

Davy

Kitwe, Zambia, 1998

The school building is an old structure, built long ago by a colonial mining company in the boom time. I peer inside, sun blinded at first. There are no desks or blackboards. The red ochre walls are pitted and scrawled with chalk; the cement floor has decayed, revealing the dirt beneath. Motes of dust float up in the light that filters in through small openings beneath the corrugated roof. Even without the children inside, the air pulses with heat.

I cross the threshold. I breathe deeply to release the tension in my shoulders, which began to take hold this morning with the jolting of the plane – a flimsy tin can with just twelve seats. I am a special guest here, working for an American aid agency. My job is to advise them on how to support this school which has been so recently set up by the community. I have been working with similar schools in the capital, but this is my first consultancy work. I wonder if my experience will be enough to make me useful here. What can I really know of these people from flying up for the day?

It is my first visit to Kitwe, a town that was established as a centre for mining in the 1930s. Its fortunes still fluctuate with the price of copper. Despite a decade without investment, the town continues to grow thanks to the influx of villagers leaving their homes in search of a different way of life. Having lived in Lusaka for two years now, I am familiar with this urban drift. There, townships have sprouted on every side of the city, with new hand-built shacks popping up each week. There is no infrastructure to support them: children play in the piles of waste that grow in ditches, and a single tap may be shared by hundreds of families. There are never enough school places for the kids in these dusty unmarked streets, and I have been working for an NGO which helps communities to set up schools of their own, schools like this one.

Someone guides me back out of the building. It is less crowded here than in Lusaka, with more space. I scan a large dusty area edged at one end by stunted trees, and see the pupils. They have been given the day off for my visit but they have come anyway, and brought their families too. It is the middle of the dry season so there is no grass. Groups of people have gathered near the trees to keep out of the bleaching noonday sun. Children run around in

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the shabby, ill-fitting western t-shirts that are imported in bales from overseas op shops. Most of the women, though, wear traditional *chitenje* – bright patterned fabric tied around their waists to form skirts. Some have wound matching cloth smartly around their heads for the occasion. As they mill about their lush colours and patterns make me feel pale in my thin summer dress.

There seems to be nobody organising them, but the groups somehow come together. They gather outside the school to begin a dance in my honour: the caterpillar, where boys are paired with girls, following them closely, knees bent, almost joined at the thighs. Mothers and aunties create impromptu harmonies and the children smile open-mouthed in celebration. These offerings always move me – they speak so directly through dance and song.

When the dance ends, an old woman begins another, slower rhythm on a low drum. A small child follows her beat on an upturned tin. People laugh and chatter expectantly in the heat. Someone offers me a tepid bottle of orange Fanta and I swig it gratefully.

After the official welcome I tour the classrooms. I must assess this meagre space that houses such hope; must gauge the community's capacity and motivation. My employers will develop a project backed by the US development department, USAID. I know the questions they want me to answer. How sustainable is this education model? On what high-profile projects can they pin their cash?

I sigh. Local people have plunged their few resources into setting up this school. Here, individuals teach without pay or training. It is an inspiring act of faith in the face of poverty. But I know that to survive they need more than goodwill: they need wages. And I have learnt how hard it is to get funding for wages, since aid agencies seem reluctant to sponsor recurring costs. They tend to favour projects that can generate the funds to run themselves. And although everyone agrees that education is an investment, there are simply too many communities in need.

I will try to secure the long-term funding that this school needs, but it seems unlikely, so I must look for additional ways to support them too. I can request the classroom resources

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that donors love to provide – the textbooks and blackboards and soccer balls. I will introduce the teachers to the basic, condensed curriculum that has been developed for schools like these. And I can check out the local education resource centre, perhaps, to establish a training network. Running through these ideas in my head, I begin to feel more confident.

I have been asked to talk to the committee after our classroom tour, and I want to give them some guidance on setting up their classes. But when I step outside, I realise it is not just the committee I must address. The people have organised themselves into a large seated horseshoe, four deep. Mothers with babies tied onto their backs shush squirming toddlers, the colours of their clothes looking dulled now by the red dust.

‘*Natasha,*’ I repeat – *thank you* – one of the few local words I know. Eyes light up at my feeble attempt to speak Chibemba and I feel ashamed. I have been appointed an interpreter, though: a softly-spoken local man named Davy Siwila, whose response to my queries when we spoke earlier was shrewd and informative.

It is Davy who leads me now to the head of the horseshoe. I listen to the formal welcomes from community leaders, and I praise their new school. Many in the audience speak no English but they listen attentively.

I am not sure how to pitch my feedback to this crowd, or what they expect of me. I launch into my practical advice on organising the pupils. Then Davy steps forward and begins to translate. I have never had an interpreter before, and I stand beside him watching. Davy is slightly built, with a wispy beard. His wiry frame contains a tense energy; his eyes dart around the people in the crowd. As he speaks, his face is expressive and he makes open gestures. I become absorbed watching the audience. There are approving murmurs, and then silence, and then laughter – all that from a tip on class sizes? He pauses, and looks to me again.

‘What did you tell them?’ I whisper.

Davy smiles. ‘What you said. And maybe an example or two I put in.’

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I learn from him. My formal report can wait. These people have embarked on something brave, but it will be hard to keep it going. They need inspiration. They need encouragement to take small steps, to build their school into something lasting.

‘In Lusaka, I have been working with 23 communities,’ I begin. ‘All of them have set up their own schools. Some of them teach in classrooms like yours, some of them teach under trees. Each community is making it work.’

Davy and I relax into our joint role. I begin to throw in examples of problems that our schools have faced, and the adults listen more intently. We talk about how to reach the most needy children and what stops families from enrolling kids into school. We discuss what their children need to learn and how to manage with limited resources. Each time I pause, Davy steps up. I cannot understand his words but I can see their impact. He is by turns solemn, intent and humorous, creating moving stories and jokes from my most prosaic statements.

We take questions from the crowd. I do not want Davy to finish. I feel like some magical ventriloquist. He takes my words and polishes them, amplifying them so they resonate with his community, so they shine.

At last we come to an end. The sun is no longer high in the sky. People thank me with formal speeches and with shy expressions of excitement. I look around for Davy but he has retreated, allowing me to take the credit for his performance. I gesture to him but he shakes his head.

‘I am only the translator,’ he says, his voice light with laughter.

I save my gratitude. In my head I am already composing a commendation of his work to put into my report. Later, I am able to talk to Davy about his young family and his hopes. He is a devout man, deeply committed to building his community. I am humbled by his belief that change can be made to happen, and by his faith in the people here.

Back in the city, I write my report on the school and assume that my work is done. Weeks later, though, I am summoned to meet a representative flown in from USAID headquarters

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in Washington. The man sits hugely in a chair, perspiring in his suit. He thanks me for my report, but would like clarification on some of my recommendations.

‘Particularly over funding these schools.’ He speaks slowly and distinctly to make sure I will understand. ‘If we fund wages then schools become dependent on our aid. Surely there are other ways we can support such initiatives? Teacher training perhaps?’

He wants projects with timelines and objectives and photo opportunities. I refer him back to my report: I have included such proposals and hope they will be taken up. But he is bullish. He rephrases the same question in several ways, his expressions dripping with development jargon. I notice the plastic folder in my hand beginning to shake, so I place it down. I feel young but I can’t back down. I understand his arguments about sustainable development; I have probably used them myself in the past. But I have seen many of these schools now, each a miracle built from nothing.

‘My recommendation still stands. These children cannot wait for an education until their communities are viable. What this school needs, if it’s to become established, is wages, even if it’s for just a few years.’

We reach an impasse; I cannot make him see. We share a common language, but once again I could use an interpreter. For him there seem to be no shades of grey: poverty must fit neatly into his scheme of the world.

‘Thank you for coming in,’ he says, dismissing me at last with a clammy handshake. ‘And for your detailed report.’

Leaving the room I am still trembling, but with anger. I know I will not be asked to work for this agency again. It doesn’t matter: I have had enough. And when my regular contract expires not long after, it is time to return home.

Shropshire, England, 2002

Four years on, I am married and settled back in rural England. My days turn around the absorbing routines of caring for my one-year-old child. One morning I receive a flimsy

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envelope, postmarked to show several re-directions. It is franked by the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I know of no-one in South Africa.

Davy Siwila writes to thank me. Interpreting for me, he claims, was a turning point for him. 'I am now pursuing a Master of Social Science in Community Resource Management'. It is a powerful achievement.

My daughter puts a hand up to my wet eyes, curious, and I give her a hug.

We connect. Change happens, and I am glad.