ENCOUNTERS

Congo bites

For the first two weeks, she battles an army of diminutive house ants. Even Chinese insecticides fail to keep the ants out of her precious bread supply. Finally, she gives up. She decides the family will simply eat the ants. But as she fires up the gas stove, the ants quickly scurry away. It turns out ants can't stand heat and on this point, they agree.

It's a blistering hot Monday. Lucien, her soft-spoken Congolese driver, smiles as she tells him of her hapless battle with the ants. *Why not place the bread in the sun?* Lucien asks as they drive past beautifully dressed women balancing baskets of mangos and melons on their heads, and smiling men *bien coiffée* but shimmering with sweat and freckled with sawdust emerging from carpentry shops to lounge on white plastic chairs at roadside cafés.

Lucien tells her that Africans can tell a lot about a person from the steadiness of their eyes. The next moment he pulls over and captures her with his dark steady eyes. She dare not look away. Aw, he says finally, his face melting into a full smile.

A few weeks later, Lucien is stretched out on her living room sofa and she is surgically removing an abscess from around his eyes while her kids parade through the house with bananas and oranges on their heads. She had been reluctant to operate in this strange land, fearful that his skin would grow disfiguring scars. Finally, under the spell of his trusting gaze, she cuts into his skin. Later, her kids asleep under mosquito nets and her husband cuddled up with a portable DVD player, she imagines Lucien's smile as she scrubs her surgical instruments in the kitchen sink.

She is intrigued to discover that in Africa a woman may take a second husband. *What if my husband doesn't approve?* she asks in jest. *He has no*

Kevin Pottier

International health care workers may try to stay detached, like those looking through the window of a vehicle on this street in Brazzaville, but oft times the heart intervenes.

choice, says Lucien, neatly picking his way through neglected hole-ridden streets. *But remember, he can take a second wife.*

Dr. Joseph and his wife arrive at her compound in the late afternoon. As the sun sets, he speaks of his journey to Brazzaville. A forced march, day and night through a war-ravaged rainforest: two of more than 200 000 refugees fighting malnutrition and malaria, surviving raging rivers and crocodiles on makeshift rafts, enduring constant fear of militia attacks. Joseph says the crossing took six months. His wife, dressed in kelly green waxed-cotton and red spiked-heels, says 12. Details fade in the heat. He communicates best through gestures: his large hands glide through the air, *hmm*, his dark eyes flutter with lightness, *ahh*. His gestures invite her closer; more than 200 000 words could ever manage.

A black Diesel-Power cap sits on

Lucien's knee. His face withers, near defeat, covered in dark whiskers. His shoulders, arms and fingers hang, dead like weights. His youngest son had fallen ill with fever. His wife took him to a clinic, near the fabric shops, but found no doctors. She heard of a pediatrician near the Congo rapids, but again, no doctor. He died. She holds tight to her four-year-old son, her fingers grasp at the small wisps of hair on his thigh, searching to avoid the weight of Lucien's grief.

A week later, Lucien is back at work. He notices her son has nimble fingers. Later, she watches her son put a tablet to his mouth, jiggle his little lips as though preparing to swallow, and then take a swig of water. He goes off to play and she spots the tablet sitting on the table. Completely fooled, she can't help feeling impressed. Unfortunately, he has palmed weeks of tablets; she finds a neat stack in his craft area.

She realizes this only after he develops malaria: soaring fever, aching muscles, severe fatigue. Like Lucien's son. Fortunately, with medicine his fever drops and by morning he is again running around the expat compound.

The Congo sun bakes the brown sandy soil. The intense heat gives way to a sudden tropical storm: winds so strong they slam doors, shatter windows and shear tin roofs from humble houses. Trees plunge across streets and rain arrives like a moving wall of water, transforming potholes to pools and roads to rivers. Lighting strikes 20 times within seconds; homes shake under siege of thunder. Then the storm ends. The next day violet orchids bloom.

Sixteen-year-old Estelle arrives at the Kouamba field hospital with a bullet in her femur. Thierry, her older

brother, has accidentally blown a hole into it. Estelle is dangerously pale and writhes in pain as she removes fetid, blood-soaked dressings. Joseph repeatedly examines the hole; razor-sharp bone fragments push against his gloved fingers. She races to the pharmacy for antibiotics and morphine; then off to give blood. She watches her bright red blood flow into Estelle's arm. She notices the sting of emotional recognition on Joseph's face as he stands over the bullet hole — the same sting that paralyses Thierry, who sits wrapped in his mother's shaking arms.

Upon her return from the field hospital, Lucien greets her with a warm smile and points his chin in the direction of her compound. At home, her daughter and son are grinning from ear to ear and

small tears fill their eyes as they hug and swing around the front room.

The threat of war eventually subsides and the humanitarian relief project winds down. Rhythmic drumming and cowbells accompany brilliantly dressed young dancers. She sits with Lucien and watches as staff siphon tanks of gasoline and pocket kitchen and medical supplies. They watch as villagers steal the bamboo fencing one shoot at a time. They sit on white plastic chairs and sip beer and talk quietly about their children and about their shared hope for the future of Africa.

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