

*I cried the day you came into my life, a babbling bundle of squirming happiness. I cried when I first held you in my arms and you stared at me with your kaleidoscope eyes, cooing and curling your tiny, perfect fists. I cried when they took you away from me to clean you. I cried as we made our way back to the sea of white, grimy tents, an ocean of despair. I cried as I set you down on the straw mat that covered the cold floor and covered you in our only blanket, a threadbare, mangy affair. I cried because I knew, that despite all my efforts, I would not be able to give you the life you deserved. I cried because I knew I would not be able to protect you from the pain and suffering you would face for the rest of your life.*

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You squat outside our tent, a stick in your hand, gibbering away, oblivious of the destruction and ruin around you. You are in your own world, a happy place, filled with wonder and delight. You raise your head to the sky, squinting at the sun, which rips through the clouds, spreading light across the camp, a metaphor for the light you shone on my life. But despite everything, you have grown on me. My heart, bitter from years of disappointment, melted at the sight of your thick dark eyelashes caressing your rosy cheeks as you lay in a peaceful sleep, your laughter bouncing off the canvas walls of the tent as I amused you with a makeshift doll of twine and sticks, you uttering your first word ‘m-m-mama’ with a smile, your first wobbly steps, surprise written all over your face. I am broken from my reminiscence by a shrill scream. I look up, just in time to see you collapse to the ground, clutching your head. I am frozen. Another cry from you brings me back to reality, and I run towards you and take you in my arms.

‘Mama,’ you say, staring straight at me, your eyes wet with tears. ‘It hurts, mama.’ You press your hands against your head, your eyes scrunched in pain. You suddenly retch on the dirt outside the tent. There’s blood in your vomit. Perhaps you have caught some disease from playing with other kids in the camp, but my motherly instinct tells me that something much more serious is going on. The pained expression on your face stirs me into action. I get up, holding you in my arms, and begin the two kilometre walk to the Red Cross tent. The sun is beating down mercilessly on my face, and the stench of human waste is unbearable. Mosquitos buzz around my face, biting every inch of bare skin. It takes every atom of my strength to keep from dropping you, it seems to me you are getting heavier by the second. I am exhausted, but I keep pushing. You are the only thing I have left. I need to help you. I take care not to step in the various potholes; the sudden jolts may further injure you. Finally, we arrive at the tent. A smiling lady greets us. Her happiness annoys me. How can she be so cheerful when the world is falling apart?

‘Hello,’ she says in a strong American accent, as she sees me approaching.

‘What can I help you with?’ she asks, more urgently this time, registering the distressed look on my face.

‘My daughter, please!’ I say in broken English. The lady’s eyes sweep over you, unmoving in my arms, and the smile drops from her face. She nods, and steps forward.

‘Head pain?’ she asks. I nod. ‘Has she vomited?’ I nod again. The lady grimaces, and takes you from my arms.

‘We need to run some tests’, she says, starting to walk away, making no indication of whether I should follow.

‘Please help her! She’s the only thing I have left!’ I scream at her retreating back, taking a few steps forward.

She turns around. ‘We’ll try. Come back tomorrow.’

And I am left standing there, alone.

That night is one of the longest I have ever experienced. I do not feed you dinner. I do not wrap the blanket around you. I do not wake up to your restless rustling as you try to get out of the tent. Finally, the sun rises, up, until it reaches its zenith. It is time for me to make the journey back to you. It takes less time, as I am not carrying you.

A man is at the entrance.

‘I need to see my daughter,’ I declare, daring him to contradict me. ‘She was admitted yesterday, at midday. Her head hurt.’

The man nods, and gestures for me to follow. He leads me down one corridor, and another, past beds with screaming patients, past grim doctors. I finally see you propped up on a pillow, in a metal bed. Your eyes are closed. I rush towards your side. My stomach is in knots. Are you alive? The lady I first met appears next to you. She is crying.

‘What’s wrong?’ I ask, not wanting to hear the answer.

‘She needs a major surgery. She has a brain tumour. She needs to go to a real hospital. Otherwise she’s going to die,’ the lady says. Her eyes are closed, as if she doesn’t want to see my reaction. She has already given up.

‘Nooooo!’ I scream. The walls are caving in. My whole existence, my whole purpose, has dissolved at the utterance of these words. I know it’s impossible to get you to hospital. The officials will not allow it. Besides, the waiting list is too long. We don’t have any official documents. We are nobody. I have failed to protect you. Now, all we can do is wait, wait for the inevitable. And after that, there is nothing left for me.