

A BEGINNING

BY CHRISTINE AGNEW

In the city of Warri, Nigeria, a deeply rutted dirt road branches off from the bustling streets of peddlers and traffic jams. The sounds of the city are replaced by the bleating of wandering goats and clucking of strutting chickens. The chatter of children fills the air as they play in trash scattered about the ditches. Small wooden huts and shops full of native carvings line the street. I took this road one warm day last spring and stopped in front of a weathered gray building. It was a sad display of rusty railings, crumbling walls, and peeling paint. Curious faces poked out of doorways, and shopkeepers clamored for me to buy items I didn't need. A woman sat in the dirt yard, washing clothes out of a bucket. Her clean clothes hung on a dirty clothesline, sure to dry quickly in the arid temperature. The woman ignored my stares. She had no idea of my tie to this building. It was once a clinic painted a crisp white, dedicated to the health of all who stepped through its doors. I had only seen it in pictures. This was my first time to visit this place: the place I was born.

I barely thought of Africa when I was young. It was, to me, a distant land of deserts, giraffes, and lions, hardly a place I envisioned to be a part of me. My parents had friends that would come to our home from Africa to visit for a couple of weeks at a time. They are wonderful people, but to this young curly-haired child, they seemed a little strange. They hated ice in their drinks. They did not enjoy desserts such as cake and ice cream. To a child, someone who does not enjoy sweets is definitely missing something. They wore long garments of brightly colored linen. I still remember the time my mother made me wear a traditional Nigerian outfit to church. I cannot remember the exact occasion, but I do remember feeling a little embarrassed. What kid really wants to wear an outfit like that to church, when no one else is? I certainly did not. I did not think of the significance of where I came from. So that was my taste of Africa: every year, for a couple of weeks, friends would come and stay with us and I would be exposed to a different culture. I saw them wear funny clothes and I could not understand what they were saying.

Being born in Africa was always a cool fact for me to tell people. When I went to camps or met new people and they would ask me to tell them something different about myself, all I had to do was say I was born in Nigeria. I said it so much I never realized what it meant. I never realized what it could mean.

My junior year of high school, I had the opportunity to travel to Africa. I never thought I would get the chance to go, but there I was, early one weekday morning, boarding a plane bound for a distant land. I don't remember the flight being glamorous, as anyone who has flown on a plane knows. I remember being crammed

into an uncomfortable seat that barely folded back. I remember babies crying the entire way. There were many crying babies on that plane. I remember landing in Nigeria at five in the morning and as soon as I walked off the plane warm, sticky air hitting my face. My clothes immediately clung to my back as I walked in a daze to collect baggage.

So my trip in Africa began. Began with me feeling sick and tired and ungrateful, to be honest. I only wanted to sleep. I didn't recall until later the hurting people I saw on my first trip on a road in Africa.

As we walked to our cars, beggars rushed at us, pleading for something, anything. I can still see the longing in their eyes and hear the desperation in their voices. Some were crippled. They were hurting so much that they thought nothing of pressing their faces against our car windows, banging on them until I thought the glass would break. I can still see the old man and young boy, who came up to our car when we were stopped in the heavy traffic. The old man, with a dirty scarf around his head, and the young boy, his small open hand outstretched towards us, because we were Americans. We could help them. We could save them.

How many times do I see someone in my own life that needs help? They need help and I hand them something quickly, something to satisfy them for the time being. They hold out their hands and I fill those eager, pleading hands with something, but that something is never enough. I need to give them something that never fades away, something that will fill their hands but never run out. What can I give them besides Christ? I can give them love, and show them by the look in my eyes and the tone of my voice that I care for them. I can give them a cell number or an e-mail address, something that will keep them in contact with me. Contact that I can use to bless their lives.

There they were, natives living on the street, begging for money, sitting with papers held over their heads to shield them from the merciless sun. There they were, and there I was, pulling up to a gated, comfortable hotel, where I could rest and sleep and forget all of those on the streets. I could take a warm shower and crawl into cool comfortable sheets. Maybe I should have left that hotel, that cool place of ease, walked through the heavy glass double doors, and sat on a street corner with an old woman who had no teeth. I should have brought her a glass of water and held a pink umbrella over her head, shielding her wrinkled, leather skin from the hot beams of sunshine. I should have talked to her, asked her questions. Do you have a family? Do you like sitting on this corner? Where do you sleep? But I didn't.

Then that made me wonder. Should I treat only the poor in Africa with such respect? Should I ignore the bum on the street corner at an intersection in my city just because he lives in America? I don't think so. I think people need love no matter what country they come from, and we sometimes forget that. Our focus is on the world, not on those hurting people right down the street. And then I wonder again, because we should still

care about those around the world who are in need. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I want to help everyone. I want to help everyone and that is a concept I've just come to understand.

The next day dawned hazy and humid, like almost every day in that city. On the ride to the school, I noticed the people. Many schoolgirls in their plaid school uniforms trudged through the dust, some dragging little brothers along by the hand, some walking alone, their books clutched tightly to their chests. Some old women sat in roadside huts, huts full of tiny bananas and fresh pineapple. Huts full of wooden jewelry and statues. I noticed the men, many riding on old motorcycles, weaving in and out of the thick traffic slowly snaking along the streets. Men, in their skinny ties and outdated suits walking to whatever job they had. I noticed the families standing outside of tiny wooden shacks, the mother squatting by a pot, stirring breakfast, the children running circles in the dirt yard, half-naked, in tattered clothes. They were all living their lives, starting the day as they always had and would until they got married, moved, or died. Their lives were like mine in a sense. They had routines and obligations they had to fulfill.

At the school we visited, I stood out. I, of course, was the only American girl there. Maybe that is why they all wanted to talk to me. Maybe that is why some pressed their e-mail addresses into my hands, and treated me as if I knew something they all did not. One girl, completely thinking I could answer all of her questions, started to ask me about medical school. She told me, in her soft voice that seemed scared to ask, that she wanted to go to medical school. She wanted to be a doctor one day. What did she need to do to get in? What courses should she take in school? I realize she was just like me. No, I did not want to go to medical school or be a doctor. But I had dreams and aspirations. And I had questions about where I was going and what I should do. I felt small, because I could not answer all her questions. I was only seventeen. I had no clue where I was going. I was asking questions myself.

On the ride back to the hotel, I felt humbled. These students were so wonderful. They sat in a school, on wooden benches with no backs, no air conditioning, and limited resources. I thought of my school at home. Each classroom contained rows of shiny desks. When we sat in these desks, our backs had support and our feet rested on clean carpet. We were warm in the winter months and cool in the hot months, and we had books and resources at our fingertips. I played volleyball games in our large gym, my feet pounding against the honey-colored wood floor and my parents watching comfortably from the stands. I had so much, yet I thought of all the times I had complained about a test or the behavior of a teacher. I had complained about volleyball practices and the crazy schedule during the season. There I was complaining when students just like me would give so much to have a fraction of what I had. They had very little, yet were the most joyful people I've ever seen. They wanted to go places. They were searching. They would not let their circumstances determine who

they turned out to be. They were going to be doctors, teachers, and lawyers. They were going to do something about their dreams: they were going to chase them.

Then the day dawned of our journey to Lagos, a town two hours away. I was born there when my parents were living there as missionaries. I still remember sitting there in the backseat, watching the forests of palm trees out my window. We had to stop periodically for checkpoints on the highway. The soldiers came up to the driver in their head-to-toe camouflage uniforms, their big guns slung over their shoulders. We always passed through without a problem, but it was a grim reminder to me of Nigeria's unstable political society. Everything is so messed up. The world has become a terrible place where governments cannot be trusted and people are corrupt. Life is not how it was intended to be.

We passed over a bridge before we came into the city. It was over this beautiful river that seemed made of jewels because the sun was hitting the water just so that it seemed to sparkle. There was so much beauty in this place of poverty and unrest. On the side of the road, fresh carcasses of large rodents hung on poles of roadside stands. As our car slowed when we entered the city, natives ran up to our windows, holding long sticks covered in little fried balls. "What is that?" I asked my dad, who was sitting next to me. "Fried slugs on a stick," he replied. We didn't buy any.

As we traveled into the city, I noticed the activities. Women walked along the side of the road balancing large straw baskets full of laundry or their purchases from the market on top of their heads. A little boy was taking a bath out of a blue bucket. As I took pictures out the window, men standing in the doorways of their shops pointed and stared at me. I'm fairly certain they were not used to getting their pictures taken by a strange American girl. My dad pointed out the apartment he and my mom had lived in while they were working in this city. It was the top floor of this dingy old building. I stared out the window, thinking, these are the streets my parents walked down every day during their work. Those are the roadside stands they bought fruit from, and these people who cover every space are the people they loved. These people were their family for two years. Would I be able to do something like that? Could I leave every loved one behind, knowing I could not touch or see them for months? Could I move to a country so far away that every aspect of their culture is behind the one I'm used to? I think I could, if I knew I was supposed to. Maybe I am supposed to. I was born here for a reason.

Of course, my dad couldn't remember where the clinic was, or if it was even still there. After searching for about an hour on our own, we stopped at a stand and asked the old man working there for directions. Dressed in a blue and gold outfit of linen, he walked stooped over, resting his weight on his crude wooden cane. He had so many wrinkles you could barely see his eyes, and when he smiled, you could see his few yellow teeth. Yet

when he smiled, you could see the joy in his eyes. You could see how happy he was to be living and helping us. He found the clinic for us, which was now a house. I looked around, amazed that this quiet side road was the place where my journey began. This is a journey that I am still searching on, a journey in which I am still growing with Christ, the One who chose for me to be born in Africa.

I can't really describe to you how I felt when we left that street. I turned around and looked behind at the building, all gray and worn. I don't remember my time there, but it was weird going back. Before, I had been me, a girl living in America, going to school, living my own life. Now, it hit me that my life was bigger than a small town in Oklahoma. I started my journey in that clinic in Nigeria. I was brought by my parents from that quiet street to my life now. It's crazy to see where we begin and where we end up. Why did I begin there? I'm not quite sure. I only know that the trip back to my original home changed me, and I understand the significance of that time more now than I did back then. I understand that Christ showed me that there are more important things in life than what I'm going to wear, or what kind of music I listen to. Life is more than what I'm doing on Friday night and life is even more than my friends and family. I saw people on that trip that had absolutely nothing, yet they had Christ, so they had everything. They were happy. I saw me, who went to a great school and had everything I could ever need, and yet I was selfish. I only wanted more. I want to go back with all these thoughts in my mind and truly fulfill something. When I left that place and the people I had met, I felt as if I was leaving family and home. I know Christ has more for me to do there. My time in Africa is only just beginning.