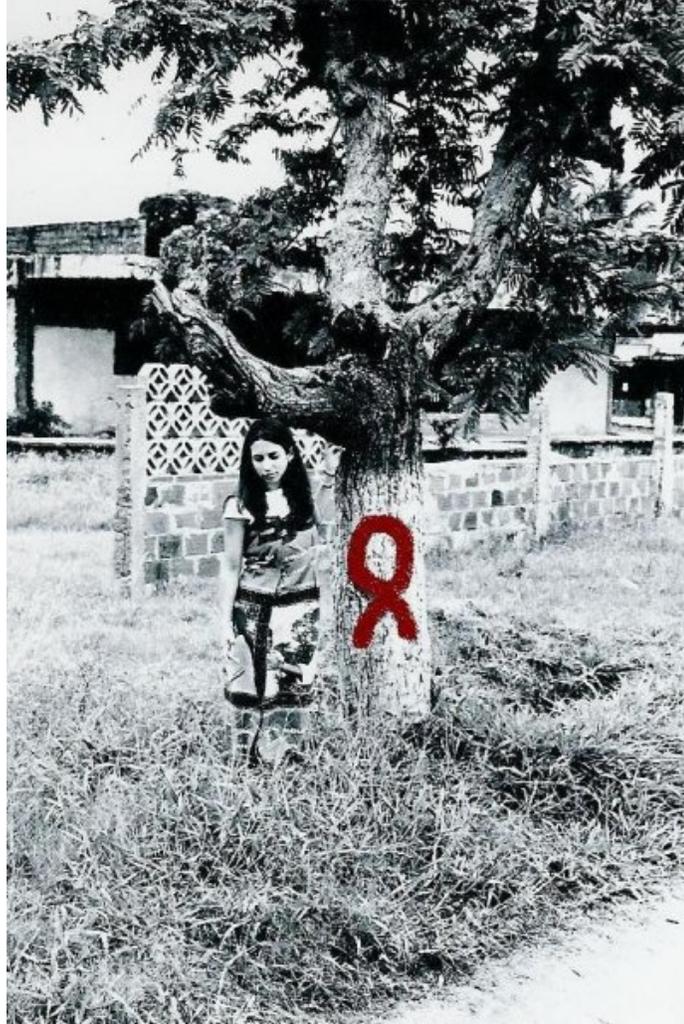
Millie McGehee Dasher

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Honors Advisor

# Why Go



Millie McGehee Dasher

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**Discussion Guide 131**

*I like to spend some time in Mozambique  
The sunny sky is aqua blue  
And all the couples dancing cheek to cheek  
It's very nice to stay a week or two*

*There's lots of pretty girls in Mozambique  
And plenty time for good romance  
And everybody likes to stop and speak  
To give the special one you seek a chance  
Or maybe say hello with just a glance*

*Lying next to her by the ocean  
Reaching out and touching her hand  
Whispering your secret emotion  
Magic in a magical land*

*And when it's time for leaving Mozambique  
To say goodbye to sand and sea  
You turn around a take a final peek  
And you see why it's so unique to be  
Among the lovely people living free  
Upon the beach of sunny Mozambique*

Bob Dylan and Jacques Levy  
"Mozambique"

# Tested

*December 8, 2005*

I wake early into a gray morning, use the bathroom, let the dog out, and fill the kettle. I make a tiny pot of blackberry sage tea and take the pot and its matching tiny mug to the coffee table.

Jacob is gone.

The dog comes back in full of energy and nuzzles her damp nose against me as I sit. I scratch around her ears, then fill my mug.

She nudges me, wanting more.

I have not put up the decorations. The tree Jacob bought last week sheds needles silently in the corner.

I should check the water.

Then the nausea.

Six months and six days.

I have been home for six months and six days.

I drink my tea and get dressed in the pressing silence. The house is chilly.

I pull up to the public clinic downtown at 7:50. I walk inside with my head down, trying not to make eye contact with the crew of construction workers taking a break over fast-food egg biscuits.

Inside, plastic sheeting hangs over the atrium walls. A great skylight illuminates the dusty air and staircases rising through the floors. Hardly anyone is here. It smells stale.

“Can I help you?” a woman at a central desk asks, not looking up from her keyboard. She doesn’t seem particularly helpful.

“No.” I read over the office listing: Child Clinic...Maternal Clinic...Clinic A, second floor.

That’s mine. Clinic A. I’d called weeks earlier, sitting on a curb in the hospital parking lot, afraid to even ask for the information about where to go, information that made the risk real, that took the shadowy fear I felt and gave it weight, called it by name.

I climb the stairs slowly, my shoulder bag weighing me down, willing back into the lobby, back into my car, to a world where I am the one helping people who face this sort of thing.

The glass door of clinic A is papered on the inside, and the shades on the adjoining windows are drawn. I stand for a moment, considering what is on this side of the door, what might be waiting on the other.

I go in.

A dry-looking couple is seated on the molded plastic chairs, staring straight ahead. They are not holding hands.

I walk to the desk, guarded by sliding glass, and lean in.

“Is this where the HIV tests are run?” I ask in a low voice.

The receptionist looks up at me. She has freckles, lipstick flaking at the corners of her mouth. “Mmm-hmm. You need a test?”

“I—yes.”

“Okay. We run a syphilis test with the HIV test. You’ll get a number for your gonorrhea and chlamydia. We’ll call you by your number and you’ll go into an examining room.”

I am middle-class, slim. I have had orthodontia. “I don’t really need...”

The receptionist types rapidly on her keyboard. “That’s our standard testing. We recommend the whole screening.”

Can’t hurt. Much. “Okay.”

I give her my name and social security number.

“You’re W6,” she says. “We’ll call for you soon.”

I turn back toward the room, realize my shame is ridiculous. We are all here for the same reason, and yet. I feel markedly different as I catch sight of the few who entered while I was speaking with the receptionist. A Hispanic woman sits by the door with her daughter, who is suckling a bright red lollipop. Her black curls tumble from yellow plastic barrettes, the kind I used to wear. A few strands cling to her cheek, where her sucker has left a sticky streak.

A dark-skinned pair walks in, a fearful-looking middle-aged man and a pouting adolescent. She wears a puffy, quilted coat and

elaborate fingernails. Looking around the room, she drops her jaw with disgust. Her tongue is pierced.

The man places his hand at the small of her back, guiding her towards the receptionist. The girl's hoop earrings catch the fluorescent lights and wink.

"My daughter is here for testing," the man says, sounding exhausted. "I called ahead."

I walk to a seat in the corner, passing a bearded man in a torn jean jacket, who hisses at me as I pass.

There are posters everywhere, flashy warnings: "Use a condom every time!" and "What you don't know could kill you!" with a photograph of a woman in thigh-high boots and a midriff tank top.

Really?

There are offers:

---

#### HERPES VACCINE

*Trial being run by the University of North Carolina Medical School. Eligible women please call. You must be free of herpes, over 18 years of age, and willing to undergo experimental treatment. Test includes free screening for herpes, free vaccination, and monetary compensation for travel expenses. Some candidates may receive further monetary compensation.*

**NOTE: THIS VACCINATION CANNOT GIVE YOU HERPES**

---

In ways this is radically different from Mozambique.

In ways it is exactly the same.

"W6," a voice calls out, and I stand and walk to the right of the receptionist desk, where a petite, curvy woman guides me through a door leading to the examination rooms. She indicates that I ought to take a seat at the desk tucked into a corner of the hallway, and sits down at the computer.

Again, I give my name and social security number. So much for the promised anonymity.

There is another poster beside me, blue lettering on plain white cardboard:

---

**COULD YOU HAVE HIV?**

**Symptoms:**

- fatigue
- nausea and diarrhea
- purple spots in the nostrils and on the genitals
- flu-like symptoms that will not go away

**COULD YOU HAVE CHLAMYDIA?**

**Symptoms:**

- burning sensation while urinating
- discharge from the—

I turn my head away. A white chill cuts through my chest.

No.

Please.

“So you want an HIV test. And syphilis. And the chlamydia / gonorrhea screen.”

“Ye—yeah.”

“Do you have a partner here with you today?” Her eyebrows are thick. She doesn’t look Central American. South American, maybe? Cuban?

“No.” My breath is shallow. “I’m married. And I don’t do drugs or anything.”

“Mmm,” she says, typing.

“I don’t.”

She shuffles the papers in my file. My file, now in the records of county health. Good thing I never wanted to be president. These things have a way of getting out.

“We’ll run the tests today. Your chlamydia / gonorrhea results and the syphilis test will be available a week from today. You can get those on the phone. Your HIV tests will be ready in two weeks, but you have to make an appointment to come in and receive those in person. We don’t give them over the phone.” She closes my file. “See the receptionist on your way out and she’ll give you an

identification number and the phone number to call. And then we'll see you back here in two weeks."

I nod and go back to the waiting room, as she directs me to.

There are already more patients here. A middle-aged man with uncombed hair dozes in the corner chair where I'd sat. His cheeks are dark hollows; his eyes are sunken in concave sockets. I catch a glimpse of his forearm, pock-marked and tattooed and bruised.

I try to quiet it, but the little voice comes, insisting that I don't deserve this, that I didn't know what I was getting into. How could I have known?

I suck on the inside of my cheeks, raw lately with this nervous habit, and find another seat.

The room feels filthy, like there are parasitic worms weaseling their way through the walls, through the braids and beards of the patients. It smells like a homeless shelter, like a bleached-down dormitory that will never feel entirely clean.

I wait with my ankles crossed, feeling conspicuously white. I'm wearing a holey brown sweater for comfort, broken-in boots. A little mascara, which suddenly seems ridiculous.

"W6?" another voice calls out, and this time I go back to an examination room, where a red-headed woman my about age is waiting.

"Lynn Clark," she says, not extending her hand. "I'm a medical student and I'll be performing the tests on you today."

"You're a student?"

"Yes. We all get assigned to service positions. This was mine...unfortunately," she says, puckering her lips as she looks down at her clipboard. "I was kind of hoping for another job, but here I am."

I sit in the chair beside her.

Her voice shakes a little. "Um, how many sexual partners do you have right now?"

"None. One. Sort of one."

"Do you consider yourself heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual?"

"Straight."

“Have you ever had sex with a woman?”

“No.”

“Have you ever paid someone for sex?”

“No.”

“Have you ever been paid for sex?”

“No.”

“Do you use intravenous drugs?”

“No.”

“Have you ever used drugs?”

“Not in years. A little bit, in high school. Never IV drugs.”

She ticks a box. “Have you ever been incarcerated?”

“No.”

“Have you traveled within the last six months?”

“That’s why I’m here. I was working in Mozambique this spring.”

“Yeah? Doing what?”

“Nursing.”

She sets her clipboard down and rolls her shoulders. I hear her joints pop. “We get all types here, you know, from the druggies to the women who just found out their husbands are having affairs to your average Joe. Sometimes we get people coming in here thinking we can cure AIDS. Can you believe it? People can be so ignorant. And the girls, they think it’s no big deal if they have chlamydia, like, ‘Oh, give me an antibiotic and I’ll be fine.’ It’s not that simple.”

“I’m sure,” I say. “I was working in an AIDS hospice and you know, I tried to be careful, but I didn’t have gloves. There were some risky situations. Blood tests.”

“You had bloodwork in Africa?”

“A stick to check my blood type. Another time for transfusion. Once to check for dengue.”

“You got a blood transfusion in Mozambique?”

“No...look, can we just do the test? There were multiple opportunities for exposure.” I feel exhausted, weak.

“Well, I need more information. Did they use new needles?”  
Lynn asks.

“Once yes, definitely. I’m not sure about the other times.”

“Did they swab your skin?”

“Yeah, with the soap mixture they had.”

“Not alcohol?”

“I had some swabs with me for the dengue test.”

She sighs. “I’ll be honest. I’m not sure what you were thinking. You’re in healthcare.”

I pick at a hangnail. “I know.”

Lynn picks her clipboard back up, brisk now. “Well, if your potential exposure was in Africa, then you’re going to need to be tested for HIV-2 as well as HIV-1.”

“Yes, I know. Can you do that here?”

“Not really. You know the HIV-2 strain is less virulent than HIV-1. It’s harder to contract and takes longer to develop into AIDS, but once it does, the results are pretty much the same. HIV-2 is naturally resistant to a lot of our drugs.”

In my mind, Lapis gasps through his chest fluid and launches himself up on the hospice bed with his stick-like arms, desperate eyes rolling back.

“I know.”

“We only run the HIV-1 test. Usually, if someone has HIV-2, the HIV-1 test will come back inconclusive. The doctors will meet and hold a conference as to whether or not they should run a HIV-2 test.”

“Can we specifically request that they run both?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

“Do you have medical insurance?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“You may be able to talk your private doctor into running both tests, but we don’t do that. We can’t afford to.”

“I understand. I was as careful as I could be, given the situation.”

“Look, I get it,” she says. “You do what you have to do. I’m going to get a full screening when I finish here. Like I said, this was *not* where I wanted to be assigned. The women’s prison would’ve been

better.” Lynn frowns over my chart. “When was your last pap smear?”

“A while ago,” I tell her. “I don’t remember exactly when.”

She tucks her hair behind her ears, which stick out a little.

“Well, we’ll do that, too.”

“Okay.”

“If we’ve got all that settled, you can go ahead and get undressed for the exam.”

A few minutes later, I am prone on the table as slips on exam gloves. “It’s going to feel like a menstrual cramp,” she says, and I grit my teeth against the sensation, sucking air.

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs. “I’m having a hard time finding your cervix.”

“I don’t think they migrate,” I mutter. It doesn’t make her any gentler.

Ten minutes later, I return to the changing area behind the curtain, realizing I will officially not leave this experience with my dignity intact.

“When you finish getting dressed, go down the hall to the right of this room,” Lynn instructs. “You can get the HIV and syphilis blood tests there.”

The phlebotomist’s back is to me as she reaches for another blood collection tube. The young woman in the blood-drawing chair stares hard at me. I escape her gaze, reading more posters like the ones in the waiting room and hallway.

The woman stands and I take her seat, handing my file to the phlebotomist. Her eyes are amber brown gulfs of serenity. Her uniform is bleached perfectly white and starched at the collar and cuffed sleeves. Her white clogs are unscuffed.

This is too much. It’s too much to extend my arm to that kind, kind woman whose eyes beam, who works here, I am certain, because she loves Jesus, or because her son died of AIDS, or probably both.

“I was working with a missionary organization,” I tell her. “I was in Africa.”

Her voice is quiet as she ties a tourniquet. “Please hold out your arm. You don’t have to look if you don’t want to.”

I feel small.

She finds a vein and sticks me. It occurs to me that she doesn’t care—or doesn’t believe—how any of the people here put themselves at risk. She doesn’t blink at me any more than the woman who was gang-banged, or the one who shoots dope, or the one who’s been married for sixteen years to a man who just told her that he’s actually gay.

Everyone here is paid to be morally neutral, to keep their eyebrows level as they ask me if I am a prostitute and how often I share needles and would I like any condoms?

No. And never. And no.

## Postmortem

*March 20, 2005*

It is my second-to-last shift before Dan and I leave for Mozambique.

“It’s not looking good,” Charlie says, pulling up Ms. Bernice’s file on the computer. “She’s got a bad inhalation burn. Combine that with her age and COPD, and, well...”

“Has Dr. Natoya spoken with the family?”

“He told them what to expect. They’re on their way here. They had to figure out a way to get her husband up here. He’s been hospitalized post BKA for non-healing wounds.”

“Diabetic?”

“Probably.”

“That’s so sad.”

“Yeah, I spoke with her son on the phone. They managed to get dad out with a woundvac and wheelchair. They should be here in a couple of hours.”

“Is she going to live that long?”

“I mean, we’ve got her on norepinephrine and a ventilator. We can keep her going long enough for them to say goodbye.”

I sigh.

“Sorry to leave you with this one, Rose.”

“No, it’s...”

“It’s the job.”

“Yeah.” Charlie stands and walks across the hall to the door of the room. “Come meet Ms. Bernice.”

She’s in her 80s. Fluffy white hair, no teeth. The skin around her lips, leading up toward her ears, is ghostly white and leathery looking. People don’t know that the bad burns, the really bad burns, often look the least bad to start with. It’s not until the surgeons start debriding the dead skin that you really see the damage.

“Was she on oxygen?” I ask.

“Yep. Smoking. At some point people really have got to start believing that their faces will blow up if they do that.”

I cringe.

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“Well...yeah.”

Charlie runs through Ms. Bernice’s medications and says goodnight. I gown up and head in to check her IV lines. I fluff her hair a little and drape a blanket over her, trying to minimize the appearance of the lines and tubing for when her family arrives.

They come some time later, her son wheeling in his father. Her son’s eyes are red. He nods towards me. “You the nurse?” he asks.

“I am. My name’s Rose,” I say.

“Ma grew roses,” the man says.

I smile a little. “What should I call you?”

“John,” he says. “And this is my father, Ellis.”

Ellis doesn’t take his eyes off of his wife.

“Can—can we go to her?” asks John.

“Of course,” I say.

John pushes Ellis over to Ms. Bernice. Ellis reaches out a finger, places it gently on her shoulder. “She don’t look like herself,” he says gruffly.

It is quiet for a moment. The ventilator hisses.

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No, we’re fine,” says John.

“Music,” says Ellis. “It’s too damn quiet in here.”

“You want me to play music?”

“Gospel,” he says in response.

I flick the TV on, clicking up through the channels until I find the one that plays gospel music. I leave it on low.

“Is that okay?” I ask.

No response. Ellis leans over his wife. John stands at the foot of the bed, face tight.

“There’s no chance she’ll make it?” asks John.

“Did you speak with Dr. Natoya?” I ask.

“He said she won’t make it.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say, biting my lip.

“Just give us a minute to say goodbye,” says Ellis. “Then you do what you need to do.”

“Please take your ti—”

“Just give us a minute. You can stay here.”

I lean against the doorjamb. “All right.”

Ellis strokes his wife’s shoulder tentatively. John watches, wiping severely at his eyes. I offer him a handful of tissues. He takes them, nodding his thanks.

After a few minutes, Dr. Natoya taps on the door beside me, halfway entering the room. He introduces himself. “We spoke on the phone.”

“Yes,” says Ellis. “You gonna turn off the machines now?”

Dr. Natoya hesitates. “Would you like to discuss this more?”

“No. You said what you had to say. She’s ready to go.”

The doctor looks at me. I offer a small shrug.

“So, uh, you’re ready?”

Ellis nods without turning around.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Dr. Natoya says.

“Ain’t lost her yet.”

“Right.” He turns to me. “Can you give her more Ativan and morphine?”

“Yes,” I say, and leave to retrieve the medicines. I come back and push the morphine, then dilute the thicker lorazepam and add it to her IV, too. The respiratory therapist slips in and turns the ventilator down. We keep at it, sedating her and reducing the air until the respiratory therapist is able to extubate Ms. Bernice entirely. She gasps a little when the tube is finally gone.

“How much longer now?” asks John.

“Discontinue the epinephrine,” Dr. Natoya says quietly to me, then louder: “Likely just a few minutes.” He leaves for the hallway, to watch Ms. Bernice’s monitors from a distance.

My patient takes another ragged breath. Her husband leans his head against her shoulder. “I know you don’t need that body no more, Bernie,” he says, “but dammit if I’m not gonna miss it.”

“Dad—” John croaks.

“Say ’bye to your ma, John.”

John kneels down on the floor across from his father, and places his hand on his mother's cheek. "I love you, Mama."

I can barely breathe.

I move quietly over to the IV pole and turn the epinephrine off. She is still breathing, but barely now.

And then she is gone.

Dr. Natoya comes into the room to announce the time of death. You don't need monitors or a physician to tell you, though. The room feels strange and hollow when somebody dies.

Soon, Ellis and John are gone, too.

I don't know how anyone ever decides they're finished saying goodbye.

I leave the room and return with the heavy black bag, two tags, a washcloth, and towels. I fill a basin with warm water, lug the gallon jug of chlorhexidine soap from under the sink, and plug it into the water.

I close the door to the room, turn the gospel music up a little, pull back the covers, and begin to remove Ms. Bernice's IV lines and stickers. Careful as a new mother, I wet the washcloth and circle it behind her ears and back into her hair. A new washcloth. One corner of it for each eye. Another corner to wipe from the inner eye to the outer. The nose last, then the slackened lips.

This has always felt like a sacred act to me.

Arms next, lighter with no resistance. Shoulders, underarms. The rest of the tape, and the bandages and antiseptic cream on her singed hand. I wash each finger individually, scrub around her fingernails.

When patients have been here for a while, their fingernails are long. Toenails, too, and beards on the men. The women will have downy hair on their legs and underarms. We don't clip fingernails or shave our patients. Sometimes I want to scold their bodies for putting energy into such useless things. *She doesn't leg hair right now, I've thought. She needs to survive.*

But then it's beautiful, too, in a way, how the body won't stop. My own grandma filled her eyebrows in until they day she died. Even when she was eighty, even when she was too old to realize

she'd bought a navy blue pencil, not dark brown, and had walked around with blue eyebrows for a week until someone corrected her.

I ached with love for my Nanna then. Every time I looked at her, I thought of the photos I'd seen of her young: long-legged and vibrant on the boardwalk, kneeling happily between the tomatoes in her victory garden. She'd always been careful with her appearance: breezy clothes, jewelry just so. And even when it probably didn't matter anymore, she wanted her eyebrows.

We are probably all alike more than we are different, our bodies doing the driving more than we realize, propelling us toward procreation, demanding food and sleep, feeding cell after cell into fingernails that don't need to grow.

I wring out another cloth over Ms. Bernice's pelvis, let the water run across her genitals. I huff a little as I roll her to her side so I can wash her back and buttocks.

Her flattened breasts and stretch marks say everything. She carried that boy John, fed him from her body. I'm sure she buried her nose in his neck, dreaded the inevitable fading of that sweet smell. She was probably embarrassed in front of gruff old Ellis by these silvery, squiggly stretch lines on her stomach and hips. She must have fussed in the dressing room, trying on bathing suits, trying to find the one that hid the most. Turning away from him to get undressed, even when he told her stop being ridiculous and get on over here.

Thighs, knees, shins, calloused feet. I bet she still went barefoot sometimes.

I dry her. She is splayed on the bed, palms up, legs slightly spread, a little slack in the face.

I've always heard ghosts described as spirit, but in the harsh fluorescent light, her body is the ghost. This eerie gray presence tells the story of what was, but the being has fled. A snake shedding its skin.

## Going Alone

April 1, 2005

My phone beeps as I spit toothpaste into the sink. 3:17am. I need to be at the airport in the next couple of hours.

It's Dan, texting. *Call me ASAP*. He and Jenny are supposed to be picking me up at 4:00.

I slip out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, pour myself a cup of coffee. I find his name, dial.

He answers. "Rose. Hi."

"Hey, is everything okay?" I ask, stirring heavy cream in.

"We're at the hospital."

I set the spoon down. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"I don't know, Rose."

"What's going on? Is it Jenny?"

"Yeah. She started having contractions around midnight. She kept hoping they'd go away, but they've been getting stronger."

"She's not due for two months."

"Yeah. They're giving her something to try and stop labor. And some steroids, I think. I don't know why."

"That's to help the baby's lungs."

"Right, that's what they said." Dan's voice is shaky. "She's scared."

"Of course she is. Do you want me to come?"

"Well, the contractions have stopped. Nothing for the last half hour."

"That's good, Dan. That could be a good sign."

He sighs. "I hope so."

Silence hangs for a moment. "Dan, I hate to bring this up—"

He cuts me off. "You're wondering what to do."

"Yes. I can't stand the thought of leaving you and Jenny right now. But can we reschedule?"

"I've been trying to figure all this out. Do you think you'd feel comfortable going on your own?"

No. "On my own?"

"It's just...I hate to ask you this. But I'm worried that if we don't show up, we won't be able to work with the cholera patients."

"Is that your priority?"

"Showing the director of the hospital that we can make a difference with the cholera is a big step to getting the hospice up and running."

"I see."

"So I have to ask you, Rose—and please say no if you don't want to do this—do you think you could keep your ticket for today? I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Is that what you need from me, Dan?"

"It is. I'm sorry."

"Would that be better than me supporting you and Jenny here?"

"We're being taken care of really well."

"Of course."

"Can you do this?"

I pick the spoon back up. It's left a perfect circle of creamy coffee on the countertop. I glance back toward the bedroom door, trying to imagine how Jacob will react.

"I'm going to need you to talk to Jacob about this for me."

"Yes, of course. I'll call him in a couple hours."

"He's going to be upset, Dan."

"He'll understand. How does anyone make a decision between these two things? Whose need is more important?"

"What do you mean?"

"We all need things. Jenny needs me. The Mozambicans needs us. They need a hospice. I can't say that what I need or what Jacob needs is more important than what they need. That's not our call to make..."

I bite my lip. "Fair enough."

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Okay," I whisper.

"You're going to be okay. You'll get to Johannesburg tomorrow morning. Take a cab to the hotel. You can hang out there; there's a little spa. They have a business office where you can go online."

“Okay.”

“Just take a cab back to the airport the next morning. You’ll fly to Beira. Horacio or Beatriz will meet you there. Everyone speaks English in Johannesburg. It’s not that different from flying into...I don’t know, Dallas or something.”

“Dallas?”

“Charlotte. Seattle. Biggish city.”

“Will I be safe?”

“Have faith, Rose. You’re going for a good reason. Just be safe. Be smart. You’ll be okay. Jenny’s flown in to meet me several times.”

True.

He goes on, “Thank you. Jenny will be really glad you said you’d go. You know she’s in there hooked up to an IV, worrying about you and Beatriz and Horacio.”

I laugh a little. “Of course she is.” My beautiful friend.

“You’ll be okay. I’m going to head back in. You should call a cab now to make sure you get to the airport in time.”

“I will. I’ll be thinking of you and Jenny. And that baby. Please give them my love.”

“You’ll be in our prayers, Rose.”

“Thanks. You too.”

We hang up, and I slug down my coffee. My hands are trembling.

## Clouds Stretched Out Like Snow

April 3, 2003

Morning, somewhere over Namibia. According to the screen built in to the seatback, it is -51° Celsius. We are hurtling forward, over 11,000 meters above the ground. My feet feel swollen and numb. I pull my foot up onto the seat, slip my sandals off. The straps have left indentations. I press on the outer arch. My fingerprints stay, deep. +3 pitting edema.

Any nurse has seen it, but in burns, it's *what* we see. Fluid shifts; skin swells. Fasciotomies relieve the pressure, let the fluid go where it may without splitting the skin like an overcooked sausage. If we don't do it, the pressure builds up so much it kills the surrounding tissue.

But still, that slice into the skin, the removal of a three-centimeter-deep slab of muscle and fat up the length of the thigh or arm...it's vicious.

They still leak. They weep from blisters, seep from swollen scrotums. Sometimes it's slow, pooling yellow on the linens and disposable pads. Sometimes it comes fast, beading on ruined skin, rolling like sweat.

Once I was doing dressing changes on a patient who had been trapped in her car under a burning 18-wheeler, and was burned over 85 percent of her body. I'd stacked her pillows on the cart by her bed and was beginning to cut away her bandages when I noticed a trickling noise. The sink was off, so I stepped forward to see if the pipes were leaking. I slipped. The pillows were so saturated that serious fluid had been running out of them, pooling on the floor at my feet.

Thinking of still makes me a little queasy.

I hadn't wanted to disturb my seatmates, sleeping sentinels between me and the aisle, but I need to stretch, walk a little, take my anti-malarial medication, and use the bathroom.

My feet and bladder ache. I can't wait anymore. I slip my sandals back on, stand, and bump my way over my seatmates' legs, apologizing as I wake her, and then him. They nod, nestle back down into their pillows. I will have to wake them again when I come back.

Woozy with exhaustion, I stumble back to the bathroom and lock the door. I fish a scored white Lariam tablet from my pocket. It looks about as dangerous as an aspirin, but there have been news articles. Four soldiers at Fort Bragg killed their wives a few years ago. Two committed suicide. At least one blamed Lariam, or mefloquine, the anti-malarial drug developed by the US military.

Dan told me he's known people to have bad nightmares with it, but that's about all. The printed information the pharmacist gave me said the drug shouldn't be used in patients with active depression or with a history of psychosis or convulsions.

I've never had psychosis or convulsions. Depression, sure, but haven't we all, a little? Life is sad. We all feel like we're missing something.

I swallow the pill dry, look at myself in the mirror as I wince it down. My face seems unfamiliar, distant. Looking into my own eyes is disorienting, like I've had three drinks and can't entirely focus.

Tired, I think. Dehydrated. Swollen and tired. I zero in on my pupils, swaying a little as the plane trembles. "You're tired," I whisper out loud. "You've been on this plane for fourteen hours."

I pee and wash my hands, avoiding the mirror this time. I walk back to my row, apologizing again to my seatmates as I climb back. I settle in, consider taking a nap, but turn and crack the window shade instead. We'll be landing before long.

The sky is brilliant blue, and the clouds stretch out, thick like snow on a flat, flat field. The sun glares off the top of the clouds. I squint and press my forehead to the glass to look upwards. The clouds are feathery there.

The plane trembles again. My feet feel wet. Too much salt, not enough sleep. As good as weightless, barreling toward Johannesburg at 969 kilometers per hour.

# Johannesburg

*April 3, 2005*

I step outside the airport into the temperate weather. Customs was no trouble, but now I have to contend with two gigantic suitcases stuffed with medical supplies.

Johannesburg is dangerous. I've done my research. It's not at all like flying into Charlotte or Seattle.

The murder rate here is the second highest in the world. A woman is killed by her husband or boyfriend every six hours in this country. Fifty percent of children will be sexually abused before they turn 18.

The HIV rate is 25 percent, and the virgin cleansing myth has a third of men convinced that sex with a virgin will cure them of AIDS. Many lesbians and gay men are victims of "corrective rape," the belief that they will be converted to heterosexuality if they are assaulted.

And as hotwiring cars has become more difficult due to alarms and immobilizers, carjackings have increased. Locals recommend running through red lights in dangerous areas at night.

I wheel my bags into this world and onto the curb, where a line of taxis waits. A driver hops out of his yellow car with a wide smile.

"Hello, my friend!" he says. "Would you like a ride? Where you going? Museums? Casino?"

I tell him the name of my hotel, just a few minutes' drive away. He hoists my bags into the trunk of his cab and opens the rear door for me.

"What are you doing in Jo-burg?" he asks as he climbs into the front seat. The cab is clean.

"Just here for the night," I tell him. "I fly to Mozambique tomorrow morning."

"You'd prefer to go to Mozambique than stay here in beautiful South Africa?" he asks, gesturing out the window at the sprawling hills and city.

“I am going there to work. I am a nurse.”

“Oh, you are an angel.”

I laugh lightly. “Not quite. Just a nurse.”

“That is a good job here,” he says. “Not so easy to get the education, but if you can...”

“Yes, it’s a good job in the States, too.”

The driver merges onto the road swiftly. “Okay, pretty, so what time is your flight tomorrow?”

“Nine.”

“All right, so I come to your hotel tomorrow at seven.”

“You will?”

“You will need a ride, yes? I will come and get you.”

It seems as good an offer as any. “All right.”

“So what are you going to do today, pretty?”

“You can call me Rose.”

“Beautiful! I am Banele.”

“Banele?”

“Yes.” He catches my eye in the rearview mirror. “I am the seventh of seven boys. My father named me Banele. It means ‘boys are enough.’”

I smile, feeling a little more relaxed. “What did your mother think of that?”

“Not much she could do about it,” he says, shrugging. And then: “So what are you going to do today, Rose?”

“I don’t have any plans.”

“But you are in Johannesburg by yourself!”

“Yes, I thought I might just stay at the hotel. I’m supposed to be here with a friend, but he couldn’t come.”

“Okay, okay. I tell you something. You want to go to museums? Mandela House? Apartheid Museum?”

“I hadn’t really planned on it.”

“Art gallery?”

“If anything, I think I’d just like to see the city. I have a friend who grew up here. He says I have to eat biltong.”

“Okay, so you want to eat biltong. No museums.”

“Yes.”

“Okay, so I tell you. You give me forty dollars US. I take you around, show you everything.”

I hesitate.

“Hey, pretty Rose! It is okay.” He opens the glove box and pulls out a photo. He hands it to me over the back of the seat. I quickly identify Banele standing in the back. He is bookended by a slender, light-skinned woman who smiles slightly, and a stern-faced elderly couple. Three small children giggle in the front of the group, two girls with hands up by their mouths and a mischievous-looking boy.

“That is my family,” he says. “My wife and her parents. My children. We are good people. Christians.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“It is okay, Rose. This is not a safe city. But I can show you what you want to see.”

“Forty dollars?”

“Say thirty-five! We go and drop your luggage off. I wait for you while you check in, and then I take you around.”

It is that or spend the day alone at the hotel. I am uneasy, but agree.

After I check in, a uniformed bellhop gathers my bags and makes his way toward the elevator. I trail him, noticing how thin the elbows on his jacket are, how his pants are a few inches too short, allowing his faded black socks to peek out.

I open my room for the bellhop and he carries my bags in, propping them up on luggage racks. I thank him and offer him a dollar, apologizing for not having the chance to exchange any dollars for rand.

“No, thank you, miss,” he says, backing out of the room.

The room is small, with tiled floors and fluffy white linens. A dark wooden wardrobe takes up one corner. The bed is pushed up against one windowed wall, with a matching wood nightstand between the bed and the bathroom.

A wave of sleepiness hits, but I do want to see the city. I fish my toiletries out of my bag and begin to brush my teeth at the pedestal

sink. I spit and go to turn the water back on to rinse my toothbrush, but pause as the bristles hit the water. Am I allowed to use the water here? I turn off the water, tapping my toothbrush on the side of the sink and setting it aside to dry.

Outside, Banele leans against his cab, laughing with the doorman of the hotel. "There she is!" he says happily. "Come, come, Rose," he says, opening the back door.

I pause for a moment, still unsure. The doorman smiles at me, and the warmth in his face calms me. "You are in good hands," he says.

I get into the cab and Banele shuts the door, circling around the front and calling out a goodbye to the doorman.

We begin the ride into the city. The boulevards are wide and tree-lined, with walled neighborhoods sprawling down the cross streets. Rocky red hills, dotted with scrub, extend up towards a bright blue sky. We could be anywhere.

The closer we get to the city center, neighborhoods give way to individual houses, mostly gated. House numbers are hand-painted on the stucco walls, with the occasional strip mall breaking up the residential strips. There is a little less grass here, a little more red dirt, a little more garbage in the gutters.

"Is it safe here?" I ask Banele.

"Yes, mostly if you stay on the paved roads, it is safe. In the daytime, anyway."

We move further into the city, with its dated architecture. Advertisements flake off the taller buildings. The road looks a little dustier, but the brick sidewalks are crowded, and men stretch out on the benches in the sun.

"I tell you, Rose, that I will get you the best biltong in the city. Up here, my friend has a stand."

"Thank you," I respond, as Banele parks his cab. We get out together, and head toward a wooden food cart, stacked with varieties of biltong.

"*Salibonani, Sibangani! Kudala ngakucina!*" Banele calls out to a slight man, leaning against the cart.

“Banele! *Unjani?*” the man replies.

“*Ngikhona. Unjani wena?*” Banele responds.

Banele’s friend smiles and shrugs.

Banele turns to me. “Rose, meet my friend Sibangani. We grew up together in the northeastern part of this country. Not far from Mozambique.”

“Oh, you grew up near Mozambique?”

“Yes. Some of my friends fought to help free Mozambique in the 1980s.” He smiles. “Not Sibangani, though. He was always too lazy.”

“Too smart,” Sibangani says, tapping his temple. He extends his hand to me with a broad smile. “*Kuhle ukukubona*, Rose. *Siyalemukela* to South Africa.”

“Thank you,” I respond, shaking his hand.

“That means ‘Pleased to meet you.’”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, too.”

“And ‘Welcome to South Africa.’ How do you like our beautiful country?”

“It is beautiful,” I answer. “Banele has agreed to show me around.”

“Banele is your tour guide? Pssh,” he says playfully. “Look at him over there, stealing my biltong.”

I glance over, and Banele stops chewing. “*Uzabhadala konke lo*,” he says through a mouthful.

“What did he say?” I ask Sibangani.

“He said you would pay for everything.”

We laugh. “I would like to buy some. And I suppose I can cover whatever Banele has eaten,” I tell him with mock frustration.

“You know about biltong?”

“I have a friend from here.”

“Ah. What did he tell you? Get the steak?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, so I can sell you some steak. But you must try some game, too.”

“Game?”

“Yes. And ostrich! It’s a little more expensive, but you must try something as well as the beef.”

“I’ll take a little of everything,” I say.

“Perfect.” Sibangani opens a brown paper sack and selects a few strips of biltong from his piles. “A little of everything for you,” he says.

I decide it might be better not to know exactly what kind of meat I’m purchasing. “How much do I owe you?”

“You have rand?”

“No, just dollars. Is that all right?”

“Okay. You have five?”

I slide a hand up under my shirt to get money out of my passport belt. I feel a little foolish, and try not to let any skin show. I don’t know the rules here. I pull out a handful of bills, find a few fives and several ones. I hand him one five and put the rest in my pocket so I don’t have to dig around under my shirt next time.

“*Ngiyabonga*,” he says, taking the money and smoothing it out. His eyes dart around the sidewalk and across the street as he slips it into his pocket.

Following his gaze, I look across the street to a paved square, where several carts are set up. “What’s over there?” I ask.

“They sell jewelry. Beads,” Sibangani responds.

Banele grabs another piece of biltong and approaches Sibangani. “I need to ask you something, brother,” he says. “About my family.”

The two turn slightly away from me, speaking quickly in their melodic language. I hear a click every now and then as they talk.

I drift away as the men go on, picking a small piece of biltong from the bag and nibbling on it. It’s jerky. Decent jerky, but still...kind of just jerky.

Across the street, two men near the jewelry stands lay a checker board on the ground and begin to divvy up the checkers. I watch, fascinated, as they begin to squabble. Behind them is a row of pay phones, and my stomach twists in guilt.

I have hardly thought of Jacob.

I should call him.

“Banele?” I say. He raises his eyebrows at me. “I’m going across the street to make a phone call.”

He nods slightly and turns back to his friend.

I cross the street and walk into the park. It is down an embankment from the road, grassy and quiet. The square is wide open with large pavers. Jewelry carts are lined up between me and the pay phones, and I stop to look at what the vendors are offering. I select a set of twisting beaded bracelets: one gold, one red, one purple, one green. “How much are these?” I ask, holding them up to the man walking over to me from the checkers game.

“Forty rand each.”

“American dollars?”

He shrugs and walks back over to the game. After a quick conversation with the men playing, he returns to me.

“Ten dollars.”

“Thank you,” I say, and fish the money out for him.

He nods at me, silent, and goes back to his friends.

I approach the pay phones. I have an international calling card, and after several attempts, manage to connect to Jacob’s cell number.

He picks up right away. “Rose? Is that you?”

“Hi, Jacob.”

“What the absolute hell, Rose? What are you thinking?”

I pause, my mouth suddenly dry. “You talked to Dan?”

“Of course I talked to Dan. He called me yesterday and told me what happened.”

“Is Jenny okay?”

“Yes, the baby is here. She’s in the NICU. Jenny’s fine. I cannot fucking believe you did this, Rose.”

“Dan said he would try to meet me—”

“Not the point. You got on a plane and flew to Africa *by yourself*. Do you have any idea how stupid that is?”

“Dan seemed to think—”

“I don’t care what Dan thought. I’m your husband. I’m the person you talk to about this.”

“You would’ve said no.”

“Yes, of course I would have! That’s because no sane person would decide to hop on a plane and fly to a third-world country where they had never been and don’t know a single person.”

“Dan’s people are picking me up in Beira. Horacio and Beatriz will take care of me until he gets here.”

“Yeah? And what are you doing now?”

“I’m in Johannesburg.”

“Doing what?”

I glance up around me. The men have abandoned their checkers game and are standing in a straight line on the near side of the jewelry carts. They stare.

I take a slow breath, keep my eyes on the men. “I’m at the hotel,” I lie.

“At the hotel?”

“Yes, I have an overnight layover. I fly to Beira tomorrow. I’m tired and I don’t know where to go here, so I’m just staying at the hotel. There’s a business—” I lose my voice. The men begin to move closer. I count quickly. Twelve. Their expressions are blank. “There’s, um, a business center here. And a spa.”

“A spa.” Jacob’s voice is icy. “This is so goddamn dangerous. Dan’s not going to meet you. He’s staying here, with his wife and baby, who are in the hospital. You should be here with them. With me. I don’t understand what you were thinking, Rose.”

His voice seems to be coming from very far away. The men form a half-circle as they move, closing in like a drawstring bag tightening.

I look up the slope and across the street, where Banele and Sibangani are still deep in conversation, turned away from the park. The man closest to me has troublingly bloodshot eyes.

“I was thinking that people were dying alone, Jacob,” I say, speaking slowly to keep the tremble out of my voice.

“I know you want to help, Rose. I just cannot *believe* you would put yourself in this kind of danger.”

“I’m not in any danger,” I say lightly. I can hear my blood rushing in my ears. I feel woozy. “I do have to go, though.”

“Oh?”

“Yes...there’s a line for the phone.”

One of the men mutters something to his neighbor, who lets out a harsh laugh. They take another step in unison, moving so slowly they seem to be drifting.

“I’m sorry, Jacob. Dan felt like I needed to come.”

He sighs.

“I know scared you. I didn’t want to. But I didn’t feel like I had a choice.”

“We always have a choice.”

“I’m sorry for scaring you.” I can smell the men now. “I’ll call you again as soon as I can. But I’m safe, okay? Try not to worry.”

“All right,” he says reluctantly.

“Talk to you soon,” I tell him, replacing the receiver and turning. The men are just a few yards away. One of them gives a large whoop.

Across the street, Banele glances up at the sound. I catch his eye, and wave frantically.

“Come here, Rose!” he hollers.

“I’m coming!” I yell, as loud as I can. I skirt around the back side of the payphones and run along the grass beside the square. At the top of the hill, panting a little, I turn around. The men are howling with laughter.

My face is blazing with fear and exertion, but my hands are clammy and shaky. Banele moves across the street swiftly and places a protective arm around my shoulder.

“I take you back to the hotel now, Rose,” he says. “I tell you, you must be careful here.”

My throat is tight. I have no words. I settle into the front seat of the cab this time and close my eyes for the ride back.

## Dondo

*April 4, 2005*

I pause before customs, \$40 cash bribe in my pocket. Dan explained that the customs officials might arbitrarily decide to apply “taxes” to the suitcases of medical supplies I’ve brought in.

The customs officials are uniformed in dark slacks, ties, and military berets. As I approach the table where I am meant to lay my suitcases for inspection, they gather around another passenger’s bag. I watch as they flick open a portable DVD player, speaking rapidly in Portuguese to the passenger. He digs into his carry-on bag and pulls out a DVD, sliding it into the machine and turning it on. They are transfixed for a moment, and I take a deep breath and slip on by, wheeling my bags.

No one stops me.

Through the door and into the terminal, and there is a curvy, curly-haired woman waving excitedly as I enter. This must be Beatriz. She runs up with a cackle and grabs my shoulders.

“You are Rose!” she tells me.

“I am,” I laugh. She is contagious.

She folds me against her large chest. “Welcome, welcome, Rose!” She takes a step back, her hand on my cheek. “We are glad you are here.”

“Thank you.”

“You speak Portuguese?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“Okay, I practice my English!” she shrugs.

I see a flash of tiny braids, and someone is tugging my suitcase handles out of my hands. I grip harder, confused.

The would-be thief steps back and frowns. She is pregnant, with a round ball of a belly and thin limbs. Her eyes bug out a little. She turns to speak to Beatriz, and tied to her back with a brightly patterned cloth, I see the top of a baby’s head.

“Rose, this Alif! She helps me,” Beatriz says.

Oh no. "I'm so sorry," I say, looking at Alif. "I thought—"  
"She don't have English."

"I thought she was going to..." I pause. There's no way to get out of this one graciously.

"She take your bags, okay?"

"Oh, I don't mind," I say, smiling too big.

Beatriz looks puzzled. "Alif helps us."

Right. Sorry. I hand the bags over to Alif, cringing as this bit of a woman struggles with my suitcases.

The terminal is small, a single room with rows of molded plastic chairs. No café, no money exchanges, no little shops for tourists to rid themselves of their last few meticaís.

We reach the exit together, Beatriz's arm around me. Alif struggles with the door, and several scrappy-looking boys appear on the other side of it, swinging it open for us. Alif walks through the door, then shoos them away. "*Não!*" she says, trying to jerk the bags away.

Undeterred, the boys keep up with us, grabbing at my suitcases and carry-on. A group collects quickly, with some boys clutching to a portion of each bag, some just resting a couple of fingers on my luggage.

"*Não!*" Alif repeats.

"What do they want?" I ask Beatriz.

"A money."

"Oh, are they trying to help with the bags? That's okay. I don't mind giving a little."

Alif swats at the nearest hands.

Beatriz hesitates. "If you want..." she trails off.

"Should I not?"

"I doesn't."

"Oh," I say, feeling torn. Surely they just want a little. They are so eager.

Alif slows, reaching a rusty white pickup truck. She goes to the truck bed and begins to hoist the bigger bag over the gate.

I go to her. "Can I help you?"

She gives a little grunt as she drops the bag over the gate. I packed it; I know how heavy it is. Two copies of *Onde Não Há Médico*, that seminal healthcare manual translated into Portuguese. Hard candy, crayons, and coloring books. Six boxes of gloves, two liters of hand sanitizer, writing utensils, alcohol swabs, wound care supplies. Deflated playground balls, requested by Beatriz, to give to the children. My own clothes and toiletries, and a couple of novels and bag of chocolate to keep me company.

Beatriz is climbing into the driver's seat, located on the right side of the truck. "Can I help you?" I repeat.

Alif glowers at me, lifting the second bag into the truck bed.

"I'm sorry," I say, knowing she isn't likely to understand at all. "It's supplies."

Alif unties her baby carrier and swings the child from her back around to her front. I get a good look at the baby. In a navy T-shirt and cloth diaper, he is darling: a fuzzy little Afro, round cheeks, light brown eyes.

The boy gazes up at his mother and she nuzzles him. A wave of calm washes over her features, and she is suddenly lovely.

I decide to take another approach. "Thank you," I say. "*Obrigado*," I repeat, making my first attempt at Portuguese.

Alif looks a little softer when she glances back at me, gesturing for me to follow as she climbs into the truck. She slides into the middle of the bench seat, cuddling the baby against her sizeable belly.

"Alif is having the baby so soon!" Beatriz announces, cranking the truck. It shudders as we pull out.

"Who is this child?" I ask.

"That is Delson," Beatriz responds.

"Hi, Delson," I say. "*Bom dia*."

Delson turns to me and offers a tentative grin, all pearly baby teeth and fat cheeks. "He's perfect," I say.

"Yah, that our Delson," Beatriz answers.

We are greeted by a billboard as we leave the hospital parking lot. Faded black and pink, it shows a man embracing a woman on a park bench. "Always use a condom when you are away from

home!” the billboard directs, a cartoonish strip of condoms under the lettering.

We turn right and head onto a highway. I am disoriented, sitting on the left side of the car, driving on the left side of the road.

We pass what looks like a bombed-out apartment building. Laundry lines, tied to exposed rebar, hang in the open spaces of the building. Brightly clothed women mill around. Children climb on a pile of crumbling concrete.

We pass lower buildings, concrete and wood and what looks like stucco. The trees are stubby. The ground is dirt or cracked concrete. There is no grass.

As we pause and wait to turn, I catch a glimpse of a gray-haired woman and young girl on the street corner. The woman gestures to the child, who promptly hikes up her dress, squats, and pees in the dirt on the side of the road.

My heart twists. All of a sudden, I am overwhelmed with a sense of loss—children begging to do a job for pocket change, a pregnant woman carrying her baby and my oversized suitcases, this little one pissing in broad view.

We keep moving, and the city road quickly gives way to rural sprawl. Mud houses cluster on the sides of the road. The shoulders are packed with people on foot and on bicycle. Several women walk with loads of sticks or baskets balanced on their heads.

Further out. In the distance, palm trees tower, and dense forest edges farm fields.

Women work the rice paddies, swinging their hoes dramatically up into the air. Some have babies tied to their backs as they work.

“We go to Dondo,” Beatriz says.

“Oh, good,” I respond.

“You like our Moçambique?”

“It’s beautiful. I’m just taking it all in,” I tell her.

Beside me, Alif coos at Delson again. And again, her face softens as she looks at him.

Farther and farther into the countryside. We slow as we approach a denser village, the roads dirt and massively potholed.

Beatriz yells out the open window, greeting women on the road. A few boys race after the truck, laughing.

I am here.

The air is heavy with charcoal, and maybe a little, marijuana.

The potholes are huge.

“*Bom dia!*” Beatriz calls to a woman pushing a bicycle with two small children balanced on the crossbar.

“*Oi!*” she says to a group of giggling girls, who stare as we pass.

I am here.

## Rato

April 5, 2005

Early morning. Beatriz swings the door to my room open, smiling. Her energy is its own thing. Even her exhaustion makes her laugh. “Oh, Rosinha,” she says, leaning against the doorway. “I am up all night again with a baby.”

“A baby? Whose? Alif?”

“Ya,” she says. “Alif had baby. Girl. Name her Beatriz.”

“After you?”

Beatriz nods.

“How sweet,” I say.

“She say I save her. Silly. Alif did not need me. But she want – you know, the women want someone there.”

“You could have taken me, Beatriz.”

Beatriz waves me off. “You have to sleep. We need you for other things. Cholera tent today. Doctor is coming to the hospital tomorrow. You must go. Tell him what you can do.”

I swallow and nod. I did a maternity rotation in nursing school; I have seen birth. Many births. All of them in hospital rooms with contraction monitors, some with the pervasive sense that something could go wrong at any moment. Vacuum births. Cesarean deliveries, so brutal I had to hold my classmate’s hand as we watched.

But to see Alif squatting on the floor of her own home, the home she built with mud-caked sticks and her own hands, to see her birth her baby into those same hands, take her baby to her breast and mat, to be curled around her baby that very night...how could Beatriz think I’d rather be sleeping?

“Rosinha,” Beatriz says, coming all the way in, “can I sit?”

I nod, and she settles onto my bed. I notice a skewer in her left hand, what looks like barbecued meat. “What are you eating?”

Beatriz laughs, open-mouthed, showing off the gold caps on her back teeth. “*Rato*,” she says.

“*Rato?*” I look closer. Little burnt, round ears, eyes squeezed shut, four tiny paws. The tail disappeared at some point. A smooth wooden skewer runs up the animal’s behind and exits through its mouth, holding it open so the creature’s little yellow teeth—still there—are visible.

“Is that...a rat?” It’s mouse-sized, but she did say “*rato.*”

“Ya,” she laughs. “Very good. You try?”

“I...uh...no. No.” I can’t even thank her. Just no.

Beatriz nibbles on the animal’s flank. “I don’t think you like *rato*, Rosinha. Americans never eat *rato*. But meat is meat.”

“How do you catch it?”

“Oh, the boys, they dig and put a bucket in the ground. Water. *Rato* climbs in, don’t come out.”

I consider the guinea pig cages, stacked three-high on stilts near the back door. Pets would be foolishness here. Dogs are for guarding, not cuddling. But it hadn’t occurred to me that the guinea pigs might not be her hobby.

I point toward the doorway, gesturing across the yard toward the cages. “You eat those too?”

“Oh,” she says, smiling hugely. “Yes. Yes.”

I swallow hard. Day two, and I am being offered a rat to eat.

Dan isn’t here. He’s gotten in touch with Horacio and Beatriz and explained that the baby is stable but in serious condition, and he needs to be home with his wife and daughter. I wonder if he will be coming at all.

Beatriz interrupts my thoughts. “Okay, Rosinha, I go rest. You go to cholera tent in the afternoon. Doctor comes tomorrow.”

I say goodbye as she leaves and turn to the bathroom. The bathroom is the size of an airplane restroom. There is no shower curtain. There are no towels. Mildew grows in the corners, where tile meets tile, and where tile doesn’t quite meet tile.

I haven’t been brave enough to try it yet. But Beatriz had told me to shower whenever I wanted, and I feel grimy after the plane trip and my day wandering Dondo with Beatriz and Alif.

I remove the roll of toilet paper and wastebasket for toilet paper disposal, undress, and turn the water on. It comes in a lukewarm

trickle, splattering onto the toilet and sink. I shampoo my hair, apply conditioner, and twist my hair into a clip while I begin to lather my body.

The water cuts off. I turn to fiddle with the faucets, but no matter how I twist them, nothing.

I decide to wait, turn the water off, see if it returns. Nothing. I am beginning to shiver, and the soap on my legs is drying to a white paste. A few more minutes. Still nothing.

Sighing, I step into my flip-flops and back into the bedroom. I grab the t-shirt I slept in last night and begin to wipe down my limbs. My hair, still coated in conditioner, drips onto my shoulders and the floor.

I pull it back into a greasy bun, smiling wryly at the unexpected leave-in conditioner treatment. I feel sticky and greasy all at once.

I grab a pack of baby wipes and try to get the soap off of my skin, but mostly succeed in further lathering it up. I give up, finish drying myself as best I can with my t-shirt, and get dressed.

Worse things have happened to nicer people. I shrug, turn to tidy my bed and knot the mosquito netting up. I need to contact Jacob, let him know that I have made it safely to Dondo. I am anxious and tired and sticky. For a moment, I miss home.

## Cholera

April 5, 2005

Cholera comes with the rains. The rainy season has nearly ended, but cholera has not. I have been here all afternoon, watching Judite manage the patients. The boy was vomiting earlier, then suddenly, let loose with milky diarrhea. This man has been listless and weak. That baby, temples sunken and eyes hollow, hasn't kept down water or milk in two days.

It's nearly impossible to contain the diarrhea of the littlest ones. One woman was dripping with it when she came in, her baby tied to her back with a feces-soaked *capulana*. The excrement dripped down onto the floor of the makeshift tent.

It's an old party tent, donated, of course. Heavy vinyl sides, held up with hollow metal tubing. In this tent's previous life, there were dance floors where I am standing now. Brides tipsy, or tearful, or triumphant. Music. Hope.

At least there are IVs. Milder cases can be treated with oral rehydration, but severe ones require IV fluids. Judite shows me how she collects water from the hospital well, a dozen yards beyond the entrance to the tent, and splashes in a capful of bleach.

"Soak them, and then hang them to dry," she explains, with Manuel translating as she sloshes the tubing in the bucket of bleach water. She stretches two sets of IV tubing and two catheters out on a table. The needles stay in the bleach a little longer. She will remove the needles and carefully rethread the catheters. Unthinkable in my education. Necessary here.

"They are very proud that they have so many IVs," Manuel whispers. "Not every year is so good. But of course, we have been very fortunate to have few cases this rainy season."

Few cases, maybe, but each one feels like too many. The smell is oppressive and rotten. It is humid in the tent, but eerily quiet. I am followed with the gaze of dark, dark eyes.

“Most of our people do not have access to clean water,” Manuel explains. “Here at the hospital, we have a well, but in the village and farther out, things are not so good. There was a cholera vaccination campaign in Beira last year, but no one came to Dondo.”

Judite is busy. A slight woman hoists herself up from a cot. She wears a yellow and blue printed *capulana* and raggedy sleeveless t-shirt. She picks up her naked toddler and approaches me. His skin looks dusty gray. I reach out to touch him, aware of how many people I have touched without nothing more than a basin of well water to rinse my hands in. A room full of fecally-transmitted bacteria and no soap. It’s hard to imagine people are much safer here than they would be at home.

The woman lets loose with a string of Sena, the tribal language. She lifts her baby’s hand. It falls back against his side. She does it again. He rests his head on her collarbone, panting rapidly.

“She is concerned that the baby, he is not drinking, and he is very weak,” Manuel says. He is lean in his white button-down shirt. His eyes are peaceful, and though he smiles broadly, his voice is always low and calm. He will be with me for a little while, on breaks from university.

“Of course,” I murmur, placing a hand on the child’s chest and gently lifting a pinch of skin. It stands up in a dry little mountain.

“You can help?” Manuel asks. He learned Sena as a child, Portuguese in school, and English in university. He is a lucky one.

“We can try to do more. If he is not drinking, we can give him IV fluids to rehydrate him. Can you explain to her that all we can do for cholera is supportive care? We need to figure out how much weight he has lost to determine his level of dehydration. Is there a way of finding out what he weighed before...” I trail off as I realize I am asking a silly question.

Manuel looks at me vaguely but nods, and turns to speak to the woman.

She listens intently and without another word, thrusts the child into my arms. He opens his dry mouth and begins to cry, a weak little mew that seems to take all of his effort.

Manuel smiles. “Probably he has not seen someone like you before.”

Someone like me? Of course. White.

“The children are afraid sometimes.”

I nod, the smell of the tent making it difficult to focus.

The cots are made of wooden pallets. Plastic sheeting is draped over the cots, with holes cut through the sheets and wood. Under each hole is a plastic bucket, where patients can vomit, void, and stool.

We can hang the IV bags from the tubing above the cots. Eighteen cots, ten full: two men, three boys, one woman, two young girls, and nearest the supply table, two mothers lying with their babies. They try to hold them over the buckets when the babies poop. Sometimes they make it.

Judite approaches, flicking bleach water off of her bare hands. She speaks to Manuel quietly, pointing toward the baby’s cot.

“You can take the baby back there,” Manuel says. “Judite will prepare him for his IV.”

I carry the light little child back to the cot and ask Manuel to explain to his mother how she must keep trying to catch the baby’s stool in the buckets, and to be very careful to keep her hands as clean as possible.

My words are practiced, my manner professional, but I don’t know that I have ever felt so small.

# Ignorance is A Poverty

*April 6, 2005*

“I want to say to you that you are welcome to our country, and especially to Dondo and our home. We don’t believe that we own anything; what we have belongs to God.” Horacio is a massive man, coal-black with a scraggly beard and intellectual affect.

He has returned home on a two-week break from the university and invited me to join him and Beatriz for dinner. We had chicken for dinner, one from Horacio and Beatriz’s walled yard, served with gravy over rice.

I nod. “Thank you.”

“Look at this country. We were at war for independence for ten years. That ended in 1975. Then after that, we had civil war that just ended in 1992. So we are just now experiencing peace.”

I peel an orange carefully, picking at the pith and opening up the membranes to reveal the tiny sacs of pulp and juice.

“We have so many problems. Health problems, education problems. In the war, Dondo saw many people coming from different areas, so it has become fused with many behaviors and many peoples. There’s nothing to organize us. Our problem is coming together. People just...coming together in some place without any preparation. That is a problem.”

His English is nearly perfect.

“We believe in a holistic ministry, Rose. We can’t just say that we are going to preach the Gospel and get people saved so they can go to Heaven, while we’re despising their needs and their problems. We prayed and we asked, ‘What can we do? We need a vision.’ That is where your friend Daniel came in.”

The orange is sweet. Hearing fluent English may be sweeter. I didn’t know how much it meant to be able to talk, ask questions, make idle conversation, until I couldn’t, really.

“When Daniel and I began speaking, he had many questions. He is a man of many questions. He asked me why Beatriz and I wanted to help children. I said, ‘Well, our country is full of children. Half of the population is children. Most do not have the opportunity to go to school, even those who are living in privileged situations.’

“You see, we had to do something, because those children were growing. Even if we did nothing, they would still grow up. If we could do something, it would bring some changes. We have poverty, but the greatest poverty we have is ignorance.”

“That’s why you started the schools?”

“Yes, with Daniel’s help. It is so unusual that someone could trust a person on another continent, without watching over the person, without being there. Daniel has trusted and sent resources. He just trusted! And we knew that this was coming from the Lord, because no one would dare to send the resources without seeing the situation. But he did it.”

“He and Jenny are wonderful people,” I agree.

Horacio nods. “We worked on the school, and they came. Primary school, vocational training for the older ones...we still have many other problems, of course. Malaria, diarrhea. So many people are infected with AIDS. Even the children have AIDS. We have to bury people wherever we can. I talk at their funerals. I talk to the living ones. I like to say to them, ‘This guy’s gone, man, but *you* still have a choice.’ ”

“That’s beautiful,” I tell him.

Horacio sits back down at the table. “We have poverty. We know this. You have seen this. We have many serious problems. But the biggest poverty we have is ignorance. People don’t know how to take care of their children. They are not educated. They don’t know how to make something more with their lives. Without these things, we will always have poverty.”

I nod again. Beatriz leans back in her chair, digging between her teeth with a toothpick. She smiles broadly, seeming happy, as always, just to be where she is.

Horacio takes a long drink from his bottle of water. “You see, I believe Jesus Christ was a man of action. He didn’t just teach. He also acted. He performed miracles. He fed the hungry. He healed the sick. He taught people, and I believe the school is very important. Lack of knowledge is the reason for much poverty and for many problems. Many children have potential, but if they don’t discover it—if we don’t give them opportunities to discover it—then they will be beggars for their whole lives.”

Horacio places his enormous hand on my shoulder and grins with his broad yellow teeth. “You are welcome here with us, Rose. You may feel strange and like a foreigner. But no matter color, no matter what land we are coming from, if we are people of God, that is the most important thing.”

God feels very far from here.

“Experience differences, okay? Experience diversity. It’s hard to experience—sometimes it’s painful, eh? But try to experience it. It’s good.”

I smile. “It is good. Hard, yes. But good.”

“You know, three years ago, I had an accident on the way back here from the university. God saved my life. I came back and I sat down and I said, ‘Wow. How good of God, man! He saved me. I’ve got more work to do.’

“The way I see it, if we are alive, we’ve got business.

“We’ve got business. That’s what I want to say.”

## Gloves

April 7, 2005

Beatriz pulls the seat of her truck forward as we exit, stashing her purse behind it.

“It’s okay?” I ask, pointing.

“Ya. You had the gloves?”

I nod, balancing the six boxes of exam gloves I brought in my luggage, two boxes of each size. It seemed like a lot when I was packing, but after a day in the cholera tent, I realize it is nothing.

We are standing in the dusty courtyard of the hospital. The cholera tent is to our left. Judite waves from the entrance.

From all other directions, paths plait a neighborhood together. The homes are in various stages of construction. First, inch-thick wooden poles are stacked in loose log cabin formations. Stones are balanced and fitted between the poles. Mud is packed around the stones, and finally, straw is stacked on the roofs.

There is no electricity. The houses are each about the size of my bedroom back home.

“We go this way,” Beatriz says, pointing towards the long, low hospital building. I have not been inside yet.

To my right, a man sits in a wheelbarrow, clutching his thigh, which is shimmering with blood. A long line of women extends along the cement stoop of the building; they all hold babies wrapped in *capulanas*.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“They come for, the, uh...” Beatriz pats her belly.

“Pregnancy?”

“Yeah, they come to see the doctor.”

I notice a white Land Rover parked on the other side of the courtyard. A young man stands next to it, hands on hips, surveying the yard.

“Is that the doctor’s car?”

Beatriz nods. "That man is watching it. Usually, you know, a boy will watch. But the doctor have a man."

She leads me past the lines of women and knocks on the door that leads off of the porch. A soft-spoken man in a white coat answers. We stand in the doorway as Beatriz speaks to him in Portuguese, then English.

"This is Rosinha," she says, pulling me forward by my elbow. "She have brought you a gift."

The man has that vague expression we all seem to put on when someone is speaking to us in a way we don't understand.

"Are you the doctor?" I ask.

The man doesn't say anything.

"No," Beatriz fills in. "The doctor with the women. This man, he work with the doctor."

Oh. So much for building a relationship, beginning with a much-needed donation. I extend my arms. The two boxes balanced in the middle tumble to the ground.

The man—the doctor's assistant?—takes the four boxes out of my hands, turning to stack them on the desk behind him. I retrieve the two fallen boxes and hand them to him as well. He adds them to the stacks.

I smile, tell him, "I am glad to meet you."

The assistant nods, then begins to close the door.

We move out of the doorway, and he closes it entirely. Beatriz and I stand still for a moment, still facing the door.

"That's it?" I ask.

"I take you to see the hospital," she responds.

I find some enthusiasm. This is what I came for.

"We are in maternity," Beatriz says as we enter together. We take a left down the cinderblock hallway, unlit by the florescent bulbs overhead.

We peek into the first room, which is empty. The floors are tiled. The strings of what were once curtains hang in front of window screens. The windows are barred and screened, not glassed. This is typical here.

Four beds stretch the length of the room, an arm's length between each.

A tabby cat darts between us and into the room, jumping up onto the farthest bed. Beatriz smiles. "You think she pregnant, too? Maybe she come here to have her babies. Maybe we come back tomorrow, look on the bed, and there are little cats with her. Mew!"

I laugh out loud. The sound of it hangs in the quiet air, suspended and tense in the dark hallway, seeming to dissipate as it hits the floor.

Beatriz pulls me along with her, pauses at the entrance to another room. A woman lies in the bed by the window, lazily stroking the stomach of the tiny baby lying naked beside her. She beams when she sees us.

Her baby is so new its limbs are still bunched up in the fetal position.

Beatriz congratulates the mother and coos over the baby, shifting her gaze to the bed closest to the door. Another woman is there, watching the new mother touch her baby. This woman's face is flat. She does not move. Her eyes stay fixed on the happy couple two beds down.

I catch Beatriz's eye and raise my eyebrows in question.

"Probably she lost the baby," she whispers.

"You mean she miscarried?" I ask.

"Ya. Or the baby is dead when she had it."

My jaw falls open. They put the woman who just lost her child in with the woman who just gave birth?

My stomach feels like it is staggering, drunk, in my abdomen.

Beatriz throws her solid arm across my shoulders and guides me across the hallway where, she explains, malnourished babies stay for treatment. A woman lies on each bed surrounded by her brood, *capulanas* spread over the thin mattresses.

The air is humid and thick with the smell of unwashed skin and old excrement. The women greet us in great spirits, happy to be here.

"They need to leave," Beatriz says, smiling happily at them as she whispers in my ear. "But they get food here, so they stay."

She goes to greet the women, offering cheerful kisses to the mothers and tut-tutting over the children. People are so delighted to see her, she might as well be Santa Claus.

There are no nurses anywhere. No hospital personnel at all, actually: no janitors, respiratory therapists, nursing assistants, physical therapists...just rusty metal beds in the rooms, screens on the windows, and the smell.

Beatriz bids a happy farewell to the patients – squatters, it would seem – and whisks me back into the hallway.

“You come back the next time the doctor is here, and ask to go to the *SIDA* hospice. You bring him a gift today, so he will like you,” she says cheerfully.

“All right,” I say slowly as we walk down the hallway and into another room. This one is freshly painted and brightly lit by a wall of windows. There is an exam bed, two metal folding chairs, a wooden table, and a locked set of cupboards running the length of one wall. It is empty, too.

“Beatriz, where is everyone?” I ask.

“What you mean?”

“Where are the doctors?”

“The doctor, he is busy,” she said.

“Okay. But what about the nurses?”

“Judite is in the tent.”

“And the other nurses?”

Beatriz laughs loudly, showing her back teeth. “Rosinha, *meu amor*,” she says, squeezing my hand. “That’s you.”

## Paper Cranes

April 8, 2005

“The Lord be with you,” the priest says. His stole is shockingly red against his alb. Is it Holy Week?

I am wearing a sleeveless dress. The scent of tea olives drifts through the airy space. It is the smell I like best of all. “And also with you.”

“Lift up your hearts,”

“We lift them up to the Lord.” I raise my hands an inch or so, open them towards the ceiling, towards Heaven or wherever God is.

“Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.”

“It is right to give him thanks and praise,” I murmur.

“Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name—”

“Stop it!”

There is deep silence in the congregation. I look around wildly, realize that my tongue has just hit my palate, that the words have flown from my mouth.

“Rose!” my father whispers angrily. What is he doing here?

Beside him, my boyfriend from ninth grade, the sweet one I ditched wordlessly after nearly a year, is plucking out his eyelashes, hair by hair.

A woman is moaning at the back of the church. “Stop it!” I yell again, without really meaning to. She startles, narrows her eyes at me, and continues. “*Lamma sunu ictha. Lamma inni sofos. Tues nue ictha. Hiad. Hiad!* Lift up your heart to the Lord.” She is screaming now. “Lift up your heart to the Lord!”

Chris is weeping, leaning against my father. “Did you know she ruined me?” he says. He tosses his eyelashes up into the air. They morph into paper cranes which hang, beautifully suspended for a moment, then dive-bomb me.

I feel my clothes melting into my skin. The cranes buzz like mosquitos, digging into my nose and ears. I swat at them. A few crumple to the floor, splattering me with thick yellow paste as they fall.

I run from the church, out the lobby and through the heavy wooden doors. The parking lot is full of monster trucks. I stare, panicked, as the driver's side doors open in unison. Out of each steps my high-school art teacher, holding the only good drawing I even made: a pewter goblet, somehow perfect in shading and form, despite my considerable lack of talent.

"You'll need this," they all say, and as I reach for the papers, I see my arms have become tentacles.

I gasp myself awake, my hands extended up above me, flapping in the dark. My heart is racing.

A dream. I tell myself to breathe, force my hands down onto my chest, clasping them together.

My hands are there. I grab my book light off of the bed beside me, flick it on to examine my hands. They are there: calloused, lined. Fingers. Thumbs. Trembling. I shine the light onto my watch. It is 4:30am.

I am in Dondo.

I sit on the edge of the bed, feel for my flip-flops, and rise.

They said Lariam could give you nightmares.

My heart slows a little. I put my hands on my belly, try to breathe deeply enough to feel my abdomen rise and fall.

In Beatriz and Horacio's yard, one of the dogs snarls viciously, then is quiet again.

There are no birds here. They were all killed in the wars, I was told, when the people were so hungry.

I sink back down on the edge of the bed. I am disoriented, feeling as though the demarcations in my life have dissolved. I haven't thought of Chris in years. Why would he be here now?

## Just an Hour

*April 8, 2005*

“Come, come, Rosinha!” Beatriz calls, knocking on the door to my room.

I am dressed and washed, but the dream hangs on my like a spider web, sticking as I try to find it and peel it off.

I open the door. It is just after dawn.

Beatriz hands me a fresh white bun. “Eat now,” she says. “We go to the hospital.”

I wrap the bun in a tissue and slip it into my bag. The bread is delicious here, but I’m not hungry.

“My phone called this morning. There is someone who needs our help.”

I nod, close the door behind me, and walk across the yard to the gate as Beatriz climb into her truck. I open the gate, careful not to let the dogs out. Beatriz drives through, and I latch the gate back, then climb into the seat beside her.

There is a teenage boy who works here most days doing odd jobs—I am realizing how well-off Beatriz and Horacio are; he came from money— and when we come or go, he normally sprints over to the gate to open it. It is too early, though, for him.

“What’s happened?” I ask Beatriz, closing my door.

We pull onto the main road. Already, women are walking with their goods stacked on their heads. We pass two men hunkered over a bicycle on the side of the road, patching a tire.

“The doctor went yesterday, after we left,” she says. “But they bring in a boy. Two yesterdays ago he was play football with his friends and he go...” she holds one palm up, slaps the other one down.

“He fell?”

“Ya, he fell. Just a twist. But today, it is worse, and his father bring him to the hospital.”

“What is it?” I ask. “Do you know?”

“Witch, I think.”

“Witchcraft?”

“Ya, we have witch doctors here. Probably one was angry.”

We ease our way over the potholes and down the dirt road to the hospital courtyard. We get out of the car quickly, and Beatriz hurries me back to the office where we met the doctor’s assistant.

A drawn-looking woman comes out to meet us. She and Beatriz speak quietly.

I hear moaning through the door.

“Okay, okay,” Beatriz says. “Now, Rosinha, I ’splain. So this boy, Sabão—”

“Sabão?” *Sabão* means “soap.”

“*Sim*, Sabão,” she says. “He was playing at the football, and he do what I tell you—”

“He fell.”

“*Sim*. He fell. And he—” she grabs my arm, acting out an Indian burn.

“He twisted?”

“Ya, he twist his foot. So he go home to rest. But then a spider come, his mother think, and bite.”

“He got a spider bite where he twisted his foot?”

She leans over and taps at her calf.

“So he hurt his foot, then got a bite from a spider on his leg?”

“From the witch doctor.”

“How did he get a spider bite from a witch doctor?” I am genuinely confused.

“The witch, maybe she give the spider.” She shrugs. “So Sabão, he rest but it get worse. His mother and father bring him here, but no, um—” she opens and closes her hands rapidly.

I hazard a guess. “X-ray?”

“Ya. We don’t have none here, and Beira hospital close on *sábado* and *domingo*, but they can maybe do if we get him there today.”

“The hospital in Beira closes on the weekends?”

“Ya, so no more waiting. Now...” Beatriz swings open the door to the office. Sabão’s mother lingers at the doorway, peeking in but not joining us.

There is a teenage boy on the desk, half-lying back on his elbows. He faces away from the door, a sheet covering his lower body. Beatriz lifts it, and the boy sucks air through his teeth.

“Come see,” Beatriz says.

I take a step closer, look over Sabão’s shoulder. From his knee to his ankle, the flesh of his inner calf is just...gone. His bone glints, yellow-white in the dim light. The muscle, fiery red and dotted with black and gray scabs of dead tissue, is surrounded by a thin layer of globby adipose, as pale as my own skin.

Around his wound, the flesh is swollen tight.

“It gets worse, you know, Rosinha,” Beatriz whispers. “We try and get him to hospital.”

“Acute necrotizing fasciitis,” I mumble. I have never seen this in real life.

“Huh?” Beatriz says.

“Flesh eating disease,” I say.

She looks blankly at me.

“Never mind,” I tell her. He needs aggressive surgical debridement, broad-spectrum IV antibiotics while we wait the results of the culture sensitivity, and a woundvac, or at least, sterile dressing.

There have been cases here and there across the news. It is largely fatal, and when it’s not, amputation often becomes necessarily. He needs an ICU—a patient like this would likely end up in our care on the burn ICU, where we could manage the wounds and severity of his condition.

The boy gasps and lets out a low moan. His eyes are like a spooked horse’s.

“What can we do for him here?” I ask Beatriz. “What supplies do we have?”

She shrugs.

“He needs surgery. He needs to get to Beira now.”

“Ya, we are try to get him there.”

Beatriz's truck is just outside. I chew on my inner cheek, debating whether or not he could tolerate the 45-minute ride.

The door swings open as I am considering this, and the man we met yesterday, the doctor's assistant, comes into the office, carrying his white coat.

Beatriz speaks to him, and I am able to pick up that she is asking the assistant what he has done for the boy.

The assistant reaches into his pocket and extracts a travel-sized bottle of hand sanitizer.

*Onde não há medico*, you do what you can. Combat medicine and all. I understand. But to offer hand sanitizer for an infection like this? Brilliant, I think bitterly.

"Okay, I go see," Beatriz says, and leaves.

Sabão collapses back onto the desk. He shifts and moans like he is giving birth.

My head is pounding, foggy. I try to get the boy's attention. At least I can try and help him calm down.

"Sabão?" I say. His eyes roll toward me, then away. I crouch down so I am speaking into his ear. "Try and breathe with me, okay?"

He grits his teeth.

"*Despacio*," I say, trying Spanish. Maybe the word for "slowly" is similar. But neither Sabão nor the assistant seem to understand.

I stand up, look at the dingy floor, the wall with its faded medical posters. Dammit. We need an IV pump, propofol, fentanyl. We need surgeons.

Sabão's teeth are chattering now. His eyes clench shut.

Where there is no doctor, you do what you can. But there is nothing to do.

I rise, try to gather my thoughts. Where there is no doctor, you pray. "Okay, Lord, please, um...please heal Sabão—" *Do I even mean this? What I am expecting to see here?*

Come with faith. Right. Ask and it shall be given unto you. Behold, I stand at the door and walk through the valley—what? I cannot even collect a thought, but I know if I had an IV, I could get

it in, hang the bottle of propofol, at least help this kid not feel what he is feeling.

Dammit. Goddammit.

Fifteen minutes pass. I stand awkwardly, trying now and again to get Sabão's attention to help him breathe slowly, but I cannot even figure out how to help him with that. Time keeps crawling. Where is Beatriz? Where is the help?

This is not what I bargained for. I did not come here to stand and watch a teenager suffer to death. I did not.

I try and pray a little more, but my tongue is stuck. I feel like some kind of sick voyeur, standing here helpless as Sabão's mother weeps audibly on the other side of the door.

It swings open, and the morning light floods the room. It is Beatriz. "Okay, we find someone take him to Beira," she says. "Maybe he get there in time. You come with me, Rosinha?"

He's not getting there in time. And even if he does, what are they going to be able to do for him? I haven't seen the hospital in Beira, but I doubt it's packed with brilliant surgeons waiting to repair witchdoctor curses...or is it witchdoctor cures?

My tongue still thick, I nod to the assistant, reach out to comfort Sabão, but withdraw. I am worried I will make it worse if I touch him.

Sick with shame, I trail behind Beatriz as we leave. I am relieved to go. I am relieved to walk away from this unspeakable horror where I am so helpless.

We step out into the day. Beatriz tells me we need to go visit a friend who is waiting for her by the church. We walk back across the hospital courtyard, past her car, and begin to make our way down the dirt path.

I glance at my watch again. It has been an hour since she knocked on my door.

## Robin Calling

April 12, 2005

The cholera shit nearly splashes over the side of the bucket as I stumble over a stone on the dirt path. I jump back, holding the bucket away from me and trying to keep it steady. My arm trembles.

Judite asked me to take the buckets up the north side of the hospital and dump them in the trees behind the orphanage. It is a five-minute walk under normal circumstances, but trying to balance a pail of contagious feces as I walk has me going slow.

The path, like all the paths here, cuts through tall grass and wooded patches. Mud huts with swept dirt courtyards are tucked into the woods. Children gaze out from darkened doorways as I pass, sucking their fingers, eyes big at the sight of this *gringa* passing by.

Some of the women smile, lips closed over their inevitably perfect teeth, amused at the sight of me.

I approach the fence surrounding the orphanage yard. The building is cinderblock. I often hear the voices of the children, but rarely see them.

At the base of a massive panga panga tree, I carefully tip the bucket to the side, allowing the liquid to slosh over the side. The orphanage has a well. I'm not certain, but hopeful, that the meters of dirt and rock between the ground and the aquifer is enough to make sure we're not giving the children cholera.

"Hello!" a voice calls from behind me.

I jump again, splashing my hand with the shit, vomit, and urine. Shit. I'd tried to ask Judite about the gloves, but she'd shrugged. They haven't been seen since I handed them over, and I imagine using them for this sort of purpose would be frowned on as wasteful anyway.

I shake my fingers to try and dry them, turning to look. There is a middle-aged white woman, tan and sinewy, in a tank top and

long skirt. Her hair is wiry gray, tied back in a stubby little bun at the base of her neck. Her face is thin but warm.

“Looks like you’ve got yourself in a bit of a mess,” she says dryly. Her accent is neutral, Midwestern.

“It’s, um...it’s from the cholera tent.” I say. “I was told I could bring it here.” I wonder if I am in trouble.

“You’ve got to take it somewhere, don’t you?” she says.

I nod.

“Still dealing with the cholera?”

“A few cases.”

“Last year wasn’t so bad,” she says. “Less than a hundred deaths. Mostly in Maputo.” She leans against the fence. “Now in ’02, we had nearly 25,000 cases. Never seen anything like that before. I was up to my elbows in that stuff”—she gestures towards the contents of the bucket, slowly seeping into the dirt—“every day for months.”

“You were involved?”

The woman nods. “I’ve been working around here on and off for ten years. Just stopped by the orphanage to say hello to a girl I brought in last year. Her parents gave her to be married when she was ten, and—”

“Ten?” I interrupt.

She nods again, grimly. “It’s not customary. Well, it wasn’t. Many people in the older generations know girls shouldn’t marry until they’re 18 or 19. But recently, there’s been a push...”

“That’s awful.”

“Her husband, if you want to call him that, brought her to me one night. She was bleeding.”

“You mean...”

“Yes. I told him she needed to stay with me overnight, and when he went home to his other wife, I snuck her out. We got a ride here with a friend, a man from a few villages over. I knew she’d be safe here.”

“Are you in healthcare?” I ask.

“Yes. I’m a nurse. Oncology in the US. But here, I do everything.”

"I'm Rose," I say. "I'd offer to shake your hand, but between the cholera poop and the fence..." I shrug.

She laughs. "Robin."

"It's nice to meet another nurse. Will you be here long?"

She shakes her head. "Just a few days. I've come to pick up a shipment of medical supplies. Syringes, mostly. More antimalarials and some antiparasitics." She tightens her hair. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm a nurse, too. ICU. I'm here working with Horacio and Beatriz. Do you know them?"

"Yes, of course! They've been very supportive and encouraging of my work."

"I came to help them get the AIDS hospice established, but it's been really slow going. I haven't even met the hospital director yet."

Robin smiles. "Yes, you have to expect life to move on a different sort of timeline here."

I nod.

She looks at me with pursed lips. "But since you're not terribly busy at the moment, would you consider coming with me tomorrow?"

"Really?"

"Yes, I'm going to be running a clinic for the children. I could use a hand. Meet me at the church in the morning?"

I nod eagerly. "What will we be doing?"

"Vaccinations, screening for malaria, looking for malnutrition. I don't have any vitamins, unfortunately, but we'll be checking the babies' teeth and so forth."

"That sounds good," I say, relieved at the thought of these sorts of manageable tasks. With someone who speaks English.

"Wonderful, Rose. I'll see you then," Robin says, and slips away.

## Lines

April 13, 2005

The work feels like salvation. The lines stretch down the path away from us, towards the village: women with babies, women clutching the hands of small children.

The little ones are quiet, waiting without complaint. They come to us reluctantly, obviously afraid. Manuel is here to translate, but Robin does pretty well with her Portuguese. We feel their bellies, ask their mothers about their fevers, sweats, aches. Most of the mothers say yes, yes, they have worms in their poop.

The *capulana*-wrapped babies are handed over. We peel back the cloths like we are opening gifts, feel their little elbows and check their hips, check to see if their thighs are fat.

Robin tells me what to do. Such simple work. It is satisfying. I give injections, separating the needles from the syringes when I am done. Needles go into a big water bottle, syringes into a plastic bag.

We dispense medication for the worms and malaria. Robin tells the women to keep breastfeeding until their babies are at least three years old.

Some of them look incredulous, but Robin is steadfast. "Protein is one of the biggest problems here," she tells me. "I wish we could do more, but at least we can help the babies get the best start."

I ask her what the mothers do when she's not here. How long the children suffer with malaria and worms when the medication didn't come in. Where else they can go for help.

"We do the best we can," Robin says.

The line dwindles over the course of the day. The sun filters down through the leaves of banana trees. The tinny sounds of a far-away radio reach us. The air feels soft.

It is so peaceful, sometimes it is hard to believe what kinds of things happen here.

## More Sacred than Sex

*April 16, 2005*

Robin and I are scrunched in the back of Horacio's truck. Alif and her children are in the front with Horacio; Robin and I insisted. Horacio wanted to see a minister friend in Lamego before heading back to the university. Alif's mother lives here, and she asked to come along so they could visit for a while.

Robin and I will sit on the stoop of the church or school, working our way down the lines that will inevitably form. I still don't know quite how the women know, how the word gets out. But they will be waiting for us.

The aluminum canopy is like a greenhouse. Robin and I hold the dwindling boxes of supplies against the sides of the truck bed, trying to keep the boxes from sliding. We brace ourselves against one another, our upper arms touching, as we steady the supplies. Glass vials rattle as we work our way over the potholes.

The feeling of Robin's arm against mine is profoundly comforting. Everything about her feels safe to me. She is so competent, so calm. If she had been here with Sabão, she would have known what to do.

Our skin sticks together in the heat. I look down at our arms, at the way a little pinch of my skin clings to hers. Robin gazes out the blurry plastic window, sighs peacefully. "I like the heat," she says.

I do, too.

The canopy smells a little like sweat, clean sweat. It is warm. I feel safe. I am doing a thing that feels right.

The way we are touching, the things we are doing feel sacred, like sex. More sacred than sex, united in purpose and intent, making something together that is bigger than what I could ever make myself.

## Needles

*April 17, 2005*

We hadn't planned to stay the night, but Horacio had learned that one of the young men working for the pastor has been skimming money off church donations. Educated and wealthy, Horacio seems to be the de facto bishop of the nearby churches, although he wouldn't call himself that.

He'd sat us down late afternoon and explained that he needed to meet with the young man and all the church elders immediately, and that it might take hours to sort the issue out.

Robin agreed immediately. "Yes, of course. We can work our way up toward Chimoio tomorrow." She smiled reassuringly at me. "The more flexible we are, the more good we can do."

The pastor's wife brought woven grass mats for us, along with plastic bowls of rice and gravy, as evening neared and we wrapped up our work with the last few children.

"Being sad and overwhelmed won't help anyone, Rose," she'd told me as we ate. "We do what good we can do while we can do it. That's all any of us can do. Whether you're here or working in the best hospital in the world, all you can do is the good in front of you."

Nevertheless, I dream again. From a confused tangle of images, a clear picture emerges. A police officer steps out of the flashing scenes. I realize immediately I am meant to kill him, and wrestle his gun away from him, hit him with the butt of it. He barely flinches. I hit harder, but cannot do the damage I know I am supposed to inflict. I fumble for the trigger.

Somewhere in my consciousness, I realize I must wake. I drag myself through the cotton layers of dreaming and awake. It is cold. The thin blanket over me is sweet and rank, like body odor. I hear trucks on the nearby highway, and a nearby rooster.

I open my eyes to see Robin, kneeling on the floor of the church, the dim light of dawn illuminating the frizz in her hair.

“You seem disturbed,” she says casually.

“I have these dreams...”

“Why do you think that is?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe the Lariam. But talking with Horacio and Beatriz has me half-convinced it’s some spiritual issue.”

“Do you see a distinction between the spirit and the drugs?” she asked.

“Yes. One is physiological. The other is not,” I say.

Robin smiles mildly. “What about stress?”

“Stress?”

“Is it physiological or spiritual?”

“Both, I suppose.”

“Drug addiction?”

“Both.”

“Cancer?”

“You’re the expert on that one,” I say.

“Both. Certainly both. It may start as physical, but it’ll end up a spiritual battle. And vice versa.”

I nod, considering.

“It may not ever make sense, Rose, but our answer is simply to show compassion with whatever skills we have.”

I smile and begin to roll up my sleeping mat.

“We’re heading out towards Chimoio as soon as we can get a ride,” Robin says. You’ll love it; it looks completely different than it does here. These giant green mountains shoot up from the farmlands like giants dropped mossy rocks as they went along.”

“That sounds beautiful.”

“And the houses are round grass huts.”

“I can’t wait to see it. Are we ready?”

Robin digs into one of the boxes and pulls out a small water bottle, filled with a yellowish liquid. “Can you pour this into the bottle where we’ve been keeping the sharps?” she asks.

I take the bottle. “Is this bleach?”

Robin nods.

“Why do you want me to bleach the needles?”

“We’re almost out. If we’re going to do anything, we need more needles.”

I hesitate.

Robin purses her lips as she looks at me. “Rose. Tell me exactly what disease you think is going to survive a bleach bath.”

“I know it’ll kill everything. It’s just...”

“It’s what we need to do.”

“It seems like bad practice. Like it’s just a step away from, you know, really putting somebody at risk.”

“We can bleach the needles and head out, or no one will get injections today. What’s your preference, Rose?” she is calm but clearly quite serious.

I flush, feeling ashamed. “I trust you, Robin.”

“I know things are different here. You have to be able to work with that,” she says.

I nod. “Okay,” I say. “I’ll take care of it.”

## Days Pass

*April 20, 2005*

I continue the bits of work I can do, helping Judite in the cholera tent, visiting the sites Beatriz and Horacio support. Two schools, one evangelical church, a crowded chicken farm, and a bit of land where they're hoping to dig a well.

"It would make all the difference in the world," Horacio tells me over dinner, the night before he is set to return to the university. "Clean water for everyone, can you imagine?"

Beatriz and Horacio have massive tanks to collect rainwater for washing, and they are wealthy enough to buy bottled water for drinking.

There is nothing but need beyond the gate of their property: a man with deformed feet pulling himself through the market with his hands. Elderly people bumping along with sticks for canes, eyes white with cataracts. Women confiding that they know their husbands are unfaithful, but HIV is a distant fear when the children are immediately hungry.

Judite is so pleased to receive the wound care supplies and hand sanitizer. She promises to protect them.

This time I dream of Dan, furiously scrubbing at Sabão's wound, telling me we can fix it all if we just try hard enough. The harder he works, the more skin he removes, until he has erased Sabão's leg away. I am scrambling frantically on the floor of the little office, trying to pick up the dust so we can piece his leg together again, telling Dan to stop, stop, stop.

## Breastfeeding Class

*April 22, 2005*

Robin is back in Dondo. She and I stand at the front of the little room with cinderblock walls and a concrete floor.

The women sit in white plastic chairs, their children placid in their arms. They watch attentively, listening politely as Robin explains the benefits of extended breastfeeding.

My stomach twists. Nearly thirty percent of the population here is Dondo HIV positive. The EN1 highway originates in Beira, where the HIV rate is 36 percent, and runs through Dondo to Zimbabwe and further inland. Truckers distribute HIV along with their mango, cassava, and cashews. Many have a girlfriend at every stop, or even a child or two.

There are 24 women in this room. I pick eight at random, imagining that those eight may well be HIV-positive. At least eight of them likely are. One of the women I picked, a severe-looking mother of three in a bright yellow outfit, pops out a breast. Her toddler latches on eagerly. My stomach twists.

Robin says it is worth the nutritional advantage. The risks of HIV transmission through breastfeeding is up to 45 percent if the woman aren't on antiviral medications—and none of them are—but it's as low as 15 percent, too. If they don't breastfeed, the babies will go hungry. There's no money for formula. So we teach the women to keep breastfeeding.

At the end of her talk, Robin passes out some of the hard candy and crayons I'd brought in my luggage. The women accept the tokens enthusiastically, coloring and eating their candy with such deep gratitude I am ashamed.

Nothing here feels like an actual answer or solution.

## Furniture

*April 23, 2005*

I set my book down and stand up, facing my bed. It is all wrong. The window, screened but not glassed, is open. Wind bristles the leaves outside, sounding like someone pushing their way through the trees. It is unnerving. I want suddenly to be away from it, as far away from it as I can be.

I push the light little nightstand away, steadying the lamp. The electricity in this room is unpredictable, but the lamplight is welcome when I have it.

Thankfully, the bed is lightweight, and it scoots easily away from the window. I replace the nightstand and step back to survey the room.

Now things feel uneven, disorienting, like when I would return back from a school holiday to find that the teacher had rearranged the classroom.

I scoot the bed back towards the window and sit on it.

Now it's too close.

I pause, take a deep breath. I remind myself that Beatriz and Horacio's house is surrounded by a high wall and hot-tempered dogs.

But still.

I get back up and push the bed back, just a bit this time. I slide the nightstand into place. It looks a little better now, but the darkness of the window seems cavernous.

It is so dark here at night. Never knowing if electricity will be available when I flick on the light is disconcerting. If anyone came into this room, the advantage would be theirs.

I go in for one more readjustment, compromise between the window and the unevenness.

I notice my heart is beating hard, hard, hard.

## Funeral Passing

April 25, 2005

The dump truck is piled high with people standing in a packed group. The women sing loudly, their tanktops, *capulanas*, and head wraps bright against their skin.

“They believe if they come to all the funerals, everyone will come theirs,” Beatriz says.

We are going to the market to buy blankets for the hospice. I told Beatriz I had donation money to spare, and she immediately lit up with enthusiasm.

“Blankets,” she said. “They don’t have blankets. And the people, they are coming with nothing.”

“Blankets sounds great,” I responded, and we headed out.

The morning is balmy, that perfect temperature that feels completely neutral against my skin.

A boy runs ahead of us, a newspaper kite trailing behind him. I watch as he sprints back and forth across the road, trying to get the flimsy kite in the air. He kicks up dirt as he runs.

There are huge heads of romaine lettuce, men with baskets of charcoal in front of them, bananas and plantains piled on sheets. We pause in front of a plump woman, lying on a blanket beside her harvest of tomatoes. I buy a few ripe ones, ask if I can take her picture. She nods and smiles shyly.

Beatriz finds a woman selling fabric from her stall. I finger the *capulanas* as they talk. They are so bright, such light squares of fabric. I select a tiny green paisley, a large yellow and blue checkered print, and one I can’t resist, printed with a newspaper-style photograph of president Joaquim Chissano. He was the beloved president who led Mozambique out of civil war in 1992, and only left the presidency this February. His photographs are still on the school blackboards and hanging in the windows of homes we pass.

Beatriz picks a stack of heavy wool blankets. They are scratchy and uncomfortable-feeling, and seem like they will be impossible to wash.

“These are the ones you want?” I ask.

She nods eagerly. “They are warm.”

I shrug and agree, paying 32 dollars for eight blankets, and another three for my fabrics.

As we walk back through the market toward the hospital to drop the blankets off, another funeral truck passes by. A young couple approaches the road from the tall grass to the side, holding hands. The girl giggles.

We balance our load, and move on. The hospital director is supposed to be coming this week.

## **Still Alone**

*April 26, 2005*

There have been complications with the baby. Beatriz can't explain to me exactly what is happening with Dan, but she tells me he will come when he can, that he and Jenny send their love, and that he will be in touch.

I write to Jacob, apologizing again, try to sound upbeat.

## Soupa

April 27, 2005

Domingas grunts and thrusts her chin at the withered rooster. I am stirring the soup, thickened with manioc, the tuber that is the mainstay of the Mozambican diet. Eaten improperly cooked, and frequently enough, a person can accumulate cyanide in quantities large enough to cause paralysis and toxicity. Unexpectedly dry seasons—while good at keeping disease patterns depressed—leave only the most hardy, but toxic, forms of manioc for consumption.

It is a choice you have to make sometimes.

Even in the best case, manioc doesn't provide much beyond calories. And yes: enough calories means survival, at least for now.

Domingas and I peeled the manioc three days ago, careful not to cut too deeply. She was fast, the root skins flying off of her knife and onto the packed red dirt. I fumbled, thinking how much easier this would all be if I could have brought a vegetable peeler.

It's a thought that never really leaves: if only there were vegetable peelers, plumbing, electric saws, drug stores, paper towels. It would all be easier if only.

I'd slipped and cut deeply into the side of my left middle finger, taking a gouge out of my nail and leaving a gash that might have called for a stitch or two in another country. I sucked on my finger, then quickly wrapped it in the hem of my black shirt, trying to slow the blood.

Domingas had only raised an eyebrow. She dumped her peeled manioc into her waist-high *pau*. She'd raised her heavy club of a *pilão*, three feet long, and begun to pound the roots. It would take several hours of wrangling the giant-sized pestle and mortar to turn the manioc into flour, an exercise so taxing I'd managed about four minutes before my arms gave out.

Domingas had dried the flour in a long, rough-woven sack, squeezing the moisture out over the course of two days. I'd thought, wryly, that avoiding the entire process of preparing

manioc would likely leave one in better nutritional standing than expending the energy to prepare it, only to be left with, well...manioc flour to eat.

Now, Domingas carefully tosses the flour in a woven basket, sifting out the fine flour particles to thicken the *soupa* of coconut, manioc leaves, and the pitiful rooster. She arcs the manioc up, artfully catching every bit back in her basket, then gently flicking the basket as she picks out the larger chunks.

I reach into the aluminum pot with two large forks, spearing the rooster and waiting for the liquid to run back into the soup. Domingas watches me carefully, ignoring her hands but still managing to catch every bit of that hard-won starch.

I move the rooster, still hot, and hold him by the neck over a second aluminum pot. He is scrawny. I'd plucked him poorly, and broken shafts of feathers poke out like greasy stubble from his wings.

Domingas, squatting easily, her hair cropped close to her head, her skin glowing and tight like a polished hazelnut, pauses and looks into my eyes.

Beatriz has told me she has four children, all teenagers, and that her husband left in 1999.

I smile at her. She returns to her manioc.

I work the forks up under the rooster's skin, scraping the mushy meat off the bones. I get every bit of it, go back and forth until not a fleck remains.

Domingas sprinkles a handful of flour into the pot and picks up her long wooden spoon to stir. I pull the meat; she stirs. We are silent.

"Fernando," she finally says.

I look up. A tiny, sweet man who aspires to be a doctor but only made it to sixth grade, Fernando stands behind me, smiling broadly. He holds the handlebars of his shiny black bicycle.

"*Um minuto*," I say.

He nods.

I scrape last of the meat off the forks and into the pot and stand. Domingas grasps the pink plastic bucket Fernando brought and begins to ladle the steaming soup into his bucket.

Fernando holds the bucket for her. We are taking it down across the courtyard into the hospital for the patients. It is the only food they will get today.

Together, Fernando and I balance the bucket on the seat of his bicycle, steadying both over the potholes. We have been trying to teach each other languages; he has been sharing words in Sena and Portuguese, while I have been helping him with his English.

“*Soupa*,” I tell him, “is soup.” I pretend to sip from a spoon. “*Sabão* is soap.” I mime scrubbing my upper arms.

“Soap?” Fernando asks, tapping the bucket.

“Soup,” I say, laughing. I haven’t met a Mozambican who can get this one. They must not be able to hear the difference.

“Okay, Rosa. I take soap inside for you.” Fernando hauls the bucket up through the white exam room and down the hall. There is a little table where we can rest the bucket, softened with the heat of the soup.

I wait with Fernando’s bicycle.

The bicycle is vital for Mozambicans. It is perfectly normal to see two, three, or even four family members piled up on one bike. They are all black, one size, and one speed. Mozambicans are so confident on their bikes; I have seen men grab a small child from the ground, swing the toddler up onto the handlebars, and pedal off, barely slowing. A few have tiny bicycle seats screwed onto their crossbars so the children can ride along. No one seems to worry about them falling, but then, they never seem to fall.

I am weary. But I came with a pocketful of money, and if nothing else matters, money does. I gave Horacio money to buy a bicycle for his pastor friend in Lamego. A bike is two month’s wages, a set of tires half as much. One might as well pop by a rural North American church with three or four used cars, say, “Enjoy!” and drop the keys in the collection plate. It is a small thing—a few hours out of a normal shift for me—and yet, it is the good I can do.

Fernando returns to fetch his bike, and I go inside to take care of the soup, bracing myself for the smell.

The patients know I am here, and some have sent their children out into the hallways to wait. All patients here bring their own cups and bowls; if they don't have them, they can't eat or drink.

I always start with the children. They wait quietly, almost reverently, in line. I fill the plastic bowls, trying to get a little meat in each one. The children carry the soup back carefully, and I go room-to-room to retrieve the bowls from the patients who couldn't come to the hallway. They smile with quiet thanks when I return.

I have not yet met the director or received permission to go into the AIDS hospice, but occasionally, a family member waits outside the hospice door with a bowl for me.

Today, there is a young boy, maybe six or seven, holding a scratched yellow bowl and cup. The cup is full of water, and he stands with his back straight, alert at the door. He looks like a little soldier, so serious and focused. I take his bowl gently, fill it, and make sure there is a little extra meat in it. I hope he will get a bite, too.

When the bucket is empty, I leave. There is no nursing work for me to do, so I serve soup.

It is my twenty-eighth birthday.

## Gloves, Again

*April 29, 2005*

Like every day, Fernando and I approach with the soup. But today, the white Land Rover is back in the hospital courtyard. Finally.

We head inside to distribute the soup. Judite is in the exam clinic with Manuel, who is leaving tomorrow. She explains that since all the cholera patients have left, she is returning to her usual post.

She walks me through the exam room, which seems to function as the emergency room, as well as a medical clinic. Judite opens the locked cupboards with a key she wears around her neck and shows me her blood testing products, vintage scale, and stethoscope. She has a few IV bags and catheters, needles, some linens, and a glass jar filled with a soapy liquid.

The blankets Beatriz and I bought are folded neatly in one corner. The wound care supplies are still in their boxes, clean and organized. Judite smiles when I notice them.

The rest of the equipment is dated and seems useless to me: glass bottles with rubber stoppers, tubing, graph paper, a few pencils.

She tells me that once I begin to work in the AIDS hospice, I should come to her for anything I need.

I nod and thank her, hug Manuel goodbye, and leave with Fernando.

As we walk across the courtyard, I spy the director's assistant, out by the Land Rover. He is washing the vehicle with a bucket and rag, wearing a bright blue pair of the gloves I'd brought.

# Once Inside the Hospice Walls

*April 30, 2005*

I still haven't met the director, but over breakfast, Beatriz tells me she will take me to the hospital.

"You can go to hospice now, Rosinha!" she says.

I slip into a pair of scrubs, grab my notebook and pen, and slide my bandage scissors into my pocket. With my stethoscope around my neck and broken-in clogs on my feet, I finally feel as though I am heading to work.

I am here. We are going in.

The walk over helps to calm my nerves a little.

We enter in through Judite's clinic, take a right back into the hospital, and arrive at the hospice door. Beatriz swings it open

"You come now whenever you want," she says.

We walk in together. The room is nearly empty. It has that same rotten smell, the dank sickness, only more so.

The floor is old yellow tiles. The walls are discolored cinderblock with chipped, dirty paint. The rear wall is mostly open windows, protected with old metal grating and punctured screens.

Each bed has a faded number painted above it on the wall. Mosquito netting is knotted up above the beds, which are rusty, rickety cots, some with thin mattresses, some just bare springs.

There is one patient in the room, immediately beside the door. I recognize the boy from yesterday, standing next to a wincing woman curled up on the bed. He holds her plastic water cup, urging her to take a sip.

Her lips are cracked and a little bloody. She doesn't open them, so he dips his index finger in the cup and wets her lips.

There is no sink in the room. No soap. No drugs. No pharmacy. No meal delivery. Nothing, just this woman and the stink and this miniature soldier.

"Beatriz?" I manage to ask. "What do you think I should do here?"

“Help take care of people,” she responds. “You can do.”

Beatriz kisses me goodbye and leaves, promising to return soon.

I look for something to do. Get water? No, the woman has water. I cannot ask her if she needs anything.

I pace around the room, peeking out the windows. Little groves of lebombo ironwood and muanga trees, mud houses, dirt paths.

There are no beds to make. No baths to give.

I eventually find myself in the corner, leaning against the wall, my hands behind my back. I look at the woman occasionally, watch her son tend to her.

When Fernando comes with the soup, I slip out to help him distribute it, making sure the boy in here has a full bowl. I return when we finish handing out the soup.

The boy takes the tip of his spoon and dips it into the bowl, urging it into his mother’s mouth. She takes a little. He gets another few drops and feeds her again. This goes on for an hour, and at the end, the bowl is still half-full.

When his mother turns away from him, the boy takes the bowl and slurps down the rest of the soup.

He dumps her water into the bowl and swirls it around, pouring it out onto the floor. He dries the bowl on the hem of his t-shirt and places the dishes and utensils on the little metal bedside table.

I think my heart is going to crack wide open.

## Papa Fred

May 1, 2005

There is a new patient in the hospice, a rail-thin, wild-haired older man. His name is Papa Fred, and he grins crookedly at me when I walk in the room. He knows a little English. He came alone in the night, with a pair of shorts and literally nothing else.

Papa Fred has not been tested for AIDS, but it doesn't really matter. Whatever is causing him to shrivel into grayed skin and protruding joints is enough.

The day stretches ahead of me, empty and tense. I so wish I had work to do: head-to-toe assessments, medication administration, consulting with the infectious diseases doctors and psychiatrists...there is so much I could do, if I could.

The woman in bed one is still tended by her devoted son. I ache, thinking of what will come to him. Being orphaned, or his own journey with HIV.

When Fernando comes with lunch, I look for a bowl for Papa Fred. There are no spare bowls to be found. I search through the clinic, the maternity rooms, the patient rooms, but no. None.

I tell Papa Fred how I'd tried to find a way for him to eat, but couldn't. He is nearly blind, and looks above me to my right as he speaks. "Do not worry," he says. "When I leave here, I will make you a feast. Chicken. *Carne*. We will eat."

I manage a little laugh. "Of course you will," I say. "That sounds perfect."

Papa Fred goes to sleep, and I wander the hospital again, listless and useless. If I could do more, I would. I would.

## **Rooster**

*May 2, 2005*

The rooster I slaughtered is back. Featherless and fleshless, he screeches at me, telling me he could have lived, too, if I'd let him.

I try to tell him it was for a good reason, and I didn't like it much more than he did, but it's not good enough. He lunges at my face, pecking furiously.

I wake up batting him away, saying sorry.

## Papa Fred Shits

*May 2, 2005*

Despite everything, I am eager to see Papa Fred. The woman in the bed nearest the door, bed one, is gone. Maybe her family came to get her to take her elsewhere for better treatment. Maybe she died. A new patient is crumpled in her bed, coughing ferociously.

Papa Fred is on his side facing the door, and I realize right away he is pissing. He holds his penis through the fly of his boxer shorts, and the urine splatters onto the floor.

I sigh, remind myself that he can't help it, and tiptoe back out. I can't imagine how to fix this one. I find Judite sitting placidly at the clinic table, and try to mime out the word "towel." She doesn't understand, but when I finally touch the lock on her cupboard, she comes over to open it. There is a small stack of sheets, and she nods when I point to one.

I return to the hospice room and drape the sheet over the puddle of urine, waiting as the worn polyester spreads the urine, soaking up a little.

I grasp the sheet from its corners and holding it away from my scrubs, walk the dripping fabric out to the well. I get water going from the pump and rinse the sheet out, trying to rinse my hands as well. I wring the sheet out after it is rinsed and return it to the hospice, laying it out over an empty cot to dry.

The smell hits me, and I realize that Papa Fred has shit through his shorts. Diarrhea covers his mat.

God, this is too much. This is too much.

I approach Papa Fred, whose yellow eyes are rolling like he's dizzy. "You need help, Papa Fred?" I ask him.

He turns away from me, the heave of his heart visible through his ribs.

I gingerly grasp the waistband of his underwear, trying to keep my body away from the cot, and begin to ease them down over his drooping buttocks. I manage to slide the shorts off, only smearing a

little on my forearm, but a substantial amount down Papa Fred's leg. I catch my gag reflex.

Just then, Judite peeks her head in. "Rosa!" she says, "*Você precisa de água.*"

Yes, I need water. Clearly. And also gloves, and wipes, and a stack of chux pads, and a nursing assistant, and a sink, and soap.

I set Papa Fred's shorts on the cot. Judite returns in a moment, holding a white plastic bucket of water. She rolls Papa Fred onto his stomach and pours a bit of the water over him and onto the bed. It splashes. I jump back a little.

Judite reaches over, barehanded, and spreads Papa Fred's buttocks. I spy a wiggly white thing, and as she pours water over him, several worms wash off and are squirming on the cot and floor.

"Oh God," I say, turning away. My breath is shallow, quick. The room spins a little.

"Rosa?" Judite asks. I look at her; she seems genuinely perplexed.

I don't want to breathe through my nose, as the smell is so bad, but I can't stand the thought of opening my mouth during this process. I force a long, thin breath into my nose and down my throat.

"*Nada,*" I tell her, turning back to Papa Fred.

We work to get him cleaned up. I fetch another bucket and we pour this one more slowly, trying to angle the watery poop and worms off the cot and onto the floor. There is a drain in the middle of the room. Thank God there is a drain in the middle of the room.

I pick up the soiled sheet and underwear, drop them in the empty bucket, and look at Judite, questioningly. How I wish we could communicate, actually talk.

She shrugs.

I take the two outside and leave them on the ground by the well. I will deal with them later. I fill the bucket back up with water and return to the room. Judite is holding a small bottle of bleach

She uncaps the bottle and tips a little in, then circles the puddle of watery shit, dripping water out and trying to force the

excrement down the drain. When she is satisfied, she splashes more bleach water out dramatically, leaving a huge wet area we will have to let air dry.

The smell of bleach isn't better than the smell of the room before. Now it smells like shit and rot *and* bleach.

"*Um pouco?*" I ask her, pointing toward the bleach bottle, which she'd set on another cot.

She nods and I pour a little out into the bucket, figuring I'll bleach the underwear and sheet. At least I can kill the germs.

I would give almost anything for a pair of gloves right now.

I've dealt poop all my career, massive blowouts or teeny little smears all day long. The worst is when someone has severe thigh or buttock burns, and we have to get the feces out of their wounds, but it makes the patients bleed and writhe in pain. That happens a lot; people poop on their bandages, and we have to cut away the soiled portions.

But there are always gloves. You learn you can do a lot if there are gloves involved.

Judite and I leave the room together. I walk over to the jug of hand sanitizer I'd brought, which she is proudly displaying at her little table. I take six or seven squirts, nearly filling my cupped palm.

Judite looks at me, horrified.

I don't care. I'd take a bath in the stuff if we had enough.

## Dan Could

*May 3, 2005*

He said he would come when he could. He said he would come when he could. He could come, but now he says he'll come when it seems right, and could I just...could I just...could I just?

## Lucia and Louisa

May 4, 2005

Beatriz finds me wiping the bloody mucous off Ana-Silvia's bed and brings me out to the two young women who disappeared from the hospice overnight. They are asking for money for the bus, a large-bed truck fenced in on the sides with two-by-fours. Locals cram in, holding one another up with the pressure of their bodies. It is the least expensive way to travel, save climbing onto a bicycle, which neither of these women could.

Lucia has her name tattooed in crooked black lettering on her left forearm, as if she might forget it. She is standing as she speaks, leaning back on her heels, keeping her balance with a thick bamboo staff, which she clings to like it holds her very life intact. Her hair is cropped and a long scar runs whitely across her cheek.

She is friendly, soft-spoken in her torn t-shirt and ragged skirt. "I won't go back there," she says when I ask her why she is leaving the hospice. "You did nothing for me. I thought I would get medicine."

But of course, I have been told that we can't waste medicine on dying people.

Lucia was orphaned young, and became a prostitute to support herself. She is twenty years old.

Louisa scowls as we talk. She has spread a brown and tan *capulana* over the courtyard grass. Atop the fabric, she has piled a half-eaten loaf of bread and several bananas.

It is good that she has an appetite.

I ask Louisa how old she is, but before she can answer, a spasm of coughing overcomes her. It is a deep cough, coming from a dark, damp place.

"As old as she going to get, I think," Beatriz mutters, her eyes dancing.

TB. Pneumonia. This is how you might die, drowning in your own fluid. Hurling bloody mucous onto your caregivers, which has

happened to me more times than I care to count in the last few days.

As Louisa recovers her breath, she whispers, "*Vinte e dois.*"

Twenty-two.

I give them money for the ride, plus another 130,000 meticaís. Six dollars, nearly a week's wages.

Louisa tucks her half of the money into her loose white bra. "What am I going to do tomorrow?" she asks. "What are we going to eat?"

I don't have an answer for that. I tell her I'm sorry, but she turns away, coughing again.

# Massage

May 5, 2005

Helena lurches up in her bed, groaning. She rubs exhaustedly at her lower back. She came a few days ago, in immense pain, dropped off by her two sisters.

Helena is tall, richly dark-skinned with round cheeks, despite her emaciated frame. There is a gentleness to her; even as she cries out in pain, her face is soft.

I watch her for a few moments before heading over. I catch her eye and point at her back. She nods, sweaty, and pulls up her shirt to expose her lower back. I reach out and dig the heels of my hands into her lower back, massaging. Helena sighs with relief, smiling up at me with tearful eyes.

She is so beautiful. Young, probably younger than me. She has three small children who came by once, herded gruffly by their aunts.

For their aunts, I am sure, this is a problem of money, and who's going to feed these kids, and there already wasn't enough.

I flip my hands over and dig my knuckles into above her pelvis, feeling Helena relax into me.

*"Eu me sinto como a minha mãe está aqui,"* she whispers. Papa Fred, who is having a good day, tells me, "She says she feels like her mother is here with her."

I keep rubbing, kneading, trying to bless her with comfort, the only thing I have to give, but it is what I have to give.

Before too long, I tire, and pull my hands away. They are sticky with blood, with Helena's dried blood. Her skin is so dark I hadn't been able to tell.

The room seems to lurch. I hold my hands out before me, looking at the blood.

I can't imagine where the blood came from, but with these patients, there are so many comorbidities and complications, you can't ever really tell.

Suddenly disoriented, I hold my hands in front of me and wander over towards the entrance. I stop and take a few pumps of hand sanitizer, scrubbing my hands with it, then move out to the pump, where I rinse and rub my hands under the cool water.

Back in the clinic room, I tear open an alcohol swab and sit on the exam table, scrubbing around my nails and between my fingers.

The cut on my knuckle isn't even the kind of thing you notice, normally. I'd slipped again, peeling Manioc with Domingas. But it's all I can see now. It's the biggest thing in the world.

## **This is All There Is**

*May 10, 2005*

The days pass like this.

Papa Fred dies, of course. It is blessedly quick once he starts to go.

There is no sacred act of washing his body down or zipping him into a bag. Fernando and I wrap him in his sheet and together, haul him across the courtyard to the crematorium, a square cinderblock tomb just a few paces wide. It has a tin roof with a mud-packed chimney reaching up.

It turns out that to burn the bodies, all they do is dump gasoline in the room, toss a match in, and shut the aluminum door.

The man who tends the crematorium fire walks on the sides of his feet, avoiding putting weight on his soles, which are swollen with oozing sores. He begins to come over to the hospital when the soup arrives, all missing teeth and desperate eyes. He waits while I dish it out, quiet, eyes trained on the bucket. I always save some for him.

The stench is unbearable on the days he's waiting to burn the bodies. It's unbearable on the days he burns the bodies.

No family comes to collect Papa Fred's remains. We scatter the ashes and chunks of charred bone and teeth—the crematorium fire isn't hot enough to burn the whole body—in the woods behind the orphanage. I think he'd like that, somehow, in the shady woods where he could hear the children playing in the distance.

In my mind, I promise him a feast as I scatter his ashes, as Beatriz prays on and on. I don't know what there is to tell God except that all Papa Fred wanted a feast and instead, he died mostly alone, and probably never in his life did he have as much meat as he wanted to eat.

I dream of Papa Fred, dream that I am pouring water over his soiled back and bottom, that he keeps shitting out little brown worms. I smash them with the bucket I am holding. He shits more out, and I smash those, too. I hear a pitiful little mew, and look closer. They are all tiny babies.

His bed is filled with tiny smashed babies.

Judite comes in, shrugs, and dumps bleach over him and the babies.

I wake, horrified.

The thing about people dying of AIDS is that they take up so little space in the beds.

I have not heard from Dan in a week. Jacob is tense, frustrated with me, but I can tell he is trying to be patient, even-toned, understanding.

Beatriz keeps belly laughing through the days, delighted with “everything I am doing for the hospice,” which is nothing, and teasing me with her grilled *rato* and happy plans for the future.

I keep thinking I’ve contracted HIV or TB, and the fear fills my head with white noise.

Everything is starting to feel like it is very far away.

# Supermarket

*May 12, 2005*

I say yes, eagerly, when Beatriz asks me to run errands with her. Anything to do something other than the hospice.

Beatriz wants me to see the beach first. She parks the truck beside a crumbling Catholic church that overlooks the water. It makes me think of Confession, which I've always loved. I'll go in with the weight of my mistakes, my errors and dirty little selfish moments, and leave feeling blessedly clean like I've been rebaptized. Humbled, thankful that there was a God who could look kindly on me.

I feel bewildered at the thought of sin now. It seems like everyone is just trying to do what they can to survive, and all of it is wrong.

The Indian Ocean is magnificent, heaving with dark waves. The air tastes salty and fresh, like clean sweat. I gasp in so much I feel dizzy, grateful for the clean breeze that doesn't smell of death, or charcoal fires, or hand sanitizer.

I spot a sandbar where the waves are breaking early. A group of fisherman stand in the shallows, tossing bait nets, pulling in shimmering fish.

An old woman picks her way across the sand, a plastic shopping bag in hand, picking up bits of garbage as she goes.

You wouldn't think it, but this is the cleanest country I've ever seen. There is not a scrap of trash on the streets. Nothing is wasted.

I've brought my camera, and snap a few shots of the men arcing their nets up, of the woman dragging a hunk of driftwood behind her, of the crumbling church.

When the Portuguese were here, it would have been beautiful. The boulevards are wide, still oak-lined, and the decaying buildings were ornate and grand, before the communists came and built their tower blocks, before the tower blocks were bombed out and the people lived in rubble.

Three ragged little boys approach us outside the supermarket. Beatriz explains that they panhandle for that bigger boy, the one standing at the edge of the parking lot with his arms crossed. She tells me not to give them any money, that he will just take it from them.

I ask her to go across the street with me to the market stalls, where I buy three little t-shirts. We go back across the street to the supermarket, and I pass them out. The boys immediately put them on over the clothes they are wearing, looking delighted.

We buy the things you can't get in Dondo: soft cheese, butter, a little meat, toilet paper, instant coffee with chicory.

By the time we are back out at the truck, it is surrounded by school-aged boys.

Beatriz raises her eyebrows at me, amused. "I tell you, Rosinha!" she says.

The boys crowd around me, tugging at my skirt. I dig into my backpack, and pull out a handful of peppermints, passing them out, one each.

"*Não mais!*" I tell them, holding up my empty hands to show them it is true. I shove my Nikon into my backpack, zip it up quickly, ashamed at my comparative wealth and frustrated at how hard it is to explain that wealth is relative, and by western standards, I don't have all that much of it.

The boys are good-natured, and they wave happily as we pull out, the three little ones in matching navy t-shirts standing at the front of the pack.

One does a handspring in the empty spot where the truck was, and for a moment, things are beautiful again.

## Leaving or Not

*May 13, 2005*

I reread Dan's email, explaining that he'll be here in a week, finally, and he's so glad he'll get to see what I've been doing. He knows it's asking so much, but can I plan to say another few weeks so I can hand the projects over to him?

I feel caught. Sure, I can extend my leave of absence from work. My manager explained that I could have up to three months. I haven't taken a vacation in over two years.

But there is Jacob, waiting at home for me.

And perhaps that is part of why I say yes, I'll stay: because Jacob is waiting at home for me.

## White Ball

May 14, 2005

Beatriz comes home, full of nervous excitement. “You have listen, Rosinha. This lady, she come in yesday to the *sala de nutrição*. You didn’t met her.”

I shake my head. I’ve been camped out in Horacio’s office for the better part of two days, trying to rearrange my travel plans, communicate with Dan, Jenny, and Jacob, and work out the details of my leave of absence.

The internet comes and goes; when it goes, I lose my progress. A handful of times, the electricity cut out, and I had to wait through the ten-minute process of rebooting Horacio’s antique desktop before starting all over again.

“Her family bring because she have not eat or drink for a week. They think she will die. But so strange: she don’t—” Beatriz sucks in her belly and cheeks, drawing her hands close together.

“Waste away?” I supply.

“Yes.” Beatriz nods. “So Fernando and I am there with the *soupa*, but she don’t want any. And we bring her water and say she must have some, but she don’t want any. We think we have make her drink. You know if she don’t, she will die.”

“Mmm-hmm,” I say.

“So we get Judite and we hold her down. Fernando make her mouth open, and Judite has a spoon and she give the woman water.”

I’m trying to keep my face neutral.

“She spit it out. So we try again, but we hold her nose close this time.”

Good Lord.

“So then we get three spoons in, but her eyes go so big.” Beatriz acts this one out in her animated way.

“And she make loud noises and then this white ball come out of her mouth, this big—” she cups her hand like she’s holding a

tennis ball. “This big thing, she spits out. She don’t have food or anything in her but she spit this out. It come at me, but I jump back.”

“What was it?” I ask.

Beatriz shakes her head. “Some...thing. I look where it hit but no spot on my shirt.” She taps her chest. “I get down to floor and look, think it fall, but *nada* on floor.”

I am puzzled. “What do you think it was?”

“I think the enemy send it. I know the hand God protect me, because it don’t reach me. I am scared, because I think it was the demon of death.”

Oh.

“This now is third times I face a demon too strong for me. But I know God protects me.”

“What happened to her?” I ask.

“Fernando and I finish with the *soupa*, and we take the bucket back for Domingas. The woman gone when we return.”

# Bone Break

May 16, 2005

It's been days since I felt well.

I begin to shiver every night around 9pm, despite the wonderfully temperate weather. I wrap myself in my blanket, sip on the lemon tea I found at the supermarket.

I ache down to my bones. Each night a new limb or portion of my back sends dull purple waves of pain through my system, and I close my eyes, waiting for it to pass. It does, invariably, and invariably, I wake once more during the night to repeat the process.

My head pounds insistently as I begin the day. At the edges of my vision, lights dance. My knuckles are tight; they throb from time to time. I tremble and nearly spill the soup at the hospital, which would be tragic. My whole body feels tightly-wound as if there is too little room in my skin for swollen and bulging muscles and bones.

"Dengue," Beatriz proclaims. I feel relieved. If dengue is the worst illness I develop here, I will be happy. The fear of AIDS gets louder every day, until sometimes I can barely think.

Beatriz takes me into the city for a test. I bring a couple of alcohol swabs from my dwindling stash and a needle I found in my bag. It is left over from my time with Robin, wrapped in refreshingly American, blissfully sterile packaging.

Beatriz stands beside me as I pay for the test. It costs fifteen dollars, such extravagance.

I pull out my needle for the medical technician, and Beatriz laughs, gesturing at the stick the technician holds. "Those are okay," she says.

"I would like to use this," I tell her, and turning to the technician, "*Desculpa. Doida Americana.*" Crazy American. I rub my fingertip vigorously with an alcohol swab as the technician unwraps my needle.

The technician sticks me hard, hard enough that my fingertip blossoms a purple bruise as we sit in the waiting room while they run the test.

Beatriz holds the needle I used, which she'd recapped.

"What are you doing with that?" I ask her.

"This one still good," she says. "These are expensive here." She slips it into her purse.

The test comes back negative. Something else is wrong with me.

## Puff Adder

*May 18, 2005*

Beatriz and I are finishing our breakfast of toast and instant coffee when we hear the truck honking in the driveway.

Of course it is Robin. She is in the back of a black truck, riding with a young boy. He looks around four years old, and he is gray and drawn. As I peek over the side of the truck, I see that his leg is stretched out, and his ankle is ferociously swollen. It is wrapped in a thin undershirt and oozing serosanguineous fluid, pinkish-yellow.

“What happened?” I ask Robin.

“Snakebite. His father brought him to me two days ago, but before I could do anything, he left and took him to the village healer.”

“Witchdoctor?” Beatriz says.

Robin gives her a look.

“You know those people, they have demons,” Beatriz says. The boy lets out a single weak sob, which lingers in tense silence.

“Did you try and stop them?” I finally ask.

“They wanted to make sure the fangs weren’t stuck,” she responds.

“But...that can’t happen, can it?” I say.

The boy looks terrified.

“It was important to them,” Robin says. “I wasn’t going to stand in the way.” She leans in to me. “It takes a lot to build trust, Rose.”

I look back at the boy, who clumsily reaches down towards his ankle.

“No, honey, no,” I say, catching his hand. “We need you to leave that alone, okay?” He draws his hand back into himself.

“He’s from Muanza,” Robin says. “Two hours north. We need to get him to the hospital in Chimoio.”

“Chimoio? That is three hours,” Beatriz says.

“Yes, I know. Dondo was as far as we could get a ride. Can you help?” Robin asks.

“You canna go to Chimoio,” Beatriz responds. She turns to me. “Terrible hospital. Health minister visit in *fevereiro* and see nurses and doctors drunk. Patients on floor, garbage all over. Some the patients, the doctors make extra pay.”

Robin is tense. “What else are we doing to do, Beatriz?”

“We can help him here.”

“There is a very good chance he needs an amputation.”

I cannot do this again. I cannot stand there and watch this boy suffer.

“I’m going to splint his leg while you two work this out,” I tell the women. I march through the yard, searching for something that will do. Nothing.

I reach the screen door, where I briefly debate ripping the wood apart with my hands. I get to my room, looking frantically. There is a single clothes bar in my room, suspended from the ceiling. My eyes light on the wire hangers. I rip my clothes off, quickly bending the four hangers into relatively straight lines.

I grab another shirt, cut it into strips with my bandage scissors, and return outside with the hangers and cloths.

I climb into the back of the truck and smile encouragingly at the boy. “I’m just going to try and keep your leg from moving,” I tell him, helping him readjust so his leg is elevated on wheel well. “We want your leg above where your heart is, so you’ll have to keep it right here, okay?”

I know he can’t understand me, but I have to try.

The truck driver, a small man with a shaggy beard, leans out the window and says something to Beatriz.

Beatriz touches my arm, stopping me. “He has go,” she says.

“Where can we take him?” I ask. “Whatever we’re doing, we need to do *now*.”

“We are going to Chimoio,” Robin says. “Beatriz, we need to borrow your truck.”

Beatriz sighs. “Chimoio canna do it. You white ladies go there, they charge more.”

“I’ll pay for it, Beatriz,” I say. “Please. Just let us try.”

She finally agrees. I splint the boy’s leg with the hangers, tying them tight with the remains of my shirt.

“He needs to stay calm,” Robin says. “I’ve just been trying to keep him calm.”

“I’ll ride in the back with him,” I say.

The three of us get the boy settled in Beatriz’s truck bed. I climb in with him and rest his head in my lap. He is sweating, but his skin is clammy.

Robin gets into the driver’s seat, and we go. The trip is eternal. We pick our way over the potholed roads, those same roads that seemed so sweet, wedged in the back of Horacio’s truck a month ago.

The boy seems more and more delirious. I check his pulse, and think I count 160 beats in a minute, though with the jarring bumps, it is hard to feel the beats, and hard to see my watch.

He vomits into my lap. I turn him onto his side, trying to hold him steady as he finishes.

I lean over and pound on the back window. Robin slows even more as she slides the window open.

“I think he’s septic,” I tell her.

“I know,” she says grimly.

“What’s his name?” I ask, embarrassed that I don’t know.

“Ebenizario.”

Stone of help. That is what Ebenezer means. It is a place where you stop and make a marker, raise a monument, to remember divine assistance.

“He’s three,” Robin says, pushing the gas pedal.

By the time we near Chimoio, the boy is breathing rapidly. His heart is tachycardic and thready, like an ongoing ripple under his breastbone. He cold to the touch. He won’t open his eyes.

“Robin,” I croak through the open window.

“I know.”

“We need to stop.”

“We’re almost there.”

“Robin, I need you to stop so we can baptize him.”

“Dammit, Rose.”

“Please.”

She pulls over on the side of the road, and the truck shudders to a stop. She grabs her backpack and climbs into the truck bed with me.

Robin cradles Ebenizario’s hand, touching his cheek.

“I thought maybe...” she says.

“We can keep going. I just needed you to stop for a second, in case he doesn’t make it.”

She shakes her head. “His mother died of AIDS last year. I think he has it, too. Being immunocompromised, all of this is so much worse. I knew it was a small chance that we could help him.”

“Do you have water?” I ask.

She nods and pulls her water bottle from her backpack.

Together, we baptize the boy, dribbling the water on his little forehead.

Some small part of me yet hopes that his eyes will pop open, like Lazarus, and he will shake off the dust of death. But Lazarus had to die again, didn’t he? And who did he talk to about where he’d been? What if death was beautiful, and he felt like he lived in a vague dream thereafter, wishing to return? Or what if it was unspeakable, and he walked around empty and terrified?

I cannot call Ebenizario back; I can only hope that his mother is waiting for him.

In the back of Beatriz’s raggedy Nissan, lap soaked in vomit, I lean against Robin. We stroke this boy gently, in silence.

There are no birds.

There is no one around.

It is a beautiful day.

## The Biomedical Model

May 19, 2005

We are quiet as we drive, stopping only to fill the truck up with gas and buy a stack of *capulanas* from a roadside stand. Robin chooses a thin white fabric with a delicate square pattern of pale blue and light brown, small sprigs of flowers occasionally breaking up the lines.

She wraps him reverently in the makeshift shroud.

"I can't let him bounce around back there," she says.

"I can't hold him," I tell her.

"I will."

She holds Ebenizario's body all the way back to Muanza. I focus on driving, shifting with my left hand, disoriented as I hug the left side of the road, over the bumps and past the bicycles.

The women hoe their fields.

So many of them have lost babies. We ask why they have so many. But an innocent life is one of the few plainly beautiful things here, one of the few hopeful things.

I stay in the truck as she carries Ebenizario to his father's doorway, gently handing the boy's body over to the crushed-looking man.

I am flooded with sorrow, and then with the impotence of ferocious anger. He was likely the source of the HIV. He was definitely the source of the delay getting help.

"How do you forgive him?" I ask her finally, when we are on our way back to Dondo.

"Forgive?"

"We could have gotten Ebenizario care so much quicker. We didn't have to delay treatment for days."

"His father was getting him treatment, Rose."

"But it's not!" I explode. "That's not medical care!"

"Why do you think the boy needed medical care?"

“Didn’t you? Isn’t that why we were trying to get him to the hospital?”

“Yes. I practice western medicine, like you do. But that is only one way of approaching sickness and health.”

“What do you mean?”

“The local healers—what Beatriz calls witch doctors—they also treat illness.”

“They do—” I pause, trying to remain neutral. “They do things that are not backed up by science.”

“Why does all care need to be backed up by science?”

“Because that’s reality! That boy died because he was septic. He was septic because he was immunocompromised. He was immunocompromised because of a *virus*, and he became septic because of a *bacteria*, and neither of those had to happen. He could have been protected from that supposed treatment.”

“You need to understand, Rose, that not everyone believes that sickness is caused by microbes.”

“But it is.”

“Sure, in a way. But *why* do people get sick? Why does one person get an infection, and someone else doesn’t? Why did Ebenizario’s mother die of AIDS, when his father, who most likely has HIV as well, looked absolutely healthy just now?”

I am confused.

“Western medicine says it’s just what, luck? Happenstance? But that boy might have survived if his parents had made different choices. The healer might have had a remedy that worked.”

I shake my head.

She goes on. “The concept that illness doesn’t involve psychological, or spiritual factors, as well as social factors, is incomplete.”

“So what are you saying?”

“That maybe the local healers *do* know how to treat illness. Maybe...I don’t know; maybe the reason they’ve never been able to determine exactly what causes schizophrenia is because they’re not looking in the right place.”

“That doesn’t really make sense. Germs make people sick.”

“Yes, and so do thoughts, emotions, behaviors.” She pauses. “You told me you had nightmares. Would you consider those an indication of good health?”

“No.”

“Maybe you are having nightmares because you are on a drug with known side effects. Maybe you are having nightmares because you are seeing things you couldn’t imagine seeing. Maybe...maybe your nightmares are a sign of a *healthy* psychological response to what is happening. A strong—or even tortured—reaction to something like what you just experienced may be the most appropriate reaction you could have.”

“I just want them to stop. I hate feeling so afraid.”

“And yet, fear...well, isn’t it appropriate to be fearful, now that you have seen what life can be like when the structure you’re used to, the structure you rely on, is non-existent?”

“I just—”

“Just let it marinate, Rose.” She smiles gently. “And grieve. You need to grieve.”

# Empty Everywhere

*May 21, 2005*

Robin spends the night with us, and in the early morning, flits off again to go do her serene good.

I tell Beatriz I am not going to the hospice today.

But the hours are empty. I've read all my books. There's no work, no movies, no errands, no tasks. No creative ways to bring goodness or beauty into the world, to plant flowers or paint walls or scrub the bathroom. There is not even anything to scrub the bathroom with.

The sun treks its way across the sky, and I wander in Beatriz and Horacio's yard, watching the people pass by.

It is all surreal.

I feel weighted down, exhausted. Thoughts slip through my mind. I thought I would grow closer to God here.

Instead, I feel the pressing silence, notice again how quiet the world is without animals, how empty the trees are without squirrels.

A few days ago, I met two children, one in a t-shirt and shorts, the other in a frilly party dress. Beatriz told me they were not in school because their parents cannot afford shoes, and that the boy in the party dress has a family so poor they cannot afford pants.

They grinned boldly for my camera, pleased with the attention. Perhaps being unaware of one's misfortune is a blessing, even if the rest of us are calling it a curse.

## Patience and Beauty

*May 22, 2005*

Judite comes to the hospice, where I am spoon-feeding Joao-Carlos. She calls my name and gestures for me to follow. Through the exam room, I go to the hospital steps, where a lean woman stands, clutching the hand of a sweet-faced toddler in one hand.

When I reach them, the woman smiles.

“I am pleased to meet you,” she says in perfect English.

“Oh?” I am surprised.

“My daughter and I are from Zimbabwe. We have been here for several years, since the government began to redistribute land. Our economy was destroyed, and our money was useless. There was no petrol, no food.”

“Yes, I heard about what was happening.”

“My daughter was just a baby when I decided to leave. I came here, to live with my mother’s cousin. But there is not work for me here.”

I sigh. “It’s very hard.”

“I would like to show you something,” she says.

“Okay.” I am intrigued, a little confused.

The woman lets go of her daughter, reaches into her shoulder bag, and pulls out a small cloth. She kneels and spreads it onto the dirt, then extracts several small, paper-wrapped packages from her bag.

She unwraps them lovingly, laying out a carved stone nativity set and palm-sized stone busts of a man and woman in traditional dress, perfectly carved.

She stands. “I would like to know if you are interested in buying these from me. My husband made them. This was his trade.”

“They’re beautiful,” I tell her.

She nods modestly.

“Would you tell me your name?”

“I am Patience.”

I feel a surge of hope. Patience has come to me.

“And this is Beauty.”

I squat down to look at the little girl. “That is the perfect name for you,” I tell her.

Beauty pops her first and second fingers into her mouth and tucks herself behind her mother’s skirt.

I laugh gently. The sun is warm.

“Yes, if you are willing to sell them, I would be happy to buy them from you.”

Patience looks me squarely in the eye. “I would like forty dollars.”

“Oh...” I say, embarrassed. “I only have twenty right now.”

“I will accept twenty.”

“No, I’m happy to get more money. I can get meticaïs from the bank next time I go to town. I just don’t have that much money with me.”

“I will take twenty.”

“I’m not trying to bargain with you, Patience. I just need to go get the money. Will you be around here for a few days? If you can wait until tomorrow, I can give you the full amount.”

“Twenty is okay.”

“I will pay you the rest later,” I promise her, digging into my pocket and extracting my last bill.

“Thank you,” she says, and slowly wraps the carvings back up, bundling them in the cloth and handing the knotted package over.

“No, thank you,” I say. “These are perfect.”

“I have one more question for you,” Patience says.

“Of course.”

“Is this enough?” she asks, holding up the bill.

I look at her questioningly.

“My daughter and I need to come here. We have not eaten in three days. I am very weak.”

I don’t have any words.

“I understand that you can feed us here. And we will need testing,” she says with a lower voice. “We have not been well.”

Oh God.

“Is this enough?” she asks again, pressing the bill into my hand.

“You don’t need to give me any money.”

“I do. May we go inside?”

“Yes. Yes. I’ll show you where you can go.”

With Patience and Beauty following behind me, dignified and quiet, I reenter the hospital.

# Showering

*May 23, 2005*

The smell of the hospice grows stronger as I step under the trickle of water. It overwhelms me, fills my nose. I gag.

I reach for my soap, begin to scrub furiously. The smell is worse.

I focus on my hands, digging the soap in around my fingernails. I can feel the hospice under my fingernails.

I rinse them desperately. The smell is still there.

It is in my ears. The hospice is in my ears. I soap up the ridges of my ears, scour my face, work shampoo into my hair as quickly as I can. I scrape at my skin.

The more I work, the more I can smell it. It fills everything. It is in me. I cannot get it off.

## Blood Transfusion

May 24, 2005

When I return from rinsing the hospice patients' bowls out under the well, Judite calls for me to join her in the examination room. Patience and Beauty are sitting at the little table with Judite. Beauty is nestled against her mother's breast.

Patience looks up at me. "We were discussing my daughter, nurse. Judite thinks that she needs a blood transfusion."

"Oh? Why?"

Patience speaks to Judite in Sena, then looks back at me. "My daughter is very weak. You can see this."

"Yes, but there needs to be a reason for a blood transfusion. You thought she was malnourished, right? Or that the two of you might have HIV."

Patience winces.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to embarrass you. I'm just not comfortable with agreeing that she needs a blood transfusion when I don't know why."

Patience speaks to Judite again for a long time, then to me. "She says that my daughter's skin looks poorly. That she is pale. And she has been unwell lately. If she has malaria, then she might be anemic. This will help her anemia."

Judite's request—assuming she is correct about the malaria—is a reasonable one. Malaria can cause severe anemia, especially in young children. Anemia increases the chance of brain damage and epilepsy.

The little girl looks up at me with her deep brown eyes.

"*É malária?*" I ask Judite. "*Certeza?*"

"*Sim,*" Judite says, looking a little insulted. She has diagnosed malaria hundreds of times. There are no blood tests available in Dondo; we diagnose it by symptoms alone.

"Okay," I agree. "Assuming we have the materials."

Judite pulls her key out and goes to the cupboard. She removes out her blood-type testing kit and returns to the table.

Patience grasps one of Beauty's fingers and extends it to Judite. Judite extracts a soapy cotton ball from her glass jar and wipes Beauty's finger. She carefully pulls a needle out of a small tin and wipes the needle off, too.

Judite jabs Beauty's finger, squeezing the drops it onto her laminated blood testing card. One drop in the anti-A circle, one in the anti-B circle, one in the anti-Rh circle, and one in the control.

She pulls the antigen-testing chemicals out from another box, carefully adding a drop to each spot of blood: the blue bottle goes to the anti-A drop, the yellow bottle to the anti-B drop, and the clear into the anti-Rh drop. The anti-A clots almost immediately, but the other three spots remain liquid.

"A-negative," I say. Judite nods.

We repeat the test with Patience, holding our breaths. The anti-A clots, but so does the anti-Rh. Patience is A-positive. Incompatible.

Judite shakes her head, and speaks to Patience.

Patience turns to me. "Judite says that I cannot give blood to my daughter. I don't understand. She is my daughter."

"It can happen," I tell her. "It's complicated to explain, but it's normal for a mother to be a different blood type than her baby."

Judite speaks again. Patience tells me that Judite said she would give blood, but that she is A-positive, too.

Then three pairs of eyes are on me. I hesitate. The room is glaringly bright.

It is silent for a moment. I don't want to say it. But how can I not, when this little one is looking up at me so plaintively. My head pounds with worry. But how can I call my life more valuable than this little one's? How can I count my safety as being of more importance than her well-being?

"I am A-negative," I say. "I'll do it."

"You are...safe to donate?" she asks.

"Yes," I tell her. I hope.

Patience beams with gratitude, and tells Judite. Judite wipes the test card down, then cleans the needle with the same cotton ball. She holds out her hand to me.

Please, God. I extend my finger.

Judite jabs me hard and kneads my finger to get her four drops. Sure enough, the only circle that clots is the anti-A circle.

She nods, pleased, and takes me to the exam bed. She goes back to the supply cupboard and removes a glass bottle with a metal swing contraption and rubber stopper with a tube leading from it. She hands the bottle and stopper to me and returns to get the rest of the materials.

I examine the bottle and stopper closely. The tube has a Leur adapter on it, the same type we use to attach IV tubing. The metal swing can be hung from a hook, allowing the bottle to flip upside down to empty.

Judite fits a firm plastic straw into the stopper, so the flexible tube attaches to the straw, which reaches the bottom of the bottle. She inserts a short rubber tube into the second opening and fits the rubber stopper into the mouth of the bottle, securing it with a metal ring, not dissimilar from a canning jar.

Finally, she Luer locks a needle onto the tubing, then motions for me to lie back. I comply, closing my eyes and straightening my arm. She swabs my arm briefly.

The needle goes in easily but scrapes me as Judite shifts her weight. I open my eyes and indicate to her that I will hold the needle in place. She nods as I take over, carefully holding the needle in place.

Judite places the jar onto the floor as my blood dribbles in. I realize the short little tube must allow air to escape.

It takes a long time. I open and close my fingers, trying to get my blood to flow more quickly.

I am woozy by the time we are done, but Judite moves quickly, laying Beauty down on the bed and instructing Patience to keep Beauty still, handing her a cotton ball to clean Beauty's arm.

She switches the tubing from the straw to the ventilating tube and flips the bottle upside down. Now the long straw is ventilating

the bottle, and the blood can run out through the short tube. Pinching the tubing shut, Judite hangs the bottle from a nail in the cinderblock wall and slips the needle into Beauty's vein.

I am impressed. It's like battlefield medicine, so resourceful and practical. And I am appalled, knowing how risky this is, how far away this is from the tidy, evidence-based nursing practice I am accustomed to, all overzealous sanitizing and heaps of medical waste.

I sit quietly and sip from my water bottle as my head slowly clears. I can't tell whether Beauty feels better or not. Fear creeps at the edges of my consciousness like seeping water.

I can only hope that God, if he is at all involved in this, recognizes that we are all just trying to do good here.

## Jacob and Beauty

*May 24, 2005*

I realize immediately that the way he is holding her is not innocent, and I run to snatch the toddler away.

I rip her out of his arms, and he lets her come to me, blood dripping from her nose.

“What did you do to her?” I scream.

“You knew what you were getting into Rose,” he says. “Don’t act all surprised now.”

Panicked, I run out the door and into the dark outside, tumbling down the steps I hadn’t known were there.

I crack my head on the bottom step, rolling over with Beauty still in my arms.

She is wailing, still bleeding. I taste blood in my own mouth, realize that I have nearly bitten through my tongue.

I open my mouth to yell for help, and Beauty scrambles to get out of my arms, drip-drip-dripping blood into my mouth. I close it, but it is too late, and I cling tightly to the little girl, her blood and mine, mixing everywhere, filling my mouth, tasting salty and ripe.

## **Dan, Finally**

*May 25, 2005*

I can't help but run to my friend across the airport terminal. I collapse against his shoulder. He feels clean, strong, safe.

He pulls away from me, hands on my shoulders, laughing. "Isn't it incredible, Rose? Isn't it beautiful here?"

## **Robin Breastfeeds**

*May 26, 2005*

I am cradled against her, suckling hungrily on her breast. She looks down at me lovingly, stroking my hair.

“Eat, love,” she says.

Suddenly aware of what I am doing, I lurch back.

She presses me back against her. “You need to grow strong.”

I obey and take another mouthful, but am suddenly aware of a crawling sensation in my mouth.

I pull back again and spit. My mouth is full of snakes.

## Grilled Cheese

*May 23, 2005*

“I guess we need some sort of processing system,” Dan says. “I’m afraid I made a terrible mistake.”

I stare silently at my grilled cheese sandwich. I’d made one for both of us, using the soft cheese Beatriz and I bought in Beira and fresh bread from the bakery in Mafarinha. Dan wolfed his down, but I have no appetite.

“I don’t know what I was thinking, taking a middle-class nurse and plopping her down in the middle of Mozambique.” He sighs. “I didn’t know things had been so hard for you, Rose.”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Would you talk to me about it now?” he asks kindly. “I want to know what you’ve been going through.”

“Everyone is dying.”

“Yes, that’s why we wanted the hospice. People were being dropped off to die, abandoned on the steps of the hospital. No family wants anything to do with a person who has AIDS – or who even seems like they might have AIDS. We wanted to give them a way to die with some level of dignity.”

“But everyone is dying.”

“Can you explain what you are trying to say?”

I think about it before I respond. “It’s like...it’s like a war zone. To describe it gets repetitive, right? Today, oh, my friend got blown up. And yesterday I heard about somebody else dying. Maybe I didn’t even know them that well, but it’s this dark cloud of death that hangs over everything. And the whole time, I’m scared for my life. The whole time, I’m wondering if I’m next.”

He nods sympathetically.

“And I could describe each and every person to you, every time someone yelled in pain, or writhed on the bed, or coughed blood on me. I could tell you their names and their stories and who left

them and which lucky few have someone who still cares enough to sit by them while they die.”

I pull my hands into the sleeves of my thin sweatshirt, feeling chilly. “It would get tedious for you to hear about every moment, every devastating moment, every time I watched the lights go out. But what I can tell you is that it’s horrible every time. Every day is the same, and every day is its own trauma.”

Dan looks devastated. “I’m so sorry, Rose. I thought...I don’t know how to put this.” He pauses. “I thought you would be okay with this. I mean, don’t you see this sort of thing a lot?”

“Not like this! Not kids. Not people screaming to death, or drowning in their own fluid. That’s not how we do it.”

“I hope you can understand that I thought—Jenny, too—Jenny and I thought you were uniquely positioned to handle this. You have such passion for your work.”

“I can’t do it without *tools*, Dan. You have no idea what kind of resources I’m used to. Morphine, propofol, chux pads, goddamn gloves. I’m used to gloves.”

“Yeah, that one...I can’t believe they took your gloves.”

“But you know, I think I could have been okay without the resources. I think I could have even been okay without the gloves. But I can’t communicate with people. I can’t talk to them about what they need, or how scared they are, or find out what might comfort them. I can’t even say soothing things to people who are dying.”

“I see.”

“It would have made all the difference if I could have just *talked* to them. You can be a nurse with so-so skills and great people skills. You can be a nurse with great clinical skills and, you know, less than stellar people skills. Ideally, you have both. But there’s no way—there’s no way!—you can survive with neither.”

“I can understand that.”

“All I’ve done is stand here, helpless, while people suffer. And then they die. And I’ve done basically nothing. I’m just standing there watching people die.”

Dan runs his fingers through his sandy hair. “I—we—we failed you, Rose.”

I keep my eyes on the floor tiles, running my eyes along the dirty grout, back and forth, back and forth.

It is quiet for a long time.

And then Dan speaks again: “I do want to offer something to you. And I don’t know if this will help you, but I’d appreciate it if you’d hear me out.”

I nod, barely.

“You *have* done something. We have done something. Yes, to you, it feels like nothing. It feels like suffering and death and nothing else. And I don’t disagree with your perspective. But just to inform it a little...you have done something.”

I look up at him. My head is so heavy.

“Rose, a few months ago, these same people were literally dying in the hospital courtyard. When they started to get sick, their families wanted them gone. They were dying in the dust, with no food, no privacy, no one to clean them up.

“So I know you feel like you’ve done nothing. By your standards, the treatment they’ve gotten is inexcusable. But for them, for us here—this is something. Having a cot and a bowl of soup and someone to wash them, that’s something. That’s a step.”

I look back down at the tiles.

“I just want you to hear me, okay? You’ve done something. A big something. What they have may look like nothing to you, but here, it’s better. You’ve helped make it better.”

## Have You Heard of Africa?

*May 28, 2005*

The stars are so strange here. No Orion, no Big or Little Dipper, no North Star. It's disconcerting and makes me disoriented. I feel like I'm on another planet, so far from home.

I lay back on the concrete porch, staring up, trying to find some picture, pick out some constellation that is meaningful here.

There is nothing.

The wind in the palms sounds like rain to me.

"God," I whisper into the stillness.

Nothing.

"God," I say again.

I wait, thinking that if ever there were a time for a merciful creator to make his presence known, it is now.

"You know, people say you are good," I say, louder. "All my life, people said you were good."

I feel cold.

"I'm just wondering if you've heard of Africa. People say you are good, but have you heard of Africa? Do you know what's happening here?"

The stars don't answer. The breeze doesn't answer.

All I feel is the prickly concrete, hard against my back.

## Can You Smell This?

*May 29, 2005*

“Rose, I think you’re being a little paranoid.”

“I’m not. It’s all I can smell,” I say. “Please, just smell my hair.”

Dan leans over reluctantly. “Rose, you just smell like shampoo. I know you’re having a lot of anxiety, but really, you don’t smell like the hospice.”

“I do. I do. I kept trying to wash it off in the shower, but it just gets stronger.” My voice catches.

“Rose.” Dan wraps his arms around me. He should be clean and safe, but even the inside of my nose smells like the hospice.

I tell him this.

“I think it must just be so strong that I can’t get away from it,” I say. “I’ve been there almost every day. Three people died today. Three.”

“Rose, let’s just sit and eat, okay? We can talk. You’ll feel better if you get your mind off of it.”

“How am I supposed to get my mind off of it? It’s like being followed around by death.”

“Come, sit. Let’s eat,” he says, leading me to a chair.

He says grace and tells me to pick up my fork. I try a single grain of rice. It tastes like the hospice, and I nearly gag, but I don’t want him to think I’m losing my mind.

I choke down another bite, and then another.

“Isn’t that better?” he asks. His eyes are kind. My friend is kind.

I nod. I’ve never tasted anything worse. “Yeah, that’s better.” I take a tiny sip of my water. “Thanks.”

## Get You Home

*May 30, 2005*

Dan finds me in my room, sitting on the bed. I am staring at the place where the wall meets the tiled floor, where a little hole in the extends back, back into the cinderblocks. I wonder what lives in there. My head aches. It was a baby today. A baby.

“Rose,” he says gently.

I don’t look at him. If I do, I will cry. And if I cry, I will never never never stop.

“Rose,” he says again.

I keep my eyes on the spot.

He sits on the bed beside me.

“I’m so grateful to you for coming, Rose. But I think we need to get you home.”

I nod slowly, still watching.

“We’re going to put you on a plane in the morning,” he says gently.

I nod again.

“You’re going to be okay, Rose. We will figure all of this out. Jacob knows you’re coming, and he knows what you’ve been though, okay? We’re all going to figure this out together.”

He puts his arm around me, pulling me in to him.

I keep my eyes open wide, but a tear drips out onto my lap.

“I’m sorry, Rose,” he murmurs into my hair. “I wish...” There is a long, long pause. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

# Lapis

*December 10, 2005*

It is Lapis who comes to me the most. At work, or reading a book, or walking the dog, I hear the gasping. It is faint at first, then louder until there is nothing else, until all I can hear is the gasping.

And suddenly, he is with me again. Lapis, not yet thirty, lunges up toward the ceiling with the force of the force of his breath as he struggles to breathe through the mucous. He looks for all the world like a lizard, scaly and dusty, sucking in and out around his ribs.

The smell is live, its own breathing thing. Grangrene, urine, sweat. Mulch, rotting flesh. Blood, shit, worms.

Lapis is Catholic too, and his priest comes, with a little gaggle of nuns, to offer him Last Rites. They surround him, clucking like hens, clinging to their rosaries. It occurs to me that virginity is the only safe thing here.

The priest lights a taper, fumbles with Lapis' hands. Death is such an awkward, noisy thing. He slops wax onto Lapis' retching chest. Spittle flies from Lapis' mouth, and the nuns back up.

The priest unravels a rosary and twirls it through Lapis' fingers. His hand opens, and Lapis falls onto his back, lets the beads go. The priest picks the rosary back up, stuffs Lapis' head through the beads, jamming the crucifix into his mottled palm.

Lapis comes off the bed by a foot, the hospice filled with his screaming, interrupting the Hail Mary the nuns are trying to say. He finds the strength to howl.

They say, "Oh death, where is your victory?"

It's right here.

They say, "Oh death, where is your sting?"

Here.

Beatriz hears the commotion from the maternity room and comes in, standing near me. "Possession," she says casually.

I shudder.

“Demons,” she says as the nuns back up farther, drawing strength in their clustered distance.

“Pray,” she whispers, and capably with a string of words, she does.

Lapis quivers and yanks the rosary off. I am weak. So tired.

The priest makes do with knotting the rosary, now broken, around the rusting cot frame. The room quiets.

I don’t stay to watch Lapis die. I know what it looks like when they die.

Is there any difference, really, between AIDS and demons?

When I lay down to sleep, I am back on the concrete stoop. A man passes by, looking dejected, and an old woman picks through the grass at the roadside, bunching sticks together. The sunset is beautiful.

I will go back to the clinic in twelve days for the results of my test. I am haunted by the fear, sure I am about to drop dead. My feet are iron, stuck, and my stomach swirls with sick acid.

I obsessively check my mouth for white spots, review my body for flulike symptoms, symptom-checking my body, over and over.

I wonder if God watched Lapis die, if he was there when I couldn’t stand to be.

## Lazarus

*December 23, 2005*

It is 3:00am, and I am sitting at the computer in the nurse's station, thinking about hell. This is what I know about hell: there are children there, and they have brown teeth, rickets, protein deficiency. They are reaching for you all the time, reaching with their little hands, pounding on the inch-thick glass separating the two of you.

Behind them is a woman being beaten, bleeding to death, and she is looking at you like you have all the power in the world. You smash your face up against the glass, scream that you want to help, but she cannot hear.

It is just before dark in hell. Shapes are murky and liquid, and every so often a roach wiggles out from the dark spaces at the edges of your vision. It crawls across your foot.

You have not slept well in weeks. Your eyes burn and your thoughts feel slick; they slide away as you try to grasp at them.

In hell nothing is certain or definite. There is no sense of beauty here. There is nothing to say to God. It stinks. You are always waiting. You are hungry and hoarse and there is nothing to say to God, and there is this woman suffering in front of you, and these children begging, and even though you have everything, you are helpless.

My patient's alarm is dinging, and I go into her room. Her blood pressure is high, high. 190 over 140. She is awake again.

She was burned in a meth lab explosion. It was everything horrific: her daughter died, and of course she survived, but barely. The burns on her arms were down to the bone, fourth degree. Her hands had to be amputated. She has been here for five months, and she's become tolerant to the morphine and Ativan. It's getting harder and harder to keep her sedated.

“Julia,” I say quietly as I go into her room. Her face is fiery red and weepy. The bandages around her forehead are soaked in pink-yellow fluid. With no hair, eyebrows, or eyelashes, and her eyes taped shut, she barely looks human.

The tracheostomy makes it impossible for her to speak, but she gurgles at me as I approach her.

“You’re in pain?” I ask.

Her heart rate is 154.

I stand at her bedside. “I’ll ask the doctors again about upping your morphine. We’re doing the best we can...it’s just that you keep bottoming out, and they’re worried that we’re going to give you too much.”

When we get Julia’s pain under control, her blood pressure and heart rate will fall, fall down to scary low levels. 80 over 50, and 40 beats per minute. The physicians worry about the effects of the drugs. I worry about her pain. We go back and forth.

“In the meantime, can you try and rest? Just try and breathe, nice and slow. Try and pretend you’re somewhere else, on the beach somewhere, with your toes in the sand.”

It’s hard for me to get the words out, because I doubt she’ll ever feel that sensation again, if she ever has. She has a fungal infection in her wounds. It’s a losing battle.

Tears begin to seep out from Julia’s eyes. She tries to sob, but with no voice, ends up looking like she’s silently screaming.

My breath catches. I turn away from her bed, looking at the floor. I just can’t look at her right now.

I take a minute to get settled internally.

“I’m going to go talk to your doctor, okay, Julia?” I say. “I’m going to see what we can do for you.”

I go out and find Dr. Natoya, who is busy at his computer. I show him her blood pressure readings, explain that she’s waking up, that she’s not sedated.

“We can’t expect her to stay totally under for months,” he says practically.

“But she’s in *pain*,” I tell him.

“Yes, burns are painful.”

“She’s lost her hands and her face,” I say. “We have to be able to do more for her than this. We have to be able to do something.”

“I understand your concern,” he says. “But I can’t justify putting her at risk. I’m not comfortable with what’s been going on with her pressures. We need to stick with what we’re doing.”

I breathe out slowly and nod. “Okay,” I say. “Thank you for your time.”

Jacob and I have been talking a little more. We go for walks. Nothing is uncomplicated, much less perfect. Most of the time, I can’t find words for what happened, for what’s still happening. But he has been patient.

For Christmas I am planning to tell him that my test results came back negative. I am still achy and weak, and most of the time, feel like I am wandering through a scorched grassland, no relief in sight. My heart weighs a thousand pounds. I know I’m ruined, in a way, that I won’t ever be the same. But still.

Vanessa, comfotingly plump and always tender with me, is walking out of Julia’s room when I return to the nurse’s side of the station.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Her blood pressures were going crazy again,” Vanessa says. Her monitor was beeping, so I went in to check. She was trying to sit up in bed.” She shakes her head. “That woman needs about twice as much morphine as we’re giving her.”

I nod. “I just had that conversation with Dr. Natoya.”

“What did he say?”

“The usual. Worried about her blood pressure. Doesn’t want her to bottom out.” I rub my eyes. They’re tired. “But she keeps crying.”

Vanessa sighs sympathetically. “This is hard for you, isn’t it?”

I nod, a catch in my throat.

“It seems like it’s been worse since you got back from your trip.”

I nod again.

“Why is that? What happened?”

I cross my arms tight, digging my fingernails in my bicep to keep my voice steady. “It was just...a lot of suffering. Pretty much only suffering.”

“You have a big heart. That’s why it’s so hard for you,” Vanessa offers.

I shrug. “I just wanted to be able to do something. And I couldn’t. There was nothing I could do...all these people kept coming to the hospice, and I just sat there and watched them suffer until they died.”

“Mmm.”

“I kept thinking if I only had what I needed, I could help them. If I just had there what I have here—or even a little bit of what we have here—I could have actually helped them. But there wasn’t anything...there wasn’t *anything* in that hospice.”

Vanessa moves closer to me, puts a gentle hand on my tense forearm. “There’s nothing that can save us from the human condition, baby.”

“What do you mean?”

“We have all this technology, and all these drugs, but sometimes, our job is still to hold space for people while they walk that road. We can’t cure everything. Cancer, abuse, the burns that go bad, those terrible accidents we see...we can’t fix it all.”

“But we can try.”

“Mmm-hmm. And we do try. And sometimes it works, and that is a blessed good.”

“But sometimes it doesn’t.”

“No, sometimes there’s nothing we can do but be there. And that’s life. If we’re lucky, we find something beautiful, or somebody to love. But we all walk that same lonely road in the end. It means everything to have a friend walk with us, or a friendly face by the road.”

I let her words sink in.

Still, none of it makes sense. None of it is fair, or makes any sense if there’s a God anywhere, because it all seems to be more chance and where you happen to be born than anything else.

Some of us see suffering and rise to the unstated challenge, to bring some beauty into it. Some of us are Beatriz, taking everything in with a grin and a shrug. Some of us are Robin, accepting nuance and contradiction with a perfect practicality. Some of us are Horacio, high-mindedly thinking of the proximate causes and ultimate goals. Some of us are Dan, all ideas and bright hopes about what could be.

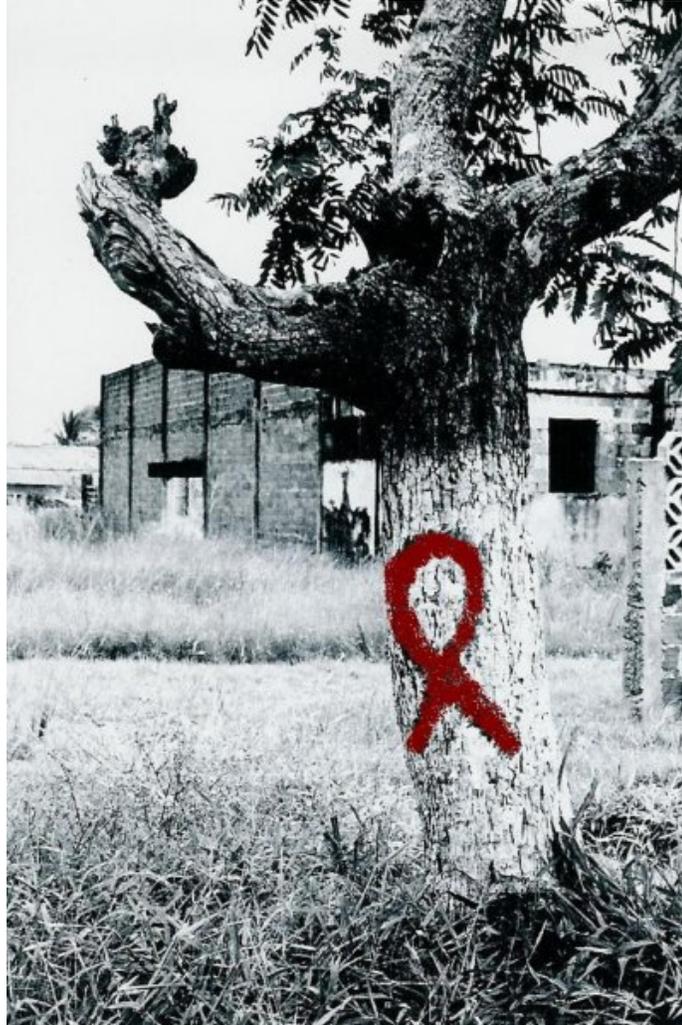
“Rose,” Vanessa calls me back to the present. “The monitor is beeping again.”

Some of us are me, whatever that might mean.

I take a breath, and head back in.

# Why Go

## Discussion Guide



1. Consider the totality of Rose's experience as she embarks upon her trip to Mozambique, from travel logistics to food to religion and spiritual practices. What differences stand out? Was she prepared? Is it possible to prepare for cultural immersion of this sort?
2. Mefloquine hydrochlorine, or Lariam, is frequently prescribed as an antimalarial drug. Nightmares, anxiety, and depression are well-known side effects of the drug. A small percentage of patients develop symptoms that resemble obsessive-compulsive disorder.
  - (a) Were Rose's symptoms related to the drug, or to her experience?
  - (b) Given the known side effects, are the risks worth the benefit of the drug?
  - (c) What ethical considerations must prescribers consider when discussing potential side effects of medications?
3. What does it mean for nurses to *provide care*? What aspects of the nurse's role are required for the provision of nursing care? Consider concepts of competency, specific skills, necessary supplies, and effective communication?
4. Discuss the ways in which Rose's experience as a burn nurse influenced her work in Mozambique.
  - (a) Identify existing skills she had.
  - (b) What skill deficits became apparent?
  - (c) Was Rose's nursing care in Mozambique enhanced or impaired by her previous experience?
5. How does Rose's perception of the concept of *wealth* influence the meaning she gives her experience? In what ways might *wealth* be defined in Mozambique as compared to the United States?
6. Discuss indications of Rose's increasing psychological stress.

7. How does the concept of *self-care* apply to Rose as she considers her trip to Mozambique? What resources are available to assist Rose with the challenges of working as a nurse in a developing nation?
8. Consider Robin's statement that Rose's nightmares and anxiety might be a healthy response to her situation. How might you interpret Rose's response? If her response is viewed as unhealthy, what might be a healthy response to Rose's circumstances?
9. In what ways might suffering differ for patients in the AIDS hospice in Mozambique as compared with patients in the United States?
10. Robin argues that the biomedical model of care is only one belief system in which to view health. She states that physiology, spirituality, mental well being, bad decisions, and luck can intersect with the theory stating bacteria and viruses cause sickness.
  - (a) What examples in from Rose's experience indicate a different model of care is present in Mozambique?
  - (b) Describe the philosophy of health held by various characters in the story: Rose, Beatriz, Robin, Horacio, Dan, and Judite.
  - (c) What is your philosophy of health?