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## *Stepping Downward*

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I woke to the sound of frustrated voices outside my window speaking in muted tones of Kawkwa and Juba Arabic. It was not yet 7:00 A.M.

What now? We had been open only a few weeks. Every day seemed to bring more challenges than answers to solve them. What had God gotten me into?

I threw on a long skirt and stepped outside into the early morning light to find out what the problem was. Several of our older children were looking at a hole in the back wall of our rented building. Though not large, the hole served as clear evidence that our bricks had been chipped away by AK-47 rounds during the night. And one-quarter of the back of our bamboo fence had grown legs and walked off with the neighboring community. One of our younger boys brought rocks to me that had been thrown at our windows. We were getting quite the reception.

I looked back at our small courtyard to the thirty or so people who were already waiting to see me. The gunfire had kept me up most of the night, and our three youngest had managed to take up the remaining hours before dawn. I had not even had time to wash my face. And I am not a morning person.

What was I going to do? Jumping on the next flight back to the States to pursue a career as a coffee-shop barista definitely crossed my mind. But my thoughts were quickly distracted by a small tug on my skirt.

“Mama, *garhol*.” (“Mama, my throat hurts.”) I looked down into two intent, dark eyes asking me to make it all better. Barista-hood would have to wait. Another day of motherhood in Sudan had begun.

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### *Life in a Fishbowl*

I love my life. I really do. I love it so much that I want to share it with you. Let me begin by greeting you, for greetings are important in Sudanese culture.

You are most welcome! Welcome to a glimpse of life here: its joys, its challenges, its heartaches and its triumphs. Welcome to where I live—a place called Yei in the far recesses of the bush of southern Sudan, along the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda. It is the last place I ever expected to find myself.

I am a city girl at heart. I have always loathed camping and have never been too fond of dirt. I like perfume, mascara and Starbucks coffee. I love the ocean. I grew up in Florida, so swimming is part of my DNA. I really enjoy running water and

electricity, I do. So how is it that a little beach-loving Floridian city gal wound up in the landlocked African bush with none of the above? And how is it that she has never been happier? (Okay, I bring the perfume, mascara and coffee with me—that helps.)

How could I be happy in a place so far removed from all I have ever known? I invite you to venture farther into one of my days to find out. The particular day I have begun to describe to you dawned with scenarios that were often repeated during my first months in Sudan.

After waking to the aforementioned morning reception, I spent the next three hours finding out if we had enough beans for lunch, sorting out household chores and meeting with each little group waiting to see me. It was 11:00 before I had the chance to drink my cup of coffee or wash my face.

I soon noticed a slight man sitting off to the side snoozing in the shade of our building. I went over and introduced myself. He looked up at me with a big, toothless grin. He had heard about our problems last night. We had had a break-in the night before, right? (Yes, we had discovered a few things missing beyond the bamboo fencing, but we had not told anyone . . . hmm. And it was amazing; he knew just what they were.) Would we like to hire his services as a guard? he asked.

I was not sure whether to laugh, cry or tell him off. It did not even occur to me to call the police, as there were not any. Our mystery was solved. The clairvoyant culprit was sitting in front of me asking for employment. We did not know what else might happen that would require his protective services, he informed me. I had flashbacks to 1980s mafia movies.

Taking his résumé, I thanked the man for his time and told him I would pray about his offer. If I was not learning anything else here in Sudan, I was learning to talk to God before doing anything—to find out His take on it, because He is always right and knows way more than I do!

I went over and began greeting the remaining 26 people waiting to talk to me. All were there to give me children. This scene was repeated every day for three months. Every morning and every evening for three months. What do you do in the face of such need?

I listened to each person's story:

“My sister died, and I cannot afford to take in her children.”

“My husband left me, and my new husband does not want my children.”

“I cannot afford school fees. I cannot afford food.”

Every story was unique. Every story was the same. I did not know what to do. How could I? I was still learning how to introduce myself in the language. I was still learning how to talk. My two-year-olds had more vocabulary than I did. Perhaps they should decide who got to live with us. Yet I was learning, I was learning, to look through eyes of love and express God's heart to the ones around me.

One by one, I talked with and cried with and listened to each person God had brought to us. I knew they were not there by accident. *I may not be able to meet all their needs, I thought, but I can at least give them the dignity of caring enough to listen and pray with them about what is on their hearts.*

Finally all the stories had been shared and the decisions offered. Seven more children were put on our growing waiting

list; two were moving in with us right away, and five would study in our school when it started.

I took my notes and walked back to my room. I looked down at my arms. I knew I was no way near that tan. The Sudanese dirt had been ground into my sweat-drenched skin, two babies had already peed on me and it was not yet lunchtime. I could hear more people just arriving as greetings were exchanged and my name was mentioned. I decided I would try to sneak past them to grab a quick bath. Talking to a clean missionary had to be better than talking to a dirty one.

How I thought that would work I do not know. I stick out just a little bit here.

I grabbed my bucket and headed to the bathing room. Too late. I was seen. No supernatural intervention rendered me unnoticed. So I waved in greeting on my way. It is rude here to not extend any form of greeting.

If I had been Sudanese no one would have cast a second glance. But I am very white, and everyone was fascinated. In addition, I have one leg and walk with crutches, making my white appearance all the more fascinating. Privacy here is indeed a relative concept, and the whole world knows when I take a bath in Sudan. It is life in a fishbowl.

I was beginning to think we did need a guard—not so much to fend off nocturnal intruders, but to seat people somewhere on the other side of our small compound so I could get to the bathing area and take a bath without an audience. Every time I stepped out of my room for those first twelve weeks, a crowd was waiting in the small outer courtyard that separated my door from the bathing rooms.

When I say “bath,” don’t envision anything too fancy. We do not have bathtubs or hot showers. We do not even have running water. These bathing areas are simple concrete slab structures with tin doors that are falling off rusted hinges. A makeshift drain drains the water, unless one of the children’s shirts gets wadded in the way. You carry with you your bucket of water, a cup to pour the water over yourself, soap and a towel.

Furthermore, the building we rented in our early days was a bombed-out, bullet-riddled shell that survived the war years. Our doors and windows had bullet holes in them, many right about eye level if you were under ten years old or four feet tall.

Being the incredibly astute missionary that I am, it had taken me only five months to realize that the perforations lacing our walls were made by machine gun ammunition. I had just thought it was odd that they would make doors with holes in them. A cultural innovation? An adaptation for increased ventilation? It took some Western visitors to point out the truth to me.

It occurred to me that our bathing room doors had bullet holes in them, too. I hoped no one was that curious.

I took my bucket, hung my towel over the door for a little more privacy and washed as quickly as possible. Relaxing, leisurely bathing rituals were a dream from another lifetime. I emerged from the bathing area to an audience of waiting onlookers. They all clapped and cheered when they saw me. Little did I know that my entrance was a command performance. I did not know whether to bow, give an encore or imitate a tomato (in color at least).

The bell rang for lunch. I did not need to ask what was on the menu. It was the same every day in those days: beans and boiled

maize flour called *posho* cooked in large pots over a charcoal fire. Dinner was usually a repeat performance of lunch with some small variations.

I had been eating beans every day without a break for well over six months since arriving in Africa. I just could not eat any more beans right then. I decided fasting lunch was a great option. I snuck out the side entrance of our building and the side gate of our compound to go check my email before attending to the waiting crowd.

### What Are You Doing?

For five minutes I was clean. That was something to revel in, especially as it was dry season and the hottest time of year where I lived—the season when many of the foreigners prefer to leave town for cooler climates. In Yeï we do not have summer and winter, hot and cold. We have wet and dry, hot and hotter. As I walked, large four-ton trucks whisked past me in clouds of dust that stuck to the rivulets of sweat running down my face. So much for clean. It was nice while it lasted.

As the U.N. convoys swept past me and I traversed the red dirt mountain range generously called a road, my heart began to wonder: *What does home look like, Jesus? Is it really a building made of bricks that is one bombing away from oblivion? Surrounded by bombed-out skeletons of once-grand structures, I had been thinking on that a lot since arriving here.*

*What really matters if your world can be blown apart in an instant? What does love look like to those who have had their dreams shredded by decades of the ravages of war? What*

*remains that is safe to trust in?* My mind wandered as I picked my way through canyons and valleys in the road.

It took me fifteen minutes of walking along that dusty red road to get to the converted shack that housed my connection with the outside world, but it should have taken only half that long. I was in no hurry. I took my time to take in the setting around me. I still had the feeling that I was walking through an issue of *National Geographic*. They really do live in mud huts with grass roofs here. It is not trick photography. Sometimes it felt surreal.

I like to soak things in. And I like to meet people. I like to look in their eyes and show them they are worth seeing, worth stopping for. Jesus stopped for me; I want to stop for them. As I walked, one petite elderly woman in a fitted, blue floral print dress came toward me. Her scarf-covered head was bowed as she shuffled along the uneven road. She got to me and stopped. I stopped, too, and extended my hand in the customary greeting: right hand extended with the left placed on your forearm and a slight bow to show honor to the one you are meeting.

“How are you?” I asked in my broken Arabic.

“I am sick,” she replied, slightly taken aback at the little white woman with one leg and crutches trying to speak Arabic to her.

“Where is the problem?” I asked.

She pointed to her back and stomach and said she had “fever.” I asked her if I could pray with her for healing. This was more important than my waiting emails. She agreed, and we prayed a simple prayer.

The prayer was not long. It was not complicated. It was the simplicity of a child asking a loving parent for help. She never

closed her eyes or bowed her head. She stared at me the whole time I prayed. How do I know? I stared back. Open-eyed prayer. Her expression never changed. She gave no indication that anything happened at all.

I asked her, “Mama, how are you now?”

“I am fine,” she said. “The pain has left.” No *Thank You, Jesus*, no emotion, no hint of any difference in her at all, except that her shuffle became a full-blown step. She and I walked away in opposite directions.

*What was that about?* I wondered. No answer came.

Once at the shack, my Internet session was beyond frustrating. Its connection speed made dial-up look state-of-the-art. In two hours I downloaded and sent as many emails. I was hot, dusty, tired and completely unable to accomplish even a fraction of the work that was pressing on me.

There were no miraculous letters in my inbox. No one had pledged two hundred thousand dollars to meet our immediate needs. No one had bequeathed to us his great-grandmother’s million-dollar estate. In fact, I did not have news of any monies coming in. The joy of seeing a woman healed on the way to the shack was eclipsed by the looming reality of budgets and necessities with no visible way to meet them.

I felt the weight of it all pushing down on me. And there were at least twenty more people seeking help who were waiting for me to return. I felt heavy. I walked home in the afternoon heat. It was about three o’clock.

*What are You doing, sweet Jesus? What are You doing? Are You really here? I just need to know You are here.* My prayer went unvoiced, but not unheard.

## *Baby Ima*

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I arrived home to our familiar bamboo fence and took a deep breath in preparation for meeting with those waiting for me. To my surprise, for the first time since we had opened our doors on Christmas Day, the crowd had dwindled. I was left with one lone visitor.

He was a slim man of middle age. His shoulders sagged under an unseen weight. He looked heavier than I felt. I walked over to him and introduced myself. He went on to tell me that his daughter had died in childbirth a few weeks back. She had given birth to a small son. With the mother gone, his family had no way to feed the baby.

It was a story that has repeated itself countless times in these parts. According to some, southern Sudan is the second most expensive place in the world. Yes, you read the words correctly. It is second to Tokyo. In the southern Sudanese capital of Juba, a small mud hut worthy of being condemned can go for as much as two thousand U.S. dollars a month. And it costs well over a hundred dollars a month to feed an infant on formula. The average salary, if a person is fortunate enough to have one at all, is about half that.

The grandfather told me that this baby, not yet two weeks old, had been fed on cornmeal and water. The options were obvious. If we did not take this little one, he would certainly die. I told the man to bring me the baby so we could see him. I knew how dangerous this would be. He was my first baby. I knew that as soon as I laid eyes on him, there would be no letting him go, no matter how expensive he was.

As the man left our compound to retrieve the baby, I asked God, “What is the baby’s name?” Immediately the reply came: *His name is Immanuel*. I thought God was being figurative and was trying to give me encouragement that He was with us, as *Immanuel* means “God with us.”

A short while later the man returned with a small bundle in his arms. I looked at this tiny form almost completely hidden by the four layers of fabric wrapped around him. I asked what the baby’s name was. “His name is Immanuel,” the man said.

I could scarcely believe my ears. *God, are You really here?* I had asked. My silent prayer had been answered in a baby named Immanuel. Tears began to build in my eyes. With wonder I took him in my arms, peering into the sleeping face of God’s answer to my question, and thus baby Ima became our smallest family member yet.

He was frail and sickly, but he was a fighter. He survived all the faltering attempts of someone who knew nothing about babies. He lived through a measles outbreak and a cholera epidemic. He made it through growing up his first year in a large family. Now he is a downright fat toddler. Every day he toddles around on his chubby legs with a huge grin that continually reminds us, God is indeed with us.

It was a message I desperately needed to hear the day he came. I was clear across the planet from my family and loved ones in a completely foreign culture. Nothing was even vaguely familiar. People were shooting machine guns at night right behind us. Our water supply was a hand pump that the community would let us access only in the middle of the night.

I did not come on a scouting mission. I did not do a feasibility study. God said go. I went. I really had very little idea of what He was getting me into. And once I was in the middle of it, I needed to be reminded that He really did know where Yei was, even if most of the world did not.

So Jesus sent us Ima to let me know that He knew where we lived. And He was intent on living with us.

### *Fried Green Termites*

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Dinnertime came that night with a surprise.

Toward the end of dry season the flying ants come out in force. You might call them the biggest termites you have ever seen. They swarm the lights in early evening. They get into everything. One night a visitor even awoke to her floor moving—they had swarmed under the door to blanket her room. I am not talking about three or four, or even thirty or forty. I am talking about bugs of biblical proportions.

Well, this city girl does not do bugs. Not crickets or spiders or ants or wasps or roaches or flying termites. Not a one. But in this season, they are inescapable, in more ways than one. And termites, I came to discover, are a dinnertime delicacy. The southern United States is known for fried green tomatoes. We in southern Sudan pride ourselves on our fried green termites.

That's right. They get fried, stewed, boiled and baked into every concoction you would never want to imagine. And my children were all on the edge of their seats to see how Sudanese their little white mama really was.

I vaguely recalled the table being laden that morning with small insects drying in the sunshine, their wings meticulously broken off one by one. I honestly thought my younger boys were simply bored. Little did I know that these insects were on their way to my dinner plate that evening.

The whole compound grew still. I felt all eyes follow the plate that was brought to me. As my dinner was unveiled, I laid eyes on the glistening brown, oil-laden fried shells of the bugs that had flown around our compound the night before. You could have heard a pin drop. Everyone was holding his or her breath in anticipation of my reaction.

A million dietary excuses and sanitary objections flooded my mind in the space of less than ten seconds. “Wow,” I heard escape from my lips. I mean, what else can you say in the face of bugs for dinner? Wow.

*When in Sudan in termite season, I thought, eat termites. I delicately took my spoon and scooped a few fried pieces onto it. It is only protein, Perry. You are a Sudanese in training now. It is a mental thing. Get over it.* Tentatively I put the spoon into my mouth and began to chew the crunchy contents.

It tasted buttery and a little salty—not too unlike burnt popcorn. It was not that bad. I took another bite with more confidence. *Hey, I can do this.* I looked at my kids and gave them a thumbs-up and a smile. “Mmmmm, *kweis, kweis*” (“very good”).

The shout of triumph could have been heard in Khartoum! They cheered and cheered. “Mama, you are a real Sudanese now! If you stay here long enough, your skin will even become nice and black like ours.” I had no doubt of the truth of that statement. But not for the reasons they might think.

What does it take to be Sudanese? It is not as hard as I had supposed. It takes only a heart to love and learn, a commitment to be real and a willingness to try termites.

### *Jerry-Can Litanies*

It had been a long day. I was tired, to say the least. But I was not about to miss my favorite part of daily life here. And I had just conquered a dinner that might make even a tough guy think twice. It was cause for celebration.

Every evening our kids break out the plastic jerry cans, pot lids and bamboo sticks and go to town. They sing and dance their hearts out to Jesus. Orchestrated chaos might be an accurate description. Our highly skilled percussion section of ten- to twelve-year-old children pounds out rhythms of God's heartbeat under our little bit of African sky. It is truly a family affair, with everyone joining in, from the youngest to the oldest. While rhythms of worship fill the night, some of our children are singing, most are dancing, but all are a part of this jerry-can litany of praise to our King.

I cannot imagine anything more pleasing to God's heart. I bet He silences the angels to hear true worship rise from this war-torn patch of earth. All the frustrations of the day faded into the night as I heard little voices crying out to the One who is altogether lovely and faithful. In the middle of holy dust and ear-jarring cadences, I knew there was no place I would rather be.

They introduced a new song that night. This one was in English: "I will never leave my Lord till I die, till I die. I will never leave my Lord till I die."

These who had seen mortars drop and lost loved ones to the violence of conflict knew all too well the reality of the words they were offering in worship. Two-year-old Viola climbed into my lap and snuggled her head into my arms. Mama's lap is a great place to fall into the land of dreams. I felt tears silently begin to wet my face.

It was almost too much. At moments like this I wondered if I would wake up back in America and discover that this was a dream or vision.

Was this really real? Did I really have thirty-plus children calling me Mama in the middle of Sudan? Did a woman just get healed on the way to the Internet? Did we just take in our first infant? Was I really holding my promises from heaven in my lap and looking into their eyes every day?

As I watched my growing entourage of children and toddlers jumping and dancing in the moonlight, I realized that I hardly felt qualified for the next stage of my journey. What would it mean to love little Viola, who was curled up in my lap, into her destiny? Holding her when she was two was one thing, but what would love mean when she was ten and twenty?

The dust cloud ascended like incense before His throne. The jerry cans slowed to a meditative beat, and the singing became soft. One by one the children knelt down with their faces in the dirt, or they stood there with their hands lifted to their King.

Was this what revival looked like? I did not know. That was for history to decide, not us. But I did know, in that moment, that I was watching His Kingdom come and His will be done, if only for an instant, on earth as it is in heaven. And that was all that mattered.

The sun set on our prayers. The children lay down on their mattresses, and we tucked them in. We would not have beds for a few more months. As I looked at their sleeping faces illuminated by the faint glow from a kerosene lantern, I again wondered about the days ahead. Instability loomed on the horizon.

But, termites aside, it was not such an abnormal day. It was a day of learning how to love and how to see people as God sees them.

### *Jesus, Teach Me How to Love*

There is a pace to life in the bush. It can be demanding in its intensity and infuriatingly slow all at the same time. Life here is a constant paradox that invokes questions and compels an inner journey. New life grows up in old ruins. Development thrives right alongside destruction.

I have been writing these pages from the semi-dark of another evening with no electricity on the waning recesses of my laptop battery. My “shower” is sitting in the plastic jerry can about ten feet away. I think a mouse just danced over my foot. My arms look tanner than yesterday, but I know it will all wash off.

I am no super saint. And I am certainly no suffering missionary. There are moments a hot shower would be lovely, but it cannot compare to being in the middle of God’s dreams.

How did I wind up here doing this? I began a journey. I said yes to a downward trail of humility to find His heart, to find what is really real. I prayed a dangerous prayer a little over a decade ago: *Jesus, teach me how to love.*

Many of you have picked up this book thinking it was about Sudan. It is. But what my current address reads is the secondary story. I would not be living where I do if I had not stepped off the paved road in search of what it means to love and be loved. All journeys that really matter start deep inside us. This one did for certain.

I invite you to spend a few hours in our world here with me. Come experience life in a recovering war-torn African nation. Encounter the paradox and embrace the journey. Celebrate the simplicity of the Gospel as miracles happen in the mud. Recapture the eyes of a child, take a deep breath and start to play with angels. Learn to see hidden treasures caught up in worthless existences.

Most of all, I invite you into my journey of discovering more about what it means to live loved by God and to become an expression of His love to the people around me. No matter where in the world we reside, it is this journey into God's heart that will lead us home.

That is where we are going. Life does not always lend itself to roadmaps. But they make most of us more comfortable. I want you to keep reading—right to the edge of the map. And then step off the known path into your own story lived from the center of His heart.