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We Are Jumping!

The taxi lurched to the rhythm of my stomach. The absence of a seat belt made me uncomfortable. Out of control. I stared bug-eyed out the cracked windshield, trying desperately to latch onto something familiar, something grounding, to place everything else into a comprehensible perspective. But instead, I saw a tremendous balancing act, women with baskets of meat pies on their heads, roadside stands with ten or more oranges stacked precariously one on top of another. I saw homes ready to collapse, tin roofs held up by leaning wooden planks, babies held to their mothers' backs with nothing but pieces of cloth tied in the front. I saw a country on the verge of disaster, like a Jenga tower, late in the game, ready to topple.

All I saw that first day was difference. Different cars and different buildings and different people. Every shade of brown, all the rusty roofs and trash and dirt and faces that stared back at me. Spiraling barbed wire lined the tops of crumbling cinder block walls. Black plastic bags wafted away from the ditch where they'd been thrown. Clothes hung on sagging nylon lines, gray from too many washings, flapped in the warm wind against the overcast sky. The people and the cars were bustling, blaring, clogging the streets. And as my taxi reached the peak of a hill, the difference seemed endless, the desolation stretching as far as I could see, repeating itself over and over, like a city surrounded by mirrors.

"Accra is too big." In the front seat Teiko switched to English, for my sake. He was the program director in Ghana from my volunteer organization, and he was escorting me to my placement. I mumbled my agreement. I must have looked miserable to him, scowling in the backseat. The smell of exhaust and burning trash was everywhere, invading my nose and mouth. There were people in the streets selling shoes and toilet paper and sunglasses and apples. They came right up to the window of the car, seeing only my whiteness, my ability to buy anything they were selling, and I tried not to make eye contact. That day, I didn't know anything of the problems of urbanization. I couldn't have. I didn't know about the children working and the disabled begging and the people starving.

Eventually, though, the endless strings of dilapidated buildings grew long strips of nothingness between them. We were leaving Accra. This was my orientation, my welcome to Ghana, I guessed, as Teiko pointed to a vast open area paved with bricks. "Dis is the new market, on Mondays and Thursdays." We swerved around potholes big enough to swim in. I wanted to ask, where are we going? Are they expecting me? Am I wearing the right

clothes, will the kids speak English, will I be sleeping at the orphanage or in a homestay? But Teiko was busily talking to the taxi driver in a language I couldn't begin to understand. I hugged my backpack closer to my chest and wondered how long until lunch. Finally, we turned onto a dirt road and I thought we would be stuck in the mud forever. But we kept going. The taxi steered off the road and we pulled in what vaguely resembled a driveway. The sign read: Royal Seed Needy Home.

Those first few minutes I couldn't stop smiling. There were kids everywhere, playing soccer. Chickens and goats mingled with them. It seemed to me the freest place on Earth. I felt an overwhelming sense of joy at seeing the kids for the first time. They were exploding with life; their brown faces shone in the morning sun. They had on their school uniforms, mostly red and white checked dresses for the girls and collared shirts for the boys. Most notably, they smiled back at me.

I was embarrassed by my two giant suitcases. They wouldn't roll through the dirt. I apologized to the boy who carried them inside for me. How could I explain they were full of books and crafts for the kids? I wanted to apologize for my own weight, for my excessiveness, the obvious interruption I was causing in their typical day.

One girl ran to me the minute I stepped out of the taxi. Her school dress had a huge hole in the front and I could see her underwear when I picked her up.

"What is your name?" I asked her.

"What is your name." She giggled uncontrollably, bouncing on my hip.

"No, what is your name?"

"Whatisyourname."

And so began my questions with no answers. Names came slowly over the next four weeks, long after I learned each kids' personality and after-school shirt. Most kids knew the answer to "What is your name?" but the younger ones were just learning to recite common English phrases in their kindergarten class, and apparently they hadn't learned the appropriate answers yet. I learned to not ask anyone how old they were. They would tell me three different ages all in the same day. No one had any record of their birth or knew about birthdays or even how long they'd been at Royal Seed. To the orphans, time meant only the distance between breakfast and lunch. Days didn't add up to months, or months to years. Time didn't contain any anticipation. It just meant that more water must be fetched for cooking, more clothes must be washed, and more food must be prepared.

That first day, I met Naomi, the mother of the Home. She was overwhelming. She was young and vivacious and wearing a yellow dress and huge, plastic beaded jewelry, and a bright smile to match. She held my hand and gave me a tour of the orphanage and talked endlessly in an English I only sometimes understood. She showed me the new toilets first and told me another volunteer had just donated to have them built. She said, "When you go back to your country, you tell your parents, all your family and friends about

Royal Seed so they can send us money.” She showed me where I’d sleep. She called it the “Female Volunteer Room.” I was comforted by the distinctly American backpacks I saw on the bunk next to mine. Then she showed me the school—just a dirt floor and a tin roof supported by bamboo poles. We had to climb over kids sleeping on desks to get to the other classrooms. The other two volunteers were teaching in English, “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes” in the kindergarten class, and it carried through the whole school. There were no walls between the classes. Naomi said, “I believe all these children are the future doctors and lawyers of my country.” Then she said, “We are lucky to have the bamboo. It lets the air in.” I kept looking for other buildings. Where did the kids sleep? Where did they eat their meals?

I am humbled by the relentless nature of life to endure, despite all odds. In Ghana I was surrounded by perpetual, defiant life. Lives carelessly brought into this world and then forgotten. Lives given every opportunity to fail. Stubborn lives, refusing to give up despite holes in their mosquito nets and days of forgotten meals and visible excrement in the water. Every day was a triumph for the kids at Royal Seed. Some were dropped off in the bush by parents or grandparents, left to die because the family couldn’t afford another mouth to feed. Some lost their parents to AIDS. Most didn’t remember anything before Royal Seed. Children as young as three were left to take care of themselves, with nothing to hope for and no one to care if they kept on living or not. But they did.

“Madame, your food is ready.”

I didn’t know she was talking to me.

“Madame, come. Eat.” She reached for my hand. I wasn’t used to being touched.

“What is your name?”

“Happy.”

I smiled. I didn’t think she understood the question, so I asked her again.

“Happy,” she grinned back, with laughter in her eyes.

Hers was the first name I learned. It was impossible to forget, because Naomi would always be hollering for Happy to fetch her something to drink or to help her find something she’d misplaced. Happy was one of the kitchen girls who helped prepare meals every day.

That first day I also met the other two American volunteers, Sameena and Norah. I gave them my Cheese Its. My mom bought me a travel box for the plane, but I was too nervous to eat anything on the plane. Sameena and Norah had been at Royal Seed for two weeks and were craving anything American. I wanted them to like me. We were in our room, the three of us alone together for the first time, and I felt like I was intruding. I watched them devour the entire box of Cheese Its and then lick the plastic bag. I thought I’d never be that hard up.

We met over lunch: heaping plates of seasoned rice and frozen salad covered in mayonnaise. Sameena explained that they must have just retrieved the salad from the neighbor's icebox.

"We use the neighbor's toilet too," Norah added.

"What about the new ones?" I asked.

"Oh. She won't let anyone use them until they're painted."

I picked at my food hesitantly. I asked too many questions. Sameena and Norah were friends from NYU, both a year younger than me. Sameena's parents grew up in India, but lived in Texas now. Norah lived with her mom in California when she wasn't at school. We ate in the room next to where we slept because there were fewer bunks and more room for a table. The window had plastic over the screen and there was a sheet hanging in the doorway. It was always dark for meals.

"Have you guys traveled at all since you've been here?" I instantly knew it was a stupid question.

"Naomi took us to Cape Coast the first weekend, but we missed the kids too much, so we just stay here now." Norah did all the talking.

"What do you do here? I mean, how can we help?"

"Well, we try to teach, but it's really hard. And help with chores. They have a lot of chores."

"Are they good to the kids here? I mean, do they hit them?"

There was silence for a minute, and Norah looked at Sameena. "Not anymore," Sameena offered, finally. I didn't know what that meant, but I felt uneasy about pushing the topic.

"Well, I'm really glad you guys are here. At least for my first two weeks." I was really relieved that I wasn't alone.

Sameena and Norah exchanged a look that held more than an hour's worth of words. "We're not really emotionally stable here," Norah said. Her words were stuck in my head the whole first week.

The second day at Royal Seed we had fruit salad with watermelon, oranges, and pineapple for lunch. There was just one big bowl of fruit and three forks. I picked out the pineapples, silently enjoying the food for the first time in this country. Sameena pulled back the curtain hanging over the door, looking for Jonathan. "Jonathan is the oldest boy at the orphanage, probably thirteen," Norah explained to me, "and all the big kids get the same size portions as the little ones." Through the doorway, I watched some of the younger boys chase a flat soccer ball around the yard. "Naomi doesn't like it when we give our leftovers to the kids," Norah continued.

"She thinks we save it for them," Sameena inserted. She was gesturing to a tall boy staring at his feet on the far side of the yard. He was smiling and shaking his head, no.

"Or that we don't like the food she has them prepare." Suddenly Jonathan burst through the door, panting. He clearly felt uncomfortable inside the room with the three of us. I offered him my chair, but he refused it.

Sameena pulled another plastic chair off the top of the stack in the corner and he finally sat. We pushed the bowl of fruit toward him.

“I can’t,” he said, and shook his hands at the bowl as if to scare it away.

Sameena and Norah seemed to have heard this response from Jonathan before. “Why not?” Norah questioned, laughing at the absurdity of his stubbornness. All he had had for lunch was seasoned rice.

“I don’t know how,” he mumbled, ashamed.

Norah stopped laughing. “You’ve never had fruit before?”

“I eat orange.”

“Yes! Yes, this is orange. See. And watermelon and pineapple. Do you know watermelon or pineapple?”

“No.” He looked humiliated. Just then, three other boys peeked their heads in around the curtain.

“Come in,” Sameena urged. “It’s okay.” These boys were younger, fully aware of Jonathan’s whereabouts at all times and incapable of silencing the urges of their hunger. They began eating the fruit with their hands, juice dripping down their forearms and off their elbows. Jonathan left, not eating any, and busied himself with the flat soccer ball. The little boys, who he stole the ball from, watched in admiration.

Norah came and stood with me at the door. “He wants to be a football player when he grows up,” she said. There was a certain sadness in her voice.

That afternoon all the classes were blocked off for PE. One of the boys from class six rang the school’s bell, which sounded more like a distant clicking, and shouted, “PE please.” Click. Click. “PE please.” Following the bell was a chaos I didn’t expect. All the boys started untucking and unbuttoning their uniform shirts, hanging them on the branches of the mango trees. They were a sea of mismatched undershirts advertising familiar American slogans and icons like “Keep Austin Weird” and Snoopy. Some of the younger boys were jumping up and down, shouting “PE! PE!” I thought of the thrill of outdoor gym class when I was in elementary school, when the snow would finally melt and we’d play Capture the Flag or Sharks and Minnows in the grass behind the playground. I wondered if any of the kids here had ever seen grass.

Jonathan carried two of the small desks from the kindergarten class towards the back of the yard to set the boundaries of the goal and another boy arranged a goal opposite Jonathan’s. The bigger boys spent a great deal of time deciding the teams, all in Twi. The teachers were nowhere around to yell at them for “speaking vernacular.” I was exhausted and decided to be a spectator for this round. Some of the littlest kids clung to me, fighting over lap space and who could hold my hand. The smaller boys kicked around another dilapidated ball, with seemingly no boundaries to their imaginary field. They giggled and chased each other all around the yard, trying to avoid the big-boys game, but sometimes accidentally running through the middle.

I only noticed the girls' disappearance during PE in retrospect.

Sameena and Norah grabbed some plastic chairs from the room where we ate and sat next to me to watch the match, alleviating some of the babies' bickering for attention. Norah leaned over to point out Koblah to me. He was the only one playing without shoes or a shirt. She told me he had shoes, but that his toes came all the way through the front and the soles were coming off. "That's Kwame," she said. He was by far the smallest kid playing in the match, and he was scoring all the goals. He wore a red and purple tie-dyed shirt, unbuttoned and flapping behind him as he ran. Koblah, Kwame. Koblah, Kwame. I repeated their names over and over in my head, trying to etch their faces, their personalities, onto my memory.

Jonathan turned into a different kid when the match began. He was the referee as well as an offensive player for one of the teams, and he was constantly shouting for a pass or about some infringement of the rules. The ball came zooming towards the three of us a few times, and Jonathan deliberately paused the game to come over and apologize to us. He kept losing the ball or missing the goal, and every time he would hold his head in frustration. I could tell he loved the game, though, because his face lit up, kind of crazy-happy.

Breakfast for Sameena, Norah and me was always tea, one slice of white bread, and one hard-boiled egg each. For the first two weeks, the three of us had a small container of some sort of jam, no bigger than the paper cups used for ketchup at McDonald's. We rationed in evenly, to make sure we had a little jam in every bite. Some mornings, we'd find ants crawling in the bread, but we'd eat it anyway. We would save the yolks from our eggs for Esi, one of the kitchen girls who was in charge of the dishes and always found a reason to come in while we were eating. "Esi," one of us would urge, "do you want an egg?" She would shake her head side to side, shyly denying her privilege. "Come on, please? It's good for you." Norah was the best at convincing. Esi, still silent, popped the yolk in her mouth all in one bite and smiled at us. She always finished chewing in the room and then opened her mouth for us to certify its emptiness before she went back outside. She was eight and had a silly spunk visible in her mannerisms: the way she held her skirt while she washed the dishes, the way she always danced instead of walked.

School was never consistent. Sometimes there was a chance for a small amount of learning to happen in the school with no walls, but most of the time it was too noisy or too wet, or the kids were too tired or too hungry to learn. School-hours dragged both for us and the kids. There was something stifling about the red and white checked uniforms and the marching before school that made the kids edgy. And school itself was undeniably irrelevant. The nursery was learning rhymes from the Children's Book of Poetry I brought from home. I'd hear their teacher drilling them, "Dumpy Dumpy sat on the wall." Letter sounds like "h" and "t" and "r" were lost in the English these kids were learning. Class three was learning to tell time,

even though none of them had ever seen a clock. Class six was learning the health hazards of female genital mutilation, even though they weren't entirely certain there was a difference between male and female genitalia. It wasn't until after school, when the kids would change back into their play clothes, that we all relaxed again.

After dinner, darkness came much quicker than the July nights I was used to at home. Some nights I'd climb up on the woodpile to watch the sun set. I later learned the wood was donated to help build a dormitory, but they ran out of money and construction ended, but the wood remained as a symbol of hope for future donations. Inevitably, at least a handful of kids would follow me up there, and I worried some about the unstable planks shifting unexpectedly, but it seemed the lack of rules and structure and mothers cooing, "be careful, you might hurt yourself" left a pleasant vacancy. The kids were tough, needed to be tough, and laughed at us when we were concerned about them.

Sameena and Norah told me one of those first nights that their favorite part of the day was "campfire time." There wasn't ever a campfire, but every night Jonathan would light the kerosene lantern and hang it in a tree in the middle of the yard, providing the only source of light for the evenings. There was a leak somewhere in the lantern and he was the only one who could pump it properly. Often, when he'd light it, it would send flames out the top and burn his hands, but he never complained.

Those nights, after the kids sang their prayers, the younger ones would head to bed inside the school and the older kids would gather around the light to "study their notes," as one of their teachers called it. But mostly, it was a time free from chores, when they could just be kids together. Some kids would draw in the dirt, or play tic-tac-toe, as I assumed Sameena and Norah taught them.

It was a shadowy, secretive light at best, one that illuminated only halves of faces, and allowed the older kids to reveal a different side to us than they presented during the daylight. It was a side that pleaded for love, for cuddling and hand-holding and hushed voices. They were bashful, perhaps thinking they were too old for hugs and lap-sitting, or maybe they were too busy wiping the tears of the smaller kids' faces, fulfilling the role of parents during the day. But when their obligations ended, they were able to be the recipients of parenting in the mask of darkness. They asked us to read them stories. Their favorite were the Magic School Bus books I brought from home with pictures of outer space or the inside of the human body, inconceivable images to their realms of understanding. They asked for help on difficult homework. I spent an entire evening helping a girl in class four name five differences between a frog and a toad. She fell asleep on my lap. We asked them to teach us how to say, "I love you" in Twi. "Mepuwassum," they'd whisper as Naomi came to shoo them into bed with her flashlight. "Mepuwassum," we'd whisper in their ears as we kissed their cheeks and held them close, squeezing hands already drifting into sleep.

Emma, Happy, and Eva, the three oldest girls at Royal Seed, lingered at the cement wall by the road. I saw Sameena and Norah coming out of our room.

“Where are you guys going?”

“Up to the roadside,” Norah said, “to get pads.” I knew that they were buying them for the girls. Emma was complaining about cramps that morning while we were doing the wash.

“Can I come?” I had been in Ghana for two weeks now, and it was Sameena and Norah’s last day at Royal Seed, but I still felt like a tag-a-long.

“Yeah, sure.”

I went to get my backpack and stuffed in a wad of cedis. When I came out of our room, I watched Esi swinging on the swing someone had just tied up in one of the trees. I thought then that no one can escape womanhood; none of these girls will go without blood in their underwear and painful budding breasts. I thought of the shame of my first period. At first I didn’t know what it was. I was thirteen and sharing a bed with my younger brother at my grandparent’s cottage. The next day, I told my grandma and she took me to the store to buy some pads. She didn’t have any advice on what kind to get. I was ashamed to even be in this feminine aisle, surrounded by pink boxes and flying “wings”. I wondered if these girls were also ashamed, disgusted, betrayed by their own bodies. Did they too feel unprepared, like this was something their mothers should have warned them about? Did they sit, silently crying on the toilet, wondering if they should tell Naomi, wondering if there would be enough money for pads this month?

I admired Sameena and Norah for their foresight, for knowing instinctively what these kids needed the most, and trying to provide as much as they could before they went home. The six of us began to leave, but before we’d even dodged the first puddle in the road, Bishop, Naomi’s four-year-old son, began to scream and cry. Emma went back for him, picking him up and wiping his tears. It was some unspoken understanding that Emma was in charge of Bishop. Every day, she carried him on her back, wrapped in cloth, like all the other Ghanaian mothers. But today we took turns carrying him. I could tell Sameena and Norah resented his presence, knowing he was spoiled, since none of the other babies at the orphanage were ever picked up.

We walked down the side of the road single file, silent. I could tell the girls were thinking about Sameena and Norah leaving. The roadside was blaring with taxis honking and tro-tro assistants hanging out the sliding door yelling their destination. We bought them pads, the entire stock the store had, five packs of ten, and as an afterthought, chocolate biscuits. Bishop whined for a biscuit before we even left the store, and we opened a pack for him. On the way back to the orphanage we recognized one of the teachers from the school sitting out front a beauty salon. We didn’t want to go all

the way back to Royal Seed with the biscuits and not have enough to share, so I went inside to ask the woman who ran the salon if it was okay for us to sit on her porch.

We savored the biscuits, only opening one package at a time, and dividing them among us. I watched Eva, next to me, pull apart the two sides of her biscuit and lick the cream out of the middle, like I used to do when my mom packed me Oreos in my lunch. Sameena and Norah were uncharacteristically quiet. I looked over at Emma, holding Bishop on her lap, as one huge tear rolled down her face. She turned away and brushed it off when she noticed I was watching her. I wondered if anyone had ever cared for her as much as Sameena and Norah had. I knew she'd been taught to be tough; she'd learned all the skills necessary to be a good wife and mother. But did she know what it felt like to be precious to someone? Was it possible for her to know the cooing words of motherhood, if no one ever whispered them into her ear? I remembered being fourteen and bleeding for attention, affection. Would that unfulfilled desire leave her empty, not knowing the name of the thing she craved, but only the hole it left in her.

After Sameena and Norah left Royal Seed, things started to deteriorate. The first morning I woke up alone, there was a burned hole in the sheets where Sameena and Norah had slept. Sameena always lit the mosquito coil for us, to ward off all the bugs, but Norah and I had done it together that night after Sameena left for the Accra airport. Norah stayed through most of the night and left an hour or so before dawn. Neither of us slept much, as usual, but we didn't acknowledge that we knew each other were awake. She must have heaped her sheets on the coil when she left. The blackened hole and vague singed smell reminded me that I was completely alone for the next two weeks.

I lingered in the bedroom that morning, exhausted, not yet prepared to face the blinding light. But then one of the girls came and stood in my doorway.

"Cala, Cala! Madame is calling you!" I stumbled out of my room, reluctantly slipping on my flip-flops, clearly not in any rush. Naomi was behind the kitchen, near where the kids kept their clothes. Some of the older boys were in a line looking anxiously at me, with eyes that pleaded for me to save them. First in line was Vincent, who was eleven. He was squatting in front of her while she finished shaving his head with a naked razor blade. It was bleeding in more than five places, and she had poured some white powder on the places where she'd cut him. It looked like the stuff my mom used on our dog when she'd cut her nails too short. My dog would whimper and hide under the piano for hours afterwards, licking her nails and making us all feel guilty. But Vincent was silent and Naomi wasn't being careful.

"Cara, look," she started, gesturing toward the boys in line, "no one helps me. I used to have a man who would come take care of the boys, cut their hair and check their penises."

I had gathered pieces of Naomi's story in the last two weeks. She told me she'd left her family when she was fifteen, because her father wouldn't pay for her to finish secondary school, and she lived at the train station, carrying people's luggage for a little bit of money. Then she married and had Bishop. Her husband left them. She told me she started a vocational school for single mothers, but it quickly turned into an orphanage because her students ran away in the middle of the night, leaving Naomi to look after their children. I knew there were holes in the story and there were things I could never understand. It was more than just the language that barred me from comprehending.

She pulled down Vincent's pants and showed me his penis, taking it in her hand. It was bigger than I expected, and covered in sores. It reminded me of when I used to take baths with my brother and his penis would flop around as he jumped in and out of the water, splashing me. It was like another rubber toy in the tub, and I knew, then, that I wasn't supposed to look at it, but I was curious. I felt like he'd been born with something more, and where mine should have been, there was a vacancy.

But with Vincent I didn't want to look. I could see his shame welling up behind his cloudy eyes and I didn't want to be any part of this violation. "Now I have to do everything myself," Naomi continued, pulling Vincent's pants back up. Her voice was biting, intense with the anger of being left, alone, to care for these children.

I knew she was reeling since Sameena and Norah had just left, and that she was trying to tell me she needed my help. But I couldn't bear to watch her shave the boys' heads. "I'm sorry," I mumbled as I walked away. I didn't want to be in this place, alone, unsure of what was right anymore. I went back into my room and flopped down on the bed where Sameena and Norah used to sleep. It was mine now. I buried my face in the only pillow, and I wanted to cry, but couldn't. Emma came in and took my dirty clothes off my bunk to wash them with the rest of the kids'. I felt heavy, like someone had tied dumbbells to my arms and legs and no amount of force would ever raise me from my starfish position on the bed. But then I heard crying out my window and something in me found the strength to get up. It didn't sound like the usual short-lived crying from one of the three-year-olds. Behind my room, I saw Derek perched on the side of the well, crying hard. He held his teal bucket, the one he used to fetch water every morning, and turned away from me when he saw me coming. He wouldn't tell me what happened, even though I knew he understood the question. Usually, the older ones never let you watch them cry. They'd hide in some shadowed corner and do it silently, but Derek wasn't hiding.

I knew he was crying for Sameena. He'd fallen in love with her during her month visit, and his seven-year-old heart knew more about grief and loss than I'd ever known. I felt, then, more helpless than I've felt in my entire life.

That morning, the morning after Sameena and Norah left, I began bath-

ing the younger kids. I'd always been too shy to help with bathing before, because Sameena and Norah never did, and I wasn't sure if they considered it perverse. There was a distinction between all the boys who bathed themselves in the bushes behind the school, where they lugged sloshing buckets of water every morning, and those, usually five-and-under, who stood in line naked, waiting to be bathed in the metal basins. The older girls usually showered in the cinder stalls at night, since they had so many obligations in the mornings.

I sat on one of the desks from the kindergarten classroom with a sponge and soap that one of the older girls had given me. She showed me how to rub the soap into the sponge and then mix it with the murky water in the basin, starting first with the head and moving to their backs, legs, bellies, arms, and ending finally, gently with their faces crusted in snot and sleep. I brushed over the boys' penises quickly, trying hard not to acknowledge them, and moved on to their bloated bellies, sometimes tickling them softly, instigating an early-morning smile. Then I'd use a bowl to pour clean water from another basin over their heads to rinse, asking them quietly to tip their heads back, but they never understood my English. I'd wash their sandals last, and set them next to the basin, indicating I was done. Then they'd come snuggling, dripping up onto my lap so I could dry them off with an already mostly-wet towel.

Naomi only shaved the heads of three boys that morning before she came to see what I was doing. All day, they had the white powder covering their heads, their scabbed-over shame. Naomi smiled at me, that huge smile she seldom used with the kids, and went to find her camera. I was shy, trying to ignore that she was taking my picture, not sure if I wanted her to document my involvement with bath-time.

"What are you doing?" she sang to the kids in a rhythmic voice I'd never heard before. This must have been a routine they knew, because they all started jumping up and down, singing, "We are jumping" over and over. Their naked brown bodies wiggling in the morning sun made us all giggle.

That morning, I felt initiated, as if they finally trusted me, and that I could love them without restraint, like they were my own. Everyday, it seemed, begged for a reason, pleaded for me to justify my flesh, the space I occupied. All I wanted when I got off the plane in Ghana was for someone to say, This is what you can do about all this pain. Here, take this soap, take this sponge, you bathe them now. I thought maybe, if I kept my hands busy, I could make it through the next two weeks alone.

But really, What are all of us doing here? We are jumping uselessly; we are beating our arms and kicking our legs against this icy water, treading to stay afloat.

On my flight home I couldn't stop thinking about Derek. I threw away my peas in the kidney-shaped tinfoil container. Derek would have loved them. I thought of buckling him in next to me, showing him how to work the seat-

belt, watching him press his nose against the window. I would have saved my snack for him, or maybe asked the stewardess to bring him an extra, to show him what it was like to have an infinite supply of something. She would see the way his gray tights sagged on him and the way his t-shirt always hung off one shoulder. Maybe she'd hug him goodbye on the way off the plane and feel his ribs, the way I felt them when he wiggled on my lap or when he'd hold me close before bed.

I lied to Derek.

The day before Sameena left Ghana she told me her parents were going to adopt Derek in December. I'd noticed she favored him. He was a standout kid, with his long, thick eyelashes and his eruptive smile. All the kids called him Alhaji, which I later learned was a nickname for someone who'd been to Mecca. But he insisted we call him Derek. He was seven, and we knew he'd never been anywhere but Royal Seed Needy Home. He talked to us in English a lot more than the others dared to try, explaining things like why they only washed their right hands in the bucket before meals, because the left hand was viewed as dirty, and they never used it to eat. I loved Derek, as much as I loved Jonathan and Esi and Happy, but I'd always viewed him as Sameena's, and off limits.

Until she left. He began to cling to me as he had to Sameena, counting my fingers to see if I had the same as him, tracing my watch tan line then pointing to me and saying, "abruni" and then to himself, "abibini", teaching me the names of our colors, our differences. His elasticity surprised me. He sometimes would accidentally call me "Sameena", and then giggle. "Cala" he corrected. We were temporary parents, our presence a fleeting disruption to the vacancy of security. I don't think he had any sense of permanence.

On my last day at Royal Seed, all the kids knew I was leaving. Derek kept asking, "Cala, today you go?" like he was learning the English words for his familiar sense of loss. I told him I had to go back to school. "Are there people like me at your school?" he asked, impressing me with his insightfulness and his English.

"Yes," I said, "abibinis and abrunis, together." This baffled him. I wanted to tell him that I'd never been friends with an abibini before, how they sat at different lunch tables and were left out of History books. I wanted to tell him that before I met him, all I'd seen was their blackness, even though I knew racism was wretched and nonsensical, I too had participated. I wanted to tell him I was sorry.

"So you come back on Saturday?" he asked. I tried to explain to him about airplanes, pointing one out when it would fly over, and about oceans, their vastness separating us. He'd never seen a map before and I tried to draw one for him in my journal, but I don't think he understood the correlation between the dots on the page and the actual distance.

"Cala," he decided after an extended silence, "don't go."

"I have to."

"If it's raining, do you still go?"

“Yes.”

That morning Naomi distributed all my clothes to the kids. Derek got my blue shirt from the Gap and one of the pairs of boys’ underwear I bought at the market, since none of the younger boys had ever owned their own pair before. He put on his new clothes immediately, and my shirt fit him like a dress, reminding me of my dad’s t-shirts that I used to wear to bed. Most of my underwear went to Emma, the only girl big enough to fit into them, but Jonathan got my pink flowery pair. The other kids laughed at him, but he was proud and went to put them on under some other too-big boxers he had.

Later that morning, I went up to the roadside to buy some biscuits for the airport with the last of my cedis. I knew it would be a long wait between lunch at Royal Seed and the meal on the plane. I’d been checking my watch all morning in my room. My ride was supposed to pick me up at one-thirty, but it was one now and there was still no sign of lunch.

To pass the time and distract ourselves from hunger, Derek sat on my lap, playing with his whistle. It was one of those thin plastic ones from a malted lollipop, where you could lick the candy on one end and blow the whistle on the other. Someone had donated a big bag of them to the orphanage and Naomi handed them out that morning. I always hated when these volunteers brought candy. I wanted to yell, these kids don’t have toothpaste! Their mouths bleed when I brush their teeth, their eyes grimace! Some of them fight to be last in line because they dread it so much. But who am I to take away any of their remaining privileges of childhood?

We watched the older boys play football that whole morning. They’d made goals by sticking tall sticks into the dirt and tying a vine across the top. It was Saturday and they could play all day uninterrupted. Derek blew his whistle when either of the teams scored. I watched Happy and Esi to see if they carried anything into the room where I ate. I hadn’t been this hungry in a few days. I saw them getting the kids’ bowls ready, lining them all up on the table to fill with today’s rice and beans mush. It started raining and the match was paused temporarily. I helped Jonathan carry the tables and benches into the school, knowing by now the weather-adjusting routine. Then I helped the kitchen girls carry the bowls into the school, serving the small kids first. Derek handed me his whistle and told me to hold it while he ate his lunch. There was some confusion surrounding lunch, more than usual because the kids were so hungry, and they were one bowl short. Jonathan gave his to the boy who was complaining and shared with Emmanuel, the second oldest boy at the school.

“You are invited,” Derek said, noticing I was watching him eat. He’d explained early on that it was rude to approach or sit with them while they ate, but he said it was okay if they invited me.

“Just a minute, I’m coming.” I left the school and walked through the rain to my room. Watching them eat, my hunger became unbearable. Behind the curtain of my room, I tore open the wrapper on the biscuits I bought that

morning. They tasted just like chocolate wafers from home, and I wanted so badly to be home, to sit down with my family and devour the hamburgers and chocolate cake I'd requested for my first meal. I felt guilty for wanting to leave, for surviving only because I knew I would shortly be getting on a plane and leaving the devastation. I ate the whole package, knowing I'd be hungry later, but I couldn't wait any longer. I went back out, still chewing.

Derek caught me at the entrance to the school. "Biscuit?" he asked.

"No. I'm not eating anything." The words just came, instinctively.

"You're lying," he said, grinning. I opened my mouth for him to examine. "You're lying." He giggled, like it didn't really matter. But it did. I didn't want him to know I'd been sneaking biscuits, not sharing. I didn't want him to know that I couldn't give him everything, that I still thought of my own needs in this place bursting with need. But this lie would never protect him. He'd been deprived of nearly everything else, and now I was depriving him of the truth. I told him that I'd come back soon, that this goodbye wouldn't be forever. I knew this promise was more for me than for him; I had to tell myself that I wasn't going to be another adult in his life who'd abandoned him, but I had no plan, no idea how I'd ever come back.

They finally brought out my food right before my ride arrived, and I scarfed it down greedily. The kids did their goodbye routine, just as they had for Sameena and Norah. It was soggy in regurgitated English and Christian doctrine, paradoxical in the direct address. We remember, they sang, how you suffered, how you suffered, on that cross to save our sins. I stood awkwardly, watching Derek make faces at me and Emma holding Bishop and Jonathan trying to reign in some of the younger boys, to be serious.

As we pulled away in the truck, I felt like the whole trip was unwinding, ending the way it began, dragging my suitcase through dirt, hugging frail bodies that wouldn't let go, dodging potholes and street vendors and the knowledge that no matter how much money or food or compassion I could have given, it would never be enough.

Later, on the plane, I found Derek's whistle in my pocket. I knew then that I'd taken more than I could ever give back, that there was no compensation for the suffering and lies in this world. But perhaps in the pursuit of Truth, in the act of alleviating ignorance, I will fling open the padlocked doors and release the dammed up water behind them, flooding the streets. I will no longer succumb to be muffled or to allow their voices, their joyfully sung prayers, to be forever unheard.