

# A WORTHLESS WOMAN

J. Andrew Cole



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DINA'S FATHER DISMISSED HER AS "WORTHLESS;" but for as long as I can remember a framed photograph of her has secured a prominent place in my home. It was never entirely clear to me what her relation to me was. I thought of her as a kind of "big sister;" she may have seen herself as a nanny to me. She was one of those many people whom Mom and Dad had opened our family to and, as was true of all Umbundu young women, she naturally took it upon herself to share responsibility for our well-being.

I must have been eleven or twelve years old when the Stintons, a missionary family from the Boma Mission, joined us for a holiday on Angola's coast and the following scene was captured: the Stintons, Dina, my brother, sister, and I are standing on the arching peninsula that circles into the Atlantic creating the Lobito harbor. Behind us is the inlet where Portuguese slave ships once hid from British frigates that patrolled the waters in search of slave traders. Beyond an expanse of sea, short red cliffs gather themselves out of the blue water, and tuck themselves into the grassy hills of the mainland. To my right, on the periphery, stands Dina; her arm seems to be edging toward mine.

## NOSTALGIC PULL

For more than thirty years I had not expected to see Dina; the war in Angola does not inspire nostalgic longings. Most boys I knew as a youngster have outlived their expected forty-two years and women, like Dina, were not expected to live more than a year or two longer than men. The security of those who do manage to survive is constantly plundered by threats of war, disease, or hunger.

To me, Dina had been a distant memory. However, two years ago, an unexpected letter arrived. It came as Lynn and I were preparing to search Namibia, south of Angola, for refugees and perhaps, to find among them, friends I had known from the Chilonda Mission where I had spent my boyhood. We hoped

*"But I will leave within you  
the meek and humble,  
who trust in the name  
of the Lord."*

ZEPHANIAH 3:12

to enter southern Angola for the letter carried news that Dina was yet living near the Angola/Namibia border.

In January 2000, the situation in Angola took a turn for the worse. In deft and decisive maneuvers government troops attacked rebel strongholds and fighting drove hordes of civilians out of their villages in search of refuge. The Osire Refugee Camp grew from 8,000 to 12,000 inhabitants. Among the new arrivals were people with news of Dina! She was in Zambia. No one knew exactly where she was, but a longing to find her took possession of me; I would travel by foot if necessary!





## ZAMBIA

A trip to Zambia for me involved struggle with few inner reservations. This hub of David Livingstone's explorations of the "Dark Continent" had been a second home to me because I had spent my earliest school years there. Sakeji School, located near the source of the Zambezi River, was built seventy-five years ago by Christian brethren to educate missionary children who boarded there. While Sakeji was the only landmark within Zambia with which I was familiar, after a few clicks on the Internet, news bullets from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) spotted the location of the latest influx of refugees: Nangweshi, a hamlet too small to be noted on travel maps. To my surprise, Jim Whitfield and Mike Milco upon hearing of my hopes to find Dina, agreed to join my son Ross and me. Realizing how difficult the trip could be, they agreed to pursue a refugee unknown to them in a refugee camp unknown to any of us.

Missionaries listed in the Brethren 1998 Missionary Prayer Handbook, solved the practical problems through e-mail. Gordon Hanna, a Canadian missionary at the Chitokoloki Mission along with Zambian, Kayombo Ndonji, of World Vision, not knowing to whom they were responding, agreed to meet us in Zambia's Western Province. Kayombo's response to my e-mail said little more than "Come. Don't

worry about anything." It wasn't an especially reassuring note, but arrangements made for us exceeded all expectations. My daughter Megan would have called this "a God thing" for it was truly miraculous to have found guides willing to join us to such a remote and difficult to reach spot in Africa.

Simplifying the travel, John Loudon, of Christian Mission in Many Lands (CMML) Flight Service, whose flight precision matches the exactness of a brain surgeon, agreed to transport us from Lusaka to the Western Province. He would lift us in a single-prop Cessna to Mongu where our new friends, Gordon and Ndonji awaited us on a grassy landing strip. They had 4x4 trucks that had enough clearance to make the trip over the most treacherous roads. The drivers they provided made what would have been an extraordinarily difficult trip a thorough joy, for without the help of drivers experienced in negotiating the roads, our arrival in the camp would, indeed, have been on foot. Ruts cutting deep into the sand, often threaten to clutch the axle.

## INITIAL DISAPPOINTMENT

Upon arrival at the refugee camp, and the customary introductions with officials, I may have cut short the customary and prolonged ovlambo (greetings) typical of the Ovimbundu. Dina Justina, wo kuliha? (Do you know her?) In an abruptness characteristic of Westerners, I needed to know directly if the goal of our trip would be realized and didn't care to engage in small talk.

Lakamu (No). The shaking of heads of three or four camp leaders prompted me to store the photo I had shown them and began to consider Mehemba, another refugee camp. I zipped my backpack shut as I pulled myself back into the truck cab; Gideon, a worker with CARE International, urged the driver forward. The campsite that had at first thrilled me, now became a rude blur. Captivating bush homes, enough for 11,000 clientele, constructed from the raw materials of the bush such as tree limbs covered in a thatch of long yellow grass and bound with tree bark, at the moment were of no interest to me. Strategies to shift direction were the central focus of my attention.

Gideon, directed our driver to stop near a group of children collecting water from four or five spigots connected by a single hose to an enormous rubber container. I tried to concentrate as he explained how water contained in enormous bladders was hauled up via tractor from the Zambezi River four kilometers distant. I didn't at first heed the presence of a sophisticated woman who had joined the crowd to see us. I found myself absorbed with the children and calculating the distance to the Mahemba Camp and the disruptive effect a suggestion to travel there would have upon my companions. The children were especially curious about Ross. How could a ten year old American,





be so much larger than Ovimbundu of the same age? Meanwhile, Gideon, perhaps having sensed the cloud cast over my mood, wasted no time in seeking from the newly arrived woman knowledge of Dina's whereabouts.

Ndokukba chiwa (I know her well), was the sophisticated woman's reply to Gideon's inquiry. She clasped her hand over her mouth in a manner characteristic of the Ovimbundu when we explained who we were. Recognition washed over her; she was Dina's niece! This was another "God thing" for how else could I explain finding a specific uncelebrated African in the heart of the African bush. Elena, Dina's niece, hastily dispatched several youths to arrange a reunion and tightly grasped my hand in hers. With a sigh of relief, I again pulled myself back into the truck, this time hopeful. I unzipped my backpack and handed Elena the treasured photo. Gideon interrupted to ask if we would be interested in seeing "the bad parts of the camp" as the reunion was being arranged.

"The bad part?" I asked.

"The graves," Gideon replied. Elena was now in the truck with us, and I learned that it had been Elena who had brought Dina to safety.

The grave yard, one-half of a kilometer out of the camp, was unlike any I have ever seen. Instead of a cluster of ground plots, it consisted of sand mounds spaced in a single line one foot apart and stretching for more than 300 yards into the bush and beyond sight. A second line had been initiated, giving the impression that rapid expansion was expected. The latest tomb was marked with a cross of fresh boards yet unmarked by rain and sun; beneath its shadow, a plate and spoon had been placed to appease hungry spirits. The dead were mainly children who had perished from malaria, dysentery from dirty water, and malnutrition. One grave was marked by a red Tonka truck, perhaps the only toy of a child whose parents now must understand no limit of grief.

Our drive back into the camp was characterized by reverent silence. Moments after arriving, a group of children under the canopy of shade trees rescued us from the disquieting spell of death. A black board, perched on an easel in front of logs arranged for sitting, labeled the site a "school." Gideon explained that the instructors, though unpaid taught enthusiastically through grade twelve. As we slowed the truck, the children rose to sing a song of welcome.

As Gideon directed us through the camp, pausing here and there to show the sites, I found myself mesmerized by wonder. The Ovimbundu were historically known as traders, traveling all through sub-Saharan Africa carrying from the interior gold, copper, tusks, and slaves destined for the New World. The heart of their homeland lies within kilometers of the mission where I had

lived as a boy. I recalled sitting with children, just like those we had just seen, under the shade of jak-o-randa trees listening to stories of the short tax collector Sangeo who climbed into a sycamore tree because he wanted to see Yesu. I also recall being spellbound watching craftsmen who shaped scraps of metal into axe heads, hoes, arrow heads, and even into parts delicate enough to fix broken type-writers. Gideon explained that the local Zambians brought their plows to be mended by the refugees. As we watched old scraps of angle iron being turned into farm implements, I wondered about the time all nations: will beat their swords into plowshares/and their spears into pruning hooks. /Nation will not take up sword against nation,/nor will they train for war anymore. /Every man will sit under his own vine/and under his own fig tree. (Micah 4:3,4)

## THE REUNION

I was shocked at Dina's diminutive stature. The old photo from my childhood, shows her as vigorous; I had barely reached her shoulders then. Now, she felt small and pitifully thin. As I held both her shoulders to search her face, her collarbone made an impression on my thumbs and my palms embraced angular and hard shoulders. She buried her face in my chest and shook, and I felt a strange presence in this African who years ago had cared for me. The words of the Apostle Paul to the





Thessalonians arose: We are gentle among you like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. Surely you remember....(1 Thessalonians 2:7). This black woman, in many ways a stranger to me and in desperate need, was one of those people who God gives the grace to remain: meek and humble, [trusting] in the Lord (Zephaniah 3:12).

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Human life in some ways seems to suspend from threads fragile and thin. In November and December the rains will begin to fall in Zambia. By January the Barotse plain upon which the Zambezi meanders will become an enormous mosquito-infested lake. The road from Senanga toward Nangweshi, now sheltered upon a bluff overlooking the plain, will for five months be impassable. An uneasiness grips me, for as I enjoy the crisp holiday season, for Dina and those with her, a season of hunger will grip their bellies. Floods in Mozambique ruined food supplies that could have been stock piled from the rainy season. Who will be first to do without food? It will surely be those viewed as "worthless."

It is of course objectionable to speak of a person as "worthless." But as a young woman, ovarian cancer had left Dina unable to bear children, and to be childless in a harsh world, where offspring are considered valuable property, is to be worthless! Only by having many children can a group on the brink survive. Her father, upon being informed of her surgery had declared to my parents that, "She is no good to us now." In retrospect, I now wonder if it may have been because she was "worthless" that my father and mother brought her into our lives.

I have been driven to refugee camps in Africa by a desire to find people; I have not yet failed to discover a Presence. Jesus once said that "...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). It has been through encounters with people like Dina, and those to whom she introduced me, that I have become convinced that Africa's refugee camps are indeed the outpost of Messiah, for it is here that the Gospel and the life it brings is embodied in its most concrete Presence.

### EPILOGUE

As I write these words, news briefs from Angola and Zambia report that nearly 9,000 Angolan refugees are crossing into Zambia.<sup>1</sup> This is of grave concern to me. Gordon Hanna, as a result of our visit, has made it his ambition to do something for Nangweshi. With his help, and the generosity of many within our Life Together class, CMML, and Moody Memorial Church, four containers filled mainly with pasta and rice are being sent to help protect a few from the life-threatening rains. Is there not more that we can do? ☪

<sup>1</sup> "UNITA Rebels Among Angolans Fleeing to Zambia." *Reuters Limited*, 9 September 2000.

