

A Girl of Iron

By Izabella Watkins-Gray

“I chose the women as subjects because I think that the women reveal the condition of the society.” JR

For a ludicrously brief moment I was weightless. My eyes flicked open before I thumped back into the steel tray of the Ute and remembered where I was and why. I had come to see the family I had been supporting for the past year and four months, because in spite of the updates and the thank you notes from Save the Children I wanted to see and touch and immerse myself in something *good* for once. I twisted to see the guides I had entrusted with my location and security. A strained shout came from the overcrowded cab of the Ute when the driver noticed me staring: “Nother half an hour.”

I lay back and closed my eyes again; the Ethiopian sun beat against my eyelids. Finally I accepted that the potholes were ceaseless and it was best to simply ride them.

I assume half an hour later I was nudged awake by one of my fellow travelers, an older woman. Swimming groggily to the surface of my consciousness I could only see her eyes, pocketed in dark folds. I extracted myself from the coil of rope I had been sleeping on and collect my pack and she is gone. “This way.” gestures my guide.

Loose gravel crunches beneath my feet and I notice, again, the poor repair of the road. *I suppose nobody here has use of it.* There are sprawling houses, most made from mud and sticks with cement supports, haphazardly sprouting along the road. We head for one with two children drawing in the soft dirt outside, I recognise the little girl. Her name is Ekua and she is supposed to be eight but she has the physique scrawny five year-old. I couldn't remember the boy's name, but I knew he was only six. You couldn't tell how tiny she was in the photographs, but playing next to her brother who was so much bigger, her malnutrition was obvious and staggering. “That one.” The guide points to the shelter Ekua and her brother were playing near. “Thank you, but before you go, why is Ekua's brother so much bigger than her?” The guide's face remains expressionless as he replies, “He was the boy, his father died and he is the man and the man eats first.” He turns and leaves after

collecting his fee. I can't remember if I was baffled, angry or just disappointed. I think I was all three at once.

I approached the house and introduced myself, the girl, Ekua knew little English and told me her brother was Taye. I sat and played with them for a while, chatting with Ekua about her school, which was in the next village east. She said it was a long walk, but not as long as some. Her favourite class was maths because it was the same in all languages and it didn't confuse her. Although she was small, Ekua had presence, her eyes were dark pools like the ocean at night, back through time. Her brother Taye continued to scratch in the dirt.

Suddenly there was a sharp cry from inside the hut.

"What was that?" I jumped.

"Ma's having the baby!" Ekua responded, sensitive to the situation. I'm sure my shocked white was stark in contrast with hers. "She told us to wait outside," she looked up, "but I am worried."

Taye was burying sticks upright in the dirt, creating a spear ring for the stick men he'd placed inside.

"Let's go see what's happening, Ekua." I said, offering her my hand. Taye still didn't look up.

I had to duck through the low door. Ekua's mother was lying on a woven mat it was the only thing separating her from the dirt floor, there was an older woman either side of her and one especially old medicine-woman crouched between her legs. When they heard me enter they looked around simultaneously and the medicine woman started yelling in a language I didn't understand. Now I know it meant "cursed". Ekua dropped my hand and hurried to them, explaining, I assume, that I was a friend and the family's sponsor. They all calmed, and although the medicine woman glared at me, the woman to Ekua's mother's right smiled and beckoned. I came and sat behind Ekua who was supporting her mother's head in her lap and speaking gently to her. I had been at one birth before, my sister had a daughter a few years ago, and she was struggling far worse than Ekua's mother was now. My sister had been demanding a spinal tap and screeching in white-knuckled pain. Ekua's mother, in comparison looked calm and determined, crying out only during the contractions, although the brows around her were all furrowed and the women were muttering in displeased Oromo, and the one to her left wouldn't stop shifting, from the birthing woman to the pile of incense and boiling coffee, back to the birthing woman. The woman to the right asked Ekua to translate for her and told me that the mother's name is Ashanti,

this is her fifth child and she has done better with previous pregnancies, except her last one, she lost the baby, and nearly herself to a hole in the vaginal wall, fistula, she called it. She was Ashanti's mother, this baby was to be her grandchild and she was scared. She took my hands between hers and held them to her chest, as if praying. Through the language barrier, she begged: would I please, please take Ekua as a guide to the next village over, where her school is, and collect the midwife, Lesedi, who lives there

When Ashanti cried out there was no language barrier, when the old woman's dark face paled, and her hands came up slick and reddish brown, there was no language barrier. And when Ashanti's mother looked at me with palpable fear in her eyes, there was no language barrier.

I found myself hand in hand with Ekua again, walking, endlessly beside her. I didn't know where I would end up but I went. The sun was high when I first asked how far away we were. "A while." She said, and she kept walking. Ekua who had been so calm, was frightened, her eyes wouldn't leave the ground in front of her. Her father had died of AIDS only months ago, if her Mother died, she would have to take care of her little sister, Sitina, and her brother. Their Grandma couldn't take them. They would be alone. She was scared for her mum and for her brothers and sisters, for herself. She told me that the doctors said that the fistula formed when the baby had been inside too long, because Ashanti's hips were too small, they said that it let feces into the vaginal canal, and drowned the baby. I could swear that Ekua's tears sizzled silently where they fell.

The sun was setting when I spotted the silhouetted buildings against the rolling scrub that passed for the landscape, and Ekua muttered, "that's it". Eventually we came to a building exactly like all the others in the village. Ekua knocked while I stood back, people there hadn't easily trusted me so far. A man came to the door and spoke with Ekua briefly, then looked up at me. He held my gaze. Quickly he turned and barked, "LESEDI", his gaze turned back and fixed on me again

A woman younger than me came to the door and said goodbye to the man. As she left she wrapped a shawl about her homely shoulders.

"Come on." Her voice was sharp and kind. She had a brisk pace and we set off hurriedly. The sun had set and a big moon had come out. Suddenly I was frightened. I was in a foreign country, with a girl and a young woman, walking at least three

hours at night. *Literally anything could happen*, my mind whispered, *you are all but alone, you are vulnerable*. I was accompanied by a little girl, who was made of iron, and I couldn't stop thinking about myself. I was with a young woman, in a nightdress and a shawl, who had taken it upon herself to *hopefully* save the life of a woman and child she had never met, and in order to try, she was willing to traverse an unstable county at night, all but alone, and there I was, the messenger, petrified. *I am disgusting*, I had thought. I was overcome with grief for humanity and gratitude for the good people in the world and I realised that the people I had met that day were probably some of the bravest I was ever like to meet. "Thank you." I said, into space. "It's my job." Lesedi replied. Ekua said nothing. "How is she?" The Midwife asked. "She was bleeding when I left, and it looked dirty. She had a fistula with her last pregnancy. She lost the baby." Lesedi took note, grim. "The girl is Ekua?" she gestured to Ekua, small beside us.

I nodded. "Ekua. What did your mother do about her fistula?" Ekua looked up and said, "She went to the Hamlin Hospital, they fixed her, they said to come in if she was having another baby, so they could look after her. But Papa had died, I think she was sad, she didn't want to go, there would be no one to take care of us." "How did your Papa die?" "AIDS."

Lesedi was silent for a moment, and then simply said, "I'm sorry Ekua. I will try hard with your mother."

Nobody spoke for a long time after that, we just kept walking. The soil was soft and mostly sand and the moonlight danced off the crests, left from the footprints ahead of me. Occasionally Lesedi's large prints overlapped with Ekua's shallower, ghostly ones.

This time the village crept up on us, pale moonlight washed over it sucking colour from the already grey sprawl of the village. Ekua gulped like a fish when she saw it, her eyes shimmered and her pace quickened and she was off, scrambling home. Lesedi and I scampered forward too, exhausted. When we are about 200 meters away we heard a scream and Lesedi looked at me and said, "That is good. She is alive."

Ekua disappeared into the house and we broke into a run, beside me Lesedi's white night gown streamed behind her and for a moment, as her toes leave the ground, she is an angel. When we arrive Lesedi enters first and by the time I'm through the she already has command of the room, even the old medicine woman listens to what she says. Ashanti is very nearly in the peak of her labor, she is crying and the strong steel woman has begun to rust. She is gleaming with sweat and tears that reflect the

dim fire. Lesedi is speaking in Oromo, I hadn't even realised English wasn't her first language. Lesedi calms Ashanti down and asks me to leave.

I mustn't have been outside long, for I watched the moon meander across the sky, but when I heard Ekuia cry out in anguish through the concrete walls, I knew that I hadn't been fast enough.

Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 5A, is to reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio. With the assistance of skilled staff at births and increased access to both prenatal and postnatal care, this goal is achievable, and of the MDG's it has made good progress. "The maternal mortality ratio dropped by 45 per cent between 1990 and 2013, from 380 to 210 deaths per 100 000 live births."

Bibliography:

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