

IF YOU SUFFER FOR DOING GOOD: The Life and Work of Margaret Arach Orech of Uganda

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2014 Women PeaceMakers Program



University
of San Diego®

JOAN B. KROC
SCHOOL OF PEACE STUDIES
Institute for Peace and Justice

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, and a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.¹

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER —
Margaret Arach Orech



Margaret Arach Orech is the founder and director of the Uganda Landmine Survivors Association (ULSA). A survivor of a landmine explosion and a subsequent attack by rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Orech is an ambassador for the Nobel Peace Prize-winning organization the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. In the late 1990s, while working for the Association of Volunteers in International Service, in Kitgum in northern Uganda, the bus she was riding in hit a landmine and was ambushed by the LRA. Her right leg was shattered from the blast; as the rebels scoured the bodies for survivors, she played dead until the army came nearly an hour later. Orech has worked since that time for the health and rights of fellow survivors of landmines and victims of the war in northern Uganda.

Orech's work with communities affected by the conflict in northern Uganda includes encouraging dialogue and interaction with other survivors of violence, including former rebels. In one case, she came face to face with a young man who was part of the group responsible for the attack that nearly killed her. Showing him compassion upon his expression of remorse, she helped organize a traditional cleansing ceremony to help him begin his slow journey to recovery.

With ULSA, Orech mobilizes survivors in a peer support structure in which they share and develop ideas that address survivors' needs and foster social and economic reintegration into their communities — many of which were displaced for years because of the violence in northern Uganda.

On the international level, Orech is a commissioner for the Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa, and continues to lobby nations to sign and ratify international agreements such as the Mine Ban Treaty, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. She has met with heads of state and those in the midst of conflict to advocate on behalf of victims and survivors.

Of her experiences she writes, "My healing was a drawn [out] process, but I was able to overcome and now use the bitter experiences to encourage those who have faced similar situations that there is actually hope after all. ... Here I am, today, after that long and difficult road to recovery and the transformation from victim-survivor to peace advocate."

CONFLICT HISTORY – Uganda

Long before they were colonized as a British protectorate in the late 19th century, the land and nations now known as Uganda held a rich history of cultural interaction among distinct nomadic and tribal civilizations, whose styles of social organization, livelihood and politics predate Western presence in the region by more than two millennia. As Bantu-speaking agriculturalists populated most of sub-Saharan Africa in the centuries before the advent of Christianity, cross-cultural intermingling with nomadic pastoralists eventually led to the formation of states as early as the end of the first millennium A.D. The Bito state system in Bunyoro grew into the dominant political power in the region for centuries, its history as a banana-cultivating nation marked by stability and expansion, with intermittent episodes of civil unrest and coups d'état as clan-based power relations vied for control.

As a place of refuge from civil strife in Bunyoro, the nearby land of Buganda, situated on the northern shores of Lake Victoria, attracted a growing population, becoming a matrilineal clan-based kingdom whose ultimate rule in the person of the *kabaka* dates to the 15th century. The Buganda state expanded swiftly with specialized road systems and sophisticated armed forces conquering much of Bunyoro for its own. By the mid-19th century, Buganda and Bunyoro existed in rivalry as great power civilizations. In the north, the Nilotic-speaking Acholi people, known for their successful hunting techniques, created their own semblance of smaller, clan-based chieftaincies starting in the 18th century.

Ivory, Christianity and Western Imperialism

In the mid-19th century, an onslaught of international intervention changed the country's history forever. First, Arab traders financed by Indian elites, and then Egyptians pursuing territorial expansion, arrived in Buganda, Bunyoro and the Acholi-peopled region in the north. It was ivory they were after: guns and textile fashions imported from the Americas in exchange for the lives of East African elephants and their lucrative tusks.

In the short decade that followed, travelers, missionaries and Western imperial powers fought for control over the source of the Nile River, before pre-colonial Uganda became embroiled in conflict for the supremacy first of Christianity over Islam, and then of British Protestantism over German and French Catholicism. Emerging victorious over the Germans as the converted *kabakas* of Buganda fought their war for them, the British mistakenly dropped the letter "B" and called their newest addition to the British Empire "Uganda," eventually declaring the territory a British protectorate, largely to maintain control over the source of the Nile. As its prize for supporting the British during the conflict, Buganda maintained significant autonomy as a self-governing kingdom throughout the colonial period.

Post-Colonial Politics, Seeds of Violent Conflict

After nearly 70 years of colonial rule as a protectorate of the British Empire, Uganda gained independence in 1962, with Lango tribesman Milton Obote of the Uganda People's Congress (UPC) elected as the country's first prime minister. The Bugandan kingdom remained intact only until 1967 when Obote changed the national constitution and proclaimed Uganda a republic, abolishing the system of traditional kingdoms, removing the president and installing himself as executive president.

With the support of the police and army led by Idi Amin, the UPC suppressed political opposition and removed Bugandan King Mutesa II from power.

In 1971, Army Chief Idi Amin, who hailed from the West Nile district of Koboko in northern Uganda, led a military coup against President Obote, who was forced into exile in Tanzania. Obote sympathizers from the Lango and Acholi tribes fled back to their home areas in northern Uganda, where they were persecuted and killed en masse by the new regime. Seizing power as president in an 8-year military dictatorship known in history for the killing of an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 people, Amin's violent legacy lives on, well after his exile to Libya in 1979 and death in Saudi Arabia in 2003.

In 1979, at the hands of Obote, Amin was overthrown in an equally tumultuous coup d'état. The newly united Uganda National Liberation Front, comprised mainly of Acholi and Langi exiles, launched their defensive from Tanzania, in support of the Tanzanian government in retaliation for Uganda's 1978 invasion. As Amin's supporters fled into exile and migrated with their arms into northern Uganda to avoid persecution, two interim governments would be installed and deposed by the army before the Obote II regime settled into power in 1980, following elections widely perceived as fraudulent.

Obote II became an increasingly violent and repressive regime, with Uganda accumulating one of the worst human rights records in the world. In an effort to control the armed political opposition, led by Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army, much of northern Uganda was laid to waste and an estimated 100,000 people were killed.

A final military coup removed Obote from power in 1985, installing Tito Okello as president for just over six months, until January 1986 when National Resistance Army rebels overtook the capital city of Kampala and proclaimed their leader, Yoweri Museveni, president. Militant supporters of both Obote II and Tito Okello retreated with their arms to the north, sowing the seeds for decades of devastating armed conflict. Amid repeated allegations of questionable electoral ethics and investigations into high-level corruption within his government, Museveni has emerged victorious in all of the presidential elections since then.

Armed Conflict in Northern Uganda

Seeking revenge and political power, a number of well-armed militant factions assembled in the northern and western regions of Uganda. Separate armed groups — including the West Nile Bank Front I and West Nile Bank Front II, the Allied Democratic Front in western Uganda, and the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces led by Acholi woman Alice Lawkena — shared the ultimate objective of overthrowing Museveni and his National Resistance Army government.

Following her forced exile in Kenya, Lawkena's followers regrouped as the Uganda Christian Democratic Army, led by her cousin Joseph Kony. Soon, Kony and his allies would align under the ideal of ruling Uganda based on the Ten Commandments, taking the name the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Initially, the LRA maintained a reputable level of popular backing, until the violence of their struggle outgrew supporters' ideological sympathies.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the LRA employed tactics of abduction, looting, murder, rape and hacking of limbs, ears, lips and noses in the countryside and towns of northern Uganda. As the

years wore on, rule of law disassembled into widespread insecurity, terror and violence, with school children increasingly abducted and trained as combatants for the LRA. Decades of conflict forced nearly 2 million Ugandans into makeshift camps as internally displaced persons living in horrific conditions of starvation, malnutrition and disease. The death toll from hunger and cholera numbered in the millions, higher than that of the conflict itself.

While the government counter-offensive forced the LRA to retreat first into southern Sudan and then into Central African Republic, the armed struggle in northern Uganda left tens of thousand dead, hundreds of thousands maimed and wounded, and as many as 20,000 child soldiers abducted into the ranks of the LRA. The International Criminal Court has outstanding arrest warrants issued for LRA leaders Joseph Kony, Okot Odhiambo and Dominic Ongwen.

Landmines and Social Recovery in the Aftermath of Conflict

As Uganda works in cooperation with international aid agencies to rebuild in the aftermath of devastation in the north, the removal of landmines and the restoration of livelihoods are pressing issues that demand significant attention. Millions of people have known nothing but violence, fear and displacement for nearly three decades, and conflict survivors are faced with the stark reality of starting their lives anew, frequently in areas unfamiliar to them, with social networks and family ties lost in the turmoil. Human security, local community development, provision of social services and livelihood assistance require coordinated efforts by government and civil society to ensure a brighter future for the people most affected by the conflict.

The presence of landmines left over from the conflict continue to threaten the lives of those living in northern Uganda, with mine clearance still incomplete. However, thanks to the advocacy of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and its local partners working on behalf of landmine victims and survivors in Uganda, the Museveni government signed on to the Mine Ban Treaty in 1997, opened a Mine Action Center in 2005, and developed a national plan of action to support survivors in 2007. Despite these government initiatives formally in place, there has been little implementation to date, particularly in the area of assistance to victims and survivors, including counseling, rehabilitation and livelihood support.



Credit: University of Texas Library

INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in Uganda and *Personal History of Margaret Arach Orech*

1890 Britain and Germany sign treaty giving Britain rights to the land of Buganda. The British mistakenly drop the letter “B” from the name and call its newest addition to the British Empire “Uganda.”

1894 Uganda declared a British protectorate, largely to maintain control over the source of the Nile.

1956 **December 4 — Margaret is born in Lira, Uganda.**

1962 Uganda gains independence after nearly 70 years of British rule. Milton Obote of the Uganda People’s Congress (UPC) is elected as Uganda’s first prime minister, with the territory of Buganda retaining considerable autonomy. Uganda is admitted as a Member State to the United Nations.

Margaret’s family moves to the United Kingdom while her father attends the Royal Military School of Music in Kneller Hall, Twickenham.

1966 **Margaret’s family returns to Uganda to live in the army barracks in Jinja.**

1967 Obote changes the constitution and proclaims Uganda a republic, abolishing the system of traditional kingdoms, removing the president and declaring himself executive president. With the support of the police and army, led by Idi Amin, the UPC suppresses political opposition and removes Bugandan King Mutesa II from power.

1969 **Idi Amin marries Margaret’s aunt, Norah Alaba.**

1971 January 25 — Army Chief Idi Amin seizes power after leading a coup against President Obote, who flees to exile in Tanzania, marking the beginning of the violent eight-year military regime known for the killing of an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 people.

1973 Amin declares that he has left all of his four wives, **including Margaret’s aunt.**

1974 **Margaret finishes 0-levels at Mvara Senior Senior Secondary School in West Nile.**

1977 **Margaret receives her diploma from the Uganda College of Commerce in Secretarial Studies.**

Margaret begins working at the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, appointed the following year as secretary to the controller of programs of Uganda Television.

1979 **February — Margaret’s Aunt Norah is found dead in her home.**

In retaliation for Uganda's invasion in 1978, Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere declares war and counterattacks. On April 11, exiled Milton Obote and the coup led by the Uganda National Liberation Front topple Idi Amin's regime, forcing him into exile in Libya and then Saudi Arabia where he remains until his death in 2003.

April — Margaret flees to Sudan. Her father is imprisoned by the new regime at Luzira Prison for nearly two years.

1980 Milton Obote becomes president in the regime known as Obote II following elections widely perceived as fraudulent. Obote installs an increasingly repressive regime, which leads to Uganda having one of the worst human rights records in the world. In an effort to control the opposition, led by Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA), much of northern Uganda is destroyed and an estimated 100,000 people are killed.

1985 July — Margaret escapes from Sudan and returns to Uganda through the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Margaret moves to Jinja with her sister Katie, where she stays until 1990.

Obote is ousted by military coup and replaced by Tito Okello.

1986 January — National Resistance Army rebels overtake Kampala and install Yoweri Museveni as president. Conflict begins in northern Uganda with the antecedents of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), West Nile Bank Front I and West Nile Bank Front II, along with the Allied Democratic Front in Western Uganda.

Margaret begins working as an administrative assistant with Dutch African Promotion in Jinja.

1989 Joseph Kony leads the LRA in its armed struggle in northern Uganda against the Museveni government. The LRA has its roots as the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces led by Acholi woman Alice Auma Lakwena. Upon Lakwena's forced exile in Kenya, her followers regroup as the Uganda Christian Democratic Army led by her cousin Joseph Kony, which becomes the LRA.

1992 Margaret moves to Kampala to work with Water Aid, a British NGO.

1995 New constitution legalizes political parties while upholding ban on political activity.

1996 Museveni maintains the presidency following Uganda's first direct presidential election.

1997 Ugandan troops support the coup against Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, who is replaced by Laurent Kabila, fueling later conflict.

December 3 — Uganda signs the Mine Ban Treaty

1998 Margaret begins working with the Italian organization AVSI in Kitgum.

December 20 — Margaret becomes an evangelical Pentecostal Christian.

- December 22 — Margaret is wounded severely in a landmine accident on a bus in Gulu, losing the lower half of her right leg.**
- 1999** February 22 — Uganda ratifies the Mine Ban Treaty.
- February 28 — Margaret is released from the hospital after two months in recovery.**
- March 5 — Margaret travels to Harare, Zimbabwe with the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda.**
- September — AVSI sets up an office in Kampala, where Margaret works until she resigns in October 2002.**
- 2000** Margaret speaks at the UN meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty in Geneva as part of her advocacy for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), after which she travels to speaking engagements in over 40 countries. She speaks at the Regional Conference on Landmines for the Horn of Africa and Gulf of Aden, held in Djibouti, her first Africa-specific speaking engagement.
- 2001** Margaret begins mobilizing landmine survivors in Uganda, forming a survivor group in Gulu, which marks the early stages of her organization, the Uganda Landmine Survivors Association (ULSA).
- 2002** March — Uganda signs an agreement with Sudan to contain the activity of the LRA along their shared border.
- October — Margaret begins full-time advocacy work for ICBL.**
- 2004** December — First talks held between the Ugandan government and the LRA.
- 2005** July — Ugandan parliament approves constitutional amendment ending presidential term limits. Referendum vote results in favor of returning to multi-party politics.
- October — Arrest warrants are issued for five LRA commanders, including Joseph Kony, by the International Criminal Court.**
- Mine Action Center set up in Uganda under the Office of the Prime Minister.
- ULSA formerly registers as a nongovernmental organization.**
- 2006** August — The Ugandan government and LRA sign a truce, initiating subsequent peace talks.
- 2007** Uganda develops a national plan of action to support landmine survivors. The plan expires in 2010, with a subsequent extension until 2014 and little implementation.
- 2008** The Ugandan government and LRA sign permanent ceasefire in Juba, Sudan, but Joseph Kony fails to sign the agreement, prompting Uganda, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo's campaign against the LRA.

December 3 — Uganda signs the Convention on Cluster Munitions, in Oslo. As of 2014, it has not yet ratified.

- 2009** **ULSA receives funding from the Japanese organization Association for Aid & Relief (AAR) for livelihood support to landmine survivors. Additional funding from AAR in successive years, plus financial support from the ICBL, allow ULSA to provide rehabilitation services, livelihood support and capacity building to 12 survivor groups in northern and western Uganda.**

Margaret advocates for funding from Austria, and Uganda begins implementing the Victim Assistance Action Plan, a main pillar of the Mine Action Plan, nearly 10 years after signing and ratifying the Mine Ban Treaty.

- 2010** Official investigation begins into corruption case against Vice President Gilbert Bukenya and Foreign Minister Sam Kutesa for the alleged theft of \$25 million.

July — Somali Islamist group Al-Shabab claims responsibility for attack on rugby club in Kampala, killing 74 people during the World Cup final.

- 2011** February — Museveni maintains the presidency in his fourth successive presidential election. Opponent Kizza Besigye alleges vote-rigging and dismisses the election as a sham.

July — United States deploys Special Forces to support the Ugandan army against the LRA.

August 22 — Uganda becomes a State Party to the Mine Ban Treaty.

September — The Uganda Supreme Court orders that LRA commander Thomas Kwoyelo should be released and given amnesty.

- 2012** November — United Nations accuses Uganda of arming Congolese rebels. Uganda announces its withdrawal from UN international peacekeeping missions.

- 2013** **June — Handicap International leaves Uganda, leaving ULSA as the only organization working with survivors at the national level.**

- 2014** **Margaret is chosen by the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice as one of four Women PeaceMakers for 2014.**

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF MARGARET ARACH ORECH

Exile

The honeymoon — if you could call it that — lasted less than a year.

Well before they left Uganda, Samuel's insecurity, his jealousy, seemed to have gotten the best of him. He'd spend long mornings away, disappearing into the afternoons, no explanation or excuse for where he'd been. It wore on Margaret, her freedom increasingly restricted by the young man hired to stay with her in her husband's home, to regulate her movements, limit her time spent with girlfriends, monitor her whereabouts when she was out selling the imported cosmetics that had been made illegal, and therefore lucrative, in the days of Idi Amin's military dictatorship.

But with her mother far north in the village and her two stepmothers making life unlivable at her father's home on Mbuya Hill, Margaret had nowhere else to go. At 21 years old, she was working as a secretary for Uganda TV at the Ministry of Information in Kampala.

It wasn't like her nights of teenage escape with her sisters, bargaining past the armed guards with bribes of beer from her father's fridge, sneaking through the back gate beyond the vegetable garden, walking down to the posh Silver Springs Hotel at the slope of the hill for a night of dancing at the swanky discotheque inside. Returning home, giddy from the night, they'd sneak back in, pleading with the guards to open the front gate, tiptoeing past the rose bushes at the front of the tile-roofed house, cracking the back door just enough to slip inside, silent until they were safely in their beds. Dawn would break as they closed their eyes, carefree in the security of never getting caught.

No, it wasn't like those days at all.

When she packed her things and left her husband's home — the tension and abuse too much to bear — he caught up with her and brought her back. And after that, the war began.

"You want to leave me?" he asked Margaret, knife blade pointed at her as he backed her into a corner. "You leave again and I will make sure I leave a mark on your body."

It continued like that for months, then months turned into years. There was no peace.

Samuel was 10 years her senior, she learned from the documents she found after giving birth to their first son, Sam. And it was only when they buried their second son the day after he was born that she learned her husband wasn't Ugandan.

"How can I just throw away my baby?" Margaret asked, incredulous, the lifeless bundle still in her arms. Traditionally, babies were buried at the father's home. "If you have no clue, if you have nowhere, I'm taking my baby home." When he did not object, Margaret knew her husband had nowhere to bury their son. And that was only the beginning.

Although Samuel never paid dowry for Margaret as he should have, and they never had a formal marriage ceremony, unanswered questions still tugged at Margaret, eerily uncertain about the man she lived with, the person she would come to know as her husband for 11 years.

“What language is that you speak?” Margaret remembered asking the guests in Samuel’s apartment in Kampala before he reminded them to converse only in Arabic in her presence.

“Ask your husband,” they would respond, turning away.

In April 1979, Henry, their third son, was nearing 2 months old. Samuel had landed a new job with East African Steel Rolling Mills as a purchasing officer and was making enough money to quit hiding Margaret’s bank books — enough money to stop resenting her independence as a woman with a job, a wife with her own resources. He was even making enough money to buy nice furniture for their cozy two-bedroom apartment, and to tell Margaret he was looking for a piece of land to build a home for their family, growing now. But Margaret knew it was the new baby that kept her husband from beating her in the weeks before the coup.

Trigger-happy Libyans were everywhere. Baby Henry at her breast, Margaret watched them in the streets from the second-story apartment window, identifiable by their lighter skin and softer hair, shouting in a language she didn’t know as bullets flew from their rifles, and people ran, and some people fell. They were fighting alongside the army to uphold Idi Amin and his government against the invading forces from Tanzania, hell-bent on revenge.²

The television news had everyone believe the government was still in control, that the exiled former President Milton Obote and the Uganda National Liberation Front weren’t advancing into the city, ready to topple the regime. But the constant shelling in Kampala and the rumors through the grapevine told a different story. Below their apartment, as Margaret rocked Henry in her arms, glass shattered as looters broke the street side windows into the General Motors display to steal the luxury vehicles they could never afford.

With the whir of bullets flying beyond the walls and windows of their humble flat on South Street in the middle of Kampala, Margaret stood at the kerosene stove, warming meat for breakfast and grateful for a moment to herself, Henry now asleep in the bedroom. Zuena, the Ugandan wife of Samuel’s Sudanese friend, sat on the brown patterned sofa in the living room, biting her nails.

Zuena’s husband had just returned with a second vehicle. The women had refused to leave with him in the blue pick-up he had looted from a man old enough to be his father.

“Please don’t take my car from me,” the elderly man had said, kneeling in the street, pleading for his keys. Their conscience still about them despite the circumstances, Zuena and Margaret wouldn’t budge.

“If you are robbing that man’s car,” they had said, “we are not getting in.”

This time, Zuena’s husband had returned from the army headquarters with a military Land Rover belonging to his boss, an army captain who had died on the frontlines just days earlier. He now sat with his wife on the sofa, perusing the titles on the bookshelf next to him, a radio perched on top of it.

Margaret set a pot of water to boil for tea and checked the temperature of the meat with her index finger, just as a bullet pierced the bedroom window, ripping a small hole in the white lace curtain before lodging deep into the cream wall.

Silent by instinct, Zuena, her husband and Margaret dropped to the floor beside the dining table, the light blue fabric tablecloth Margaret had sewn herself placed neatly on its surface, four delicate chair covers to match. A candle sat, unlit, in the center.

Baby Henry didn't make a peep. As usual, Margaret's husband was nowhere to be found.

"Stay down," Zuena's husband said. They crouched and listened to the gunfire in the streets. They had an arrangement, the Sudanese community, for evacuation to one of the richest suburbs of Kampala, at the home of the highest-ranking army officers, where they would all meet if things got too hot.

A second bullet flew through the window, and it was only when something snagged Margaret's sleeve as she ran down the stairs that she remembered the baby asleep in the bedroom. Had her blouse not caught on the way down, she might have left him there, like the tea pot still whistling on the stove.

The car that had been waiting drove them straight to the evacuation point, where they met nearly a dozen families, their lorries and Land Rovers packed with belongings. The women stayed busy cooking as soldiers guarded the entries. They would be safe there, for a while.

As they set out early the next morning, Margaret eyed the government vehicles filled with families and their stacks of luggage. Her suitcase was small, insufficient, by contrast, holding only the few clothes, baby supplies and items her husband had thrown together when he went back to the apartment to pack it. It was April 11, 1979. The day when things went upside down. And that single suitcase was all she had.

"What is this language they're all speaking?" Margaret asked her cousin Mary Doka, who happened to be among the families traveling in their convoy amid the chaos, as people fled northwest from Kampala to Arua. It was the same language Margaret had heard her husband speak on occasion before quickly switching back to Arabic. Mary already knew. She was also married to one of them.

"These people are Sudanese," Mary said. "You didn't know?"

Sudanese? Margaret thought to herself. *Does that mean my husband is also Sudanese?* She wasn't sure it was something she wanted to believe. He had told her father he was Ugandan, that he came from Koboko.

In the two days they stayed in Arua with Mary and her husband Martin, a captain in the Ugandan armed forces, they monitored the news. And Margaret contemplated her escape. "If I find money, I'm not coming back," Margaret told her cousin in confidence. She snuck away to the bank, alone with the baby, only to find that everything had been looted.

By then, news had arrived that the government had been overthrown and Obote's forces were now marching to hit Idi Amin's village home in Arua, only a stone's throw from where they slept in her cousin's home. They would leave that very night.

It all happened so fast. Hungry, Margaret worried about her family, her firstborn son Sam, not yet 4 years old, who stayed with her mother in the village; she thought about her father, the

director of music in Idi Amin's army. *What will be their fate?* Margaret wondered, closing her eyes to picture their faces, baby Henry bouncing in her arms as the convoy traveled west.

It was only when Margaret recognized the flag of the Red Cross, the organization in charge of refugees, that she knew they were crossing the border.

"Where are we going?" Margaret asked her cousin.

Mary turned to Margaret, her voice quiet. "We are going to the Sudan," she replied.

Margaret's eyes grew wide, but it wasn't until Mary told her that their husbands had registered at the border as returnees, and not refugees, that Margaret was forced to believe what was now impossible to deny.

Margaret's husband was not Ugandan, and he was taking her with him, home.

Four Days

“Cassava flour,” Margaret spoke out loud in Luo, to no one, as she discovered the bag of white, mealy substance hidden deep in the cupboard. The baby might have heard her, but like everyone else in southern Sudan, he wouldn’t have understood her anyway.

She dipped a shaky finger into the flour, fine and soft as it met her skin. For four days, Margaret had been waiting for the woman to return, to unlock the kitchen where she might find something to eat. Four days without a proper meal, she waited. She breastfed the baby. And she cried.

It was the end of mango season, and the trees were tall outside this grass-thatched hut that wasn’t hers. Juicy, overripe mangos hung heavy from the branches above her. Margaret felt their insult deep in the pit of her empty stomach. On her tiptoes, she could not even reach a leaf.

Grateful for the roof over her head in the home of her husband’s cousin, in the strange land and foreign culture that met her in the first two months of exile, Margaret went hungry. Baby Henry had eaten well though, suckling and slurping until Margaret had nothing left. Then he cried, and Margaret wished she could throw him away.

Raising the dry cassava flour to her mouth, Margaret tasted it, slowly at first. And then ravenously, in small handfuls, its white powder slipping between her fingers. Mixing with her saliva, it caked inside her mouth as she struggled to swallow. That was when Margaret noticed the maggots. The bag was full of them.

In the struggle between desperation and disgust, hunger won. Margaret ate cassava flour until she could no longer stomach it.

In those dark days in the Sudan, Margaret spent what seemed like entire weeks alone, with only the baby. Her husband disappeared to look for work, but mostly to drink, leaving Margaret to remember the life she had left behind. The days in the material comforts of her father’s five-bedroom home on Mbuya Hill, one of Kampala’s most envied neighborhoods. Her childhood years spent at boarding school in the UK, after the army toppled the first Obote regime in 1972 and Idi Amin came to power. The moments at the tip of luxury visiting her favorite aunt, Norah, at the State House in Kampala during her breaks from Mvara Senior Secondary School in Arua.

In the throes of hunger, in what she would later remember as her Sudanic nightmare, Margaret lent herself to a daydream, to all that was no longer. She remembered traveling overnight by bus to reach Kampala at dawn, eager for a glamorous breath of Aunt Norah’s rich perfume and her otherwise unfathomable fortune as one of Idi Amin’s five wives — the fairest of them all, if Margaret were to judge.

“Orech!” Aunt Norah would call to her brother, Margaret’s father, showing up unannounced to steal Margaret away for the holidays no more than an hour after Margaret had arrived home from school.

“Orech! Tell Arach to get ready!” She was the only one who ever got away with calling her niece by her traditional name. “Arach!” she would yell up to Margaret. Usually spoken only in the greatest of disdain, out of respect for her elders, when Aunt Norah said her name, it sounded lovely, and Margaret hurried to gather her best dresses, her shiniest shoes. From the black government limo

to the towering white State House perched on the hill, this was the lavish life of luxury, and Margaret was the only one among her six brothers and four sisters chosen by Aunt Norah to see it, to live it, for days at a time as the special guest of Idi Amin's most beautiful wife.

Margaret saw him once, from the back in his dark green military uniform. She peered around her aunt's wide hips and tall frame to sneak a look at the man feared by an entire nation. When he first saw Norah, she was working at the cabinet office. And in the early days of his dictatorship, everyone knew that what Idi Amin wanted, Idi Amin got. Together, they had two children.

In Aunt Norah's bedroom, Margaret stopped beside the dressing table, set in front of the well-lit mirror, reading the perfume labels in brand names she twisted her lips to pronounce. There must have been hundreds of them, little bottles in dozens of shapes of glass and crystal — elegant, exotic.

"Bring me that handbag from my closet!" Aunt Norah instructed Margaret. "And bring that pair of shoes." Margaret hurried to obey her aunt's instructions, knowing that she was dressing to receive the wife of Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi on visit at the State House.

Aunt Norah moved over to her perfume collection now, standing beside Margaret in her long black dress, satin and flowing. Margaret admired her aunt's venerable taste in fashion, like something out of the magazines she remembered seeing in the UK, an elegance Margaret would try to emulate back at school, in the tailored dresses Aunt Norah gifted her right from her closet.

Aunt Norah reached for one of the perfume bottles, cylindrical in shape with brown cursive lettering, struggling to open it.

Madame Rochas, Margaret read the label to herself as she examined the golden liquid through the glass, lifting her chin for dramatic effect.

The cap wouldn't budge, and Aunt Norah hadn't time to keep at it.

"Oh, have that one," Aunt Norah handed the bottle to Margaret, grabbing another from the display for herself, turning her head left, then right, to spritz either side of her neck, her black hair swept up tight and pinned back with a shiny, gilded barrette. She smelled expensive.

Madame Rochas, Margaret repeated silently, looking down at the bottle, heavy in her hand. She smiled, thanking her aunt with a sincerity slightly feigned, deepening her guilt. Because just before Aunt Norah gave her the *Madame Rochas*, Margaret had stolen a different bottle from the dressing table, with another name she couldn't pronounce, now burning a hole in her pocket.

As she sat hungry in the thatched-roof home that wasn't hers in the early days of exile in southern Sudan, Margaret missed her favorite aunt — the woman who, with a single phone call, transferred Margaret out of the boarding school where the other girls teased her, calling her Miss London when she returned from the UK with her family, into Mvara Senior Secondary School. She missed the awestruck days at the State House with rooms too many to count and endless meals laid out on the banquet table, where she could go, already full from the snacks of the day, and choose what she liked, leaving the dishes for someone else.

On January 30, 1979, less than three months before the coup, they had found Aunt Norah dead on her bed in her private home in Kampala. Three days earlier, Margaret had been with her,

laughing, reminiscing. And then she was gone. In labor with Henry in the hospital, Margaret couldn't go with her mother to bury her aunt. Norah's death remained a mystery, unspoken by family members who feared any connection to her in the uncertain years after the coup.

Closing her eyes in the hut, Margaret could almost taste the scent of Madame Rochas in her throat, and for a moment, suspended in memory, she nearly forgot she'd eaten nothing but small handfuls of cassava flour for four days — and counting.

Sudanic Nightmare

Before things got better, they got much worse.

Margaret endured social backlash from village women for things as simple as riding her bicycle to the funeral of her husband's aunt, or refusing to lay with the dead body and throw herself around in heaving wails of exaggerated physical grief. As a Ugandan woman in exile in southern Sudan, it took time for Margaret to grow accustomed to these new traditions.

She learned Arabic and some Bakka, the local dialect. She cooked *chapati* flatbread to sell on the roadside to support her family. Survival became synonymous with cultural adjustment. And surviving her marriage became a full-time job.

"Please, can someone allow me to mill it fast?" Margaret asked in nearly fluent Arabic. She was in line at the flour grinding mill, a two-minute walk from their homestead in her husband's home village of Maridi, where they had been living for nearly five years. Not expecting such a wait, Margaret had told Samuel she'd be back in a hurry.

"I have left my baby alone," Margaret continued. "Please, can I mill it quickly?" She was talking about David, her youngest, still an infant, whom she had left home with her husband after realizing she had run out of *dura* flour to make *asida*, the stiff porridge to go with the sauce already simmered and ready on the charcoal stove. James, now 3 years old, was also at home, and Henry, nearing 5 now, was nearby in school.

"We have also left our babies at home," one of the women responded, unmoved by her story. "We were here first," another said.

Margaret waited. She sat with the other women inside, chatting to pass the time until it was her turn to mill the sorghum she carried in a bucket.

Glancing out the open door beyond the grinding mill and into the sandy street, Margaret squinted into the sunlight. There was her husband, pedaling quickly toward her on a bicycle he must have borrowed.

Margaret knew the insults were on their way. She wondered who he had left the children with this time.

"Why have you taken so long?" he spoke loudly to the whole room, nearing his wife. "Don't you know that you left the baby at home?" The women looked at him, sighing in shared commiseration. Margaret stared at the ground, waiting for him to finish.

"Don't you know the baby has been crying?" he went on. "He's disturbing me. You said you would only be gone a few minutes, and here you are chatting with these women."

"Why don't you buy me a machine?" Margaret responded coolly, standing to meet his gaze, eyes wide. "Then I can have it at home so I don't have to come and wait for this one!" Over the years of abuse she'd endured, Margaret was learned in the art of fueling her husband's fire.

She watched his brow wrinkle in anger, knowing she had wounded his masculine pride, adding to the insult that she was now making 260 pounds per month working for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to his 32 pounds as a teacher on consolidated

government pay. At least he had finally landed a job of his own. For the first two years, Margaret had been the sole breadwinner, taking on secretarial work on a borrowed typewriter, receiving clients in their home, Samuel disappearing for long afternoons to smoke cigarettes and drink away her money, only to return home to pick a fight with the woman he beat to mask his shame.

“Can’t you see she’s waiting in line to mill sorghum flour for your meal?”

“Leave her alone, would you?”

By now, the other women at the grinding mill had started in on him, and that was too much for Samuel’s pride. What he’d do within the confines of their home, he would do anywhere.

That day, there inside the flour mill, in front of everyone, Samuel came at Margaret full swing. He slapped her across the face in a blow that was sure to leave a bruise wherever it hadn’t broken the skin.

Margaret had learned to fight back, scratching at him and throwing whatever she could grab. The chopped stalks of sorghum she had in her hands, heavy bags of milled flour within reach, metal pieces from the milling equipment — she threw it all, aiming for her husband’s head, his chest. Glass shattered to the floor, white powder clouding the air, until Margaret ran out.

It wasn’t the first time he had embarrassed her like this in public, but she swore that time would be the last. Twice it had happened in church, once on Christmas when Margaret was reading from the scripture in front of the archdeacon and the entire congregation. Samuel had stormed in, shouting and drunk, and dragged her out by her hair. Then there were the times he’d embarrass her in the office, ordering her to come home and wash his clothes that instant. “Please get out,” Margaret’s boss would tell her and Samuel, politely, as they argued loudly in the office. “Solve your domestic issues at home. Don’t bring them here.”

Samuel would follow Margaret to the water source, to the market, monitoring her every move, fearful of the Ugandan women she’d befriend, anyone she’d confide in that she wasn’t supposed to. Which was everyone, now. She’d linger at the market on Saturdays, early in the morning before breakfast, sipping *dumba*, the local brew made of honey and yeast, chatting with the other exiled Ugandan women living in Maridi with their Sudanese husbands. It was the only place Margaret knew she could be among her community, even if only in the brief moments before Samuel showed up to start a fight — first with words, then with his hands.

And so it went, from riches to rags, with episodes of abuse and depression scattered between. It wasn’t until Samuel became violent with the children that Margaret began planning her escape. “You’re just as stupid as your mother,” he’d say to their sons, and then he’d beat them just the same.

When Margaret ran the first time, she, Samuel and Henry were still living in the brick house given to them by the church in the months after they arrived in Maridi. That was when Margaret threw herself in front of the truck.

In a moment she wouldn’t quite remember clearly, the truck swerved to miss her. What she couldn’t forget was the shame of her attempt to end it all, especially when she’d watch Henry playing in the dirt outside their home, his innocent smile cutting deep into her heart.

After that, the children kept on coming. James. Then David. Each time there was a new child, things with Samuel would cool a bit. He was caring, loving even, with the charm she remembered from their early days together in the canteen at the Ministry of Information in Kampala, when he'd buy her tea to catch her attention during their breaks.

In the days and weeks they cared for one another and their young children, Margaret nearly believed her husband had changed for the better, for good.

But then he'd come home to find her drinking tea, chatting with one of the Ugandan women she wasn't allowed to see. And it all started again, just like that. Twice Margaret escaped, and twice she was found out, dragged back and beaten by her husband.

That was Margaret's life for six years, until the minute she escaped her nightmare. What she didn't know the day she left for good with her children was that she was less than one month pregnant. Esther would be her only daughter.

A Daughter's Journey Home

“Are you Margaret?” a woman asked as Henry and James, now 6 and 4, hurried to finish the meager breakfast of bread and tea. Margaret had bought it with the money Dr. Okot gave her before he left. David, still a baby in Margaret’s arms, ate some of the crumbs. Her own appetite uneasy, Margaret watched her children eat.

Craning her neck to peer above the restaurant’s low wall, beyond the crowds of street vendors and passengers waiting to board taxi-buses to Sudan or deeper into Zaire, Margaret had watched anxiously as Dr. Okot passed her children, one by one, across the sewage trench marking the Sudan-Zaire border. “Good luck, Margaret,” he’d said, leaving them in the small restaurant in Bazi with instructions to find Hadijah. “I’ll see you in Uganda.”

When she heard her name spoken by the steady, unfamiliar voice, Margaret looked up at the tall woman standing beside their breakfast table. *This is Hadijah*, she thought. *I am certain it is her*. Tears filled Margaret’s eyes and ran down her smiling cheeks, the tired sobs of feeling safe, at last.

“Hurry!” Hadijah grabbed Margaret’s arm, pulling her up from the chair. “You mustn’t be seen here!” She had already received the news of Margaret’s arrest in Yei from Muzamil, the radio operator whose home Margaret and her sons had landed in over a week ago.

“You will be Amina,” Hadijah told her, revealing the plan for Margaret to get the travel documents she needed to pass through Zaire and into Uganda. Now hidden in Hadijah’s home, Margaret dried the children’s clothes in the heavy midday sun.

“Amina, daughter of Rehema and Mahmoud,” Hadijah went on. “And you are a refugee from Meke going to find your relatives in the camp at Aru.” Margaret tried on her new persona. It would have to work. Just before dusk, Hadijah led her to the immigration office.

“Oh, you have brought us this beautiful young girl,” the lewd soldiers greeted them, grinning between French entendre. Their speech, though foreign to Margaret, was noticeably slurred.

From the frying pan into the fire, Margaret thought, fists tight at her sides. Twisting in her gut was the memory of her first run-in with soldiers, just 200 meters from her home back in Kampala, the mention of her father’s powerful name the only thing that saved her from being violated that night.

Margaret blinked quickly, shaking the memory from her mind, and off her body. This was not Kampala. This was Zaire, in the time of Mobutu Sese Seko. And at that time, there was no law at all.

“Just leave her here with us,” one of the soldiers said. “When you come back we’ll have her travel papers ready.” His words crept under Margaret’s skin as he eyed her up and down.

But Hadijah was tough, unrelenting. “Here, take this,” she said, handing them the money Margaret had given her. She knew how to shut them up. And in a matter of minutes, the two women were back at Hadijah’s home, forged documents in Margaret’s hand.

At daybreak the following morning, before anyone could see them, Hadijah accompanied Margaret, her three children and their paid escort to the lorry. Margaret climbed on top of the merchant sacks piled high, wedging her body between them so she wouldn't fly off over a bump. She gathered the boys around her, tying a bit of her sash to their wrists, and held the baby in one arm, her other hand gripping the railing above her. They would travel like that to the market in Aliwara at the Ugandan border—a 12-hour journey marked by frequent stops, not only for flooded bridges and unpaved wilderness, but also at the hands of the *kamanyolas*, demanding money.

“How did you know me, Hadijah?” Margaret had asked before they hugged goodbye back in Bazi.

“I was in the jazz band,” she replied, smiling. “I was one of the girls singing in the band. Your father was my boss.” *Just like the young woman who served us tea in Yei*, Margaret thought. Both Ugandans. Both musicians in the official band of the Ugandan armed forces. “So when you get home, you tell your father Hadijah passes her regards.”

Again Margaret wept, this time at the memory of her father and the hope of seeing him, in their home, once again.

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The Zairian soldier staggered toward them, drunk, as the lorry slowed beyond the towering gate, their driver impatient after waiting at the unmanned post on the opposite side. His small bribe accepted by clumsy hands meant they were all free to pass. Margaret had made it to Uganda.

She closed her eyes in silent victory as the lorry rolled on. *Now I'm heading home*. She had visions of her return. Her sisters and brothers would be there, her mom and dad, all together in Lira. Her firstborn son, Sam — whom she had left behind when he was just a young boy — would be there, too, nearing 10 now. Her life, waiting for her. So close she could feel the warmth in her chest.

“Everyone out!” Margaret was jolted from her daydream by the voices of soldiers at an unexpected checkpoint in Odramacaku. People were getting out their travel documents, preparing. But Margaret had chewed her papers before crossing the border, knowing that they wouldn't get her out of Zaire with her destination listed as it was: the camp in Ituri province, hundreds of miles away on the wrong side of the border. Once again, she had nothing.

“But you're a Ugandan,” the girls on the truck had reassured her. “Just speak to them in your language and they will let you through.” The four Ugandan girls had become her allies after she spoke to them in their shared language, Luo.

“Where is her luggage?” Margaret had overheard one of them say as they neared the Ugandan border. “She must be escaping from her husband,” they giggled. A thing only women would notice. Margaret kept quiet, never breaking her gaze straight ahead. Later, the girls were embarrassed to learn she understood their gossip about her shabby skirt and blouse, her dirty skin, unkempt hair.

Margaret had left Uganda during war, she was returning during war. It was July 1985, six years into the Obote II regime and just days before its official end at the hands of another military

coups. In times like this, at the checkpoint in Odramacaku, the soldiers weren't taking any chances. And on the 14th day of her journey home, just inside Uganda's border, undocumented and suspected as an informant using her children as a cover, Margaret was arrested.

"No!" the Luo girls shouted as the soldiers led Margaret into the interrogation room. She imagined herself in a movie scene, what they do to make you talk. Even worse when you have nothing to say.

"This woman has done nothing wrong," one of the girls continued. "She has just escaped from her husband who has been mistreating her. Can't you see? These are her children!" But their pleading fell on ears practiced in heartlessness.

"You people will kill her! We are not leaving this woman behind." Margaret heard them outside the room as the soldier took a seat opposite her across the table. She never learned who they were, but she would be forever grateful for their solidarity as Ugandans, as women, on their journey.

Margaret told her story to the interrogating officer, truth her only defense, her last hope. "I am just going home. I have left my husband in the Sudan. He was abusing me. I am a Ugandan citizen, please." The officer looked at her, unmoved. Her children looked at her, too. Margaret wondered if they knew enough to know they should be scared.

"We'll see what the *afande* says!" he barked, fury at his brow as he dialed his boss, circling his finger on the old colonial phone. Margaret knew her fate hung on this conversation. She knew these soldiers were ruthless. They had to be to carry rank in Obote's armed forces. Especially now.

He spoke in Swahili, and Margaret's body shook as she listened to his side of the discussion, inventing the rest in her logical but terrified imagination. "What shall we do with her?" the interrogator asked. "Yes, sir," he spoke confidently. "Yes, sir. OK, sir." He turned to Margaret. "Yes, sir. We shall do like that, sir.."

He put down the phone, sitting again to look directly at Margaret. She struggled to read his face, but in that moment Margaret knew that the *afande* had ordered her to be executed. She drew her children close.

The phone rang, breaking the standstill of their weighted silence.

"Yes, sir," Margaret heard again, the soldier's back toward her, his responses repetitive. "Yes, sir, there are three. Three, sir." And suddenly, breaking character, he turned around and looked at Margaret with a smile.

"OK, sir," he continued, holding Margaret's gaze. "I'll do like that, sir." She was sweating into her tattered clothing.

"The *afande* says you are his visitor," the interrogator told her now, gentle even. "Our *afande*'s guest."

The afande's guest? she thought. *Who is the afande?*

“Come,” he said. “We are taking you to his home.”

“Who is the afande?” This time she asked out loud, stepping into the private car with her three children and the Luo girls who were now quieter than they’d been for a hundred miles.

“He is Captain Opito,” the soldier replied. “Commanding officer of the battalion based at Bondo.”

With an audible exhale, Margaret’s eyes closed in the grace of her impossible fortune, sheer disbelief buzzing through her veins. Captain Opito was her brother-in-law. And he had nearly ordered her dead.

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The soldier drove them into Arua, a busy urban area on a normal day. But with the fear of the military takeover wafting through the city streets, Margaret noticed many shops were already closed up, and the streets were strangely unpeopled, save for the soldiers at every corner.

The large gate opened for them as they approached Captain Opito’s home, its imposing grandeur in stark contrast to Margaret’s current circumstances, threadbare and suddenly small.

“I’m tired of guests,” Katie told the soldier, her long skirt pink and elegant, as Margaret looked up to the balcony, watching her sister drink Skoll with her girlfriend, rich in the spoils of her husband’s rank, his infamously ruthless command. Margaret was in rags.

“But we have brought the afande’s guest,” the soldier pressed, trying to change Katie’s mind in his boss’s absence. “They have just come from the Sudan.”

The Sudan. Katie set down her beer, squinting to scrutinize her unwanted visitors.

Margaret smiled, watching the white in her sister’s eyes grow wide, now fixated on her and the children. Katie screamed and flew down the stairs toward Margaret, falling on her in the whirlwind of an embrace six years in the waiting.

“I only recognized you by your teeth!” Katie blurted in Margaret’s ear, the two of them laughing and crying and shouting in harmony. “I have just been talking about my sister in the Sudan, and there you are standing in my home!” Even the seasoned soldiers and uniformed guards couldn’t help but smile at the two women, giddy and girlish. By then, the two Luo girls had left without a word, disappearing into Arua, forever remembered as Margaret’s angels in disguise.

“You’re a stick!” Katie said, whisking Margaret into the house to rest and bathe. “Come, let’s find you a dress to wear.” Her closet was full of color, rich in taste. The fabric fell limp on Margaret’s hungry frame, sliding down her thin torso to the floor. Hundreds of dresses, and not one of them fit.

Later that evening, Margaret’s brother-in-law, the widely feared Captain Opito, returned to find his wife and her sister chatting over tea. As the tape player buzzed with Caribbean steel drums, carrying a carefree island melody, he set a bottle of Johnny Walker on the table in front of Margaret.

“I almost killed you, my sister-in-law,” Captain Opito laughed from his belly, shaking Margaret’s hand to welcome her into his home.

Take me back home ... I want to be loved. The song lyrics felt smooth, serendipitous, on Margaret’s ears as her mind drifted to her mom, her dad.

“Drink,” her brother-in-law said, pouring her whiskey to the brim, “and forget your miseries.” That evening, as he recounted their story, Margaret drank her fill.

“We hadn’t bullets to waste on the type of woman I thought you were,” he told her, confirming himself as the voice of authority at the other end of the phone that morning. “I had ordered you to be burnt in a hut,” he said almost jovially. Margaret closed one eye to study the medals on Captain Opito’s dark green army uniform, shuddering at the thought of what might have been. It was the children who had given him pause, he said, prompting him to call again.

“At your father’s request, we had been searching for you in the Sudan,” he continued. “And we had learned you had three children.”

Drunk, Margaret spun in the spell of her whiskey, the magic of her faith. She closed her eyes as the music swayed her in her chair. *If not for my children*, she thought, *I would be dead*. If not for her sister marrying the commanding officer responsible for the post in Odramacaku, if not for her father’s happenstance connections meeting her at every step along the way, Margaret knew she would have never seen her family again. And in that swirling instant, she knew she had more than angels in disguise guiding her journey home.

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In the morning, they packed Katie’s pick-up truck — another lavish gift from her husband — and set off for Lira, an armed escort accompanying their driver. “The station here is getting out of hand,” Margaret’s brother-in-law had told them the night before. “I want you to leave immediately.” The hurry, the insecurity, was familiar to Margaret by now.

That morning, like many mornings before and after, Margaret’s timing was impeccable. Just after they began their trek, they learned the military coup had taken place that very day. Obote’s government had fallen, ousted by the army. Tito Okello would be installed as president, but his regime would prove even shorter lived. And Captain Opito would flee to Zaire, unsure of his possible fate in the months of violent chaos that followed.

The rain fell loudly on the roof of the pick-up as Katie, her baby, Margaret and the three boys sat huddled inside, one of eight vehicles stalled in a row, stuck in the mud. Nightfall would keep them put, hyenas hissing in the distance, the tall grass obscuring the leopards and lions undoubtedly prowling nearby. A roar snarled within earshot. Margaret was grateful their escort was armed.

At dawn, the sun woke Margaret from her unsettled slumber and dried the mud just enough for them to travel onward. The bumpy road squished beneath their tires as they made the turn toward Alee. “I’m going to see my mom and dad!” Margaret told their driver and escort, loud enough for passersby to turn their heads and smile. “I’m going home!”

She told the strangers they met at breakfast in the restaurant, the merchants on the street, anyone who would listen. As they neared the village, Margaret counted the banana trees welcoming her home, taller than when she'd left. She waved at children along the roadside, playing in front of their homes, familiar yet worn and tattered in the years of vandalism and pillaging by Obote's army after the fall of Idi Amin.

A half-kilometer away, the pick-up slowed in the mud, stuck again.

"Katie, you have come!" said a man on a bicycle, nearing them as they examined the tires, wedged deep in the sticky earth. "And is that Margaret with you?" he asked, his words excited.

"Yes, we've come!" Katie replied, gathering her skirt in her hand as she stepped down from the truck. The man started pedaling away, yelling back at them over his shoulder, "I'll run and tell your brother to bring the tractor! We'll get you out!"

"Margaret?" their mother asked, incredulous when the man found her and the rest of the family sitting under a tree, lunch just finished. "Are you sure it's Margaret?"

None of them waited for his answer except Margaret's father, who stayed back, humming in his chair, shaking his head. He wanted to see his daughter in his home.

"My daughter is back!" Margaret heard her mother's joy in the pack of familiar faces hurrying at them, the younger ones outrunning her older siblings. All eight of them were there, even the cats and the dogs. Margaret grabbed her sister in wild laughter, worried her welcoming committee would throw her down.

"Margaret is back!" her mother yelled, her long red dress chasing her in the wind as she ran. "Glory to God, my daughter has come!"

Henry and James stood together, watching the crowd fall on their mother in hugs and screams, smiles and tears. As they walked the half-kilometer back to their family home, Margaret's children didn't understand a word.

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On the 15th day of her journey, after six years of exile in the Sudan, Margaret and her three children were home, where they found her father, Orech Abednego, still humming in his chair. Margaret recognized the melody of the well-known church hymn but was surprised to hear it in her father's throat.

"Haaa," he said as she neared. He was different, lighter somehow in his being. No longer the man they'd hide from, scurrying to straighten the cushions and wipe the counters when they'd hear his car in the drive. They never knew what he'd do if he found the toilet dirty or a dish out of place on the table. Only when he started humming was it safe to come out.

Margaret hugged her father, closing her eyes. With her arms around his back, she ran her right thumb over the slight scar on her left little finger, losing herself to the image retained in her mind, his face younger then, on the day she'd forgotten to clean the balcony where the dogs slept.

“Arach!” he called his daughter by his mother’s traditional name, a sin to be spoken aloud even in whisper. “Is it beautiful?” he asked, pointing at the dogs’ mess on the terrace. “Is it nice?” He only stopped when his army baton broke through the skin on her hand, as she sought to shield her buttocks from his repeated lashings. That was the man she remembered, not the father she embraced today.

Babies and aunties and siblings gathered around her on the white and grey squares of the sitting room rug, listening as she narrated her story to her father. He had been left to imagine what happened to his favorite daughter in the aftermath of that fateful day, April 11, 1979, when their world turned upside down. They sat together now, his eyes worn yet bright. Once the director of music in Idi Amin’s armed forces, then a prisoner of Obote’s second military regime, and now a volunteer music teacher in the Pentecostal church, Margaret’s father was a changed man.

His hand trembled slightly on Margaret’s shoulder. His strong voice met her ear. “Jepula,” he said lovingly, calling her by his mother’s Christian name, as he had when she was a girl. “Finally, my daughter, you are home.”

The Accident

In tight blue jeans and a lightweight denim jacket, Margaret sat at the front of the *kamunye* taxi, heart pumping heavy in her chest, a bag of ripe oranges set between her feet. Her stature tall even by Lango standards, Margaret was grateful that the man sitting to her right had been willing to swap places with her, his stout frame a better fit for the middle seat next to the driver, leaving her with a little more leg room at the passenger side.

With 24 strangers and four babies aboard the taxi-bus regularly equipped for 14, Margaret said a silent prayer. She hoped she had made the right decision to take the route to Kampala via Gulu, instead of the more dangerous road that would have taken her through Lira, nearer to her home region.

On holiday from the private boarding schools Margaret struggled as a single mother to afford, her five children awaited her arrival at her rented four-bedroom home in Kampala.

Am I going to reach my destination? Margaret thought as the taxi-bus turned onto the Gulu highway, just 15 kilometers south of Kitgum. Her prayer for traveling mercies expected an ambush at every curve. *Will I make it? Or will I not?*

Each bump jolted Margaret's spirit, jostled the oranges, as the taxi-bus crept on. Of course, this kind of fear was predictable when traveling in the north. In those months and years, the fear was normal, quotidian. Everyone knew it was just a matter of time until it was your turn.

It was December 22, 1998, the start of the festive season and the height of Joseph Kony's merciless reign of terror as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) swept through northern Uganda. Built on the dream of overthrowing Museveni's government to install a regime based on the Ten Commandments, the LRA was gaining ground. The rebels looted homes and hospitals, abducted children into their ranks, maimed limbs with machetes and raping women in the villages.

This included Kitgum, where Margaret had been working since September with AVSI, an Italian organization providing psychosocial support to former child soldiers. Just below the hilltop hotel that towered over her comfortable two-bedroom apartment, Margaret shared walls, and often tea, with her neighbor Palma. Finding friendship in lonely commiseration, the two women also shared a fear of the hefty scorpions that fell from their ceilings at night — delicate thuds followed by screams and quick, barefooted hopping on worn mattress springs.

A week before her journey back to Kampala, as the day turned dark, Margaret heard a knock at her door.

"Please allow us to sleep here," a voice among the 40 faces begged in the still of early evening. Entire communities now feared leaving their homes after dusk, locking their doors behind them before the sun set.

"Please," another voice said, "we can't sleep in our homes. Last night the rebels came and picked people up." The scariest nights, they told her, were when you'd see a torch light up the darkened village, a single beam of white bouncing from far to near. And when you lived in a grass-thatched hut with doors that simply push open, that torch meant your fate was all but certain. For

over a week, 40 women and children of the neighboring village slept on mats in Margaret and Palma's brick-walled apartments. But Margaret knew they wouldn't be safe for long.

As promised in the case of emergency, AVSI had already taken the expatriate aid workers out by airplane, leaving Margaret to contemplate her diminishing options between bad and worse.

"The plane only seats four," her boss had told her days earlier. "We'll send another for you soon."

But there wasn't time to waste waiting to see if they would keep their promise. And with all the extra money to be made from the high volume of passengers headed home for the holidays, Margaret's driver didn't have time to wait either. The army's security clearance telling him it was safe to pass may take days, or weeks even, when the rebels knew there was money riding in the overflowing kamunye taxis carting merchants to the trading posts, parents shopping for gifts for their children. No, kamunye drivers wouldn't wait for an army clearance they knew would never come.

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Margaret had left Kampala to forget, to start anew. Three-hundred miles north, her assignment in Kitgum would be far enough away, she thought, from the broken relationship she had left behind.

"I'm sorry, Margaret," he'd said when he discovered her plans to leave, offering fruitless gifts of apology to win back the love he'd betrayed. Margaret was not easily swayed.

In late September 1998, leaving a long list of dear friends and close relatives, entrusting her younger brother to manage the small grocery shop and 300 backyard chickens awaiting lucrative slaughter for the two hotels she supplied nearby, Margaret accepted her new post in Kitgum.

By mid-October, Margaret had found solace in her work with AVSI in Kitgum, supporting former child soldiers as they reintegrated into their communities, ravaged by war. Reuniting them with their families, Margaret helped children and teenagers — victims turned perpetrators, and now survivors — access the psychological support, emotional healing and traditional cleansing ceremonies required to rinse their sins in the eyes of their parents and villages. Trained as LRA soldiers, their young minds had become versed in the indiscriminate art of murder, plunder and torture, often in the very same communities where they were born and raised. Reintegration was difficult, frequently impossible. Justice and forgiveness fought a battle no one could win, the atrocities too great, the pain too fresh. Soldiers and killers by most standards, they were just children when they had been taken. Margaret couldn't have known then that some of the same children she counseled would be among those responsible for the ambush that nearly took her life.

•

"How come you're so quiet?" Margaret asked the young man seated in the folding chair next to her, his demeanor unsuited to the wedding celebration about to begin around them.

“Auntie,” he called her, “you don’t know what I’ve gone through.” He looked down at his ankles, crossed tightly above tattered shoes on the grass. “It’s still haunting me.”

“Do you mind sharing it?” Margaret asked, gentle enough for him to know he was safe in her company.

He was a former rebel, he said. “At night I hear people screaming,” he confessed. “I see dead bodies. I see all the nasty things we did in the bush.” Margaret watched him fight tears as he spoke, seeing him at once as youthful in innocence and hardened by the involuntary sins that now defined him.

“Prayers won’t work,” he continued, hiding his gaze from the wedding party. And his relatives couldn’t afford to conduct the cleansing ceremony that might save him from the trauma of his memory, the shame of his community.

He had raided shops, forced people to carry supplies for them to their commanders. He had abducted children, too, he said. They all had.

The mother in Margaret sought to console him, to tell him it wasn’t his fault.

“Did you kill?” Margaret asked, even though she knew she shouldn’t.

Quiet again, he looked down.

“You don’t need to answer that one,” Margaret set her hand on his shoulder.

He had been abducted three times, escaping first after a month, and then staying three years as a rebel the second time around. He had managed to run away after a week this last time by lying about where he was from so that they mistakenly sent him to raid in his home area. Disobeying orders and hiding out in the village he knew well, he ultimately surrendered to the local council, handing over his guns and avoiding prosecution as a minor.

“All I want,” he told Margaret, “is for the cleansing ceremony to be done so I can feel at peace with myself. I regret everything I had to do.” But when you’re a child abducted, drugged and trained as an LRA soldier, there are many things you must do, because if you don’t, you are killed.

“I just want to go back to school,” the young man said before standing to leave. In his words echoed the trauma and vulnerability of others she had helped return to their communities. Listening to their stories, Margaret’s sympathies wavered. She believed in amnesty for children whose wrongs were not of their own accord, but she also favored justice for the crimes against innocent men, women and children left dead, displaced, orphaned, widowed, disabled and broken.

•

Will I make it? Or will I not? Margaret continued her prayer. It was 10 o’clock in the morning. A Tuesday.

She couldn't have been the only one praying, Margaret thought, listening to the uncharacteristic silence of 24 Ugandans traveling to see their families for the holidays. Save for the brief cries of the babies whose mothers were quick to quiet them at their breasts, the taxi-bus had been voiceless for nearly 15 kilometers now. As the driver turned the wheel, slowing the tires around the sharp curve toward the village of Laguti on the Gulu highway, the silence was broken. An explosion blasted through the windshield, her eardrums, the undercarriage of the kamunye taxi.

Wetness soaked Margaret's hands, face, legs. She struggled to get her bearings amid the chaos unraveling around her. Only when she tasted it sweet at her lips did Margaret realize it was only juice sprayed from the oranges, and not her own blood, that covered her body. And it was only when she heard gunshots and footsteps running toward them that Margaret understood it was an LRA ambush and not a blown-out tire. Passengers screamed. The vehicle swerved before landing in a lump of soil by the roadside — instead of tumbling down the steep cliff beyond.

“Open the door!” passengers yelled, many of them already out the windows and onto the road, running in every direction as the gunshots continued. The stout man next to Margaret struggled across her to jump out the window, too.

“Wait!” Margaret said. “Let the car stop!” Finally, she opened the passenger side door and swung her left leg around her body to climb out of the taxi-bus and onto the road. It wasn't until she tried to run that Margaret saw her right leg. Or where it used to be. Bones and flesh hung at her shin, and below them, nothing.

What happened to my leg? Blood dampened the pant-leg of her torn blue jeans. But she didn't feel any pain. A bullet went through the taxi and she knew she had to run. With one leg, Margaret hopped. She threw herself into the bush and started crawling.

With each motion, the loose flesh, tendon and exposed bones kept catching in the tall grass, pulling her backward as she crawled. She crawled until she couldn't move another inch. She lay near the bushes in the grass, completely still, pretending to be dead. That was how Margaret survived.

Eyes closed to the world, she heard footsteps close to her body, breath heavy in the mid-morning sun. He unzipped her, struggling to lower her blue jeans, tight around her hips and thighs. Margaret was heavier then, something she never thought she'd be grateful for.

He shook her unresponsive body from side to side, wanting to be sure she was alive before he carried out his deed. He threw her this way, that way, this way, that way. Four times he threw her. And each time she would land, lifeless. It wasn't until he slapped the barrel end of his gun against the flesh hanging where her leg should have been that the senses in her body woke up. Margaret felt a tingling pain. Sweat began to glisten on her forehead, upper lip, the middle of her chest. Lying upside down in the position he had left her, half undressed, Margaret held her breath.

She felt his feet on either side of her. When she heard him unzip himself, everything in her body told her to open her eyes, if only to see his face, even if it was the last thing she ever saw.

Don't open your eyes, a voice spoke clearly to Margaret, loud enough for her to listen. She thought of Esther, her youngest. She saw all of her children smiling together, felt them close to her

heart. She would never know what he looked like. His face would never haunt the nightmares she'd live with from that day forward.

He pushed his hand in her pocket to see if there was anything worth having. When he found nothing, he unlatched Margaret's watch from her wrist and took off her necklace in one swift motion, as if he'd done it a thousand times. When Margaret lifted her eyelids just enough to see but not be seen, she saw him from the back, standing over an old lady, whose arm reached for Margaret's leg.

"Take off your clothes!" he said to her in Luo. Not even elderly women were spared the rape and plunder of the LRA. She could have been his grandmother.

"Hold on a bit my son," she responded, untying the sash of her traditional dress, fingers shaky. It wasn't her body he was after.

"Where is the money?" he yelled. From where Margaret laid, she couldn't see that the old lady's hand was gone, blood staining the seam of her colorfully patterned dress. "Give me the money!" he ordered. Like most traveling women, she carried a handful of bills tucked inside her sash.

Satisfied with at least the material spoils of his siege, Margaret thought, she heard his footsteps as he turned to leave. One step, two steps, he stopped.

He's looking back at me, Margaret thought, still motionless in the parched, brown grass.

He took another step, two steps. He stopped. She knew he was again looking back to see whether she'd moved, to be sure she really was dead.

Down to her intimates, Margaret lay there, just as he had left her, bare as the sorghum stalks in the dry fields around her, the harvest complete for the season. Eventually, he walked away. Margaret watched now as he set fire to the grass behind him, making his way to the road. Smoke billowed. Her flesh grew warm as the fire neared. Flames promised to reach the taxi-bus just meters away. Margaret knew that any minute the tank would explode.

She stopped pretending. She woke from the dead. And with the fire sweeping across the sorghum fields, its smokescreen keeping her safe from sight, Margaret crawled for dear life.

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The small patch of cotton, leaves fresh and not yet flowering, acted as a fire belt. Margaret caught her breath, picking thorns from her hands, long blades of grass from the raw skin and muscle, tendon and bones where her right lower leg had been. Covering the flesh with one hand to protect it from catching on the bushes and slowing her down, Margaret crawled forward with one arm. At last, she reached a homestead, abandoned by the looks of it.

They take the goats, all the foodstuff, anything they can find. So when Margaret saw the huts empty, the animals missing, she knew the rebels had already been there. Peering through the small crack between the hinges of the door in one of the huts, Margaret felt thirsty. Crawling still, she

scoured the inside of the hut for water, finding none in each of the five pots she came across. She wrapped herself in what must have been a grandmother's mat and went back to her hiding place behind the door.

It had been 20, 30 minutes by the time Margaret heard men's voices in the distance. Swahili, not Luo. The army, not the rebels. Margaret crawled out from hiding.

Don't go back through the bush. A different voice, this one from within, directed her away from her chosen route. As Margaret crawled down the village path, long guns pointed at her from the grass on either side. A soldier walked in front of her with a walkie-talkie.

"There's one," she heard him say. "We have found one here."

When he was near enough to reach, Margaret grabbed his legs, gripping them with impossible strength, so tight it would take four uniformed men to pry her arms from him before carrying her to the military truck.

"Please, let go," the soldier said. "We want to help you."

Margaret thought about the army green trousers she nearly wore that morning before changing into the tight blue jeans instead, her denim jacket to match. With her hair in all directions, dressed in army green like the rebels, they would have shot her, no questions asked.

She looked at the gun mounted on the truck as she sat where the men had carried her. Another soldier got close, pointing his finger at her face.

"Are you a rebel?" he asked.

"Are you the UPDF?" Margaret asked, in turn. She had to be sure he was from the government's army before she answered.

"Yes," he replied.

"I'm not a rebel," Margaret exhaled. "I was a passenger in that kamunye taxi." She told them she didn't know where the rebels went. "Maybe they ran to the opposite side of the road," she said, remembering she hadn't seen anyone moving on this side.

She waited for the army soldiers to take her and the other wounded to a nearby health unit. Together with two women who stared blankly into space, their babies wrapped unhurt in their arms, Margaret sat with the old lady whose hand she saw now had been blown off completely.

"How are you?" The old lady asked Margaret the kind question they both knew the answer to.

"I'm not OK," Margaret didn't have to say.

"Me also," the woman replied, lifting what might have been her wrist toward Margaret. "This is what they did to my arm."

Margaret closed her eyes, and waited.

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The local health unit had already been vandalized by the rebels. There was no bed, no mattress, nothing. Margaret laid on the bare floor as strangers from the community gathered around.

“What are we going to do?” Margaret heard the concern in the medical officer’s voice. “There’s not even a bandage.” The police were told to take the new patients’ details. “Just in case,” the medical officer said.

Just in case we die, Margaret thought, *and they don’t know where to take our bodies*. Margaret would remember that moment as the day’s scariest: fighting for life and hearing them say it, just like that, while you’re still alive.

Someone brought Margaret a jug. She drank all of it. Someone cooked food. Margaret worried she would faint with so many people there, surrounding her air space.

She asked for a chair. She put her legs up, one of them anyway, keeping her head on the ground. She stayed in that position until 4 o’clock in the afternoon. The medical officer gave Margaret a tetanus shot. And then Panadol. Paracetamol. Over-the-counter pain medication. It was all they had. Someone offered a bed sheet that must have been old, because they just ripped it. But it was clean, and it would have to do.

“We’re sorry,” the nurse told Margaret. “We don’t have any anesthesia. So you might feel a bit of pain.”

It might have been a surgical blade they used. Or it might have been a knife, Margaret couldn’t tell. But it took forever. And she screamed at the top of her voice. The bone stayed intact as they trimmed the skin around it. The tendon proved the toughest to get through. They cut the hanging flesh below the knee just like they were cutting meat. They bandaged her with the bed sheet. And Margaret, alert for all of it, never lost consciousness.

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If I don’t make it to the hospital, I’ll die. Gripping the railing as she sat on one of the sacks of perishables stacked high in the merchant’s truck, that was the last thing Margaret remembered thinking before everything went white.

Cars and trucks passing by the health unit had already seen the scene of their accident. Not even the Red Cross vehicle would stop for them. Just beyond the military road block, 500 meters past the health unit, the driver refused to drive any further, now that soldiers had jumped on for a ride. He claimed his vehicle had broken down, knowing the rebels would attack just down the road if they saw soldiers catching a ride on his truck. He had seen the branches placed on the road, the common symbol warning of rebels waiting in the bush.

Margaret tried to open her eyes. But everything was still white.

God help me, Margaret said to herself, blind to the commotion around her.

When she finally saw something, it was another truck coming toward them, this one carrying cattle to be slaughtered for the festivities of the season. This truck would be the ambulance that took Margaret, the old lady with no hand, and the other injured passengers to the hospital in Gulu. Margaret sat among the cows and prayed.

“Who’s going to pay for all these people?” the cattle truck driver demanded. Margaret had left her handbag, with all of her money and documents inside, behind on the taxi-bus.

“Aunt Margaret, is that you?” a passenger said through the legs of cows.

“I’m Ezama,” he said. He was an armed escort, his face not easily forgotten from the months she lived with her sister Katie and Captain Opito in the years after the fall of Okello.

“Don’t worry, Margaret, I will pay for you,” Ezama assured her. Gratitude welled in Margaret’s eyes. She felt her brother-in-law’s presence in Ezama, as if he were there with her again, just as he had been over a decade ago.

Nearing the hospital, 5 kilometers from Gulu, the cattle truck pattered to a stop, out of fuel. By then, nearing seven hours after the explosion that took her leg, Margaret’s pain was unbearable. Ears pressed back, the cows stared at her as she shouted, writhing and screaming on the bed of the truck until her voice was all gone.

Why, God?! Margaret shouted in her head, pleading to the sky. *Why now? Why did you make this happen to me after I’ve already put things right with you?* Just two days before the accident, Margaret had responded to the altar call at church, committing herself to a life of faith, surrendering to the grace of God. “Yes, Lord,” she had said. “Take over my life. Guide me on my path.”

A man sitting near the driver found a bicycle to ride to a petrol station. Finally, at 7 in the evening, Margaret arrived at Lacor Hospital in Gulu. She recognized the building; she’d been there four years earlier, as doctors took months to diagnose her mother with a cancer it was too late to save her from.

A linen stretcher greeted Margaret, as the priest she would later come to know as Brother Elio watched the emergency staff handle her from the cattle truck.

“Is there anyone you want me to notify?” Brother Elio asked Margaret as they began wheeling her to X-ray. They took a sample from her arm to determine her blood type. Margaret’s skin had turned a lackluster gray after all the blood lost in the long hours since the accident.

“Yes,” Margaret responded. “The organization I work with is AVSI. Please tell them I’m here, that I’m OK.”

“AVSI, the Italians,” Brother Elio said. “I will let them know.”

“And please,” Margaret asked him as her eyes began to close, knowing AVSI would contact her family upon receiving the news. “When you send the radio message, tell them not to tell my children until after Christmas.”

Brother Elio nodded, honoring the protective mother’s request.

Please spare my life, Margaret bargained with God in the moments before she lost consciousness. Please, for the sake of my children, spare my life. Please let me have a second chance. Please, God. Please.

As they rolled her to the operating theater, it was the anesthesia that put her to sleep.

Recovery

Margaret felt herself drifting down a circular slide, shiny gold in color, that surrounded her body in all directions and dropped her slowly out the opening at the bottom. A second slide enveloped her now, this time silver, and again she felt her body weightless as she fell through the opening, into nothing.

Opening her eyes, Margaret saw a man she faintly recognized, her vision still blurry, standing beside her hospital bed in the intensive care unit. Seated beside him along the cream-colored wall, Margaret saw her brother-in-law, dressed in his army officer's uniform, the dark green fatigues familiar even when strangely out of place. Her wound dressed tightly in fresh bandages following surgery, Margaret realized she was naked beneath the thin white sheet. And then she saw that her leg was missing.

"Haaa, you're awake." It was not her brother-in-law who spoke first, but the man standing over her. She would soon come to know him as Brother Elio, the Italian Catholic priest in plain clothing who took time from his work managing the construction department to offer care and support to the victims and survivors at the mission hospital in Gulu. Throughout the two long months Margaret spent in recovery, it was Brother Elio and his encouraging words she would remember most.

"What happened?" Margaret asked, disoriented from the anesthesia beginning to wear off. "What happened to my leg?"

One of the nursing sisters dressed all in white jabbed Margaret's arm with a needle. "Just rest," Margaret heard her say before falling back asleep. The nurses weren't taking any chances after the patient who died of shock upon learning his leg had been amputated when he awoke from surgery.

"What happened?" Margaret asked again when she came to a second time.

"You were involved in an accident," Brother Elio said gently before the nurse jabbed Margaret once more, sending the powerful chemicals flowing through her nervous system.

When she awoke a third time, it wasn't her leg that concerned her. That part, she remembered now, as her faculties had slowly returned.

"Father, I'm naked," she said to the priest. "Please, can you get me something?"

Brother Elio hurried to find Margaret a night dress, borrowed from one of the nuns, a gift she would keep for nearly a decade following her release from the hospital.

Margaret spent the two days leading up to Christmas in the intensive care unit, missing her children. Only when she read her medical report weeks later did she learn her future had hung between life and death, her body resuscitated twice during surgery, someone else's fresh blood pumped in to replenish what she had lost in the hours of waiting.

And while her children would remember being forced to leave the home she rented in Kampala after hospital fees left her with no money, Margaret would remember December 24, 1998, as the Christmas gift she would have never asked for. Released from the intensive care unit as a survivor in recovery, Margaret started her new life of disability.

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In recovery at Lacor Hospital, Margaret got the best care that she and her family members could pool their salaries and savings to afford. Later, Margaret would suffer to learn her children had been split up in her absence: Esther and David, her youngest children, living with her sister in Kampala; Henry and James with her brother in Luzira, a suburb near the home he rented in a rough neighborhood to house Margaret's belongings, where they slept at night to be sure nothing was taken; and her eldest son, Sam, back in the village with her father. Unable to pay rent with her hospital bills mounting, Margaret made sure her children could still afford school tuition.

They brought four more people. One has already died.

For two months, Margaret listened to the nurses and attendants rush by her private room as she sat in pain, chatted to Brother Elio for inspiration, ate the traditional meals prepared at her brother-in-law's home and brought to her by his army bodyguards. He was now stationed in Gulu, the coincidence of him being close when she needed him another instance of divine serendipity.

There was a man and a woman. The man has died.

They brought three more ... they are bleeding badly.

Margaret heard it all. And the screaming, the kind that pierced her eardrums and woke her in a sweat, instinct drawing her palms to her ears, her heart in your throat. She knew what that kind of screaming felt like. And she felt lucky to be alive.

"No more pethidine." The nursing sisters took Margaret off the strongest of her intravenous pain killers. "We can't give you more," they said, "otherwise you'll get addicted." So they switched her to morphine. But after just five days, it was no more morphine either.

"But please," Margaret pleaded, crying out in the pain that consumed her leg, her nerves, and nearly her spirit. The pethidine, the morphine, she needed them so she could sleep. Because if she wasn't sleeping, she was in pain. They gave her diclofenac. But after they exceeded the dosage of that one, there was nothing more to give. So Margaret would just scream until she fell asleep. That was how she stayed in the hospital until the sutures on her leg were removed. And the pain was less. And she began to heal.

But the most difficult times in recovery were when they would come to dress her wound. As she heard the nurse's trolley cart approaching her room, her skin anticipated a trauma her shivering body couldn't take. It would take four people to hold her down.

"I've come to nurse my sister's daughter," Margaret's Aunt Constance had said, holding on to her niece's upper body as the nurses unwound her soiled bandages. It was her leg's second stitching that was healing now, and the tube that drained off the bad liquid from deep in Margaret's body had already been removed, a thick line of black sutures now in its place just below her right knee. As the final bandage was removed and Margaret closed her eyes tight, screaming into the

crowded room, Aunt Consy peeked to get a closer look at the wound. The nursing attendant watched Margaret's aunt fall to the floor, fainting at the sight.

“What are you doing?” the nurse said, stifling a laugh. “Get up and nurse your sister's daughter!” As her aunt came to and peeled herself from the floor, even Margaret couldn't help but laugh.

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“I was one of the passengers,” the visitor greeted Margaret, seeming out of breath. “One of the passengers in the taxi that day,” the girl continued in hurried words. “The day of our ambush, I mean.”

She was a young girl, around 15 if Margaret were to guess, and very thin. She said she ran from the rebels for over 15 kilometers that day. “One of them threatened to shoot if I didn't stop,” she told Margaret. “But I just kept on running.”

When the girl learned people had been wounded in the explosion, she wanted to come and see those who were in the hospital. She came by herself to visit Margaret. And that visit was one Margaret would always remember as touching her heart when she felt most alone.

She never told Margaret her name.

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As the conflict in northern Uganda carried on outside the walls of Lacor Hospital, Margaret's visitors were few. It was still very unsafe to travel in the north, and she worried her family members would be risking their lives to come and see her. She told them not to. But still, some did.

Like her cousin William and his younger brother Dr. Lawrence Okello. And her brother Moses, whose own life would last only a few more years, falling victim to a car accident.

Two of the district officials she had worked with in Kitgum visited, too, as well as a few members of the AVSI staff, including those Margaret might have sued for not giving her a seat on the emergency airlift when they knew the roads would be too dangerous to travel. *But*, Margaret thought, *all the money in the world will never bring back my leg.*

The older woman who had lost her hand came. So did a priest from Margaret's home village, Father Onimo. And her cousin, Lily, who Margaret hadn't seen for nearly 30 years. They had grown up together, playing in one another's homes when they were young. Lily was at home in her village near Gulu when the news had reached her of her cousin's accident.

“Jepula, is that you?” She called Margaret by her traditional name after passing her room three or four times, not recognizing a woman she only knew as a young girl. “It's me Ayugi! Lily!” She had expected to see a person wrapped all in bandages. It was only when she heard her speaking Luo in the Lango dialect that she knew it must be Margaret. They laughed and reminisced, moments of joy letting streams of light in where the darkness of Margaret's pain had otherwise settled, nearly entirely.

Margaret's son, Henry, who didn't listen when they told him it was too risky to make the trip to visit his mother — he was the first to come see her. Drowsy from her second operation, Margaret opened her eyes to find her son sitting in her hospital room. She watched him as he began to cry.

"Why are you crying?" Margaret asked. He was 18 years old now and preparing for university in Kampala. "I thought you should be happy that I'm alive," she said sweetly as he swept away a tear. "Or are you crying that I don't have a leg anymore?"

Of course, they weren't questions she expected him to answer. Henry was quiet.

"Which one is better," Margaret continued, "no mom at all, or a mom with one leg?"

Henry smiled, looking up at her. He sat there for hours, looking at his mother.

Despite the message she had Henry deliver, warning others not to risk their lives to visit her, Margaret's father came next. Within days of her accident, rumor in the village was she'd been blown to pieces by a bomb, that she was already dead. Not knowing what to believe, Margaret's father needed to see her for himself.

As he entered her hospital room, Margaret smiled, wide lips and small teeth slightly open, gentle spaces between them revealing glimpses of her tongue—the same smile she had always smiled, *her* smile. His daughter's face, her smile, he said, that was enough for him.

Of everyone who visited — and those she thought would visit but didn't — there was one she would work hardest to forget. For weeks, Margaret stared at her door. Each time it opened, she expected to see his well-shined shoes on the floor, his slacks as he walked into her room, his eyes dark and wide as they met hers, understanding that whatever had gone sour between them hadn't kept her from wanting him there. It would have been the right thing for him to do.

When the door pushed open and different feet walked in, the feet of his brother who he'd sent with a box of gifts and goodies instead, Margaret knew it was the best she would get — that her disappointment in him would be the closest she'd get to feeling him there, when she needed him most.

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"Margaret," Lilian called as she knocked on the door. The social worker from the orthopedic center, Lilian's voice was now recognizable to Margaret after two months in private room number two.

"Margaret, I have visitors for you."

Margaret straightened to a seat in her hospital bed, adjusting the pillow behind her back, sitting up against the wall with her legs extended, her stump bandaged and healing well.

"OK, come in," Margaret replied, ready as she could be.

"I think she's the right person," Margaret overheard one of her two unknown visitors as they entered her room. The two men limped toward her, upper bodies swaying from side to side, walking sticks supporting their weight as they moved.

“Right person for what?” Margaret responded, curious as they approached.

“We’re from the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda,” they said, introducing themselves as James Mwesigwa and William Nokrach. “We are very sorry to hear of your accident.”

Margaret was courteous as they began with small talk.

“By your status, you are one of us now.” She forced a smile, nodding kindly. “But you don’t have to worry. When you are out of the hospital, you can come to our office. You will meet people who will help you adjust.”

Margaret waited for them to answer her question: *The right person for what?*

“We’re looking for a landmine survivor who can represent Uganda at an international conference in Harare.”

Zimbabwe, Margaret thought to herself, unsure what they might want with her there. “But there are so many landmine survivors in northern Uganda,” Margaret told them, “so many in this very hospital.” *Why should they pick me?* she thought.

They were looking for a woman, they said. “There are so many women landmine survivors, here in this hospital, as well,” Margaret said.

“Yes, we know that,” they continued. “But we need someone who can speak English.” Now she understood why the social worker had directed these visitors to her room.

“But I’m still an inpatient,” Margaret said. “I have not yet been discharged.” They would speak to the doctors. “And I don’t have a passport. It was stolen in the ambush.”

They would take care of that, too. They prepared the necessary documents for Margaret’s passport application. They drove her on temporary release from the hospital into Gulu for her passport photos. Now, she would only need a lawyer’s signature and a seal of authentication to prove that she was, in fact, Margaret Arach Orech, and that her passport had, in fact, been lost in the accident.

As fate, or faith, would have it, she needn’t look further than her own hospital wing, because in room five, Margaret learned, was Felix, the district chief magistrate of Gulu himself, interned for the weekend on bed rest for high blood pressure. Margaret had begun chatting with him when his daughter mistakenly brought his home-cooked food to her room. She accompanied the young girl to her father, offering to taste it herself so he knew it hadn’t been poisoned. In those days, in the north, you couldn’t take any chances.

“I have been waiting for that food!” he joked as Margaret rolled her wheelchair into his room. “I have already eaten in the hospital restaurant. You can eat it if you’d like.” As they chatted, Margaret nibbled at the eggs cooked by his wife and shared her story with Gulu’s district chief magistrate, telling him about her accident, her visitors from the National Union, about the paperwork she needed signed by a lawyer.

“Go and get your paperwork,” he said. “I will sign it for you.”

Returning to his room, papers in hand for him to sign, she rolled past the open doors of the other patients. Two military officers in room three stopped Margaret on her way. They had lost their legs to landmines and were now amputees in recovery. Margaret was polite, listening mostly. One of them shared his story of waiting nearly a week to get from the minefield to the hospital, his wound already so bad that the doctors had no choice but to amputate. Their wounds were heavily infected.

“Who is looking after you?” Margaret asked them, concerned.

“The army is doing everything for us,” one of the soldiers responded. On a monthly basis, they received 50 kilos of sugar. And each week, each of them got a tray of eggs, juice in tins, even detergents and cartons of ultra-heat treated milk. They had nothing to complain about. And their families were looked after in the villages while they stayed in recovery.

“How unfair,” Margaret blurted out. “I’m here lying in the hospital, having gone through the same, and the government is not doing anything for me.” The soldiers looked away as she spoke.

“And not only me,” Margaret went on. “I’m sure for the others, as well.” They must have felt guilty, Margaret thought, because they offered to send her a bit of their rations.

“It’s too much for us anyway,” they said. “We don’t use all that stuff.”

Margaret refused. There were many others in the hospital in much greater need than she. Lacor Mission Hospital provided rations of maize flour, beans, cooking oil and sugar to those who really needed it. Margaret always refused those rations, too.

Leaving the soldiers’ room, Margaret continued down the corridor with her documents to room number five, where Felix signed her affidavit. He promised to take it with him to be stamped with the required seal of authentication when he returned to the office.

Margaret’s stump, however, still bulky, was not yet ready for its prosthesis. And the doctor didn’t want to discharge Margaret on crutches. “You should be walking on your leg,” he told her. “But you are a very strong woman. If you are ready to go, you can go.”

On Tuesday afternoon, February 28, 1999, two months and six days after losing her leg, Margaret was discharged from Lacor Hospital. On Wednesday, she returned to Kampala, received by her family at her sister’s home. On Thursday, she visited the city office of the National Union to return her completed passport forms. On Friday, she received her new passport. And on Saturday, Margaret boarded the plane to Harare.

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“Margaret, welcome to the club,” the other survivors would say, lightheartedly, even jovially, as she met amputees and a full range of people who had been wounded and disfigured by violent conflicts occurring across different decades and regions of the world. In Harare, as a member of the five-person delegation representing Uganda at the Conference on Disability Caused by Landmines, organized by the Pan-African Federation for the Disabled, Margaret received her first line of counseling from other people with disabilities.

Margaret spent the week in tears, crying from the pain of what had happened to her; acceptance would take its time. In her transition from victim to survivor, faith helped Margaret believe that whatever had happened was for a reason — that it would not be in vain.

Marianne Holtz was just one of the many people Margaret met at the conference. An American woman from Idaho who nearly lost her life to a landmine in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Marianne had lost both legs and the lower half of her face. But she had been pieced back together. And on white skin, you can't see the scars as easily.

"I was able to survive because I'm an American," Marianne told Margaret, pride in her words. "If I was just any other person, I wouldn't have survived." Because the American government, she said, did all they could. They evacuated her to Nairobi, and when she stabilized they flew her home, where she got the best medical care. She wore prostheses that you would never know replaced her missing limbs. She was 60 years old.

Doctors, Margaret thought, looking at the woman before her, feeling her strength and courage by what might have been osmosis. *These doctors must have a higher calling.*

Margaret, 41 at the time, was inspired by Marianne's story, by the encouragement she offered her in the months and years to follow, and by her connections to the peer support Landmine Survivor Network based in Washington, D.C. Through that, Margaret would connect to the Nobel Prize-winning International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), under whose auspices she would travel to Geneva the next year to share her story as one of three Africans in a delegation of 23 landmine survivors chosen to testify at the United Nations for the second meeting of States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty. It would be the first of dozens of similar speaking engagements in the years to follow, Margaret representing the human face of the impact of landmines and serving as a spokesperson for victims assistance in her international advocacy work with ICBL. And it was through ICBL's coordinator, Liz Bernstein, that Margaret would receive her first prosthetic leg from the World Habilitation Fund's prosthetics center in eastern Uganda.

Returning to Kampala from the conference in Harare, looking out the airplane window in the moments before landing, Margaret remembered pleading with God the day of her accident, and in the weeks and months of recovery in the hospital. "Why God?" she had asked. "Why did you make this happen to me?" Awaiting an answer, Margaret had found a lonely solace in the scripture, reading verses in her hospital room to strengthen her faith.

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in.

It was Isaiah 43:18 that had spoken to her most, she remembered, reflecting on it now as the plane touched down. She had read those words in the hospital just two days before the unexpected visit from the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda that forever changed the direction of her life.

Catwalk

Six months after receiving her prosthetic leg, Margaret went for a follow-up visit to the orthopedic center run by AVSI in Gulu. Less than a year after the rebel ambush, and only a few months after finishing her own physical therapy, Margaret had her first experience supporting other victims of conflict in the north, healing together into their new lives as survivors.

“OK now,” the physiotherapist spoke in Swahili to the short, heavy-set woman. It was rare to find anyone in Gulu who spoke her native Lugbara, the dialect of the West Nile area she came from. She and 15 others, eight men and eight women in all, had been brought to Gulu to fit their new prosthetic limbs and endure three weeks of intensive physical therapy.

“Just try to walk,” he told the woman again. Around her, the other patients sat on benches against the walls at the circumference of the room, in gentle, mostly silent, encouragement.

By now, the woman’s knuckles had turned from deep brown to bloodless grey as she gripped the parallel rods of the metal walking bar, her body between them as she stared at her reflection in the wall-length mirror at the end.

Margaret watched, remembering her own fear the first time she tried walking on her new prosthetic leg, the terror in the thought of tumbling to the uncarpeted floor.

Worse than the walking, Margaret remembered, was when they first tried to fit her into the prosthesis. The discomfort of a still tender stump pressed into unforgiving edges carved of wood, plastic and metal was suffocating. Each time they lowered her stump into the device, she couldn’t breathe.

“Just take it home and keep it there with you,” they had told her. For three days, she stared across the room at her new leg. In the mornings, she would get her nerve up to try it on. But as soon as she raised the limb to the skin of her stump, Margaret’s impulses were quick, forcing her to remove it and stow it safely out of sight, the suffocating sensation one she couldn’t easily shake. Recalling it now as she watched the woman hesitate to take her first steps at the orthopedic center, Margaret shuddered.

The woman said something in a language Margaret didn’t need to understand to know what she meant, how she felt, her fingers still wrapped tightly around the walking bar. *No, I can’t. I’ll fall.*

Margaret watched the physiotherapist near the end of his patience.

“You can do it,” another woman said. “Just take a step.” The woman at the walking bar shook her head.

Let me show them how to make this thing happen, Margaret thought, swift and graceful as she stood from her chair.

She drew strength from her own recovery process. She had taken those first few steps slowly, despite the uncertainty she recognized in this woman. She had endured the painful months of physiotherapy, the discomfort of weights tied to her body, the nausea of regaining her center of

gravity, the breathlessness of hopping up and down stairs on one leg. She learned to use crutches, first wooden ones that left deep bruises beneath her arms, eventually trading two for one, and finally, walking alone. Holding onto nothing.

For Margaret, walking had meant freedom. Freedom from long dark days of depression on her sister's couch in the months after she was released. Freedom from entire weeks spent staring into space, waiting for someone to come home and lift her from the living room to the kitchen, from the bathroom to the bedroom in the home that wasn't hers. For Margaret, walking was freedom from the dependency on others she couldn't bear. Independence and wherewithal were definitive of her nature as the eldest of 10 siblings, as the sole breadwinner while living with her ex-husband in the Sudan, as a single mother of five with boarding school and university tuition awaiting her recovery. So for Margaret, walking meant sustaining the only life she ever knew — for herself, but mostly for those she loved and cared for. And so, despite the pain and fear, Margaret taught herself to walk on the leg she would learn to accept as her own.

“Just walk!” Margaret said, moving toward the woman at the bar, a little swagger in her step, some wiggle in her hips for dramatic effect. Like a runway model, Margaret's sarcastic gaze never broke character. So smooth was her gait, they would have never guessed she only had one good leg.

Some of the faces in the group hid smiles they weren't sure they were allowed to show. But the woman, unconvinced by Margaret's display, held tight to the walking bar. It was only when most of the group left the room that Margaret reached down along her right leg, bunching the fabric of her long patterned skirt in her right hand to expose the manufactured limb that now replaced her foot, ankle and calf. Margaret watched the woman's disbelief, the gap between her front teeth now exposed below her lips as they widened into a smile.

Margaret saw her hands loosen on the walking bar, just enough to let the prosthetic device support her weight. She began to laugh. She said something Margaret didn't understand. Soon, her eyes welled with joy and her laughter grew louder, drawing a crowd again as the other patients hurried back to witness the commotion.

“Who has gotten this lady to laugh?” one of the men in the group asked the physiotherapist, incredulous at the quietest among them shaking in full-bodied laughter.

“Why is she laughing?” Margaret asked the others in the room.

“She's laughing,” someone responded, “because she thought you had normal legs. But you have only one leg, just like her.”

Holding gently onto the bar as Margaret smiled in reassurance, the woman took her first steps on her new prosthetic limb—and into her life as a survivor of the violent conflict that ravaged northern Uganda. Those steps would inspire Margaret's work from that day, helping landmine survivors access medical care, peer-to-peer networks, livelihood support and, most importantly, the courage within themselves to live their lives in hope, forgiveness, resilience and faith.

Among the survivors, Margaret's catwalk would not soon be forgotten.

Survivors

The early years of Margaret's career as an international advocate for landmine survivors with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines took her around the world—to Geneva, Djibouti, back to Geneva, and then on to Mali, Washington, D.C. and countless other destinations. On each visit, Margaret shared her story of survival, offering her testimony to heads of state and UN representatives to put a human face to the weapons of war that fuel the conflicts responsible for civilian atrocities around the world.

It was the informal conversation with survivors from Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Angola and Bosnia on her first trip to Geneva that planted the seeds for Margaret to begin considering a greater contribution to landmine survivors throughout Uganda. She had felt alone in her recovery experience: phantom pains of nerves attempting to reach limbs no longer there, falling at night, getting up to walk and believing her leg was still there, enduring social isolation. But hearing their stories, Margaret learned she was part of an international community of survivors, connected in their common experiences of neglect and loss, forgiveness and justice, suffering and healing.

“Isn't it true?” Margaret asked the group in Geneva, smiling in the ease of their assumed camaraderie. “Women stay with their newly disabled husbands, while husbands always abandon their disabled wives. Isn't it so very common?” The other survivors nodded in obvious understanding.

When she said it, lightheartedly, Margaret wasn't expecting Wibonrat, a landmine survivor from Cambodia, to burst into tears. She hadn't meant to cause any pain. In the years to follow, Margaret would hear Wibonrat's story — her husband leaving her with her two children — echoed by so many of the women survivors in Uganda, the same bitterness, sadness and anger ripe below the surface of their wounds.

Margaret's life as a survivor began, unexpectedly, in the public eye, as she became a global spokeswoman for ICBL. Yet as she traveled and spoke and shared, Margaret grew restless. Her words felt impotent, knowing there was more to be done to bring greater justice and deeper peace to landmine survivors in Uganda and beyond.

In Geneva for the second time in December 2000, Margaret reflected on the work she had fallen into since her accident. *Most of the time I'm just called to share my experience, my testimony. Sharing my story, here and there, over and over. For what?* Margaret asked herself. She was tired of it. She thought about her accident, all the things she should have never had to endure, all the things never done to help her, everything that should be in place for survivors. *There must be more we can do.*

In the years that followed, Margaret's role in international advocacy for victims assistance slowly evolved. She would continue her work with ICBL, leading initiatives to counsel governments on supporting victims and assisting survivors, and holding leaders accountable to the Mine Ban Treaty,³ the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. She would also continue to lead efforts to ensure victims receive all that is rightfully owed them in their lifelong journey of disability. But her self-reflection in Geneva and those first conversations with survivors from other countries would inspire her to work with landmine survivors back home in Uganda, where government support was severely lacking and Margaret had her work cut out for her.

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When Margaret refused to return to her post with AVSI in Kitgum after her accident — because of its connection to the trauma of the ambush, but also because the conflict had intensified, promising even more insecurity — they opened an office for her in Kampala, where she would work as an administrative assistant and live closer to her family. In 2001, she traveled to a landmine survivors workshop coordinated by AVSI in Gulu, where she gathered a peer support group under a mango tree. That first gathering of survivors laid the groundwork for Margaret’s organization, which would later solidify itself formally as the Uganda Landmine Survivors Association (ULSA) and become a nationwide network providing peer-to-peer counseling, referral for medical care and rehabilitation, and livelihood support to hundreds of conflict-affected persons with disabilities across the country.

Now, five years later, she was sitting with the same group that had gathered beneath the mango tree, at another workshop for landmine survivors. Except this time they were at Gulu’s Sunset Hotel, and Margaret was learning that after five years there was still much to be done.

“Is there anyone among us willing to share the experience you went through?” Margaret addressed the small room of women, ranging in age and physical mobility but all disabled survivors of the conflict in northern Uganda.

Silent in the practiced resignation Margaret knew all too well from the early stages of her own recovery, 12 faces stared up at her, hardened in the aftermath of conflict and the scars it had left on their bodies. Their spirits had grown deaf to the pity-ridden words of support offered by strangers, dampened by the begrudged alms from the few family members or friends who hadn’t yet abandoned them.

“OK,” Margaret conceded, acknowledging the deep wounds connecting her to these women. She began sharing her story — this time, closer to home.

“The first thing I felt was a lot of anger,” Margaret told the group. “At the military for not protecting me as a civilian, at the rebels for inflicting these injuries on me. And when my friends whom I really relied on abandoned me, I felt a lot of anger and bitterness toward them. It was only my family who helped me pull through.”

The women nodded, not with sympathy but with the empathy of a shared pain.

“I wasn’t prepared for what I was going to meet when I got out of the hospital,” Margaret continued. “How distant people would become from me, how I lost my friends, and how people looked at me. I was now more of a dependent, someone who would be a burden to them, so they thought it best to keep their distance.” Margaret knew she wasn’t alone in her experience of loss and abandonment.

“Then of course, my partner,” Margaret went on, going deeper into the wounds she knew the other women would relate to. “Somebody I cared so much about wasn’t there when I needed him most. As much as the relationship had already gone sour,” she admitted, “I still expected him to show up. I was so angry, so bitter.”

But in a strange way, Margaret was grateful for the people who abandoned her, she explained. “If they’d showered me with all that attention, I don’t think I would have picked myself up. I would have kept pitying myself and waiting to be helped. But at the end of the day I realized that holding onto all this bitterness and anger was just making my situation even worse. And I decided that I had to let go of some of that baggage that was weighing me down. I realized that by holding onto the past, my inner healing would suffer.”

The women turned to one another as she finished speaking, their eyes meeting in a way only possible between those who have been rejected and abandoned. Margaret hoped that some of them would now be willing to talk.

“Is there anyone among us,” Margaret asked, “who can share what makes you so angry? So bitter?”

One by one, in the hours that followed, the women shared their stories. Stories of the pain they endured in the explosions and gunfire that cost them their limbs. The emotional abuse they suffered — for the sake of their children — in the homes they still shared with husbands who had found new, able-bodied wives to replace them. Husbands who left them, snuck back and made them pregnant, and snuck back out. Family members who no longer wished to claim them as their own. Parents who couldn’t repay dowry, so refused to accept them as their daughters. Relatives who never visited in the hospital. Uncles and aunts who stole their property while they were away. Stories of insecurity as war waged on around them for 20 years, while the army first failed to protect them from harm, then the government neglected the damage they now wore on their bodies. Jobs lost because they were deemed incapable. Loneliness, depression, diminished self-worth. The discomfort of being someone else’s burden. Stigma and social marginalization. The stares and averted eyes that met them as soon as they found the courage to leave the house to visit the market.

They were angry at the government amnesty that provided material incentives (cash, four-wheel-drive vehicles, houses) to former rebels in exchange for their arms and surrender.

For his atrocities, now he’s rewarded with a car. And for me, they can’t even pay for me to get a decent leg.

If people who cut knees, chopped legs and lips, are being compensated for what they’ve done, what about us?

For all of these women, Margaret realized, it was the anger and bitterness still living within them that prevented anything sweet from returning to their lives. She knew forgiveness was a difficult remedy to find, an even harder one to take, but only forgiveness would allow them to find peace in their transition from victims to survivors. Forgiveness was something that had taken time and pain for Margaret to find within herself, a process of inner healing that may never prove complete.

As the women spoke out, one by one, Margaret noticed a younger face among them. Perhaps 20 years old, her demeanor was quiet and she seemed able-bodied compared to the others. She hadn’t said a word. Curious, Margaret turned to her.

“You haven’t said anything,” Margaret called to the young woman, hoping to encourage her to share.

She responded with quick sarcasm, “What can I say when I’m even rejected amongst the survivors?” Tears welled in her eyes. The other women in the room looked at her, then away.

“Can you talk about it?” Margaret’s question met silence in the young woman’s downturned face.

Later, in confidence, she shared her story with Margaret. The rebels had come to her village. People ran, but her father didn’t want the rebels to take his goats, so he tethered them to a tree he thought far enough from their homestead. He would go back and fetch them when the rebels were gone.

“Unknown to my family, the rebels went and took all the goats and left only one, with a mine,” the young woman said. “When we returned home, my father went to get the goats. And in the process of untying the goat, he stepped on the mine, and he and the goat were blown into pieces.” Margaret reached for the young woman’s hand.

Hearing the explosion, neighbors had come running. “In no time, our homestead was full of mourners,” she continued. “They were all now preparing for burial. My mother wanted to boil some water for refreshments to give to the mourners, so she went to pick up the saucepan from the fireplace. The rebels had put a bomb there, just near the fireplace, and the landmine exploded and killed my mother. In one day, I lost my mother and my father. We didn’t even know if we buried the goat or my father, they were just crushed to pieces. Everyone was so scared that they ran away and we couldn’t even bury my mother that day. We had to wait until the army came and cleared the area.”

A neighbor had taken her and her two brothers in, but at 12 years old, she became the breadwinner, responsible for raising her brothers. “But you know what pains me most?” she asked Margaret. “Whenever the survivors are gathering, I go to meet with them but they reject me. ‘You are not one of us,’ they tell me.”

In my case, it was just a leg, Margaret thought to herself. But somehow my leg has healed. For this young woman, her wounds may never heal. Survivors and victims, we all need to support one another in healing.

Ashamed that the survivor group she helped create hadn’t supported this young woman, Margaret knew it was up to her to help them accept this young woman, a victim, as one of their own.

Returning to the group, Margaret addressed the women. “Victims are our sisters. Being a victim means you are the survivor, and the person who hasn’t lost any body part, they carry the same pain, the same loss. This young woman, she lost both of her parents on the same day when she was 12 years old. She is a victim, and she is our sister.”

It would take time for the survivors to accept the young woman, but slowly they did. Seeing her smile that day, seeing the glimmer of hope in the women’s faces as they spoke through their pain — and in the dozens of survivors she supported in the years since the attack and her loss — Margaret found her own determination and inspiration to forgive and let go. She found her own strength to carry on, to keep healing.

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“If you’re willing to work with the public, you should be prepared to face everything, both good and bad,” William Nokrach would say to Margaret. “If you want to do it, do it from your heart; but if you expect that someone is going to pat you on the back, forget it. You will never get it. They will always find something wrong to say.”

One of the men from the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda who had shown up at the hospital to recruit Margaret, William was now a member of parliament representing persons with disabilities in northern Uganda. He counseled Margaret in her most trying days of working with survivors, receiving little appreciation and often the target of slander despite her good intentions and tangible impact on survivors’ rehabilitation and livelihoods. The hope she helped instill in others was often no match for the sting in their words and acts of betrayal.

Just as she had in Gulu, Margaret created a network of peer-to-peer support groups in the rural villages where the conflict had taken its most vicious toll.⁴ Survivors gathered together, encouraging one another to heal the past, to access rehabilitation services and government support they were entitled to under the Mine Ban Treaty, and, eventually, to move on, heads held high, toward lives of dignity.

The Luo-speaking Lango and Acholi people in northern Uganda had always been known and respected as hard-working and proud, unwilling to accept charity from others. But the conflict had left their communities in chaos, their livelihoods lost in the years of war and devastation. NGOs came in to offer temporary support for victims and survivors of conflict, delivering foodstuffs, clothing, medicine and other material goods that people in the north came to depend on. Handout culture had become the norm, slowly transforming an entire people who now had no choice but to open their hands to whatever they could get.

Entire rural communities awaited Margaret’s arrival, eager to see what she might be bringing. They’d watch through the windows as her car drove in, disappointed when she’d step out with nothing to give. Once, arriving by motorbike, she greeted the people gathered outside the District Union in Lira, where a survivor meeting had been convened. Margaret laughed to herself, knowing that she never fit the shape of their expectations but hoping to still have an impact on those willing to listen.

“Now, if you’re thinking I have something to give you, I have nothing to give. Only words,” Margaret told the survivors and their families at the gathering in Lira. Air supply, they called it. “So if you are looking for something more, I am not the person you are looking for.”

Many left. And Margaret didn’t blame them. It wasn’t their fault, after all. But some would stay to listen, to share. And some would join together to create local survivor groups affiliated with Margaret’s organization ULSA. But despite Margaret’s many successes — and the fulfillment of knowing she and ULSA have supported nearly 300 people with counseling, rehabilitation, medical care access and livelihood financing — working with survivors had not been easy.

Those who expected more than she could give accused Margaret of being a politician looking for a platform to campaign for votes. They complained when funders paid for posh lodging at the Africa Hotel in Kampala during ULSA’s General Assembly meetings, saying they should have stayed somewhere more humble so they could keep the extra money for themselves. *If she spends so*

much on a hotel, imagine all that she is keeping for herself, they would whisper between meetings, just loud enough for Margaret to overhear.

They accused her of stealing the funds raised for the survivors, lining her pockets with international aid money earmarked for them. In 2008, they accused her of misdirecting funds from the Austrian government, not understanding that Margaret was only responsible for writing the grant and lobbying Austrian delegates— that funds sent from one government to another are often channeled to the receiving government’s ministries, with paperwork and bureaucracy at every level. When Margaret announced the grant award to the survivor groups and they didn’t see the money after five months, they began to think the worst. They didn’t believe her when she told them the government hadn’t released the funds. They went to the local newspaper, saying she had taken the money and eaten it, unaware that it was not Margaret but the Ugandan government who was responsible for ensuring the money was delivered to the survivors.

Margaret was broken. The very people she had committed her life to supporting mistook her selfless intentions for greed, theft and deceit.

That’s the end of it, she thought to herself. *I am never going to do anything for any of the survivors again*. For a whole month, Margaret cried. The director of the Mine Action Center, where Margaret now worked in the office of the prime minister, said he would go to the press to right what had been said about her.

But he didn’t. And no one ever did.

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Convinced she’d had enough working with survivors in Uganda and shouldered with the weight of their latest slander in the newspaper, Margaret found a letter addressed to her that would prove a consolation to her grief. It was a consultancy invitation from the Southern Africa Development Corporation to conduct a regional assessment on assistance to landmine survivors in six African countries. For a month, tired and torn, Margaret traveled to Zimbabwe, Zambia, Angola, Namibia, Mozambique and Botswana, reporting on the status of survivor assistance in each country she visited.

Then, Margaret attended a month-long training at the International Mine Action Training Center in Nairobi. After that, she flew to Japan for advocacy work with the Association for Aid & Relief (AAR),⁵ one of ULSA’s major funders. Time away allowed Margaret to forget the things they had said about her in the papers, to dedicate her energy to supporting landmine survivors around the world when those she worked with in Uganda had turned on her. While they tarnished her name at home, Margaret found solace in the recognition she received internationally for her work with survivors.

It wouldn’t be the last time Margaret felt slighted by those she had supported over the years. It became cyclical. The strength she found in late night phone calls from survivors sharing news of their successful business ventures, the fulfillment of watching amputees learn to walk on the new limbs she worked hard for them to receive — it would all fall suddenly in the ebb and flow of survivors’ waning admiration, lofty expectations and flimsy appreciation.



Following the ULSA General Assembly in 2009, which brought together four representatives from each survivor group throughout northern and western Uganda, AAR sponsored a pilot project to support small business endeavors for 20 landmine survivors in Kasese district in western Uganda. Those chosen to receive financial assistance were given basic lessons from a microfinance specialist on how to handle the resources, save money and create a business plan. After opening bank accounts as a local cooperative, Margaret would sit with the selected survivors, listening to their business plans.

“Is this all mine?” one of the women, incredulous and shaking, asked Margaret as she received her payment of 1 million shillings, around \$500 dollars at the time. For most of the survivors, it was more money than they had ever seen in their lives. Some would open neighborhood grocery shops, others beauty salons, retail stores, small restaurants or bars.

One man we supported wanted to make sun-dried bricks for building houses, Margaret wrote in her report to the donors. Three men took on that business together, and the materials they needed included a wheelbarrow, cylindrical mixing drums, a bicycle for fetching water, containers for carrying it, and firewood. After two months, they sold their first consignment and made a profit of 250,000 shillings. Margaret smiled as she wrote, remembering their excitement when they called to tell her in the middle of the night. It must have been 2 o’clock in the morning. They couldn’t believe it. And when she returned for the monitoring visit, they had begun constructing their own house, a permanent brick structure of their very own.

Another man who had lost both legs and walked on two sticks had a kiosk at the foot of a hill. He worked at the kiosk but his family lived up the hill, which he traveled up each day with his bag of soap, salt, sugar, matchboxes, all the basics he sold in his kiosk. “You already have a business going on,” Margaret said to him when they first met. “Can we support you and buy you more stuff?”

“If you buy more stock, I have nowhere to keep it,” he told her. “If I leave it at the kiosk, people will break into the hut and steal it.” What he wanted was help building a proper house.

“But the money we have cannot build a proper house,” Margaret explained.

“Then just help me to get it started,” he said. “I’ll do the rest.” He would make the bricks himself with his children. He had his own land where the kiosk stood, and a bit of it was empty where they were planting crops. He would need to pay people to take the measurements and dig the foundation, and he would need to pay the builder.

All he needed from us was cement, Margaret wrote in her report. And the iron sheet for the roof. We didn’t buy him cement to finish the whole house, just to start. And today, he has a house. Margaret remembered seeing it built there, next to his kiosk, where she broke down and cried.

Then there was Johnson, a tailor. Margaret had worried that he wouldn’t be able to make a living, since most people bought secondhand clothing and only went to a tailor during Christmas. But Johnson had a plan: He would look for contracts to make school uniforms. All he needed were rolls of fabric. By Margaret’s next visit, he already had contracts with three schools. *He was doing very well with that out of the proceeds from the uniforms; he expanded his business into poultry-keeping,* Margaret reported.

Ada already had a nursery of coffee seedlings when Margaret met her, so she used the money to buy more land for different crops. With her extra harvest, she built a home with her husband for their family of 10. Boniface, another man who had lost both legs, wanted to set up a butcher shop, so Margaret bought him a cow, a goat and a pig. The next time she saw him he had started roasting the pork, and because roasted pork was popular with people who were drinking, he opened a bar next door.

And Silvia. She wanted to be a nurse, but because she couldn't afford nursing school she was selling medicine in a drug shop even though she had no license. The drug authority came and confiscated everything, so she decided she wanted to be a hairdresser. *We went with her to Kampala, bought all of the hair dryers, the combs, the lotions, the shampoos, everything. Today, her hairdressing salon is one of the most successful in Kasese.* Margaret paused at the computer, gratitude in her heart for the lives that had been transformed through the livelihood support project.

Based on the success of the pilot project, AAR funded 50 more survivors, this time in Lira. Thirty-five would receive livelihood support and 15 would travel to an orthopedic center in Gulu for medical care and rehabilitation. They would be fitted for prosthetic limbs, many for the first time in their lives, years after becoming disabled. Others would receive treatment to remove the shrapnel that remained in their bodies and caused life-threatening infections.

Even when projects failed, which they sometimes did — the woman who spent all of her payment on her husband's funeral expenses or the man who used the money on school fees instead of starting his business — the success stories of livelihoods regained and disabilities rehabilitated always outnumbered the failures.

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On her lowest days, the days when she doesn't believe she has the energy to continue, Margaret remembers Brother Elio from Lacor Hospital. She remembers the divine interventions of her brother-in-law, Captain Opito. *If no one supported me, I wouldn't be where I am,* Margaret counsels herself. *If I'm going to do something for the survivors where I possibly can, then I have to do it regardless of what I face in the process.*

Visiting the survivor groups and their communities when she returns to Uganda from her international advocacy work, Margaret always encounters the new faces of those in need. They look to her for help, and in those moments her grief fades into a drive deeper than the sting of any wound. Seeing their hope in the simple services she offers through ULSA and knowing she can help just one more person, Margaret draws strength from scripture to carry on: *If you suffer for doing good, consider it a blessing.*

Working with the communities, you can never be a saint, Margaret reminds herself. *If I'm suffering for something that I've done which is right, then I consider it a blessing.*

And so, despite her many twists of fate and the cycles of fulfillment and disappointment, the lives of the survivors — their strength, their resilience, their hope — keep Margaret's faith alive.

A CONVERSATION WITH MARGARET ARACH ORECH

The following is an edited compilation of interviews conducted by Tara Ruttenberg and an interview during a public event by IPJ Senior Program Officer Jennifer Freeman on November 4, 2014.

Q: Most people who live through war suffer injuries — some are physical and some are psychological, some are temporary and some are permanent. The loss of half of your right leg to an LRA landmine defined your life and led to the work that we are so inspired by. Did any of Uganda’s other conflicts before the LRA affect you personally?

A: Yes, in a way, because my father came from one of the tribes in northern Uganda that was posing a threat to Idi Amin’s regime, so he was one of those targeted to be removed. One of my aunts was also married to Idi Amin, and in January 1979 we found her dead on her bed, and still no one knows exactly what happened. After that, because my father had served in the regime of Idi Amin, we were often attacked as being a family of a traitor. Our homes were vandalized by every one of the invading forces. When Idi Amin’s forces were overthrown, the liberators went to our home and vandalized it. And then when the Obote II regime was overthrown, the Tito Okello regime raided our home again and took whatever was remaining, until the LRA came to power and the same thing happened. Our home was targeted and called the command post because of the link our family had.

Q: Since the attack when you lost your leg, you’ve gone on to found the Uganda Landmine Survivors Association (ULSA). You’ve become a spokesperson for the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign to Ban Landmines, with which you’ve negotiated on the Mine Ban Treaty, the Convention on Cluster Munitions and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, among others. You’ve negotiated with U.S. senators, ministers of foreign affairs, and even heads of state from many, many different countries. How has your experience as a landmine survivor shaped your current work in advocacy and activism?

A: I used what happened to me as my stepping stone for starting peace-related activities. I didn’t want what happened to me to happen to others. It also feeds into the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. I became a voice of the people injured by the lack of peace that we talk so much about. It’s like the wounded person becoming a healer for other wounded souls.

I once found myself talking to a young boy who was now so traumatized because of what he had done, and he turned out to be one of the people who was at the scene of the attack that took my leg and almost took my life. I just felt so sorry for him. The situation at that time was complicated, because these people had been abducted as children. But because of the long period they have been in the bush, they have become animals. They have become murderers. What they have done is wrong; justice has to be done. But then you feel sorry for the person, because that person is also hurting. After interacting with them, you learn they are also angry that the government did not protect them from being abducted. So every side is angry.

When I was talking to him I was just so sorry about what he was going through. I guess it also brought out the human side of me, because before I hadn’t a care for anything at all in the world. I was just like a free bird in the air. It wasn’t until I became disabled that I started becoming more aware about people around me. I was loving and caring to family and friends, but not to the community. So my community service started with my disability.

Q: Did you go through a process of forgiveness at a certain point?

A: Yes, a process of forgiveness, and it also had a lot also to do with my newfound faith. Somebody forgave me, that's why I'm also able to forgive, you see? And I realized that one bitter feeling and one moment of anger adds on more, so I was just piling it on. But then when I got rid of a little bit of it, I started offloading all the anger and bitterness. And I was free. Even when it came to the trying times of working with survivors who were ungrateful, it hurt a bit but then it was easy to let go.

Q: In your application to the Women PeaceMakers Program you wrote, "I realized that by holding onto the past, my inner healing would suffer." Can you share a little bit about that more personal inner journey, and where you see the possibility for reconciliation both as individuals and as Uganda struggles at the intersection of seeking justice for crimes committed by the rebels and the Ugandan military, as well as moving forward with rebels and others who were also perhaps victims themselves before they became perpetrators?

A: After going through the horrendous experience, of course the first thing I experienced was a lot of anger: at the military for not protecting the civilians, at the rebels for injuring us when we were not combatants. And when I got out of the hospital, my friends whom I had really relied on abandoned me, and I felt a lot of anger and bitterness also toward them. It was only my family who helped me pull through. But at the end of the day, I realized that holding on to all this bitterness and anger was just making my situation even worse. I decided that in order to move on, I had to let go. But this has not been the case with many survivors because, individually, people react differently to such traumatic events.

As a nation, Uganda tries its best to extend amnesty to the rebels, so that they can come out voluntarily. What we wanted was for this rebellion to stop, so that the part of the country that had really seen lots and lots of bad days could start rebuilding itself.

For most of the survivors, this government attitude came as a big surprise and they sort of resented it, because in the execution of the policy, the government would provide some incentives to former rebels, and the survivors felt the government wasn't paying much attention to them. Whatever incentive was given, they saw it as a gift for what the rebels had inflicted on the survivors. So it did cause a lot of resentment, but then when you are really looking for peace, not everyone is going to be happy with whatever resolution has been arrived at. Some may have to go through that difficult, trying time, but at the end of the day, what we all want is peace.

Eventually, with a lot of peer support and gatherings amongst ourselves and encouraging one another, most of the survivors actually decided: Let's pick up our own pieces of what has remained and move on. Today, people do live together; they coexist with some of the rebels who have now come back. Many of them have been taken into the armed forces, and those who committed serious crimes, they went through the courts of law and then to prison.

Q: Being a child of war and now being a mother of five, what do you say to your children in times of war? How do you give them hope and how do you mother under those conditions?

A: Well, at that particular time when there was so much going on, my children were actually no longer children. Maybe to add on to my title, I'm also a grandmother of six. But I will tell my children that whenever there is a confrontation, keep away from that area. Even though the conflict has ended, there are still people who try to cause problems, especially in the city areas where we are

living. You find demonstrations all over, and then riot police come, and still many people get injured. I tell my children to try as much as possible to live at peace with one another, because they have seen what lack of peace has done to their mother.

Q: At a university campus, we have the incredible opportunity to work with students, academics and community members, and oftentimes we try and get together to think about new peacebuilding possibilities. The Women PeaceMakers are leaders in this, in that they know their communities and use their experiences and knowledge to think about what innovations they'd like to develop in their communities. Could you share with us what innovation you've thought of that you think could really benefit some of the survivors back in Uganda?

A: After leaving the hospital as a disabled person, I went home to the rural area where I come from, and it dawned on me that I could no longer use sanitary facilities, the pit latrine. I had to be driven 40 kilometers to the nearest town to use a toilet that had a seat. That got me thinking, and I realized that the majority of survivors, but also the elderly, have problems accessing toilet facilities in our rural areas. So I came up with this idea of making portable toilet seats that can be used by both the elderly and the disabled, and even those who are sick, in the rural areas. It is something that is very dear to my heart.

I've seen amputees who walk on their hands move into such toilet facilities, and it's really very degrading. So my idea is to have these toilet seats made. It would include persons with disabilities, or even the survivors, who are interested in carpentry; they will learn a trade and at the same time they'll earn a living. So that is one of the innovations that I have in mind, and I believe it will make a big difference in the lives of persons with disabilities and the elderly.

Q: Given that your journey to activism and involvement against landmines has been so tied to the disability that was thrust upon you, how have you developed strategies to give agency to persons with disabilities to be involved in the policy agenda and policymaking decisions?

A: Uganda has one of the most active unions for persons with disabilities, and it is also well known for having one of the best policies in place. But a lot of these remain on paper. What I have done with most of the survivors is to pick out the national laws that are related to disability. I pick out the text of the Convention on Cluster Munitions, Article 5, which relates to victim assistance. I pick out the text of the Mine Ban Treaty, Article 6.3, which also relates to victim assistance, and the Guiding Principles on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I've been able to get it translated into the local languages of most of the survivor groups where we operate, so that they are aware of these laws. We have also distributed these booklets to some of the district officials who are often not even aware of such national laws.

We help these people become informed, because sometimes they're not able to take action because of lack of information, so creating that awareness and equipping them with that basic knowledge enables them to contribute and take action. Like myself, I didn't know anything about the Mine Ban Treaty, not until I was injured and I started looking for it.

Q: Could you remind us where we stand with the Mine Ban Treaty? Who has signed and who hasn't?

A: To date, we have 162 signatory States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty, committing themselves to clearing existing landmines, stopping their manufacture, use, sale and trade, and providing support

to victims and survivors. In most cases implementation — particularly as it relates to the treaty's pillar on victims assistance — is a serious task still at hand, requiring ongoing advocacy and international support.

As of 2014, there are 35 countries who remain outside of the treaty. The top of the list is the United States of America. And since I am here, I really call upon all of you to pass the word around that the United States come on board. I know that most of the countries that are out of the treaty are doing so because the United States hasn't joined, countries like North Korea, Russia, China, India, Israel, Iran, Libya, Egypt and Somalia. It would mean a lot if the United States took some leadership there.

Q: How did you start getting involved in government advocacy in Uganda?

A: During meetings at international advocacy events, I would attend under the civil society umbrella. We had to identify who was from our home government, but at that time I did not get any recognition from home, only abroad. It was only from those meetings that some of the Ugandan delegates started talking about my work back home. So it started from outside, coming back, and yet I started the work from inside going out. My work was brought back home by the delegates themselves.

My biggest breakthrough was when I traveled to an event with one of the ministers and I had to take him through what goes on and how he should prepare. I built a relationship, so when we got back it became easier for me to interact with this minister for the disabled and the elderly, as well as the minister for disaster preparedness. Then they were aware of my work and invited me to their meetings. Before that, my work went unnoticed for a very long time within Uganda. But I'm happy that at least I've brought the survivors in Uganda into the limelight, which hadn't happened there before. And I've brought the Mine Ban Treaty out into the public.

Q: Tell us a about your work with Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa (IFAPA).

A: We started a national chapter in Uganda after the summit in Johannesburg in 2000 when IFAPA came into being. We have held a number of activities, including exchange visits between survivors of landmines in the East Africa region and a meeting of the IFAPA women's commission in Kampala. We coordinated a dialogue session with the minister for land and housing, since at that time there were a lot of land issues, land wrangles, with the internally displaced persons going back home to the rural areas and finding their land taken over by other people. We also had a youth seminar from within the region, held in Kampala, where participants looked into issues of environment, sports to bring people together, and sharing their message of peace.

The Ugandan chapter of IFAPA has worked with the Joint Christian Council of Churches, the Baha'i faith community, the Hindu and Christian communities, as well as with the survivor groups and with victims of conflict. The principal objective of IFAPA is to look for African solutions to issues of peace, particularly using a faith-based approach, including the African traditional religions, which all talk about peace.

Q: How did people get through the constant fear of the conflict in northern Uganda, knowing that whenever you go anywhere there's the possibility that you'll hit a landmine, or that your children will be abducted? How did people deal with that state of fear?

A: That's the resilience that the community developed, just to cope. Most with relatives and friends in other districts moved away, but those who had nowhere to go, they stayed. They are still there

today, and now people are trying to reconstruct. It's been 20 years; two decades lost. How are you going to recover what you've lost in those two decades? There's already a vacuum, a gap. Children born during the war are now in their early to mid-20s, and these are people who have grown up seeing nothing but conflict. These are the ones who need special attention given to them.

Q: Why have you chosen to support landmine survivors specifically, as opposed to advocating for all persons with disabilities in general?

A: Many people ask me what the difference is between landmine survivors and victims from a road accident or someone who has lost a limb. I say that we are special in the sense that we are victims of a manmade disaster, and no one has taken up responsibility for our rehabilitation. As much as the Convention on Cluster Munitions says government should do it, government says it does not have the resources. But the person who was knocked down by a car and broke a limb, chances are the owner of that vehicle will be held accountable by police, and they will pay medical bills, some form of compensation. There's a responsibility there. But for us, who will provide compensation? Nobody. The government didn't pay a cent of my medical bill; the government has never even provided me with a prosthetic limb. And yet, we were the victims of the conflict.

We are hoping that government will really see us. I have brought survivors from different parts of Uganda to march in the streets in Kampala to show that we are here. The government might make a statement that they are going to do this or that, but it will stop at that.

Q: Can you share a bit about the traditional reconciliation processes in your region?

A: I come from the Lango region where, in relation to the LRA activities, the cleansing ceremony is most common. In Lango, someone who has been away from the community for some time has to step on an egg before entering into the homestead. This is done to cleanse the person from all evil things committed during their absence. With the returning former rebels and abductees, this practice was performed in some homes, but most communities now embrace the Christian approach of holding prayers and thanksgiving for the returnee.

To bring conflicting parties together, some water is put in a calabash, bitter roots of the oput tree are crushed and mixed with water, and then both parties drink from the same calabash. The olwedo leave is then dipped into the calabash, water is sprinkled on each of the two leaders, and both of them will drink from one bowl. For us, reconciliation is like eating from one bowl; if you can eat or drink from the same cup, they believe you are able to coexist and live together. And for a while, it has worked. But now people are shifting away from some of those traditional, positive cultural values that have helped communities come together and are embarking on the faith-based approach, as well as looking at the justice part of it.

There has also been a lot of inter-tribal conflict, like with the Lango, where I come from, and the Acholi, the tribe of Joseph Kony. They never saw eye-to-eye because the government of Obote, who is Lango, was overthrown by Tito Okello, who is an Acholi. During that time, many atrocities happened between the two tribes, and the chiefs are still having meetings for reconciliation.

I was part of a faith-based planning process of the 2013 Lango Convocation in Lira, organized by Lango religious leaders to give the tribes in Uganda a platform to repent for the wrongs committed by past leaders. The Lango paramount chief forgave Joseph Kony.

This big gathering also brought together politicians, Christians and cultural leaders from all over Uganda. It offered the people an opportunity for inter-tribal forgiveness for past mistakes under previous regimes. They all came together with the religious leaders, and in turn, each one would stand up to ask for forgiveness on behalf of the other tribe.

Q: Have you been involved in any reconciliation processes with the survivors and their perpetrators?

A: We've been working with the survivors to encourage them to embrace peace. You can't force someone to forgive, but it was a healing process to sit together with the people who caused some of the atrocities, not necessarily the ones who inflicted injury on us, but former rebels. They had to do what they did because they were forced. They were abducted as children, and there was no way they could escape; but when the opportunity presented itself, some of them managed to escape and came back, and all they wanted was to reintegrate into the community. As part of the government amnesty, many of the former soldiers were absorbed into the army, given ranks, and enjoyed the benefits of their position. That was what caused anger among the survivors, because for years, the survivors have been calling for compensation from the government, and the government has done nothing.

Q: How did your own healing process and years of work as an advocate for landmine survivors shape or change you as a person?

A: I've grown very, very humble through it all. Of course when I started these speaking engagements, lobbying heads of state, attending state functions, sitting with queens and princes, sometimes I would say: Is this me or not? It takes me back to some words in the scripture that talk of lifting you from the ashes. When you leave the mind idle, lots and lots of things come in. To get my mind off of those things, I just pick up the Bible and start reading. And sometimes, when I really need it, I land upon a word. What keeps on sticking out from the scripture is "Humble yourself, and you will be elevated." If you exalt yourself, you will be brought down. Being humble is something that has come easy for me.

So a bit of who I am is shaped from the words of the Bible. And it also didn't happen until after I lost my leg. I started looking at life afresh, how to adjust. The difficult times I went through, losing my leg, was actually a new chapter in my life. As bad as it was, it opened me to look at life through the eyes of a person with disabilities. And that is why I got involved in campaigns against weapons and advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities.

Q: What would your advice be to a teenage girl in Uganda about her country and its future?

A: Wow, that's a tall one. We all want to live at peace. We all want to see our country develop to be prosperous. And for that to be possible, the younger generations coming up should really work towards improving what the generations before them have already ruined. To do that, she has to start with herself. She must be the person she wants the other one next to her to be, and from there she will be able to grow up into a person that will help build the country.

BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER—
Tara Ruttenberg

Tara Ruttenberg is a doctoral candidate in peace and conflict studies at the University for Peace, in Costa Rica, and serves as assistant secretary to the Global Alliance for Ministries and Infrastructure for Peace, an international peacebuilding organization. With a background in international politics, Latin American studies, grassroots community development and socioeconomic justice, Ruttenberg has written on issues ranging from leftist trends in Latin American politics and the role of indigenous cosmologies in development policy, to the emerging field of wellbeing economics, sustainable surf tourism and social activism toward systems change. She has a master's degree in international peace studies, also from the University for Peace, and a bachelor's degree in foreign service from Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service. Ruttenberg currently resides in Costa Rica. In 2013, she was a peace writer for Rutuparna Mohanty of India.

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE
at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

ENDNOTES

¹ A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

² The newly united Uganda National Liberation Front, comprised mainly of Acholi and Langi exiles, launched their defensive from Tanzania in support of the Tanzanian government in retaliation for Uganda invading the country the year prior.

³ States Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty are required to develop a plan of action for victim assistance, including the many components of care, treatment, justice and compensation vital to the dignity, rehabilitation and livelihood of survivors and their communities. While governments have developed plans aligned with the tenets proposed by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, implementation is an ongoing task.

⁴ Margaret established a successful network of survivor groups in Lira, Kasese, Agago, Pader, Oyam, Amuru, Kitgum, Otuke, Alebetong, Apach and Yumbe district in West Nile.

⁵ The Japanese Association for Aid & Relief is one of ULSA’s most reliable and generous donors to date.