

UC Berkeley

Recent Work

Title

Anatomy of a Temporary Country: in eight acts

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9cr6b8mf>

Author

Palmstrom, Becky

Publication Date

2011-04-11

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9cr6b8mf#supplemental>

Anatomy of a Temporary Country: in eight acts.

By Becky Palmstrom

(5,538 words)

Act One: Sanitary pads in purgatory

We are pushing our way through a mass of sweating women in brightly colored headscarves. On this particular morning, I am joining my students in performing that most loathed of activities: cutting a line. Glimpses of faces and bodies appear, then blur back into this throng of femininity: the hips of a Congolese grandmother, rounded and draped in green; a tear shining on someone's cheek; an adolescent collarbone jutting out from a pink Lycra shirt. We are all headed toward a warehouse in the middle of a twenty-year-old refugee camp in Kenya.

We are still far back, jammed in lines that weave and pulse their way into the warehouse, like veins to a pumping heart. But we are frantic: it can take all day to wait in these queues, and our small gang does not want to linger for hours in 110-degree heat, and I am supposed to be running a workshop that officially started two hours ago...and that is how I find myself queue jumping an aid distribution line.

Operation Queue Jump is a ragtag bunch. Cala offers us determination; Amida is the strategist; Kailey has her sharp tongue, essential for clearing people from our path. Then there's me, twenty-seven, a Welsh graduate student turned aid worker. My greatest contribution is my white skin—a ticket to privilege among the black, earthy, and golden tones of one of the most cosmopolitan refugee camps in the world.

The Lutheran World Federation, the NGO running this particular handout, does not assign appointment times, so twenty thousand women wait for four or five hours in the baking heat to collect their aid. This is the way all distributions in Kakuma Refugee

Camp work, from food to firewood. In the two-decade history of the camp, neither the NGOs nor the United Nations has come up with a better alternative.

“You will go first, Becky,” Amida, the planner, says, as she leads us away from these queues to the line at the back door of the warehouse.

“We will follow,” says Kailey.

The tools I teach in my video production workshops often seem less valuable than the privilege my students gain from my personal proximity. It lets them wander into the gated NGO compound, ensures us meetings with important people in the camp, and, as now, saves hours of waiting for basic necessities.

Cala laughs at how much of life’s basic workings she must explain to me. The bimonthly ritual of aid distributions has governed her whole life. She is originally from Sudan and is a noncitizen of Kenya, the country she has lived in all her life. She has no family. She dropped out of school in the camp early, but not before she learned English and Ki-Swahili, the lingua franca of Kakuma. Although her writing is patchy, her dark eyes flash with intelligence. They gleam as she pushes me through the crowd. I take a breath, put my head down, and pretend that I am burrowing, instead of pushing my way through mothers, daughters, and wives. Kailey shouts at people to let us through. I hear Cala and Amida giggling behind me. I apologize when I feel the crunch of someone’s foot beneath mine.

Just as we reach the fence at the front of the line, we see her: the gatekeeper.

She is drenched in sweat and wields a white stick as she herds women back from the wire fence protecting the warehouse. Like almost everyone with authority in the camp, she is Kenyan.

Refugee camps bring trade, infrastructure, and employment to certain regions, like this poor corner of Kenya. The international community donates most of the money that keeps Kakuma running, with the agreement that Kenyans get the jobs. Most of the time the jobs don't go to the local population, the Turkana tribe, which has an even lower literacy rate than the refugees and higher levels of malnutrition, but to more educated folks, from Nairobi, like this woman with her stick.

For the women crammed against the wire fence that morning, she is all that stands between them and today's aid allotment: a few bars of soap or a couple of bags of soap powder, two pairs of ladies' underwear, thirty disposable sanitary pads, and two washable pads, all meant to last four to six months. Twenty thousand women here received 64 disposable pads last year, while the average North American woman uses 264 sanitary items per year.

The refugees of Kakuma come from many conflict-stricken African countries, such as Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Forbidden to settle in Kenya, Kakuma's seventy-six thousand residents have no option but to wait for resettlement elsewhere. Kenya has nearly four hundred thousand refugees, mainly restricted to camps, which seem designed to keep refugees from getting too comfortable and neglecting to emigrate or go home.

The United States usually accepts less than a fourth of this number each year from across the entire world, and it is one of the largest recipients of refugees. As the number of refugees far outweighs the number of resettlement spots, most people spend years waiting. Thus, temporary places of protection have morphed into modern-day purgatories, limbos, waiting rooms. More than ten million encamped refugees worldwide have fallen through the gap between nation-states.

I came here to train refugees in filmmaking, in part to allow people to tell their own stories in their own words, for what good it might do them, and in part to shed some light on what it means to spend so much of your life waiting.

Act Two: A Temporary Country

In camp myths, the name Kakuma means “nowhere.” From the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, most aid workers fly 530 miles over the Great Rift Valley, which splits this part of Africa in half. Passing the glittering waters of Lake Turkana, turn left at the Ethiopian and Sudanese borders, and just when it seems you might crash into the lush mountains of Uganda, you will see it, springing up from the desert plains: row upon row of corrugated tin roofs and mud homes. The earth is cracked by years of baking under a hostile sun.

Behind walls of recycled plastic bags stitched together and under roofs made of World Food Program cans hammered flat lives a population almost the size of Berkeley, California. This is nowhere.

Nowhere has bad drainage. The unpaved roads don’t usually need it, since the region averages less than twelve inches of rain per year. But I arrived to storm clouds—and streets already swamped with murky water. The indispensable white four-by-four van that carried us and our equipment through the camp on our filmmaking missions was covered in mud those first few days.

“When it rains, the streets of Somalia smell so bad,” said Abdul, a skinny eighteen-year-old who talks too fast in every one of the four languages he uses. He was sitting up front just then, where he could manage the music, while the rest of us crammed into the back.

“Somalia does not smell as bad as Ethiopia,” seventeen-year-old Amran shouted, hitting him on the head, yet somehow keeping her headscarf tucked in place. The yelling moved between Ki-Swahili and English and back again. Abdul updated his Facebook profile through his phone and yanked up his baggy jeans.

By Ethiopia, Amran didn't mean the country between Sudan and Somalia. She was talking about a stretch of market in Kakuma, where the six thousand Ethiopian residents live, many of the other camp residents shop, and the impoverished local population, the Turkana, sell firewood in exchange for some of the refugees' food rations. When Kakuma residents say Baghdad, they don't mean the Iraqi capital, either, but the area of the camp favored for drinking local home brew, fistfighting, and passing out in the street. For these young people, this cosmopolitan encampment is the whole world.

The camp was built in 1992, when the Kenyan government carved out a space for the thousands of Sudanese "Lost Boys" fleeing across the border eighty miles to the north. Despite growing to hold seventy-six thousand residents, in certain ways, Kakuma Refugee camp is still a temporary fixture on the harshest landscape in Kenya. Over time, other people fleeing conflicts and persecution arrived: Ugandans, Rwandese, Congolese, Ethiopians, Eritreans, Burundis, and Somalis.

In a way this is a temporary country, now composed of fourteen nationalities; eighty-eight churches and mosques; twelve primary schools; one hospital; one high school; three graveyards; three libraries; and any number of "hotels," as they call the small restaurants. It has its own laws, regulations, and customs. Yet this is a country almost entirely reliant on social security handouts meted out by the humanitarian aid workers—the de-facto government. Kenyan law stipulates that refugees cannot leave the camps without a permit. The camp residents are not allowed to work for a real wage, own property, or grow almost anything in the dusty soil, and so they are forced into dependency, often for decades; the average protracted refugee situation lasts for seventeen years. As Jeff Crisp, head of policy development for the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees writes in the *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, "The right to life has been bought at the cost of every other right."

Like the concentration camps upon which the first post-World War II refugee camps were modeled, control of the residents seems as crucial as protection of them. Lives are summed up in measurements: 2,100 calories of food per day, 2.5 liters of drinking water,

and shelters that measure 3.5 square meters. One of my students called Kakuma a “cold, hard prison”—somewhat ironic, since he fled persecution in search of a better life.

Picking out the ironies of Kakuma would become part of life here for the next six weeks, as would generators, sweet Ethiopian coffees called macchiatos, red tablets to overcome iron deficiency, endless meals of cabbage, and accompanying my students on the quest for ladies’ necessities.

Act Three: It Could Be Worse

The gatekeeper with the stick is in midscream when she sees me.

Cala, Kailey, Amida, and I are now crammed against the fence. My smallest finger curls around the wire. The woman’s face changes; she recognizes I am an obvious member of the “aid worker” set and shouts at the other women to let us through. I put my hand on Cala’s and talk about the importance of my workshop and why these women can’t spend five hours in a queue that day. Suddenly, we stumble into the warehouse clearing.

Kailey, like Cala, is Sudanese and grew up in Kakuma. Since Cala has no family, both she and Kailey live with Kailey’s mother in a tiny shack. Kailey often uses her mobile phone as a speaker to play music, and the two of them dance, to shrieks of applause from my other students. Cala is the quieter of the two, and the more stubborn. Her face stays blank right up until the moment she bursts into giggles. Amida, the third woman with me on this mission, arrived in the camp a year ago from Congo and is not as confident in English or in the rhythm of camp life.

Within minutes they are all clutching bags bulging with feminine goodies. We drag ourselves back through the disgruntled throng.

We are sweating, but triumphant. I see the green plastic packages of Naturelle pads already arrayed on the dusty ground for sale next to the line. Amida, Kailey, and Cala will

sell some of their feminine products to buy fresh vegetables, milk, and clothes. None of these items are provided by the camp, but they can be obtained in the markets, which are supplied by outside traders. Life in Kakuma requires constant negotiations.

When their supply of pads runs low, women look for alternatives (reusable pads, old clothes, paper) or ways to make money so they can buy more disposable pads. One option is also to use the washable pads the NGOs hand out. Washing the pads requires water, which is only available at certain times of day and must be carried from shared taps through the streets. When the allotted soap is used up, more must be bought in 'Ethiopia' at more than a dollar per bar. In addition to this, carrying soiled reusable pads around in 110-degree heat is unpleasant my students tell me; it puts students off coming to school. The Lutheran World Federation now gives extra pads to girl students attending classes.

But that's still not enough for everyone.

"The pads usually don't last until the next distribution," one woman tells me. She has sex with men, for less than sixty cents each time, to earn money for milk for her child, lotion to protect against the dry climate, clothes, and sanitary wear. She never uses condoms. The men don't like them.

A report last year by the Humanitarian Accountability Project confirms what women tell me: that the lack of alternative livelihoods pushes women to trade sex for clothes, lotion, and pads.

On the world's television screen, refugees are almost always seen as products of the conflicts they fled, their past, and as problematic immigrants arriving in Western countries, embracing their future. What we forget is their history in between: often, decades spent in refugee camps, waiting. They are almost never understood as existing in an extended present, a nowhere place, like Kakuma.

In contrast, in that ongoing present, I notice people rarely speak of their past. Although I spend many hours talking with my students, I never ask why they left their home countries. It seems taboo. Instead, I wait for them to bring up personal anecdotes and histories. But they seem to prefer focusing on day-to-day moments.

One of the things we do talk about is women's panties. Victoria's Secret lists seven distinct panty categories, and hundreds of colors and patterns. In Kakuma, when the underwear is included in those seasonal distributions, there are only four options: small, medium, large, and extra large. All are variants of the granny-pant.

"We don't want to wear them," Kailey says, swinging her bag. "They are so unsexy."

An employee of the Lutheran World Federation designed the panties herself, here in the camp. Some refugee women make the panties, using nineteen sewing machines. The women are paid twenty Kenyan shillings, twenty-three cents, for each pair they stitch. Amida thinks the low price shows.

"They fall apart," she whispers. Everyone screams with laughter. Amida speaks English accented with the French she learned in Congo. Her family converted from Catholicism to Islam recently, and she tosses her veil over her head haphazardly as she walks. She often forgets to wear it.

"They're made for old women," Cala agrees. Kailey puts one hand up to her mouth to guffaw. She wraps her other arm around Cala's shoulders. Living together as they do, they act like best friends or sisters. Their skinny frames shake with laughter. At moments like these, it's easy to forget that both Cala and Kailey are mothers.

For schoolgirls only slightly younger than Cala and Kailey, the underwear is sometimes too big, Cala and Kailey say. But just as some refugees find ways to work illegally outside the camp or to escape to Nairobi without an official permit, others find ways to bring different types of underwear into the camp.

“You can buy nice panties in ‘Ethiopia,’” Kailey says, referring to the main place to buy black market clothes. Cala nods. The nice panties, which include lace and tiger print varieties, are trucked in from Nairobi by Somali or Ethiopian traders. But they must be paid for. “You need money for nice things,” Amida says, playing with the plastic bracelets that jangle at her wrist. She wishes she had more nice things.

But, my students inform me, it could be worse. We could be in Dadaab. Dadaab is a series of camps 450 miles away, where 270,000 more refugees live; in Dadaab there is not enough funding to offer any sanitary pads or underwear. Kakuma, with its unsexy panties, is known among aid workers as a five-star camp. The residents are reminded to be grateful.

Act Four: The Waiting Place¹

Sadia is not grateful.

Sadia is sick of waiting. The nineteen-year-old is tired of putting her life on hold while her application for resettlement is processed.

She is short and sturdily built. She is Ethiopian and teaches me the difference between the Oromo and the Tigray. She tells me when it is appropriate to tell people off for being late,

¹ The Waiting Place...for people just waiting.

Waiting for a train to go or a bus to come, or a plane to go or the mail to come, or the rain to go or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow or waiting around for a Yes or No or waiting for their hair to grow. Everyone is just waiting.

Waiting for the fish to bite or waiting for wind to fly a kite or waiting around for Friday night or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake or a pot to boil, or a Better Break or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants or a wig with curls, or Another Chance. Everyone is just waiting. – *Dr Seuss*.

and informs me which communities are arguing that week. She leads workshops with me. When Cala and Kailey start missing class, she marks their absences beside their names with tuts of disapproval.

Sadia is also an exception, in that she talks about the past. “Becky, I want you to take my story,” she says to me one day as we both sit in the office. “I want you to tell people what happened,” she says. “Maybe it will help. Maybe someone in America will hear and they will help me leave. I want to leave. I want to study.”

The generator stops humming. When lunchtime hits in Kakuma, the lights switch off, and darkness and silence pour into the room.

Sadia tells her story carefully, administering it in small sips, like medicine that is hard to swallow. “My parents were taken,” she says. “Back in Ethiopia. I was fifteen.” There is deadness in her eyes.

I bring my head closer to hear the words that catch in her throat.

“Then they came for me,” she says.

“I was in jail for two weeks. They would tie my hands and put me down a hole—hanging there for days. Beside that pit was a pit for the people who died. They would beat me. We ate the scraps left over from their meal. They kept asking: were your parents part of the Oromo Liberation Front. I said I was still a child—I didn’t know what that was.

“It was in the jail that I was raped. They all raped me.” Her son is from the rape. At school here in Kakuma, she says, other Ethiopians beat him and call him names.

I want to reach out and touch her, but she doesn’t look like the woman I worked with every day. The Sadia I knew plastered her golden face in my white sunscreen, removing

her veil to get the cream in properly. She sang along to the radio at the top of her lungs, and shamelessly teased everyone about their love life. But this woman is smaller.

“Now, I’m just waiting,” she says, as we sit together in the darkened room. “I need a new life somewhere new.”

“Can you help, Becky?”

She is not the only one to ask.

Act Five: The Crossroads

Everyone wants to start life over somewhere else. People’s fortunes rise and fall according to the resettlement lists posted at the UN compound every week. The citizens of Kakuma talk about asylum countries the way they discuss their favorite football teams (Manchester United and Chelsea). They rely on information gleaned from the Kakuma rumor mill, the generator-fueled televisions that play at the “hotels” at night, and those who have gone before.

“Australia’s the best,” someone says. “It only takes a year for the paperwork. It’s really fast.” Australia, though, won’t take people who fail parts of their medical examination, particularly those with HIV/Aids.

“America’s tough since 9/11,” someone else says. “It takes forever.”

An Ethiopian friend, Mamush, calls me excited and drunk. He has spent his entire adult life in Kakuma—waiting for this day. “I am going to America, Becky,” he cries. He left his country when he was twenty-one years old. He is now forty-two—and during that time in Kakuma, or “the crossroads” as he calls it, he has been “waking up each morning and trying to find a way of killing time.” He tells me I don’t understand what time means

in Kakuma, because I act as though there is not enough of it. “For us, Becky, there is too much.”

When I see him the next day, he tells me he will meet Obama in America. He tells me he will write books. He tells me Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela represent the greatness of America. “In America there is freedom,” he says. “I want freedom.”

Mamush has seven days to say goodbye to everyone he knows. I ask him where in America he is going. “I don’t know,” he says. He hasn’t checked yet. I ask him what he will do once he gets there. “I will do anything,” he says. “I have been waiting my whole life—and now this is my reward. This is the end of my journey.” A week or so later he will arrive in Baltimore.

Everyone is somewhere on the path to resettlement.

“I was supposed to go to America,” says Andrew, thirty, a towering Sudanese teacher. “But September 11 happened and they stopped my case.” Andrew is one of the Lost Boys, the first refugees to come to Kakuma. He and thousands of others walked there from Sudan in 1992. Almost four thousand Lost Boys were resettled in the America in 2000. Andrew was not among them.

I tell him that his application might have been rejected because he said he handled a gun and fought in Ethiopia when he was seven years old. If you admit to fighting in a conflict, you are often denied resettlement in America. He doesn’t seem to hear. He still hopes that America might change its mind.

“Until then, I’m still lost,” he says.

Act Six: The Rumour mill

When people stumble off the small World Food Program (WFP) plane, they are often greeted with a hearty, “How is Kenya doing?”

As time goes on, it seems more and more appropriate: Kakuma is not Kenya. When people introduce themselves here they say "I am Sudanese by nationality..." as if there is a second half of the sentence... "but really I don't know where I belong.." People talk about Kenya as though it is a vague shape on the horizon somewhere else, instead of the ground beneath our feet, just as Uganda is the place where the rains occasionally come from and Sudan is where the ivory bracelets for trade originate, so Kenya is elsewhere. Here is Kakuma - it belongs to no one. With none of the rights of Kenyan citizens, third generations of young people grow up here, unsure what nationality they really are.

Here, in these nowheres, people lose their working life, their childhood, their sense of nationality. They wait. But while they wait, they grow old, fall in love, kill time, have babies, watch premier league football matches, lose sleep, tell stories, build churches, catch up on sleep, go to school, create mosques, braid hair, menstruate, argue with neighbours, drink tea, check facebook, drink beer, dream, get married and, much to the frustration of NGOs, pass on rumors.

Like the one about Mix Me.

The discussion starts because of a blue and orange t-shirt. Affiliation between t-shirt bearer and t-shirt message is not crucial, I soon realize. NGO clothing sells for 500 KS, (\$6.20) in Kakuma's Ethiopia. But, I still don't know this and the shirt bears the logo of the food supplement, MixMe, on the left breast.

MixMe prevents anemia, says WFP. The refugees say it prevents babies.

I ask if anyone eats it.

“They put family planning in it,” Sadia answers, surprised at my ignorance.

“Oh Becky,” she says in a fit of giggles. “no-one eats it.”

If people do try it, the powder is almost tasteless, though some people say it tastes of iron.

It comes in handy as an adhesive when mixed with water. It is used for fixing broken shoes, or gluing together iron roofing.

“It sticks to the ground like glue,” says one boy. He postulates on how the active Mix Me ingredients might interact with human stomach acid to dire affect. Eating it is not worth the risk, he concludes.

Mix-Me is not wholly useless to the economy of the camp however – people are paid to collect the packages - strewn in the dusty soil at the end of food distributions. A nutrition survey in March last year, was puzzled as to why there was “no significant drop in anemia rates among women of reproductive age²” and calls for investigation into the low uptake of MixMe despite its distribution. For 16-year old Libin the reason is obvious:

“Giving us Mix me is all about reducing the population of Africa,” she says. She knows she can’t be sure this is true but she doesn’t eat it all the same – just in case. Soon, WFP will give up on changing hearts and minds and will burn its remaining stock.

Act Seven: Storytelling

On a large outdoor screen, the flickering image is several meters tall and illuminates the night. On screen, Rose Nakeny is sitting on the dusty ground outside her mud brick home, swatting the flies away from two children who wander in and out of the frame. Her face bears the marks of domestic abuse. She is drunk.

² Division of Nutrition of the Kenyan Government March 2010 – Kenyan Nutrition Bulletin” – see folder. aideffectivenesskenya.org/index.php?option=com...

Rose Nakeny is one character in a series of short documentaries my students and I made during my workshops. This is the premiere, and the audience is made up of hundreds of Kakuma residents. I know the sequence by heart—I have spent four days drinking luminous green soda and editing the films alongside my students.

On screen, the interviewer asks Nakeny why she drinks. She says it is because of another child she had: a child she saw hacked to death by a man with a machete in Southern Sudan. She is slurring her words and obviously drunk.

Disconcertingly, the audience starts to laugh.

I stare at the crowd, unsure if I am interpreting the roar of sound correctly.

Nakeny continues to talk in the Dinka language, her words subtitled in English. “My child was killed,” she says. “I take alcohol because of my child.”

Sadia shrugs. “There are just so many people like this, weeping about their past,” she says. “She’s funny.”

I used to think storytelling was healing. The people I meet in Kakuma don’t seem to believe this. Most seem terrified of telling their stories. Perhaps they want to distance themselves from tragedies that are all too familiar. Perhaps they believe they too will be laughed at or seem self-pitying. Or perhaps they do not want to endure comparing their stories with others that are worse, or better.

Many refugees tell me they believe forgetting is the best way to deal with their past. Forgiveness is too much to ask, they say, unless you’re in America apparently, where it will be easier to forgive. How can they forgive the people who killed their parents, torched their homes, forced them to carry guns and commit murders, raped them, left them to walk away from everything they knew, facing wild animals or militias? And, so

the logic of Kakuma says: if they are not going to forgive, then what is the point of remembering? Forgetting is sometimes the only defense one has.

“Everyone has a story here,” says a Congolese resident. “People are tired of listening.” There’s also the chance that you might end up living next to the people from the same community that set fire to your home. “You’re still living it here,” he says. “It’s just not over yet.”

Sympathy, like everything else, is rationed in Kakuma. It makes storytelling as muddy as the streets after a storm.

I ask my boss to remove the Nakeny scene from the documentary. I don’t want her to be laughed at anymore.

Act Eight: When you walk away

When you walk away: Take One

“I couldn’t stay in the room,” Scisa says. “I said I wouldn’t go to one of those meetings again.”

The thirty-year old incentive worker from Congo is talking about evacuation protocol and a meeting of humanitarian agencies about what happens if things go wrong. It’s an evacuation plan. It doesn’t include Cala, or Amida or Scisa. It doesn’t include any of my students. If the region becomes too violent, the expats and Kenyans (the first class citizens of the camp) will be evacuated, leaving everyone else to fend for themselves.

“It makes it hard to trust the NGOs or the UN,” someone says. “How can you trust them? If things get really bad, they’ll leave us.”

Everyone else nods in agreement.

“How can you trust anyone who leaves you like that?”

When you walk away: Take Two

The sun is setting. I am standing on top of the white van, looking out over the camp. I can see Kakuma spread out, in its dusty, dirty, yet sunset-infused beauty. Even the rocks where people shit and the gulley where trash rots look glorious, from this distance. We will be showing our final films later that evening, and we're exhausted from an intensive week of film editing.

In ten hours I will be in an armed convoy driving toward the horizon, away from Kakuma. Soon, I will leave all this behind.

One of my students, Libin is dressed in white from head to toe and dancing. Her whole figure looks made of white linen. The cloth blows in a wind I can't feel. Her limbs are like water – billowing out around her as she moves – and when she looks up at us – the world tilts and this feels like the center of everything.

Cala and Kailey are sitting with their heads together, and I go over to them. Cal doesn't look up, and Kailey silently leaves, making me the designated listener. Cal sits with her arms wrapped round her knees. I ask her if everything is okay.

“I can't stay with Kailey's mother anymore.” Cala says. “She doesn't like the baby. She tells me to go out onto the street and sell my private parts.”

What about the NGOs in the camp, I ask. Could they help? A list of programs available to women runs through my head. She has already tried.

“They gave me some hand lotion,” she says with disgust, and laughs a little under her breath.

“When I told my boyfriend I was pregnant he hit me and said I was sleeping with other men,” she says. Then when he ran away, she, like most single mothers in the camp, was called a prostitute. Soon there was no other way of making a living. “Now, I have to sleep with men.”

Calais shivering. Her voice loses all its lulls and lilts.

“I tried to hang myself,” Cala says. “That’s why I missed the workshop on Tuesday and Wednesday.” She licks her upper lip and moves to cross her legs.

“Why did you do it?” I ask.

“I didn’t know what to do.”

“What about your baby?” I ask.

She scrunches up her shoulders, like a teenager shrugging off her parents’ nagging.

“I don’t have anyone here, Becky,” she says. “I am a size two.”

In Kakuma, people are given numbers to mark the size of their family, to determine how much food aid they receive. Until Cala had her baby, she was a size one, meaning she was an unaccompanied child.

“My throat hurts,” she says, from where the rope was. “I went to the IRC hospital. They refuse to help me if I don’t sleep with them. You hate them—but then you need milk for your baby.”

I try to talk about other options. I suggest ideas for other jobs she could do to earn money. I try to listen properly—I don't want to lose her. I press into her hands all the money I have on me, but it is not enough to start over.

“It is so hard,” she says. “Just so hard. This is how we live.”

Almost every single mother I meet in the camp seems to have been pushed into a form of prostitution. Men will come at night to your home and insist on sleeping with you, they tell me. Your honor is ruined, and at the water tap in the mornings, other women push you to the back of the line and call you names.

The prejudice against women like Calacan be so palpable that redemption seems all but impossible.

I ask her what she wants.

“A shop,” she says, in the market. “I want to be able to make my own money.”

People are gathering in front of the white van, ready for the film to begin. Someone, probably Abdul, is using the van speakers to blast his favorite Tanzanian pop.

Kailey comes over and puts her arms around Cala protectively. Together, we pull Cala to her feet. And suddenly, we are dancing.

It is a song I don't know, but I dance. The air is full of music. I dance because I don't know what to say. I dance because in this moment, I too want to forget, and want them to forget. I dance frantically and ridiculously to make Cala laugh. The moon rises. The sky is huge, and it feels as though we are dancing in it. The ground seems far below us.

