

ISNTD FESTIVAL SHOWCASE | WRITTEN & JOURNALISM

SHORT STORY ON RABIES

BY JOANA EGWUDA



Dear Sir/Ma,

Good day. Permit me to tell you a story.

The first time I saw her, she was walking down the dusty street with a slight smile on her face. I had travelled to my village for the holidays. She was part of a group of students returning home after school and most of them were hurrying because gray clouds were gathering in the sky and the smell of rain was in the air.

When the first rain drops fell, while her friends broke out running, she stopped, looked skyward and opened her mouth to let rain drop into it. I remember chuckling to myself; tasting rainwater was something we all did as children. In a short while, the rain increased in intensity, pounding down and forming little rivers on the street, but she stood unmoving in the street, rain dropping into her open mouth.

I called to her to leave the rain. I repeated this twice and she just stared at me, looking puzzled. A thought occurred to me and I repeated it in Igala. “Li ya, kwe fo mi. Come, leave the rain”

She walked to where I stood under the shelter of a balcony and stayed with me while the rain thundered down. That was the first day I met Ojamalia. That day, I learnt that she was in Primary 4, the 5th of 7 children and that she had gotten her crooked tooth when she fell as a dog was running after her. I learnt that she loved climbing trees and she wanted to be a pilot. We had most of our conversation in Igala as that was what was used to teach them in school.

The second time I saw Ojamalia, she was returning from an errand. I was struck again by her personality, her big eyes, wide smile and crooked tooth. She taught me the song she learnt at school and we walked home together, singing it.

The third time I saw 'Ojamalia' –seven months after our first encounter–, it was inscribed on a wooden cross over her grave.

Her mother had told me “Oma mi domo gen. Oma mi le. My child is no more. My child is gone.”(Dot under the o in domo and under the e in gen) and I hadn't believed it until she took me by the hand and led me to the small cross at the back of the house. Maly – as apparently everyone called her – had died 2 weeks ago. I cried when I went home. The next day, I went back to see Maly's family. I wanted to talk about what had happened, it was expiation for me.

She told me what happened in detail. It had started with fever and vomiting and they had treated her with herbs but she only got worse. When Maly started staring into corners and having conversations with her grandmother who had died 2 years ago, everyone concluded it was another spiritual attack; there had been reports of similar attacks in the village. When she started convulsing and foaming in the mouth, her father locked her up in a hut.

“He didn't want visitors to see her like that”, Maly's mother told me in Igala. “He even told me to stop going into the hut”

I told her that Maly had not died from a spiritual attack; she had died from Rabies. I found her to be a very attentive listener, she wanted all the details, no matter how trivial. I told her about all the symptoms, including the ones Maly had had. Fever, nausea, vomiting, headaches, anxiety, hallucinations, paralysis. I told her about what could likely have caused it: a dog bite. She nodded and told me that Maly had returned home limping one day; a dog had bitten her while she was returning from school. Nobody thought anything of it because dogs were everywhere and dog bites were common.

When I told her it was one of the Neglected Tropical Diseases, she looked at me surprised.

“How will I neglect something that killed my child?” I told her it wasn't called that because she neglected it, but because the people who had the opportunity to do major things about it had refused to do so.

“Ene naa (straight line on the first a) te ne. Na kola nwu ma (hyphen on n). Who are the people? I will talk to them.”

I explained the role of the Government and Health Organizations in providing vaccines, and also the role of the community in avoiding stray dogs. She promised to tell everyone about it.

“No child should die again. Eku kolan, na che. Don’t worry, I will do it”

Her words kept ringing in my head as I left and they have followed me ever since. Her words are what has prompted this letter.

Maly shouldn’t have died, she should have grown up to be a pilot. She had so much moxie, so much vitality that nothing would have kept her from the skies. She would be alive today, if she had gotten vaccines, if the community had been educated on rabies and the dogs vaccinated.

While emphasis is being placed on other more ‘common’ diseases, people die of NTD’s in rural areas. A major cause of this seeming neglect is that most of the people in positions to help are the least affected by it. The policy makers, the people with the funds and resources, are almost never infected by NTD’s. We are confronted by statistics daily and so it is tempting to think of these lives as numbers, as vague percentages we observe indifferently. Do we realize that, every statistical figure, no matter how little, represents lives? Even though we see mortality rates that we think are low compared to other diseases, we have to understand that, to the people affected: the man who has lost his wife, the child who has lost his parents, the mother who has lost her child, the 1% is 100%.

Maly’s mother lost a child and vowed to educate everyone she met about Rabies. I hope this letter prompts you to do the same. I hope it becomes a burning reminder of lives that are lost unnecessarily. I hope the next time a pilot’s voice comes on in the plane you’re in, you remember Maly and know she could have been, under better circumstances, the one taking you to your destination.

Na che. Let the words of Maly’s mother burn in your mind always. We all have roles to play to eradicate these diseases, from advocacy to health education to healthy practices and if we all play our parts, we can successfully beat NTD’s and have a healthier world.

And anytime you are tempted to forget how important it is to eradicate these diseases, anytime you are tempted to ease back on your efforts towards this movement, remember Maly, the child pilot and remember her mother’s declaration: Na che. I will do it.

Yours in advocacy,

Joana Egwuda