

The Ones that Changed Me

Based on the humanitarian work of Liz and Miguel De Almeida Amaral

Told from the perspective of Liz De Almeida Amaral

The Angolan civil war began in 1975 and I never thought I would be a part of it.

My skin is sticky and uncomfortable. I stretch my arms high above my head and sit up. Hitting my head, the events of last night fade into my memory... *Gunfire blared and I woke up startled. I sat up in complete shock. Thinking about these events and how to defend yourself never prepares you for the real thing. Miguel reached over and pushed me down forcefully, proceeding with another shove, this time off the bed and onto the floor. I waited anxiously under the imported wood frame and dusty mattress.* Surprisingly enough, at this point, all I want to do is shower. I meander into the bathroom, wiping my forehead on the inside collar of my pajamas, and pray for water. I hold my breath as I touch the cold faucet, turn the handle, and then exhale in disappointment. Another day of brushing my teeth dry. My hand lingers on the metal, hoping for a second of relief from the heat, but my body temperature warms it within a few seconds and leaves me unsatisfied. I exit the room hoping that breakfast will comfort me. Opening the heavy door, I already could tell by the smell, the fridge was warm and the food was spoiled.

I am greeted with a kiss on the cheek from Miguel, and some help scrounging a meal together from Amelia. Amelia is like a sister to me, and Miguel is my husband and the love of my life. Both of them grew up here, in this war zone, and they take care of me. If it weren't for Miguel, I might have been shot or blown up by now. In the U.S., we take for granted the many freedoms we have. Here, I have to keep my opinions to myself and be wary of whom I trust. Not even Amelia knows about my thoughts on this war, I can't risk being turned in. In my time in Angola so far, I have noticed that war does two things to people: Strengthens bonds between family, friends, and neighbors, and tears them apart. I'm lucky to have not experienced the latter. Many become numb to the tragedies and death after a while, disregard for human life is rampant. Remembering this, I set down my plate and rush to the door. "Miguel! We're starting at the new village today!" I shout. Our bodyguards guide us to the car.

Entering a new village is always hard. The people there have been neglected. They sit in their homes made of mud and sticks, not saying a word. They are conserving the little energy they have. They own no more than one pair of clothes, but at this point clothes are obsolete. Mothers and fathers guard their young as we pass by. All around me, where children should be laughing and playing, I see timid little people, their skin peeling, bellies and rib cages protruding, and hair turning orange from malnutrition. No one speaks, their minds are not yet able to process anything more than surviving. That is life here, surviving. Our worker's jobs are to find the most at risk people and immediately get them into therapeutic feeding. When you haven't eaten in as long as they have, your stomach needs time to recover. In the medical department, they specialize in giving small, nutritional meals to the most affected people. Doctor Ani passes me and reaches his hand out to an elderly woman holding a newborn baby. He has a special bond with the people, having been one himself in Nigeria as a teenager. He treats the woman with dignity and takes her to a clinic. I watch the dust fly up behind them as he carries her off. After having fed everyone, we decide to call it a night. Our bodyguards drive Miguel and I home skillfully along the rubble covered path, being careful of landmines.

We arrive the next day and start setting up the operation. Using sandbags, we create wells of corn and beans and help villagers collect rations. One bag per person. They wait in silence for their turn. Meanwhile, our teams are on the move to look for clean water. Diseases spread quickly in these conditions and even quicker when the water supply is contaminated. The people drink from the same water they use as a restroom and bath, and all is shared with local wildlife. But I am here today, joining Miguel's usual job of watching over the distribution. My palms sweat in the heat of high noon. I wonder why the process is taking so long. To my left, I see Sargent W., an Angola national and previous military pilot in the war. This man has gone from dropping bombs and killing people to saving lives with food, care, and respect. He stands with Johnathon Amayo, a Ghana national, along with Doctor Ani, Jonathan was also once on the receiving end. These two workers speak to a group of individuals who seem to be having trouble measuring. I walk over hoping to be of assistance somehow. As they were demonstrating how much corn each person could take, one of the community members starts to wince in pain. He grabs his forehead and looks at his feet and within a few moments he falls to the ground. Sargent W. and Jonathan rush to his aid, picking him up and carrying him to the nearest doctor. The air is tense. Everyone watches as the doctor pulls out his bag and helps the man into the shade. Moments pass and breath is held. The silence now is different from the silence of the first day, but the intense stares and

fear are reminiscent of it. Minutes pass. Suddenly, the man gasps for air and opens his eyes. A woman, who had been near him when he fell, cries and runs to him. Every villager there sighs in relief, then turns to exchange hugs with loved ones.

I pick up the phone and dial the number for the Norwegian demining company. My feet tap anxiously. After a month or so of distributing food and therapeutic feeding, the villagers have gained back much of their strength, but the danger of the landmines was still high. *A roughly 7 year old little girl, decides to make it her mission to show me around her community. On her tour, she introduces me to her family's chicken, her baby sister and eldest brother, shows me the games she likes to play, and allows me entry into the village graveyard. The graveyard is massive compared to the small population of people who live here, stretching far with variously sized patches of grass indicating where the bodies rest. I notice the height specifically. Too many graves are no more than five feet tall, too many host children. I feel pressure start to well up around my eyes. "This is where they buried him." The little girl announces, pointing to a small grave marked by nothing more than a few rocks. She doesn't seem upset, to her she is still introducing me to her family and friends. Whether they are alive or dead makes no difference to her. "Where they buried who?" I ask, my voice soft and my lip quivering. "We were playing in the field. I remember a loud sound because it hurt my ears. My mother said he was blown up by a 'landmine'." she looks up at me, "My brother Adrien is here."* I hang up the phone, sighing in relief. The Norwegians would be arriving soon to remove all mines from the area.

Distribution of food is not sustainable. Community members growing crops that have been shown to fall victim to the same diseases over and over again will leave them in the same situation that they were in when we first got here. Today is the day that agronomists will introduce their new genetically engineered crop that locals can germinate and produce quickly. After speaking with them about logistics, I decide to stay and hear a part of their lesson. Farmers and all adult men capable of growing a crop gather around as the scientists teach them about their next harvest. They tell jokes and tease each other and I see smiles spread across their face when it is mentioned that they are resistant to the things that had caused their homeland so many meal-less days and nights. I recognize one in particular, it was the man who had fainted on our first day of distribution, with him is his oldest son.

I walk back to the distribution to find Miguel. Women were helping each other measure their rations and people were bartering with each other to get the ingredients that

they wanted. Vitality. I saw vitality, laughter, conversation, and community here in the very place where I had once seen malnutrition and shock.

The last day in a village is always bittersweet, but the market was already full of fresh crops and we were no longer needed. Men and women give their best sales pitch to those passing by, telling them about their food and offering it to them at their best price. Children walk by with their eyes barely peaking over handwoven baskets full of goods and merchandise. We stopped the distributions completely today, keeping them up would only damage this new economy. When doing humanitarian work, sometimes the best thing you can do is letting the community thrive on it's own. Before Miguel and I decide it is time to go, I do one last thing. I walk up to a stand selling corn to find the little girl standing by her mother's side with a baby on her back. Across the plaza is an elderly woman with her daughter and grandchild, the same woman who Doctor Ani had helped on the first day. The man who had passed out, his wife who cried and ran to him, and their son are also here selling their crops. I take a deep breathe, knowing that I will forever cherish the things I have learned here and the people I have met. I turn back to the little girl, her mother gives me a nod. I hug the child tightly. Releasing her, I look her in the eye and say, this time without a quiver, "Thank you."

"One of the things I think of is that many times, well my experience was, I'm gonna go into this community and I am going to make a difference. I think one of the things that happened to me is that the person who changed the most is myself."

Liz De Almeida Amaral

"See how they endure this, but they still manage to smile. These here are moms, dads, children, they are registering people and giving food. They are the ones who built this community."

João Miguel De Almeida Amaral

"It gives people a sense of pride when they know, we are helping each other, not someone from the outside, we are part of this."

Mira cómo aguantan esto y a una si pueden sonreir

Liz De Almeida Amaral

"Without the community, you can't do it."

Liz De Almeida Amaral

"I don't think I am a hero, I think that the people who are there are the heroes."

Liz De Almeida Amaral

Las Personas que me Cambiaron

De la historia de Liz y Miguel De Almeida Amaral

Me despierto y no tengo agua o electricidad. En la noche, estaban balazos y no pude dormir. Es la mañana, mi esposo me saludó. “Vamos al pueblo Liz.” Salimos. Las personas en el pueblo son tímidos y no tienen emoción. Están sobreviviendo a medias. Veo una vieja con un bebé, está hambriento. Un doctor que se llama Ani era como la gente de este pueblo cuando era joven. Se levanta la vieja y el bebé y lleva a la clínica. Para alimentamos la gente, sacamos maíz, frijoles y aceite. Está muy caliente y tengo sed. Un poco de los trabajadores están enseñando de la organización. Un hombre que está escuchando parece a enfermera. Se desmaya. Los doctores corren para ayudar. El hombre se despierta y la esposa de él llora. Este es la primera vez cuando ellos se notar emoción. Llamó la empresa que saquen las minas terrestres. *Ayer, caminé con una niña. Ella quiere me muestro a su pueblo. Me lleva al cementerio. El cementerio fue grande, pero el pueblo no tiene muchas personas. “Mi hermano está aquí. Murió cuando una mina terrestre explotó.” Lloró cuando ella dijo ésta, pero ella no estaba triste.* Cuelgo el teléfono. La empresa sacará las minas. Los científicos enseñando a los hombres del pueblo para cultivar comida. Los hombres ríen y contar chistes. En el pueblo, las mujeres trocean y platican. Están manejando todo. Es el último día en el pueblo. Soy feliz, pero sentimental. Me paro en el mercado que la gente vendieron los cultivos. Cuando que estoy haciendo trabaja humanitario, la mejor algo que haces es dejando la comunidad para prosperar en solo. Antes de salir, dijo adiós. Veo toda las personas que me hube conocí alrededor. Doy un abrazo a la niña. “Gracias,” yo digo, “para todo que hiciste para yo.”

Por Izadora McGawley

