

## Okahandja Lessons

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*Welcome to Namibia!* The battered wooden sign stood at the edge of a highway that was strewn with piles of twisted, smoking metal.

“Car accidents!” Pastor Cliff shouted above the wind and dirt spinning inside our van that had evidently lost, or never had, glass windows.

“What about them?” I shouted back.

“The number one cause of death in Namibia!”

There were no bodies on the highway and no emergency vehicles, but the accidents appeared every few feet: grotesque, abandoned arrangements of rubber and steel, smoldering into the sky. They protruded from the land like medieval gargoyles, casting strange, tortured shadows before disappearing in the cloud of dust created by the wheels of our car. I wondered where the passengers in these burned out vehicles had ended up post-accident. Had they fled the scene? Did any lose a limb? A life?

I tugged my skirt over the hydraulic knee of my prosthetic limb to keep out the flying gravel. The inside of the leg’s silicone socket was stinking and sticky from the long plane ride. I could feel an itchy rash forming on my stump, and I was anxious to get to Okahandja, to the cabin where I’d be sleeping, so that I could apply my anti-fungal cream. I’d packed all the necessary leg provisions: an extra socket in case the strap on this one broke; antibacterial soap to clean the socket; extra cosmetic hose to cover the outside of the leg when the one I wore became dirty from wearing sandals on the dusty roads.

There were no reflections on the gravel road as we sped along in Pastor Cliff’s van; there were no lights except the dim blue ones illuminating the dashboard and the headlights. I put my hand out the window and felt the air resist the skin on my arm as the van barreled into a buoyant darkness. It was unsettling to feel a part of everything: the air that smelled of burning rubber and body odor; the sound of the decrepit motor grinding into the sky; the occasional bellow of thunder far away.

There was no horizon. The stars were points of light that looked close enough to pierce an outstretched hand. The land was so dark and felt so private that the stroke of the headlights seemed unwelcome, a violation. I had come to Namibia to attend a ten-day conference designed to provide theological reflection, direction, and instruction for youth in southwest Africa, but I had my doubts; I knew a bit about the situation for disabled people in African countries. I worried this would not be an easy place to visit.

I was not prepared for this wide, black-hot emptiness. Nothing sliced up the space to make it manageable: no train tracks, truck stops, billboards, streetlights, mileage signs, rest stops, or pit stops. I was used to roads in Wyoming that climbed thousands of feet, curves buffered by mountains. In Geneva, where I’d been living in the year after graduating college, I was surrounded by manicured parks and mountain views. I strolled along cobblestone streets dotted with outdoor cafés and lined with luxury shops like Rolex and Cartier.

I’d spent most of the seven-hour plane ride from Frankfurt today listening to a repertoire of guttural pub songs performed by a group of inebriated Austrian poachers. They wore leather necklaces with white tusks that rested on the thick carpets of chest hair bursting from their open-collared shirts. One of them stumbled around in the smoking section, where I was unfortunately seated, leaving behind the scent of alcohol and cigarette smoke on his hourly visit to the toilet. “Sexy you!” he said to me as he hung on to the back of my seat, practically dragging himself up the aisle.

We landed at midnight on a strip of tar lined with weak streetlights. Inside, the airport was dimly lit and muggy. A man seated at a card table stamped my passport. At first I thought the loud buzzing noise came from the overhead ceiling lights, but I realized quickly that the noise came from the chorus of mosquitoes feasting on my arms.

“I’m Pastor Cliff,” said a portly, balding man who stood outside the airport entrance. His white T-shirt was patterned with sweat. His frayed cotton shorts fell just above his dusty knees, and his skin was a deep, rich black. Alone in the entrance hall, he held a sign that read MS. RAITT. When we left the airport in his sixteen-passenger van that appeared to have had some of its roof clawed off, we drove past the closed-up shops that lined the colonial streets of Windhoek. At a stoplight I looked out to the door of a shuttered store on the deserted main street. The white-skinned mannequins were illuminated by the lights of our car. Suddenly, the shop door seemed to move, and a shadow detached itself from the doorway. I jumped.

“The homeless,” Pastor Cliff explained. “They’re a problem here.”

I watched the asymmetrical shadow hop further out into the street. It was an elderly man, an amputee. His left foot was bare and the fabric of his right pant leg pooled on the ground. He regarded us with a mixture of suspicion and hope, and then hopped back into the doorway, his body once again absorbed in shadow.

“Many of them are damaged,” Pastor Cliff said as the light turned green and we continued down the empty street.

“Oh,” I said, and nodded.

A year earlier, I had stood for over an hour in a long line at the Cheyenne, Wyoming DMV to renew my driver’s license. On the back wall was a poster

advertising the dangers of drunk driving. Under the familiar warning “Don’t Drink and Drive” was a photograph of an amputee, the figure balanced on crutches with one pant leg pinned up to his thigh. I wondered how that man had lost his leg. I wondered how I was supposed to feel, sitting in this van now or standing in that line then, knowing I would be asked to tell my story (no, not a drunk driving accident), knowing I would have to prove that I could drive as if I had just turned sixteen.

Now, as Pastor Cliff and I pulled back onto the gravel road in Okahandja, I thought of that young driving instructor who had asked me to drive around the block in my car. He had kept his eyes on my left leg. “Wow,” he kept saying. I said nothing.

“How far does it go up?” he asked at a stoplight, staring at my lap. I didn’t answer. “Shy, I guess,” he said, then instructed me to “turn right when it was safe” and drive back to the DMV.

After he signed off on my license, reminding me that I was not allowed, by law, to drive a stick shift, and that I should never drive with my leg off, I drove home, shaking and silenced. Afraid to open my mouth.

When we arrived in Okahandja, I settled into the bunk in my cabin, which I shared with seven women from different parts of Africa. Our days were filled with Bible studies, discussion groups, AIDS education, and teacher training for those women interested in becoming theological educators in their respective regions. I quickly adjusted to the daily routine.

Each morning in Okahandja began the same way: I woke to the sound of flip-flops on concrete, dreaming of a strong espresso. I was greeted instead with the burning-paper smell of bugs’ wings in the sunlight, the smell of the salt from my forehead and neck mixed with the strange human odor of other people’s bodies, the smell of warmed dirt. The gaps between the logs of the wooden cabin were intended to let in fresh air, but they served only to let in bugs.

As I did each morning, I quickly put on my artificial leg, checking first in the hollow socket area for any winged or legged creatures that might have strayed in. I grabbed my thick glasses and hobbled out to the bathroom.

The sink and shower area was packed with African women who smiled and acknowledged me when I came in, though they continued to speak in a language I did not understand. During the day, I heard the meaning of their words via the two translators, who spoke to us in their French-accented English through the headphones that everybody wore.

All of the women were naked, and their bodies were lush, full, and different shades of black. I always wore pants, a bra, and a T-shirt. I slipped my head

under the brownish water that came from one of the taps. I disinfected my hands with the special soap I’d brought from Geneva and slipped contact lenses into my eyes, which were exceptionally dry and tired in Africa. I tried to look at myself—a conglomeration of shades of insipid white in the bathroom mirror. Without makeup, I had no eyelashes and my face was as pale as the moon. *You are so ugly*, is what I thought. *You are so ugly compared to all of these people*. Here were women who had come from situations of hardship and struggle that were unimaginable to me, a woman from the United States. Here I stood, with all of my privilege, envying their bodies.

I felt that my body, with its damage, marked me with shame. And even more shameful was the thought that came to me on those mornings: that I would gladly trade my body for theirs, but wanted nothing to do with the difficult circumstances of their lives.

I showered at night, when everyone else had gone to bed. I tried to ignore the enormous insects flitting in the light of the flashlight that cast my asymmetrical shadow on the stone walls. I thought of the man in the doorway in Windhoek; I thought of the poster on the wall of the DMV. I could find no right place inside my skin.

One afternoon, halfway into my trip, Pastor Cliff and I were eating strudel and drinking coffee in one of the few air-conditioned cafés along the single commercial street in Okahandja. Our waitress had a frown for a face and a white boss who stood behind the counter, gesturing rudely and shouting orders to the other waitresses in German.

“What’s he saying?” I asked Pastor Cliff.

He shook his head. “I don’t want to repeat it in English.”

As we ate the sweet, greasy food, a legless man and a one-legged woman set up their beggars’ camp across the road in front of a display of newspapers: *The Windhoek Advertiser*, *The Namibian*, *Allgemeine Zeitung*. They used their makeshift stick crutches to lower themselves awkwardly to the ground, arranging their bodies on the sidewalk, arranging their paper cups in their hands, preparing to beg.

Watching these amputees extend their arms for change and charity, I felt ill. The skin on their forearms shook; their mouths twisted into sad faces of pleading. The line that separated me from them seemed so thin, and yet, at the moment, I could feel nothing but disgust for the way they looked, for the way their pants were filled with air, for the way they *were*—so deformed, so wrongly made, so incomplete. Normally, I never look at amputees. When I encounter legless beggars in the United States, I usually avert my eyes. I never

look at my own body in a mirror, but here in Namibia I felt I was doing so. I watched these two the way others probably watched me when I wasn't careful to hide my disability. I could not avert my eyes.

Passersby gave money with a shy smile to the man, but they tossed the money at the woman's face. One man even spit on her. The woman lifted her head again and again, defiant. She looked down at the ground only to see what had been offered: money, empty wrappers, small puddles of spit.

Watching those amputees on that hot, muggy street while I sat, cool and comfortable behind the glass windows of the air-conditioned coffee shop, I felt implicated in their predicament. I was angry, and deeply, wretchedly afraid. I wasn't sure if these feelings came from a relief at my practical superiority to their situation, or if they came from the knowledge that my body, in this context, was really no different from theirs. I wanted those two people to disappear and I felt horribly guilty for those feelings. The fact that I was on one side of the glass and those amputees were on the other was an accident of birth and passport alone.

My own accident at birth was a congenital defect that required my left leg to be amputated at age four. Although it had saddled me with a similarly disabled body, my American citizenship landed me on the inside of the café, sipping coffee from a clean porcelain cup while I watched these rag-clothed Namibian amputees beg for food outside, hands clenching broken Styrofoam cups. The idea that this all might simply be an issue of luck was troublesome to me.

I'd read up on Namibian history before arriving in Okahandja. The Nama and the Herero tribes fought throughout the 1800s, culminating in the Battle of Moordkoppie in 1850. More than 700 Herero men, women, and children were massacred by the Nama, who dismembered the Herero victims for the copper bangles worn on their arms and legs. As I watched the disabled woman across the street extend her shaking, emaciated arm, over and over again, I had visions of limbs carted off as war booty. I felt nauseated.

As Pastor Cliff and I walked back to camp, I thought about the privilege of a state-of-the-art prosthesis, and how having it literally set me free. The only things I do without my prosthesis are shower, have sex, and ski. The rest of the world only sees the transformed me, the able me that appears fully assembled and fully mobile. Although I resisted associations with those beggars, I also felt strangely aligned with them. This thought surprised and frightened me.

Inside I felt raw. Raw and mean. I rejected—yet also craved in some deep way—reminders of a body I wanted so badly to discard. For the rest of my

trip, I never went back to that café, worried that I might see the disabled beggars again.

I do not know if this is true, but I was once told that almost every African language has a word for disabled people that means “stepped on by an animal”—an elephant, a lion, a wildebeest. Once, at a conference in Geneva, a Tanzanian woman approached me and said, “In my language ‘disability’ is like a curse word.” She spoke to me in hushed tones as if she were invoking a demon. I felt immediately associated with what was broken, dirty, close to the ground, and closer to death. I was aware that there were millions of landmines in places like Angola, Zambia, Mozambique, Cambodia. Before I left for Africa, I dragged around thick charts of statistics in clean white folders to present to people wearing white shirts and black suits. But I did not identify with any of the people in the statistics.

Here in Namibia, I was white, rich, and well-dressed. I wore lipstick and had different clothes each day. Clean underwear. I was one of the deformed and yet I was also privileged. Therefore I fit no category. I could not be defined, only named. Distrusted.

In America and Europe, I was used to being the one cast in the role of victim. I was used to being the person who had the special ailment to struggle against. I was used to my body acting as a mirror for others' worst fears of deformity, or what they viewed as an end to real or normal or fulfilled life. I realized this had made me feel special; it had given me a kind of collateral that I simply did not possess in Namibia. I was not considered a victim here.

One Sunday I drove with a group of local women to church in Pastor Cliff's battered, seatbelt-less van. Most of the women, many of them younger than I, had several children back home and were clearly delighted to have this time together. Their laughter and songs were buoyant and infectious as we continued along the thin dusty road into Windhoek, the absent windows letting in the warm morning air.

We visited a local city market where people sold their handmade goods in front of the sleek display windows of The Gap. Clothes from last year's catalogue graced the thin white mannequins. The women placed smooth sculptures in my palm, closing my fingers around figures of elephants and lions, nodding their heads. Their fingers moved over the object, over my own hands. I dangled an elephant from my thumb. He was sleek and special—dark brown with a long, curved tusk.

As we drove on to the church in a rural village, the perimeter of Windhoek revealed to us its history of apartheid. Tarpaulin huts were arranged alongside the road; gutters of sewage ran wickedly through the unpaved dirt streets.

A filthy girl with a straw twisted into her hair opened her rotted mouth and screamed at us. We heard dogs bark ferociously and then whine plaintively as if they'd just been kicked.

I later learned that colonizers had deliberately settled warring tribes next to each other. "To see if they would kill each other off," I was told. Tribes stacked upon tribes, in dominoes of hate. The townships of Goreangato, Wanaheda, Hakahana, and the southern areas of Katutura were high-crime areas characterized by boredom and unemployment. In all the guidebooks I read before my trip to Namibia, it was recommended that travelers avoid these areas. After Namibia's independence from South Africa, discrimination was officially illegal; yet in practice, it appeared that little had changed, at least geographically. In the center of town, near stores and cultural happenings, were the rich people—mostly white—living in stately houses surrounded by tall, impenetrable fences. These neighborhoods extended into formerly white-only suburbs with leafy streets and more high fences. Then there were the newer, middle-income suburbs, followed by the outlying all-black townships we drove through now.

The people in the settlements had a look of willful transience, of brave and reckless wandering, and yet they were confined to these spaces. The skin around their wide eyes sagged from malnutrition. Thin squatters picked through a fetid pool of garbage. We passed a tarpaulin hut. Two women sat on the ground in front of the entrance, one braiding the other's hair. In the rearview mirror, I watched one of the women throw an empty bottle at the van's wheels as we drove past.

I had seen extreme poverty before—kids standing ankle-deep in shit—viewed from a riverboat in Thailand. From that distance, I had been horrified and saddened, even shocked, but not deeply implicated in the people's lives or situation. Here, I was a white woman among African women in a van looking at a situation that was more than just a lack of services and goods. It was the product of a sinister institution. It was the kind of poverty built on nothing but the promise of eventual destruction.

I still do not know how to write or think about these moments. My privilege was like a sick fever I was grateful to have, a booty to grab and take with me on the plane *home*, a concept for which I was willing to barter anything in order to keep up the myth that this would never, ever happen to me.

I was so distracted by the surroundings and the feelings they aroused in me that I failed to notice that my skirt had fallen away from my legs, exposing the white skin of my right leg and the light brown hose that covered the prosthesis. Suddenly, I felt all eyes on my body. I kept looking out the window, where

everything appeared unsafe, to avoid looking at the people who stared at me now. My face filled with heat as I felt their gaze and heard them murmuring.

Once we reached the church, the women piled out of the van and watched me climb out. Then they all seemed to prod one woman forward, as if they had chosen her as the communicator.

"Mine," she said, pointing at me. I was confused at first, but it suddenly dawned on me what she meant.

"No," I said, vigorously shaking my head. "Not a landmine."

She nodded as if I had not spoken. "Accident," she whispered. Her eyes glittered and I recognized the hunger in them—the hunger for the story, for the scandal.

"Birth," I replied.

She looked at me for a long time. "No," she said, moving her sandaled foot back and forth over the sand. She did not believe me. She turned her back to me and began talking to the women who stared at me.

"Birth," I said again to her back. I had meant to say it loud and strong, but the word came out soft and weak. I felt the women straining to hear something painful, something pornographic and scandalous. They wanted damage. I turned and set my face away from them. They could not have it.

Now or never, I thought. "Birth," I said under my breath for the rest of the day. "Birth." I felt deep anger at that woman for trying to call me out and make me ashamed. I suddenly wanted our van to fall in a hole somewhere, caught in the quagmires caused by the wet roads. I wanted to watch these women struggle, and then refuse to help them. I would stand back and judge them instead of letting them judge me.

In Geneva, the bus I took to work each morning made a stop in front of the United Nations. In the middle of the lawn in front of the sprawling white buildings was a giant three-legged chair, a sculpture that served as both a memorial for victims of landmines worldwide and a reminder that millions of mines still remained in the ground, waiting to kill and maim. When the bus approached that stop, I would look away as soon as I spotted the chair. I felt the need to straighten up, to somehow separate myself from those people who had lost legs to landmines. I'd seen the films—the sad, slow song playing as one-legged children, women, and men on crutches appeared on the screen. Such films were designed to arouse people's philanthropic tendencies by showing them a reflection of their fears. I knew the elimination of landmines was a worthy cause, and I wanted people to give money to stop the senseless carnage, but the films aroused strange emotions in me—anger, pity, shame. But, when the bus pulled away from the chair, I always found myself wanting

to turn back, wanting to look. However, I resisted; I didn't want anyone to mark my interest in this piece of artwork.

That day in Namibia, after our group returned from church, I sat down on my bunk and carefully painted my toenails and fingernails a rich, bright pink—a polish I'd bought at a ritzy store in Geneva, where the air was rich with the smell of chestnuts sold from barrels on the street. That nail polish nearly brought tears to my eyes. I felt the desire to be anywhere but here, but the here was my body. The promise of rain leaked through the walls. The sky was murky and muddy, too thick; it looked like I could stretch out my hand and grab great swaths of it, like taffy. My five bright pink toes twinkled, colorful, almost sinister, in the silver light.

By this point in my trip, I found that I had gotten used to the dark in Namibia, which seemed nothing short of a miracle. My life had never been my own in darkness; fear of what emerged from dark, unseen corners was an intractable childhood fear I had never been able to shake. Why, suddenly, was I not distraught when I reached out and could not see my hand several inches in front of my face? Maybe it was the swarm of warm breath in the cabin, the way it surrounded me like a heartbeat. At first it had been a disconcerting sound. I imagined all of us—asleep in these log huts, asleep in the middle of Namibia, in the middle of Africa—where even our breath was exposed to one another. But the more I listened to it, the more it made me relax.

In the hot climate my leg gave off an odor of melting rubber and stale sweat, a smell of metal and oil, a smell that was not quite human. All around me were very human smells: laundered panties drying over the racks of bunks, stale unwashed underarms, hair oil melting into scalps. My smells were no less obvious and no more offensive than anybody else's. We were sweating, shitting, and showering together. We were locked in our own sleep and breath, together.

That night, like every other night, I waited until everyone else eased into sleep, and then I disassembled. Lying on my back, I carefully undid the Velcro of the socket, bit by bit, as quietly as possible so as not to wake anybody. I could not see what I was doing and had to go by feel alone. I worked in the dark, touching first the slightly rounded lip of the prosthesis, like rolled dough at the top of a pie crust, then the smooth thigh of silicone and plastic, hot to the touch. I worked my leg off under the covers and then sat back with relief. Fresh air! Out of the hot zone!

I ran my hands over my stump and worried over it. My stump resembled a baseball bat, chewed-on where the scars are but rounded and smooth at the end, as if shaped by a potter's hand. It fit into the leg with a snap and a swoosh.

That night, enveloped in the thick, fog-like blackness of an African night, I learned that there is something spectacular, almost magical, about discovering your own shape in the dark, surrounded by the breath of others. Searching for the shape of your body with your hands is like using a key to hunt for a lock in deep, deep darkness. With my hands I found my disabled body in a mysterious, quiet space. For the first time in my life, I secretly—guiltily—rejoiced, although I had been claiming for years that I loved my body. The fear of darkness had always been linked to the fear of my own body. But I now discovered that my body was something strange, yet wondrous, to behold. That night was the beginning of a kind of recreation, a rebirth. Words that shaped first in my mouth, then eased into my body, and then finally moved into the world, began in that darkness: *My Body. Mine.* ☞