LETTERS FROM MALEMBA

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LOOKING FOR THE STORY

January 24, 2003

I am looking for the subject of my next film. In a few days I am headed for the Congo, then Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in Central Asia, and finally Kosovo. I am not looking so much for a place... a geographical location, as for a situation, a story, a group of people who are willing to join with me in the process of making a film about who they are and what they do. Specifically I want to show something hopeful - the work of a humanitarian aid organization, how its field staff overcome social and cultural barriers to deliver effective aid that nurtures self-sufficiency rather than dependency. At the same time I want to come away with good television – a compelling story, with a beginning, middle, and end - with conflict and protagonists.

I've been preparing for about three months. It has been a process of sorting the wheat from the chaff – contacting international aid organizations and gradually working through the hierarchy of each until I get to talk to the people that really matter; the people in the field. It's only then, on the phone to Colombo, Tashkent, Pristina, Kinshasa, Malawi, and Johannesburg that I get to see if there's a film there, by which I really mean a potential for a relationship that could lead to a film.

The U.S. based press officers who are used to dealing with the likes of CNN and the Discovery Channel don't quite know what to make of an independent filmmaker who wants to hang out for weeks on end, is in no rush to make a deadline, and who really wants to get to know people. It unnerves them. But they are also intrigued by the possibility of a film that really tells it like it is and makes them look good in the process.

My first stop on this scouting trip is the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire). I'm going there not because that place beckons to me, but because one person, Cathy Skoula, the mission head for Action Against Hunger in Kinshasa, seems to understand what I am trying to do. She is also willing to extend the logistical support and protection required for me to visit a remote field base in the bush.

Once the invitation is made I find I am anxious about going to what I vaguely perceive to be a malaria-infested and war-torn spot. Added to this my funder has asked me sign a waiver: In case I meet with an untimely end I won't hold the foundation accountable. Not an unreasonable request, I think, but it gives one pause.

WHAT I DIDN'T KNOW

In the days following I begin to learn about where I am going. I know next to nothing about the Congo. My one association is the phrase *The Heart of Darkness,* the title of a late 19th century novel by Joseph Conrad about a hellish voyage up an African river in search of a white ivory trader named Kurtz who has gone off the deep end. The plot of Conrad's novel was freely adapted by Francis Ford Coppola for his Vietnam war epic, *Apocalypse Now,* with the evil blood-drenched Kurtz played by none other than Marlon Brando. Conrad's novel, I know, was considered a literary masterpiece and often held up as a parable on colonialism, rotten to the core. It is hard to know at what point in time to enter the tangled history of a nation that includes the likes of Kurtz, slave traders, the very worst aspects of colonialism, a brutal and avaricious African dictator, and feudal wars stretching into the 21st century.

At this point I'll just go back to 1997, when Congo's aging dictator of 32 years, Mobuto Sese Seko, was toppled in a coup led by Laurent Kabila. Kabila was backed by the armies of neighboring Rwanda and Uganda, but these "allies" soon turned against him for harboring Hutu militiamen who had been complicit in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Coming to Kabila's rescue were troops from Angola, Chad, Namibia and Zimbabwe.

Motivating the participation of armies from so many nations, in what has come to be called Africa's First World War, is the Congo's incredible natural wealth in gold, diamonds, copper, cobalt, uranium, timber, and coltan, a valuable mineral used in cellphones, computers, and many other electronic devices. These riches made the war economically sustainable, with big bonuses for those closest to the mines and the other sources of wealth.

In January 2001, Laurent Kabila was assassinated. His son, Joseph Kabila, took over, intent on finding a way to end his father's war. In the closing months of 2002 hundreds of Congolese political and civic leaders met in Sun City, South Africa, to try to lay the groundwork for the country's postwar future. On Dec. 17, 2002, a major peace agreement was signed, and foreign troops began to pull out of the eastern Congo in return for a role in the country's future.

In the past five years 3.3 million people have died in the Congo as a result of a war that has involved armies from no less than nine neighboring nations and dozens of indeginous militias. Most of the casualties have been civilians. Many died from disease and starvation after their villages were pillaged and crops were burned. One journalist I read refers to the Congo as "half a Holocaust," three million Africans versus six million Jews.

Cathy Skoula, the mission head for Action Against Hunger, tells me that she sees the Sun City peace agreement as a window of opportunity. All over the country security risks are down and there is a good chance that AAH programs (and those of other aid organizations) will be able to move forward unmolested. After some discussion we both agree that AAH's operations in town and administrative district of Malemba Nkulu, in the eastern province of Katanga, seemed best suited for a documentary film.

SEEKING REASSURANCE

January 25, 2003

The situation in the Congo is more than I bargained for when I imagined this project. It sounds like hell. My wife Jan and my stepson, Wes McLean, who works with me as my assistant and sound technician, are letting me know, in no uncertain terms, that this is not their destination of choice.

A U.S. State Department notice that I find on the web, "...warns U.S. citizens against travel to Congo-Kinshasha" and goes on to say that "travel in the eastern provinces of the country, especially rural areas, is considered to be highly insecure due to the number of uncontrolled militias operating there."

I call Cathy in Kinshasa. She reassures me that the situation in Malemba Nkulu *is* hopeful. It is quiet there, only a level-two security risk on a scale of one to four. The six-person expatriate team that is based there has been able to do its work unmolested for the past eight months and there is the opportunity to follow the work over time... to show its impact and evolution.

Cathy promises that if things get rough, she'll put me and Wes on the first plane out. In this case the edict is not "women and children first" but rather those dumb American filmmakers who don't know the drill and who, most likely, haven't a clue about how to react in times of danger. I am comforted by her solicitude. Cathy, by way of additional reassurance, also tells me that Action Against Hunger has an excellent intelligence network throughout the country. On the long-distance line from Kinshasa she tries to explain to me the identities and positions of half a dozen warring factions with strange acronym names – until my brain glazes over. The point is that AAH gets daily reports on who is doing what, when and where, throughout this vast country, and can react accordingly.

In preparing for this expedition I get shots for every imaginable tropical disease plus a brand new kind of malaria medicine which I am assured does not cause the paranoia that the old larium is famous for. I have a new ridiculous-looking sun hat and an impressive "Order of Mission" in both French and English, which lets the authorities know that I am traveling under the protection and auspices of Action Against Hunger. Added to this will be special "laissez-passer" documents which allow passage to the interior. An AAH fixer or "protocol" officer will meet me at the airport. When passing through passport control I am instructed to "speak French and smile."

I don't mind telling you that I am heading into this with trepidation. I really have no idea what it's going to be like and how I will react, and it may all be simply too much for this pushing-50 gringo. But so far this is just a scouting trip, and that's what scouting trips are for. And so far it feels "right."

PARIS

January 26, 2003

Paris, where I am stopping over for a few days, enroute to Kinshasa, is wet and cold but it is good to see Arlette, my friend and former landlady from when I lived here in 1990. In anticipation of having to work again in French (since the Congo is a francophone country) I ask Arlette to help me formulate, in correct French, an explanation of what I am hoping to accomplish with this project. Of course I can muddle through on my own, but I hope it will make a better impression to start with a clear, unambiguous statement of purpose. This is, in turn, a deja vu: I remember in 1990 preparing, in white-knuckled panic, for interviews with former French prime minister Michel Debre and the ex-governor of Algeria, Paul Delouvrier. At that time, with Arlette's help, I wrote out the questions, for fear of committing some unspeakable faux pas. At least this time around I am not interviewing les Grands Hommes.

This morning I go shopping for edible gifts for the mostly French staff in Malemba. Cathy has warned me not to bring American goodies, that the French, on principle, are likely to consider indigestible. So I have the great pleasure of conferring with Parisian merchants about the best wines, the best cheeses, and the best dry pork sausages to bring to French men and women who have "le mal du pays" (are homesick) in the heart of Africa. Long discussions ensue, and excellent things are purchased with a view towards durability for the long journey.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

January 29, 2003

My first sense of being in a different place is in the air, over Kinshasa at twilight. Not the usual flood of lights you'd expect from a big city but concentrations of dozens of small wavering pinpricks of light – cooking fires amid larger areas of darkness.

I am dreading the arrival at the airport, expecting it to be chaotic. Thankfully the AAH fixer is there, waving to me from behind the pass control barrier. I also meet Laurent and his Kenyan wife Linah, back from vacation in France, who get off the same plane with me. With the fixer's help we round up our bags and bluff our way past dubious customs officials and perhaps "un-officials" hoping for bribes.

The ride in the back of the Rover reminds me of my first rides in Egypt, India and Vietnam. Heavy heat, strange smells, coal and wood smoke and diesel fumes. But I see very little. We come to a large high-walled compound with huge steel gates that screech on their hinges as they are opened by a guard. The house, called La Chinoise, is where Cathy Skoula and some of the other AAH expatriates live. It is spacious and more comfortable than I expected. There is even an air-conditioner in my room, which slightly eases the ambient temperature, and a large bed with a cube of mosquito netting stretched taut over its wooden frame and tucked in with military precision.

Cathy and I talk for a while in the huge living room with its cool marble floors and African print curtains... the usual pleasantries of people meeting each other for the first time, sizing each other up. Jet lag kicks in. I sleep.

SECURITY AND ATROCITY

January 30, 2003

So far, it is hard for me to imagine making a film in this country, although admittedly, I can't say I've actually seen anything. My main experience is of security measures, which are rigorous and religiously adhered to. I am sobered by what they imply. As an expatriate it seems impossible to walk alone in the street in Kinshasa at any time of day. For desperate people one is obvious prey. Currently there is a group of bandits in town who pose as policemen and approach expatriates in the middle of the day in front of major hotels, demanding to see their papers. Then they shake them down at gunpoint for whatever they've got.

Believe it or not, the Democratic Republic of Congo actually has an office of tourism... I know this because I had to fill out their travelers' questionnaire on entering the country.

Both AAH's residences and offices are in protected compounds. An army of drivers is on call to ferry staff back and forth. They are in communication with an AAH radio dispatcher 24/7, reporting destinations, departures, arrivals, and personnel in the car. Everyone has their own radio call sign. Mine is "Kilo 8." When you get in the car, you lock the door and put on your seatbelt. When you get home you lock the door, despite the double protection of the guardians at the gate.

It seems peevish to express alarm or indignation at these evident dangers ... or even mention them, when I think of the litany of horrors that are routinely suffered by the Congolese. Though on a national scale, there is a peace agreement in place, there are ongoing reports of horrific violence. United Nations investigators have confirmed reports of cannibalism, rape, torture and killing just two weeks ago in Ituri region, in the northeast of the country. The perpetrators, who went on a ethnic cleansing spree they called "Operation Clean the Slate," are affiliated with the Congolese Liberation Movement, which is a party to the Sun City peace accords. According to eyewitness accounts collected by U.N. observers, some 200 people witnessed pygmy families from the Ituri forest being massacred and being forced to eat pieces of family members before they died.

It is from Cathy Skoula that I first get this news. She reports it to me with perfect composure, just rattling off the facts, like a weather bulletin. That makes an impression on me. Here's this nice gray-haired woman who looks like your proverbial Aunt Sally and whom one could imagine as the odd girl out in conventional social settings back home...who answers my questions about malnutrition and militias, in precise, incredibly well-informed, and (one might say) ghoulish detail. I know now, but will probably quickly forget, exactly the process by which a child dies of starvation.

It is absolutely Cathy's job to know these things and to know them in detail, and she does and somehow it doesn't seem to get her down. When I ask her about this she says its because she's in a privileged position, sitting in her office in Kinshasa – she can remove herself from the daily stress of the field... Her nurse practitioners, by contrast, burn out on a regular basis.

I sit down with Cathy and do my first on-camera interview. I'm not sure she'll make a good TV presence. There too much control there, not a lot of affect. But she might loosen up.

SECOND IMPRESSIONS

January 31, 2003

My second day here is very different from my first. I meet Sophie, an AAH nurse at the base and she takes me with her to a Centre Nutritional Therapeutique (CNT) – a live-in facility for mothers who have severely malnourished children.

We go in one of AAH's immense Land Rovers together with six Congolese staff who are going to different clinics. The Congolese welcome me very warmly and, throughout the trip, keep up a kind of collective, non stop hilarious banter. Everyone seems in incredibly good humor. The city around us (we are heading out to what might euphemistically be called the "suburbs") is not really what I associate with cities but rather pockets of intense traffic and commercial street activity separated by short stretches of vibrant green space and connected by roads and tracks, some paved, some not, with huge water-filled holes the size of small swimming pools. Although some denizens of Beverly Hills might differ, I never thought you needed a land Rover, a Humvee, or a Landcruiser to get around a city... but here you do. And these Land Rovers look nothing like your pretty, citified SUVs. They are immense metal tanks riding high off the ground. No frills.

We pass a couple of police patrols that are checking cars for weapons. We are waved on. All AAH vehicles are emblazoned with a sticker that has the silhouette of a Kalashnikov rifle encircled in red with a bar through it... and the words "No arms on board."

Sophie, a slight, energetic 25-year old French nurse who is just completing her first year in Africa is the undisputed head of the Bumba Centre Nutritional Therapeutique which has about 65 clients at any given time. When we arrive she takes me around and introduces me to her co-workers. Everyone welcomes me warmly, saying things like, "Thank you for coming to report on our work."

Sophie has brought her own video camera, a gift she's received from her family in France. She asks me to take some shots of her at work. I am grateful to be asked. It gives me something to do rather than just standing around awkwardly.

The images I make are exactly what you can imagine from the hundreds of photographs that accompany appeals from humanitarian organizations - women and their kids with stick-like limbs and big bellies lying on mats inside large rooms made from blue plastic UNICEF tarps. The unexpected part of the experience (which I'd expected to be horrified by, but was not) comes when a woman in charge of health education starts singing a song about good health practices linked to the patriotic future of the Congo. She draws in some 60 or 70 women and children in a kind of call and response – everyone singing, clapping, ululating, with extraordinary enthusiasm. One can hardly imagine such glee in the midst of such squalor and suffering - but there it is. Sophie confirms that this is one of the paradoxes of this place; such a joy for life amid such misery.

This makes me think about something that Cathy has told me: According to statistics on expatriate field volunteers working for NGOs in Africa, the Congo holds records in two categories for, 1) The highest rate of burnout and early departures and 2) The highest rate of volunteers recommitting for long-term engagements. In other words the Congo hits you two ways. You hate it or you love it. I can't say yet which category I fall into.

WAR ORPHANS

February 2, 2003

Days pass slowly in Kinshasa while I wait for the necessary permits to travel to the interior. Over the weekend I beg the expats to take me somewhere – anywhere that affords a different view from the one from our compound walls. Sophie consents. She takes me to visit a reserve of pygmy chimpanzees more properly known as bonobo apes. It is great to get just a few miles outside the noise and heat of the city, climbing up from the Congo riverbed to lush rolling hills.

It starts to rain just as we get to the ape reserve. A trickle quickly turns into a thunderstorm of biblical proportions. We shelter in a little tin-roofed gazebo surrounded by the jungle and pens for the apes. The bonobos, extremely timid creatures, are terrified by the thunder and lightning. They set up a howling and screaming that mingles with the deafening roar of the storm. It makes quite an impression.

The rain stops and we go and shake hands with the apes in their cages. These particular apes, along with chimpanzees, bear the greatest genetic resemblance to human beings and exist only in a small portion of the

northern part of the Congo. They've been hunted nearly to extinction during the war, mostly by soldiers, for bush meat. A philanthropic French lady founded the reserve to raise orphaned bonobos. They have a great need for physical affection, without which they die. So each bonobo is assigned a human "mother" who cuddles, strokes, and plays with it.

On the way back we come to part of the road that has been washed away in the thunderstorm. It looks dicey. People warn us not to go through. Sophie guns the Rover through the mess without apparent difficulty.

LUBUMBASHI

February 3, 2003

Today we completed the first leg of our journey to the interior: We flew to Lubumbashi, the provincial capital of Katanga, the southeastern province of the Congo. We are about 1300 [CHECK] miles southeast of Kinshasa, on the other side of the country. The Congo itself is huge. The third-largest country in Africa, it is larger than all of Europe or equal to the land mass of the United States east of the Mississippi River.

It's taken quite a bit of bureaucratic wrangling just to get this far. In addition to the laissez-passer, I am required to have permission to travel with video equipment (I have a small camera that I use for baseline interviews and reconnaissance images) lest it be confiscated by the authorities.

The day before our departure, the fixer, Tcheeze, shows up at base with a worried look. It seems a ministry official has declined to sign off on the laissez-passer unless we pay a large sum of money and agree to take along a policeman who will make sure I don't point my camera at anything sensitive. The cost is $250 a day plus food, airfare and lodging – quite a sum when you consider the per-capita income here is around $500 a year. Hamouda, the financial administrator for AAH, went with me and Tcheeze to the ministry. Miraculously the official handed over the documents without a murmur. I think it's a kind of test they put us fabulously rich foreigners through.

It's delightfully cool in Lubumbashi. This is the first thing I notice. It is more tranquil too. Compared to the nine million in Kinshasa, there's a mere one million here. The three-person AAH expat team welcomes me warmly. They are Christophe, a logistician who handles supplies and communications with the bush, Mélanie, a nurse who runs health centers here in town, and Fabienne, the base director. When I arrive the residence it is lit by candles, which make it seem more intimate and welcoming. There's been a power outage for the past 10 days.

This morning I take a walk. What a reprieve! The streets are safer here. I am told I can be on my own as long as I have a walkie talkie with me. I walk to the center of town, which is dominated by immense billboards alternately featuring the likeness of President Joseph Kabila and ads for detergents, cell phones, etc. Though I am the only white person around, nobody seems to pay me much attention. Occasionally a "Bonjour m'sieur" or, more disconcertingly, "Bonjour chef" (hello, chief) or "Bonjour patron" (hello boss).

ASTRONAUT FOOD

Mélanie invites me to accompany her on her rounds to several outpatient feeding centers. At each place it is the same; long lines of women and their children wait to be weighed, checked, and given their rations. Here they are testing out a new kind of nutritional paste that seems to be working wonders. It comes in gleaming silver wrappers (like energy bars) and looks like high-tech astronaut food. It tastes like grainy peanut butter.

Mélanie tells me some of the frustrations of her work. AAH is collaborating with several existing medical clinics, mostly supported by churches and other NGOs. Unfortunately not all have adequately trained nurses and nutritionists, so it often happens (in spite of directions to the contrary) that they mix the astronaut food with other ingredients that they think will make it go further, thereby destroying the delicate balance of nutrients that the medical experts have devised.

Another problem is that mothers who have one or two children that meet the requirements for admission into the feeding centers often have others at home, who may not be as malnourished but who have nothing to eat. The mother splits what she receives at the center... and what is intended for one or two children is dispersed among four or five.

Mélanie says that the feeding centers would not survive without at least one expat to police things. Our Congolese driver agrees. The discipline needed to follow medical and nutritional protocols is inevitably undermined by dire economic need. Here it is hunger and desperation that corrupts.

At the base of the poverty in this particular region is the collapse of Gécamines, the state-owned copper mining industry, which used to employ about 50 percent of the regional population. Under the dictator Mobutu, Gécamines was at its most productive. Since his demise, the Kabilas have replaced key people in the company with their own cronies, who systematically looted the coffers and infrastructure. Result: Gécamines is now operating at about 5 percent of capacity, regional unemployment is up to 80 percent, and more and more cases of severe malnutrition are showing up at Mélanie's feeding centers.

WHERE IS MOTHER THERESA?

February 4, 2003

I expected to find deep people here – highly principled, Mother Theresa-like individuals who follow some sense of vocation – though not necessarily in a conventionally religious way. Instead I find beautiful young French nurses who listen to loud rock and disco on their off hours, kid around in a giddy kind of way, talk a mile a minute, and seem as energetically unhinged as most twenty-somethings, save for the fact that that they are dealing with starvation, disease and death on a routine basis.

Christophe, the male logistician, is a bit older. Like me, he's graying around the temples. He's the only one, so far, who's given me an adequate ideological explanation of why he's here. He's passionate about a radical social movement in France which translates into something like "Association for the Support and Solidarity With the Poor in the Fourth World." Christophe tells me he was previously in Burundi, where someone threw a grenade at his house. He was evacuated and sent here.

I still have not reached the location where I might make this documentary, but I can't shake a feeling of general hopelessness. I don't understand what keeps the AAH staff going, motivationally, psychologically. It isn't money, since they are basically volunteers and only get a small stipend, and they tell me that their experience here won't stand for much on a resumé. Sure it's wonderful to be able to point to a child (as Mélanie did this morning) who has been brought back from the edge of death. But knowing that the same child is far from safe, and that many things can undo the healing that has been done, must be hard to live with. Also one can't help but be aware that what one does is a mere drop in a vast ocean.

WAITING FOR MALEMBA

February 5, 2003

This whole narrative up to now might be entitled *Waiting for Malemba*, as if finally, when I get there, there will be some kind of epiphany, some kind of understanding of what so far has eluded me, i.e: "What's the point of making a film here, and how can I do it?"

Christophe confides in me that he is not particularly happy here in Lubumbashi and that he envies my trip to Malemba. He tells me that everything is going to be different there. For the expats there is a kind of mystique about the bush. To experience the real Congo, the heart of Africa, you have to be there. That is what everyone is telling me. Also, in Malemba, Cathy intimates that there is a kind of hopeful synergy, better working relationships between expats and staff and a higher level motivation among the Congolese, many of whom are themselves refugees from the war.

She explains to me the recent history of the region as it fits into the larger picture of the Congo. The region was been split in two by the war. Thirty kilometers to the northwest of the town is the border with rebel-controlled territory.

In 1997 people fled to Malemba when their own villages were burned and pillaged. Some 45,000 or so refugees came and stayed in what they considered a "safe zone." Cathy says:

> In Malemba we found the population was split between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the indigenous population. They were doing a remarkable job coping with the problem. The majority of refugees were welcomed into homes and vacant buildings and were given assistance by the locals. This allowed the refugees to survive, but it brought down the standard of living for everyone. Everyone was suffering. They were right on the edge. You could walk into a health center and find no thermometers, no medications, not even pens or paper. Roads were abysmal. And there was significant malnutrition among children and mothers. We also found major problems with water and sanitation. Cholera is endemic and becomes epidemic on a fairly routine basis, in surrounding villages. We also found food security problems. When people fled they brought very little with them. It was a surprise attack and they just had to pick up and run. They had no seeds or tools when they got to Malemba.

Cathy wrote proposals to international donors documenting the situation and succeeded in getting money for four separate yet interlocking programs. A nutrition program, supported by the Canadian government, helps children suffering from severe malnutrition. A food security program supported by the European Union will distribute seeds, farming tools, and fishing nets to some 5,000 refugees who have been dispossessed by the war. It will also follow up with technical support to promote more efficient farming and fishing skills. The United States, through USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, is supporting the rebuilding, restocking, and re-staffing of regional health clinics that were destroyed during the war. The O.F.D.A. is also supporting clean water programs (the digging and protection of wells as well as natural water sources) as well as the education programs to teach basic sanitation and the means to avoid water-borne diseases.

GETTING THERE

February 6, 2003

Eight hundred and fifty kilometers north, two hours in a small plane. Although we fly at a low altitude, I see little visible sign of human habitation: no buildings, no paved roads, no cars, just the occasional cluster of thatched roof huts and small irregular rectangles of cultivated land, bordering on streams and rivers. Contrary to my expectations, we do not fly over dense jungle but rather open, very green country.

Malemba from the air is a very large concentration of huts and low buildings. The runway is a strip of grass. Waiting for us is a contingent of soldiers – red beret FAC (Forces Armée Congolaise) troops who appear to be using the runway as a parade ground. They cheer when we land, and then a couple walk up and ask for cigarettes. We pile a ton of baggage and medical supplies into two Rovers and head for AAH's base.

The town is laid out along wide, straight leafy avenues of red dirt. There are no cars, save for the vehicles of Action Against Hunger and a handful of other NGOs. About 50,000 people live here, including 10,000 refugees who have been displaced by the war. It looks and feels quite peaceful.

The Action Against Hunger base is a compound of cement and plaster buildings previously occupied by missionaries. Arnaud, the 27-year-old boss of the base, gives me a tour. There are offices, dormitories, an open kitchen, a dispensary, a radio room, a fuel dump, and various storage hangars. The place is bustling with the activities of 30 or 40 Congolese staff who work as field assistants, cooks, carpenters, mechanics, drivers, cleaners and guards.

I am also introduced, with some ceremony, to several mascots who are shamelessly spoiled and fussed over. Most imposing is an immense spoonbill crane with an evil eye. Named Kalash, after the Soviet automatic rifle Kalashnikov, he stands about four feet tall and has the immense head of a pre-historic pelican. There is also a Guinness, a barrel-shaped mutt with short legs and Simba, a cat named after a brand of Congolese beer. A black chicken with a limp, named Maccabee, is the a gift of local militia leader of the same name.

MEETING THE EXPATS

At lunch, in a little thatched-roof gazebo called "la paillotte," I finally meet some of the key people whom I have come all this way to meet and, who, if all goes well, will be protagonists in my film. I am struck by how young they are. I could be the father of any of them.

Arnaud, the logistician and head of the Malemba base, strikes me as both serious and shy, with a kind of tough-guy veneer (think young Jean Paul Belmondo). I have the greatest difficulty understanding his French, because he speaks in sentence fragments, heavily sprinkled with southern French slang. If there is to be a film, he would not figure largely in it, since his is basically an administrative job with little contact with the population or field staff.

Alex is a self-effacing English agronomist whose French accent is actually worse than mine (although I can understand him). He has been in the bush longer than anyone else, more than one year. He is the director of the Food Security Program which, after many months of preparation and study, is on the verge of distributing seeds, farming tools and fishing nets to 5,000 refugees. I find myself liking Alex but at the same time I am dismayed that he tends to swallow his words in both languages. He also parenthesizes mightily and takes a long time getting to the point. I fear he may not do well on camera. That's one of the perils of making documentaries: It sometimes happens that you come across people whose work is fascinating and whose circumstances are seductively riveting, but who are utterly unable to articulate in a way that gives them credence on a TV screen.

Stephanie, age 25, is a nurse with immense responsibilities. She's been in Malemba for about 10 months and is close to the end of her tour. Perhaps she is burnt out (later I will wonder why she acts the way she does in certain situations). Her work is similar to Sophie's in Kinshasa. She is in charge of the Centre Nutritional Thérapeutique (CNT) in Malemba as well as eight outlying Centres Nutritionales Supplémentaires (CNS) within a 100-kilometer [CHECK] radius. The CNS centers are clinics for children who have been cured of acute malnutrition but who continue to receive rations and follow-up treatment on an outpatient basis. Stephanie directs a large Congolese staff that not only runs the nine clinics but conducts home visits and surveys to identify new patients. On any given day there are over 1,000 [CHECK] patients for which she is ultimately responsible.

It is not clear if Stephanie will be here when (and if) I return to make the film. She has to wait for her replacement to show up. For reasons I don't yet understand she seems suspicious of me. It will take persistence to persuade her to sit down and do a one-on-one base-line interview.

Mariona, age 29 or so, is a "watsan," a water sanitation engineer. Prior to arriving in Malemba two months ago she had a good job supervising the operation of a high-tech steel forge in Barcelona. Now she is responsible for the digging of wells, the building of latrines, and the renovation of health centers that were destroyed during the war. She tells me that her engineering degree in no way prepared her for Africa. She's learned all the low-tech skills she needs to do her job from her Congolese assistant. I found myself really liking Mariona, with her charming broken English, open face, and hopeful aspect. When she speaks I don't feel that there is any filtering go on. She says what she thinks and feels without trepidation. And it is clear that she loves the work that she is doing here.

David, age 27, has been here about three months. He looks like a skinhead with his head shaved to reduce the likelihood of lice. His work picks up where Mariona's leaves off. He's a nurse in charge of recruiting, training and supporting Congolese medical staff for the refurbished Health Centers. In my first conversa-

tions with him he is intensely serious, almost military in the precision with which he describes to me what he is doing here. I like this. I like the clarity of it, though I wonder if I will ever get to see a softer side of him on camera.

THE HEAT

After lunch I find my way to my bed in the boys' dormitory, where I collapse. I've been in Malemba for four hours. I am stupefied by the heat. There is no air-conditioning. There is no functioning electric fan. For awhile there has not been much electricity. For the past week the place has depending on a tiny Honda generator to keep computer batteries charged and the radio up and running. Arnaud was ecstatic that we brought a replacement part for the base's main generator.

A RISKY PROPOSITION

It cools off a bit in the late afternoon. I have a formal meeting with the expats in which I explain what I hope to do with this film and I invite their participation. I think there is an appreciation of the fact that this film in not being forced on them. I will spend a week here. I will sit down, one-on-one with the expats and their Congolese assistants and I will visit their projects in the field. At the end of the week they will tell me if they accept my proposition to come here and live with them and make this film.

It's a risky proposition to come all this way and then put the fate of the project in the hands of field workers. The usual approach would be to work out a deal with Action Against Hunger's New York headquarters, then show up with a crew. We'd shoot for a couple of weeks (manipulating and re-creating events where needed) and then get out. This is different. If I come back I want to come back for at least 10 weeks. I want to see things unfold. I want to get to know people. I want them to feel that we are making this film together. Does this sound too touchy-feely? The bottom line is that for this kind of film to work people have to want to be a part of it.

THE MAI MAI

That afternoon our meeting was interrupted by an official messenger who arrived, unannounced, from the territorial administrator of the district of Malemba Nkulu. The territorial administrator is the highest-ranking civilian in the district which includes not only the town of Malemba but dozens of other villages within a 100-kilometer radius comprising the Malemba Nkulu district.

The messenger bears a letter ordering Action Against Hunger to provide a Land Rover to transport the territorial administrator to peace negotiations with Mai Mai rebels in a distant village. Arnaud politely but firmly refuses. Lending assistance to one side or another in a conflict is strictly against AAH rules, not to mention the fact that AAH needs the few vehicles it's got full time.

Peace negotiations? That would imply that a state of war still exists here in Malemba. It does... and it doesn't. Peace has been proclaimed on a national scale by the agreement arrived at in the Sun City negotiations in December. But the national peace – the "big peace" – must be ratified and bolstered by local agreements.

Here representatives of the Congolese government and military are still in the midst of discussions with a loose network in indigenous rebel militiamen that call themselves Mai Mai. Some estimates say there are as many at 10,000 in the bush, claiming allegiance to a bewildering array of leaders. The Mai Mai practice a kind of magic that they believe makes them immune to bullets. They are alternately perceived as Robin Hoods or hoodlums. On the one hand they are native sons, credited with protecting villagers from the predations of hungry and unpaid FAC soldiers, on the other hand they are seen as the minions of warlords who are protecting their own turf.

A couple of days after I arrive in Malemba enroute to a village clinic, we encounter a Mai Mai column, most likely heading to the same peace negotiations as the territorial administrator. They are young boys mostly. A couple have automatic rifles. The rest, nothing. Some are dressed in the oversized uniforms of their enemies. Others wear T-shirts and flip-flops and gigantic sunglasses, which gave their thin, malnourished adolescent faces an owlish aspect. One man, perhaps the oldest, is wearing a strange hat almost covering his eyes, with a double cross on it. He is also carrying a fetish made from feathers and skins. This group of men and boys looks pathetic to me... and slightly ridiculous. For me there is this kind of "disconnect" between what I see and what I know. What I see are thin boys, mothers' sons, who seem in no way dangerous. What I know is that during the five years of tangled war and shifting allegiances, these child soldiers have proven themselves to be no less murderous and brutal towards the civilian population than the invaders.

I sense there is also this kind of dichotomy for the AAH staff. Macabee, the best known Mai Mai leader in the region, has made gifts of a chicken and a goat to Mariona to signal his appreciation for the health clinic she rebuilt in his village of Musao. He's been supportive of AAH's mission in the region and this support has eased the way for the collaborations with villagers. But in a place where a popular leader's grip on power is constantly being challenged, it is dangerous to get too close.

The Mai Mai courteously step aside to let our Rover pass. Pleasantries are exchanged with our driver and we are on our way. We radio back to base that we have encountered them. The same column has also been noted by another AAH vehicle that passed the same way a few hours before. A code word is used to identify them as well as the location where they were seen. This is AAH's intelligence-gathering system. Vehicles are constantly radioing back to base who and what they are encountering along the road. If large or sudden movements of troops or refugees are noted, heightened security procedures go into effect.

Parenthetically, the efficacy of AAH's intelligence network is such that the three or four United Nations observers based in Malemba sometimes visit Arnaud for briefings on local conditions. In fact they are held in utter contempt by Arnaud and the other NGO heads working here. Not one of them speaks a word of French, the universal language in the Congo, and they rarely venture forth from their lodgings in a local monastery, relying almost entirely on the NGOs for their "observations" of the local situation.

MEANWHILE, BACK HOME

February 7, 2003

During breakfast in the paillotte I fiddle with Arnaud's short-wave radio. Without much trouble I pick up the signal of Voice of America in Africa... The U.S. government's "information" radio to the world. A bulletin informs us that Homeland Security has just upped the terrorist alert warning to "orange level" and that sales of duct tape are booming in anticipated defense against a biochemical attack. The French here just shake their heads and smile. From here, "homeland security," sounds like the title of an absurdist play by Ionesco or Havel.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

February 8, 2003

Two days after encountering the Mai Mai column I am in the bush with Mariona. She's looking for a supply of fired bricks to build latrines at the health center in Lubindoy. Lubindoy is also the site of a FAC base and, as we're standing there bargaining over a pile of bricks, a big military helicopter churns overhead and lands in an adjacent field. Suddenly a lot of men, women and boys are rushing towards the chopper ululating. Word is that chopper contains a high ranking FAC general, Malemba's territorial administrator, and the governor of the entire province of Katanga. Nobody is sure why they are here (it must have something to do with the peace talks) but suddenly the situation feels volatile.

Mariona asks me to stand next to her. I put on my sunglasses and try to look tough. Mariona's worries have to do with the fact that she's had a run-in with the local FAC commander. A couple of weeks ago he tried to commandeer Mariona's Rover to carry soldiers to Malemba. She, by sheer force of personality, talked him down. She made his armed soldiers to get out of the Rover and walk the 25 kilometers from Lubindoy to Malemba. The man was humiliated in front of his men by a white woman.

It turns out we are in no danger. The bigwigs in the chopper have bigger fish to fry. And within half an hour we know from the bush telegraph why they are here: Peace negotiations with the Mai Mai have gone well and the FAC is withdrawing. Also a unit of the PPU, the president's elite guard, is pulling out of Malemba.

The people in the health clinic are guardedly happy. Lately the head count at the outpatient feeding center has been down because soldiers have been stopping mothers coming into the village and demanding a toll in money or food. Now people are rushing home to hide their bicycles because the soldiers are going door to door, grabbing bikes to ride to their next post.

Overall, the withdrawal is good news. At least the people seem to be happy about it. There will be fewer predators around. The caveat is that it leaves the region under the defacto control of the Mai Mai, but the hope is that because they belong to the region and have family ties here, they are less likely to create mischief. (In the end the pullout of the FAC will become an important factor in my decision to return here.)

PAPA BONA

February 8, 2003

I begin my week long survey with a series of interviews with the expats and their Congolese assistants, sitting side by side. I want to get to know them, and I also I want to know what, in the work that they do, they are proud of. What is worth filming?

Mariona Miret, the watsan, and her assistant, Bonaventure Kabangu Mpotongo (Papa Bona) are the first. On paper Bona works for Mariona, but she freely admits that he is her guide and teacher. Just about everything she's learned in the three months since she's arrived in Congo she's learned from him. How to build buildings with rudimentary tools and resources, how to negotiate with laborers, how to talk with village elders.

Despite Mariona's appreciation, Bona is stiff and deferential in the joint interview. He rattles off his qualifications as if this were a job application and looks to Mariona for cues. I will come to realize that this formality and deference is a universal quality in relationships between the expatriates and the Congolese staff. I do not think it is because the expats demand it. Rather the Congolese adhere to it for a complex reasons that I am just beginning to understand.

I invite Papa Bona to talk with me separately. He's more open when he sits down with me a couple of days later. I have the sense of a man with a strong spirit; a survivor. In consideration of my poor French, he chooses his phrases carefully. He is patient.

Bona was born in Katanga province in 1955, [CHECK] five years before Belgian Congo became independent. His father had solid jobs working for a European-owned cotton export company and then for a railroad, and could afford to send his son to primary school and missionary-run secondary school. Bona's third year of highschool, in a village near the Angola border, ended when mercenaries massacred the Catholic priests who were his teachers. Despite this trauma, Bona eventually found his way to university in Lubumbashi from where he graduated with a degree in industrial sociology in 1976.

After a fruitless year looking for work, Bona went to visit friends in Manono (to the east of Malemba) where he had never been. Here he received news of his father's death, but when he tried to leave Manono to attend the funeral he found his way blocked by outlaw factions that controlled the bush. Unable to leave, Bona stayed in Manono, got a job as a school principal, got married, and, over 18 years, had 10 children with his wife.

On the 8 th of May, 1999 (this date is vividly imprinted) Papa Bona and his family woke up to discover that rebels had invaded Manono. Bona was barely able to retrieve his university diploma from his office before they had to flee into the bush with little more than the clothes on their backs. After two difficult months in the bush they arrived in the safe zone of Malemba. There Bona's wife died giving birth to their eleventh child.

Bona, thanks to his education, was able to get a job working for AAH as a logistician and then later as a water sanitation engineer with Mariona. He supports his 10 children, three of whom are at university in Lubumbashi.

Bona is glad for his job with AAH. As a refugee it would be hard for him to get work in Malemba as a teacher, since preference is given to local candidates. Even if he did get a job he'd be lucky to earn $10 U.S. a month, barely enough to live on, let alone pay the university tuition of $120 a year for his three children in Lubumbashi.

HYGIENE AND SUPERSTITION

February 9, 2003

I spend a day with Papa Bona, accompanying him on his rounds to the health center at Kamambulu, a village on the Congo river which, until recently, has bordered on rebel-held territory. Bona must have come through this way when he fled with his family from Manono.

He is proud of the work that he and Mariona have done here. His workers are putting the finishing touches on a new thatched-roof, brick building that will serve as a maternity ward. Deep, rectangular brick-lined shafts are also under construction. These will be latrines for the health center which, when completed, should lower the risks of the next cholera epidemic.

Bona gets word there's a problem with a nearby AAH well. We go to take a look and find that its bucket has fallen in. The man appointed to be the well's guardian expects that AAH will come to rescue but Bona encourages him to find a way to fish out the bucket himself. I get the feeling that this sort of conversation is repeated many times. Often people just want the NGOs to take care of them. Teaching people to take the initiative to take care of themselves is hard work.

Mariona concurs. Only half her job is doing things like building wells and refurbishing structures. The other half is education. It's harder to show the results of education... there are no pictures that you can take of results to impress donor agencies. Yet education is by far the most important aspect of the work being done by NGOs. Without it nothing will change.

To show me what she's up against, Mariona takes me to visit a natural source from which villagers have been taking water for generations. It's a putrid pool surrounded by dense vegetation. At Mariona's instigation, tree branches have been laid around the pool, forming a platform from which people can take their water. This cuts down on the contamination of the pool by fecal matter that is picked up on the soles of the feet.

For Mariona the tree-branch platform is a victory, but it is only half of what needs to be done. The particular leafy vegetation surrounding the pool is a magnet for malaria mosquitos and should be cleared. But it is difficult to persuade villagers to do this. Water sources are protected by guardian spirits and one risks offending them by rearranging the landscape.

The battle against ignorance and superstition is fought on a daily basis by *animateurs* – teachers who address the villagers who come to the health clinics and feeding centers. At Lubindoy a hygiene class is in progress. Mothers and children listen on benches under the shade of a spreading tree. At first I mistake the *animateur* for a priest because he is dressed in a long white robe and he is calling upon his audience with all the fire and fervor of a Baptist preacher. He is certainly animated. His visual aids are cartoon-like paintings that show good versus bad hygiene: A man using in a latrine; a man defecating in the woods; a polluted water source and a protected one, boiling water, washing hands, etc. Such simple measures save lives.

SERIOUS DOUBTS

Today I have my first taste of goat for lunch. It is a staple here. Beef and pork are nonexistent. Occasionally there is chicken or fish from the river. The goat kebabs are extremely well cooked, tough and desiccated. In time I will grow to loathe goat meat.

The generator is broken again. I start to write and my computer battery gives out. I give up and lie in bed in a kind of stupor. It's really hot. Too hot to move around. Too hot to lie still. This heat is all-consuming, enervating, exhausting. I take a shower. There is only cold water but in

this climate that is in no way a liability. Around 5:30 in the evening it's a little cooler outside, but now the mosquitos arrive, which makes hanging out a health risk.

Have I mentioned that the roads here are worse that you could possibly imagine? Consider a brand new Land Rover, the toughest vehicle on earth. Its life span here is two years or about 60,000 miles. It takes an hour to go six to 10 miles - one hour of bone-jarring, teeth-rattling, mind-numbing ordeal. Many AAH health centers, like the one I visited with Bona in Kamambulu, are three to four hours away from base. It's against security rules to drive at night, so one leaves at 6 AM, drives for four hours, spends four hours on location and drives back four hours. I don't know how they do this, day after day. One trip to Kamambulu practically kills me. Quite apart from the creative and logistical viability of making a film here I am having some serious doubts about being here for 10 weeks.

LES VULNÉRABLES

February 10, 2003

Les Vulnérables is a term that is used to identify those in the general population who are *most* vulnerable. In Alex's Food Security Program a huge amount of effort has been going into making and checking a list of 5,000 individuals in the Malemba region who qualify as *vulnérables.* In about two months AAH will give them kits containing seeds, farming implements, and fishing nets - enough for a family that has been dispossessed by war to make a new beginning.

I go with Alex and his assistant, Kinekinda, to the village of Kobozya to meet with village officials who have been asked to help identify the *vulnérables* in their locality. The ride is along flat, sandy roads flanked by man-high grass. Women with baskets on their heads merge into the tall grass to get out of the way of the Rover and completely disappear from sight.

AAH's rural development agent in Kobozya was down with malaria so, after a meeting with the village committee, Alex decides to do his own spot check of designated recipients to see if they fit the "vulnerable" criteria.

Before each thatched hut the procedure is the same. Kinankinda approaches and calls out from a respectful distance. A man or woman emerges and invite us to sit under the shade of a tree while neighbors bring extra chairs. After introductions, Kinekinda translates David's questions to the Kiluba language. "What do you do for a living? How many children do you have? How many meals do you eat a day?"

Most of the people we talk with are women, surrounded by hordes of children in rags. Most eat at least one meal a day. But some talk of going for three days without eating.

We speak with a fisherman who says he can not fish because he has no nets. Surprisingly, he speaks both French and English, which makes Alex suspicious. Since he has some education it would seem that he would be able to get other employment.

One woman makes money by walking 50 kilometers to buy bottles of palm oil in a village where it is manufactured. She brings the oil home and divides it into smaller amounts which she resells at a small profit. She buys four or five liters of oil for 70 to 80 Congolese francs each, then sells it for 120 francs. Her profit from 5 liters is 250 francs (about 50 cents) for four days of walking.

One man is a widower. According to local custom his wife's family was able to exercise their right to confiscate everything he owned after his wife's death, including the children. One might call this death alimony.

We don't know the origin of this custom but we imagine it is a kind of community-sanctioned threat to make sure husbands take care of their wives. The widower whom we talk to still owes a huge debt to his in-laws and until he pays off this debt he is forbidden, by custom, from using certain forms of personal address, from cutting his hair, and from bathing. He is utterly destitute. There is no doubt he qualifies as a *vulnérable.*

Every man, woman or child that I see looks to me to be to be deserving of help. Everyone is poor. But only some are *vulnérables*. There are degrees of poverty.

THE FEEDING CENTER

As I expected, I had to corner Stephanie to get her to do a personal interview with me. She is very shy. She mumbles and swallows her answers, but I get a totally different impression when I ask her to give me a tour of the feeding center for acute malnutrition (CNT) in Malemba. Here she explains to me her work with clarity and aplomb.

I learn that there are two main types of protein-energy malnutrition. In *marasmus* malnutrition the child is 60 percent or less of the standard weight for age. The body is wizened, the face gaunt, and limbs are like matchsticks. By contrast children with *kwashiorkor* malnutrition don't, at first glance, look malnourished. The key symptoms are edemas (a swelling caused by the accumulation of fluids) on the feet, hands and face. Sometimes this is accompanied by patches of excess skin pigmentation and peeling. The child is apathetic and will not eat. The word *kwashiorkor* comes from the Ga language of Ghana, where the disease was first described in the 1930s. In the cases of both *kwashiorkor* and *marasmus,* nourishing the child back to life is quite a delicate process. When children arrive at the CNT many of them are close to death. They are weighed, measured and examined for diseases in addition to malnutrition and started on a three-day regime of specially formulated milk. The concentration of calories they receive increases as their bodies adjust to the unaccustomed intake of nourishment. After three or four days they graduate to Phase II, and are given a richer milk. Eventually, over the course of a few weeks, they start eating solid food.

I find it hard to film the mothers and children in the Phase I area. These are the new arrivals with the most acute symptoms of marasmus and kwishiorkor. Just blank vacant stares looking back at me. I am not able to make the connection that I usually do when I am filming people. By contrast, in the Phase II and Phase III hangars (large plastic-covered shelters), where the children are on the road back to health, there are more smiles, more affect.

Once I finish the tour with Stephanie I walk around the grounds with a tripod getting shots of the compound. Visually the place is striking... the AAH hangars lie in the shadow of an old hospital, which seems to be abandoned and inhabited by squatters.

Whenever I set down the camera a dozen or so children and adults gather at a respectful distance from the lens to pose for their portrait. Eventually I contrive a way to get candid shots. I frame a composition, turn on the camera and walk away, as if contemplating some other view.

COURAGE

February 12, 2003

Like Stephanie, back in France David Doledec would just be a regular shift nurse on a hospital ward. Here he and his right-hand man, Kabila Wa Nsenga Kawans, are ultimately responsible for eight Health Centers spread out over a 100-kilometer radius. I asked them what they thought would be the best way to show their work. They suggested I film a new clinic on its opening day and follow it over time as David and Papa Kabila provide hands on training to the staff. David says it's great to see how the nurses gradually gain confidence until they are able to function on their own. This correlates with something that Alex has said to me: "The most important thing we can give them is courage... In this country people used to be able to act

independently to take care of themselves, but this has been undermined by the war.... It is necessary now to rebuild that."

My own courage is failing. It is near the end of my visit here. Yesterday I was ready to give up on Malemba despite the fact that the reception I have been getting bodes well for a film. I was completely crushed by the heat and simply could not fathom being here for two months. I could not imagine working, let alone engaging in rational cognitive processes, under these conditions.

In the middle of the night there is thunder and lightning and a blessed downpour, bringing the temperature down to a bearable level. I sleep well. This morning there is a general meeting to consider the prospect of the film with the entire AAH staff, from the administrative level down to the cleaners. Good, challenging questions are posed, mostly by the Congolese who have had less of an opportunity to get to know me. What are your reasons for coming here? Who will see this film? How will you distribute it? Will we get to see it when it is done? It is a challenge to respond to such a large group in French.

In the end Arnaud asks for an indication of whether people are in favor of the film. Everyone says they really hope I will come. There are no dissenters. I feel honored.

I've worked really hard to get this understanding and acceptance. Now the question is: "Can I do it? Can Wes do it?" I start to reconsider last night's qualms about coming back. It seems such a unique opportunity. No time to lose heart and wimp out.

QUESTION OF LODGING

At lunch I talk to the expats about ways to create a level of comfort that would make this place us. The big issue is lodging. I explain that I'm an old man, relatively speaking. I like my comforts and am not prepared to live communally in the boy's dorm. I know Wes would feel the same way.

After discussing various possibilities, such as renting a room from another NGO in Malemba, Arnaud suggests that they simply build a house for us. Mariona who is the base's defacto architect and contractor, thinks it's perfectly feasible. Together she and Arnaud sketch out a plan for a house with two rooms separated by a bathroom. Water from 55-gallon drums on the roof would feed a sink and a shower. The toilet would be flushed with buckets. They would also make a bed long enough for me to sleep in. We could buy a couple of electric fans and bring them up from Lubumbashi. The house would be a traditional structure with a concrete floor and thatched roof, much cooler than the European option of sheet metal. I would pay for labor and materials. The entire cost would be about $1,500.

It feels terribly selfish to demand such comforts and privacy when the expats here live under spartan conditions and never seem to complain about anything, not to mention the demands placed on Mariona's time when she could be out building more wells and latrines. Then I remind myself that no television crew I have ever worked with (before I started doing my own shooting) would ever consent to this job – even under these "improved" conditions. Also we all hope that this film, when it is finished, will benefit the work that AAH is doing.

SUMMING UP

This is the place where AAH and a handful of other NGOs (some more or less compromised by political considerations) are trying to do something... anything to give people the means to move forward, to dig themselves out of a hole of ignorance and misery. As Alex says, above all, "...we are here to try to give people some courage" the courage they need to take their destiny into their own hands. It seems to me to be quixotic but also heroic. As Vaclav Havel once wrote, during the dark days of his political imprisonment in communist Czechoslovakia, "Hope is not a rational expectation that everything will turn out all right in the end." Here it is something you work at, day in and day out, taking whatever comfort you can when a child lives rather than dies, when soldiers pull back from their forward posts, when villagers risk offending the spirits by laying tree trunks by the edge of their sacred forest pool, when a nurse gives his first injection

with confidence, when someone perseveres in extracting a fallen bucket from the depths of a well rather than waiting for others to come to the rescue.

I leave Malemba with mixed feelings of hope and dread. Even before visiting the other locations on my scouting trip itinerary I know that, deep down, am pulled to come back here. Will my funder accept my proposal for Malemba? How can I justify it over the other options? And if my funder does accept my proposal, what then? Will they really be able to build a house for me in the six weeks before I must return? Am I truly up to making this film?

THE ALTERNATIVES

Early March, 2003

I retrace my steps... Malemba, Lumbumbashi, Kinshasa... and then two delightful and blessed days in Paris, where I eat my fill of excellent food, sleep late, and walk the cool streets with gratitude.

I do go to Central Asia, specifically the fertile Ferghana Valley, where the borders of the former Soviet republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan converge. The American NGO that has invited me to visit its operations is working to ease cross-border ethnic conflicts by involving villagers in projects that require them to work with their neighbors.

Our government is pumping huge sums of money into the region in the wake of September 11 th. If the "stick" is being used in Afghanistan and Iraq, the "carrot" is being proffered in the surrounding "stans" to keep the influence of terrorists at bay. As a result the NGO I visit is rolling in dough. It is also under a lot of pressure to launch construction on projects so that it has something physical to show to the folks back in Washington. It is not uncommon, when some big cheese from D.C. shows up, to quickly fix a pump, paint a school, or otherwise spruce up a specific location so that a good impression will be created and the dollars will keep flowing in.

It is here that I get a whiff of what a racket the humanitarian aid business can be; huge per diems and tax-free incomes for administrators to push paper in "hardship locations," whose sole purpose is to get the USAID dollars rolling in, irrespective of the actual conditions and needs on the ground.

Physical infrastructure (gas lines, water lines, schools) sells well. On the other hand helping to create civil society is a good and lasting thing but it is harder to measure, to evaluate. I do meet one tenacious field officer who is resisting the pressure to quickly build things in favor of working more slowly with communities to ensure their full participation in projects... a participation which hopefully will translate into self-empowerment and the independent skills to create a better future.

I have a lot of interesting adventures in the Ferghana Valley (see my letters from Central Asia) but both my heart and my professional assessment of the situation convince me that this is not a place to make a film. The problem with making a documentary here is that, if one follows the process of creating a civil society, what you would mostly witness would be community meetings, meetings with government officials, meetings with contractors, meetings with village heads – everything conducted in Uzbek, Tajik, Kirgyz and Russian. Occasionally these meetings would be punctuated by a colorful village celebration, some labor on a pipeline, paint going on the walls of a school but there's little visual drama here. I realize the situation will be the same in Kosovo, where the same NGO is running similar programs, so I cancel my visit there.

In Africa the heart of the work is also about getting people to learn to take control of their lives, but there the environment is more striking and the conditions are more dire. Decisions can make the difference between life and death. In other words the stakes in Africa are more obvious; the consequences of success and/or failure rapidly apparent. That is the argument I will use with my funder to promote a film about Malemba.

DREAMS COME TRUE

March 13, 2003

Dreams come true. My funder has agreed to a film in the Congo. I return in 2½ weeks. So now I am in the midst of feverish pre-production activity. This mostly consists of imagining what can go wrong on a shoot 2,000 miles and days away from the nearest camera store, where intense humidity can damage tape and electronics, generator surges can destroy computers, and the smallest oversight, like forgetting to bring enough 9-volt batteries, can develop into a major production problem.

I am by nature an obsessive list maker, so you could say I am in my element. Ah the elegance, the finesse, the sheer beauty of the lists I am making! They are much more than lists, in fact they are a kind of magical talisman against disaster, disease, despair, and the like. Wes and I discovered that a good way to assuage anxiety is to go to REI and buy stuff. Flashlights, clothes, hats, and various camping doodads.... Berkeley dudes go to Africa.

Yesterday I took time out and went for a long walk with a journalist friend whose advice I value greatly. He reinforced how important historical context is for a film in the Congo. Without it it would be hard for most Americans to grasp the conditions there. I agree. The obvious question is "How did things get to be this bad?" What is the root cause of suffering of this destitute and lawless society? Was it European colonialism? Was it Mobutu's dictatorship, propped up by Western powers? Is it the Congolese people themselves who failed to muster the political will to confront those who would exploit them?

HISTORY

Looking for answers, I do my homework. Adam Hochschild's thorough book, *King Leopold's Ghost*, tells the story of the Belgian King's exploitation and colonization of the Congo. It's a horrific tale of mass murder, mutilation, and slavery right on into the early 20 th century.

I hadn't realized that Joseph Conrad, the author of *The Heart of Darkness*, had actually been a river boat captain on the Congo in the 1890s and that what the world of literary criticism has largely taken as a cautionary tale about colonialism is based on Conrad's own encounters with real people. The heart of darkness was a real place. The fictional character of Kurtz was partially modeled on a real Belgian ivory trader who collected human trophies. The actual site of Kurtz's compound (ringed with human heads set on stakes) was just a couple hundred miles down river from Malemba.

The last chapters of the book are about the Congo Reform Movement... headed by some far-thinking humanitarians who took considerable risks to call Leopold to account for his brutal exploitation of the country and its people for his own personal gain. It is estimated that some 10 million Congolese died between 1890 and 1913 as a result of forced labor to harvest ivory and wild rubber. In the years leading up to World War I, the reform movement was successful in stirring up considerable international censure of Leopold's abuses and effectively put an end to them....but while Britain, France, and Germany were indignantly condemning Leopold and Belgium they were quietly carrying on their own forms of forced labor in adjacent African states.

By World War II, the history of the exploitation of the Congo had been obliterated from the government archives of European nations – so much so, that when in 1974, a Belgium consular official in Kinshasa read an article in a Liberian newspaper referring to his country's exploitation of the Congo he sought to refute the "slander"... only to discover, after some persistent digging, that it was all true.

History is full of ironies: Within months of Congo's independence its first democratically elected leader was assassinated with the support of the CIA. He is replaced by Mobutu, who seemed a perfect clone of the rapacious Belgian King.

A book by the BBC correspondent Michela Wrong, picks up where Hochschild's book leaves off. *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz; Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo* chronicles a litany of greed, abuse of power, and theft on a grand scale that is simply mind-numbing.

The pattern, under Mobutu's regime, has been one of repeatedly killing the goose that laid the golden egg. The Congo has offered many golden eggs: uranium, copper, gold, cotton, diamonds, and a host of precious metals in quantities only dreamed of in other parts of the world. By rights it should be one of the richest nations in the world. Yet it is one of the poorest because in the taking of its precious resources first by Europeans, then by Mobutu himself, there has been no thought for the nurturing of infrastructure, education, rule of law, social justice.

Equally astonishing is the blind complicity of the World Bank and the IMF, which for 20 years paid for this dictator's lavish palaces, fleets of private Mercedes, Boeing jets, and payoffs to political cronies. Anything to keep the heart of Africa from the Soviets. The result is a country and a population that is demoralized by a century of economic rape and pillage. First by Leopold, then by the Belgian government itself, and finally by its own leader, who could not have survived for 30 years without the support and compliance of the United States and European powers.

The CIA agents and World Bank officials that Ms. Wrong interviewed for her book say that they have no regrets... they say it was a different world back then, during the Cold War. But one can't help but feel that American presidents and Western European leaders could have taken a more nuanced view of the communist threat, a view that would not have compelled them to become complicit in consigning the populations of Third World nations to unending squalor and poverty.

If a country were a person, and available for psychological diagnosis, one could say that the Congo is in deep and chronic depression. There is no hope for a better future because history, time and again, has shown that such hopes are a mirage. Theft, graft and fraud – relentless taking without expectation of consequences – are bred in the bone because, for those at the bottom it is the only way to stay alive and for those at the top it is the only way of staying on top.

THE FATHER AND SON THING

March 24, 2003

One week to go and counting. Meanwhile, we've started a war. My Berkeley friends are going to demonstrations and getting arrested. I don't listen to the news or look at papers. It makes me feel angry and impotent. I much prefer to immerse myself in my preparations for the Congo which, I convince myself, is something useful to do. Jan feels the same way, but at the same time this cuts us off from our friends and neighbors who are so engaged.

I've have also been talking to Wes about what to expect. Wes is my wife Jan's son. I have known him half his life (he is now 32) and have come to think of myself as his father. When he opted to go back to college to study broadcast journalism and production I did my best to dissuade him from this impractical and silly idea. Now he works for me during those stretches when I have the budget to employ him. From the start he's not been keen on the idea of Africa. I have shown him clips from the material I shot in Malemba on the scouting trip. He is, by turns, excited and worried. The other day I reluctantly gave him a printout on medical and security issues in the Congo. I wanted him to have a grasp of the larger realities of the place but I didn't want to alarm him unnecessarily.

Now he's having nightmares, sleeping poorly and being quite tense and snappish around us. I keep telling him that it will be all right, that we'll get out if there is any trouble, and that I have a lot of confidence in Action Against Hunger to keep us safe. Actually, neither Jan nor I think it is the physical dangers that will be most challenging to Wes. Rather it's the isolation. He's a sociable guy, some would say something of a party animal. He's also a young man with a lot of anxiety. Suddenly he's parachuted from the San Francisco club scene to a compound in a jungle where most people do not speak his language and there is nowhere to go. Jan worries that he'll sink into depression. On the other hand maybe he'll discover inner resources he's been too busy partying to know that he has. And perhaps if he lives through this and faces his fears (I know he will, one way or another) the anxieties and burdens of ordinary life will loom less large.

The trick for me is not to play therapist, which I am perilously prone to doing... but just to be there and be available. And also not to indulge in archetypal behavior... for, you see, in the back of my head, there really is this father-son thing going on. Here I am taking my "son" into the jungle on a kind of rite of passage. He's afraid, but so is every young person on the threshold of manhood, self-knowledge, etc. I have this yearning to be his mentor. Does he want me to be? The fiction between us is that I am his employer and he has a job working for me. OK, so that's not a fiction, but it feels to me like such a small part of what is going on here. And I have to keep pinching myself not to presume for it to be anything else, which, in an odd kind of way, is a means of showing respect and support for him.

CONFIDENCE

March 30, 2003

Pema Chodron, the Zen Buddhist abbess and author, writes that people are constantly trying to "get ground under their feet" and never really succeeding. What she means by this is that we are always looking for reassurance, emotionally, materially, politically and that we are forever engaged in a frenzy of self-enrichment. And we rarely stop to hear the music or smell the flowers. In the past three or four days I've found myself in the unusual situation of smelling a few flowers. I've reached the limit of asking for – and getting – all the ground under my feet that I could wish for. Which is to say I am <u>really</u> ready to go to the Congo.

We are packed, vaccinated, documented, and insured. I have built redundancies into our equipment package and I have arranged for our evacuation in case of medical emergency. In the midst of our war with Iraq I have sparred with paranoid airline officials about the contents of our equipment cases. I have obtained new currency bills in small denominations, a shortwave radio, a fancy airtight case with silica gel for humidity sensitive cameras, a final dose of rabies vaccine to administered to me and Wes in Lubumbashi, books to read, CDs to listen to, and on and on.

When I run out of things to do for the trip I pay bills, clean the house, cut the kindling, fix the barbecue, and cook dinner for Jan. And finally, the blessing of it all: I spend some real quality time with Wes, his sister Andrea, and Jan – talking, listening without being distracted, eager to go off and finish some task or another.. because all the tasks are done.

NEW YORK

April 4, 2003

Jan and I have had four good days together in New York, interstitial time, going to galleries, movies, visiting with my family and friends and making a point of not dwelling on the war. We visited the New York headquarters of Action Against Hunger. It is nice to connect in person with the people I've been talking to on the phone for the past three months. It reinforces my feelings that I have made the right choice in working with this organization. No detectable political agenda, no bullshit. They have a lot of anxiety about losing their funding as a result of the Iraq war, as USAID pays a portion of the Congo budget.

Finally, we're going. I am sitting in JFK airport this evening, where it is impossible to escape from loudspeakers broadcasting MSNBC and CNN blow-by-blow accounts of the attack on Baghdad. War as spectator sport. Too bad no one's been watching the Congo in the past five years.

KINSAHSA AGAIN

April 5, 2003

Our arrival in Kinshasa is like what I had feared the first time: There is no one waiting for us.

We are immediately surrounded and hemmed in by porters and drivers all wanting to "help" us. I am able to borrow a cell phone from a U.N. soldier to call AAH to find out what was up... It turns out the driver was delayed in traffic. So with the help of an army of "protectors" we wrestle all our equipment away from another army of wannabe helpers and sit tight in the baggage claim until Tcheeze, the protocol, arrives and rescues us.

Hamouta (AAH's financial administrator) and Laurent (AAH's chief logistician) are extremely pissed off at the driver being late and give him a major dressing down. They are tense because last week there was a security incident participants in a funeral tried to hijack one of AAH's trucks to carry the coffin. The driver managed to drive away, but not before he was struck in the face with a stone. People get very emotional here during funerals, which makes them a risky situation.

We are invited out to dinner at a fancy restaurant with other AAH folks by a Lebanese businessman who supplies fishing nets for the food security programs. Wes seems in good spirits. People welcome him and make an effort to speak English. He has an annoying tendency to echo the last word or phrase of what is being said to him... it's kind of a nervous habit which I think bugs me more than others. But I try not to interfere and let him find his own way.

SUPREME RAP

April 6, 2003

I've planned to make good use of our time in Kinshasa while waiting for the documents we need to go to the interior. I've asked Dominique, a French-Canadian anthropologist, who is doing some free-lance work for AAH, to research the local music scene. My hope is to record some live music that could be used in the sound track of the film. Dominique, a fearless woman, has found her own unique solution to living with the security risks of Kinshasa. She loves to go out at night and taste the vibrant cultural life of the city in dives where few expats dare to venture Her protection: a string of adoring dance partners who double as her defacto bodyguards.

It's one of these bodyguards who accompanies us to our first audition with Supreme Rap Kinshasa. In the late evening we set out for the outer slums of the city amid a huge thunderstorm. Our Rover crawls at a snail's pace through large crowds hunched under against of the torrent with lightning flashing in every quarter.

In the backyard of a slum hovel, Olivier, Shadow, Fafy and Dr. Ken, welcome us gravely. They are four twenty something boys who comprise the group Supreme Rap Kinshasa. We are given four chairs to sit on and, there in the lessening rain, they rap for us... songs about poverty, oppression, humanitarian organizations, and the need for Africa to get itself together. I don't usually like rap but I sense that this is coming from the heart. It is not about a pose or an attitude. We invite Supreme Rap Kinshasa to do a recording session with us on the following day.

CULTURE SHOCK

April 7, 2003 Near midnight.

My clock says it is 86 degrees in my room. I can't sleep and taking another sleeping pill tonight would be overdoing it. It was a good day, except for the end.

The rappers come to a recording session which Wes and I set up on the patio of one of AAH's residences. They are terrific. So is Wes. I don't know if it will work in the film, but it is nice to roll some tape at last. We sweat torrents. I keep worrying that my sweat will run into the video eyepiece of the camera and destroy the delicate electronics inside.

We show the rappers themselves on playback. They listen to the sound and pronounce it "impeccable," better than anything they have been able to achieve in a Kinshasa studio.

After a brief respite and lots of drinks of water the next act shows up: Laviniora-Esthetique is comprised of a male lead singer, a back-up chorus, and someone they call the "animator" – a contrapuntal voice that alternates with the chorus, often in a high, falsetto range. There are drums and guitars and a guy whose instrument is nothing more than a fragment of a cardboard box placed on top of a chair which he beats with drumsticks. They sing, *L'Amour au Prochain,* a plaintive song, yearning for peace. Most of the words are in Lingala but the refrain is in French: "Oh the pity, have pity on the people of this war-torn land..." It is haunting and beautiful.

The heat wears us down to the point where we are running on automatic. I stop worrying about getting good images because, after all we are just doing this for the sound. When it is over Wes and I put the gear away in a stupor. He says he is dying of hunger so Dominique suggests we go

to a popular neighborhood to eat grilled brochettes. Wes was is so hungry he eats a good bit of chicken before he notices that it is dangerously undercooked.

More dismay when we get back to the residence. There is no electricity and the place is sweltering. Some fish has gone bad in the fridge and even our water bottles are impregnated with the stench. Wes gets very quiet and sits down on his bed in a state of shock. The heat, not being able to speak French, extreme culture shock and jet lag finally catch up with him. I feel terribly responsible.

Later I think I hear him weeping. Without letting on, I go in and offer to try and raise someone on the radio (our hosts are out) to see if we can get moved to another house. He rejects this idea. "Aren't you upset too?" he asks me.

"Yes, of course I am, but it's different, because I have been through this kind of experience before." For Wes it is a whole new ball game.

I let him alone for awhile and try to sleep but I can't. I feel, somehow I really have to go in and talk to him. I want to tell him that what he is going through is not a preview of the three months to come; that we will have some hard times and some good times but that he should not, in his despair, feel that this is the way it is going to be.

I tell him that I love him. I tell him that tomorrow we will sort things out and get other rooms if need be and that I really want to be there for him. All this is true. And I think he hears me. He said he loves me too, he just wishes he had a big bottle of ice cold water, a real mosquito net instead of a room sprayed with insecticide, a bed that doesn't have lumps in it and an electric fan (if not an air-conditioner) that works. I tell him these are utterly reasonable desires and that I will do my best to get them for him.

April 8, 2003

Things look better in the light of day. In the morning we hang out with Laurent's Kenyan wife, who speaks English. Wes and Linah are able to compare their notes on Kinshasa (she dislikes it intensely) which in an odd kind of way seems to cheer Wes up. It is a relief to him to have a personal conversation with a sympathetic person other than me. Also Cathy has returned from her break today, calm and well rested, and at my request takes Wes aside and embarks on a three-hour one-on-one security and history briefing. I can still hear them at it, outside on the veranda. She is telling him the entire history of the Congo, humanitarian aid to the region and the current political and military situation. I am sure this is more than Wes ever wanted to hear but I think that the time she is spending with him makes him feel that he is a valued part of the team. Which indeed he is.

We do an interview with Natalie, a new nurse who will be arriving in Malemba about a week after us to replace Stephanie. Natalie has come from another post in the Congo where she contracted a bad case of malaria. She's been in hospital in Kinshasa for two weeks and looks like hell - thin as a rail - but she's completely upbeat about going back into the bush. Wes and I console ourselves that we will not get sick like Natalie since we are religiously taking our malarone pills (an anti-malarial prophylactic).

FINAL PREPARATIONS

April 9, 2003

Wes and I take a walk through the cool streets of Lubumbashi and have beers at the fancy expat Park Hotel in the center of town. To give him a frame of reference for what is to come I am telling him about my own experiences of culture shock, isolation, and lonlieness when I lived for long periods in strange places – the Alaskan bush, Cairo, Prague, even Paris (which I love). I think he is listening. He seems more upbeat.

At lunch with the AAH team Wes asks everyone how to say things in French. They are patient with him. I take this as a hopeful omen.

In the afternoon we talk with Malemba base on the radio. Arnaud tells us that our guest house is nearly completed. He says that they are still working on the extra-long bed for me and connecting the running water... but everything else is set and it will be habitable when we get there. AAH has kept up its end of the bargain.

The last piece of the puzzle falls into place this afternoon when Fabienne (the Lumbumashi head-of-base) successfully talks the Congo equivalent of the FBI into not insisting on sending a minder to keep an eye on us in Malemba.

WAR STORIES

April 12, 2003

I had an e-mail from Jan last night. She says that since I've left, she's been mostly close to tears. Reading this makes me feel the same way. I feel very bad I have given her cause to worry about us. Perhaps I have repeated too much of what I hear in my letters to her and in these more general letters I send home to friends.

It is true that people here like to tell war stories, it's a kind of bragging. Last night, over beer, goat and fries, Christophe and Laurent told Wes and I about the horrific things that they saw in Somalia and Burundi. It made Congo seem tame by comparison. But even the things that get dwelled on here may not be a representation of what we will encounter.

It's early morning and I've been waiting in line for the shower a last luxury of hot and cold running water before Malemba. The past two days here in Lubumbashi have mostly been about waiting and roaming the aisles of the town's supermarkets to find things to make life more comfortable in the bush. I found a large plastic lawn chair. Wes bought South African beer in cans as well as some olive oil and balsamic vinegar to contribute to one of the Sunday lunches that the expats cook in Malemba on the cook's day off. Plus a lot of other stuff. In fact we have nearly half a ton of stuff. I feel a little sheepish about this since the AAH workers, when they come here, are allowed no more than 20 kilos of personal effects. Even discounting all our video gear we are traveling deluxe.

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

April 12, 2003

Malemba, finally. We fly up today. We stuff everything into the tiny six-seat aircraft except for the mattresses that Christophe bought for us and which just don't fit. Standing there on the tarmac I really feel as if we are saying goodbye to civilization, though I realize that's a rather biased choice of nouns.

The ride is smooth, the only disappointment is for Stephanie, who couldn't get the plane's CD player to work so she can listen to her girl rock. Carlos, the pilot, obligingly takes us down to 2,000 feet to have a look at a large waterfall on the Congo river. On arriving at Malemba he circles the village and follows the river so I can get some aerial shots. Wes and I also take shots of each other. It feels as if our adventure has started.

Our reception committee at the landing strip is a horde of children, Alex, the English agronomist, and Arnaud. I think I am expecting the equivalent of a brass band, a big welcome, because it has taken so much

effort to get here. But that's not the way here. At least there were no FAC soldiers on the airstrip this time... they have completely gone, which is very good news indeed.

We pile all our stuff into two Rovers and drive to base, where we make a beeline for our new house. It's charming. Two rooms and a bathroom. Brick with thatched roof and white-washed interior. Of course it is not quite finished. As we arrive an army of workmen is putting varnish on the wooden shutters and doors, others are scrubbing the concrete floors and working on the plumbing. Wes is miffed at the prospect of having to spend another night in a boys' dorm with

me and Laurent "snoring like chainsaws." Both of us so dearly want to be able to unpack, create a home away from home and just "be there."

We are in time for lunch. It turns out everyone here speaks English when French will not suffice. This is a pleasant surprise for Wes.

Mariona and David invite us to come with them during the afternoon to film them teaching a class on water borne diseases to members of village health committees. We are antsy to be working, so we jump at the offer. We drive to what looks like a church that's been converted into a school room. Thirty adults are hunched over ancient child-sized wooden desks, below guano-encrusted rafters. We break out some new gear (wireless transmitters) that we have not used before. They work like a charm, and Wes and I heave a mutual sigh of relief that finally we are doing what we have come to do.

On the way back to base a puppy crosses in front of the Rover. Mariona decides she'd like to have it for a pet. We go looking for its owner, which results in a huge gathering and consultation of adults and children all pressing in around Mariona, clutching the puppy. I film the scene.

Back at base Arnaud obliges our desire to be in our new home. We move in the immense and heavy hardwood bed that was made especially for me by the local carpenters. It is a giant's bed, almost as wide as it is long. It is as if the locals with expecting some white being of mythological proportions. Arnaud dredges up a mattress which sits in the middle of it like an island, along with a more normal bed and mattress for Wes. Mariona and Stephanie hang our mosquito nets and make our beds for us. In a way, everyone helping us to get settled is their equivalent of the brass band, only more useful. The only downer, or should I say "fly in the ointment" is the bugs. We're talking monster mosquitos and other things that we could not identify. A lot have got inside while we were moving in the beds. Wes goes berserk with an aerosol insecticide, nearly asphyxiating himself in the process.

We have dinner of pizza, cheese, sausage, and croissants that we brought from Lubumbashi. A very welcome change to everyone here. Then commences a convivial evening of drinking and music. At one point, while buying booze in Lubumbashi, I said helpfully to Wes... "if you get really depressed up there you always drink yourself into a stupor." I had not thought he would follow this advice quite so soon... but keeping up with the French's consumption of alcohol is a

challenge. I beg off early and crawl into my island bed. Wes and the others party until dawn. So maybe there is hope yet for a party animal in Malemba.

April 13, 2003

Today is all about making our new home a home. Once the party-goers drag themselves out of bed, around noon, we are able to gather up chairs, tables, a bookshelves, the refrigerator. I talk Arnaud into firing up the generator (even though it is Sunday) and voila, we have cold drinks and fans that work. I set up our personal water filter. Wes hooks up the CD player, and gets out his guitar and we sort through the video gear, putting all the sensitive stuff in our airtight case.

April 14, 2003

Today we make ritual obeisances to the local police and civilian authorities. We go to the local offices of the National Information Agency (two rooms in a mud brick hut under a thatch roof) to register our passports. There the top cop decides it is a good idea to send someone to check our equipment because, "how could he know that we actually had with us what we said (in our declaration) that we had with us." Arnaud protests

that we have already been cleared in Lubumbashi and Kinshasa, but the local policeman is not to be deterred. So we bring a pleasant young man with us to the base who makes serious, approving noises as we hold up every piece of equipment and explain to him what it is for.

We take a tour around the base and film daily life here. The Congolese servant staff that supports the expats is extensive. This may seem like an evil extension of colonialism but it makes sense. Not only does it help the local economy by employing people at better than average wages, it frees up the expats to do what they have come here to do in their specific areas of expertise. So we film Cafoula, the cook, cooking over a charcoal brazier, the masons working on brickwork outside our house, washerwomen doing laundry, mechanics fixing trucks, the guard at his post, the new pet goat, and hundreds of bright yellow birds nesting in a tree in the center of the compound and raising a terrific racket.

I am particularly conscious of sound here. Right now it is early evening and there are crickets outside my window and the occasional murmur of voices from a path that runs along the low compound wall. Later the crickets will become quieter, punctuated by the occasional hoot of owl. At 5:30 a.m. roosters crow and there is a gradual increase in the voices of birds. By eight a.m. the base is wide awake and humming. Rovers are heading out of the gate which rolls back on squeaky wheels, there is chatter from the radio room, the goat is bleating and the yellow birds are warming up in the big tree. Cafoula is banging pots and pans in the kitchen, carpenters are sawing (only by hand) and mechanics are banging bent metal into shape in the front yard. On weekends it is different. Inside the compound it is mostly quiet, but outside there is singing and drumming wafting in from every quarter as the choir of one missionary church or another cuts loose... or a funeral passes by.

MARIONA'S FIRST WELL

April 15, 2003

Today is our first shoot in the field in a couple of small villages near Malemba. Kabozya is the place that Mariona is planning to build her next well with the help of the local villagers and the

village health committee. We go there to scout a location for the well and to rally the village elders to the cause.

The head man is not around and the secretary of the village health committee is reluctant to fill his shoes, but he is eventually persuaded to give us a tour of the plot of land that is available for the new health center and well.

Wes puts radio microphones on both Mariona and Papa Bona, and we walk through the bush, led by the secretary, sporting a red Mike Tyson World Champion net T-shirt and followed by the usual horde of children. Mariona's aim is to find out if there were any burial grounds or latrines on the land... since obviously you don't want to dig a well near either. A big discussion ensues about a place where there had been a latrine at one time... but that turned out to be 30 years ago, when some Belgians still lived there.

Both Mariona and Bona talk sternly with the secretary about needing to mobilize strong young men who will be willing to work for the community and commit for the duration of the time it would take to dig the well by hand. Papa Bona points out that other neighboring villages have done this successfully.

He tells the story of how in Musao the laborers hit a huge boulder about 2 meters down. The villagers, to whom the well is extremely important, cheerfully encouraged their laborers to keep going. Without access to a backhoe or dynamite the workers chipped away at the stone with hand chisels until it could be dislodged. It took three months to dig the well and build its casement.

The Secretary says that if those villages, which were smaller than Kabozya, can do it, then Kabozya certainly can. It is a question of honor. We say goodbye. I reach out my hand to the Secretary and he embarks on a soliloquy about how we have been sent by God to help the poor people of Kabozya. This is embarrassing, especially since Papa Bona first translates him as saying that we are God.

There is something childlike about the people we are encountering. Of course I cannot say that I know them.

Structures here seem to be continually under siege by the forces of nature. There is more stern talk in the village of Mutambo, where a caretaker of a health center hangar has allowed termites to consume a good portion of the vertical poles supporting the structure. We also check out a commissary hut, which Mariona has sheathed in concrete to keep mice from burrowing through the mud brick walls to get to the flour.

Then we go to look at Mariona's first well. We interview her standing in front of it, telling how afraid she was that she would fail. She had never built a well before and she felt that the villagers were counting on her.

When she first arrived in the village children would run after her (as they run after Wes and me) shouting *Musongo! Musongo!* which means "white person" in Swahili. On the day the well digging team struck water they started calling her "Mariona." Since then, whenever an AAH vehicle passes through town the children run after it shouting "Mariona! Mariona!" regardless of whether Mariona is in it or not. We get a shot of the kids doing just this as we leave the village. Later, looking at the tape, I marvel at how fast and with what incredible determination a dozen small bodies racing after us.

Wes and I arrive back at base, gasping in the heat. It surprises him to see me more wiped out than him; he has been so worried about his own performance. We spend the afternoon in our relatively cool house around which workmen are still putting the finishing touches. With masons

and carpenters peering through our windows in amazement we digitize and screen some of the video that we shot in the morning.

The foreman of the job, Hubert, tells us that today is the 28 th day since they started work on the house. He promises it will be completely done on the 37 th day. He is proud of his work and has good reason to be. Hubert says Arnaud was quite worried about the house not being done in time, but indeed it is pleasantly habitable already.

I am dreading going to Kisula, tomorrow where Mariona has invited us to film her work crew putting the final touches on buildings. It's a seven-hour drive that requires staying overnight in rudimentary lodgings. The drive is something we will have to get used to because this is where the next health center will be opened and where we hope to film a principal story. I am not sure I will go. I have been fighting a case of Mobutu's revenge and have finally succumbed. I don't fancy an attack of the trots en route. I've given Wes the option of going alone to get a few "B roll" shots of workmen, but I've made it clear it is up to him.

THE SCORPION

April 17, 2003

It's a good thing we didn't go to Kisula. And it's a good thing the toilet in our house is operational. I have a miserable night, up every 10 minutes. About 2 a.m. I glance up at the wall above my bed and see a huge black scorpion. I pick up Dorothy Dunnet's historical novel *Niccolo Rising* (it seems a weighty enough weapon) and prepare to attack...but when I look back the scorpion is gone. I spend the next half-hour looking for it, and gingerly removing everything from around my bed where it might hide. I confess that at this moment, sick as a dog, I begin to question my resolve about coming here. I think about German filmmaker Werner Herzog's tirade in the Amazon jungle in the famous documentary, *The Burden of Dreams*. Herzog rails against the "evil" of nature, which is red in tooth and claw and not at all man's friend. Here it is termites, mice, and a scorpion, all in one day.

By morning I am beginning to feel better. Some antibiotics that Stephanie has given me are kicking in. I mention the scorpion at breakfast and the French just shrug their shoulders in that typical Gallic way. Scorpions here don't kill you, they just give you a very nasty sting.

Hubert showed up and was gently solicitous. He figures the scorpion must have come down from the thatched roof and entered my room through one of the gaps between the walls and the ceiling... so he puts

his masons to work covering up these seams. Hubert also tells me about his plans to paint the base boards, put planters by the doors, and other decorations around the house. He wants Wes and me to return to the states with good memories of our stay in his house. I tell him that his work on the house should not detract from the more important work he has to do on heath centers, latrines, etc. He says "don't worry." I thank him and go to crash on the expats' living room couch, where I sleep until noon.

MEETING THE MOMS

In the afternoon I ask Kimba, the base radio operator, to keep us abreast of the E.T.A. of three Rovers that are returning from the bush. They are carrying new patients for the feeding center in Malemba. I want to be there when they arrive. My hope is to follow several mothers and their children from the moment they are admitted into the CNT until they are discharged a few weeks later. It seems like a way to get to know individuals and transcend the problem that seems to plague documentaries on Africa in which suffering is generalized. You never really get to know the people who are doing the suffering.

The three mothers and one father that arrive with their sick children are very quiet and passive. Possibly some of the children are close to death, but I don't know enough about symptoms to judge and the center staff is too busy handling the admissions to explain, so I just shoot. I feel that we are doing good, focused work, but after awhile the scene begins to get to both me and Wes ... especially the unusual case of a 25-year-old mother with the grotesque symptoms of acute malnutrition that one usually only sees in children. (Two days later we learn that she has died.)

Altogether we follow six patients through the admission process. When we get back to base I ask Wes how he is holding up. "You don't want to know," is all he will say. I make him teach me backgammon this evening.

I brood a good deal about what we have seen in the center and I am revisited by that general feeling of hopelessness that I first had on the scouting trip. I can see why people don't want to watch films about Africa (at least this part) and I wonder why I am doing this and for what purpose. At the same time the complaints and obsessions of the average American seem so unreal and absurd by contrast. I keep thinking of that ridiculous TV show *Survivors* in juxtaposition to the program that I am making about survivors and of how my real survivors are so much less marketable than the fake ones. And then I get angry. And then I am sad.

HOW TO COPE

April 18 th (Friday)

This morning, in an interview with Mariona, I ask her how she copes psychologically with the situation here. She says at first she was really upset by everything, especially when a child died in her Land Rover on the way to the CNT. But gradually she's become inured to it. After awhile she began to worry that she had become a person without feelings. She talked with others and found that it was normal to build a kind of self-protective wall as a means of surviving emotionally.

I ask her to repeat this in English to Wes (she speaks English pretty well). She also stresses how important it is to be able to talk to someone about what one goes through. And she tells Wes that he can come and talk to her anytime he wants. I hope he will take advantage of it.

We go back to the CNT in the afternoon. I ask Lunda, the head nurse, to take us around for a visit with each of the patients that we have filmed arriving. With Lunda translating and explaining I learn that Jean-Paul N'Kulu, age 2, was admitted to the CNT because of edemas (swelling caused by the accumulation of fluids) on his hands and feet. Edemas are one of the key symptoms of kwashiorkor. Because of the accumulation of fluids, which gives them a rounded look, kwashiorkor children often don't look as if they are starving. In addition to the special milk formula Jean-Paul is receiving medications for malaria, parasites, and anemia.

Fifi, Jean-Paul's mother, says she's committed to staying here at the center for as long as it takes for her son to get better.

Luwandaji Wa Mikombe is also 2 years old (26 months). His illness started with measles but after the spots went away he stayed weak and didn't want to eat. After awhile he became very passive, not reaching out or asking for anything. When he arrived at the center yesterday he was pratically inert. Gigi, Luwandaji's mother, says she throught he was getting ready to die. Now he is drinking milk.

Shati, a little over 3 months old, is in a special section of the CNT set aside for "*petits poids*" infants who are under six months, who are underdeveloped and under-weight. Shati is the first child of Faustine, who looks extremely young. When we ask Faustine how old she is, she says she doesn't know. Lunda estimates 16 or 17.

Shati's sickness started with convulsions. Faustine took her to a traditional healer in her village who speculated that something was wrong with Faustine's milk. When the child didn't get better Faustine decided to bring her here. Lunda explains that in the *petits poids* section Faustine is being helped to lactate more freely. This is done by taping the end of a small plastic tube near the nipple and the other end of the tube in a cup of formula milk. The baby sucks on the nipple and tube together, both getting nourishment and stimulating natural milk production. Faustine tells us that she is very proud that for the first time in his life her child seems to be getting enough nourishment.

The stories of Passionette and her baby girl Tantine and of Kalumba Banza and his son Malora (the other two cases we are following) are similar to the other three. At the end of the afternoon I find I am less stressed than yesterday because, on some level, we are starting to make a connection with individuals.

Back at the base, in the evening, Wes and I switch roles. He picks up the camera and I do sound. We are filming the weekly staff meeting. Doing sound allows me to use the directional microphone to focus on what I want to listen to so that I am able to hear and understand what the French are saying a lot better. It is a kind of high-tech hearing aid. This goes beautifully until an huge insect gets into Wes' shirt and stings him three times. He seems completely traumatized by the incident, so I call David out of the meeting to have a look. He says the stings are nothing, which mollifies Wes who, unfortunately, has a great phobia for insects and tend to see every gnat as lethal.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

April 19, 2003

We get up very early to drive to Kikonge to meet the plane that is bringing Natalie, Stephanie's replacement. There is absolutely nothing to eat in the kitchen, which really puts us both in a foul mood. This happens often, especially when expats leave early to go out into the field. They just shrug it off. I feel Wes's anger and resentment all through the 2½ hour drive to the landing strip. I find myself wanting to tell him that there is a point at which he either has to go home or try to make the best of his time here and stop whining.

The airstrip at Kikonge is a wide grassy thoroughfare that slopes gently, for a kilometer or more, towards the shore of a vast lake. When we get there, there are dozens of villagers walking, riding bicycles, and carrying huge loads in the shimmering heat along the red dirt track that delineates the center of the "runway." I wonder how they will know to get out of the way when the plane lands... but somehow they do.

The plane itself is huge compared to the one that Wes and I flew up in. It is too heavy to land on the airstrip at Malemba, which is why we have driven all this way to Kikonge. It is carrying many crates of the special powdered milk formula that is used in the CNT.

Natalie, still looking thin and drawn from malaria, descends and formally kisses Stephanie, Arnaud, and Mariona on both cheeks. It is their first meeting.

A line of men and boys forms to offload the cargo. The most conspicuous item is a gigantic pink mattress that Chistophe has had made to fit the dimensions of my massive bed. There are also a couple dozen boxes of tinned and fresh food for us, the expats. There is fresh beef, packed in ice, as well as milk, lettuce,

avocados, French cheese and dry pork sausage. Arnaud calls into base the good news: We are going to eat well for the next few days!

On the way back I shoot out of the back door of the Rover as we go through some most extraordinary mud holes... which are really more like mud ponds. We stop and buy bananas and a big beautiful earthware pot of black clay. Tomorrow is Sunday and the day after that is Easter. I tell Wes I plan to hibernate.

April 20, 2003

It's nice to sleep late. I take a leisurely day off, cleaning up, reading, listening to the shortwave. Wes comes in mid-morning and apologizes for the way he has been acting and says that he is going to work on changing his attitude. He goes off to the market in Malemba with some of the expats and has a good time. For the first time, of his own initiative, he picks up the camera. He shoots Alex feeding fish to Kalash. He also shoots Alex awkwardly trying to hack the husk off a coconut with a murderous-looking machete. Finally one of the base guards is called to finish the job, which he does with infinitely more dexterity.

We've asked Cafoula, the cook, to kill, gut and pluck a couple of chickens. Tomorrow (on Cafoula's day off) Wes will make baked chicken for supper and sweet potatoes and tomato salad with olive oil and basalmic vinegar that we brought up from Lubum. The challenge is to get the oven heated enough, and at the right time. It is done with charcoal. But Wes is into it.

I feel immense relief to see him in a better mood. I think today might be the first day he actually enjoyed himself here. He even tells me that he is getting used to the insects. Mercifully I have been spared making a speech to him about getting his act together.

THE ISOLATION WARD

April 23, 2003

We've been slowly getting to know the five moms and one father and their kids at the CNT, the ones that we filmed arriving at the center six days ago. I've spent a couple of days going over what we've shot of them so far, trying to familiarize myself with their particular stories and the names of their children so we can ask more personal questions. It goes without saying that they were pretty intimidated by me on the first day.

This process has been helped a great deal by Euphrasie, a pleasant middle-aged woman who was a school teacher her village before the rebels invaded. I've hired her to be our link with the CNT parents. We work out questions in advance and she does the interviews with them in Kiluba, stopping occasionally to translate into French. It works well because Euphrasie is able to put the mothers at ease.

One problem I am having is having is finding quiet, shaded places at the CNT for interviews. Today we stake out a large room in the shell of the destroyed hospital adjacent to the feeding center. Shafts of light come through great rents in the roof.

After six days the kids are looking much better. I even catch a couple of smiles on tape. Most of the moms know their children would be dead by now if it were not for the care they have received here. At the end of their interview the parents invariably ask me to give them something; a cooking pot, a shirt for a little boy, or a fishing net for the father who lost everything.

A crowd of onlookers has gathered to watch. I sense they are jealous that the chosen mothers are getting all this attention. After I finish with the moms they ask if I will listen to their story. They are tuberculosis patients, and it gradually dawns on me that destroyed space that I have been using as a studio is, in fact, their TB isolation ward. The leader of the patients' delegation points out that they have no blankets or mattresses to sleep on... only the hard concrete floor of the destroyed room. They hope that my intervention with authorities might improve their lot. I mumble that there is nothing I can do. Contrary to expectations I have no clout with the Malemba health authorities.

GIFTS

I have been trying to work out a way I can give the six parents I am following a useful gift. But I have to be careful. Arnaud is dead set against it. The very idea seems to make him angry. He also has a valid concern. He says if I give a few people something the word will get around. Pretty soon you'll have 500 people all demanding to get the same from AAH. Alex says one can make a distinction between personal gifts and AAH distribution, but Arnaud is pretty skeptical. It's true that the word is out that there are new expats on the block. Every day I get a letter asking me for work or a summons from the guard at the gate telling me that some stranger is waiting to see me.

Speaking of gifts, Alex comes home today with a rooster that some villagers gave him. It's strutting its stuff around the lunch table and emitting very high-decibel crows. Arnaud goes chasing after it with a large bamboo pole. He wants to kill it and eat it ASAP. Most of us tend to agree: There is already enough racket around here in the mornings.

Guinness, the dog, on the other hand, is spoiled. He's a canine garbage can, consuming anything and everything that is left over from our meals. In fact the custom is that if you have something on your plate (a bit of gristle or whatever) that you do not want... you shout: "Guinness!!" And the fattest dog in Malemba comes charging over to catch the scrap in midair. When not eating our garbage Guinness amuses himself by butting heads with Amarula, a small goat that was given to Mariona by the Mai Mai leader, Macabee. I have also hired Mr. Inabanza Kasongo, who speaks English, French, and Kiluba. He is a very soft-spoken and withdrawn. So far he's just helped carrying our gear at the CNT and sits with me in the afternoons watching tape and translating bits. Yesterday I offered him a canned soda, which he accepted but asked me to open for him. I don't think he had ever pulled the flip-top on a can.

FARMERS AND FISHERMEN

April 24, 2003

This morning we are able to commandeer our own Rover and driver and drive to Kabala (a short distance) where we meet Kazadi, one of Alex's rural development agents, who has agreed to take us to shoot farmers working in their fields. I hope this will give me a clearer picture of how people survive around here. The fields are nothing like my idea of fields. It is hard to make the distinction between the crop and the dense vegetation of the bush until we are in the middle of it.

We film women with hoes clearing weeds back from rows of maize and a man cleaning his cassava patch. I cannot fathom how human bodies can withstand the work that these subsistence farmers do. The cassava farmer is nearly naked, crawling on all fours, ripping encroaching vegetation out with bare hands at a furious pace – in the blazing sun. After just a half-hour of shooting and we are ready to collapse from the sun and the enervation of dense mosquitoes.

After this we go to the river and shoot fishermen setting out in their tiny pirogues (canoes hollowed out from tree trunks) and a couple of dozen women washing clothes on the shore. We interview a fisherman. He tells us times are tough. There hasn't been a lot of rain this year, which means the river is low and the fishing is poor.

The final stop is a rice paddy. Our driver gets the Rover stuck in the middle of a stream as he is trying to turn around. I feel very grateful that we could use the radio to call for help, but the driver is able to dislodge the vehicle after about one hour's work that involves a winch, jacking up the car underwater, and placing metal plates on the stream bed. We are back at base in time for lunch and a much appreciated siesta in the heat of the day.

GET A GRIP

April 25, 2003

I am gradually figuring out how to be here and work here. I realize that for each day I spend shooting I must spend equal time looking at material, translating interviews from French and Kiluba and just thinking about what I am seeing. Everything is so different from our usual life experience that I can see in myself a tendency to glaze over, not to really see what I am seeing and therefore lose my way. I now have rather detailed transcriptions of a good part of the interviews that I did with the CNT moms and dad. I have to keep returning to them to try to grasp their experience... but I am not sure I really can even though it is right there on paper in front of me.

To give an example... I interviewed Euphrasie about her own life on Monday. Unlike the CNT moms we have a language in common (French), so you would assume that I could connect with her. Yet I pretty much blanked out what she said because it just doesn't compute that someone as literate and educated as she is should be so without means... Here is a direct translation of what she told me:

> This is my story. I am from Manono, near the region of Tanganyika. That's where my father worked as a cook for the RET Company. Father paid for my studies and when I finished my studies I got my diploma, and I began to work as a school mistress. After awhile I made my marriage, but troubles came and we had to flee. I took the children. My husband fled also but he took another direction. But I left with the children and came here, and that is how I came to live here alone with my children. In order to get something to eat I was obliged to do "transport." The first house that I stayed in was burned by the soldiers in their conflict with the Mai Mai. And so I found another house. I am with my children who want to study, but we lack the financial means because I do not have employment. Suddenly I was here. I decided to do transport loads...to help others. I transported manioc 18 kilometers and that gave me a portion that I could eat with my children. For a while I did not know if my husband was alive. I often cried for him.

When we are actually shooting, when I am not in our house trying to understand what we have shot, I find I am using the camera protectively. I am spending less energy trying to relate and sympathize and more energy getting good images and sound. And I am using Euphrasie and Mr. Kasongo as buffers.

Wes and I are developing a companionable sort of black humor about life in Malemba. He's got this great idea about doing a takeoff on a MTV show called "Cribs" about the homes of music stars. Our crib: Malemba Base.

THE BIG WHITE MAN WANTS TO SEE YOU HAPPY

April 26, 2003

It's a good thing I've been spending time going over material and doing translations with Kasongo. Today I made the disturbing discovery that Euphrasie is embellishing her translations quite a bit. For example: To Kalumba, the father of one of the CNT children, she has said:

> "The big white man wants to see you happy! Therefore speak loudly! Because if he does not see you happy he thinks you are not interested in what we are doing! He is thinking, why are you sad? We want them to be happy! That's what he is saying. Yes!"

Also when I asked one of the mothers, Gigi, what it was like to return to her village, which had been invaded, she said very little. Evidently Euphrasie was not satisfied with her response, so she invented a lot of stuff about how the village looked like a desert, everything was burned, etc., but she was taking about her own personal experience, not the experience of the woman for whom she was translating.

This afternoon I send a message to Euphrasie to come by for what the French call a *sensibilization*, a consciousness-raising. I will show her the original Kiluba and her translation and talk about the differences. Behind her distortions I sense two factors: 1) Euphrasie is a school mistress who is used to telling kids to stand up straight and enunciate loudly – and she persists in her ways. 2) There is a kind of desperation that I sense in the Congolese' reception of me. They know I am their public relations agent, their link with the outside world and, above all they want to presented in a good light (no blemishes) so that white people will keep coming and giving money to NGOs like Action Against Hunger. It is extremely difficult to engage in a candid conversation because the Congolese can see absolutely no benefit in letting it all hang out, warts and all.

In light of these revelations I have decided to do something I have not done in 25 years of making documentaries. Occasionally I will turn a camera on myself. Perhaps my attempts and failures to make contact can illuminate the divide. Can one ever get past being the White Person? Perhaps Mariona did.

TRAINING DAYS

David is excited. In a week's time he will open a new health center at Kisula. This week his new staff will come to Malemba for training. The Kisula opening is David's second. He tells me he feels well prepared. The first time he didn't schedule enough days for training. Also, the first time, his head nurse was captured by FAC soldiers on the road to Musao because he had a bicycle and they wanted to use it and him to transport goods to Kamambulu. (David mentions this casually as if this is just a cost of doing business around here. After three days the nurse and his bike were released.) Now the army is gone and David has scheduled more time, so we are hoping for the best.

This morning we shoot the first training session. David is strict but fair, with a dry sense of humor. He explains AAH's fundamental rules of neutrality, equality, and transparency. These may seem perfectly obvious to us, but they are a huge adjustment for people who live in a country where favoritism, corruption, and the abuse of power are <u>the</u> models of survival on every level.

One good question is asked: "What happens if a Mai Mai chief comes into the clinic and demands preferential treatment for his men or his family?"

David's response: "Don't do anything that puts you or others physically at risk but take the issue to the top: AAH will meet with all who hold power, or pretend to, and make it clear that Health Centers remain open only so long as their rules are respected." Interestingly this expression of authority is respected here.

In the afternoon we film hands-on training featuring a life-sized, anatomically correct white female mannequin who David dubs "Mama Nicole." Germain, one of the nurses-in-training, is given the task of giving Mama Nicole an intramuscular injection in the buttocks. He breaks every rule of correct sterile procedure, injects at the wrong angle, and generally makes a mess of things. I also film the bandaging of a head wound, during which Mama Nicole's wig keeps slipping off. At one point her head detaches entirely.

Separate one-on-one training is given to the midwife. Astrid is a small, dignified lady with symmetrical round scars on each cheek. The first baby she delivered was her daughter-in-law's. She had no idea what she was doing; the mother had complications (a detached placenta) and she just dealt with it. I ask her if she was scared. "Of course not," she says.

Word got around her village and within weeks she was in the business of delivering babies... without any training whatsoever. Astrid says she's delivered about 30 babies... A few were stillborn but she is proud she has not lost any mothers.

Kabila teaches Astrid sterile procedures. I film her putting on her first pair of surgical gloves and delivering a rag doll baby from the birth canal of a specially designed mannequin.

Afterwards Astrid and Kabila came over to our house to see themselves on TV. They are fascinated. I also show Kabila the shots of the disastrous training session. He shakes his head in dismay. In five days' time they'll be facing real patients.

I am surprised how much time David spends talking with the two men who will be the sentinels or guardians of the center. Then I understand how crucial their role is. Not only are they guards, it is their task to burn contaminated dressings and clothing, to replenish water containers, to keep the center clean, and to clear vegetation away from the latrines and TB and cholera isolation hangars. Most important David stresses that they have a special responsibility as intermediaries between the nurses and the population... It is up to them to reinforce lessons about cleanliness and hygiene.

As we move towards opening day in Kisula, Wes and I find ourselves getting increasingly anxious. David anticipates that there will be 150 patients on the first day. Can we handle it? The parade of the sick and the mangled, women giving birth right and left - and no place to retreat to at the end of the day, save for a little sleeping room above the maternity ward? We're civilians. We're not used to this kind of stuff. It would be hard for us in a Oakland emergency room, let alone a clinic with only the barest of amenities in the heart of Africa.

BAD BEHAVIOR

In the meantime we must wrap up our work with the parents at the feeding center. I ask Stephanie and Natalie if I can film them doing rounds, visiting and assessing the six cases that I have been following. They come and what I film makes me a little angry. It is the cliché of the doctors not seeing the patient as a human being. The French girls bury their heads in the medical chart of each patient without any acknowledgment, in any way, of that person's presence. The mothers and children might have been animals, except I imagine vets take more notice of the patient they are treating.

Stephanie calls in Lunda, the head nurse and senior on-site medical administrator, to translate. She chides him for small errors on the charts. Then she blows up at a nurse's aide for leaving a cement block in the corner of a hangar and not filling up a water barrel. He is utterly humiliated in front of everyone – and the camera – which I keep rolling, because I can't really believe what I am seeing. I pull him aside later on and ask him if this sort of thing goes on frequently. He thinks I am a part of AAH power structure so he just tries to defend himself. I want to say: "You don't have to defend yourself to me..." but we are both tired, and I am not getting through.

I speculate as to whether Steph's bad manners are a result of burnout or if they are a part of her native personality. Is it just too overwhelming to see each suffering person as a human being? When you see hundreds... are the demands placed on the heart and soul just too great to bear – so that one becomes an automaton, buried in purely technical tasks? It is hard enough for me to follow six families and their tales of woe. Would I act like Stephanie after six months or one year here?

Certainly it is true that the Congolese staff don't fully get the necessity of keeping impeccable medical records, the need for rigorous standards of cleanliness, and the strict protocols that are part of modern medical practice. These things have to be explained repeatedly.

So what is the compassionate but effective response? I can't believe it is public humiliation or threats of losing one's job. Steph and Natalie's reactions today were uncomfortably close to the kind of racist contempt that I attribute to the structure of colonialism which brought this land to its knees, before Mobutu came along and provided the coup de grace.

FILMING THE DIVIDE

This afternoon we spend some time with Fifi, one of the mothers I have been following, and her husband, who has come to visit her at the CNT. I expect them to ask me for gifts and favors and I make sure that Wes has the second camera on me when I respond. I have a morbid curiosity to see what I look like while I am saying "no" to them.

The requests do come. I repeat what Arnaud has advised me to say... which is that people's participation in the film is a way of supporting the work of AAH, which is, in turn, a way of supporting the community.

This is true, but I don't think it sinks in. Just as there is no way that a white person one can get past being "prey" in Kinshasa, .there is no way that one can get past being seen as a benefactor here.

Martin Buber, the philosopher, conceived of the so-called ideal "I and Thou" relationship in which two human beings stand before each other as their whole, honest and vulnerable selves, without designs (conscious or otherwise) for use and exploitation. How naïve, how arrogant to expect to participate in such a relationship under these circumstances. You can see how well-meaning expats could become bitter because, despite the best of intentions there is no way of transcending the immense divide between destitution and comfort.

A BIKE FOR EUPHRASIE

Before Euphrasie started working for me she was making money by carrying manioc tubers on her head for 18 kilometers to a sell in a another village. She tells me she could do a lot better if she had a bicycle, which she could use to carry a heavier load. She asks if I can help her to buy one.

Because she is working for me, I feel our relationship is different from the one that I have with the parents at the feeding center. Perhaps I can help her. I consider the possibility of extending her contract so that she can save enough money (which I would hold in reserve) by the end of her employment to buy a bike. I would ask AAH to send one up from Lubumbashi. A Chinese-made bike costs $80, an impossible sum for someone earning a normal income here. But if Euphrasie works five weeks for me, she'll get paid $125. She can use $35 to live on and feed her five kids and save the $80 for the bike.

Without discussing this scheme with Euphrasie I send an e-mail to Fabienne, the head of base in Lubumbashi, to see if she would be willing to ship up a bike, either by plane or on the river barge that comes once a month. She writes back "no" for all the reasons that Arnaud has already explained – every expat gets a dozen requests like this every week once you say yes to one person you have to say yes to everyone.

I feel foolish for having asked. Was I being naïve? A bleeding heart liberal trying to "do good" in some small way and, in the process, wreaking havoc with my good intentions?

How do you know the difference between an open heart and naïvete? Perhaps, on a fundamental level, this is the question that underlies a good deal of humanitarian work. Simply to do what feels good, to be generous, supportive, giving, etc. is not necessarily the best approach. It is so terribly easy to foster dependency.

Yet on a one-on-one level I don't think that helping Euphrasie buy a bike would have fostered her dependency. Alex (in contrast to Fabienne and Arnaud) tells me he thinks there is room for helping people out on a personal level and that this is a normal and natural thing to do. I myself remain confused.

SUNDAY

Today we go to church. In this case a Pentecostal African church service held under some shreds of plastic sheeting in a clearing by the road to Lubindoy. Euphrasie sets it up so that we can shoot there. We are warmly welcomed and given seats of honor at the head of the congregation.

The music is beautiful. There are many voices and percussion produced by beating on hollowed-out wooden logs and a piece of railroad track. The congregation dances and sings with abandon, in a way that seems very similar to Southern Baptist and Pentecostal church services in the states.

To my surprise we are not asked for money. Instead, when we left we were presented with a live chicken as a gift. Alex came with us. This was the first such church service he attended in the year that he has been here. He enjoyed it.

The afternoon is devoted to haircuts. Wes mows my head with dull electric clippers we borrow from Arnaud, but he's rather skittish about letting me return the favor. He cuts his own. Unlike me, he still cares about keeping up appearances, out here in the bush.

I read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in the hammock by the paillotte. It gradually dawns on me that this an exercise in masochism. From where I am lying, it is just too easy to visualize the scenes in the book. Consider Marlowe's description upon arriving at the trading company's post: "Black shapes crouched, lay

and sat between trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair." With a bit of imagination it could easily be the TB ward.

In the evening Wes and I play backgammon and savor some South African beer that we've had shipped up from Lubum. A bat blunders into the room and flies around in circles until I finally swat it with my hat, scoop it up and throw it out the door. Sinister creature.

KISULA

May 8, 2003

Five intense days have passed. We are back from our much-anticipated trip to film the opening of the Kisula Health Center.

The drive is six and a half hours (100 kilometers), and deeper into the bush than we've been before. The clinic's team, which had been training in Malemba, arrives just a few hours before we do. They have thirteen people in one Land Rover.

The first thing we do is sit down with the village chief. All the health workers are introduced and the clinic's services are explained. The chief and the villagers are happy that AAH has come to town. It has been many years since there was a functioning clinic here.

The rebuilt center consists of three buildings that have been partitioned into rooms for consultation, dispensary, reception, laboratory, maternity ward, hospital ward. And there are outlying isolation hangars for cholera and TB cases. There is virtually no furniture, so the villagers have contributed twelve chairs and four or five wooden tables. There are two or three cabinets for medicines that must date from the center's antediluvian predecessor. As for the wards, they are mostly small rooms with thin, plastic mattresses on the bare concrete floors.

David supervises a rigorous housecleaning. Everyone pitches in to wash floors and cabinets. David says he makes a point of getting on his hands and knees and doing the manual labor with everyone else. At first this shocks the Congolese. It doesn't fit into their sense of order to have a white man doing scut work, but on the other hand, it gets across the message that if this endeavor is to work, everyone has to pitch in.

After the place is cleaned up David breaks open precious packages containing drugs and medical supplies, a microscope and an electronic scale. The scale and the microscope cost as much as a year's wages for a Congolese staff and David drums in the necessity of protecting them at all costs.

On that first day there are a couple of hitches. The carpenters who have been working on restoring the center have not finished the doors for the maternity ward. This is obviously a problem: If a woman comes to give birth tomorrow, she'd have no privacy. To make matters worse, the carpenters demand to be paid even through they have not finished the contracted job. When David presses them they said that a Mai Mai spirit has told them to stop working until they get paid.

The more serious problem concerns two of the new nurses. David and Kabila have come to suspect that they purchased their nursing school diplomas or "inherited" them from a dead relative. As evidenced by the botched injection on Mama Nicole, they seem completely at sea when it comes to basic medical knowledge.

I interview the village chief who gives a very impressive, stentorian oration in Kiluba. I don't interrupt, because it feels it would be disrespectful. He really seems like he is on a roll. Finally after about 15 minutes of speech-making I ask Kasogo to translate the gist of what has been said. What it boils down to is: "...Now that you've given us a health center, how about building us a proper hospital so we don't have to walk to Malemba for more serious cases?" Never mind that Kisula is a tiny village, which on the scale of relative need is way down the on the priority list for such an huge undertaking. There is no shame here in begging of the most audacious kind. The chief, like everyone else I've sat down with, also asked me for personal gifts. I keep trying to get past being sugar-daddy musongo. So far, no luck.

David decides to drive back to Musao (1 hour) to spend the night in a guest house that AAH shares with Doctors Without Borders. I am extremely grateful that he is not making us sleep in the little room over the maternity ward. On the drive back we stop in a huge open landscape. I climb onto the roof of the Rover and film the sunset. There is not a soul in sight... and I realize that this is the first time, in the Congo, that I have not had an audience of twenty-five children watching me or the background noise of ceaseless human activity. It is very peaceful.

As we enter the village of Musao a boy throws a stone at the Rover. Our driver stops and bawls him out. Wes observes, as we drove on, that in the states kids sometimes throw eggs at cars. This is utterly shocking to the Congolese. It is inconceivable to them that someone could waste food. As if to illustrate the point, the drivers eat all our leftovers from dinner; half a miserable pot of spaghetti with a bit of tinned tuna mixed in.

Apropos of this, I worry that when I get home, every time I see a bit of conspicuous consumption I'll fly into frenzy. Like your mom who used to say: "Clean your plate, think of the starving children in China!" I can just imagine myself saying: "Sweetie, don't throw away that putrid plate of week-old leftovers from the fridge. It's a feast for our poor friends in Malemba.."

At the guest house we take bucket showers in a little reed hut with a porous brick floor and we boil water in tin buckets over a charcoal brazier. The best thing about being here is there are no mosquitoes! It is relatively cool.

We learn a little more about David this evening. He's had a grueling day and is exhausted but happy, excited and ready to face whatever challenges the morning will bring. This amazes me. Seven hours on the road. Two bananas for breakfast. No lunch and the pathetic aforementioned dinner. Dealing with a hundred details at the center, encouraging his staff, talking to recalcitrant carpenters. It is like this stuff *nourishes* him. And he moves through all this with astonishing authority and equanimity, this serious 27-year-old kid. He is very firm with his staff but he is never mean, notwithstanding that there are a dozen provocations day to justify flying off the handle. I ask him how he does this. He says: "I love my work." Then a correction "No, I worship my work." Is there some latent religious fanaticism lying beneath the service? Is there an invisible halo hovering above his head? I don't think so. This is where he wants to be. And I salute him for it.

I take a sleeping pill in order to get some rest on the sway-backed reed bed that David has assigned to me. At four in the morning I wake up from a deep sleep. It's pitch black and I have violent shakes. It feels freezing cold even through it is quite warm. I mean these are really impressive shakes that go on for about 45 minutes. I am afraid that it is malaria. And it is.

In the morning we make the hour's drive to the health center. I vomit out the car window along the way. When we get there I make a half-hearted attempt to pick up the camera and get a few shots, but it just gets heavier and heavier until I can't seem to hold it up. David takes one look at me and tells me to come for a consultation.

So that is how I become the first white patient at the Kisula Health Center. Kabila does the examination, finds I have a fever of about 103, and prescribes potent drugs. I pay the standard patient fee (about 25 cents), take my pills and go to stretch out in the back of one of the Rovers. A crowd of children gathers around to see the giant *musongo* laid low like a beached white whale. Every once in awhile they climb up on the fenders to get a better look and rock the car, making me nauseous. This is definitely a low point in the Congo experience.

Wes heroically steps into the breach. David keeps him abreast of the most interesting cases for filming... there are 150 patients on this first day. He stops by the Rover for suggestions every half hour or so and we talk about what he is getting on tape. I am proud of him.

Kisula, as far as shoots go, was our own worst nightmare in anticipation. Now, thanks to my malaria, the nightmare is coming true for me. But Wes just puts aside all his terrors of pain, squalor and death and gets right in there.

No one dies this first day, thank God, but David calls us to shoot an interesting case. Wes films while I prop myself up in a corner and occasionally gave him directions or ask David to explain what is going on. A year-old baby is severely dehydrated from diarrhea (parasites). David tries to install an IV but has a hard

time finding a vein because dehydration causes veins to collapse. It doesn't help that this baby is chubby. David explains to us that with black skin it is much harder to find a vein than it is with white skin, where they easily stand out. For this reason he asks Kabila to help since he's more experienced with veins on black skin. The two of them turn the baby over and over, looking for a vein in the feet, the arms, the backs of the knees. Meanwhile the baby screams and shits.

At the same time David gives orders to the nurses with dubious credentials to bring various medications from the dispensary. They keep showing up with the wrong item. David asks them outright if they really are nurses and they just look at each other, frightened.

When Kabila can't find a vein, Olivier, the highly competent head nurse, is called in. He considers infusing the jugular, in the neck. David tells us that this is a very risky procedure, something that would never be done in America. Finally they give up. They put the baby on a regimen to oral rehydration and hope for the best. He has about a 50 percent chance of living.

Could one show this on television? Would one want to? It is so unlike "ER." I don't feel I have any perspective on it. David is totally calm through the whole thing and totally supportive of having us there. He loves his work and sees no reason why we shouldn't get right in there with him.

The one thing that stands out for me about this whole experience is Wes. He hated the idea of working on the film from the start. He's seen a lot of documentaries about misery in Africa while working for an international satellite channel. He hated them. It took a lot of courage to come here. And I think it took incredible courage to step into my shoes and film Kisula. I felt like he was facing his demons (maybe we both were). Maybe I am wrong about this, and we are going to deal with post-traumatic stress syndrome when we get back to the states. Or maybe that is just a part of the package.

BUTTERFLIES

The next day Wes and I are scheduled to drive back to Malemba with Bona. (David will remain in Kisula). I am feeling pretty shaky and thinking longingly of my big bed. Bona asks if I wouldn't mind making a detour (another two hours of driving) to pass through a village where he has some business. I tell him I can't do it. There is some discussion about leaving me and Wes in Musao for a few hours with a portable codan radio (expats are never supposed to be left alone, out of radio contact with base) but fortunately David cannot get the radio to work. I think we are both relieved.

On the way back to Malemba we come across butterflies clustered around pools of water in the road. There seem to be a dozen varieties. It reminds me of the very last afternoon that Jan and I spent together: We went to the live butterfly exhibit of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. I asked the driver to stop and get out and film butterflies exploding in the sunlight as the Rover passes by. It gives me heart that I am still feeling well enough to pick up the camera and do this.

MALARIA

I only dimly remember getting back to Malemba. Stephanie, it turns out, has also had a mild case of malaria while I was gone so we find we have something in common. We compare symptoms. It is the first time since I've met her that I feel we connect as fellow human beings.

She calls in Didier, a doctor working with Doctors Without Borders here in Malemba, to look at me. He prescribes arthemeter, a relatively new drug that comes from China and is supposed to work wonders. Its only been circulating for three years, so there hasn't been a lot of time for resistance to build up to it.

Later I will learn some interesting fact about malaria:

> Approximately one-half of the deaths worldwide from infectious diseases can be attributed to just three diseases, malaria, TB and HIV.

Malaria kills about 1 million people a year in Africa, 70 percent of whom are children.

According to estimates of the World Health Organization, the gross domestic product (GDP) of sub–Saharan Africa would be 32% percent greater if malaria had been eliminated 32 years ago.

If insecticide-treated mosquito nets were more widely available, it could reduce the illness among children by 50 percent. Presently only 2% of African children are protected at night with a mosquito net.

Anyway, back to this particular malaria case. In addition to arthemeter I am given paracetamol (a kind of super aspirin) to control my fever, which is now peaking at 104F. Stephanie warns me not to pull the covers over myself if I get the shakes... because that can drive the fever even higher. I expect to get delirious but I don't. The paracetamol works pretty well, but within two hours of taking it my sheets are usually completely soaked. The problem is that the drug doesn't last long enough. Long before the six hours are up and I am allowed to take another couple of pills, the fever is on the rampage.

Stephanie, a trained nurse, looks at me and looks very worried. She gets a bucket of water, soaks a couple of sheets in it and half wrings them out so they are still sopping and instructs me to wrap myself in them. Wes says it's an impressive shot. I tell him to take out the camera and capture the moment. He does. The sheets work. The fever comes down. This goes on for a couple of days with no appreciable change. I begin to lose sense of time passing. I remember at one point getting up to pee and nearly passing out. Wes has to help me back into bed.

Finally Stephanie, Natalie, David, Didier and Fabienne have a conference out in the paillotte to decide what to do with me (Wes reports this back to me). Clearly the arthemeter is not working, so they decide to resort to the usual treatment, a quinine IV. Arnaud gets one of the carpenters to notch a board to serve as a stand for the IV bag. I point out that one of our light stands would work better and this suggestion is adopted.

Stephanie, Natalie, and Didier prepare the IV. Natalie punctures the IV bag with the needle, which does not inspire confidence. Then Stephanie looks for a vein. I realize she probably hasn't done this in awhile, as it is not part of her regular work here. She misses my vein. I think of the baby and David and Kabila turning it over and over. Then Natalie steps in and gets the needle in.

Quinine sucks. It makes you nauseous, gives you a headache, and fills up your ears so you can't hear very well. It's about at this point that I decide to call it quits. I can't see going on here. I call Fabienne and tell her I want to go to Lubumbashi to get better. I sense that Fabienne, Stephanie and Natalie are perhaps just a little bit hurt that I don't have absolute confidence in their ability to take care of me. But Fabienne reassures me that the patient's decision is always the deciding factor and if I will feel more "psychologically comfortable" with the medical facilities of Lubumbashi, then I certainly should go.

Then I tell Fabienne we are probably leaving for good. She looks stricken at this information and begs me not to make such a precipitous decision when the chips are down. I admit she's got a point and tell her I'll make the final decision in Lubumbashi. Everyone seems genuinely surprised that I might leave – for them, malaria is no big deal. It is as common here as the common cold.

There is a Doctors Without Borders plane out of Malemba the next day, and Fabienne is able to beg a couple of seats for me and Wes. I tell Wes to pack all the gear for travel - there won't be room in the plane for it, so it will have to come a few days later.

The critical conversation is with David and Mariona. We give them a crash course on how to use the small video camera. We rig it with a wide-angle lens which makes it easier for a beginner to use....less framing and depth of field problems and a relatively steady image when hand-held. David loves the idea of filming himself and his work... I hope that he will do this as competently as everything else he does. We've asked both him and Mariona to follow the process of the new clinic and the new well at Kabozya... and to keep

video diaries. If they do well (and they are both very willing and eager) it could make a big difference to the finished film.

THIS IS NOT A DRAMA

May 10, 2003

The next morning I feel slightly better, the fever is lower and the quinine seems to be taking hold. I say goodbye to everyone, knowing in my heart of hearts it will probably be the last time we see them. We drive out to the runway and wait for the plane. Didier is there, the Congolese doctor with MSF. In his very quiet voice he says to me: "Tu sais, ce n'est pas un drame." You know, this is no big deal.

The clinic in Lubumbashi is clean and looks like the height of modern medical civilization compared to Kisula or my big bed in the Malemba guest house. There is a Belgian doctor and Congolese nurses who have no trouble finding the vein. The Doc slaps his stethoscope on my back, tells me to take one breath and tells me I have pneumonia. An X-ray confirms it. I am glad I asked to be evacuated to Lubumbashi. The girls and Didier were so preoccupied with treating my malaria they never bothered to listen to my chest, though I had a cough. What next?

I settle down to another sickbed. This time I get a IV stand with wheels which enables me to trundle down a long corridor to the loo... a sick old man in his skivvies. As in most African hospitals there is no meal service here. Relatives bring the food and water. Wes shows up twice a day with fresh bottles of water, apples, orange slices, a packet of figs, some potato salad, ice cream, yogurt, etc. And a vegetable soup. It's all I can do to get a few bites down. I console myself that at least I am losing weight. Will I be able to keep it off long enough to show off my new svelte figure in Berkeley?

The four days in the ward in Lubumbashi are blurry. The malaria begins to clear up, but a second chest X-ray shows the pneumonia more advanced, despite four days of antibiotics. The doctor doesn't seem too concerned, but when Cathy, on the phone from Kinshasa, asks specific questions about what kind of pneumonia it is, he says he doesn't have the medical technology to tell. He said he will just continue with the same broad-spectrum antibiotics. At this point I start to get worried.

SILVER BULLET

May 15, 2003

When I first got sick we notified a medical evacuation insurance service that I have bought a policy with. They have been diligently keeping in touch with me to monitor my condition to make sure I am in good hands and do not require their services. Now, it suddenly seems that I do.

Within six hours of making the call I am on my way. An exit visa is quickly arranged with the help of the Belgian doctor. Fabienne scrapes together $2,000 cash to pay for hospital bills in Johannesburg, since I have left all my credit cards in with AAH in Kinshasa for safekeeping.

I can't say I am sad to leave that little clinic, a brave imitation of a modern medical facility. I hug Wes goodbye at the airport... he will go to Kinshasa and back to the states with the gear. He has been a real friend and trooper.

The evacuation is pretty darn impressive. A silver Lear jet comes for me. I have two doctors in smart military-looking jumpsuits to care for me, hook me up to a heart rate monitor, check my blood sugar level, which is down to 2.2 (a normal person is 5 to 7). They put me on oxygen, a drip, big injections of glucose and they feed me Coke and delicious little sandwiches. Did I say "delicious?" It must be the circumstances of feeling in good hands that makes me able to taste them.

The flight is ultra smooth a sleek silver bullet streaking through the sky. I watch the stars come out through a tiny patch of porthole and I take this to be a hopeful omen: that as sick as I am, I am following my own stars, making the right decisions. Certainly I can see no reason to turn down a free ride on a Lear jet.

In Johannesburg, no customs formalities, an ambulance on the runway, more monitors, oxygen and finally the hospital. At the hospital, none of this waiting around in the emergency room for three hours. A team of people checks me in and whisks me off for x-rays. A doctor, who will become my attending physician, is waiting for me at my bed. I heave a sigh of relief. I don't think anything will slip through the cracks here.

The first day I am still in the midst of a swirling, laundry-dryer kind of world in which I feel I have the POV of a sentient article of clothing tossing around the drum, catching glimpses of reality beyond the thick glass. I go through waves of concern for the film. With David and Mariona send back good tape? Will things that seemed so interesting and poignant to me while I was shooting them hold up on the screen?

WHAT WAS I TRYING TO PROVE?

May 26, 2003

It has been 11 days since I last wrote from my hospital room in Johannesburg. I am back in Berkeley at last. And civilization. At this point I make no apology for not putting quotation marks around the word.

Things that stand out from that week in the hospital: A very thoughtful conversation with a senior banker for one of the largest banks in South Africa who turned up in the bed next to mine. He just completed his MBA and wants to leave the security of the corporate fold to promote business investment in education. A big step. He had checked himself into the hospital for electro-shock therapy. Says the drugs for depression don't do it for him. Go figure. Will taking the leap cure him?

Dr. Khonje, a black South African, is my attending physician. He seems reassuringly competent and backed by the resources of a modern hospital after the relative isolation of the Belgian clinic in Lubumbashi. What Khonje didn't tell me is that the first blood tests show extremely elevated levels of proteins in the liver, which is indicative of hepatitis. Meanwhile he continues to treat me for pneumonia and malaria. Mercifully the quinine treatment for malaria ends after two days and my head begins to clear, but not before a leaky IV causes an infection in my right forearm, causing it to swell up like Popeye's.

After about three days I figure out that I can have my own private room for only $50 extra a day (South Africa has semi-socialized medicine, so prices are quite reasonable) so I retreat to the luxury of my own private bathroom, telephone and television. On the fourth day, Khonje gets the results of a second set of blood tests and broke the news to me about possible hepatitis. Protein levels are still high, through lower.

Another day, another battery of tests for every measurable kind of hepatitis... which, thank God, all turned out negative. Khonje was stumped (as were his colleagues) about what was causing the high protein levels... but at least the numbers were coming down.

I have to admit that these days (before I got the negative hepatitis results) were the nadir of the whole get-sick-in-Africa experience. Eventually you get over malaria and pneumonia. Hepatitis is untreatable. I succumbed to the feeling that I have been deeply irresponsible to take on this project and put myself at risk. I know now that I have caused Jan and many of our friends a great deal of worry. What was I trying to prove? I had thought the level of risk was acceptable. We had taken every possible medical and security precaution. On the phone I confessed to Jan that I felt that, somehow, my usually reliable compass had failed me my sense of what I should be doing with my life.

Together we come to the conclusion that we shouldn't jump to conclusions. Jan, bless her heart, says she didn't feel my compass had failed. In the following day many dear friends call me. Phillip, Ralph, Ann, Andrea, Louis, Ruth, Solveig, Mike and Rose... have I forgotten someone? It was deeply moving to hear their voices and feel... not alone.

Once the hep tests came back negative I wanted out. Khonje was reluctant to release me from the hospital until the swelling in my forearm from the IV infection had gone down so I endured another 48 hours, getting increasingly testy and irritable with staff when my tea was not delivered on time, they didn't make my bed, etc. etc.

Meanwhile Wes had made it to Kinshasa and, following my instructions, recorded a cappella girl-group that we had heard on our way through Kin the first time. Lovely stuff, gentle feminine harmonies, compared to the male wailing and hard-driving percussion of the other groups we recorded.

SOS International, the folks who had sent me the Lear jet in Lubum, obligingly arranged to fly me straight back to San Francisco on a commercial flight saving me the need to go back through Kin and use my Air France return ticket. The flight from Johannesburg to Atlanta is 18 hours including a refueling stop in the Cape Verde islands. I thought... this is an ideal opportunity to wrangle a free upgrade to business class. I am skilled at this sort of thing, very good at evoking the pity of ticket counter personnel by calling attention to my size (6 foot 6). So in an appropriately dazed, feverish, and breathless state I tottered into the office of the South African Airways ticket supervisor and recount my tale of woe: two weeks in hospital, malaria, pneumonia, hepatitis... working in association with an heroic humanitarian aid organization. All of it true. How could this not fail to melt the heart of the stoniest bureaucrat? No dice. Not even an exit-row seat. I was shocked. Thank goodness for some heavy-duty sleeping pills that Khonje had given me for this express eventuality.

HOME

So now I am home. What is it like? Well, the food, for one thing. Were you expecting some deeper revelation? Steak frites at Bistro Liaison, my favorite French restaurant. Strawberry pancakes that I make myself. Odwalla Super Food drinks. Jan's delicious carbonara. As I relish these things I recall, with rage, Papa Cafoula's desiccated goat or chicken lunches, pasta without sauce, and salads of dubious provenance, left too long in the fridge, which is only powered 14 hours a day. I recoil at the thought of endless jars of Nutella, and the memory of

Malemba's open, bug-infested kitchen with garbage strewn on the cement steps for the easy access of the goat, the chickens, and Guinness, the fattest dog in Malemba.

As always it is difficult for Jan and me to figure out how to be together. We are so independent in our lives, our schedules, our ways of arranging our days that there is always this awkwardness, this diffidence, when we come back together. Add to that the guilt I have for what I have put her through combined with the longing simply to be held, which, thank God, she understands. By contrast sex is the furthest thing from my mind, which is not usually the case. All those images of mortality, mine and many, many others, put a damper on libido.

The sun is shining in Berkeley. The temperature is a very pleasant 70 degrees. I am in my favorite café trying to cull through first impressions of home, which come in no apparent order: At the health food store, where we stopped briefly, I noted an advertisement for tinctures that will improve your mood. An angry motorist, on the edge of hysteria, accused Jan of stealing her parking place at Bistro Liaison. A fellow customer in the café where I am sitting has just come up to me and suggested that I get some cough drops in consideration for others, because my coughing is disturbing. I want to tell him: "If only you knew."

Yesterday I engaged in a rigorous cleaning of my office along with the organization and cleaning of our equipment. I am, by nature, a bit of a neat freak, but this endeavor felt motivated by forces beyond the my usual anal-compulsive obsession. It was if I was trying to rid myself of the pestilential dust of Africa along with the danger, the chaos, and uncertainty of the whole experience. Every tape is now impeccably labeled and the beginnings of a massive log are already in place. As if to say: "This experience will be safely categorized and defined someway, somehow." At the end of the day my office was neat and I was breathless. Jan noted my haggard appearance... a kind of drooping raccoon-face... dark circles under the eyes that extend like gigantic clown's teardrops down to my chin.

HELL IS IN THE NEWS

June 3, 2003

I can't seem to stop writing these letters. Yesterday's (June 2, 2003) *New Yorker* magazine states "By any measure, Congo is one of the most hellish places on earth, and of all the hells within that hell Ituri province has come to be know as the most infernal." (*Talk of the Town Comment; "The Congo Test.")*

I've been ignorant of the goings on in Ituri, in the far northeast of the country, even though until two weeks ago I was a mere 800 or so miles away. It takes getting back to the states to plug into the information flow. What I now find most remarkable about the stories on the Ituri/Bunia atrocities earlier this month...is how they have entered into the stream of international reporting and United Nations deliberations. Horrific as it is... against the scale of death and devastation that has plagued the Congo in the past half-decade, the Bunia body count

is small. At the same time the carnage is timely. It seems to be providing a challenge and incentive on the international stage...

The basic facts are as follows: During the month of May about 350 people have been killed in fighting between warring ethnic groups, the Hema and Lundu tribes, that have been emboldened by a power vacuum caused by the withdrawal of Ugandan troops from the region, under a multi-

national deal to bring peace to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Sound confusing? It is. But not by the logic or standards of war and peace in the Congo.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is a nation in name only. It is a vast, mineral rich territory, one third the land mass of the United States, which over the past four years has been fought over by rival rebel armies from no less than nine neighboring countries and several dozen indigenous militias. The soldiers of the Forces Armées Congolaise (the Congolese National Army) have, from the point of view of the indigenous population, been indistinguishable from the foreign invaders. Command and control structures have been virtually nonexistant. All sides have raped, pillaged and burned.

Peace negotiations in the past 18 months, given considerable prestige by Nelson Mandela and precious little support by the Americans or the Europeans, have resulted in signed agreements for power-sharing between warring factions. Now most of the foreign troops have pulled out from the Congo – which is, in and of itself, a truly remarkable accomplishment. Ironically it is just this "peace" which has been the cause of eruption of violence in Bunia. The removal of one brutal but effective faction essentially takes the lid off ethnic tensions and, once again, a familiar scenario plays out. In the case of Bunia, the situation is enflamed by the fact that the departing Ugandans have armed the indigenous militias as their proxies. Maybe that's what makes the Congo hell: The apparently endless perpetuation of violence.

The Bunia atrocities, perpetrated by soldiers who are mostly children, have registered on the international media radar screen for a couple of reasons: 1) They happened under the noses of United Nations observers who warned against just such massacres and then were on hand to reliably verify them as they happened. 2) France and other nations that have not supported U.S. unilateralism in Iraq see the Congo as a cause to rally around, a means by which to restore the legitimacy of the United Nations. There is now serious talk of sending a U.N. rapid reaction force to Congo to restore the peace in this particular province of hell.

Eighteen months ago, almost exactly the same scenario played out in the country just west of Malemba where I was based with Action Against Hunger. Rebel armies from neighboring countries invaded. FAC soldiers were sent to repel the invaders and wound up pillaging villages and crops as a means to survive (their own commanders never paid them). Indigenous local militias, calling themselves Mai Mai, formed to repel both the foreign invaders and Congolese regular army. All sides exacted retribution against any civilians accused of collaborating with the "enemy."

The film I am making is about the consequences of this lawless rampage... on the average person, dispossessed and displaced from their land, who must begin again with nothing.

Eighteen months ago there was no U.N. Rapid Reaction Force to protect the civilians east of Malemba. Nor has there been much untainted foreign intervention to prevent the deaths of more than three million

people who have perished from violence and starvation in the past four years of war in the Congo. There have been U.N. observers, but as we have seen in Bunia they have been impotent and unsupported - and, in the case of two unarmed observers north of Bunia, hacked to death with machetes. In Malemba the UN observers are held in universal contempt for their apparent lack of action and initiative.

I hope that an U.N. Rapid Reaction Force is sent to Bunia. I hope they make a difference. And I hope it gives U.N. members something to support and rally around on humanitarian grounds, however tainted those grounds might be by international grudges.

At the same time it must be understood that such an action is a bit like closing the barn door after the horses have fled. The scale of carnage in the Congo over the past five years makes the Bunia massacres a minor blip on the radar screen. If it weren't for the memory of the 1994 Rwandan genocide (remember the Hutus and Tutsis?) the ethnic tensions between two tribes that most people have never heard of would not loom large – at least not based on the body count to date.

But better late than never.

PILLAGING

June 6, 2003

A couple of nights ago I had a dream about the pillaging of an African village. Not something I saw, but something I imagined from the many descriptions that were given to me. Not discounting the news from Bunia, I tend to think of dreams as the unconscious' metaphors for what is happening with me, here and now. This dream turned out to be no exception.

Since I've been back I've been on a rampage of taking. Comforts that were not available to me in the Congo I have been claiming with a kind of angry self-righteousness. Sleep, food, clean clothes... and the freedom to do whatever I want to do whenever I want to do it.

I've broken several glasses. I am a bull in a china shop. I don't do my share of the house work. Why should I? I am too sick and too tired and I feel I deserve some special coddling, some special considerations for the discomforts I have suffered.

I am easily contemptuous of others who have not seen what I have seen. I am ready to blast any poor soul – waitresses, bank tellers, parking lot attendants - who is not quick enough.

My wife Jan, who is a sensible woman, is having none of this. But she is as exhausted by my bad behavior since I got home as she was by worrying about me when I was gone. After inadvertently smashing one's of her heirloom wine glasses and catching hell for it... I finally got it: I've been pillaging; trying to fill a void created by the fear of things I couldn't ultimately grasp, intimations of mortality, the feebleness and sense of impotence that is caused by being really sick. I've been too busy trying to fill that void to show Jan I still love her. Now I think that I can change that.

But enough of this psychobabble. Now let me imagine that the dream is real – that I really am watching the pillaging of a village by hungry and unpaid FAC soldiers or by the Mai Mai children's militia. I am trying to imagine the void they are trying to fill, starting with their bellies. It's a void that includes not only hunger but a lot of death and a long history of hopelessness. Like a lot of things in this story, it leaves me speechless.

Like most people, I try to use my own experience, my own way of acting and reacting as a point of entry into understanding what is going on. That's only normal, is it not? But one might as well use a thimble to measure an ocean.

A MYSTERY

June 9, 2003

I called Cathy in Kinshasa to let her know I've recovered from my illnesses and to see if somehow, it might be possible to arrange a satellite telephone conversation with David and Mariona in Malemba to see how they were getting on with the video camera I left with them.

These two, David and Mariona, are the heroes of this whole story whether or not they will emerge as such in the film. When I returned from the shooting the opening of the health center in Kisula, I tried to sit down and write my impressions of those intense days but I was too feverish to concentrate. So I sat in front of the camera, in my big bed, inside the mosquito netting and just talked.

I watched this stuff today. A lot of it is gibberish, but what shines through is the memory of David with his shaved head and his sticking-out ears standing in the midst of controlled chaos in doorway of the new Kisula Health Center and saying "I love my work.... No, I worship my work." And meaning it. A mystery I cannot fathom.