

Flying is a strange thing - To be so far above the rest of the world, completely isolated from everyone you love but so safe and secure is overwhelming. Looking at the clouds below me, some so soft I wanted to fall into them and sleep a million dreams, some looked like the foggy breath on a cold winters morning- if you don't look quickly, you don't know if you really saw it, or if you just imagined it. I made stories in the shapes of the clouds, daydreaming until I saw the Indian Ocean peering up at me from beneath the clouds.

Africa, to put it simply, is beautiful chaos. It's like being inside a living organism- there is constant movement and a sense of genuine togetherness.

Nairobi, the beating heart, hit me in the face as soon as we stepped out of the airport into the warm afternoon breeze. The smell of fumes, the sun beaming harshly onto my pale skin, the relentless cacophony of tooting horns is all around. The intensity and the pace overwhelmed me. I stood in awe by the displays of raw humanity everywhere I looked. The open trust between locals and visitors means open doors, where I could literally look in on people's lives and marvel in wonder at how different they are from my own.

I spent my first week in Kenya with my Mum; on safari on the Masai Mara which was beauty in its natural form. Tears stung our eyes as we watched in amazement a herd of elephants playing, eating & drinking, they were so graceful. Seeing all the animals right in front me, they were the most peaceful animals I've ever seen; in their natural habitat where they live in complete freedom, together, was simply breathtaking.

Spending one warm afternoon in a Masai village, peering into their lives and traditions, the ground muddy with animal faeces and several patches of last week's fires, was an experience too amazing for words. Seeing how basically they live, comparing it to how we live in Australia has made me much more appreciative of everything I have.

One quick afternoon in Nairobi, and I am saying a rushed goodbye with my Mum with whom I have developed an even stronger bond, I was suddenly alone, my first time away from home and such a long way from my loved ones and the things I know! Now here I was, me, in Africa, in Kenya, a strange foreign land, that I have dreamed of and worked so hard to get to. Tears of excitement and fear flowed freely, and then I was shoved into a matatu, (a minivan with seats in the back - the African bus) I was suddenly on my bumpy, uncomfortable, 7 hour long journey to Kisumu.

I arrived in the middle of the night, which was anything but dead, at 1am there were people scurrying all over the place. People rushing about madly like ants, with no particular place to be.

Working at different places over the 3 weeks; a lot went right, a lot went wrong; but all in all the memories made are unmistakably, imperfectly perfect. The blind lead the blind at The Kibos School for the visually impaired, where I spent time learning Braille with the nursery class, playing football with the grade 7's, and observing them live their lives as normally as they can. I was later placed into the local hospital, into the children's cancer unit. I saw some terrible things, was given the opportunity to witness medical practices and was blessed with the job of making these sick children smile for a few hours a day.

In my attempt to capture even a fraction of the beauty whizzing before me, I eventually learned to have my camera ready for the moment. The treks through muddy villages, the cramped bus trips,

the busy markets, that one irreplaceable moment when you spot a beautiful soul from across the road and have to capture even a speck of that person's image, even though you know they are etched into your memory forever. I was spinning around in a culture thick and dense in tradition, I was completely out of my depth. I became so immersed in the culture that I forgot how we live at home.

Meeting Mary, the woman I would be staying with, and the children I would be living and playing with and seeing the house that would become my home for 3 weeks, made me a little nervous. Little did I know these people would become a beautiful second family with whom I would stay connected to for the rest of my life.

I got to know each and every one of them individually, hearing their stories I grew more inspired daily by the strength and courage of these people who have lost everything, or who have never had anything to start with. Mary is an inspiration, in 1998 Mary and her husband realised they had contracted the HIV virus. Because of the stigma and discrimination they received, they decided to start an organisation to support and educate local men, women and children with HIV. At this place they created, people come together to learn their strengths and weaknesses, to share their experiences and help each other. Mary, as coordinator, realised the high death rate and as a result the abandonment of children who lost their parents to HIV, or whose parents are too ill and/or too poor to care for them so started a feeding program and, with support from locals, supplied one meal a day for these homeless children and families.

Mary and her husband decided they could do more and open their home and hearts and care for some of the orphaned children. During the building of the orphanage, Mary's husband passed away but Mary continued their work and now lives with 22 children. Mary sacrifices everything for these children to provide them with a loving home and ensure they receive an education as well as continuing her work with people living with HIV.

Whilst staying with Mary I got to experience the amazing charity and hard work that Mary and her small staff provide for these children, I experienced the beautiful family atmosphere that surrounds the children given by these incredible people who have nothing, no possessions, and not even good health. I had some of the most meaningful moments in Kisumu, crouched on the floor with the kids, playing with new dolls and cars I had bought with me, and hearing them say 'we love you, and you love us, don't you?', then retiring to bed beneath the canopy of a comforting mosquito net. This was tranquility.

During the last 2 weeks of my stay I was witness to an astounding injustice and inhumanity by some visitors who turned out to be Mary's major funders. They visited Mary and the children with promises of improving the orphanage and providing the children with new clothes, new mattresses, and shoes among other things. These people (from America) arrived and began upsetting the place by firing two of the staff, without consultation with Mary. Mary had hired these women, for a very small wage, because they were hardworking and also because they themselves have been affected by HIV and need money to support their families, and to re-build their lives. One of the women has twins, a boy and a girl, and a disabled daughter who all lived at the orphanage. The 'visitors' told these children they shouldn't be at the orphanage because they have darkness inside of them.

These 'visitors', instead of supporting Mary and her project, inflicted disharmony and fear. No one was spared their interrogations and abuse both verbal & emotional. Staff and myself were even confronted, but the most upsetting of all was the mental abuse they inflicted on the children. They promised to bring the children new clothes and toys, but when the children asked about them they would say 'oh, I don't think I want to give them to you'. They would say things, in front of the children, like: "look at these kids eating like monkeys, it's disgusting"- when it is African culture to eat your meal with your fingers.

Most children in Kenya have shaved heads as it is cheaper and easier to care for. One little girl, Esther, whose mother is very ill with HIV and unable to care for her, had her hair braided by her mother earlier in the year. One day, again without any consultation, the 'visitors' shaved her hair. I came home that day to a distraught little girl who kept saying she wasn't beautiful anymore!

Mary had to hire new workers, as she was unable to care for all the children alone as well as continue her work at the clinic. Even the new staff were subject to a tirade, being interrogated about their lives and also trying to scare them by asking how to get the sheriff to come and visit to scope out if Mary is doing things properly. Then they turned on Mary telling her that she is not allowed to have visitors, like myself. They told her I was not to be trusted; I would steal things and use Mary. My question is, what for? Mary and these children have nothing.

When, totally outraged and frustrated, I asked Mary why this was happening she said that is just what happens otherwise the money stops, I was thinking that these women donated a large amount to Mary's project, imagine how infuriated I was to find out these women donated only \$300. Per month! \$300 allows someone to treat another person in the way these people treated Mary, the children and the staff?

After discussion with my parents and friends, Jacinta and Antipas Ojwang, in Goulburn, who head the Suluhisho Trust, I have now become the main funder of this orphanage, with their support. 'Suluhisho Trust' is a Kenyan based non- governmental organisation which works in liaison with Safari Moja Kenya driven by the urgency of the abject need of change, support, opportunity and education.

It was with great delight that Mary was able to tell the former funders to please take their money elsewhere as she no longer had need for it. She has rehired the sacked workers and before I left Kisumu, I bought food to last a few weeks and a few things for the children. I had a sad goodbye with the kids, who were smiling with their new clothes and toys, and a very emotional goodbye to my new sister, Mary; I was off to Mombasa for 3 days before returning to my life in Australia.

Mombasa is a little slice of tourist heaven. My hotel, right on the beach, was classy and beachy. Everyone is friendly and 'hakuna matata' is the main saying around there. Having done touristy things and having the chance to relax and reflect not only on my trip but on my life in general, I've come to the conclusion that I am the luckiest girl in the world. I have the most supportive family, friends and boyfriend, who beam positive energy right into my heart, and fill me full of so much love and happiness.

My family are my safety net, they have taught me so much about life, and about myself, they are truly an amazing bunch of crazy people. My boyfriend, who leaves me breathless, and my friends,

new, and old- have become family. You don't have to be blood related to be in each other's blood, they all pump through my veins every time my heart beats.

Africa has taught me life lessons, and has been my gateway to the rest of the world, and to myself. I am so happy with my life and this world we live in. In the end isn't that what we all want? Essentially, being happy is my freedom.

To provide for Mary and these 22 children I only need to raise \$550 monthly which will provide food, clothing, education and medications and a small amount for wages to Mary's staff which in turn helps their community. Any money in excess of this amount would be used to supply clean mattresses, blankets etc. I have witnessed that there are people like Mary who give their all, when they have nothing, to improve the lives of others, all I am asking for is a few dollars a month from people like me who would like to make a better life for these kids.

I have started a facebook page – 'Marys Orphanage Project' & have support from a lot of the members on here.

I am holding a garage sale on Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> November to send money to buy the kids new mattresses & hopefully a little Xmas magic too.

We are hopefully planning a raffle for Xmas as well.

& next year we hope to hold more fundraisers - & if we get enough support we could help even more people!