



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2015

Article 14

4-13-2015

The Touch

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Class of 2015

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Fattorini, Christiana L. (2015) "The Touch," *The Mercury*: Year 2015, Article 14.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2015/iss1/14>

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Keywords

creative writing, non-fiction

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The Touch

Christiana Fattorini

Conflict

“Wake up *Mtota*! Wake up now! We need you!” she shouted, as the warm blanket was torn from my body.

“*Mtota... Mtota...* what does that mean again,” I asked with sleepy eyes, reorganizing the stacks of medical records that had served as my pillow.

“It means child, you child. And you need to get to the delivery room; we need your help now!” Leonida hollered. She grabbed her gloves and hurried out of the nurses’ station. I really did need to work on my Swahili, especially if I wanted to gain some respect here in Africa. I was tired of being known as the *Wazungu*, or “white girl.” I moved to this country to help others, not to be looked down upon as some crazy self-absorbed American. I was not in Tanzania to do Leonida’s bitch work. I wanted to make a difference. Now why was that so god damn hard to accomplish?

I pushed the door open to go help with whatever the midwife needed from me. A bed whisked by me, almost knocking me over.

“Julia, I need you to prepare the table. We need sterile gloves and a birth pack. Turn the incubator on too.” I ran into the labor room, reached into the cabinet and pulled down a package of metal and gauze that in theory would help the mother after labor. Setting the gloves on the counter, I glanced at the clock. 2:22 am. Let’s see, 8 hours ahead of home, my mother and father would be sitting down to dinner at the table; another meal without me. A wave of homesickness hit me... maybe I shouldn’t have left.

The doors swung open, just in time to wake me from my daydream, and in came the cart that I had almost collided with moments earlier. On it lay a crumbled-up ball that somewhat resembled a human being. The woman could not have been older than me, curled up in the fetal position gasping in pain. Blood was everywhere. The screaming wouldn’t stop.

“16 years old.... 6 months pregnant... first birth... someone found her on the back of a *dala dala*, bleeding out. Something has gone wrong!” Leonida said aloud, although I am not sure to whom.

“She was found on the back of a bus?” I was confused. “Why would this poor woman be using the public transportation system this late at night?”

“Because, *Mtota*, unlike in your country, we don’t have the *luxury*

of calling an ambulance. We have to get ourselves to the hospital or we're on our own." She laid the girl's shawl on the birthing table, and helped the girl lift herself to meet her blanket. She looked so helpless.

The midwife pushed me to the side as she moved to the foot of the table. Starting with finding the fetal heartbeat, she prepared the woman's body for birth. The woman needed more help than we could grant her. She needed help from Igbo, the African god of healing.

"The baby's heart rate is normal, but the placenta is detached, that baby needs to come out now, or they're both in trouble," said the midwife.

The girl looked at me in the eyes for a sign of hope. She wanted to know if she would be okay. We didn't speak the same language. I couldn't tell her that I was just as scared as she was. I reached her hand and gave it a squeeze of encouragement, as if my touch could possibly ease her mind.

Flashback

"You're taking your malaria medication, right sweetheart?" My dad was trying to fill the silence that had taken control of the car ride.

"Yes, Dad, and I even packed bug spray and a mosquito net just in case. I'm going to be okay, I promise you."

"Just please remember to call or text us when you can," my mother added.

"I will Mom. I just don't know how often I'll have access to the Internet." We had had this conversation a thousand times before, and I understood why. And today was the day. The day I had been so anxiously and excitedly waiting to arrive.

It couldn't be easy for my parents to let their twenty-one-year-old daughter take off and move to Tanzania. It was a foreign country, on a foreign continent. I was scared too. They wanted to know that I was going to be okay; but honestly, heading off to a third-world country, even I was wondering how life would be. I looked in the rearview mirror, and caught a glimpse of my father's watery eyes.

Mom opened the door and we all got out of the car. I had my duffle bag and passport. I was ready for my new life. Silence took over the space between us again. I looked at my mother and father with complete gratitude for this opportunity. They returned my thankfulness with looks of fear and sadness.

Dad finally broke the silence. "I just wanted to let you know that we couldn't be prouder to be your parents."

Mom cried.

I wanted to calm them, to ease the worries that were painted on their faces. I reached across the space that seemed miles apart, and grabbed my mother's hand, as if my touch could possibly ease her mind.

Plot

"I said the placenta is detached. She is dilated 8 centimeters. The baby needs to come out now. Julia, you need sterilized gloves, and I need your help with the delivery." Leonida's shouts startled me. She wanted my help? I had never even seen a delivery, let alone deliver a baby. I grabbed gloves, and put an apron on, ready for more directions.

The girl was writhing in pain, and I was struck with fear. Again, she looked to me for help. I took a breath, I could do this.

"*Sukuma*, push! Push now! Julia, grab a cloth for the baby."

I quickly grabbed a floral printed fabric that the woman had brought with her, in awe of what was happening.

"*Sukuma*, mama! Push, push!" The little girl who was just screaming, shriveled up like a prune, suddenly transformed into a strong African Queen, afraid of nothing. And then it happened... *life* happened. Blood was everywhere. Her legs, the table, the hands of the midwife. Nausea rushed throughout my body.

"Julia, the baby!"

Yes the baby... I took the cloth, and wiped down the fragile newborn. He breathed. He cried. I cried. I surrounded the baby with as much fabric as I could find, trying to create some warmth. Leonida tried to clean up the mother. Blood was everywhere, yet everything was somehow dripping with beauty. Out of instinct, I grabbed a pair of scissors from the birthing pack and handed them to Leonida. She handed them right back.

"Cut here; where my finger is. I need to give her Lidocaine for the pain. Tie the cord too."

Something within me took over. Something moved my hand to the cord and made the cut. Tying the cord, I separated the mother and child: the baby's first step to independence. The baby cried again. This time, the mother smiled. I picked up the child, and brought him to his mother's arms. She was at peace. I had brought her the serenity she craved.

Leonida worked quickly to remove the remnants that had once been the placenta that for some reason had ruptured before delivery. She motioned in the direction of the incubator. I took that as my cue to take the baby over.

I laid him down in the warmth of the small bed. His eyes were barely open. Trying to move the blankets around him, his little arms squirmed back and forth. I watched in complete astonishment for what I had just witnessed. These were the first minutes of his life. He was so pure and untouched by the world.

Not one individual or event had impacted him yet. He had the potential to grow up and become whoever he wanted to be. He could grow up and find a cure for cancer, or live the life of a performer. He could be a

teacher or a preacher. He could do anything.

The dim light flickered, and the wind blew in a cool breeze. I looked around at the medical setup that surrounded the child. The room was filled with tools that Americans used in the 1950's. The room smelled like urine and disease. The beds looked as if they had never been touched by disinfectant or bleach.

I looked back to the child, the innocent gift of life, and was suddenly overwhelmed with concern. How could this little boy grow up with such little opportunity? He deserved more than a dirty one-room house. I had committed three years of my life to eradicate these situations, but I felt so powerless.

"She's okay Julia, the mother's going to be okay," Leonida came up behind me, congratulating my work with a pat on the back. "Now let's show Mama what good she brought into the world."

I picked up the little boy in my arms. His warmth took over my body. I felt as if the weight of my world was in my arms. So delicate, yet so strong, the little boy moved his arms.

I walked over toward the blood-ridden table and bent over the mother. She was tired and weak from all of her struggle.

"Mama, look what we have for you. Your baby boy wants to see you," Leonida said gently.

The mother turned and looked up towards me. Tears in her eyes. I gently lowered the newborn baby boy into her arms. Almost instantly, he curled up and turned his little head towards her chest. She held him close without movement, while I watched in awe. Silently, I said a little prayer of hope for the boy and his mother. I wanted him to have a good life, and find success. I needed him to have all of that.

The mother looked away from her baby and up towards me. "*As-ante sana*. Thank you," she said.

I looked down at the mother and the new life that she had just brought into the world, with unease. The mother looked in my eyes as if asking for more help. I wanted to give them all that I had.

A smile filled my face, masking the heartbreak I was feeling inside. I looked back to the little boy, so precious, so deserving of a good life. He rustled his blanket again, this time freeing a tiny hand. I lent a finger to his hand, and felt a small pressure around it he held on. His touch eased my mind.