Love Lives Here



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1. ROCKING MY DOLLS

These dolls are my children.

That was my constant thought as I teased apart the delicate white threads trailing from each piece of fresh corn. A new husk was a cause for excitement. I would spend the afternoon turning the corn strings into plaits, imitating the hairstyles of the local missionaries. I adored their thick, shining pony tails and the way they glittered in the sun. I could then pull out the green leaves surrounding the husks and imagine I had dressed each one in a prim new pinafore. My corn dolls would look just like the foreign faces that came every so often to visit my village. That was my ideal, my hope.

My grandparents didn't like my doing this. We were rarely underfed as a family, but an ear of corn was still food, not a toy. To get me to stop, my grandfather would encourage me to play with palm leaves and twist them into different shapes that might resemble tiny people. I did as he said, even though I used to cry when the ear of corn was taken away from me. It was no replacement for making my little doll plaits.

Still, I tried to treat all of my toys the same. I would wrap up each one in a sling with a piece of cloth and carry it close to my body, rocking and soothing it in case it ever cried. It didn't – often its hair would just fall out – but that hardly mattered. I would cradle each one close, knowing I was its mother. That was enough.

That was all a long time ago, and a very long way from here. It's been many years since I lived in Liberia, and even longer since I lived in my family village. Like most children, I was happy and carefree, assuming things would never change. But life, and the world, intervened. Like my little corn dolls, my country was fragile. Soon it would break before my eyes.

I have a calm and peaceful existence now. My husband Phillip and I live on the Isle of Wight, a boat ride away from the busy shipping city of Portsmouth. I work six days a week as a cleaner at the local holiday resort while Phillip takes care of the house – shopping, cooking and also doing practical jobs for our neighbours.

I take great pride in my craft. I like working with my hands more than anything else, and with cleaning nothing can be left ignored or unturned. Attention to detail is important, and I take great joy each day in celebrating a job well done. It's important to me that each room is a better place for my being in it.

My husband is a good man. He looks after me. At one point, he even rescued me. We've been on lots of adventures, not all of them fun. But at the end of it, we are alive and healthy, and our children are flourishing. I am thankful to God each day that they are.

It was a long, painful journey to get here. My country went through unimaginable horrors that saw it torn apart from within. Those of us who survived are tormented by memories of those who didn't.

Despite everything that happened, I love my country. I feel hopeful about what we as Liberians can achieve. We have a

long way to go, although I know we will face the future with a smile.

Yet, before the chaos there was calm. And for me, that calm was found 50 years ago, in a tiny village in south-eastern Liberia called Jeadepo.

My grandparents, Mary and David, were both strong and tender, and words cannot do justice to the love that they showed us. At night I would often crawl into bed with them, lying on either of their chests and listening to their breathing as they fell asleep. It felt like the safest place in the world.

At birth my name was Rita Bell Toe Wleah. My mother had died when I was little after being struck by lightning. My father hadn't stayed around long enough to see. I knew that he worked as the chief of aviation at Robertsfield International Airport, the main flight terminal in Liberia, but not much else. My grandparents were very protective, limiting my contact with him out of concern for my mother.

Despite these early sad experiences, I never felt deprived. My life in the village was secure and loving, surrounded by my siblings and school friends.

Our lives were humble but happy. Each morning I would get up before five to walk the long distance to the creek, bringing the water back balanced precariously on my head. I would then crush rice by hand so that it was ready to cook with the vegetables before heading off to school.

School was the only part of the day I hated. I struggled in lessons and found it boring having to read and write and do

sums. I've always preferred doing more practical things with my hands.

I did have some ability in geography classes, as I enjoyed learning all about other countries and cultures, and was excited by the prospect of getting to travel one day. And I liked sport, mostly because it required using your hands and feet rather than your head. I was good at kickball, and at running track and field.

I was restless. Restricting me to a desk yielded few results.

But above all, I wanted to be a nurse. This wasn't just a childish dream; I had seen first hand how my grandmother would attend to women in labour as part of her work as the village midwife as it was my job to be her attendant. It was a strange, sheltered world, one where men were completely absent. They weren't allowed in, but it wouldn't have made much difference if they had been. The men in my village tended to spend their time sitting in the sun drinking palm wine, cheerfully at a distance. It was the only time in my life I remember being that safe.

I would talk to the women and stroke their hands as they cried, groaned and heaved, their faces damp with tears and their legs shiny with dark red blood. If a woman was finding it hard to push, I would be sent to fetch some leaves, the juice from which would be squeezed onto her tongue. It would induce the birth and both mother and baby would come through, happy and healthy, while I would cut the umbilical cord with a blade, completely lacking in squeamishness. No woman ever died on my grandmother's watch. It was inspiring. I wanted to be like her.

But I was changing and growing. Before long I was being shown how to tie a lapper, a piece of absorbent cloth, around my waist each month when I menstruated. It was a rite of passage. There were no disposable pads and so it had to be washed each time I used it. Whenever it happened I was excused from helping with the cooking as my hands were considered unclean. Unlike the other girls, my monthly cycle didn't cause me pain. I just felt excited that I was becoming a woman.

I had no idea how much change that would bring – not all of it for the best.

2. MONROVIA AND BEYOND

In 1988, my uncle arrived from Monrovia to announce I was to come and live with him. Life had recently got complicated. I was a young teenager who had fallen pregnant. My family couldn't afford to support both me and my child, so when Christopher was born it was decided that he would go and live with another member of the family.

Initially I was devastated. I adored my first boyfriend and I wanted to have a life with him where we would live in the village and raise a family together. Being a farmer's wife and a mother was all I wanted. However, his family wanted him to stay in school, so that was that. Christopher was sent to live with one of my sisters. It would take years for me to form a bond with him.

In many ways I dreaded the thought of being without my grandparents and the close-knit world of my village, but I tried to seem strong, even when it came to the tearful goodbyes. Yet I was young, and before long I became excited by the thought of living in the capital. My uncle had an important position within the government, and his family lived a more materially comfortable existence. I knew my grandparents wanted a better future for me.

The walled gates to my uncle's house made me feel like I was entering my own private kingdom every time I walked through. Although my uncle and his wife, Caroline, worked long hours, they still had time for their family, and I was

happy spending all that time with my cousins. Caroline was also a very loving mother to everyone and I still call her mum to this day.

The seven-bedroom house was home to three children from his first wife and six from his second and he also built three three-bed bungalows for the family. The girls all slept in bunk beds in a dormitory-style room and we would spend our evenings chatting and gossiping, telling each other stories and watching TV together. They became far more like sisters than cousins to me. There was a lot of hugging and talking in my life, and there still is. I've always felt that talking about feelings is important, and that's probably why.

On Sundays we would dress up and head to church, where for three hours we would listen to the singing, praying and preaching, sometimes joining in but often just listening. It was long, but I always enjoyed it. God was important to me, and still is.

School continued to be a challenge. My brief tenure in my village school had been hard enough, but now I was attending a private Catholic school in Monrovia. My uncle was paying a large amount of money for me to attend, but I still hated going.

I didn't mind being trooped out for a parade, such as on Flag Day (24th August) or Independence Day (26th July), and I still liked playing sports such as kickball. But I was convinced I couldn't do anything in class and found it hard to concentrate. I cried every morning and begged not to be sent to school, despite my uncle's pleas that I consider my future.

It didn't end when we left the classroom. Once we got home there were tutors waiting for us to make sure we did our homework. I would try to dodge them, without much success. There was nowhere I could hide.

Despite this, I still knew I wanted a job that meant I could care for people. The corn husk dolls I used to make in the village had made me want to be a mother, and my grandmother's care for the women around her had made me want to follow in her footsteps.

My uncle's wife was a nurse at the JFK hospital in Monrovia, and there had been a separate missionary hospital not far from the house in my own village.

Everyone around me wanted me to do better in school, but I didn't understand what they meant. I just wanted to go home some day and be a village woman. Looking back on it, I realise I was spoiled. Although I had my chores, like sweeping the floors and fetching water in the mornings before school so that the family could bathe, my grandparents had given me everything and had never scolded or smacked me. They adored me, and I them.

Despite the fun I had with my cousins, in those first few months in Monrovia I would often weep secretly from homesickness. At night I was tormented by thoughts of my grandparents, sleeping in their bed with the space in between them that I had occupied as a child now empty forever. I dreamed about the days when even past babyhood I had suckled at my grandmother's breast, unconcerned that it contained no milk. My thoughts would soon turn to the random moments of beauty and peace I had known, like the

pieces of chicken I used to wrap in leaves for my grandparents to eat, and the numbers games we children used to play out in the yard with pieces of chalk and stone. All around me I had been surrounded by people who were tender and caring, able to dance with me in my joys and hold me when I cried. I often wished I could go back, but I knew it wasn't possible. It was a very long time before I saw any of them again.

3. FOOLS RUSH IN

When I was 16 years old, my uncle was murdered by the rebels. His loss was an unbearable burden for all of us, leaving us speechless for days on end. He had been an inspiring, legendary figure in the family, working hard as the main breadwinner to feed and educate everyone. Before I was born he had spent time in the USA, the first of the family to go there, but always intended to come back to Liberia so that he could support the family. I still miss him deeply.

None of us knew what to do. Then we woke up one terrible morning in 1990 to a news bulletin on the radio that said the country was at war. The rebels who had been fighting the government had attacked the capital city. We were warned against going out.

By that time a number of my cousins had gone to university, and the family was becoming increasingly fragmented. Eventually we had to leave the house, and I went to spend a few months with one of my sisters and my son Christopher. After that, I moved on to stay with a friend, but that also couldn't last. Pretty soon I found myself on my own.

Little did I know it, but three difficult years lay ahead. The world around us was falling into chaos, and the need to find food and safety was a constant pressure. Without my uncle there to feed us, we were forced to scatter.

It could take two days to move between places. Liberia was, and is, a small country and trying to find somewhere to stay

that was not dominated by the rebels was hard. There were two rebel leaders at the time, Charles Taylor and Prince Johnson, and it was confusing for civilians to know who was where and which side people were on. If you strayed into the wrong side's territory, then it could mean death.

Part of the problem was the distance you needed to walk between checkpoints. If people suspected you of being part of the same ethnic group as the government, then you were dead. It was as simple as that.

Thankfully in my case, and because I spoke English, I wasn't often an object of suspicion. English wasn't seen as being the language of the enemy, so I didn't too often find myself on the wrong side, even though I was from a similar ethnic background to the president. Yet life was still very precarious. Boys could be snatched off the streets and forced to become child soldiers – once you were given a gun and told to fight, you had few other options. For a girl who was caught, her fate was far worse. You might get raped and then outright killed. I saw this happen in front of me. These are memories that will never leave me.

Once you dodged being snatched, and found a new location, the major challenge was to find food and water. There was no guarantee of a roof over your head, utensils to eat with, somewhere to take a shower. Quite often I would use the pages of books as plates to balance the meagre portions of rice and sweet potato leaves I had managed to acquire. I would sleep outside and bathe in streams or rivers with other displaced people, rinsing and ringing out my clothes on the bank. We were surrounded by destroyed buildings and the

constant rattle of gunfire, sometimes in the distance, other times terrifyingly close.

Yet, there were moments of kindness and tenderness, the sort you only see from people under stress. Once, I had just come to the end of an exhausting journey by foot from Monrovia to Cuttington University College. The only place to wash was at a place called Adam and Eve Creek nearby. It was a dismal sight once I got there; many people were hungry, crying and scared, stretched out on the bank. One or two had been pushing elderly relatives in wheelbarrows for miles, and were just as weary as me.

I felt drained, so much so I barely had the energy to feel scared. On top of that, I was in the middle of my menstrual cycle. At home in the village I would have used a strip of flannel as a pad, one that needed soaking every few hours, and I would have been forbidden from cooking or doing any kind of food preparation with my hands. Here, there was barely any food, let alone any pads.

As I waded into the water to stem the flow, a woman nearby noticed my condition. Without speaking, she tore off a strip of cloth – a 'lapper' – and handed it to me, indicating I should tie it around my lower half. Hauling myself out of the creek, I followed her instructions.

I felt an immediate sense of relief. The panic and embarrassment had haunted me for most of my journey, and having to undress in the creek only added to my sense of shame. Yet everyone around me was in the same position. Privacy was a luxury. At least I wasn't in pain.

I nodded gratefully to the woman who had given me the cloth, and she nodded back. It was a small moment, but I have never forgotten it.

I spent the next few days trying to find a reasonably soft patch of ground to sleep on, planning eventually to move on. But it didn't work out like that.

The problem was not knowing where any of my family was. The last news I had heard was that my cousins had been evacuated from their university and sent to the United States. They were US citizens via their father, which meant the American Red Cross had been able to get them out. I had been left behind because I wasn't my uncle's child. I soon realised I had no option other than to stay where I was.

The time I spent in Cuttington was scary. Everyone seemed unsure of what to do, and I was surrounded by people who were just trying to survive each day. I heard terrifying whispers that to get food involved giving sexual favours to men.

The whispers soon turned into reality. They were dark times. I did what I had to do to survive.

Various white people in backpacks would turn up from America as part of the Peace Corps, and I would see them running around, tending to the sick and the wounded. They looked so busy and important. I was inspired by them. I didn't think nursing would involve further study, though.

Eventually a ceasefire was called thanks to an intervention by ECOWAS, and there was a brief end to the fighting. In 1993 I managed to leave Cuttington and make my way back to where I knew my sister used to live. Eventually I tracked her down and we were reunited. We were both thrilled.

Life started to become a bit more stable as we all adjusted to life in a war zone, knowing any peace would only ever be fragile. I shared a flat with my sister and my cousin, and we sometimes saw friends, although I rarely felt like going outside.

One day a friend persuaded me to head out into the centre of Monrovia. I reluctantly agreed, and while we were waiting for a taxi, a car pulled up next to us. One of the three men inside told us that they were from Italy, and were heading into the city centre. They offered us a lift. We got chatting, and before long one of the men said he liked me. His name was Marco.

I thought he was fine, but I didn't think much beyond that. My thoughts for so long had just been on survival. But the hard times weren't over yet. It would a long time before I could truly escape, and be free from my past.

4. WAR IS OVER?

Between 1993 and 1995 I spent most of my time trying to locate other members of my family, including my son Christopher. I had only properly started to bond with him two years previously, and it was important for me not to lose touch with him. In the meantime, I had my relationship with Marco.

He was a good man, and my memories of him are positive – yet it would not be true to say that I loved him. He was a banker, and so had money. I was young and in need. We enjoyed each other's company, but I knew first and foremost that my duty was to provide food for my family. It was never about falling in love; it was about pragmatism. Things are different now. I have a far deeper view of what marriage means, one that allows space for love, but in those days we didn't have such luxuries.

I was with Marco for a year, but then another war broke out in 1995 and he left the country and returned to Italy, leaving me with $5,000 to live on as well as a car. I wasn't bitter. We weren't married, so taking me with him wasn't ever truly an option. We had discussed tying the knot, before the violence kicked off again, but I knew a small part of me would have dreaded it, even though he looked after me well. He needed to leave, and I couldn't blame him. Yet I couldn't help fearing for my survival without him.

The cycles of violence and hunger from the previous years looked set to return. The country rapidly deteriorated, and by

1996 we were back to a situation where bullets were ripping people apart in the streets and the rebels were imposing a curfew. The soldiers were the only ones with access to food. Getting it from them was not easy.

As with the first war, you often had to travel between two and three miles to get to somewhere like a pub where people might be willing to give you food. In between there were checkpoints manned by soldiers from ECOWAS, part of the UN peacekeeping mission that had been sent to the country. They were not good men. If you passed through the checkpoints on the way to find money or food then you could not expect a sympathetic welcome.

Often the soldiers' behaviour was vicious and evil. If you were caught being out on the road during the curfew, then it was common to be picked up by an ECOWAS truck and taken to a camp. On one horrible occasion, I was snatched and thrown into a lorry with a whole load of other women. The soldiers kept commenting that they wanted women with large breasts, and it was a known fact that their ideal age for a girl was as young as 12 years old. It was sickening, but I was too terrified to feel much rage or disgust.

Once we reached the camp, we were forced into a prison cell at gunpoint and forced to stay there all night. We got no sleep, as we were often taken out and forced to perform sexual favours for the soldiers. At 6 a.m. they dragged me out and told me to rub dirty water from an outside puddle all over my clothes and hair. A few times they kicked me into the puddle, and grabbed sticks to force me and my cell mates to whip each other.

Some of the women cried out in agony and shame. I managed to bite my lip and stay quiet. By that point I was feeling angry, and didn't want to give our tormentors the pleasure of knowing they had broken me. I prayed to God that I would get through.

By 9 a.m. our captors decided to let us go. The idea that they would be willing to drive us home was laughable. In the truck it had taken 25 minutes, but by foot I knew it would take hours. With other filthy, scared and shivering women, we walked for two hours on rough roads in thin shoes and clothing.

Often I was so traumatised I wanted to crawl, but I refused. I made myself keep walking. My rebellion in those days was to survive, and I was determined to do so and keep providing for those around me.

The ECOWAS soldiers were supposed to be there for peace, but they used the Liberian women for sex. The women were the only ones they targeted among the Liberian population, and tried to exploit and shame. Their antics of kidnapping and rape continued until the main UN soldiers showed up and tried to enforce peace in the country with a slightly fairer and kinder hand, choosing to escort unaccompanied women between checkpoints so that we could find food, and stopping the rebels from attacking us. They came from all over the world, and most did not pose a threat. For some reason, the ECOWAS soldiers from Nigeria were always the worst. Like me they tended to speak English, but my language knowledge rarely seemed to work in my favour. I never found out why.

It was such a little country, and yet it was filled with military men all the time. The curfew imposed by the peacekeepers fluctuated constantly; one day we would be forbidden from going out between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m., while on another day the curfew would be from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. The information wasn't always clear, and if you got it wrong the consequences could be dangerous. It made trying to get food while not getting snatched very difficult.

In terms of the food we could get, it was slim pickings. I was living in a flat in Monrovia with several other women, including those we had just picked up from nearby, and we could only get rations by relying on our looks. Children and very young girls were the flavour of choice for most of the rebels who controlled the food supplies, and they rarely wanted 'older' women such as ourselves. Yet we still had to try. Selling our bodies was the only employment we could find in the wartorn economy. Even if we could secure other employment, the money would not have been as useful. Sex was the currency that counted.

There was no choice – you either tried or you starved. And it was never a guarantee that you would get anything. The fear that I wouldn't be able to secure food for the next day was a constant, gnawing worry, almost like a permanent stomach pain.

What we could get was always the same – rice wrapped in sweet potato leaves. Some people ate meat or fish if they could acquire ingredients for curry. We weren't so lucky. My only relief was going home each night and sobbing into my pillow.

There was occasional relief offered by the American soldiers. The US marines would sit and talk to us when they saw us out and about, and would sometimes buy us beer. Unlike scores of other soldiers, they saw us as people rather than objects for their own gratification.

By this point, most of us were savvy enough to know we needed to get out, and that the Westerners moonlighting on our soil might be our best ticket. Yet none of them ever offered to take us away.

Perhaps we were too trusting. I've travelled a lot in my life, and I have noticed that what makes Liberians different from other people is that we are very trusting. Mostly that is a wonderful thing, but during the war I felt we trusted too much. There were many bad men out there, and I sometimes feel that we should have been more aware that not everyone would deliver what we wanted. Perhaps that would have made the war easier to bear.

Another tragedy soon befell the family. My grandparents were far away in my home village, and the chaos and danger of the wars meant it was almost impossible to get to them. My grandmother died in her sleep in 1995. She was 90 years old.

Her husband died from an unknown sickness at the age of 110. They had both had long, full lives, and right until his final days my grandfather acted with grace and dignity. He had even managed to make friends with the rebels, insisting when they stormed the village that they were not coming to kill him. Somehow he got them to listen. That was his way.

It was a relief in some ways that they had died of old age and natural causes, but it was a constant heartache to me

that there had been no one to look after them, and that I didn't get to say goodbye. They are always with me, and I trust that God willing, I will be reunited with them one day.

Eventually I realised I couldn't continue living as I was. I decided to use the money I had from Marco to travel to nearby Sierra Leone and try to buy things which I hoped I could sell in Liberia. As with everything I did back then, it was all about staying alive. So I boarded a ship, and off I went.

5. LOVE IS HERE

Life in Sierra Leone was not a success. It was safer than being in Liberia, but it all felt too strange. Soon I returned home, although I would make other trips back there.

It was 1996, and the war was slowly starting to come to an end, and many of the child soldiers who stalked the streets were being disarmed. I would sometimes take the women I lived with out for trips in the car I had been given by Marco, and on one occasion, my friend insisted on introducing me to someone she knew among the UN peacekeeping forces. His name was Phillip Harris, and he was English.

The bar where we met was peppered with UN soldiers who were all staying in a big hotel nearby. I purchased a glass of bright purple Vimto, the beverage of choice among most of us when we weren't drinking beer, and after my friend had introduced us, she left us to chat.

I was hardwired to be suspicious of men, but I was intrigued by Phillip. He seemed older, gentler, less arrogant. I immediately asked him why he was in Liberia. Slightly shocked at my directness, he said he was there as part of the team trying to disarm the boy-soldiers. I was surprised and relieved to discover that he wasn't a soldier – he was a civilian within the aviation department at the UN, working as the chief of aviation, a job which involved overseeing the deployment of aeroplanes and helicopters.

We talked for a long time. During that conversation, Phillip asked me if I was OK. I was caught off guard. It was the first time anyone in my adult life had asked me that.

When I replied honestly that I wasn't, his face softened. He looked at me sincerely and said 'bless you'. I didn't know how to react. It had been such a long time since anyone had taken such a keen interest in my well-being.

We parted, and I left with positive, but very confused feelings. It seemed like without realising it, I had just been on a date.

Phillip called my friend the next day and asked her if he could see me for lunch. I agreed. When we met, he pressed me for details about my life during the war, and on more than one occasion he was moved to tears. By the time we had finished eating, he told me he liked me. I tried to process this. He seemed genuine, but I wasn't used to a man simply wanting to enjoy my company. All those I had met up to that point had only ever been interested in the exchange of money for sex.

At the end of our meeting he brought food for me and gave me an extra $200, which staggered me. He hadn't once asked me to come up to his hotel room. Later on I showed the money off to one of my friends.

I soon discovered that Phillip was only due to be in Liberia for a short amount of time. He had been in Western Sahara before and would soon be moving on to his next assignment, wherever that was. The next day he invited me up to his room, but asked, rather than demanded, that I stay with him. He said I could be there for as long as I wanted. I said yes.

After two weeks, he asked if he could introduce me to his mother. He was on good terms with his ex-wife and two sons, and asked me to meet them as well, prefacing it by telling them that he had met 'someone lovely'. I was very moved.

Before long he asked me to marry him. Initially, I didn't know how to react. My first instinct was to laugh out loud. No-one had ever asked me that question. All my encounters with men had been transactional, and both sides had always known it. Love was something else altogether. I still wasn't really sure what love was.

Phillip said he wanted to help me, which I could understand. He was kind, open and sincere. I regularly reflect on how much he has taught me in the long years of our marriage, but only a few weeks after our first meeting, he had already taught me what kindness looked like. I often feel like he was sent by God.

My family was thrilled when they heard the news. They knew that my marriage would result in my leaving Liberia, but they adored and respected Phillip when they met him and could tell instantly that he was a good man. They saw him as a godsend, even though they knew they would be left behind. That was my family through and through – they were the most loving people in the world. They knew that someone had grabbed my hand and saved my life.

I left Liberia with Phillip on 31st August 1997, the same day that Princess Diana died, a reminder that the outside world was in some ways as chaotic as the one I was leaving. But new adventures awaited – and most importantly, I was safe and free.

6. DAYS OF ADVENTURE

We arrived in Morocco shortly after leaving Liberia and stayed there for a year before Phillip was sent to Angola. I followed him, and while we were there, I fell pregnant. In my final months of pregnancy, I was sent to New York to stay with one of my aunts and I gave birth to a little boy whom we named Shaun. Later that year, Phillip was sent back to Sierra Leone and I went with him, carrying our newborn son.

Shaun's arrival was one of the best things ever to happen to me. I was thrilled beyond belief, as I had always wanted more children. There was never a time in my life when I hadn't wanted to be a mother. The joy I felt is hard to describe. Often my heart felt too big for my chest, and I knew Phillip felt the same way. It was the sign of a whole new beginning for both of us.

When Shaun was three years old, his father sent us to the UK to stay with his mother Phyllis, mostly so that I could improve my English. My first language back in Liberia was Grebo, and although my schooling had given me some English, my proficiency was far below what both Phillip and I felt it needed to be.

I loved my time there, and formed a close bond with my mother-in-law. As well as teaching me her language, she taught me how to cook English food for the first time. From that point I came back to the UK regularly, for two months at a time – but my life, at its core, was on the road.

Shaun got older and began attending various UN schools. I became a housewife, looking after the home and cooking meals, and taking care of Shaun once he came home from school. It was the case for most of the other wives, who had similar roles and formed a supportive network while our menfolk were away working in dangerous situations. We lived off-base, but the UN compound always had an on-site cafeteria where I would regularly meet Phillip for lunch.

I didn't mind not working. I was happy in my new life, but I was processing a lot.

As much as I could, I tried to focus on the small challenges of each new day and forget about the wars.

That wasn't always possible. Liberians are tough-minded, but the war had left a lot of people traumatised, including me. I took comfort from feeling that I could now send money back to my family and try to help them get out. Eventually, the UN was able to grant them refugee status across various parts of the world.

But I was homesick for Liberia, so much so that it was like a constant heartache. I missed how smiling and positive people always were, and how much of a community we had all been for each other. Even during the worst days of the civil wars, the kindness of my friends and relatives helped me survive. The culture that had existed in my village was somehow always present, one where people wandered into one another's houses rather than waiting to be invited in. I'm still in touch with many of the women I lived with during that time. The hardships we went through forged lifelong friendships. Even in the most awful situations, the memories I

had from my childhood somehow persisted, those of people sitting outside, being friendly and calm while eating and chatting. I longed to return someday, and nursed this secret hope.

In the meantime, I loved my new life. I saw so many amazing places and people, and tried so many wonderful kinds of cuisine. Singapore was far and away my favourite place to live. I liked how clean and immaculate it was, and I loved visiting the food halls and shopping malls. It was enticing to try the range of Asian cuisines on offer, and I developed a particular fondness for Singapore noodles. I was learning a lot, including how to eat with a fork and to improve my posture. It was overwhelming at times, but I embraced the challenge with a full heart.

Norway also stood out to me as a special place. I loved how peaceful it was, and how clean and tidy everything felt, even in the cities. People were so friendly and welcoming, and it was invaluable being so close to nature all the time. I loved hiking in the Norwegian mountains and absorbing the beautiful surroundings of the fjords and the forests. It was common in Norway for people to head out into nature before they went into work. It seemed to make people far less stressed than in other countries I visited.

The food in Norway wasn't quite as good as it had been in Singapore, but I valued how calm I felt seeing how clean things were. That was, and still is, very important to me.

Racism was never a problem. Wherever I went, I was welcomed like an old friend or family member. I experienced no hate on the basis of my skin colour, and I never felt there

was anywhere I couldn't go. Similarly, I never experienced much religious tension. Phillip and I are both Christians, and faith is very important to us – yet that was never a barrier when we were stationed in Muslim countries. When we lived in the Western Sahara I regularly ate, drank and socialised with Muslim women, and when we went to weddings or parties I would dress in Moroccan clothing – not because I had to, but out of choice. I ate couscous and danced with those around me, feeling just as at home as if I had grown up there. Everywhere we visited, we made lifelong friends with whom we are still in touch to this day.

A couple of times we were stationed in America when Phillip worked at the UN headquarters in New York. We based ourselves in Philadelphia, as I wasn't keen on New York. This meant Phillip had to commute two hours each way. It was worth it though, as we loved Philadelphia. As with so many of the other places I had been, I made friends easily, and my friends always loved Phillip. We became like family to them.

Away from Liberia, my relationship with my elder son Christopher was allowed to flourish. Being separated from him when he was a baby was difficult, but not as traumatic as you might think. I came from a family where many children were raised by their brothers and sisters as though they were their own, or by their grandparents, just as I had been, and everyone was kept in the family. No one was excluded, and we were all a part of each other's lives.

In the early 1990s, just before the war, Christopher still called me 'auntie' but was slowly coming to know me as his

mother. I spent a lot of time living with him and my sister and cousin, who had raised him and sent him to school, and with time we formed a bond. However, when I moved to Lebanon with Phillip years later, he finally started to call me 'mum'. He was 17 years old, and I knew we had to make up for lost time.

Thankfully, we did! Nowadays we spend hours talking to each other on the phone, and I am proud of how well he has done in his career. He studied computing in Lebanon and ultimately went back to Liberia to work in the government fire service. He has everything in his life I could ever have hoped for.

During the early years of our marriage I started to learn more and more about Phillip. His life has been one of adventure, but also great challenge and trauma. One thing is certain – it has never been dull.

7. ENGLAND PREVAILS

In 2007 we settled in Manchester while Phillip was still in Lebanon. Shaun attended Bury Grammar, an all-boys private school towards the north of the city, while in the meantime I got a job escorting children with disabilities to school, paying for Shaun to take a taxi whenever I couldn't get him to class. It was work that I adored; I enjoyed the positivity that comes from working with children, particularly their energy and enthusiasm, and I liked trying to understand and build a connection with the children who had a difficult time communicating. In turn they loved me, despite my English language skills not being so developed at this stage.

I built up good relationships with the children's parents as well. On a number of occasions I would comfort a child with Down's Syndrome or autism, holding them against my chest if they started having a fit and soothing them until they were calm. The parents were grateful. It was a role where I felt I was doing essential work.

Just before this, I had begun studying childcare at Manchester College, hoping to get a merit in the final exams. That was a difficult step to take. The thought of any kind of reading or writing made me scared, bringing back memories of my time at school where my relatives and teachers tried in vain to persuade me not to give up. The fear that I might be hopeless at anything academic still persisted.

Thankfully, when I explained this to my teacher at the college she was supportive and understanding. She took the time to explain everything to me in detail and reassured me that the test wouldn't involve too much writing – instead it would be multiple choice. When the time came for me to take the test, my self-confidence was still fragile. I assumed I was simply guessing. It turned out later that I had completely got it. Nonetheless, it didn't stop Shaun from cheekily suggesting that I was 'allergic to books!'

Unfortunately, he may have had a point. Not long afterwards I got a job in a care home, tending to the needs of those at the other end of the age spectrum. I wanted to try a new job and experience new things. I love caring for people and I enjoyed the hands-on practicalities of helping those with complex needs. However, there was still paperwork involved, which like my teenage self around schoolwork, I tried my best to avoid. One time I remember praying that an elderly lady wouldn't pass away simply so that I would not have to write an extra report about it! Regardless, writing up notes in a report at the end of each shift was a requirement, whether I liked it or not. A very kind Pakistani lady who also worked in the home tried to help me out. She was a great source of support, but she couldn't do it all the time.

Furthermore it was night work, and with Phillip abroad, it wasn't practical while I had a young son. A friend stayed in the house with Shaun in the evenings, but I knew it wasn't a long-term solution. Eventually I realised it was no longer the job for me.

I've never quite been able to understand why I find writing so hard. Any attempt to put my thoughts down on paper results in my just giving up. At least it has become a source of mild amusement for my friends and relatives.

Despite often thriving at work, I found settling down a challenge. Moving home constantly meant that I had got very used to living out of a suitcase. Having to sit still made me feel very restless. Perhaps that's one of the reasons I dislike reading or writing. I feel like I always need to be getting up and doing something.

Thankfully we were on the move again before long, even if as a family we were restricted to the UK. My confidence had also improved. I knew that I was smart and had a lot to offer, wherever we went. So in 2012 we moved to Devon, this time including Phillip.

Devon was so beautiful. We moved into a large farmhouse in the heart of the countryside, and spent a lot of our time going for long walks and experiencing the outdoors. We were close to Conrwall, and I loved the access to the sea and to nature in general – even if it meant we were miles away from anywhere and had to rely heavily on a car.

I decided I wanted to put some of my own money aside to help my family, so after a few years, during which time we travelled for short periods again, I got a job as a housekeeper for a family in Devon. I did it for a whole year, and found that it was a job that suited me down to the ground. I realised that I really love cleaning. There's nothing about it that I don't like. I enjoy the detail involved in making sure you cover all areas. You can't miss anything in a deep clean, and I

appreciate the rigour and the challenge that comes with that. Like caring for people, being good at cleaning comes naturally to me.

Throughout my period of self-discovery. Phillip was supportive, but didn't push me too hard. He loved me, and I knew he never wanted me to feel pressured. Shaun has always described his father as 'old school', in that he was happy for his wife to stay at home. This was so much so that there were times when he didn't want me to work. He stressed that we would be fine financially and that we would get by. Throughout our time on the road, he would give me an allowance to let me continue being a housewife.

I was grateful for that space and the lack of financial pressure, particularly after the horrors of my 20s. Yet it chafed slightly against what I had been brought up to believe. I came from a world where everyone helped each other out, particularly when it came to giving money to those in need. I felt a bit like he was spoiling me, possibly because of the age gap between us, and that he was being a bit over-protective. He was born in the 1940s whereas I was born in the 1970s. In many ways, he came from a different, more traditional world.

Being a wife and a mother was a full-time job, but as Shaun got older I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being lazy. I was conscious that I was dependent on Phillip, and if he had one flaw I would say it was that he didn't pressure me to do more with my brains and my talents. It was a revelation for me to realise that he wasn't going to push me – therefore I needed to push myself. I felt better knowing I wasn't just relying on Phillip's money to support my family.

However, he was always happy for me to do the jobs I did, and made it clear in the process that he was proud of me.

After Devon we relocated to the Isle of Wight and I got a job working as a housekeeper at the local holiday resort. Phillip had retired by that point, but his pension from the UN and the government meant that he could still cover the bills and the food. However, he got to indulge his love of cooking far more. The chores in the house fell neatly into two spheres – Phillip did the shopping and the cooking, while I cleaned. That's still the way we do it.

I've thrived in my job. I work six days a week, only taking Sundays off, but I enjoy it so much that it doesn't feel like a burden. I've forged good relationships with my colleagues, and I try to be a positive presence in their lives. I feel strongly that smiling and staying upbeat are crucial in my line of work. I want there to be peace between everyone at the resort – not just between me and them, but between each other. I always pray before I head into work, hoping that God will ensure I won't have a bad day.

My prayers always seem to get answered, as there have been very few bad days. I've never had difficult colleagues, and I know people find me amenable and good-humoured. I'll do any task people ask me to do. It's in line with the values I was raised with – I was always taught to be respectful and humble. I try to do that. Above all, I try to make sure that the room is a better place for me having been in it. I believe I've done that.

8. GOD IS MY SHELTER

Life might be calm for me these days, but I have a lot of strong feelings about where I came from. It haunts me how much fighting and evil there still is in the world, even though I've seen the great work done by people like my husband, who played their part in trying to get ordinary people out of terrible situations.

When I think about Liberia, I have complicated feelings. There is so much that I love and miss very deeply about my homeland. I love how hot the climate is without humidity, and how I have been blessed to come from a country with white sandy beaches, surfable waves, uninhabited islands, stunning wildlife, immense waterfalls and bustling markets and cities. I love the memories I have of my childhood friends and of my family. When I think of my grandparents, I feel both sadness and joy. There will never be any place in my heart like Liberia, the place where I was born and that I still call home.

I've recently started building a house there so that I can go back for three months at a time, followed by three months back in the UK. It has been a healing process, making me feel as though I'm building something positive and new. But I can't fully escape the trauma I went through. It used to torment me a great deal, giving me a lot of anxiety. My family and friends have helped me deal with it. These days I try as much as I can not to dwell on the past, and to concentrate on the present and the future.

Yet I sometimes think back to how I was never told that it was OK to say no. Most women were not told that. That said, it may not have helped during the war. The men violated us anyway. I often feel angry when I think about the ECOWAS soldiers. They were there to protect us, and yet they did the exact opposite. I felt very used, and still do. None of us who survived the war were taught about rape growing up, but in the civil wars there was never any choice. We did what we had to do to survive, but it should never have been like that. People failed us, and the fact that there has never been any justice in the interim for the rapes and the killings proves that. It seems to imply that all those ordinary people sometimes deserved what happened to them.

And somehow, I still love my country. I believe our challenge is to make it a place where everyone's voices are heard. I'm not sure if we've got there yet. Liberia used to be considered one of the finest countries in West Africa. Yet the wars changed all that. The country has never recovered. Jobs for young people are thin on the ground, and more investment and less corruption is certainly needed. Our technology, roads, schools and hospitals are still lacking.

I had high hopes for Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the president who took over in 2006. I felt like she had finally brought peace and stability to our very troubled country while she was president, until 2018 when George Weah took over.

My view is very much that every leader needs someone behind them who will define whether they will be successful or not, like a prime minister or a secretary. That's key, and

without that it's hard to be a great leader and to give people a voice, even if your intentions are good.

Liberians truly are something special. Something about us keeps us smiling, no matter what we have been through. It's the sort of place where people get up to dance, even when they have empty stomachs. Despite all my adventures, it hasn't quite been like that in most of the places I've lived in. That sense of joy and thankfulness for life seems to be wired into our DNA.

Liberians adore foreigners. They are some of the most welcoming people you could ever meet. They even love white people, for some reason! As I have already mentioned, if Liberians have a flaw it's that they are too trusting. They are so laid-back that they can forget about the need for security or to be wary of those with bad intentions. Maybe that's one of the reasons the war was so horrifying: it turned a country full of good people against their neighbours.

Yet that is a small flaw. For the most part, the people I grew up with were kind, humble and lovely, totally lacking in aggression. They still are.

Phillip has endured some difficulties too, and our marriage has not always been plain sailing. His time in conflict zones has left him with PTSD and high blood pressure, which has been hard for him. He saw a doctor and has got to the stage where he can manage it. However, he cannot watch films, as he never knows when a certain scene might trigger emotions.

Sometimes our lives are a little too quiet. Perhaps because of everything he has been through and because of the age gap between us, Phillip wants to be calm and still, whereas I often

want to be up and dancing! The age difference didn't bother me initially. Now that we're both older, it sometimes does. We sleep in different beds now. However, the love we have for each other is still there, and a source of great stability and comfort to me. That is what matters.

Our shared faith is also deeply important. I was raised in a Christian household, and I was always told that prayers would be answered, and could get you through hard times. Phillip was also brought up to be a Christian, and we have often found that praying together brings us great comfort. Finding places to worship while we were travelling wasn't always easy, although we sometimes found churches in the most unexpected places, such as in the Western Sahara, which was and still is, predominantly Islamic. We haven't managed to find one on the Isle of Wight, as we moved here during the Covid-19 pandemic when the churches were shut. At one point we conducted a Bible study over Zoom.

I trust that God is always present, regardless of which building we might be dwelling in, and I've never doubted Him. He removes all disappointment from my life. Nothing is possible without Him. I often thank Him and ask Him for help, and I have sensed His presence even in the most difficult moments of my life. I know He has helped me even when I haven't been aware of it. My whole life is living proof of that. I am thankful every morning that I am alive, and my hopes are rooted in Him. He guides me, and us, every day, and I want people to know that. I just try to be wise enough to be open to it. As the scriptures say, it's vital to have ears to hear and a mouth to speak.

I'm very thankful that our sons share our faith, including Phillip's two older boys, Carl and Stuart. I've always encouraged them to cry and pray rather than hold in their feelings. Stuart even attends a mega church in Australia, where he lives with his wife and three children. I suggested to Shaun that he pray before his a job interview. He got the job, which was further proof to me that prayers are answered.

We have great relationships with all the boys, and I'm thankful that I have always been on good terms with Carl and Stuart. They have grown into happy, successful adults.

Christopher continues to work for the government in Liberia, where he has similarly done well.

I was always proud that Shaun and Christopher were so smart and hard-working, and so much happier at school than I ever was. They were both good at art, with Christopher being particularly good at drawing faces while Shaun excelled at photography, a subject he later went on to study.

Despite their happiness and success, including Christopher's recent marriage, I still wish my younger self had been slightly wiser. If I could go back in time and tell the school-age Rita one thing, it would be to value education a lot more. To the adult Rita from years ago, I would tell her to go back to school much sooner. I realise now how much education is the key to success. I have so many notebooks, and yet they remain almost empty. Sometimes that makes me sad.

I believe that education is the key to success and I have recently set up a NGO in Liberia to help children to get the help they need to go to school.

But life is long, and I have so many big hopes for the future. I wish for success and prosperity for my children, but also that they continue to be respectful and humble at the same time. For myself, I hope for a long life filled with wisdom and patience, and one with my family as the central focus. I'm excited by the thought of having grandchildren and maybe even great-grandchildren whom I'll one day get to meet.

Travel will always be in my blood. The one place I would still love to see is Antarctica. The thought of the beauty and serenity I might find there, and the glory of the southern lights, fills me with awe.

Yet having seen so many huge events and massive upheavals, I often find now that it's the small things that give me the most joy. I love staying fit and appreciating the outdoors, going hiking and running whenever I can. My favourite sport to watch is rugby, so much so that I had the England rugby team rose tattooed to my arm to mark my 40th birthday. During my downtime, I find that listening to classical music helps me relax.

I have numerous tokens to mark my travels, and looking at them and remembering is a good cure for feeling restless. Whenever we arrived in a new country I would make sure I purchased a fridge magnet to add to my collection. Our fridge is now absolutely covered with them, even if a few have gone missing.

I'm very grateful for the life I have, but deep down I know that I've never fully stopped being that girl who slept on the floor in a war zone and who didn't see a disposable menstrual pad until she was an adult. I found them strange and

uncomfortable at first, and I still find it very odd that something so wasteful can be easily bought in our local supermarket. It's humbling to think about that.

I know that if I could choose, I would return to my life in the village in a heartbeat. Life was simple, but we never had to worry about money or bills, and we knew that as long as the creek gave us water and the fire gave us heat then we had everything we needed. Each night at eight was story time, and after each long day we looked forward to that. In those moments, I wanted nothing more than what I had.

Perhaps I was never meant to stay, however. My grandmother often used to comment on how I had lighter skin than my sister or cousins, sometimes jokingly calling me 'white lady'. My grandfather even predicted that I would go on a plane to the 'white man's country', something my mother never had the chance to do. I even used to dream about planes, with one landing on the river in our village in one dream. When I met Phillip for the first time, it felt like this was always meant to happen. In a strange way, he had always been with me.

I've learnt many things, and the world has taught me some harsh lessons. I've had to guard my heart sometimes, and I know that if people are negative then it's better if I freeze them out of my life. I always try to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, and at work and in life I have often noticed that people are not OK, even when they say they are, and getting them to talk makes such a difference. It's impossible to get through to everyone, though. I have learnt to accept that.

With most people I just try to be kind and humble and hope that my positivity will shine through. We all need to care for each other, and talk to each other more. I've met a lot of people from so many different places, but I know that, deep down, we are all the same. We must all leave the room a better place than it was when we walked in. When I see you, I always make sure that you are fine before I leave you. I urge my readers to do the same.



Myself in 2023 (photo by Debs Allan)

StoryTerrace