

Salamatu's story

by Abbie Reese

ABBIE WAS BORN fatherless into a world reeling from war, disease, poverty and disdain. She spent the first half of her life rigged to her mother's back. Her mother managed the small bundle in spite of 7.7-pound prosthetics fitted over her legs and a crutch propped under her left arm. She lugged Abbie and herself around to beg, appealing for sympathy or pity or just a few coins.

Abbie spent the second half of her young life in bed in a hospital ship's ward as her mother recovered from surgeries meant to repair injuries incurred before Abbie was conceived. The girl drew an onslaught of attention and a legion of women vying to fill in as mothers to the quiet baby who never, ever cried.



Abbie's life can be split in two, just as her mother's life has a before and an after – before, when destruction reigned, when the innocent were preyed upon and hope was suffocated with each additional death; and after, when hatred faltered, lost its footing and healing began.

Ten-month-old Abbie will first watch and then learn from her productive mother how to put her hands to use, clothing and feeding and providing for a family. She won't remember her mother's life as a beggar or her mother's slow recovery on the hospital ship. She'll hear the stories and see the photographs and whenever her mother walks by, Abbie will get a glimpse into her mother's life before and after; she'll learn about the arbitrariness of evil, but even more about the prevailing power of good, of how love can heal.

To her mother, the lessons will take the shape of memories. She won't have to ponder them as abstractions. She will remember it. She lived it. It's her story, Salamatu's story.

* * *

SALAMATU WAS BORN the eldest of five children in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Her parents planted and sold cassava, rice and potatoes. Salamatu liked school. She liked the music classes and the friends she made. But as more children

were born into her family, it became more difficult to pay the school fees and keep up with the uniform requirements, let alone pay for the basics, like feeding the family. Salamatu was 12 years old when she was told she must quit school to help support her family. She wasn't happy. She says she will always remember the friends she made in school, some of whom are now university graduates. Sometimes she thinks that if she had stayed in school she, too, would have a degree.



Instead, Salamatu learned to trade. Her hands would never again be idle. She walked from her home in a village outside Makeni to the next village, where she bought palm oil. Then she walked home to sell the goods.

Salamatu met Mohammed in the next village, where he also did business, buying and selling dresses and shoes. The two fell in love and married during an era of uncertainty, in the midst of their nation's civil war. She was 15, he was 17. They had one child. For four years, they lived together, content.

But fighting inched toward their city. In 1997, a peacekeeping force stayed in Makeni for several months. The people of Makeni heard the rebels had agreed to peace and then heard the peacekeeping force would be pulling out and moving to Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, and to Kono, the diamond-rich rebel stronghold bordering Liberia. The people of Makeni, Salamatu says, didn't believe the rebels would keep the peace. "Let's see," the people said. When the peacekeepers pulled out, the people of Makeni were afraid.

One day, as Salamatu returned home after bathing, she saw thousands of people moving about frantically, attempting to leave Makeni. She had heard the stories of rebels sending messengers ahead of them on their way to an area. The messengers would write letters, stating "the rebels are coming, get ready", and post them to the doors of homes. They did this to create chaos, to make the people panic. Salamatu heard that messengers had posted these warnings in Makeni.

She ran home and started gathering her belongings. Mohammed was away on business in another city so the 19-year-old took her child and joined her parents and her siblings in the mass exodus. The nine family members began walking to a village 13 miles away, thinking they would soon find refuge. They didn't realize yet that the rebels had surrounded Makeni before sending their messenger to alert the people. The rebels hid in the forests, waiting to ambush the civilians as they fled.



The area around Makeni, where Salamatu grew up, is colored with forests and covered by mountains.

Salamatu and her family walked straight into the path of the rebels.

The rebels demanded money from Salamatu's father.

He told them he didn't have any.

"What if we find money on you?" they asked. "What will we do?"

Salamatu's father didn't answer.

The rebels searched him and found bills stuffed into his shoe. They taunted him, asking why he had made them search to find the money. They shot him in the chest. His life was taken for a deception and the equivalent of \$125 US.

Salamatu's mother, her younger brothers and sister and her infant son watched. The rebels turned their attention to the rest of the dead man's family. If any of you cry, they said, you're next. In order to save their own lives, they were forced to act unmoved by the patriarch's murder. No one cried. They suppressed their horror, their fear, their sadness and anger.

Finally, the rebels moved on. The seven family members continued on to the village they hoped might still provide refuge. Salamatu walked ahead of her family. She sobbed, mourning for her father, for what she had witnessed and for her family's future. Her vision veiled by tears, Salamatu walked into the path of another group of rebels. She screamed. Her family, trailing by about 50 meters, ran for cover in the bush.

"I was praying," Salamatu, a Christian, says through a Krio translator, "but whenever you meet with the rebels you think but you don't know how to pray. You're not able to pray. If someone is holding a gun or a knife or a machete, what would you say?"

Salamatu was taken into the bush. A woman was among the rebels. They called her Adama Cut Hand. The men began to argue, fighting over what they should do with Salamatu. Some wanted to amputate her hands and feet. Some wanted to cut off her feet and buttocks. They decided to make Salamatu choose her own fate. They held a "ballot". On pieces of paper they wrote "hands and feet", "hands and waist" and "feet and waist". Salamatu was forced to pick one of the pieces of paper. She picked the one that read "feet and waist". Salamatu remembers seeing the rebels dance in jubilation.

Salamatu's brother, Sorie, who had hidden with his family, snuck close to his sister and the rebels and hid in the bush about five meters away. The 11-year-old watched as Adama Cut Hand sliced off his sister's buttocks with a machete. Then he watched the rebels lug a block of iron toward Salamatu. They placed the block under her legs and Adama Cut Hand hacked away at each foot, striking three times on the left foot and three times on the right foot to dismember her. Sorie came forward out of hiding and told the rebels to do the same to him. Take an arm, he said. He wasn't thinking right, he says now; he wasn't in his "complete sense".



The road leading out of Makeni.

The rebels refused to touch Sorie. Salamatu lay bleeding. "She was at least on the point of death," Sorie says. The rebels left.

Sorie went into the bush and cried. He returned to the place where his family was hiding and told them what he had seen. His mother said they should all go to Salamatu. When they found her, her lifeblood seeping out of her, they wept. Salamatu had fallen into unconsciousness. Her mother wrapped a piece of cloth around Salamatu's stumps and then covered her buttocks with leaves to slow the bleeding.

Sorie helped his mother carry Salamatu to the village they originally hoped would bring them safety. They bought drinking alcohol to pour over Salamatu's wounds to stop the bleeding. The next day, Salamatu awoke. She stayed in the village a week before her family heard the peacekeeping force had returned to a city near Makeni. They knew a hospital would be based nearby and so they set off in search of help.

MEANWHILE, WORD WAS sent to Mohammed that his wife's legs had been sliced off. He rushed to meet her at the hospital. "He cried," Salamatu says. "He was grieved. ... He had compassion and took good care of me."

Mohammed spoke with a doctor at the hospital and explained what the rebels had done to his teenaged wife.

"They were just sorry for me," Salamatu says.

Although Salamatu didn't have any money, the doctors agreed to assist. They stitched up the skin where her feet had been and performed four operations on Salamatu's buttocks. Each time they stitched up the wounds and each time the stitches loosened and came out.

Salamatu stayed at the hospital for a month, recovering in a ward filled with other victims of mutilations. Their hands, their feet and their toes had been amputated. Some had had their thumbs chopped off but the rest of their fingers left intact. Others had had all their fingers amputated but their thumbs left intact. They formed a fraction of the victims of the country's civil war, in which an estimated 60,000 were killed and 10,000 suffered amputations.



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Salamatu dries Abbie after giving her a bath.

None of them understood why the rebels were doing what they were doing. “It’s just wickedness,” Salamatu says. “I don’t think they had a cause. They said they were going to liberate the country.”

When Salamatu was finally discharged from the hospital, the wounds on her buttocks had not healed. Sores developed over what was once padding. In spite of her injuries, in a country where spouses frequently leave one another because of illness or deformity, Mohammed stayed with Salamatu. He loved her. Salamatu enrolled in a batik (tie-dye) school and she and her husband worked together to make money to provide for their small family, as well as Salamatu’s mother and siblings. As the eldest, and especially because she was married, Salamatu became responsible for everyone in the eternal absence of her father. Her younger siblings stayed in school and were clothed, thanks to Salamatu and her husband.

Once the wounds closed over Salamatu’s feet, Sorie bought her a pair of prosthetic legs. Salamatu says he paid the equivalent of a few American coins for the shoes, which quickly “spoiled”. The family combined their earnings to pay \$165 US for a new set of prosthetics, sturdy but unbending legs that weighed almost four pounds each.

Life became normal, Salamatu says, because her husband took good care of her. Salamatu got pregnant and gave birth to a girl.

And then things started improving in Sierra Leone. In 2001, the rebels signed a peace treaty, bringing the 11-year civil war to an end.

A year later, Salamatu got pregnant again. But then, even as the family found more reasons to be hopeful, Mohammed became ill. He had survived the war unscathed, even escaping from the rebels once when they caught him, only to fall prey to malaria. It didn’t last long; he was ill only two days. Salamatu went with her husband to the government hospital in Makeni. He was awake one day and dead the next. Salamatu was four months pregnant when her husband died. She became a 25-year-old widow.

Her third child, Abigail, was born on May 30, 2003.

The family entered into a state of crisis. In spite of Salamatu’s disadvantages – she was a woman and she was disabled – everyone looked to her to provide for them. Perhaps it didn’t occur to her family that Salamatu might not be up to yet another challenge, in the wake of her husband’s death, with the arrival of her infant, enduring not only the challenge of walking, but the pain of sitting.

“We all depend on our elder sister,” says Sorie. “We do survive under her because she used to pay our school fees and used to buy clothes for all of us. And today, look how she is today.”

Salamatu deemed herself capable. Unable to tie-dye clothes on her own, she fastened on her prosthetic legs and took Abbie on public transportation to the capital, Freetown, to beg. She stood on the streets and held out her hands.

Sorie went to work on a farm. The children sometimes sold salt or sugar with Salamatu’s mother, making the equivalent of a dollar a day. Sometimes they went to the neighbors’ homes to ask for food. Sorie says the neighbors treated the children as slaves, making them run errands before feeding them meager portions.

Salamatu often returned to Makeni from Freetown with her earnings. She found she could no longer pay her siblings' school fees.

Even as Salamatu tried fending for her family, her family was discriminated against because of her. After her husband's death, property owners became less willing to let a cripple rent from them. "Since our sister is in this type of sorrowful condition," Sorie says, "people do not accept her any longer to live in the house. They drove us out of the house. She is our sister. If she leaves, we leave." Salamatu, her mother, four siblings and three children found themselves homeless, evicted from what they believed to be their final home. They moved into a farm hut.

Salamatu, the bedrock of the family, felt she could tolerate no more. "At one time, because she felt so sorry for our family," Sorie says, "because all of us cried bitterly, she said our family is so sorrowful she was going to drink soda poison to kill herself." Her faith kept her from taking her own life.

Salamatu says she sometimes became discouraged when she thought about her condition. "But when I think of God," she says, "I forget."

Salamatu joined the Handicap Youth Development Association in Makeni and visited with the other members, either affected by polio or civilian victims of the civil war. Santigie Buya Sesay, chairman of the organization's headquarters in Freetown, says the members fight to be self-reliant. They attend school to learn a trade. To manage, though, they support each other; they depend on one another.

It was at the association for the handicapped in Makeni that Salamatu heard about Mercy Ships. She heard a hospital ship would be docking in Freetown for the third consecutive year to provide free surgeries. Salamatu thought about attending the medical screening because her right heel had become infected. Rumors spread, though, that Mercy Ships could only help people with problems from the neck-up, like facial tumors. Then someone told Salamatu the ships also provided orthopaedic surgeries. She decided to travel the 112 miles to Freetown, a three-hour journey by bush taxi.

Salamatu brought Abbie to the capital one week before the Mercy Ships medical screening at Freetown's National Stadium. They stayed at the Handicap Youth Development Association's headquarters. Salamatu arrived at the stadium the first morning of the two-day medical screening and joined thousands of Sierra Leoneans in line. Some had staked their hopes of being selected on lining up the earliest. They arrived the evening prior and saved spots in line by sleeping on the sidewalk. Daylight revealed a motley assortment. Fathers stood with daughters losing their eyesight. Mothers clutched infants suffering the malnourishment and stigma of cleft lips. Some bore the weight of tumors. A man stood upright next to his younger brother who crouched on the ground, his legs useless from polio; he draped his arms in front of his legs, grabbed his ankles and walked his feet with the strength of



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Sierra Leoneans wait in line at Freetown's National Stadium and hope to be selected for surgeries.



his arms.

Salamatu stood in the midst of her countrymen, all of them hoping to be among the 750 people selected for free surgeries onboard the hospital ship. Salamatu stood all day in the 90-degree Fahrenheit heat with Abbie strapped to her back and the cumbersome prosthetics on her feet. She never got near the front of the line.



Salamatu enters the stadium to be seen by a Mercy Ships surgeon.

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The next morning, Salamatu went to the stadium again, a crutch under her arm and Abbie on her back. She stood for several hours before deciding to give up. She turned to leave. As she walked away from the stadium, Neva Snyder, an American Mercy Ships volunteer, walked toward the stadium. Salamatu determined to try once more to get into the stadium and be seen by a surgeon

Salamatu caught Neva's eye and approached her.

"Ma'am, ma'am," she said.

Neva stopped.

Salamatu reached into her bag and pulled out a photograph. She held in her hand the evidence that revealed her condition, her need. Neva studied the photograph, unsure at first what it

she was looking at. Then it dawned on her: She was looking at Salamatu's mutilated buttocks. "Why would anyone do that?" Neva thought. "It didn't make sense."

Neva had been told to only let those people with appointment cards, given the previous year when Mercy Ships was in Freetown, into the stadium. She called to Dorothy Logans, a counselor/discipler in the Outreach Department, and gave her the photograph.

"How did this happen?" Dorothy asked Salamatu.

"The rebels," Salamatu said.

The two led Salamatu past Mercy Ships security and through the stadium gate to be seen by a plastic surgeon and an orthopaedic surgeon.

When Sierra Leonean Mickey, a Mercy Ships translator, saw Salamatu, she thought, She is like me, she's small. So is her daughter. But for them, she thought, it wasn't stature that made them small, it was lack of food; they looked thin, as if they hadn't eaten enough.

ELAINA METZGER, AN American nurse, took Salamatu's history. Elaine lived in Sierra Leone in the 1980s as a missionary with her husband and son. During Sierra Leone's civil war in the 1990s, Elaine and her husband, horrified at news in the United States of the rebels' hallmark of terrorizing the public with random amputations, gave money toward the amputees. When Salamatu walked up to

Elaine with her crutch, her legs were covered under a long skirt. Elaine didn't realize she was talking with a war victim until Salamatu explained her injuries. "How was she possibly managing?" Elaine thought as she looked at Salamatu and her baby. "And yet, she obviously had adjusted to her situation because she wasn't on the brink of tears, like I was."

When Salamatu moved to another station in the screening process, Elaine watched an entourage follow; one carried Abbie, another carried a pillow for Salamatu to place between herself and the wooden benches. The captain's 10-year-old son saw the commotion and approached. "This is a miracle," Dorothy told the boy. "She's strong.

She's come very far. She knows Jesus. She prays. But it's still hard. It's amazing she didn't bleed to death. It's a miracle. She's a miracle."



Elaine Metzger takes Salamatu's history.

Salamatu was seen by surgeons, selected for two operations and given an appointment card to return to the ship one month later.



Salamatu waits to be seen by surgeons at the Mercy Ships medical screening.



Dorothy and her translator, Henry, decided to ease Salamatu's journey across Freetown to her accommodations. They helped her into a Mercy Ships Land Rover and drove on potholed roads, past a woman throwing a rock at a dog, to a store, where they bought provisions for Salamatu and Abbie. Then they drove to the Handicap Youth Development Association. Salamatu leaned on her crutch as she walked through the building's entrance, smiled and greeted other members sitting in the shaded concrete corridor, escaping from the sun's rays.

"These are all her friends," Henry translated for Salamatu. "They help her."

Dorothy asked Salamatu to show her where she and Abbie slept. Salamatu dangled her crutch and pulled herself up a flight of stairs. She walked into an open room and pointed to a corner on the floor.

Dorothy determined to meet Salamatu before she traveled back to Makeni. She wanted to equip Salamatu to provide for her family until she returned to Freetown for the operations. Then Dorothy decided to take Salamatu home to Makeni, herself. Dorothy bought a 120-pound bag of rice, which she told Salamatu to sell in portions, and fish, cassava and tomatoes, so Salamatu could feed her family.

About a week later, when the Mercy Ships Land Rover bearing Salamatu and Abbie drove into her village outside of Makeni, neighbors screamed and jumped up

and down. Once they saw a mound of goods tied to the top of the vehicle, they shouted louder. Salamatu's mother came forward, dancing and thanking Dorothy. She looked thin and worn. She looked old. Dorothy didn't ask her age. She thought it might not be years that had aged the woman.

Several weeks later, Salamatu returned to Freetown. She walked up the hospital ship's gangway, leaning on a crutch, wearing her hair in plaits and weighing about 106 pounds – almost eight of which she lost each night when she slept but hoisted back on during the day in order to move around. Without her prosthetic legs, Salamatu weighed only 98 pounds. With them, and with her baby strapped to her back, Salamatu carried an extra load of 20 pounds.



Dorothy Logans laughs with Salamatu; her translator, Henry, holds Abbie.



Salamatu hoists herself up a flight of stairs.

Salamatu was led to the hospital ship's Admissions Office. Beverly Kohl, an American nurse, talked with one patient while another nurse talked to Salamatu. Salamatu recounted her story. Soon, the nurse started crying. Beverly started listening. "It was all so overwhelming I could hardly control myself," Beverly says. "Oh, what this poor woman has been through." Almost as startling as the details was Salamatu's straightforward way of relating them. Salamatu appeared unmoved, almost stoic. She seemed to indicate, "It happened. It's what happened. ... That's the way things are in Sierra Leone."

Those who met Salamatu learned her faith sustained her, breathing life into her patchwork body. God, she believes, has protected her life. "It's a miracle that up to now I'm alive," Salamatu says. "It's God."

When Salamatu received her bed assignment in the C-Deck ward, she started her stint as the ship's longest-standing patient during its seven months in Sierra Leone. She occupied one of the ward's 43 beds for four months. Her family would have to manage without her. Salamatu worried for them.

Dorothy visited with Salamatu and learned what she had done with her gifts. She used some of the goods, sold some of the goods and spent the profit on material to tie-dye. Dorothy was impressed by Salamatu's business sense. Then Salamatu told Dorothy her family was homeless. Dorothy asked what she wanted.

"Mama Dorothy," Salamatu said, "I need a house so I don't keep getting kicked out."

"Okay," Dorothy said. She wrote about Salamatu on a poster board and appealed to the ship's 300-plus volunteer crew. Individuals, impacted by Salamatu's spirit in spite of what she had endured, donated more than \$1,200 US towards a house.



Salamatu plays with her son while her brother, Sorie, looks on. While Salamatu stayed on the ship for four months, her son and daughter stayed with family in Makeni.

"Salamatu's story is really poignant, really," says Dr. Tony Giles, a Maxillo-facial surgeon from England. "She nearly lost her hands. Instead she lost her buttocks,

which in the end is better.” Practically every task during her day – from cooking to dressing to changing Abbie’s diaper – would have become impossible if she didn’t have hands. Salamatu picked the right piece of paper, Dr. Giles says, as feet are easier to replace than hands. “What a world,” he says, “to think about what you would lose.”

“Physically,” says Dr. Tertius Venter, a plastic surgeon from South Africa, “it’s amazing she could suffer the amputations of two ankles at the same time when she could have bled to death from one amputation.” Dr. Venter performed Salamatu’s first operation on her buttocks. After the rebels’ initial assault, Salamatu developed secondary injuries – pressure sores and pressure ulcers where once she had padding. Plastic surgeons commonly treat people for pressure wounds, Dr. Venter says, but Salamatu’s injuries had not developed as most of his paralytic patients’ had; hers grew from “horrific circumstances”. “When we see any of these war-injured, it’s just horrific,” he says. “It’s quite disturbing what one human can do to another.”

The major trauma Salamatu underwent the night the rebels caught her would have made her bed-ridden for months, Dr. Venter says, which would have caused the two sores, each about five centimeters in diameter, to form, then become chronic. She had no potential to heal on her own. Sitting, Dr. Venter says, would have been painful and she would have had to care for the wounds daily, keeping them clean because of the risk of infection.

When Dr. Venter interacted with Salamatu, he was struck by her demeanor. She always smiles, he says. “She went through all this and still smiles.” Dr. Venter explained before the operation that her movement

would be restricted for several weeks while she recovered. If she were to heal properly, she would have to sit and lay and sleep on her side. She couldn’t stand or bend. Ward Supervisor Sorina Fadden says Salamatu was upbeat as Dr. Venter listed her restrictions.

“What else do I have to do?” Salamatu asked.

In an operation onboard the Anastasis, Dr. Venter cut out the ulcers and the scar tissue surrounding them. Then he cut “defect flaps”, using tissue from an adjacent area, to give her buttocks padding.

THE WARD’S NURSING staff dubbed Salamatu’s bed “Party Corner”. Mickey, the Sierra Leonean translator who met Salamatu at the medical screening, visited her almost every day. “Everyone loves Salamatu,” Mickey says.



Salamatu swings on Aft Deck while her brother, Sorie, holds baby Abbie.

Salamatu would prop Abbie in bed with a book in her lap and tease that her daughter could read. “I want her to teach me,” she laughed.

Teenaged burn patients recovering from plastic surgeries found their way to Salamatu’s bed, as did women recovering from Maxillo-facial operations. Alimamy, who thinks he’s about 13 years old, suffered injuries and



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Salamatu sleeps after undergoing an operation.

was orphaned when the rebels burned down his family’s house five years ago. As he recovered from operations onboard the *Anastasis*, he found himself drawn to Salamatu. “I can joke with she like brother and sister because I like she and she like me,” Alimamy says. “She can advise me to be to school, to do good at home, to not dwell with the bar friends.”

The patients gravitated toward Salamatu, Sorina says, because she had lived through so much. “She’s not alone,” Sorina says. “They all could relate to the horror of living through the war. Everyone, they all are such survivors.” Yet Salamatu had proven resilient and maintained her bubbly spirit.

Doctors and nurses from around the world cared for Salamatu as she recovered. They brought their accents and their cultures to the bed of the 26-year-old who had never ventured beyond her country’s borders. Mona Stusvik, a ward nurse from Norway, once heard Salamatu talking with some other patients about what it was like on ship. “They said they were no longer in Africa,” Mona says. “They were in Europe. Being on the ship was like a trip to Europe.” The ward provided air conditioning, televisions, Western food, at times, and Western medical staff. “I think in one way it was a big adventure for her,” Mona says. “In a way she has been in Europe and the U.S. and all over.”



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Salamatu combs her hair in the ward before it’s plaited

Salamatu’s story also circled the globe. Crew wrote home to family and friends about the 26-year-old war victim. Fernanda Casulleras, an 18-year-old from Mexico, remembers the first time she told her mother the details of Salamatu’s injuries. Her mother cried. Fernanda told her mother that Salamatu was a strong woman who worked hard and believed in God. For four months, Fernanda visited Salamatu almost every day. The two opened up to each other, communicating in English, which wasn’t either woman’s first language. “For me,” Fernanda says,

“she’s the coolest lady I ever met because she really worries for your feelings.” Fernanda e-mailed her mother dozens of photographs of Salamatu and Abbie and constantly updated her mother about Salamatu to the extent that her mother felt she was living the same experience as Fernanda. When her aunts and uncles visited her parents for a family reunion, her mother took out the photographs of Salamatu and showed them off. “She loves her as much as I do,” Fernanda says of her mother. “She loves her like if she was here.” Her parents sent money for Salamatu to buy food for her family. Her grandmother sent money toward the construction of Salamatu’s house.

As other crew, hailing from more than 30 nations, wrote e-mails home about Salamatu, more money trickled in. Dorothy’s translator, Henry, drove to Makeni and paid for some land next to Salamatu’s aunt’s home, where Salamatu’s family was staying. Each time Salamatu received a gift, she would call Mickey over. “Write thank you,” Salamatu would tell Mickey. “I’m her secretary,” Mickey joked.



Salamatu teaches a visitor in the ward how to crochet.

Salamatu busied her hands, knitting and crocheting her own thank you’s. When she didn’t have visitors, which was rare, Salamatu made bags and hats and doilies for crew, and skirts and shirts and dresses for her daughters.

Abbie sat, content, on her mother’s bed, or was toted about the ship, content, on the backs of nurses and crew. She rarely made a sound. Ann Giles, a palliative care nurse and the wife of Dr.

Tony Giles, visited the two in the ward one time and found Abbie hot with a fever. Most children would have put up a fuss, says Ann, a mother of six girls. Ann heard Abbie whimper once. “I would say the chances are Abbie is such a good baby because she has had to become one,” Ann says. “Salamatu was in the condition she was in way before she had Abbie.” Abbie’s father died months before her birth and Salamatu could not have physically tended to her infant’s every whim. “She’s just sort of adapted to the situation,” Ann says. “Salamatu couldn’t cope if she was a whiny child.” Or, Ann says, Abbie’s easy-going nature could be her God-given temperament. “God knew what Salamatu could cope with or not cope with.”

A month after Salamatu boarded the *Anastasis*, she was taken to the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital east of Freetown to recuperate for several weeks while the ship sailed to the Canary Islands for a mid-point break. Ann Giles trained Nathaniel, a Sierra Leonean nurse, to care for Salamatu in the absence of the Mercy Ship. The 22-year-old became responsible for cleaning and dressing Salamatu’s wounds. For



Salamatu recovers in a local hospital while the *Anastasis* sailed to the Canary Islands.

Nathaniel, Salamatu marked the first severe war injury patient he had ever cared for. As Nathaniel prepared to dress Salamatu’s wound one day, she started to tell him how she had been injured. “She wanted to explain about the trouble and

tragedy,” Nathaniel says. “I asked her to stop and forget about it.

“If she started explaining that problem,” he says, “she might also start to remember about it. And when she started to remember about it, it would create more problems for her. It was too pathetic.”



Salamatu walks up the gangway after recovering for several weeks on land.

When the *Anastasis* returned to Freetown, Salamatu returned to the hospital ship to continue her recovery and wait for her second operation. Salamatu walked up the gangway, her crutch propped under her arm, weighing 117 pounds – 11 pounds more than she had two months earlier when she first boarded the ship. Once in the ward, she was told she had been moved to another bed. She refused. “Thirty-three is my bed,” she insisted. The nurses complied.

Salamatu hadn’t liked the bed in the corner at first because it sat directly under a television. Salamatu said she couldn’t see the films the nurses played throughout the day. Then she discovered she could see the films if she simply turned around and looked up. One day The JESUS Film played overhead. Salamatu watched in intervals. Roman soldiers

hammered a nail through Jesus’ hands onto the cross. Jesus screamed. Salamatu said she didn’t like watching the film. “These people are acting like the rebels,” she said.

But Salamatu wasn’t bitter toward the people who had maimed her. “Everything is God,” she says. “If God has allowed something bad to happen, I don’t have anything to do. I only have to look to God.”

Several days after returning to the *Anastasis*, Salamatu underwent an operation for a right stump revision. Dr. Douglas Sammon, an orthopaedic surgeon from Scotland, says a leaking sore, a hole half a centimeter in diameter, had formed in the heel of her right foot. The rebels had cut through Salamatu’s left shin but had hacked through the joint of Salamatu’s right ankle. It swung about, rubbing against her prosthetic shoe, creating the sore.



Salamatu undergoes an orthopaedic surgery to shorten her right leg, which had developed an infection in her heel.

Ideally, Dr. Sammon says, he would have amputated her right leg just below the knee to give her more control and ease her mobility with a prosthetic leg. But he let Salamatu choose how long she wanted her leg to be. She told him to make it the same length as her left leg. She wanted to be made symmetrical in her deformity. “Now,” Dr. Sammon says, “limb fitters can help her choose how tall she will be.”

Several weeks later, Salamatu was fitted with new prosthetics at Mercy Ships *New Steps*, a land base that provides free limb rehabilitation to victims of disease and war. At first, the legs were made too long. Salamatu was too tall. She felt unsteady. Salamatu walked into the ward and promptly pulled her new white gym shoes off the brown plastic feet to show off the new legs. The shoes fit tightly, though, and the nurses struggled to pull the shoes back over the plastic feet. One nurse noticed Salamatu eyeing someone's flip-flops and advised her that the flip-flops would be a little too adventurous. "Well I have got toes," Salamatu retorted.

It was as if she had realized for the first time, her nurses said, how crude her other prosthetics had been. Beverly Kohl remembers seeing Salamatu's old prosthetics when she was first admitted to the ward. "They looked like stumps," Beverly says. It looked as if someone had whittled down a log and stuck some clunky black high tops on the end.



Salamatu's prosthetic legs were shortened during a subsequent fitting at Mercy Ships *New Steps* but she was still several inches taller than she had been before. Two days before her discharge date, Salamatu returned to

Mercy Ships *New Steps* for her final fitting. She left 10-month-old Abbie in the care of the ward nurses. "She has so many mothers on the ship," Salamatu said, smiling. Abbie, Salamatu said, would wonder when they went back to Makeni, "Where are all my mothers?"

Ann Giles drove Salamatu to the appointment. Salamatu sat in the Mercy Ships Land Rover and crocheted until the vehicle pulled out of the port. Then, the white yarn hung limp as her eyes wandered, lingering over the scenes outside. When she walked into the Mercy Ships *New Steps* office, Ann told Richard, a prosthetic orthopaedic technician from Liberia, "She's developed a squeak." Salamatu demonstrated. Her right leg sounded off.

Richard repaired the leg, altering the screws then tightening them "so when she goes," Richard said, "she will be in the hands of God and there will be no loosening." The squeak stopped in the right leg but a snapping sound started in the left one. For two hours Richard worked on the prosthetics, fitting them just right and then asking Salamatu to walk around.

The prosthetic legs weighed less than a pound and would have cost about \$125 US if she had to purchase them. "It's better," Salamatu said as she held up the ends of her skirt and looked at herself walk, without a crutch, in a full-length mirror. "Now God will heal everything for me," Salamatu said. "And I thank God."

As Richard fixed Salamatu's legs, Salamatu said she was eager to return to Makeni in two days, on Sunday. She had received news from her mother the previous day, when someone from Makeni visited the ship, that her brother had been ill with a stomach ache.. "Everything is hard for them," the messenger relayed. Salamatu missed her family and friends and was only eager to go home. She didn't say she would miss the ship. She simply said of the crew, "I'm thinking good things. ... They encourage me. Everything I want they give me."



Richard, a Mercy Ships *New Steps* prosthetic orthopaedic technician, hands Salamatu her new right leg.

The next day, Saturday, Salamatu finished packing the belongings she had accumulated during her time on the ship. Friends on the ship had given her clothes, material and tools for tie-dyeing and an additional \$830 US toward the building of her house. Salamatu would once again return to Makeni – as she had after begging and as she did when Dorothy drove her home – with more than she had taken to Freetown.

Salamatu asked Fernanda to drive with her the three hours home to Makeni and speak with her mother. "She always cries," Salamatu said of her mother. She cried, Salamatu said, because of Salamatu's condition. This, in turn, saddened Salamatu. "Tell her, 'Don't cry,'" Salamatu told Fernanda. "She has to be positive."

At 6 a.m. on Sunday, Jitske Timpers, a Mercy Ships volunteer from the Netherlands, sat on bed 32, next to Salamatu. Jitske had provided Salamatu with a steady stream of her staple: yarn. She held Abbie in her lap, reached over and touched Salamatu's right wrist, where the patient identification was clasped.

"You can take this off now," Jitske said.

"It's my watch," Salamatu joked.

"It's about time to go home, it says," Jitske said.



Salamatu hugs Jitske Timpers goodbye.

"A day like today is great," Salamatu said, "because I am able to sit by myself. I tell God tenki (thank you) for that."

Salamatu said her faith had increased while staying in the hospital ship's ward. "The time I had this problem I was crying at that time and seeking for a way God could help me. While I was thinking about that, I came to the ship and received healing. I just believe my faith in God caused the people to touch me.

"Now it's really good. God will work for me. God will work everything for me. I know God will continue to do it for me." She will marry again, she said, if God brought the right man to her.

Salamatu walked up two flights of stairs and was greeted by Mickey, the ward translator she had befriended. Mickey woke up at 5:30 a.m. so she could travel across town to the port and say good-bye to “Sali”. “She is now my sister,” Mickey said of Salamatu. She promised to visit Makeni soon. “I pray that God will give her strength because this is the starting of a life,” Mickey said.

Nurses lingered in the ship’s reception area as Salamatu and Abbie prepared to leave. They said the ward would seem empty without them – without Salamatu, who was dubbed the queen of the ward, and her little girl, fittingly called the princess of the ward. Donna Shippie, an eye nurse, walked by and said she would miss baby Abbie. “I call her Miss *Anastasis*,” she said, “because she’s been here so long she thinks she owns the place.”

SALAMATU WALKED DOWN the gangway without her crutch. She wore a Western-style wig with black and red braids, a jean skirt and Adidas running shoes. Her legs were lighter and longer than when she arrived four months earlier.

“I think she’s been given a really good start,” one of her nurses said.

“Or a new start,” Mona added.

But the nurses were concerned for their charge when she left the ward. On the ship, Salamatu’s meals were provided, her clothes were washed and she had ample help with Abbie. Salamatu never demanded anything, the nurses said, but over time she became familiar with the care. Abbie had become institutionalized



Salamatu returns to her home after four months on the *Anastasis*.

during her four months onboard, but she was a baby and would readjust. Sorina thought it had almost reached the stage where Salamatu, too, was institutionalized. “She had to go back to her own life,” Sorina said of Salamatu, “because here it was a vacation for four months, which is a long vacation.”

Some feared how Salamatu would respond once she moved out of the ship’s limelight. “I think she liked being special,” Mona said.

“She’s still going to be special,” Sorina said, “because we’re building her a house. She will have a step-up on life.” But, Sorina added, Salamatu’s neighbors would see her return after four months on the hospital ship with her new legs and a new house and they might find it hard to relate to Salamatu. Or they might grow jealous. “A lot is going to be expected of her because she’s been given a lot,” Sorina said.

Salamatu joked as she and Abbie got into the Land Rover with Fernanda, Alimamy and several other Mercy Ships volunteers. As they drove toward Makeni, Salamatu sang. As they got closer to Salamatu’s aunt’s house, where Salamatu’s mother and siblings and children were staying, Fernanda thought she could see her friend

growing anxious.

When Salamatu stepped out of the Land Rover outside her aunt's house, her mother danced in joy, happy to see her daughter "normal". Abbie was passed to Salamatu's aunts but she cried for Fernanda and cried because a heat rash had developed on her neck. Salamatu, who had thought the temperature too cold when she first boarded the air-conditioned ship, felt too hot in her home environment. She stripped off her shirt to cool off.

After several hours, Fernanda and the others prepared to leave Salamatu for the evening and stay the night in a nearby village. Salamatu said she wanted to go along. She feared they wouldn't return the next day to visit her. They promised they would. Salamatu told Fernanda she was afraid to be left alone without any means of communication.

The next day, Salamatu's friends returned. When they again said good-bye, tears welled in Salamatu's eyes. She didn't cry. Abbie did. She flung herself into the Land Rover. Fernanada said she hoped to return once more before the ship sailed from West Africa to Europe.

Back on the ship, the nurses talked about how Salamatu might fare.

"It would be interesting to know six months from now what happens to her," Sorina said, "but we won't."

"Still, she will find a way," Mona said.

"Oh yeah," Sorina said, "she will."

Salamatu's caregivers were convinced that even if Salamatu's hands had been amputated in place of her feet or buttocks, she would have prevailed over her circumstances. "Without her hands," Beverly said, "she would have adjusted just like she has without her legs."



Above, Fernanda, right, watches Salamatu greet her mother after four months apart. Below, Salamatu's mother dances in joy to have her daughter home and "normal".



Salamatu, home in Makeni, smiles.

"She's a survivor," Sorina said.

Two weeks after depositing Salamatu back into her village, Fernanda returned to Makeni for one final goodbye. She went, bearing gifts. The Mercy Ships Land Rover pulled down a dusty road and the Land Rover's headlights shone through a veil of rain onto Salamatu, sitting

on the porch of her aunt's home, and her children being bathed. Nearby, Salamatu's

plot of land sat empty of a structure; the dirt was covered with a layer of mud bricks.

Her Mercy Ships friends gave Salamatu a bank account card and a cell phone to stay in contact once they returned to their homelands. Salamatu immediately put her hands to work crocheting a cell phone holder to wear around her neck. She told them she had tie-dyed almost 60 yards of fabric they had given her. Neighbors in the village helped. The only reason she had refrained from dying all of it was so she could show them how it's done.

Salamatu recounted her family's struggles since returning. A sty had grown on her eyelid. Her sister had contracted malaria. Her daughter, Abbie, had gotten ill and Salamatu sold a bag of rice to have the 11-month-old seen at a local hospital. Her family again faced the possibility of eviction, she said, if they didn't pay the equivalent of about \$2 US for the next month's rent. She pointed to the area where her home would be built. She had hoped construction would be further along, as the rainy season had just started.



JOSHUA FLETCHER

Salamatu's aunt's home is lit up by the headlights of a Mercy Ships Land Rover when Salamatu's friends return for one final goodbye.

Once Salamatu tie-dyed her few remaining yards of material, with the assistance of some neighbors, her Mercy Ships friends loaded up the fabric to take to Freetown and sell; they would deposit the profits in her bank account. Salamatu's family and her friends waved them off. Salamatu sat on the porch. She lifted her hand to wipe away the tears that spilled onto her cheeks.

* * *

SALAMATU'S STORY ENDS even as a new chapter begins.

At 26, Salamatu begins the process of assimilating life in Sierra Leone "before" – her father's murder, her own victimization and her husband's death – with life "after" – her months onboard a hospital ship of foreigners and her return to the village she grew up in.



JOSHUA FLETCHER

Salamatu smiles.

Salamatu and her children face poor chances of survival in a nation where the average life expectancy is 43 years old and more than 30 percent of the population dies before the age of five. She continues to confront the challenges of discrimination even as she assumes responsibility for her mother, four siblings and three children.

But already Salamatu had survived – and thrived – when the odds indicated she should have died. Although disabled, Salamatu had triumphed, in the spirit of so many of her countrymen, over her circumstances. Her unrelenting spirit had buffered her from trauma and her faith had preserved her. She had embodied joy when bitterness could have ensnared her.

Now, Salamatu's body has been altered, relieved of pain. Now, she has been given a financial footing with the promise of a home and the beginning, once again, of her business. And once again, she occupies her hands, which so narrowly escaped destruction, to care for her dependants.

Salamatu hasn't changed, really. She's only been strengthened.

