

Because She had No Choice

Obediently they fell into line behind her, scuffing their bare toes through the dusty track between the grass houses of the small town. Their clothes were torn and streaked with dirt. They smelt. They took turns carrying one baby while Marissa balanced the other on her good hip. She limped noticeably. She'd been run over by a car as a child and not expected to survive. She had, but lived with her disability ever since.

→ The Vurra market was thronged with children roaming, women sitting on cloth squares selling vegetables they'd grown on family plots, and men squatting in small groups, passing the time talking and boasting. The main work available was labouring, subsistence farming supplemented by hunting small animals or finding bananas deep in the forest to sell. The economy of Uganda was still suffering from the depredations of the dictators in the 70s, Milton Obote and Idi Amin.

With the rice money, I'll buy corn and make porridge with it. The boys can sell it in the market, Marissa thought.

"Yo' not good enough to keep your man," taunted another woman at the market. "Yo' gonna be out on the streets soon."

The words twisted like a knife in Marissa's belly but she'd learned to hide her feelings and emotions. Her face a blank mask, she hitched up her torn skirt, called her children and they set off in a dignified manner towards Arua, the largest town in Vurra Subcounty. It took an hour to reach the ORA Uganda base.

"What else can we do to help you?" asked the nurse who checked the malnourished family. She packed milk powder pouches into a bag for them.

"I'm going to sell things in the market," Marissa told her, "like cassava flour and corn. My uncle says I can grow tomatoes on his plot to pay the rent and send my boys back to school. Can you lend me money to buy some stock and seeds?"

"I'll talk to the boss. He likes to see how he can help families," smiled the nurse. "Come back next month." Surreptitiously she slipped a few sweets into the bag.

"Thank you," said Marissa politely, her heart sinking. Maybe her uncle could help right now. "Follow me, boys."

The nurse watched Marissa swing her damaged leg down the veranda stairs. So many people with nothing but aspirations in an environment that conspired against them on so many levels.

"Hey, Boss," she called when she saw him next. "Is there any way we can help Marissa? That's what ORA's about – helping people help themselves, isn't it?"

“Mmm,” murmured Robert absentmindedly as he filled in paperwork. “I know that if a woman earns a shilling, she’ll put it into the kid’s education.” He paused. “The average family here is 5.5 kids. If women like her can earn money to educate their families the whole sub-county would be better off.”

“What if ORA could find a hundred New Zealand dollars each for ten women and their 5.5 kids? That works out to...” the nurse checked the exchange rate on her phone, “245,000 shillings per woman. Each could start a little business with a loan like that.”

Robert lifted his head at the mention of that much money. “That’s a thousand dollars,” he said, “but 55 kids helped. Might be worth asking HQ about it. But risky though. Too many factors against success here.”

Back in Vurra, Marissa mixed the milk powder with water the eldest boy had fetched that morning. She fed the babies and sent the big boys to her uncle to borrow a small net. “Go down to the river and see if you can catch some fish,” she told them. “Make sure you don’t do anything silly or lose the net. Maybe we eat tonight.” Exhausted, she lay down on the mattress they all shared, and slept with her babies.

At five next morning, she hurried several miles beyond the village and purchased corn from the farmers at prices cheaper than the market. During the day she pounded the corn, made porridge and sent the older boys out late afternoon to sell it.

Looking wistfully at other children playing after school, the elder balanced the saucepan on his head while the younger held the spoon to serve with. The buyer supplied the bowl. Sometimes they made a little money. Sometimes they were beaten up, the food stolen and once, the money they’d already earned.

Marissa found that cassava flour had a short shelf life, that if she’d paid too much for a raw product she couldn’t make even a small profit to feed her family. In fact, she owed her uncle money. When she hadn’t paid the rent for two months, they were evicted from their shack. The risk hadn’t paid off.

She wanted to die. It would have to be a car, Marissa thought. A car would be quick. Her children couldn’t be any worse off without her. Relatives would take them in. She wasn’t frightened of death. Living at the bottom of the heap was too hard. She wanted to leave the daily struggle of finding enough to eat, a safe place to live and survive until the next day.

But she was too scared to do it. Humiliated, the family carried their meagre belongings, dragging their mattress, to a tumbledown shack on the outskirts of Vurra. The roof leaked in the rain and it was near a swamp. The noise of frogs kept them awake at night. Hungry and desperate, they made another trip to the ORA mission base in Arua.

“I have a deal I can offer you,” Robert told Marissa. “We can give you a loan to start your own business selling in the market.”

“No, thank you,” she replied. “It doesn’t work for me.” She told the boss man her story.

“We’ll work with you Marissa, teach you some skills, help you make a success of it this time. Don’t allow one failure to stop you,” he encouraged. “Use it as a stepping stone to better things. You know more now. Don’t you want your boys to go back to school?”

The boys glanced up from the ground with hope. They stayed silent. It was not for them to show desires.

“It’s called micro-financing,” said Robert, weighing up the situation. “We loan you money to help you start up. You pay us back, with low interest, a little at a time, and then we can lend that money to another woman to start up a business.”

He paused for effect. “Wouldn’t you like to have a proper house of your own?”

Marissa looked up. “I could have that?”

At first Marissa sold food items, vegetables, small fish and porridge. With constant monitoring and encouragement by ORA staff, her family situation began to change. She was able to build a small one-room hut to accommodate them all, and the health of her children improved. Soon she earned enough to pay the school fees for her older children who had lost all hope of an education. And her husband returned home.

Now Marissa adds value to peanuts. She sends a boda-boda, a motor-cycle taxi, across the border to the Republic of Congo to buy peanuts. They’re less expensive there than Uganda. She roasts the peanuts, packs them in small bags and sells on the roadside near her home. She wears a proud smile because she’s shown that she can be successful.

She’s constructed another three-roomed grass thatched house for her family, with a bathroom outside. She saves 5000 Ugandan shillings (NZ\$2.15) every week. She’s found hope and can now support and educate all her children.

And the NZ\$100 is still helping others.

Note: Micro-finance initiatives issue self-sustaining, collateral and interest-free loans for as little as \$50, to poor women in rural East Africa to start businesses to support their families. The borrower’s priorities are: better nutrition, healthcare and paying school fees for their children. (From the Global Giving Foundation website)

Published in Tauranga Writers anthology Byline 2016