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Let Us Now Praise Famous Women

Erin Rhoda
Honors Thesis
2006
Professor Tilar Mazzeo

LET US NOW PRAISE FAMOUS WOMEN

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Joanie Rhoda.

Introduction

The girls and I changed into our running clothes in the locker room. It was late in the cross-country season, and the chill of winter had not yet blown through Waldoboro, although we could sense its approach. Our legs were tan, our hair still streaked with the sun's highlights. In a flurry of arms, knees, and chatter, we steered ourselves outside, into the orange haze of trees caught behind a thin rain.

“Run for an hour,” our coach said in a thick Maine accent. He wore knee-high socks and loved us, although it was our friendship and determination that won cross-country meets and not his training techniques.

We ran single-file through the branches and past the swollen moss, a train of beautiful, young girls with the world wide open. We were careful stepping over the fallen leaves because they hid rocks and roots and were slippery.

We wound deeper into the woods until we had run a mile. In the front, I slowed and stopped. Turning around, smiling, I said, “Let's do something different today.”

They grinned. “Like what?” Melissa asked.

I thought for a moment. “Let's go exploring.”

We looked at each other and agreed. With no coach or adult, we were free to make our own trail in the woods. We sang all the songs we knew—“America the Beautiful,” “Baby Got Back,” and the soundtrack from *The Little Mermaid*—loudly.

We veered off the trail and onto a narrow deer path to the left, stretching between our world of homework and one-year-left-before-college and that other world of never before. It was not really a path but a suggestion of a path, and we found ourselves crawling through a thick canopy of pine trees. They made an archway above us, and it was as if we were children creeping through a tunnel of overturned couch cushions and blankets. When the pines ended, we entered a forest of maples; the path had disappeared.

Then, a giant tree rose before us, and we stared, our chins rising upward. It was more than 200-years old and was tired of standing. We were delighted with its grandeur. “We have to climb it,” Courtney said, as she grabbed a hold of the bottom branch and hoisted herself up.

Since then I have moved away from home, and I graduate college at the end of May. That is all I know of my future. I am standing on all of my life: my red farmhouse in Washington, Maine; my mother and father who stoop under the weight of my dreams; my high school with its sinking foundation; my friends who are also my family; my college of red brick; my teachers, and it is a tall mountain, but it is not tall enough for me to see past May 28, 2006. And we never really know what is approaching us. We are running through a beautiful fall wood, but the path changes as we sink deeper and deeper. Perhaps we will turn away from it; perhaps we will climb high.

Courtney clambered up the tree until she could go no further, and the other girls quickly followed. They hooted and shrieked, and soon they all looked down and realized I had not joined them. I grinned. “What?” they all shouted. “Come on!”

“We can’t come here and not leave anything!” I said, tilting my head.

“We don’t have anything to leave!” Melissa hollered.

I laughed as I turned my back and took off my shirt and didn't think of all the women around the world who, at that moment, were lying unclothed with their lovers, their husbands, their firsts. Val let out a catcall. Then I slowly took off my sports bra, and the girls whistled at my bare back. "What are you *doing*?" "Take it all off!" "Dear God, put it back on!" they shouted from their perches. I put on my shirt and faced them. "Here!" I said, holding up my bra. "We can leave this!"

They passed the bra up the tree to Courtney, and she tied it to the highest branch she could reach. In this way we defaced the giant tree, leaving our mark for as long as the life of cotton. Perhaps the tree groaned at us and shook her head as we made our way out of the forest, back to boys and grades and restlessness.

A few of us did return to the tree in the spring, and there, waving tattered and brown, was my bra. It had survived the winter and the birds and the rain, and we were happy. But we also knew that the Bra Tree marked an end. We grew up in those woods, but none of us has ever returned and probably never will. We have all moved on to college, some slower than others, each girl finding her own way, her own self, exploring the world and the people in it. However, I think the woods and that tree and especially that bra exist in a different place now. That is what I want to be when I am old and dying: a crazy thing flying high and clinging tight, well-used and indecent, a friend to porcupines and girls.

This is a small collection of stories about remarkable women whose experiences go above and beyond the scope of everyday life. While I find inspiration in many women around me and while I understand the importance of heroism in ordinary things—raising

a baby, driving an hour to work everyday, or scooping out the tidbits in the bottom of the sink—for the purposes of this essay, the women needed to be different. The women in this collection have experienced tragedy.

After Hurricane Katrina, Mary Gehman was stranded on an overpass for four days with prisoners. Margaret Mundia, a woman from Zambia, takes care of twenty-seven children, eight of whom are her own and the rest of whom are the children of her dead brothers and sisters. Zamzam Mohamud is a Somalia refugee, making her way in Lewiston, Maine as a Certified Nurse's Assistant. I want people to read these stories so that they may learn about the suffering and also the endurance of these women. Their stories are truthful and beautiful in the face of their very affliction.

Writing this collection of journalistic nonfiction has come at an appropriate time for me as I head out into the world on my own. I still don't know if or where I'll be working. I don't know if I'll be an intern or employee or if I want to go to graduate school in the future. The world is wide open before me, and that is a scary thing. However, these women have been assuring and guiding me. Meeting and interviewing them has taught me that life is subjective. They have shown me that everything we own can be lost in an instant, that life—family, freedom, happiness—is more precious and more fragile than we may think. These women are not superficial; they are sincere and wise. I would consider myself blessed to have a fraction of their strength, and, indeed, it is their characters to which I aspire. Each woman has suffered loss, but each woman has also gained a new, deeper perspective on life. They are the ones who, from my point of view, are flying high and clinging tight—with views from the crown of the forest.

Mary Gehman
Sixty-two years old
New Orleans, Louisiana

I cannot understand what Mary Gehman has lost in Hurricane Katrina. I have tried to picture her molding house, tried to imagine her mistreatment, and tried to comprehend her overall loss, but I simply cannot without having experienced it myself. However, even though most of us have not witnessed Hurricane Katrina, we can still relate to suffering and loss. We can understand the need to tell our tale and to dispel our misfortune with words. A tragedy is only made worse by never being acknowledged.

Over 1.2 million people evacuated, but sixty-two year old Mary Gehman was one of the few thousand who remained in New Orleans. Coverage of Katrina spanned every station on television, but she refused to listen to the news because she figured newscasters always blew storms out of proportion. The mayor announced a mandatory evacuation on the evening of Saturday, August 27, which meant that anyone who stayed in the city would receive no help from city or state agencies, but Mary assumed she would be safe and back to work by Monday. As an English professor at nearby Delgado Community College and a landlady with two buildings bought just two weeks before, she felt connected to her community and figured if her century-old house was sturdy enough to survive tropical storm Cindy it would do fine in this hurricane. She also had two aging, outdoor dogs that would be difficult to transport in her Jeep for days. Her tenants were poor and had spent their government checks by the last week of the month, so they had nowhere to evacuate to and no means of getting there if they had. At least Mary would not be alone.

On Sunday, however, Mary questioned her decision to remain in the city, especially after watching the national news and then realizing that some of her friends, who had said they would stay, had decided to evacuate anyway. Giving her two dogs to a friend, she packed a bag and headed out of New Orleans on Airline Highway. Her gas gauge indicated slightly less than half a tank, but she figured she could stop at a gas station along the way. However, not a single store or gas station was open. Besides a few police cars, she saw no one. It was then that she realized it was too late to leave. She did not have enough gas to make it to the next gas station, and being stuck on the highway during the hurricane was a frightening prospect. She turned around and headed back to her house. Her dogs were glad to see her.

That night she slept on the downstairs couch, away from the upstairs, which shuddered in the gale storm. She woke to a mist of water spraying her from the window next to the couch: rain was driving in horizontal sheets against her house. The wind began lashing her five shutters against her house, so she tied each one closed with telephone cord from her toolbox and was almost lifted away by the strong winds. She realized her dogs were in the back shed but didn't want to risk the merciless wind and rain, so she called their names over and over again until they crept toward her and into the kitchen. Their ears lay back on their heads in fright, and they paced the floor, moaning. Until 3 p.m. the next afternoon, Mary rushed around her two-story house with its shotgun floor plan, soaking up water with towels and placing buckets in strategic places to save her hardwood floors and furniture. Her efforts would later prove fruitless.

On Monday afternoon, the storm miraculously stopped, and Mary breathed easier. She had been right to stay, she thought. Outside, water rolled by her front porch like a river, but she was confident that the city's pumps would kick in soon.

On Monday evening, however, the water rushing outside her front steps turned black and began oozing under the door and filling the first floor of her house. The 17th Street Canal levee had broken, and all the mechanics had evacuated the city, so there was no one to fix the broken pumps. She could do nothing but haul everything—the family Bible, valuable paintings, furniture—from the first floor to the second, coax her dogs up the stairs, fill her bathtub with clean water, and fall asleep, exhausted.

She awoke at 3 a.m. and shined a flashlight down her stairwell. The water had risen two feet in the night. She realized she might be trapped upstairs for a few days, so she braved the murky water to get food, fresh water, and other items. The floor boards were warped under her bare feet; the linoleum was soggy. She made trips piling the water jugs, packaged snacks, canned goods, apples, a half-eaten carton of ice cream, a plastic bag of frozen blueberries, dog food, and newspapers (for the dogs) on the stairs. Twice, she slid on the slippery steps and hit her tailbone and elbow.

By 5 a.m. the water had risen above her dining room table. She left her shelves of books and her grandson's toys in the oily murk downstairs and walked out onto her upstairs balcony. From her view, the entire neighborhood swam in a lake of dark water. Her eyes blurred with tears. She could hear the voices of her neighbors calling to each other, and a motor boat churned down Tulane Avenue. Helicopters criss-crossed the sky, and somewhere down below, Mary heard a woman yelling.

With horror she realized that one of her tenants, Ms. Jane, was standing in her front doorway, up to her midriff in water. There was no attic in Ms. Jane's house, and she was not strong enough to ax a hole to her roof. She had been standing in the water for hours, calling for help. A next-door neighbor saw Mary and yelled across the way that he was trying to get a rescue boat to stop for Ms. Jane. They decided that Ms. Jane shouldn't swim because she had no where to swim to, and they were not sure she would make it anyway, given her weight, heavy smoking, and age. Mary waited on the balcony, talking with Ms. Jane for two hours, assuring her that help would come. Several boats with passengers passed by and said they would return, but they never did. Just as Mary was beginning to give up hope, an inflatable dinghy from the sheriff's office appeared and headed toward Ms. Jane. Rescuers pulled her over the edge, and she collapsed in the bottom. Mary never saw her again.

That afternoon, Mary realized her house was not safe. Not only was she the only woman on her block, but the water was putting extra stress on the structure of the house, and a large crack was forming on her bedroom wall. She also heard boards snapping in other places throughout her house. It sounded as if it was about to collapse. Radio commentators repeated over and over that all people remaining in the city should leave. But they did not say how.

By 3 p.m. that Tuesday, Mary decided she had to get out of the city. She packed a small backpack with her laptop, important papers, passport, key to her bank deposit box, a change of clothing, and a small water bottle, and climbed onto her neighbor's roof, located directly next to her balcony, to look for rescuers. It was dusk when the Bossier City firefighters motored through, and Mary was forced to leave her two beloved dogs

behind. Their eyes haunted her as she petted them one last time, and she began to cry as they sped away on the dark lake. One of her rescuers wrapped his arm around her shoulder and said that he would return the next day to shoot her dogs, so they wouldn't suffer an agonizing death of starvation and dehydration. Mary does not know if he ever fulfilled his promise, but the dogs were gone when she returned five weeks later.

The firefighters picked up five more people who lived in D. Primm's Christian mission program for drug rehabilitation. A man named Earl, who lived in the house next to the mission, also climbed aboard, and Mary was happy to see a familiar face. Earl had done yard work for her rental houses, and she knew him well. They moved slowly up Broad Street around submerged bushes and cars until they arrived at the Broad Street overpass. The rescuers assured Mary and the others that the Red Cross would provide them with food and water. They also said that buses would come soon to take them out of New Orleans.

On the overpass, there were about 300 civilians and 100 inmates from Angola State Prison in orange outfits, guarded by armed sheriff's deputies. There were also about 200 members of the deputies' families, making about 600 people spread along the quarter-mile of on and off-ramps and the overpass.

One old woman had not been allowed to bring her wheelchair in the boat, but someone had found a red-upholstered arm chair and had moved it onto the overpass. The woman sat in it, unmoving. There were babies, many elderly, a few people with dogs, and prisoners handcuffed in pairs—an odd assortment of humanity.

Mary waited, but no buses came, even when it grew dark. From where she tried to sleep on the concrete curb, with a dirty pillow given to her by Earl, Mary heard roars

coming from the prison complex near the overpass, now in total darkness like so much of the city. Without air-conditioning, the air inside the prison complex was foul, and several prisoners had punched out windows to breathe, a deputy said. Mary saw a mattress on fire pushed half-way out a window. Prisoners shouted for help, believing they had been left behind. A deputy said people had been killed.

In this chaos, Mary could only wait and try to remain calm. However, she waited for much longer than she ever expected. No buses came that night. In fact, they never came. She awoke in the night to sounds of helicopters circling overhead, throwing light onto the bedraggled people. She assumed they were watching the hundreds of prisoners who had been evacuated onto the roadway. At one point, Mary woke up to the sound of running water: further down the overpass, the male prisoners were standing in a line, relieving themselves over the edge of the railing.

The rescue boats had dropped off Mary and the other civilians at the overpass because it was the only high ground available. They were not supposed to be there. The day became blisteringly hot, and Mary's little water bottle was empty. There was some food for the deputies, their families, and the prisoners but nothing for anyone else. No one was in charge. The deputies said the prisoners must be evacuated first. Until then, no one, including the deputies' families, was going anywhere.

The deputies were over-worked, demoralized, and exhausted. Their supervisor Sheriff Marlin Gusman had ordered them to work around-the-clock and had told them to bring their families along, instead of letting them evacuate. The sheriff himself was nowhere in sight. The families had stayed near the prisoners' quarters in the prison during the hurricane and then had been escorted with them through waist-high water on Tuesday

morning—small children and elderly alike. Some were sick and needed medical attention.

During the day, Mary could still hear the prisoners yelling in the tall detention building. There were rumors that prisoners had drowned in solitary confinement on the bottom floor of the prison. Some whispered that prisoners had tried to escape only to be shot and tossed into the water to rot. Inmates were panicking and rioting, breaking windows to get air and burning mattresses to get attention. There was little food for each inmate—a baloney sandwich and a small bottle of water a day, a deputy said. Some of the prisoners had been on the overpass all night because the buses could not make it through the water. Mary saw the buses parked on the I-10 roadway below, waiting for someone to figure out how to get the prisoners to them.

After a couple hours, motorboats and airboats arrived to ferry the inmates in groups of five to the buses. The prisoners, still handcuffed in pairs, had to walk down the overpass and climb over a three-foot high lane separator to the boats and then onto the buses. Needless to say, it took hours. Mary waited anxiously, knowing that she was stuck on the overpass until the prisoners evacuated. She worried about finding food and water and began scrounging around the accumulating refuse on the side of the overpass. She managed to salvage some scraps of a leftover MRE (Meals Ready to Eat)—strawberry jelly, some pasta. Where will I find my next meal? she wondered. Thoughts of survival began to consume her.

Luckily, a woman named Linda called over to her. Linda was the sister of one of Mary's tenants. She reported that the roof of the house had collapsed during the storm and offered Mary a bottle of water. "How are you doing?" she asked, smiling. Mary did

not have an adequate answer, but she was grateful for the water. Then, her attention turned to an older man who was moaning. He was alone and wearing a life vest. When Mary approached him, he said that he was diabetic and needed insulin or at least some water. She gave him half her water, which he drank immediately, thanking her profusely. Mary asked about the life vest, and he said his sister lived on Washington Avenue. He was going to try to swim through the high water. Mary eyed his aluminum cane, which he leaned on heavily. “How will you make it?” she asked.

“Why do you think I got this life vest?” he replied and then added, “In the water my legs work fine.”

Mary had her doubts that someone who could barely walk could swim for blocks, but she let him go.

Next, she met a group of Guatemalans, two women and three men in their early twenties. They had been quiet before, but when she started talking to them in fluent Spanish they brightened and began asking questions: When would they get food and water? How long would it be before help arrived? They confided in Mary that they were undocumented aliens and feared that they would be denied help because of their status. Mary tried to assure them and said she would let them know when food and news were available. She could not imagine being in such a predicament without knowing any English.

Later in the day, two young men waded through the neck-high water carrying bottled water, packaged snacks and canned goods, which they sold at high prices to the people on the overpass. Mary knew that the items were stolen, but she was grateful for the sustenance of a can of Dole fruit salad.

Mary was also thankful to meet Laura, a thin white woman who had been sitting on the curb with a green shirt draped over her head. Mary mistook her for a missionary at first, but when she sat down to talk, she realized they both had much in common. Laura was an artist and only lived a few blocks from Mary. They had never met before, but they had both moved to the diverse community because it was affordable. Both women had made many wonderful friends in the neighborhood but were on their own on the overpass. Mary and Laura's friendship would last until the end of their ordeal together.

As Wednesday night approached, Earl, her neighbor showed up, surprising her. She had thought that he and some others had left the overpass for good. Indeed, they had tried to leave and had gotten as far as the Superdome, foraging for food and water. "You don't want to go there," Earl said about the Superdome. "Nobody should go there."

His group had wandered back to the overpass because it was the only high ground available. He handed Mary several bottles of water and a package of peanut butter crackers for dinner. All of it had been stolen, but Mary did not care. On a stranger's battery-operated radio, she overheard that hundreds of people had been raped or murdered at the Superdome—facts which would later prove false. Maybe the overpass was the best place to be, she thought.

Sometimes, though, it was hard to tell where she would have been safer. The deputies looked like zombies, and their families were complaining. A black female deputy had a screaming match with a white male colleague that escalated into a race issue and ended with the woman throwing down her badge and quitting. Other deputies simply never showed up for duty. Mary did not relish the thought of remaining on the overpass with prisoners and splintered law enforcement. Thursday morning, however, she awoke

from her concrete bed to the sight of a fresh crew of guards wearing white shirts with dark blue bullet-proof vests. Several carried long rifles, and their barked orders were much more persuasive than the previous deputies'. When Mary asked who they were, she learned that probation and parole officers from around the state had been called in to relieve the overworked deputies.

The Guatemalans were very thirsty and begged Mary to find water, but Mary did not know where to look. Miraculously, though, a few minutes later she spied a man selling bottled water. However, when the Guatemalans tried to buy some, a deputy stepped up and tried to handcuff the salesman. The water had been stolen from the prisoners' supply, he said. It was a crime to steal. An angry crowd quickly formed. "It's not a crime to let people die of thirst?" they asked. "We have elderly and babies. Some of us are sick." Their protestations did nothing to stop the arrest.

In contrast to the deputy's unfairness, Mary noticed a tall, dark-skinned man. His voice rumbled when he spoke, and he had a long, graying beard and wild hair—an imposing character. However, he sat by his fragile, ailing mother all day, holding a plastic bag above her head to block the sun's glare. He spoke to her softly and with affection, the child now the parent. Mary thought he exemplified the Creole spirit of New Orleans.

That afternoon, a deputy informed Mary that boats would be arriving that evening to take all the civilians off the overpass and onto buses bound for Texas or Arkansas. The prisoners were gone, and he said the Superdome had been evacuated. They were next. Still, that night no boats came.

Something did come that night, though: helicopters. Military helicopters flew back and forth over the overpass, shining their lights on the people trying to sleep. No one knew what they were doing or what they were trying to protect them from. Near midnight, however, one of the helicopters dipped lower, and then silvery cartons fell out of it, onto the overpass. The cartons contained MREs (Meals Ready to Eat), so Mary rushed to grab one. It contained barbecued beef, pasta, crackers, a can of juice, and a delicious container of apple-cranberry sauce, which she shared with her friends.

After the meal, Mary could not sleep. She wandered to the top of the overpass and looked out to the skyline of New Orleans. Describing the scene, Mary told of how “Clouds of smoke rose from several angles, and there was an acrid stench coming toward us. I felt I was viewing a graveyard, the demise of a once vibrant and beautiful city, reduced now to nothing. In that incredible sadness was also mixed uncertainty and fear as to what would become of all of us. Would we also go down with the sinking city we so loved?”

Friday did not dawn with much hope. Helicopters continued to fly overhead, but they ignored the mass of stranded people on the overpass. Boats motored through the water below, but none came in their direction. Mary was astounded that no one could help. She saw an obese woman hyperventilating in the heat and realized she could not sit and wait any longer. She had to do something.

With Laura, Mary found a large piece of white canvas and, together with the children, they wrote in big letters with crayons: “DYING. HELP.” Whenever a helicopter flew by, they jumped up and down and waved, but no one seemed to notice them. They were about to give up when, hours later, a helicopter finally showed interest and

maneuvered onto the overpass, amid a rush of applause and tears of joy. The sick were put on the first flight, and then several motorboats arrived, manned by Texas Wildlife Rangers. Mary was one of the twenty evacuees to climb aboard. She was exhausted but utterly grateful to be safe. She would never know if FEMA had finally gotten word of their situation, if the deputies had reported to a higher authority when they left with the prisoners, or if it was her own efforts that saved her and many others.

As the rangers motored through the city, Mary did not recognize it. Suddenly she realized just how devastated the levee break had been. Cars and houses were submerged, and she could only imagine what would be left after they sat for weeks in 100-degree weather. Life would never be the same, she knew. The rangers left Mary and the others in front of the Public Library at Tulane and Loyola and were told to wade across the street to wait on a median for a bus that would bring them to safety. The water came up to their thighs and smelled of salt and vomit.

After half an hour, the bus still hadn't come. A National Guardsman came by and asked why fifty people were standing on the side of the street. When they explained their plight, he told them the only buses that were leaving New Orleans were at the Superdome. The only way to get to the Superdome was to walk or, rather, swim. Mary and the others waded through two and a half blocks of water to get to the Superdome, feeling their way over curbs and steps, often falling. The water was black, and they tried not to think of what was in it.

When they got to the Superdome, the closest entrance was barricaded with a chain. There were no signs and no one to ask directions. A passerby told them that they would have to walk through the water to the front entrance, and then they would have to

wait in line for four days for a bus because there were so many people. Mary and her group were fed up. After being told nothing but false information for days, they ignored the man and constructed a ramp over the four-foot wall to gain entrance to the large veranda-like plaza around the dome where thousands of people waited in the single line that had formed for the buses. Water was available but no food. They were told that MRE's would be distributed at 5 p.m., but getting one would involve losing one's place in line.

It did not make sense to have Mary's six friends waiting in the hot sun at the same time, so they rotated turns in line. As Mary waited in line, she tried to make sense of her situation. National Guardsmen, newly arrived from Iraq, patrolled the quarters. Mary stopped one to ask what exactly was happening and was told there was one line now, but that it split into five lines later. Another guardsman said there was only one line, that fifty people at a time were being put on buses, and that there were enough buses for everyone. Mary was not sure whom to believe.

When Mary was not waiting in line, she took note of her surroundings. Children romped near an open area, which was dotted with makeshift tents made of towels and sheets. Some people played cards. Many people wandering around were severely disabled or had mental problems. Some talked to themselves; others drooled. She saw two men doing a dance, leaping into the air and shouting. At first she thought they were performing an African tribal dance, and then she realized they were probably experiencing the effects of drug withdrawal. There were also a number of drunken people roaming. Mary assumed they had looted stores for the liquor.

Mary heard stories from people who had survived in the Superdome for a few days. They said that there had been at least one rape, which occurred when a girl left to relieve herself in the dark. There had also been at least one suicide by a young man who had jumped from a railing several floors above. They were tragedies, indeed, but the media had blown the situation out of proportion, reporting many more incidents than had actually occurred. While Mary was at the Superdome the atmosphere was more one of frustration and exhaustion than fear.

At 6 p.m. the line reached an open plaza and dissolved into a mass of people pushing their way toward the buses. Mary and her friends stuck together in the suffocating mob for two hours. They had to climb over debris—mattresses, curtains, bed clothes, folding chairs, military cots, and hundreds of empty water bottles—and were shoved along with the elderly, children, pregnant women, babies in strollers, and people almost too sick to stand. In the extreme heat, it was difficult to breathe, and they had not eaten all day. Some people, including many elderly, had been standing for hours. Mary remembers one middle-aged woman, alone, bracing herself against the crowd, tears falling silently down her cheeks. Mary could think of no words to offer comfort.

When she got close enough to a National Guardsman, she asked him why no one was controlling the crowd. He replied, “The Army is in charge of getting you all out of the Dome and on to buses.”

“Then why isn’t the Army doing anything to help us?” Mary asked.

“We don’t talk to the Army, and they don’t talk to us,” he said. At first Mary thought he was joking. Then she realized the truth: no one really knew what was happening or who was in control.

Suddenly, Laura cried out in pain. Her back muscles were spasming. The stress of the past week was wearing on her and everyone else. She continued to suffer extreme back pains as they waited. From ahead, someone yelled into a megaphone: “We’ll take 500 more people for the night.” How would they reject the 501st person? Mary wondered. Would she be split up from Laura? Would she have to sleep in the Superdome for the night, accosted by the smells of urine and feces? As she neared the front of the line, Mary saw that soldiers were directing people behind a barricade. Finally, and to her extreme relief, the gate to the barricade opened in front of her, and she was free of the mob.

In a surreal finish, they sloshed through the water to reach the bus, which was headed to Dallas. The bus driver greeted them with a cheerful smile and said in his Texas drawl, “Welcome aboard. You all must be very happy to be on the bus.” Maybe it was his naïve smile or the fact that he had no clue what they had experienced, but Mary lost it.

“Happy?” she yelled. “Why should we be happy after what we’ve been through? We’ve been treated worse than cattle. We’re exhausted and have been through things you can’t imagine, and you expect us to be happy?” She burst into sobs. She had reached her breaking point. Her family still did not know where she was or if she had even survived. She did not know if she would ever see her life’s work of research or writing again. She felt closed in by depression, fear, and exhaustion.

It was daylight when Mary arrived at a Baptist Encampment outside of Dallas. Sixty volunteers stood around the facility, applauding as everyone disembarked from the bus. Each evacuee teamed with one volunteer as they walked through the security check, discussing what they needed. Mary could not stop crying in the face of such kindness.

A Red Cross coordinator asked Mary if she had called her family yet, and she said no. She was too emotionally fragile to talk to them at the moment, so the coordinator made the first contact. “She’s all right,” she told them. Mary gathered the courage to stop crying and take the phone, and she heard, with the utmost relief, the voice of her son. “She’s safe! She’s ok!” she heard her family shouting back and forth.

The next morning she flew out of Dallas to Little Rock to stay with her family. She fell apart at the check-in counter at the airport and tried to explain to the puzzled clerk that she was from New Orleans and that she’d been through the hurricane. The captain walked with her to the gate, offering comfort and words of advice. She was going to be all right. She was going home.

However, Mary Gehman still isn’t home. She is once again living in New Orleans, but she is staying with friends. She does have her house and some insurance money, but no one is returning to her neighborhood, so she is reluctant to repair her house if she will have no neighbors or if her land will be sold to developers. Six months after the hurricane, even the nearby Taco Bell and a large office building sit ruined and empty. Rent has doubled and tripled, and the city is not providing her with direction. “When I first got off the overpass, I had never thought I’d be sitting in limbo six months from then,” she said. “I don’t have any answers.”

It is difficult to find a positive side to Mary’s story. She did experience amazing kindness from the other evacuees on the overpass and the volunteers in the evacuation center, but she also experienced appalling neglect from officials—and she still does not have a home. She has lost her belongings, beautiful dogs, sense of security, vibrant city

and, in general, a way of life. “I don’t think there’s much hope for middle-class people like me,” she said.

Perhaps Mary Gehman does not yet feel hope. Indeed, her story reminds us all of the enormous work that will be required to rebuild New Orleans and restore order to people’s lives. Forgetting about the survivors of Katrina would be to visit upon them a second tragedy.

**Margaret Mundia
Forty-eight years old
Kaoma, Zambia**

I was already drenched in the smell of Zambia, the smell of sweat and impossibilities, and I had only been there for a day. I sat on a fold-out seat in the bus and watched the burned landscape slide by my window. The way the branches bent, the trees on the horizon looked as if they were collapsing under the weight of the sky. My thoughts were building on each other, trying to surface, but I smothered them and kept staring out the window.

I was exhausted from the time change, and the new landscape, culture, and people left me feeling overloaded and suffocated. The men and women of my church, Prince of Peace, chatted in their tiny seats, their legs squashed by the seats in front of them, and I wondered how they could chatter when there was so much of the country to absorb. *Keep staring out the window. Don't start thinking about the disparities between this country and yours because you won't stop.* Our luggage towered above our heads, swaying, daring us to go over one more bump.

“The people here are just so wonderful,” Lynn said, enjoying being the center of attention. “They have so much more faith than we do. Wait till you meet Margaret.”

Lynn was the trip leader. Seventeen of us, mostly from Midcoast Maine, were going to build a house in rural Kaoma, Zambia with Habitat for Humanity International, a religious group, and she had been to Zambia six times before. She was fifty-five years old, and she dressed in hot pink. She was an expert.

“We could learn a lot from them,” Lynn continued. “Every time I think of them, I just start to cry. They love God so much.” She wiped her eyes.

The other women tilted their heads and sighed sympathetically. They patted Lynn’s back. My eyes returned to my window as I tried to block out their conversation. *It’s going to be a long three weeks.*

I had not expected the overwhelming constraint of religion. I had gone to church every Sunday for twenty-one years, but that was because my family went, not because I felt a strong desire to know God. Church was a caring community for me and was more social than personal. The Habitat group dynamic felt forced. Since I was part of their small group, half of whom were my fellow church-goers and the other half of whom were believers from other neighboring churches, I was expected to hold the same beliefs as they. And I didn’t. The prayers of Lynn and the other women seemed empty. They were just words. Their tears of love for God seemed just tears, nothing deeper. What inside of them so desperately needed to be filled? Didn’t they see the children wandering Lusaka by themselves? Didn’t they know that a quarter of Zambia’s population was dying of AIDS and that the average life-expectancy was thirty-seven years old? Their belief in a beautiful God and what I knew about the world did not match. Outside my window, women carried bananas or sacks of charcoal on their heads, their babies curled into their backs, wrapped in *chitenges*. *How are the women walking on the hot tar without any shoes?*

After six hours of driving, our bus wobbled into Kaoma. As we drove down the dusty road, we were greeted with a sea of black faces, and we gawked at the grass-roofed huts and cement stores or stands with names such as “God Knows” and “That Store.” The

people walked in the road in front of our bus. They were thin, their clothes were loose, and their gaits were long and slow. There were no other vehicles.

The first time I saw Margaret Mundia was when we pulled into the Lynn Women Empowerment Center, which Lynn had financed through personal fundraising. A flock of women and men stood nervously outside our bus door, and Margaret pushed through them, with a smile, to get to Lynn. They squealed and wrapped each other in an embrace, and I was surprised how similar women of two very different cultures could be.

Margaret wore a black felt hat even though it was eighty degrees, and her cheeks bunched into little black plums when she smiled. She wore a black and white checkered skirt and a long shirt with Mickey Mouse on the front. She shook hands with everyone in our group, and I had no idea what she did or who she was, but I could tell she was the one in control. She stood up straight, and her motions were calm and precise—as if she was wearing an imaginary crown.

Inside the center, baskets and colorful clothing lined the shelves. The women of the village made the products in order to learn skills and earn money for their families. They did most of the work at night after their routine day's work was done, which meant they made everything in the dark because there was no electricity. And they never used patterns for the clothing. They simply took measurements and drew the patterns freehand.

That night, while the women in the center sewed clothes we had ordered, we stayed at the village guesthouse and ate dinner by candlelight. Most of the women in my Habitat group refused to eat the meat because they didn't know what it was. They examined the meat with their flashlights like scientists discovering a new species. It could

have been mouse or cow, but I gobbled it up because I was hungry, and I took seconds of the kale, rice, and tomato sauce.

The group chatted, but I didn't know what to say, so I sat quietly and listened. I was still sorting out my feelings about Zambia. That morning, I had seen an old man sitting on the side of the road, without a shirt or shoes. He was white with dust, and his open eyes were empty. He could have been dead. I took more rice. Later, I learned that the guesthouse workers ate the food that we did not finish. Still, the guilt could not make me eat less for their sakes. I needed some way to remind myself that I was alive; I needed to be full. My emptiness was created by the people's poverty, but it was something more, too. It was the fact that they had hope in the face of death and despair, while I shunned faith in the face of my comfortable life.

Over the next two weeks, dinner became our story time, and I gradually learned from Lynn the story of Margaret: Margaret was forty-eight years old and had twenty-seven children. Eight of them were her own, and the rest were the children of her dead brothers and sisters. Her husband had beaten and then divorced her, leaving her with a mangled left hand and a deaf right ear. However, she still ran her own farm, managed a honey and farm stand, directed the women's empowerment center, and was head of the Zambian affiliate for Habitat for Humanity. She also organized funerals and taught AIDS-awareness classes—all with a tenth-grade education. Some of her children went to college in Lusaka, an unheard-of feat in Kaoma. The villagers went to her when they had any problem because she could generally find a solution. There were many things, though, that she could not fix.

During the day, we built a house out of cement blocks for the Kabita family: a mother, a father, and six children. Even though the purpose of our trip to Zambia was to build this house, we came away having learned much more than how to stack blocks, mix mortar, and set windows. The day after we finished building the house, the father died of tuberculosis. The news traveled by word of mouth and reached me in the comfortable cement-floor hut where I was staying. He had died in his old house, which was the size of a minivan, in the dark, on a thin mattress, covered in blankets, while his children and wife slept next to him. He had drowned in the liquid of his lungs in one of the driest parts of the country. *Death here happens all the time. Just don't think about it. Don't cry. His children will be okay.* We took our group photograph outside the finished house the next day, and no one smiled because the Kabita women were mourning directly outside the frame of the picture. The children were too young to understand, and they were the only ones who smiled.

One morning earlier in the week, I was walking to the building site, thinking about how I'd been too busy to write in my journal, when I almost bumped into a family who crossed the road in front of me. I started to greet them—“*Muzuhile cwani*”—and then realized that the father was carrying a bundle wrapped in a *chitenge*. The grandmother looked at me with eyes of stone. I realized what the bundle was and walked the rest of the way in silence.

At dinner on Thursday, Lynn told us a story she had heard from Margaret of a young woman who had recently miscarried. Her husband had brought her to the hospital in a wheelbarrow, and by the time they arrived the woman was sitting in two inches of her own blood. There was no anesthesia, but the medical personnel had operated anyway

to extract the baby. She didn't cry once. When they were done, they wrapped up her dead baby, gave it to her, and sent her on her way without even giving her a day to recover. The woman sat outside the hospital walls alone, holding her dead baby, and waited for her husband to come out of the bar. Not only had he not even bothered to accompany her into the hospital, but he had made her wait by herself just after losing her baby and undergoing an excruciating procedure—to drink Mosi beer.

The women in my group had tears rolling down their cheeks after they heard the story, and I saw how indulgent and inauthentic they looked, so I held in mine. *They didn't know the lady. They are just crying to make themselves feel better and to get attention.* Deep down, though, I knew that I should cry, too. I needed to get out the hurt. But, for some reason, maybe because I was still trying to be strong or because I did not want to submit myself to their ideology, I could not cry. My insides shriveled up instead.

On Wednesday, we toured the hospital with Margaret. We were in the children's ward, listening to the hospital official talk, and in front of me lay a boy covered in blankets on a metal bed with his father next to him. The floor was stained, and the beds looked rusty. There were no lights. I knew that the boy must have been very sick because people in Kaoma did not go to the hospital unless they needed to desperately. The entrance fee was twenty-five cents, and most families could not afford it, especially for such limited medication and no electricity or running water. Generally, the hospital was a place where people went to die.

There were other children in the room, but I could not look at them. They had no privacy, and I felt as if I was intruding. After a few minutes, though, I managed to look up at the boy, and his father met my eyes and smiled. *Smiled.* Not a fake smile, but one

with trust and hope. He was comforting *me*. When my tears began to flow, I tried to hide them. I did not want Margaret or the patients to see and then feel sorry for themselves. I did not want to take away attention from where it was needed most, and I especially did not want the women in the group to comfort me and tell me not to worry, that God would take care of everything.

On our way out of the hospital, I noticed some words written on the wall, but they had been slightly painted over in an attempt to make the place brighter: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” There was also a suggestion box. *What are people going to suggest?* “Stop the government from being corrupt, so they can afford to buy you a generator, so you can have electricity to do operations, so people won’t revolt”? Or, “Stop being poor so you can afford to build more than one outhouse for the entire hospital”? How about, “You only have two doctors to care for every patient, so hire the six doctors you need with the money you don’t have”? The irony astounded me.

We heard a story at dinner that night, as we all sat around the long, candle-lit table in the guesthouse. That day, Margaret had taken two women to volunteer in the elementary school. As they were walking, they had approached a stray dog, and Margaret had told them to walk on the far side of the road because the dog was known to bite white people. So the women walked in the ditch, and Margaret walked in the middle of the road, between them and the dog. Later, the women learned that the dog did not just bite *makuwa*; he bit everyone. Margaret, even though she had her own children and village to take care of, had put herself at risk to protect the women. She was not attacked, but she would have sacrificed her wellbeing, even her life, for them.

The next day, Margaret and I cooked lunch for the group. We bent together over the fire, stirring *nshima*, boiling cabbage, and frying a recently-killed chicken. Little sparks of grease exploded from the pan with the chicken, and I don't think she even realized she did it, but Margaret stepped in front of me to keep me from getting burned. The grease landed on her arms instead. Anyone else would have jumped away from the grease, but she moved toward it to protect me.

On Sunday, we attended church in a long grass-roofed hut on the other side of the village. There were a hundred people there, but the pastor read the service in English for the dozen of us. Before we could take communion, we filed out of the church, and the women and men split into two groups to do the foot-washing ceremony under the mango trees. I did not know what was happening, so I stood to the side and watched as women paired off and filled shallow buckets with water. They then removed their shoes and took turns washing each other's feet. After they were done washing, they knelt and prayed. I felt awkward and out-of-place, but I was in no position to refuse Margaret when she grabbed my hand and guided me to a bucket.

I unbuckled my sandals as I sat on a hide stool, and she picked up each of my feet in her hands and rinsed them with water. She rubbed off the grime with her fingers and then dried my feet with a small, faded towel. Others looked on.

"Thank you," I said. I was about to stand up, but she stopped me.

"Pray with me please."

We knelt on the prickly ground, and she wrapped her arms around my shoulders and bent her head next to mine, so only I could hear her prayer.

“Bless this day, Father, as you have taught us to do, so we might serve you. Thank you for giving us Erin, Father, so that she might do your will. Give us peace and love in our hearts, so that we might be a blessing to others. I thank you for all that you have given us and continue to give. God’s will be done. Amen.”

“Amen,” I added, beginning to stand again.

“You must pray for me now, Erin,” Margaret said calmly, pulling me back down. She pronounced my name like “Irene.”

I faltered. I knew I had come to Zambia with Habitat, a group affiliated with Christianity, but I had not come for religious reasons. I had come to explore the world and to do some good. I was still figuring out my religion. It was not something I could accept unconditionally. I had prayed as a child, though, and I could not let Margaret down, so I bent my head to hers and began: “Dear God, thank you for giving us this beautiful woman. Thank you for all that she does and for giving me this opportunity to come to Zambia and get to know the people of Kaoma. Thank you for this day and for the children. Amen.”

I could not tell if Margaret sensed my doubt. She simply looked at me and nodded. It was the first time I’d prayed in years, and my heart was not in it. I felt like an imposter. I had believed in God as a child, but the church had lost its meaning for me. I could believe in beauty, truth, kindness, and love, but I could not devote myself to a God who allowed innocent people to die, poverty to flourish, women to be beaten, and disease to spread. And yet, the smell of Margaret with her arms around me would not leave. It was the smell of dirt, blood, and hope. She had accepted me into her life as if I were her daughter, even though I was of a different race, age, and background. She had spent the

past three weeks with us, building the house, protecting us, guiding us around the village, and all for no pay, while she had a house, an empowerment center, and a village to run.

Who was I to deny her God?

In the last moments before we left Kaoma, as we all stood in a circle outside the women's empowerment center, Margaret gave each of us an African name. "Erin," she said smiling, "Your name is *Lilato*. It means 'Love.'"

I did not realize it at that moment, as I hugged Margaret with tears streaming openly down my face, but now I am beginning to understand that, just as one person can have many names and speak many languages, there are perhaps just as many different religions or beliefs. They include not only overriding religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism, but also hope, perseverance, and *love*—creeds without the often suffocating baggage of history and institutions. They are personal and spiritual, inherently a part of us and only need revealing.

In my three weeks in Kaoma, I saw only one Zambian cry, and that was on our last day. It was Margaret, and she cried because we were leaving. "Now you know that even Margaret can cry," she said to us, as she rubbed her eyes. Out of all her suffering, our departure was the source of her tears.

During dinner on one of the previous nights, Lynn had told our group how Margaret had confided in her, saying, "Maybe one day I will be able to get a night of sleep." She planned it in her head and continued, "I think that in two years I will be able to rest." I don't know how it is possible to lie down when you have twenty-seven children. And yet, she had hope. Even though the burden of a country rested on her shoulders—she had wrapped her children on her back, walked for miles with a ten-gallon

bucket of water on her head, shouldered the battered, defeated women of the village, bore the fists of her husband, endured the loss of her friends—she could envision a better future. *That* was something in which I could believe.

I leaned my head against the bus window as we drove out of the village, and the men and women in the street were so close to me as we passed that I could have reached out and touched them. The group was silent as we gathered speed, even as the packed bags swayed above us. I fought the urge to close my eyes and, instead, looked through my tears to the horizon to make sure the trees still held up the gray-blue sky.

Zamzam Mohamud
Thirty-one years old
Mogadishu, Somalia

It's raining as I speed along the highway toward Lewiston, Maine, and trees have not yet grown their spring leaves. I depart Waterville at 5:30 p.m. when people are leaving their jobs as accountants, chemical engineers, professors, and sales clerks. At 6:00 p.m. I drive through Augusta, Maine's capital. The roads are smooth; there are many buildings made of wood, cement, or brick; and the road lights are working.

In Mogadishu, Somalia, it is a *tangambili* period. The temperature is 95 degrees, and the air is humid. There is no cooling breeze from the Indian Ocean. In the Jubba and Shebelle river valleys, farmers herd their cattle, camels, sheep, and goats. In the north, people fish for tuna and shark. In the south, workers harvest bananas on the many banana plantations. Many more people are without steady work, but unemployment statistics are unknown because the last census was taken in 1975.

In Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, men, women, and children wait for a new government, which they hope will restore order to the country. At the moment, they live in anarchy, controlled by rivaling warlords. Some people live in makeshift tents or in Somalia's ministry buildings, universities, or the former airline headquarters, which have become refugee camps. There are many holes in the buildings from machine-gun fire. Some of the roads have become swamps from the heavy rains and are impassable.

Maine is one of the five safest states in the United States.

In Somalia, many people carry guns to the market.

I arrive in Lewiston and drive past Marden's and the fitness center to a complex of apartments. This housing is cheap and respectable, and many Somalis live here. I knock on the door of one of the apartments, and a girl opens it. Her smile radiates. "Hello, my name is Hanan," she says. "Please come this way." She leads me through the small kitchen to the living room where her younger brother sits on the couch.

"Hi, I'm Jama," he says, and we shake hands.

Hanan is fourteen-years old, and Jama is twelve. They have never been to Somalia because they were born in a refugee camp in Kenya, but their mother has told them stories from when she was a girl. Hanan, Jama, and I watch "Home Improvement" and talk, while we wait for their mother to finish a phone conversation upstairs. I tell them about Colby, and Jama tells me he wants to be an engineer one day.

Zamzam Mohamud, their mother, walks down the stairs, smiles, and I can tell where Hanan learned her smile. Zamzam wears a long dress with patterns of red, black, and white. Her dark hair is in one braid. With her children, we sit on the couch, turn off the TV, and begin our talk.

A life is a precious thing that must be lived and is never accurately explained. I feel like an intruder. How hard it must be to explain to a stranger, someone she has never met before, all she has experienced in her thirty-one years. But Zamzam is relaxed as she speaks in accented English. Her laugh is long, loud, and sincere, and her eyes are kind. She loves her children more than anything, it is clear. Their pictures are the focus of the room, and she speaks of their accomplishments proudly.

There has been some form of civil war in Somalia since 1977, so Zamzam and her three brothers and sister grew up in a country of turmoil. Her father died of polio when

she was two, leaving her mother to raise a family on her own. As a child, Zamzam was part of the seventeen-percent of children in Somalia to attend primary school, but life was difficult in the Hodan section of Mogadishu: electricity and food were intermittent, and they fetched water from the river nearby, which was not always clean. For fun she sewed, played games with her friends and neighbors, and attended circumcision ceremonies and celebrations.

“We had electricity,” Zamzam speaks softly. “Not every time. But we had kerosene lamps and lights. And just when I was young, up to ten years, I remember fetching water from the river. They were nice people, but everybody was poor. We would sew together or play with stones or dolls and read Qur’an together.”

When she was fourteen-years old, her aunt and uncle arranged a marriage for Zamzam. Zamzam’s mother did not want her to have an arranged marriage, but her older sister had more authority and knew the husband’s family. Two years after her engagement, Zamzam was married to Mohammed Ahmed Mohammed. On her wedding day, men and women from both families gathered together, introduced them, and told them they would be married that night. Zamzam wore a white dress and was married against her will.

After her marriage, Zamzam moved to a hut of mud and bricks in a different section of Mogadishu. By 1989, President Siad Barre became more worried about being overthrown as his power diminished, and so he used terror tactics to gain control. Torture and murder became daily occurrences in the city. On July 9, Roman Catholic bishop, Salvatore Colombo, was murdered in his church in Mogadishu by an unknown assassin. On July 14, 450 Muslims were massacred as they demonstrated against the persecution of

their spiritual leaders. The next day, forty-seven people were executed on Jasiira Beach, west of the city.

On July 6, 1990, an anti-Barre riot erupted at a soccer stadium. Barre's guard panicked and opened fire onto the crowd, killing at least sixty-five people. A week later, Barre sentenced to death forty-six members of the Manifesto Group, a body of 114 prominent officials who had called for human rights regulations and elections. Amid this societal chaos and demolition, sixteen-year old Zamzam had just moved into her new house with her arranged husband. She was at home with her blind father-in-law when looters broke into their house. She witnessed them kill her father-in-law, and then they raped and beat her until she was unconscious. She says this to me in a whisper, and I can only imagine how hard it is for her to recount that day—and in front of her children. She is not angry, however, only hesitant, as if she is ashamed. She does not know exactly what the looters wanted, and if she did, it probably would not have mattered. She could not have stopped or appeased them if she'd tried.

When her husband finally came home that night, he found her on the floor, and, with a group of others, they tried to escape across the border to Kenya, the main host of Somalia refugees. However, they did not speak Swahili, so they were obviously not Kenyan, and they did not have refugee papers. They also did not have enough money to bribe the officials, so they were thrown in jail. They had no food, and the jail was disgusting with dirt and waste. After two nights in the jail, a community group paid their bail, and they were left to make it to a refugee camp somehow. Kenya is widely known for its corruption, and on the Corruption Perceptions Index of 2005 it is listed as 144th out of 159 countries for bribery and fraud, the 159th country being the most corrupt. The

average Kenyan pays sixteen bribes a month. Zamzam, her husband, and the others fleeing with them were most likely jailed illegally and for profit.

Because they did not have refugee papers (which were issued when refugees got to the refugee camp), they had to avoid the police. However, avoiding the authorities was often impossible, so they taught themselves Swahili over the course of two weeks, which they picked up from the locals. They did not know the way to the refugee camp in Kakuma, so they relied on directions from strangers—“Good Samaritans” as Zamzam called them—and hopped onto the backs of fruit and vegetable trucks, which they hoped were heading in the right direction. By some miracle, they eventually arrived at the refugee camp, located in Turkana district, in northwest Kenya. It’s one of the furthest areas from Somalia and is often frequented by dust storms. Zamzam never received medical care for the abuse she suffered.

With her husband, Zamzam lived in an area with long grass and palm trees, and they ate food donated by the United Nations. They obtained water from the river and a well, when it was full. At the camp, Zamzam attended a school called *Sheikhali* to learn English. She lived there for two years, and it is where she gave birth to both of her children. Then, with her children and husband, Zamzam moved to Kapenguria, five hours north of Nairobi. She lived there for eight years where she switched housing often to avoid run-ins with the police. Technically, she and her children were illegal aliens, but they had no country to return to.

Zamzam explained it this way: “So if you live in the refugee camp you have to deal with the little camps and issues and problems, and whenever you get money you move out and live in an apartment. [The police] would talk to you in Swahili, and if you

don't talk in Swahili they know you're not Kenyan, so you have to learn Swahili when you're learning English, so you can talk to the police." Life was never stable.

Her husband left for the U.S. in 1997 and found a job as a truck driver in Atlanta, Georgia. He sent Zamzam money to pay for the children's education at the Kenyan Sunflower Primary School until they could afford to join him in September 2000. By then, Zamzam's family was stretched across the globe. Her sister, her mother, and one of her brothers lived in England. Another brother moved to Baltimore, Maryland, and another moved with her to Georgia.

When Zamzam arrived in Georgia, there were many things to adjust to. Zamzam was overwhelmed by the large city and was uncertain how to do things we are often socialized into knowing. In Kenya, she had let her children play outside and come home when they wanted, but she did not feel safe doing so in Atlanta. She was unsure how to use public transportation or how to go shopping. The name brands on the cans and boxes were confusing and so were American customs.

She speaks particularly of the American way of dealing with the elderly: "In my country you have to take care of your parents if they are ill or dying. It was so sad to see all these older people who used to be a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher. It was very hard for me." Zamzam also had to take her driver's test, master English, care for her children, and cope with the strain of her past. "Everything is different," she says. "We had to learn it all."

On top of this, her husband became a changed man. He wanted her to learn American ways, and then he changed his mind and decided she should stay at home and be a traditional wife who cooked, cleaned, and had babies. He came home late and didn't

care about eating dinner or spending time with her or the kids. Zamzam didn't know what he was doing away from home, and she didn't trust him.

“It was nice to see my husband,” Zamzam began. She expected them to be happy. Finally, they had the opportunity to raise their kids together in a calmer environment. “But I came in and totally he was already changing, adapting a lot of American culture,” Zamzam continued. “He changed a lot. At the beginning he was surprised at first because when he left me I didn't speak any English, and that was a change. He wanted me to learn things very fast at the beginning, and then he started changing back to my culture saying, ‘Oh, you're a woman, you shouldn't do this, you should do that.’”

““You were happy when I first moved in, so how come are you changing?”

“He wanted to come home late whatever time he wants and eat fast food and stay outside more than being at home, being as a family together, eating dinner together, which is not part of my culture, but being here, I was trying to adapt to that. It was difficult for me to accept that he gets up at 3 a.m. and comes back whatever time he wants.”

With her children, Zamzam left him, without getting a divorce, in 2001 and moved to Portland, Maine to live with a friend. She was there for three days and then realized it was not the place for her. She wanted to raise her children in a smaller town with less crime. After her experiences in Mogadishu, her reasoning is understandable.

She moved to Lewiston in November 2001 and plans to stay there for a long time. If Somalia ever reaches stability, she says she will return to visit, but she will never stay.

“We were looking for a smaller town where I could raise my kids and go to work and

enjoy life. And the milkman and the police and the postman and everyone knows you. I like living in Lewiston a lot.

“I’m thankful to God to be here. I’m a U.S. citizen now. My home is here. I’m so happy to be home. I’m settled. For many years I didn’t think I’d settle, but here I am, I’m settled.”

She became a U.S. citizen on December 15, 2005, and she filed for a divorce in January of this year, which will be official in March. She took classes at the Multipurpose Center in Lewiston and now has a job as a Certified Nurse’s Assistant at the Central Maine Medical Center. She and her children travel whenever they can to see the country and to visit family and friends. They have been to London, California, Virginia, Ohio, and Maryland, and they often travel around Maine, getting to know their new home state. Zamzam dreams of being a social worker and of seeing her children grow up to attend college and lead successful lives. After speaking with them, I have no doubt that they will.

Jama is in seventh grade, and his favorite class is math. He is a forward in basketball, a center in soccer, a running back in football, and he plays shortstop on the school’s baseball team and does the relay, the long jump, and race walk in track. He volunteers at the hospital and the Public Library and will also volunteer at a summer camp in Lewiston as soon as school gets out. He wants to go to college in Georgia.

Hanan is in eighth grade and gets straight A’s. She volunteers at the Public Library and the hospital. She plays field hockey, basketball, and track and is on the student council and the civil rights team. She tutored her neighbor in American history to help him pass the Citizenship Test. Of course he passed. She speaks Swahili, Somali, and

English, and is learning French and Spanish. When I ask her what colleges she wants to attend, she lists Yale, Wellesley, Berkeley, and Princeton.

“I think the U.S. is much better because you have much more opportunity to learn and get a good education and actually have a future,” Hanan says. “You can become whoever you want to be.”

“You can achieve your dreams,” adds Zamzam.

Hanan is fueled by something I cannot completely explain or understand—something to do with her mother and survival, her people and their past, her intelligence and her future. On her face are three beauty marks: one on each cheek and one in the middle of her forehead, forming a perfect triangle—a symbol of strength.

Zamzam and her children remain Muslim but have adapted to both Kenyan and American traditions. Zamzam says, “I keep my religion. I try to keep what I’ve learned in Kenya, and I’m still learning American culture. I put them together, and that is my culture. Getting all the good stuff. When I was in Somalia, I never heard of volunteering, so I learn. A boy and a girl can be equal and do same thing. We don’t have that in Somalia, and here I am, trying to learn, and it’s a good thing.”

At the end of our talk, I share that I interviewed a number of Hurricane Katrina survivors, and I remark that some survivors had talked, uninterrupted, for at least forty-five minutes. With Zamzam, I had had to ask each question deliberately because she rarely elaborated.

“The difference is,” she tells me patiently, “With Katrina, it happened in America. People have never experienced this. When people ask me about Somalia, I am almost forgetting. And there are some things that I don’t see the big issue, like staying without

food, getting up in the morning without anything to eat. ‘Oh, the water was brown,’ ‘Oh, we didn’t have this,’ people say that. ‘Here I am in this room, and I don’t have TV; I don’t have air conditioner.’ We didn’t have a chance to lose those things. ‘My peanut butter, my TV, my Playstation, my flat.’”

She hasn’t elaborated on her life because she doesn’t think it’s anything out of the ordinary. It’s just her life—the same as everyone else’s. She speaks calmly, sitting comfortably on her couch, with a little smile playing around the corners of her mouth. Here is a remarkable woman, I think, and she doesn’t even know. Zamzam feeds me chai tea and then thanks me for coming. I try to show that no, no, *I* am the thankful one. I say goodbye to Hanan and Jama and, as I close the door behind me, I hear the sounds of American Idol on the TV. They’ve got the wrong idols, I think, as my throat closes up, and I speed away.

Conclusion

Maybe the overriding theme is struggle. Mary, Margaret, and Zamzam have suffered hunger, physical and emotional injuries, harsh climate conditions, corrupt politics, drastic location changes, war, patriarchy, and poverty. But, then, isn't there something about struggle that is essential for survival? Maybe, then, the overriding theme is fortitude. These women have made it through. However, Mary is still living in a destroyed city. Margaret still has twenty-seven children. Zamzam works tirelessly to provide a better life for her children. These women are pushing through each day, trying to come to grips with the past and prepare for the future as best they can. Each woman is a survivor and each woman is still surviving. They have experienced loss and continued on, but nothing has completely ended. Maybe that is why it is so difficult to write a conclusion, then: there is no conclusion. Mary, Margaret, and Zamzam are real women, and they are still changing and growing, participating in cycles of collapse and renewal.

In the 1930s, James Agee and Walker Evans documented the lives of three poor tenant families in the south. They ended up writing a book of social commentary, including photographs, prose, and poetry, called Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. The goal of the book is to recognize a group of people who were rarely, if ever, represented. It is also “essentially...an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity” (xiv). Not one person can ever have the same story as another, and we are inherently sacred and new. Agee and Evans, but especially Agee, illuminates the extraordinary in small places and things:

So that how it can be that a stone, a plant, a star, can take on the burden of being; and how it is that a child can take on the burden of breathing; and

how through so long a continuation and cumulation of the burden of each moment one on another, does any creature bear to exist, and not break utterly to fragments of nothing: these are matters too dreadful and fortitudes too gigantic to meditate long and not forever to worship. (57)

I hope that I have followed in this journalistic tradition to document stories that have never been recorded before, to make something new, to show three lives as holy. I hope I have written something honest, something that resonates because it is true. Agee writes:

For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can: and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is. (11)

It is this truth and marvel that I hope I have captured—awe for these women and their continuance. Each woman has wondered how she would survive, has slept on hard beds and eaten nothing, and each woman is, indeed, divine. They are the streets in sunlight and bras flying high in trees. Their stories reflect cruel radiance and are still unfolding. They will be told by their daughters and grandchildren, and we may hope they will not end.

Epilogue

I'm trying to write a poem that doesn't exist. Behind my eyelashes
is a pit of dead spiders. I write things, and I don't know
where they come from. Do you think I'm beautiful?

Writing a poem is like falling asleep, descending deeper and
deeper. I'm a childhood room with crayon markings under
the paint. I have written fifty pages about remarkable women
and never mentioned my mother. She thinks I'm beautiful,
and I don't like it when she lies. When I call her, crying, she tells me,
Everything will be all right, but my lips are still shaking. She says,
Just do your best, but my best can't make him fall in love with me.

I can't regain the lost. I can never unlose my white picket fence,
my maple trees, my Sleepy doll. They have become the spiders.
My mother can never unlose her baby, the hours. Every word is
gone the moment it's spoken. *Hush, sweetie, you're fine. Never fear.*

And the words are the paint over her love, which is my front yard
in the fall, and I am playing with my doll tucked under my arm.

I can say, *I love you, Mommy*, but I can say it better with an unevenly-
shaped bowl, biscotti, a bell tower, a stone, the spaces in this poem.

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