

The Girl I couldn't help – and the Girls I could

December 12th 2023. Near Kibale Forest, Uganda.

My traveling companion shifted uncomfortably on his seat. "Erm...Benon, some of us have to pee". We were traveling a dirt road somewhere in the Ugandan Countryside. Our guide Benon stopped the Jeep in front of some trees. He told the guys to be quick. As a woman I wasn't allowed to hop out and "let it flow" on the road-side. So I just thanked my well-trained bladder for its patience. I still got out of the car to stretch my legs. We would see mountain Gorillas today and my whole body was brimming with excitement.

Which is why I only noticed her, when she was almost down the hill:



Photo credit: Mathias Winter

No, Miss. She will learn to run towards passing cars.

A little girl, not older than four. We had seen her work a field with a small pickaxe at least a kilometre earlier. She had waved to us, like all Ugandan children wave when tourists are driving by. Hopeful that some of them would stop to distribute toys, snacks, sweets or money. Now she was running towards us as fast as her tiny legs could carry her, pickaxe still in hand. Her brown linen dress was torn and full of dirt. It was cold up there in the mountains and yet the dress covered neither arms nor knees. It looked like an old coffee bag with some holes cut into it. She had nearly reached us smiling brightly, eyes shining, when the rest of my group ducked back into the Jeep. I will never forget the panic in her face when Benon started the motor. "Can't we wait for her?" I asked. She ran so far. So quickly. I wanted to give her something. Anything. We had already given away all the chocolate and books we brought with us and had no cash left... but I was sure I would find something in my bag.



Photo credit: Mathias Winter

"No, Miss", Benon said "it is not good for her. Whatever gift you give her is not worth it...she will learn to run towards passing cars. Far. Often with no good result. Up here that would be dangerous." I nodded. We drove away just as she had reached our window. Just as she lifted her little hand to wave. It stopped midair and fell to her side after she realised we wouldn't stop. And it broke my heart. I still think of her. Often. Ashamed and angry I couldn't help.

December 16th 2023. Near Fort Portal, Uganda

L4 days later we met Francis at a Lodge near Fort Portal. We spoke about the orphaned children in his village and his plan of buying some land to provide them with a safe home. We also spoke in depth about the young girls in his community: How difficult it had been for them, coming from violent homes or being abandoned, to get an education and continue going to school. Studying something they might actually like and having an autonomous future? Seemed like an impossible dream to all of them. It felt silly trying to draw comparisons between young women in my country and his. So I didn't.



Photo credit: Mathias Winter

The surprising thing: More people soon followed and Violet has an amazing sponsor now (Thank you, Esra!) which is why she made it into veterinary school. Still, 23 children, some with HIV or special needs, are a lot. Which is why I hope that whoever reads this – maybe someone who has always wanted to have a positive impact on the lives of others yet didn't know where to start – might feel inspired to donate. We can't always help. And it's hard. To stand by and notice how unfair and often cruel this world can be. Cruel and yet full of wonders.

But I promise: Here, at the Youngsters of Uganda, every effort (every share, like, donation) actually helps. No... let me rephrase that: It doesn't just "help". For these kids – girls and boys alike – it makes a world of difference. If you're interested in sponsoring one of our girls and their education, please visit: www.youngstersofuganda.org. Or send us a quick message on instagram.



Photo credit: Mathias Winter

Instead I decided that in this case, I could actually help. Francis and a group of international travelers had already started building an infrastructure and bringing an organization to life that could support these girls financially as well by providing scholastic materials. It was a tiny group of maybe 5 supporters doing all the heavy lifting. But it was a start.

They made sure that the kids in Fort Portal wouldn't go hungry, had a place to sleep and could actually focus on school. No matter their gender and background. However, school fees for proper schools in Uganda are expensive and there was no way that the small quarterly donations of 5 people could support 18–23 kids over the next ten years. There was no way that a girl like Violet, who was top of her class and dreamed about studying veterinary medicine, could actually go to university, when Francis couldn't even afford rice for the rest of the kids. And I knew: Here I could actually make a difference. So I joined the team. To help these amazing girls and all the other children in Fort Portal.