



AT THE EDGE OF THE VILLAGE

MUSINGS OF A MISSIONARY WIFE



LISA LEIDENFROST

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A special thanks to my children who have provided ample subjects for my stories. These are stories that I hope will be passed down through generations of our family and join a stream of accumulated stories to tell of God’s glory, the ending of which will begin His great story at the end of all time.

Last but not least, thanks to my husband Csaba, who considers this book just as much his as it is mine, the only difference being that I did the initial writing. He has the knowledge for the cultural writings and also did some ghost-writing on a few particulars for me. He is the initiator and overseer of the Bakwé project as well as the leader of our family. I am just the recorder of events.

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When I look back now on these varied stories of our daily life, and of all the friends and family that played a part in them, I am reminded of a favorite quote:

Every comfort you have is a forerunner of those eternal mercies you shall have with God in Heaven. Not only are the consolations of God's Spirit the forerunners of those eternal comforts you shall have in Heaven, but when you sit at your table, and rejoice with your wife and children and friends, you may look upon every one of those as a forerunner, yea the very earnest penny of eternal life to you.

—Jeremiah Burroughs
The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment

Preface

Step into our world, a place of laughter and tears, trials and hopes, events captured and stories told. They are stories of life, lived out on the mission field in Africa where the hand of God is ever present in every situation.

They are stories of daily events, of cultural experiences recounted, of friends loved and lost, and of trials surmounted.

They are stories of bothersome situations turned to laughter as God gives us the ability to find humor in various hardships—a humor that has kept us sane over all these years.

They are mostly stories of the familiar things in life, the little things that lend spice to our daily experience. Not all of missionary life is extraordinary or bizarre. Most of it is just normal, common events that unfold one day into another. And because God is good, there is a beauty in living, a purpose beyond our own mere existence that can make even the smallest things we do burst with life and meaning, laughter and delight. Too often these small, commonplace things go unnoticed unless they are caught and brought to life in words, words which become a lens that can, even if for a single moment, bring this ever-present beauty into focus.



Part I

Background



1

Africa Orientation Course

We stepped outside to look around. Csaba (*chawba*) shone his flashlight down on the ground. There was no ground; only a black mass moving toward us. I stood there stupefied, looking at an endlessly flowing stream of ants. We went into the kitchen. On the walls were rivers of surging ants, up the walls, down the walls, on the floor and into the pots and pans, in a seamless black carpet. I could hear them make threatening, crackling noises as if they were soldiers out for booty and we were the victims. I had heard about these ants but had never actually experienced them until that night. It was said that they could kill and consume a bound animal, no matter how large, leaving only the bones in their wake. I shivered and went back to our two young children, who were sleeping on the couch, while Csaba put some kerosene and water in a bucket to ward off the army. I was left alone on the couch, afraid to go back to the bedroom where the driver ant raid had first begun. If we were experiencing only the orientation to Africa now, I wondered what the real thing would be like when we started our project in a village.

Our first African experience together as a family of four was the African Orientation Course held in Cameroon, before we were to head to Ivory Coast where we planned to start a translation project among the Bakwé people. We were excited about this new phase of our lives, but when reality set in during our orientation, we finally realized how difficult our situation might be, and just how much we would need God's grace in the future.

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In the first part of our orientation, we were to live with other would-be missionaries in dorm-like rooms for about five weeks, learning how to live with each other and our new culture. We would receive training on health, medicine, African culture, village living, and crisis management during times of political upheaval. This was all fine and good; little happened to ruffle us—except for the medical lectures. I don't think most of the missionaries had realized what a dangerous place Africa could be, and many had brought their young families with them. At the time, we had a two-year-old son (Hans) and a three-month-old daughter (Noai). I remember sitting in on a medical lecture with my baby daughter in my lap along with rows of other missionaries. We were all diligently taking notes as the nurse talked about the different diseases we might run into and how to treat them.

As she went on and on about malaria, schistosomiasis, sleeping sickness, and the various dangers we could possibly face from either the diseases or the medications to treat them, she became acutely aware that the room was silent and that note-taking had almost stopped. Most eyes were glued to her in abject horror, except for a few impassive males who were by nature not affected by much to begin with. She looked around the room, sighed, and then said, "Okay, let's stop the lecture and sing 'Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus.'"

That was Phase One. Phase Two would test our real resolve to be missionaries in Africa. In the "village living phase" we would be dropped off family by family to live in the home of a real African family for five weeks. Those who could, would work on a community project to help the village during part of the day. Our living conditions varied from mud and stick houses with holes in the walls and little privacy to cement floors, solid walls, and tin roofs.

We actually got a nice situation in a house with a concrete floor, solid walls, and no live-in family since the owner was happily elsewhere. Concrete floors were especially appreciated because at the age of four months, my baby daughter began to crawl. (What was she doing? I didn't want her to crawl yet!) Concrete floors may seem uncomfortable for crawling purposes, but after the medical lectures I now knew what she could catch from being in constant contact with the bare soil.

Others may have had different experiences, but we actually found the village living phase much to our liking, except for a few minor details—

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such as no toilet and no running water. To get running water, Csaba and I had to put the children on our backs and walk to a stream. It took us half an hour to make one round trip with four meager buckets of water. We learned how to conserve water and never to take it for granted. A full bath could be taken in half a bucket; washing dishes took less. The problem was washing diapers and clothes by hand, which was solved only by packing the children on our backs and hiking down to the stream again. The hardest part was trying to keep my energetic, now-crawling baby daughter within the confines of the muddy bank, and our inquisitive young son from exploring the bushes alone while we washed our things by hand near the stream; we had sat in on snake lectures as well as medical lectures.

Snakes were to be the least of our problems; though we imagined several, we never saw one. What we did see constantly were the small creatures that hid in the dark crevices under our bed, and the millions of assorted black specks that came to raid the house at night. Since the children were so young and we were still in uncharted waters, we set up little beds attached to our big one and draped the large mosquito net over us all. We failed to realize that more was needed than just draping the net over the bed and letting it fall to the floor. One must also tuck the net under the mattress so that nothing that has been hiding under the bed all day can crawl up in the bed at night.

I acutely remember waking up in the middle of the night to see a big, fat, hairy spider hanging on the inside of the net just inches above my nose, hideous in appearance and horrible in size. I decided to awaken my sleeping husband to get rid of it since my own intense fear of spiders prevented any other action on my part. It is his duty anyway, written in some unspoken job description for husbands that dates back to the beginning of time. Between us there has never been any dispute—spiders and such are his job. Waking him up wasn't easy, but eventually he was coherent enough to realize my distress. After this, all was well until the driver ants appeared.

Driver ants really are a wonder of the African forest. They are one of God's marvels and I know that I should appreciate them more, but somehow at the time I couldn't. Drivers are nomadic ants of the tropical rain forest that invade an area *en masse* and wipe it clean of anything even vaguely edible. When they come in, they simply take over. They

can kill an immobilized animal of any size due to their sheer numbers. When they are disturbed, they bite with such force that you can actually pull the body of the ant off and leave the head with its huge pinchers still intact in your clothing or skin. You need to crush the head to get them off. Some people use them as sutures for wounds, making the ant bite the two sides of the cut together, then pulling off the body. Apparently it works very well (we haven't tried it).

Since our house was on the edge of the forest, the driver army decided to drop in for a casual call one night after our net was securely tucked in and quite thankfully spiderless. It did not remain antless. I don't know how they did it, but the determined ants somehow got under the net. I woke to hear my two-year-old son starting to cry. I reached over to pat him on the back and I drew back my hand with a cry of pain and surprise. Something had bit me hard. I groped for the flashlight and woke Csaba. Drivers! They had come up the net and into our bed. I grabbed our two sleepy kids and sat them on my lap away from any more approaching ants. Csaba in the mean time surveyed the situation with his flashlight. There were only a few drivers in the net now, but many would soon follow. It is very difficult to stay the advance of a determined troop. Csaba told me we would have to leave the bedroom until the raid was over.

Csaba took the flashlight and shone it on the bedroom floor, revealing the rivers of ants that were flowing by the bed and into the hall. Since the ants proceed by following another ant directly in front of them, and thus leave bare patches of floor untouched between their ranks, Csaba took our sleepy son and led me, with our daughter in my arms, from island to island of floor through the rivers of ants. As long as you don't step in their immediate path they don't seem to know that you are there. We made it to the living room, set our children on the couch, and patted them back to sleep. We then went to investigate the path of the army.

It was then that Csaba went out to splash the kerosene-water on the ants to make them retreat. When one ant recognizes that a foul substance has appeared in his path, he will pass the message on and the whole troop will flank out in a different direction. They are frighteningly organized. If your placement of kerosene water is strategic enough you can get the whole army to move on to better ground. Csaba spent the next hour coaxing the drivers away from the house. After the ants had retreated from the

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bedroom, I settled the kids back into their beds. We would repeat this little routine two more times in the next five weeks.

If the Village Phase didn't "make men" out of us, the Forest Phase certainly would. In this part of the orientation we were to hike deep into the rain forest and be dropped off family by family into different parts of the forest, within earshot of each other but out of sight. We would then put up a shelter and spend the night. The leaders would camp in a central location and come to the aid of anyone who needed it. The women with their babies and young children would be allowed to leave the next day; the rest would have to stay an extra two nights. (I must mention that this "Forest Phase" is no longer one of the requirements of the orientation course.)

The one catch was that we were not allowed to take in what we could not carry. After being loaded down with two young kids and all the diapers needed, plus a small baby bed, we didn't have room for much else. We were given some water, but not enough, and a plastic zipper bag full of oatmeal with powdered milk and sugar. This was actually the ration for the children. We guessed that we were somehow supposed to find our food on the forest floor.

After we were dropped off in our spot, Csaba immediately set to work with his machete to build a shelter large enough for the whole family before nightfall. I was of little help since I had to keep my dynamo crawling daughter (why did she have to start crawling?) from leaving the premises and my inquisitive two-year-old son happy. We explored a little and he enjoyed the forest while Daddy was wildly chopping material for our shelter. Hans even grabbed a stick and whacked a few bushes—just like Daddy. He was happy until he got into some stinging ants and started to howl. These small ants actually have poison in their stings that make them feel like bee stings. I calmed him down as best I could with oatmeal and powdered milk.

As I was occupying myself with the kids, my friend came storming down into our camp rather irritated. She brought with her their young daughter. She asked to stay with us for a while until she cooled down. I asked her what had happened and she just said that she and her husband had had a bit of a disagreement over their shelter, one of those little marital spats that one gets into under trying conditions. Maybe they disagreed over where to put the study and the parlor in their little stick shelter. I

didn't ask. I told her she was welcomed to stay but to watch out for the stinging ants. She stayed as long as she needed and left more calmly.

As night approached, the shelter was almost done; Csaba was covered in sweat but pleased with his work. It was a grand A-frame shelter with a platform floor raised off the ground to keep any invading driver ants, unwanted snakes, or spiders from crawling up in our bed at night. This was necessary because we weren't allowed the comfort and security of a mosquito net. Csaba had worked so hard in the heat that we had already run out of our meager supply of drinking water, and he wanted to go into the forest to a stream to get more before darkness set in. We would then boil it to make it safe to drink. As the sun was setting over the forest canopy, the air became damp and the shadows settled in the cracks and crevices of the forest like a thick fog. I knew how fast night came on at the equator. Dusk can last only fifteen minutes before you are plunged into darkness. As the sun disappeared behind the last giant treetop I watched my husband disappear into the forest with his flashlight. I settled down on the shelter with my son and nursing daughter feeling very much alone. We were out of sight of all human habitation. Night had fallen quickly. It seemed like an eternity until I saw a light come bobbing back through the underbrush. Csaba was back and all was now right with the world.

My daughter nursed herself to sleep and lay in her little padded bed. My son was in his pajamas and ready for bed, having already had his supper of dried oatmeal and powdered milk. I had shared in it too as I was hungry and no dinner had come forth from the forest floor. Then my son started to howl. He had come to the conclusion that he wasn't a "man" yet. He had hit his limit and was expressing it in the only way he knew how. I really could not blame him. He'd had no nap, no bath, no normal bedtime routine, was still smarting a bit from the fire ants, had only oatmeal for dinner, a towel for a pillow and sticks for a bed which were not at all to his liking, and to top it off, he was in a *jungle*, of all places! This simply could not be tolerated.

We comforted him and sang him to sleep, put him down on his bed of towels and sticks, and whispered good-night. Then we were on our own, my husband and I, under a sky brilliantly lit with stars above the upper forest canopy that covered us like the vaulted ceiling of a cathedral. I had always liked camping, and now, once the kids were down, the shelter up, and my husband within reach, I was once again enjoying myself. We had

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a crackling fire, hot water to sip on (tea was not allowed) and the warm tropical night with all its strange noises to make us feel both eerie and cozy together.

But I believe the most amazing part of that tropical night was the ground itself. We began to notice it was glowing with thousands of tiny specks. It was the most unusual thing I had ever seen. When I bent down and touched one, I found it was a small piece of glowing humus in the dirt. We had no idea why it glowed but it enchanted us—we seemed to be in a magical world with sparkling diamonds above us and glowing fireworks underneath.

After awhile I went to retire on the stick platform with the kids. It was a great master bedroom, parlor, living room, kitchen, study and sitting room all wrapped up into one stick structure. I was proud of my husband. I was proud of his house, and I wondered how my friend was getting on up there in the forest out of sight (but within earshot). As I settled in, Csaba said he didn't feel much like sleeping and would stay up a long time, keeping the fire going—all night, if he needed to. He was good to his word. As for me, *I* slept.

We only found out later what had happened in some of the other camps. When our son let out his "I've had it" cry, the other wives were huddling on their platforms looking out into that deep dark forest and wondering what wild animals were at that moment devouring the Leidenfrosts. We were all aware what kinds of wild things could stalk those dark depths and a scream was not a reassuring sound. The other wives were very glad to see me at the bus the next morning and to be reassured that we had not been eaten after all.

The wives among us were lucky—we had our husbands to protect and comfort us. But in our group we also had some single women going through the training. We later learned they had adventures too, and not all positive. I doubt that any had ever had much experience with machetes or making shelters before this, but they had to make an effort fast or they would be stuck on the forest floor for the night. This little bit of knowledge was quite enough to spur them on to great efforts to put up a shelter—*any* type of shelter—before nightfall. One woman somehow managed to erect her shelter before dark and settled down on her platform to listen to all the imaginary wild animals (one of them being my son) out in the darkness. As she was contemplating all the things

that could be out there, and the fact that she was feeling very much alone, her shelter fell down. This might not have been so bad in and of itself, but the driver ants then decided to pick her camp for one of their nightly raids. Not wanting to share her fallen bed with the army, she had to leave the premises and stand away in the forest somewhere until they left, which was not for quite some time. I don't know if she got much sleep that night, but I do know that she was with us in line for the bus the next morning.

As we sat waiting for the bus with our tired and cranky children, none of the mothers chided the single ladies who were supposed to stay in the forest another night. No one blamed them or even made a cutting remark. When a determined and frustrated single woman has just spent the night in the jungle alone with a bunch of driver ants and wild imaginary animals, without a husband to fend them off, we felt she was entitled to buck the rules.

This training camp was only the beginning of many adventures for all of us. Those who completed it went on to various stations, some to the city to do administration work, some to workshop centers as managers, and some to do teaching. The rest of us—the translators—went on to our own stations, often in very primitive conditions, where our adventures of sickness, wild creatures, political unrest, and village life with its problems and joys were just about to begin. But for now, we were broken in.

What many of us learned during this time was vital for our future survival. We learned our limits, we learned our weaknesses and strengths, but most importantly we learned that we were not very strong in ourselves alone. At times we were fed up, frustrated, or scared, but we learned more and more how to lean on the all-powerful hands of our Father, who would never fail us in all that was yet to come. We did not yet know how many times we would need Him in the future.

2

Choosing a House Site

When we finally arrived in Ivory Coast, we met the team of missionaries that comprised the Ivory Coast branch of Wycliffe. We got along very well with them and spent the next eight months working at the administrative center in the capital city of Abidjan. Then we were sent upcountry to investigate the Bakwé area. We went to stay with another missionary family so Csaba could go into Bakwé territory with the husband to see if a translation was needed and wanted. They set off the next day and after visiting many villages, they knew that a translation was needed and wanted by the people, and they determined which village would be the best one for us to settle in.

After this survey trip, we went back to the city for a short period of time to make some necessary preparations, and then we packed up our things and took off towards our new home: a missionary's house that Csaba had arranged for us to live in while the owners were gone for a year. It was situated on the fringe of Bakwé territory and would allow Csaba to travel to the village each day to build our house. But before he could begin building, he had to procure land for the house. This would not be easy.

When he went to the village with his request for a piece of land, the chief told him there was no *palaver* (argument) over house sites. Csaba could choose any house site available and take it. The chief then took him on a tour, on one side of the village only, showing him all the available sites. Csaba did not really like any, but noticed a very nice site on

the other side of the village, situated among some trees, where the chief had not taken him. He mentioned it to the chief, who said again Csaba could have any site he wanted, but were there not some fine sites he had already been shown?

After Csaba came home he described the different locations and we talked about them. I agreed with him that the one by the trees was the only good one. Csaba returned to the village and again he was shown the same sites on the same side of the village. With the knowledge that he could have any site he wished, he told the chief that he wanted the piece of land under the trees he had mentioned before. The chief said he understood, and Csaba could truly have any he wanted since they don't make *palaver* over land sites here. Csaba was to come back the next day to finalize it. Csaba left the village and returned the next day as scheduled with a Christian Baoulé friend named Fulbert.

When they arrived at the chief's courtyard, they noticed there was already a large meeting going on under the outdoor porch. The porch was filled with men who did not look very happy. After greeting everyone, Csaba and Fulbert sat off to the side on a wooden bench, all but ignored. As they looked on at the proceedings, they could see that the meeting area was divided up into two groups, the men on each side yelling at those opposite them.

Csaba leaned over and whispered to Fulbert, "Something really big is happening here. I wonder what they're talking about?" Fulbert didn't know since he couldn't understand Bakwé, so they both sat back and watched. What they saw was interesting. One by one, men got up and aired their grievances, but each time someone talked, another would interrupt him with an angry tone. There was murmuring and grumbling around the group as the factious arguing went on and on. Finally the chief stood up, said something important, and then sat down. After this, many men shot up and started yelling at each other all at once from both sides, and the whole place erupted into tumultuous confusion. As the argument finally died down a little, some men from one side stormed away in a huff. They were followed by more from the same side, all going in the same direction across the road that ran down the middle of the village, until none of them were left. Fulbert leaned over to Csaba and said, "I think they're talking about you. Don't insist on the spot that you wanted. Something's going on here. Take the site that they give you."

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After the men left and the commotion settled down, the chief turned to Csaba and said, “We don’t make *palaver* over land, and you can have any site you choose, but I suggest that you take the site on the edge of the village across from the soccer field. Csaba agreed to this and sat down to eat with the men. Since he was sitting by a young man who looked friendly, he asked him what the argument had been about. Csaba found out the village was actually made up of two villages, put together by the government to share a single school. The road that ran through the middle of the village was the border between the two clans. One village was dominant over the other and this was manifested by what structures were put on which side. On the chief’s side was the school; on the other side was only the soccer field. The chief, in constant competition with the subordinate clan, and wanting the newcomer’s prestige, had only shown Csaba sites on his side of the village. It was true he could have any site he wanted—as long as it was on the chief’s side. Csaba did not know this and had insisted on a site on the other side of the village.

The men from the “other” side jumped in and insisted he be given land on their side. The chief refused. An argument boiled up, allowing both sides to recount a long history of abuses that each had done to the other. Finally the lesser side stormed away in anger, leaving the chief to give land on the edge of the village, which was supposed to be on more neutral ground. But we noticed even on the fringe of the village, it was still on the chief’s side. It would take years for us to win the offended side back over to our cause, but eventually we did, by hiring one of their sons, Alexis, to be our main translator. All was then forgiven.

It had been a difficult road but we’d made it. Now that we had our land, we could build our house. Only then could we settle in for the real challenge—the language. But first things first.