

An Orphan's Tale

Category: Stories

written by Peter Ferrarone | July 27, 2012

Peter Ferrarone

At the outset, I confess that I have no experience in the medical field. I'm not a doctor or a nurse; I'm a recent college graduate, a writer and someone who's interested in the world. And, all last summer, I was a volunteer in Uganda.

I'd met a Ugandan priest who was visiting the States on a lecture tour. He described his work overseeing an orphanage located in Western Uganda, a day's bus ride from Rwanda and Kenya. When he invited me to go and help out there, I accepted.

Upon arriving, I discovered that the orphanage was a small, broken-down concrete house perched on a hill above a muddy soccer field. The building had four bedrooms and no running water. The yard featured a wandering mountain goat and a smelly outhouse with a faulty latch.

Fifteen orphans lived there—eight girls and seven boys, ages eight to twenty-one. In summer, when the schools let out, as many as ten more children came to stay.

Life at the orphanage ran along unusual lines: There were no adults on hand, so the oldest orphans ran the show, enforcing the rules and budgeting the orphanage's meager funds. Every week, they inventoried the food supplies, then bought at the market accordingly.

Emelda, the head orphan, was nineteen, with steel-grey eyes, high cheek bones and a straight-set jaw. She was jovial and welcoming, but with an underlying seriousness. As the younger orphans swirled about her, laughing and yelling, I watched her watch them with a guardian's quiet intentness. She told me that I'd have a roommate: a nine-year-old boy named Eric.

When we met, Eric was sitting on the living-room floor, eating a bowl of ugali, maize porridge. He was cute, with great round eyes and a bright smile, and although his conspicuously distended stomach bulged from his slight frame, he seemed lively and healthy.

Although Eric didn't know any English, Emelda told me, he was brilliant for his age. Abandoned to live on the streets at age four, he'd nonetheless managed to pick up Swahili (which with English is Uganda's official language) and other local languages.

Despite our inability to talk with one another, Eric and I instantly became friends. Like many of the orphans, he seemed fascinated by the novelty of my white skin and would stare at me, transfixed.

I wasn't allowed to help with the housework. The domestic sphere was strictly the women's preserve; when I stole the broom and began to sweep the floor,

everyone laughed at me. So I spent my days playing games with my housemates and helping them to learn English. Between times, I worked on my writing.

The orphans' lack of luxuries didn't keep them from enjoying themselves. Every night, after dinner, they'd gather around the small living-room television and dance to American music videos. Eric, clad in a white tank top and yellow soccer shorts, enjoyed moonwalking to Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. On sunny days, he and I would play *gube*, a Ugandan version of marbles, on the hardened dirt in the yard. Whenever he beat me, which was every time, he would laugh exultantly.

I soon realized that, despite the orphanage's spartan conditions, there was genuine love and concern for one another within its walls. Even I, a stranger, felt loved and wanted—and that made it a home to me.

A few weeks after my arrival, Eric got sick. I didn't find out until nighttime, when the power went off (a common event). Stumbling around in the dark, I came upon Eric lying in bed, his face illuminated only by a small candle, his chest rising and falling sporadically. A group of orphans gathered round, watching and dabbing his forehead with a cool towel.

"Eric, drink this mango juice," Emelda urged, but Eric fell into feverish semiconsciousness.

In the three days that followed, most of his "siblings" seemed indifferent to his plight. Ivan continued to get drunk at night and pound on the gate at 4:00 am to be let in; Innocent still went home with the girls he'd met at the local bar, putting himself at risk of contracting AIDS, which had killed his father.

The female orphans looked after Eric, supervised by Emelda. Day by day, as Eric grew weaker, Emelda kept trying to contact the adults who supposedly oversaw the orphanage. Unfortunately, the priest was in Italy on business, and no one returned her calls.

At last, Eric just lay in bed, unable to eat, drink or speak. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"He's kissing the grave," Emelda said sadly. We tried to console her, pointing out that she'd done her best.

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That night, in desperation, she contacted a local doctor herself. This breach of

protocol might get her expelled from the orphanage, but bold action was needed.

We all sat and waited in the dark.

Finally, there was a knock on the door. It was the doctors, coming to take Eric to the public hospital.

Over the next few days, I got to know this facility well.

Situated down a dirt road, it had ten separate wards connected by cement walkways. Beside the walkways, patients lay sprawled out on foam mattresses or bare ground. Here and there, newly washed doctor's uniforms and green scrubs dangled from clotheslines.

The children's ward was oppressive, thanks to the summer heat and a bathroom whose door stood ajar. Eric's metal bed stood between a mural of lions and apes. All about him, rusty metal beds cradled sick babies in various stages of dying.

Seeing Eric there, I felt guilty. A few miles up the road there was a private hospital with much better conditions, but the orphans couldn't afford it.

The doctors ruled out malaria; they diagnosed Eric with typhoid—two strains. They found this perplexing, until Emelda told them that when Eric was living on the streets, his parents had taught him to quench his thirst with water from dirty waste bins. Even now, although the orphanage had clean water, he still preferred running to the local dump for a drink.

Determining the right drug dosage (based on age and weight) was a struggle. Eric, delirious, insisted that he was twelve, but his weight was that of a five-year-old. In the end, the doctors set his age at nine—and, whatever his real age, Eric gradually began to get better.

On Eric's third day there, his father showed up.

Ignoring his son, he looked at the floor.

"Who's going to pay the bill?" he asked.

Emelda scowled. *Why are you here?* her eyes said.

"The orphanage will pay," she said.

As quickly as he'd come, he left. Eric simply smiled at us all and sipped his juice.

Two days later, he came home.

I heard the front door swing open. Eric walked right into our room and stood there, grinning from ear to ear. Too shy to look me in the eye, he let me put

my arm around him.

Over the next week, as he recovered, he continued to seek me out. I'd buy him a soda, then we'd sit side by side on the concrete bench outside the house, watching straw-hatted farmers herd their cows home at sundown.

Reflecting, I realized that despite Eric's ordeals, he was lucky. Most of his hospital roommates hadn't made it. Thanks to the courage and caring of Emelda and the others who loved him, Eric lived.

Before my return to America, I threw the orphans a party. Emelda and I brought home bags of fresh food from the market: watermelon, banana, beef, goat, rice and beans. Chicken was the orphans' favorite, but it was so expensive that they normally had it only once a year, at Christmas time. I bought them more chicken than they'd ever seen at one time.

The women spent the whole day cooking the food. That night we ate, danced and watched music videos. The orphans insisted that I take pictures with my camera. Many of them had never seen one before: They roared with laughter when their images appeared on its small digital screen, and I promised to send them the photos when I got back to the States.

The next morning, Eric stood with the others on the veranda as I told them, in English, that I was leaving and thanked them for their kindness in having me there.

As I prepared to go, Eric smiled and hugged me. Only later, most likely, did Emelda explain to him that I'd left for good.

In ten years, Eric probably won't remember the man who stayed by his hospital bed day after day. But I'll never forget him.

For me, becoming his friend and playing a role, however small, in his recovery from illness were the best things I did during my time in Uganda.

About the author:

Peter Ferrarone has a BA in English literature and is now at San Diego State University pursuing a certificate in English as a second language. "My goal is to one day combine my wanderlust with my love of writing nonfiction and creative nonfiction."

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