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# “Will you keep her now?”

Ellen Einterz

VICS Volunteer, Kolofata, Cameroon

**T**railed by a strapping young man in blue jeans, a red T-shirt and shiny black shoes whose improbably pointed toes curl up like sabres, a tiny woman cradling a baby girl limps into the consulting room.

The woman’s face is a thousand wrinkles, and white wisps escape from braids woven tightly against her scalp.

Her smock and wrap skirt are of a yellow cotton emblazoned with red hands and disembodied fingers, and the hands have eyes in the middle of them. A fuchsia *lafaya* drapes her shoulders. A brass loop anchors each ear. Her plastic flip-flops are yellow, thin-soled. She wears three silver bangles on her left wrist and around her neck a black and scarlet cord with six orange beads, three cowrie shells, and two toe-sized red leather *grisgris*.

She settles herself in the consulting room chair, extends a Kanuri greeting and gives her name. She is sick, she says, and the baby needs help.

Asked how old she is, she looks stunned. She smiles. She laughs. A good hearty laugh that might mean “What a peculiar thing to ask?” or “How could I possibly know?”

She pauses, looks around, answers at last, “A lot of years.”

“A lot of years?”

“A lot of years.”

“You think I should write, ‘A lot of years?’”

“That would be fine.”

“‘A lot of years’ it is.”

“Twelve children,” she says. “No, thirteen. Seven dead, the youngest married with three children of her own.”

She presents her son who stands behind her. A tarnished metal chain arches around his neck and disappears under the collar of his shirt. Dark sunglasses, a small oval label still affixed to a corner of the left lens, sit atop his head.

He speaks in English. “My mother is having an inflammation of the neck.”

Ah, inflammation of the neck. The old woman explains where it hurts. She rubs the back of her neck with her right hand, makes a circling motion with her head. She reaches around to her back, rubs her hand down her spine, up to her shoulders, down to her elbows, chest, hips, knees.



“How long all that?”

“A long time.”

“A week? A month? A year?”

“Yes, a year. No — more than a year, two years. Four years. Ten.”

The baby in her arms is newly born, her umbilical cord fresh: two, maybe three days old. The child’s ears are pierced and threaded with thin filaments of black plastic.

The woman explains that the baby is not hers — all her own babies, she asserts, came out years ago. She found the child in a Diamor box outside the door of her hut that morning. She does not know who put the baby there or who her mother is.

She explains that the baby’s earlobes had been pierced and strung with twine, but the twine seemed unsanitary so she cut it and inserted plastic thread instead, and she cleaned the cord stump with salt water and Vaseline.

“The baby is well,” the old woman is fairly sure, “not sick. But she is hungry and she needs milk ... and I have,” she says, flicking the sagging flaps that are her breasts, “no milk.”

The child does look healthy. Good tone, polished chestnut skin, bright eyes. With what combination of love and distress did the young mother — for one supposes the mother is young, unmarried, without support — pierce the ears of her perfect daughter, deposit her in a cardboard box at the doorstep of this old woman ... and then run away?

“Will you keep her now?”

She draws a weary breath and raises a hand to straighten her hair. She looks down at the girl, studies her face as if seeing it for the first time.

“God set this child before me. As long as I am able, I will take care of her. Of course.”

She collects milk for the baby and pills for her own pains. She listens as a health worker explains how to prepare the formula — clean bottle, boiled water, careful measures. Another health worker weighs the child and administers her first vaccinations.

Then the trio take off down the hill to start the long trek back to their village, leaving us to reflect that it is a worthy mission for anyone — to take care, as long as we are able, of those God sets before us. ■