

Survival – The Story of an African Girl

by Sally Park Weir

The early morning light brushes against my tired eyes. As I walk slowly down the dusty road, I look up to the sky. The sun is rising. My pace quickens – I must be back before my family wakes up, to make breakfast and sweep the house. But first we need water, and the only place I can get it is from the pump in the village. So that is where I must go.

My family and I live on the outskirts of the village, and we must walk longer than most to get to water. As the eldest daughter, this task is delegated to me – I must collect the water and then boil it, to make sure no germs remain. That is, if there is enough power. Most of the time, we must drink the water as we find it, germs and all. It may bring terrible sickness, but we have no choice. Is it not better to live, sick, than die slowly of thirst?

I can see the pump ahead of me but I do not hurry to get to it – the line is so long that it will make no difference. Every day, the pump stutters and stops, and then after a moment when everyone holds their breath, it starts up again. Sometimes I wonder what our village would do without the water. How would we survive? Most are too young, but I remember the days before the water pump, when we had to walk many miles just to collect the water that collected in muddy puddles after rainfall. Back then, there was never any power, and we had to use the sun to try and boil the germs out of the water.

Reaching the line, I can see that it will take hours for all these people to get their water. And even then, there is no guarantee that there will be enough. There is always at least one family who goes without water, who wakes up in the morning to find one of their sons or daughters is gone forever... But that will not happen to our family. I get up early enough every morning for us to swallow our meagre share of water. It may not be enough, but it keeps us alive.

“Yejide!” I can hear someone calling me. It is my cousin, Nkruma – she is the ninth born child (and only daughter) in her family, and must get up even earlier than me to get water for her family. I turn and see her waiting in line.

“Nkruma.” I walk over to her; she must not lose her place in the line that will decide whether she lives or dies. “How close are you to the front?”

“Close enough”, she sighs. “My family will live. But Yejide! You are not even in the line yet! More and more people are coming to this pump to get water. What if there is not enough?”

“There will be enough”, I reassure her, but gazing over the heads of the crowd that makes up the long, long line, I am not so sure. “I must join the back of the line. Where does it end?”

“Over there”, she says. “I wish you luck”.

“Thank you!” I call, and I begin walking in the direction she pointed. It is so hot already – my dress is damp with sweat. If I stand on my toes, I can *almost* see the end of the line. Dust, kicked up into the air by the feet of hundreds of people, is overwhelming. I bend

over to cough, and when I stand up, I cannot see the end of the line. Well, I must find it, for myself and my family's sake.

There it is – the end of the line. I walk over and stand in the right place, but it is impossible to breathe, let alone see, in the thick cloud of dust that surrounds everything and everyone. All around me, there is a mass of hot bodies waiting for water, for survival.

And then the life-changing cry.

“It has stopped!”

There is a collective cry of horror from the crowd around me. No more water? What will happen to all these families? Some will be able to hold out for one day, but most have been deprived for days already. That one announcement means death, to all who leave with empty hands. My family may be able to wait for one day, but what then? What if we do not have water tomorrow, or the next day? We will starve for sure. With seven children to feed, and Father out of a job, we have no money to buy anything. No way of quenching our thirst.

I can see Nkruma walking towards me, carrying a full bucket. “Yejide!” I hear her call out. I begin to speak telling her to get away, that it is too dangerous. But it is too late. The crowd surges forward, knocking the bucket from her hands. The water spills onto the dusty ground, turning it to mud. And Nkruma... she is lying on the ground beside her bucket, covered in blood, her body mangled by the feet of the crowd. She does not move. Hers is yet another family who will die without water, without hope and without their eldest daughter.

I slowly turn away from the body. I will now return to my family with news of death and despair. But what else can I give them? My hands are empty, and they always will be. The dusty road stretches out in front of me, dusty and unforgiving.

And so I begin the long walk home.