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**SMALL
STEPS**



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This is a work of creative non-fiction. All character names and identifying characteristics have been changed, with the exception of Tadesse and Marieke who agreed to appear as themselves. To former colleagues and students of University of Gondar, I wish there was space to write about all of you and your dedication to your work.

Chapter 1

To eat: መብላት /*meblat*/

My first patient arrived tied to his mother's back like an overgrown baby. The mother panted from the effort of carrying him on her back up the hill to the clinic and looked relieved to untie him. She crouched as she loosened the torn strips of cotton and the child gently slid to the mat.

Set high in the mountainous outskirts of Ethiopia's capital city Addis Ababa, the clinic was inside a converted shipping container with a door and windows cut into the metal walls. It was just big enough to fit a desk, a low plinth, a bench and a blue floor mat. Physio equipment was crammed into any remaining space. Although it was still early on that morning in October 2004, the street outside was busy. Road workers clinked pickaxes on rocks, pedestrians called out to each other and donkeys brayed.

I hovered in the doorway while the head sister directed the mother to sit on the mat next to her son, then she waved me over. The head sister wore a blue uniform, the same shade of blue as the nuns had worn at my Catholic primary school in Western Australia. Strands of white hair poked from beneath her blue veil, her face was pink and she puffed as she spoke.

'Meet Yeshe. She is the team leader for community-based rehabilitation workers. You will work together.'

Yeshe was tall and very thin. She might have been older than me but her skin was free of wrinkles. She was striking, with high cheekbones and a delicate, pointed chin.

‘Yeshe speaks the best English; most of the other rehabilitation workers speak none.’ The head sister snapped her wrist to summon the staff chatting under blue gums outside. They hurried inside and she addressed them in the staccato sounds of the Amharic language. I recognised the greeting from the lessons given to me by an Ethiopian family a sister in Perth had introduced me to. The final lesson had been just last week.

The head sister turned to me, her face stern. ‘I told them you were the new physiotherapist from Australia. If you want to communicate with them, you better talk through Yeshe.’

When she gave a sharp nod to the closest man, he shot his hand out to shake mine, then each of the ten others did the same. Each person pumped my hand and announced names so unfamiliar and long that by the time I’d been around the circle I couldn’t remember any of them.

The head sister looked at me. ‘Well?’ she said, then gestured with her chin at the child.

‘Yes. Okay. Well. Righto. Thank you, Sister Starling.’

As she walked out, I cleared my throat and turned to Yeshe. ‘Let’s begin?’

‘He name is Teferi. Eight years old, mental retardation case,’ Yeshe said.

I cringed, but said nothing. The child’s face showed the characteristic features of Down syndrome.

‘Could you please walk with him to the other side of the room, so I can assess his walking?’ I asked Yeshe, hoping I sounded more confident than I felt. Even though I’d been a practising physiotherapist for seven years, at that moment I didn’t feel at all confident.

The ten rehabilitation workers gathered around me in a circle. The child walked with his legs widened and knees out straight as if they were tethered to sticks. When Yeshe let go of his hand, he tottered on the spot for a minute, unable to balance without support. He wore no shoes, the sleeves on his jumper

were shredded from the elbow and the patched knees on his green trousers were worn through. Both inner leg seams had unravelled and his trousers hung around his waist, leaving most of his lower body exposed. Although Sister Starling had told me in the car that the clinic was in one of the poorest areas of Addis Ababa, I was still shocked to see such poverty up close for the first time.

Too disconcerted to focus properly on a physiotherapy assessment, I asked Yeshe, 'Is his mum so poor she can't afford to buy cotton to fix his trousers?'

'Oh no, is important like that. Infection in the...how you say?' Yeshe screwed her nose up as if it might help her think of a translation. 'Ureen. Doctor told mother fresh air for healing.'

I carried out a full physiotherapy assessment and when I asked Teferi to stand, he peed on the lino. His legs wobbled until they gave out and he fell to the floor, his bottom exposed amidst footmarks in the layer of dust on the floor. The area around the clinic was unsealed and even with the first patient for the day, the staff had tracked dust and gravel in on their shoes.

With the assessment over, I demonstrated some simple exercises to help Teferi's walking. His mother, who had a narrow face and a white headscarf pulled tight over braids, looked as if she was in her mid-twenties, like me.

When I asked Yeshe if she could translate 'Let's practise the exercises now', Teferi's mum removed his threadbare trousers so now he left a trail of splotches that turned the dust to mud.

No-one seemed worried about the mess, and when I asked Yeshe if we had anything to clean the floor with, she shook her head.

I asked two other rehabilitation workers whose names I'd forgotten, 'What can we use to clean this?'

'No have for cleaning,' one of them said, and both looked at me with kind expressions.

'Okay. Do we have a towel?'

‘No have towel,’ the other said.

I asked about every cleaning material I could think of. Did we have tissues? Did we have toilet paper? Any paper?

But no-one understood me and Teferi continued his exercises with a puddle between his feet. Then Yeshe opened the plywood wardrobe in the corner and took out a roll of toilet paper. She pulled off a few sheets and blew her nose.

‘*There!*’ I almost yelled it. ‘What do you call that?’

The rehabilitation workers all nodded and two said in unison, ‘Aahh. *Soft.*’

‘We call it *soft*,’ Yeshe said as she replaced the roll and closed the cupboard.

‘Can I please use some?’ I asked.

‘Oh, you need toilet?’ Yeshe looked surprised and pulled the door open again.

After Teferi left, I squatted with the toilet roll, smearing black marks where the wee mixed with the dirt. I wondered if I was offending my new colleagues, or if they would think me helpful.

Fortunately, Sister Starling appeared at the door and provided an excuse to stop. ‘It’s time for prayers.’

I looked over at Yeshe. ‘Yes, prayers every Monday.’

When we gathered in the central office, instead of bowing my head and closing my eyes, I waited until everyone else’s eyes were closed and peeked around the room. I studied my new colleagues, the crucifix on the wall and the statuette of the Blessed Virgin Mary beside a portrait of the order’s founding sister. I took in the mismatched wooden furniture, sagging ceiling, and the whirr of the ceiling fan.

At my going-away party the week before, my sister Michelle said, ‘Will you need to go to church every day and say prayers from the Bible?’

I sipped Margaret River cabernet sauvignon, saying, ‘I won’t be a real nun. I’ll volunteer as a physiotherapist with the nuns’ clinic, and I’ll get my food and accommodation in the convent.’

It's just logistical.'

My friend Andrew asked, 'If you live in a convent will you need to wear Clarks lace-ups and scratchy underwear?'

'I'll wear normal knickers, but I'll cultivate my latent spiritual side,' I said through a mouthful of brie cheese. 'I'm looking forward to being a volunteer and living a simple life. You know, putting aside my earthly desires for a year, at least until I turn twenty-eight.'

It was midday by the time we'd finished prayers and I was relieved when we broke for lunch. I was almost light-headed with hunger. I had taken a meagre scoop of porridge from the communal serving bowl at breakfast as I hadn't known the correct amount to serve oneself in a convent in Ethiopia and didn't want the sisters to think I was greedy.

Yeshe and the rehab workers headed towards the corrugated-iron shed for lunch. But when I followed them, Sister Meaza, a young sister, beckoned me from the open door of an office. I had met her at breakfast, where she told me that as a novice sister, she was still in training and spent part of her day carrying out duties for the senior sisters.

She said, 'Sister Starling said you'd better not eat there.'

'Why is that?'

'You won't like it. You better eat at the head office. That's where the *ferenjis* should eat.'

I knew *ferenji* meant 'foreigner' from the Ethiopian family in my street. They had taught me Amharic pleasantries and I supplemented their tuition with furious independent study. I'd completed the homework up to chapter five from *Teach Yourself Amharic* and made notes in my copy of the Lonely Planet Amharic phrasebook, which fit in the pocket of my jeans.

In the head office, I realised I hadn't met any of these staff members, and that I was the only female. Too intimidated to start a conversation, I sat in silence, willing everyone to start eating so I could too. But no-one else at the circle of desks took

out their lunches, so I took out the phrasebook and studied the section on ‘meals’ instead of opening my bag.

It seemed the men were all waiting for a catered lunch. An old lady with no front teeth stood on tiptoes to lean over the garden and pass enamel pots through an open window. With equally flagrant disregard for occupational safety, the office workers stooped to a knee-high table to serve their lunch. My stomach rumbled as I smelt garlic and spices and watched my new colleagues dish up a variety of stews from the enamel pots. I wished I could substitute my lunch for this spread but I didn’t know what the etiquette was, how I should pay, or if the sisters would allow it, since they’d sent me with a packed lunch.

Earlier that morning at breakfast Sister Meaza asked what I’d like for lunch. I replied, ‘Just whatever everyone else has.’

She had replied, ‘Oh no, you won’t like it. You better have what *ferenjis* eat.’

So without knowing what it was, I agreed not to eat it. Now I untied the blue plastic bag Sister Meaza packed for me and took out a boiled egg and a wedge of plain homemade bread wrapped in alfoil.

My fingers trembled from low blood sugar and my stomach rumbled as I tried to shell the egg. I wished I’d eaten more at breakfast, or packed some morning tea, and wished it even more when I had to stop peeling as everyone said grace. For a minute the room hummed as the diners mumbled prayers in Amharic and repeated the sign of the cross three times above their plates. I was thrilled when the prayers stopped so I could recommence preparing my lunch.

‘Are you new?’ The man sitting next to me spoke. He had silver-speckled curls and a kind face.

‘Yes, I am the new physiotherapist.’

‘Aha. We are lucky to have a physiotherapist. There are not so many physiotherapists in Ethiopia, you know. There is no university course for studying physiotherapy in this country yet.’

‘Yes, Sister Starling told me.’

The man looked as if he would take a mouthful but spoke again. ‘Just there were a few trained, in Cuba ... was it Cuba? Or Russia? I forget.’ He clicked his tongue against his teeth as he tried to remember. ‘After the war. Just a few. The government sent them for training. Just for treating the soldiers though. Not really for the civilians.’

I couldn’t get the shell off my egg and I was too hungry to think of a reply, so instead I smiled. The cook with the missing teeth moved around the room, serving tea. She set a glass of black tea in front of me and I took a sip before trying again to peel my egg.

The man tore off a piece of flatbread and used it to scoop his stew. He paused with it midway to his mouth. ‘How do you see *injera*?’

‘I’m sorry?’ I asked, wishing I could just eat instead of talk.

‘How do you see *injera*?’ He still held the flatbread by his mouth.

I’d read about *injera*, Ethiopia’s staple food, but I didn’t understand his question. I paused as I tried to guess, before I offered, ‘It looks delicious?’

He beamed at me, and I beamed back, wondering if *injera* was what the sisters had insisted I wouldn’t like.

I ate half my boiled egg and a mouthful of bread, but it was so dry my saliva vanished at once. I took another sip of tea and tried to swallow both together. The man continued to scoop his meat, potatoes and rice. It smelt so good. With an insufficient breakfast and now a lunch I couldn’t swallow, I felt more than envious. I felt *starving*. Then I felt guilty, remembering the coins we used to collect at school for the nuns to send bread to the starving children of Ethiopia.

In grade one at my Catholic school in the farming community of Boyup Brook, we had a missions box just inside the door of the classroom. The money box had a slot in the top and the photos printed on it showed African children with swollen bellies and flies on their noses. The children looked morose beside the

beatific statuette of the Virgin Mary and the blooms in a vase that always flanked the box.

‘Donate your money for the missions,’ my teacher Sister Brendan advised us. ‘Those children are starving. Bring coins from home to feed the Ethiopians.’

My classmates and I proudly dispatched our pocket money into the missions box, but in catechism class, Sister Brendan tapped her cane on the front desk and said, ‘God likes the silent giver. Give when no-one is looking.’ We all nodded but only pretended to wait until no-one could see before clinking in our contribution as loudly as possible.

Once a term, we had missions day at school where each classroom set up a stall and we spent our pocket money buying delicious things each other’s mums had baked. Our bellies ached from mixing Mrs Piper’s chocolate crackles with Mrs Hester’s curried egg sandwiches and two wedges of Mrs Lane’s coconut ice. We sat on the floor and, with legs prickling from the sisal carpet, piled the five-cent coins, ten cents and twenty cents to tally our takings. We were excited, knowing the money would help those children on the missions box whom Sister Brendan said didn’t even get to eat bread, let alone Mrs Coole’s lamingtons.

Now here I was in Ethiopia, eating *ferenji* bread.

The man next to me spoke again. ‘Is this your first time to Ethiopia?’

The tea softened the bread so I could swallow and say, ‘My first day.’

‘How do you see Ethiopia?’ He gestured with his hands around the room, at the window with its shutters falling off, the banana palm outside, the lunch lady standing back in the garden, resting her elbow on the windowsill to chat. I thought about my first patient here and the morning so unlike any other first day on a job.

I leafed to the back of the phrasebook and pointed to the word I wanted. The phonetic script was set out next to the Amharic script, but I couldn’t pronounce it, so instead I held my finger under it.

‘*Aw-od-arl-ehu*,’ he pronounced for me. ‘I love it.’

Chapter 2

To walk: **በግርመሄድ /be-eger mehed/**

The next morning's patient was already there when I got to work. I sat next to him where he lay on the thick vinyl mat on the floor. Yeshe slipped off her mules and sat cross-legged next to me, arranging her long skirt over her bare legs. The other ten workers formed a circle.

'He name Ammanuel. Four years old,' Yeshe translated from the boy's mother, who perched on the edge of a chair.

I tried hard not to look surprised. This four-year-old was the size of an eighteen-month-old, with an enlarged head and emaciated, flaccid limbs. He didn't look at me when I picked him up, instead his eyes glazed. He wore no nappy, only a shirt I guessed had once been white but was now brown and stiff with dirt and urine. When I picked him up to sit him in my lap, the shirt lifted to reveal a tiny withered body with legs dangling from soft hips. His mother's outfit was speckled with holes and the neckline of her shirt had disintegrated and split in two. The skin on her face and hands was dirty, dry and cracked.

The child and his mother smelt so strongly of rotten vegetables that I felt nauseous and while they explained their situation I pretended to scratch under my nose so I could block the smell.

Yeshe translated that Ammanuel had spent the first four years of his life tied to his mother's back, whenever she was at home or walking somewhere. She always tied him to look over her right shoulder. Now I saw how the muscles on one side of his back had

shortened and stiffened, which had caused a lopsided curve in his spine.

‘Has she ever taken him for physio?’

Yeshe translated for us. ‘Never. There is no place for physiotherapy. Just to come to small clinics like this one.’

I asked if he ever lay on his tummy.

‘Not ever lying on stomach. Only lying on back. When she wanting for resting her back, she is lying him on the bed,’ Yeshe translated and then asked, ‘Do you think he’ll learn to walk?’

Ten rehabilitation workers peered in to hear my answer. Having never seen a child in such a state before, I was overwhelmed and didn’t know how to answer. Instead I said, ‘Let’s do an assessment and discuss what we find.’

I tried standard paediatric physio assessments and saw that when I rattled a toy in front of him he wasn’t able to focus his eyes on it. He couldn’t turn his head to follow the toy when I shook it at the side. Although old enough to be a preschooler, he had the development skills of an infant. When I put him on his tummy he lay there motionless, not making a sound. As I picked him up, a trickle of his urine went onto the treatment mat.

‘*Yikerta, yikerta*, excuse me, excuse me.’ His mum dabbed at the puddle with his knitted hat.

‘No matter,’ Yeshe said in English and repeated the message to his mum in Amharic.

When I sat Ammanuel on my knee, his head sank as if too heavy for his little body. As his head lolled to one side, saliva dripped from the corner of his mouth. His mum dabbed at it with the hat, the same hat she would later put on his head when it was time to go. I was appalled but, taking my cue from the workers, I kept quiet.

Therapy for a child with this degree of disability would be a challenge anywhere, but here it seemed impossible. My first thought was that he should receive a wheelchair so his mum needn’t carry him everywhere.

‘Does anyone use a wheelchair here?’ I asked Yeshe.

She replied, ‘It is difficult, who can push a wheelchair up these roads?’

The roads were so rocky and on such impossible gradients that a wheelchair would be of little use. I put the idea of a wheelchair aside and showed his mum some exercises to do. She said they would come again the next day.

Ammanuel’s mum brought him in for treatment again the next day and every day that week. By the Thursday of the second week, he focused his eyes on a rattle when I shook it above him and began to be more responsive. It was a good sign – developing control of the eyes is the first developmental stage. As I waved goodbye to Ammanuel, who looked snug tied to his mother’s back, I wondered: if he could develop control of his eyes within a week, what other improvements might he make?

As he left, another mother arrived. She extended her hand to shake mine, bending forwards from the weight of her child strapped to her back. Teferi popped his head over her shoulder and beamed at me and I recognised him from the floor-cleaning incident of my first day. When his mother had untied the child from her back I asked him to sit on a low stool.

‘Does she carry him everywhere on her back?’ I asked Yeshe.

‘Not everywhere. Sometimes he is walking, even though he is a bit slow at it.’

I rummaged in the toy box and pulled out a toy maraca while Yeshe translated for me. ‘Her home is too far from here, forty-five minutes. He cannot walking so far, and he is so slow.’

I shook the toy up high and as Teferi stretched up to reach for it, he splayed his legs wide for balance. His thighs wobbled, too weak for the weight of his body.

‘Could we visit him at home? We can show his mum exercises to make his legs stronger day to day. So she doesn’t need to come for therapy every day.’

Teferi's mum looked thrilled when Yeshe translated my offer and invited us to come the next day.

'Do we need to organise for a car? Maybe Sister Starling could drive us there?' I asked.

Yeshe looked surprised. 'No, Julie, no car can driving there. *Be-eger mehed,*' she said in Amharic and when I looked confused she slipped her arm in mine. 'We go by walking.'

That night, in my room at the convent, I studied the copy of *Disabled Village Children* that I'd borrowed from the physio office. I pored over its pages, which gave therapy ideas for places with few resources. I made notes about the exercises Teferi might do and drew stick figures performing the exercises on a small handout for his mum and folded it inside my diary.

To get to Teferi's home from the clinic the next morning, we crossed a bridge where the land fell away in a deep cleft and a creek trickled through umbrella palm leaves. The morning light caught in the dew of winding foliage, making the leaves shine an almost pearlescent blue. The mountain air still held its overnight chill so our breath fogged as we walked and I pulled my headscarf around my neck and over my nose for warmth.

We picked our way across a low creek. I followed Yeshe as she leapt from a stepping stone to the bank. Plastic bags and household refuse dotted the riverbed and I wondered what happened to the rubbish when the river rose. On the other side of the river, rubbish overflowed from two skips piled twice as high again, with children clambering on top picking through the refuse. The surrounding area was littered with detritus. An old man hobbled from the top of the skip, carrying a full plastic bag.

I was sweating by the time we'd reached Teferi's house, almost an hour's walk from the clinic. The morning fog in the foothills of Mount Entoto had burned away and I unzipped my jacket and unwound my headscarf from around my neck and wore it like Yeshe, pulling the front of the stiff cotton out to shade my

forehead from the burning sun. Outside the house, a group of women sat on low stools, peeling onions and garlic, dropping the peeled cloves into piles on the ground. Teferi threw his arms in the air and yelled with delight on our arrival and held both our hands to lead us inside.

The one-roomed house was dark and cold, with the only light and heat coming from a single window. An iron bedstead with rusting legs sat against the wall beneath the window, lined with rags in place of a mattress. Another bed on the opposite wall had a mattress with hair stuffing poking through a split along its length. Teferi fossicked under the bed then careened across to us, first holding onto the sideboard, then the knee-high table, then wobbling towards me with a huge smile, holding out two ankle splints and two socks as an offering.

He almost reached me before falling backwards and landing on his backside with legs splayed, but he still looked elated.

‘He is very proud of his socks.’ Yeshe translated when he spoke. ‘These are his only socks.’

I helped Teferi with his socks. The black sock was so big it almost reached Teferi’s knee, with the heel flapping halfway up his calf. The green sock was better, fitting his own heel. I slid on the ankle splints made from moulded plastic that fit from the soles of his feet up to the back of his knees, then I wedged his sneakers on over the top.

‘Let’s think of exercises Teferi can do around the house to strengthen his legs, now that he is wearing his splints,’ I said to Yeshe. I took the folded handout from my diary and pointed to my diagrams.

‘For example, maybe Teferi can carry his own plates to the table at dinnertime.’ I was proud of the culturally appropriate exercise using locally available materials, as per the *Disabled Village Children* textbook, chapter one.

Yeshe translated for us. ‘They have only one plate, they all eat from the same one. His mother says can he carry a cup instead.’

Teferi's mother took three cups out of the small kitchen area. 'This the whole family can drink from,' Yeshe said.

Picturing the family of six taking it in turns to sip from a cup shared between two, I realised my exercises were less culturally appropriate than I had imagined.

Teferi clutched a cup between his hands and staggered across to the small table. With his ankle splints on, he wobbled less, and could walk further before lurching for the furniture.

'Where did he get the splints from?' I asked Yeshe.

'From the clinic in the city centre. They are giving many of splints and things. Sister Starling she already organised it.'

'Why doesn't he wear his splints all the time?' I asked Yeshe. I wondered why his mum hadn't brought his splints to physio any of the days this week.

'His socks were dirty. And then drying,' Yeshe explained.

I hadn't considered the logistics of being able to afford only one pair of socks that weren't a pair anyway, and how cold his little feet would be with no socks on in this chilly house on a mountainside, and felt a sudden outrage. This family just had one plate to share between six people, and only two socks for their son, while everyone I knew at home had more than enough plates and socks, and no-one lived near mounds of uncollected rubbish.

Teferi's mum spoke to Yeshe, who translated. 'Julie, his mum wants to know. If he walking every day with splints on, will his walking become stronger?'

'Yes, it will. He needs to walk every single day.'

The convent held a silent retreat day that weekend. No-one spoke, except for whispered essentials. Calm settled over the convent and the pacifying effect of mutual quiet was more intense than the silence of solitude. Tranquillity pervaded when everyone tried to minimise sound, to watch how they placed their feet, the speed at which they walked, or the way they placed a cup and saucer or a plate in a pile.

It was a stillness I'd never experienced in my hectic, share-house lifestyle in Australia. The sun was out, so I spread an old blanket on the grass within the convent grounds to read a book. It was such a treat to have time to read a book in the sun, with only the sounds of prayer chants drifting over from a nearby Ethiopian Orthodox church, along with birdsong and the rustle of leaves in the breeze. On Sundays at home in Perth I was usually hungover, or at committee meetings organising pro-refugee rallies. Back there I combined a job, postgraduate study and social activism with a hectic social calendar.

But this morning I marvelled at how much I had enjoyed handwashing my clothes. Timesaving devices like washing machines don't actually save time, I reasoned. They only allow us to reapportion time to fit more tasks into our lives. Now I had few tasks, and only a backpack's worth of clothes to wash.

The book shaded my face as I lay on my back and, instead of reading, imagined what I might learn from the sisters. These women had devoted their lives to helping the poor, the sick and the needy. They had turned their backs on a conventional life to achieve purity through scarcity. Perhaps I should become a nun as well? I fantasised about living a life of impressive purity and calm.

I had considered becoming a nun before. Admittedly it was in grade two, when we were visited by a nun from Thailand who was nothing like the nuns I knew. She looked no older than my cousin in grade twelve, and while my teacher Sister Brendan had wrinkles and a tuft of spiky hairs poking from her chin, Sister Theresa's face was smooth and hairfree. Instead of walloping her cane to bellow about purgatory and scrubbing the stain of original sin from our souls, Sister Theresa sat us on her knee at lunchtime and sang songs in Thai about mud crabs.

Sister Theresa was captivating when she stood in front of the blackboard to talk about her work in Thailand, helping orphans and children too poor for shoes and food, or even school. I adored this soft, fun sister and decided I wanted to be just like her.

Maybe that's why I paid attention when, not long after, Mum and I watched *The Bert Newton Show*. Dad had just installed our colour TV and Olivia Newton-John scissor-kicked in hot-pink lycra leggings and blue top to 'Physical'. We were both still spellbound when Bert announced that the next segment would be about a nun, Mother Teresa.

'Is it my Sister Theresa?' I asked, overjoyed to think of my Sister Theresa singing about mud crabs on the colour TV. But this sister on the TV looked more like the nuns I was familiar with. Her face was craggy and wrinkled. As we watched, she handed out bread to beggars and kissed a dirty baby.

'I want to do that,' I said to Mum, and I remember her looking at me with surprise. Twenty-one years later, before I left for Ethiopia, I asked Mum if she had cherished that memory, being proud of my showing such vocation at an early age. Mum looked blank and said she had too many other important things to remember and had I packed my malaria tablets?

As I became a teenager, I put aside my yearning to become a nun, but the feeling of a vocation never left me.

In grade twelve at my all-girls Catholic boarding school, I became missions coordinator with my friend Angela. Every week, we collected the missions boxes from next to the plastic statuettes of the Blessed Virgin Mary just inside the door of each classroom. We emptied the cardboard coin-boxes and counted up the change. Every week we wrote encouraging snippets for the school newsletter, imploring our fellow pupils to be generous for those in faraway places less fortunate than we. We wrote earnest editorials about the countries donations went to. Most of the time I needed to look up these places in the *World Book Encyclopedia*, and daydreamed while I researched, looking at the photos, imagining myself one day working somewhere like that.

Outside the career counsellor's office, I picked up a pamphlet about physiotherapy. I skimmed until my eye was caught by the section reading: 'Physiotherapists' skills are needed in developing

countries to assist in rehabilitation of serious injuries.’ A year later, when I was accepted into physiotherapy at university, my parents prudently enrolled me in St Thomas More Residential College. ‘St Thomas More College adheres to Catholic principles,’ read the promotional pamphlet, clearly intended to reassure devout parents of the safety of their children. ‘The rules of the College forbid boys in girls wings after 12 p.m. and vice versa ... St Thomas More College encourages the responsible consumption of alcohol.’

On my first Saturday night at college, drunk in the boys wing at 2.30 a.m., I realised I didn’t have to go to church in the morning. There was no-one to make me go, only a nagging sensation. I’d been to mass every Sunday for the last eighteen years. That first Sunday of university, I went to mass, then for a couple of Sundays after that, until a new place of weekly devotion called. They both had wine, you could attend on a Saturday night, but one was more fun. My love affair with the pub continued for the duration of my physiotherapy degree until long after I had graduated and set off travelling.

In England, I worked as a physiotherapist and sometimes went to church on a Sunday morning, providing I wasn’t hungover, or indeed, still drunk. The need for spiritual satiety bubbled out of nowhere amongst new friends, new nightclubs, historical monuments and monumental homesickness. In church, for that hour, I knew who I was. I knew when to stand, when to sit, when to kneel, what to say and when to say it. I prayed to God to forgive my sins, which transgressed a wider spectrum of the Ten Commandments the longer I travelled. I prayed for God to keep my family safe; to please let me get this new locum job; to please let my visa for my Russia trip come through on time. Spiritual refreshment achieved, I’d delay for months before the feeling crept up again and I’d need another hit of familiarity.

Then I discovered socialism. I had never heard of the May Day protests, but travelling the Big Wide World™ had given me a new

perspective on capitalism. At a tube station one frosty morning, a guy in a red bandana handed me a thin newspaper. Squashed against the other commuters, I unfolded my copy of *Socialist Worker*. Inside, articles explained how corporations exploited consumers, how consumer greed leads to poverty and how our government was complicit in keeping bad governments in power. I had an epiphany on the road to Bethnal Green. I realised, after devouring the article on corporate profit from war, that I was now a socialist.

It was socialist Julie who worked as a paediatric physiotherapist in a mostly Muslim suburb of London. Anti-capitalist Julie learnt about Muslim cultures and acquired a rudimentary Arabic vocabulary. This was before September 11, before Islam became synonymous with terrorism, and I wrote home long emails about onyx-eyed toddlers from Oman, and Saudi mothers who fed me rosewater sweets.

When my visa for England expired, it was collectivist Julie who backpacked through South America, witnessing Peruvian *campesinos* queuing by the roadside for a chance of a day's paid work on the land. My red socialist hair dried in the sun after a swim on Copacabana beach on the day I saw shanties lining the hills above glittering condominiums in Rio de Janeiro. In La Paz, I discussed left-wing politics with my Bolivian Spanish teacher, and the world made so much more sense. Until September 11 happened, and I was in Bolivia with a connecting flight through New York airport that I couldn't take. I was tired of the Big Wide World™ and couldn't wait to get to safe, predictable Home.

But home wasn't predictable anymore. Only a few months later, I was back at my parents' house and spreading Vegemite on toast in front of morning television.

'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come!' Prime Minister John Howard announced to the country. The TV flashed footage of Muslim people alleged to be ruthless enough to throw their own children into the water.

‘They’re all like that,’ people said. ‘They should go back where they came from.’

But this didn’t fit with the Muslim people I had known just months earlier. No-one wanted to hear stories from the physio work I’d done, of my cute paediatric patients. No-one was interested to hear about a heartbroken Muslim father from Kuwait cradling his terminally ill baby. Or about the Muslim father who asked after my family’s health while recuperating from donating a third of his own liver to his son.

What had I come home to? I didn’t recognise my country anymore. Its people seemed selfish and mean.

We incarcerated refugees from the same countries we had bombed in the name of liberation. We kept toddlers in maximum-security institutions. It seemed so *wrong*. The more I read articles and listened to those who’d seen behind the razor wire, the less I could ignore this incredible injustice.

Before long, I joined organising committees for pro-refugee protests and got arrested at a demonstration outside a detention centre in the South Australian desert. Letters to detainees soon became telephone calls, which led to visits to a detention centre in the hostile heat of Australia’s north-west.

I moved to Port Hedland to be near the centre and got a part-time job at a university health centre. In between visits, I was a political activist. I wrote to my comrades in Perth and organised information for media releases regarding the latest detainees attempting suicide or facing deportation.

In Port Hedland I met Sister Maeve, a Catholic nun who devoted herself to supporting the asylum seekers. Like the nuns of my youth, she had wiry hair and a maternal air. She didn’t wear the veil, but she wore the uniform of blue cardigans with navy skirts and Clarks lace-up shoes.

I went to church with Sister Maeve the first week I lived in Port Hedland, but it was a long time since I’d been a regular congregant. I couldn’t go to church every weekend and sing

hymns beside the comfortable piety of those happy to talk about injustice yet take no action. Standing against unfairness was the way I now expressed my vocation. Religious life had two elements, I reasoned: being and doing. I was a *doer*.

Over lunch in the convent guesthouse, I told Sister Maeve my feelings about talking versus *doing things*.

She knew injustice, she murmured with appropriate sympathetic sounds. She had worked for twenty years in Africa.

‘Julie,’ she swallowed a mouthful of cucumber. ‘What do you think about doing things with my order of sisters in Ethiopia?’

‘Do you mean working with orphans and people in poverty?’ I was so excited I had to put down my salad sandwich. I could leave Australia and go somewhere to make a real difference.

My heart beat a little faster and I waited to catch her eye but Sister Maeve didn’t look up. She simply rearranged her sandwich so the tomatoes didn’t fall out, as if we were discussing an everyday matter, not the very thing I’d waited a lifetime for.

‘Yes, you would work with the poor. Be prepared though, the poverty and sickness will be like nothing you’ve ever seen. You will never be the same again.’

A week later at a protest rally, an onlooker in stubbies shorts and a bluey singlet caught my eye and scoffed ‘do-gooder’. I’d never heard the term, but I understood his tone and wondered how it was an insult. I stood taller. I raised my placard higher and rejoined the chants.

He’s right, I thought. I *am* a do-gooder. I’m going to Ethiopia to do good things!

And now here I was, taking a rest from doing good things. I settled into reading my book in the late afternoon convent sunshine until a stream of ladies in blue heading to the chapel disturbed me. Oh dammit, it was 5.30 p.m. already, time for mass, and I’d wanted to finish the chapter.

It was possibly the first time in my life that I had willed the weekend over so I could get back to work. I was eager to see Ammanuel, the little boy who looked more like a baby.

On the Monday morning I demonstrated new exercises for Ammanuel. I laid him on his tummy on the blue therapy mat and rolled a small towel to go beneath his armpits. When I propped his elbows in front of him, his head drooped heavy onto the mat. Saliva trickled from his mouth and this time I whipped toilet paper from my pocket and wiped his face before his mum used his hat, and she looked grateful.

‘If you make a stroking motion on the back of his neck it can help to stimulate the neck muscles,’ I explained to the observing workers. I put pressure through Ammanuel’s shoulders to stabilise, and stroked the back of his neck. Yeshe gave instructions to his mum, who then stretched out across the mat in front of him and called his name, and with that Ammanuel lifted his head off the mat. He tried to look at his mum, and we all cheered. His mum looked joyous and Ammanuel looked a different child to the unresponsive boy who had lain here just a few days ago.

‘Let’s make a plan for his mum’s aims in therapy,’ I said to Yeshe.

Yeshe spoke with the mother then translated, ‘She says she wants him to go somewhere so she can work.’

When I looked confused she continued.

‘She cannot working with Ammanuel like this.’ Yeshe translated the mother’s story for me. She was twenty-five years old. She had brought Ammanuel to Addis Ababa from the countryside, hoping to find work as a weaver, sitting at the loom with Ammanuel tied to her back.

‘But the people, they didn’t to like Ammanuel. He make ureen, so he smells, and, how do you call it ... stigma? The people they felt some stigma for him.’

Stigmatised by this baby who never learnt to walk or talk or become a toddler, she lived a transient lifestyle, getting work

where she could, but evicted each month because she didn't make enough money to pay her rent of twenty birr, less than three Australian dollars. Over the weekend I'd spent twenty birr on an hour's access at an internet cafe.

At least feeding Ammanuel was free, his mum explained to Yeshe. She breastfed him even when she didn't have money to feed herself. As she talked, she leaned forward and kissed Ammanuel's forehead then tickled his armpits. His giggle was precious, mischievous and raucous all at the same time. It was the first time we had heard him laugh, and everyone in the physiotherapy room turned to look at him, all of us surprised and charmed.

His mum flipped him into standing and propped him beneath his shoulders, speaking in Amharic.

I turned to Yeshe. 'What is she saying?'

'*Be-eger mehed*,' Yeshe said, then followed in English, 'To walking. His mum is saying, look, he wants to walking.'

The mother dangled Ammanuel until the soles of his feet hit the floor and his stepping reflex activated. In the same way that very young babies will look as if they are walking when their feet are placed on the ground, Ammanuel's legs jerked and he tiptoed across the room hanging from his mother's hands. His head lolled backwards like a disjointed doll's and a string of saliva hung from the corner of his mouth. His mother repeated the phrase, looking hopeful.

Ammanuel wasn't walking; it was a primitive reflex that should have faded away when he was six months old, about the time he was learning to roll and later crawl. I felt so glad no-one asked me to comment, as I didn't want to say, he's not walking, he's probably never going to walk. Instead, I supported his flopping head and asked, 'Can she come again tomorrow, in the morning?'

'She will coming every day, until Ammanuel is walking,' Yeshe translated.

In a move she must have perfected over four years, his mum

flipped Ammanuel onto her back, tied a cloth around him and over his head and fastened it under her bust. Ammanuel made happy noises from his cloth cocoon while his mum slipped her feet back into her cracked plastic shoes. At the doorway she turned to smile and wave goodbye.

In my bed in the convent that night, I compared myself to Ammanuel's mum. We were similar in age, but otherwise worlds apart. Before my going-away party in Perth, I had treated myself to a spray tan. Instead of the instant transformation into a runway model as I expected, it peeled off at inopportune moments and ruined my clothes. The money from that spray tan could pay Ammanuel's rent for one year.

It seemed unlikely that Ammanuel's mum analysed failed love interests over cups of tea and Ethiopian Tim Tams. I wondered, if she could read, would she read self-help books about unlocking the hidden potential within, like I did? Or would she read *Green Left Weekly*? Or maybe she was just consumed from dawn to dusk with the task of surviving.

I felt excited Ammanuel was showing so much promise. He had already improved in just two weeks of therapy. As I drifted off to sleep, I made therapy treatment plans in my head.

But the next day, Tuesday, Ammanuel and his mum didn't arrive. They didn't have an appointment as there was no appointment book in the clinic. The closest we had to appointments was asking someone to come morning or afternoon, but patients only followed that sometimes and would arrive for therapy at random times. None of the patients seemed to wear watches, and no-one seemed to mind waiting half an hour for treatment if the therapy room was full. On Wednesday I looked up every time someone entered the physio room, but still there was no sign of Ammanuel and his mum.

By Thursday afternoon Yeshe and one of the other workers walked to the address Ammanuel's mum had given. When they

returned, too soon, Yeshe reported the pair was evicted because she couldn't pay \$3.50 rent for the month.

'Where have they gone? Can we find them?'

'No, Julie. It is impossible.' Yeshe shook her head.

I had grown fond of Ammanuel in just a short time, and he had shown such potential. With the pace of his improvement, it might only have taken one month's rehab until he could sit in a special chair and his mum might get work. Without Ammanuel tied to her back she might weave enough to make over twenty birr in the month and stay in her lodgings.

The next morning I paid extra attention out the back window of the Land Cruiser as Sister Starling sped along the main road to work. Beggars usually lined the roads by the churches. Each was a pile of dirty blankets with heads down and a hand out, palm moving up and down for alms. It was difficult to tell if they were old men or young women with children tied to their backs as we drove past them. Ammanuel's mum wasn't amongst these avenues of beggars, so I looked out, hoping I might see her walking by the roadside. But she wasn't near the church, or on the crowded streets of the Shiro Meda weavers market where crowds milled around the stalls and spilled onto the streets. I looked from the car every morning and every afternoon, for two weeks, hoping Ammanuel might return for more therapy. After two weeks I stopped looking and just hoped instead.