

WORST NIGHTMARE



I answered my mobile phone to hear screams and crying. I could only make out the two words “accident” and “Regent”, the village nearby. Then the line went dead. Caller ID

showed the number of Daniel, the senior housefather of our orphanage. He had taken all 20 of our kids on a special Boxing Day outing. I stared at the phone for a few moments trying to sort out what I had just heard. My skin crawled as all sorts of scenarios collided in my head. My own 6 year old twins were sound asleep in their beds. One of them was very ill with a respiratory tract infection. Leaving them alone in the house, even for a few minutes was out of the question.



. I phoned Stephen, a British soldier and close family friend. He had taken his wife out for the day and informed me that he was 45 minutes outside Freetown. He ordered me to sit tight and wait while he sent another soldier to find the accident and get some solid information.

Ten minutes later the soldier reported to me that he couldn't find an accident in Regent. Before I had time to digest that, Daniel called again, giving me their location and said “It's bad Mummy Judy, you need to come quick”. Since Phil was in Canada and we currently had no volunteers working with us, I was all alone. In desperation I begged the soldier to stay with my boys, quickly showed him the dvd player and television and made a flying trip in to Freetown. As I approached the scene of the accident I cried out to God for the lives of our children. The mangled taxi van was wrapped around a huge mango tree, cement fence pillars were flattened by the force of the crash and shattered glass was everywhere.

When I reached the military hospital where they had been taken I saw 4 of the children sitting on the outside step. They were caked with blood and obviously in shock. When they saw me they cried, "Mummy Judy, go inside quick". Walking through the door of the hospital was like stepping into a low budget, second-rate movie set. A dim, bare bulb hung from the ceiling by a cord. The room was noisy and packed with people. Confusion filled the air. The floor was covered with bodies, some motionless in an unconscious state, others crying and writhing in pain. The smell of blood nauseated me. A man in uniform grabbed my arm and asked me to identify the people belonging to Dove. As I made my way around the room I was horrified to discover they were all our Dove children. The man steered me further in to the room where there were 5 beds, all full of bleeding, crying children. I choked back a sob as I realized they were all our children as well, including two boys who were good friends of ours.

Major Stephen and his wife Sue had reached moments before me. Sue, a nurse, was leaning over four year old Yusef, trying to stop his bleeding. She instructed me to go back and assess the children on the floor as they had not been seen by anyone yet. I sent up a prayer for strength as screams and cries met me. "Mummy Judy it hurts so bad. Mummy Judy make it stop hurting, help me". Some were moaning softly, semi conscious. They had been denied simple pain killers, sutures and bandages with the claim that none were available. This proved untrue as I turned on the doctor in fury and demanded help ...

Realization hit me that injuries were serious and well beyond the scope of anything I had ever dealt with. It was obvious the children needed immediate professional help and that they were not going to get it at this hospital. Major Stephen and Sue joined me and we conferred briefly. We had all reached the same conclusion. Stephen left us to 'pull some strings' he said and a short time later called with the unbelievable news that the UN military hospital would accept the children. As Sue and I made our rounds trying to assure each child that help was on its way, screaming ambulance sirens could be heard outside. White coated, efficient men poured in to the room. They assessed the situation in seconds and began wheeling the children out on stretchers. The children screamed in agony as they were moved. As the last stretcher departed, I turned and spotted a young man holding 4 month old baby Phillip, who belonged to one of our girls. I grabbed the baby and Sue and I raced out to my truck. The last ambulance had waited for us to follow so we would not be held up by traffic.

As we strode into the UN hospital emergency, Major Stephen and the Jordanian Commander In Charge met us. We briskly walked down corridors through examining rooms, xray and intensive care, all filled with Dove children. The Commander gave me a brief summary of what to expect with each child. Some were sobbing as they were gently probed while others were already being covered with blankets and tucked in to beds with the glazed expressions indicative of shock. Some of the little ones slept as clean, white gauze was applied to their lacerations and torn, swollen limbs. All had IV's snaking out of their arms as drugs began the journey into their bodies to dull the pain and ward off the inevitable infection. I was relieved to see each child being gently attended to by a doctor and several nurses. The hospital had called out a full emergency and all doctors on call had come in to help. I paused by little Yusef who was passing on a stretcher, returning from xray. His face was

swollen beyond recognition. I squeezed his tiny hand and assured him that I was there for him. The only response was a single tear that trickled down his cheek. My own tears mingled with his and the Commander patted me on the back, assuring me that the best care possible was being given to Yusef. He also warned me that Yusef's condition was grave as a skull fracture was likely and meningitis could set in and kill him quickly. In addition he had a fractured nasal wall and a huge blood clot in his forehead. He was in excruciating pain.

The Commander firmly guided Sue, Stephen and I to his office, leaving his staff to do their jobs. Over a cup of pungent sage tea, we summarized the accident, injuries and the obvious question of who was going to cover the cost of treatment. I sent up a quick prayer that it would be so and assured him it would be no problem. I wondered to myself how in the world we would be able to do it. I knew the cost just to admit was \$700 US dollars per person and we had just admitted 20 people! Major Stephen backed me, saying I was reliable and good for payment. He knew we at Dove prayed about everything and had seen evidence that it worked.

After tea we again made our rounds, checking on each child and Daniel, who had been escorting the kids when the accident occurred. By now night was passing and we were in to the very early hours. Many slept now, the drugs established in their bloodstreams. I choked back sobs as I surveyed their bloody clothes (hospital gowns are not issued) and matted hair caked with blood in contrast to the clean sheets and white bandages. The Commander refused to allow me to stay through the night. His staff would remain with the children and he wanted me to try to rest. I promised each child that was still awake that I would return at first light. They were afraid in these surroundings where they couldn't understand the language being spoken and were chilled in the air conditioned rooms.

The next morning the Commander again encouraged Sue and I to share his tea and sandwiches with honey and cheese before we could see the children. My stomach was still tied in knots so I was unable to get anything down. The Jordanians are a very hospitable people and Sue discovered that it is their custom to continue bringing food if you empty your plate. She looked panicked as they brought her 4th sandwich and I whispered to her to leave it or they would never let her stop eating!

The children each cried out as I entered their rooms. There were many hugs and tears as they showed me their bandages and explained their injuries. Their pain was obvious and heartbreaking. I asked a question of God that I have repeated many times over since then – “Why? Why did this have to happen to our kids?” At the same time I realized that it was the hand of God that had preserved their lives but it was heart wrenching to see their suffering.

The next days were a blur of medicines, cleaning dressings, bathing bodies, taking clean clothes and familiar food to the hospital, keeping a schedule and dispensing medicines at all hours as each child was released back in to my care. I rarely ate or slept and was on call at all times. The children were still terrified that one of them would not wake up in the morning. Friends came to help care for my own boys and to leave food as well as all the practical things such as keeping fuel in the generator and making sure other Dove workers were

keeping things running. Sue extended her holiday in Sierra Leone and helped me care for the children as half came home and half still had to be bathed and fed in the hospital.

A month has passed since the accident. The children bear the scars both physically and mentally. Some remain in casts and others still 'feel their heads' from concussions. There are damaged tendons and a skin graft that will take time to heal. But, they are all alive. They have bonded as a family. I don't hear the arguing and fighting that went on before. They help each other with chores and there is never a complaint about having to take a turn feeding or changing baby Phillip. The emotional scars will take longer to heal than their bodies. While they were laying in the wreckage they were robbed of any cash and jewelry they had. Some lost brand new shoes, purchased with Christmas money they had been given two days before. They share their fears through drama and long, personal chats. But I believe that in time and through the grace of God's love and care, these too will diminish.

I thank God for each life that He has placed in our care. I pray for their futures and the special things He has in store for them. I thank God for giving Daniel the strength and presence of mind during the accident to call me, remove children from the road so they wouldn't be hit by oncoming traffic, get people to help lift the rolled vehicle to remove trapped children and get them to a hospital in spite of a severe concussion and torn arm ligaments himself. He stayed calm even when another taxi van refused to help the injured children unless they were paid up front.

The abundance of God has also been proven through the generosity of the UN hospital who donated the cost of all xrays (nearly 100), medicines, doctors care and after care. Also through everyone who has sent donations to cover the thousands of dollars that we had to pay for medical expenses. I am praying for grace to forgive the one who stole cash out of my backpack in the first hospital while I was attending to the children and for the driver of the taxi who caused the accident through his carelessness and then ran away, leaving our children scattered and bleeding along the roadside. I thank God because in spite of it being a parent's worst nightmare, He was there.