

Finalist, Non-fiction

Strange Lands

by Meredith Davis

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On Rebeka's twisted feet were the tiniest of handmade sandals, fashioned from old tires and colorful laces that wound up around her legs, into her jeans. I tried not to look too carefully, surprised by my hesitancy and shyness. My insides shivered. How could I take care of this girl I had just met, if I couldn't even look at her feet? We had never cared for a child with disabilities, and she was a stranger in a strange land. She had never lived in a place with air-conditioning, running water, toilets and grocery stores. We all had things to learn and it was time to get started, ready or not.

It was 2:30AM, August 6th, that first morning we met nine-year-old Rebeka at the Austin Bergstrom Airport. My husband, and our three kids ages 11, 13 and 16, had agreed to host her while she underwent treatments, and eventually surgeries on her twisted feet. Her family put her on a plane in Rwanda, and over thirty hours later she arrived in Austin. She traveled with a translator she had just met, a Rwandan, who also had her one-year-old child in tow. The translator would stay in our home for two weeks, and then she'd return to Rwanda.

"She's a shy one," said the airport employee who had helped wheel Rebeka from the gate to baggage claim. She stepped away from the wheelchair, essentially handing her off to our family. This was it. In that moment, our family started a new journey. In a week or so, we'd take Rebeka to see a surgeon who would determine if he could do anything for Rebeka. Her feet, legs, arms and hands had all been affected by the condition known as arthrogryposis. I knew all of this before she came, but seeing those little feet, bent out of shape, and shaking that hand that couldn't shake back, made me afraid.

Though she wasn't officially diagnosed with arthrogryposis in Rwanda, her family knew there was something different about their fifth child (they would go on to have

three more daughters). From the time she was born, her limbs didn't move the way their other children's did. As she grew older, Rebeka's feet curled under, preventing her from walking. When she was seven, her parents tied her to her younger sister. Step by step she found her balance, tethered to her non-handicapped sibling. Her feet weren't the only thing affected by the arthrogryposis. She couldn't lift her arms and the middle finger of each hand was bent into the middle of her palm. It couldn't move on its own.

Life was hard for Rebeka, growing up in her small village in the district of Bugesera, Rwanda. She was often left behind and sometimes teased, but these trials made her skin thick and her spirit strong. Her town was hit especially hard by the genocide in 1994, wiping out half of its population. Every family in that community has somehow been affected by that horrible tragedy, but they are a resilient, joyful people who are striving for reconciliation and recovery. Living among resilient people shaped how Rebeka has dealt with her disability, and surely gave her the courage to take this long trip.

That first night, we didn't know what Rebeka was capable of. She was extremely shy and scared, and so were we. We drove home, and the translator helped us bathe her. We lifted her on to the toilet, helped her wipe, brushed her teeth for her, took off her clothes, dressed her in pajamas, and eventually, around 4AM, after a brief encounter with our overly enthusiastic dog who terrified Rebeka, we settled her into bed.

She woke earlier than expected the next morning, and we began the business of getting to know each other and figuring out how we'd communicate. Most important, we began to realize what Rebeka could do. It didn't take long to realize she could bathe herself, feed herself, and use the toilet without any help. I was hopelessly inept at figuring out how to tie her shoes. She patiently waited for me to try, then took the shoes and deftly laced them, wrapping the colorful strings around her ankles and tying them in a bow. She knew which foot they went on by the color of the laces, and her middle finger, the one that rested in her palm, gave her the tension she needed to tie them tight.

If I was going to care for this child, I had a lot to learn. I gained the confidence to really study her feet, and she patiently let me touch them. She walked on the tops where a big, heel-like callus had formed. Her shoes were so tiny because there was only a small portion of her foot that actually touched the ground. Those feet began to look graceful to me, especially when she was sitting down. They were always pointed, curled like a ballerina. But when she was moving, Rebeka was far from graceful. She lurched around our house to chase kids or dogs. She fell often on the wood floors, but would get right back up, giggling, and chase again.

Outside she was able to take the steps down to the backyard by leaning on an ample stone banister. Inside, she got to the second story of our house by bumping up on her bottom. She figured out how to open doors, squirt soap on her hands, and take pictures with an iPhone, all things she never did back home. She did them in her own special way, adapting with ease to her handicap and the new tasks at hand. It was something she'd been doing her whole life. She was fascinated by the light switches in our house. To turn the lights on and off, she'd swing her arm to the wall and then use her fingers to walk her arm up to the switch, her thin body leaning against the wall for balance, her head tilted back in a big smile.

She had her first doctor appointment after she'd been with us a week. Sitting in the waiting room, we were surrounded by other kids with disabilities. I was introduced to an entirely new population, parents who had been hauling wheelchairs for years. Some of the children had disabilities that confined them to wheelchairs for the rest of their lives, some couldn't talk, and others couldn't hold themselves up. If the doctors couldn't help Rebeka, she too could be wheelchair bound for life. Once she grew bigger, she wouldn't be able to support her own weight. It would be nearly impossible to navigate the rough terrain back home in a wheelchair. There were no paved roads and no sidewalks in Bugesera.

I felt a sense of urgency, knowing the stakes at hand. I also felt like an imposter as I watched those parents care for their children. The doctors estimated it would take nine months to a year before Rebeka would be ready to go home, but these parents

were in it for life. I did not sense bitterness or anger. I sensed a whole lot of love. A mother nuzzled into the neck of a boy who looked to be five or six, but with the withered body of a two year old. A father read to his son, whose body was strapped to his wheelchair so he wouldn't fall over. A trail of drool trickled from his mouth, and the father wiped at it and kept reading, like it was no big deal. Because it was no big deal, really. I was just beginning to learn this, a lesson I had bypassed my whole life.

Seeing the tenacious spirit of these parents gave me a new resolve. I could do anything for a year. I could carry Rebeka's 40-pound body around once she got casts and could no longer walk. I could hold her down and whisper, "it's okay" as doctors tried to take blood and she thrashed in terror. I could help her rub lotion into her dry, dark skin twice a day and keep a large supply of beans and avocados available for her limited palate. If she could learn to navigate our world, I would learn to navigate hers.

We slipped into a daily routine, running errands, taking walks, preparing meals, and playing games. Rebeka was my constant companion. With weekly doctor's appointments, her lack of English, and a preschool level education, she couldn't go to school. Even though she was almost ten-years-old, she hadn't started school until recently in Rwanda. When a school finally opened, about three miles from her home, she entered the kindergarten just months before coming to America. She traversed a potholed, uneven dirt road to get there. The walk took her over an hour and tired her out. Occasionally, she was able to get a ride on the back of someone's bike, but she usually walked, left behind by the faster kids. Many times she walked by herself, keeping a sharp eye out for snakes and bullies.

We hired a tutor who came twice a week, and as Rebeka began to learn letters and numbers, I learned more about what it's like to live with a disability. People stared, adults with pity and kids with curiosity or sometimes disgust. Not only was Rebeka disabled, she was a very dark-skinned girl plopped down in a predominantly white community. She immediately stood out, especially paired with very white-skinned me. And then there was the way she walked. Before she got her first casts, Rebeka was able

to walk, but her body lurched back and forth, and attention was quickly drawn to her twisted feet.

After she was casted, Rebeka was wheelchair bound. Strangers clucked their tongues and asked how she hurt herself. At first, Rebeka just smiled, while I explained her conditions and the circumstances surrounding her stay, all in the time it took to check out at the grocery store. Later, as she learned English, Rebeka would answer the questions herself, saying simply, "I had surgery." Her heavy accent, accompanied by her sweet smile, made her all the more winsome.

Her disability became a way to meet people I may never have spoken to otherwise. People walked away inspired by Rebeka's story, a brave young girl coming to an unfamiliar country, leaving her family behind, enduring cast after cast and then painful surgeries. New tendrils of connections formed as we met people who knew Rebeka's native language, or had visited Rwanda. Neighbors we hardly knew gave us a bike when it was time for physical therapy. Acquaintances who would soon become good friends stepped forward with servant hearts to be a part of the unfolding story.

Rebeka's casted legs became a place for graffiti, new friends searching to find space to sign. Young girls flocked to our home, knocking on the door with craft supplies or nail polish, hoping to play. They gave Rebeka piggyback rides when she couldn't walk. They made up new games that put everyone at the same level no matter how fast you could walk, like sitting on skateboards and racing down the driveway. Many of the kids who played with Rebeka had never been up and close and personal with a child who had disabilities before. Not just me, but our whole community was becoming a little more at ease. We were learning that life and play and friendship work the same way, no matter what a person's body may look like.

After she got her first casts, Rebeka was no longer able to walk. I either carried her ten-year-old, 40-pound (which later became a 50-pound) body back and forth into stores, libraries and friend's homes, or wheeled her in a child-sized wheelchair. Having her body so close to mine, thin arms resting on my shoulders, casts hanging on either side, I was getting up close and personal with disability, and it was no longer scary.

We made a few adjustments to our home to accommodate Rebeka. My husband changed doorknobs to door levers that her hands could more easily open. We moved a barstool into the bathroom so she could brush her teeth while sitting. And we brought a small toy scooter into the house. She sat on the scooter and moved the steering wheel back and forth to propel herself from room to room. These adjustments were part of the transformation that was happening inside me. A disability was something to be embraced, tucked up close so I could understand and empathize, not something to resist or fear.

Together, Rebeka and I scouted out the handicapped parking spots and searched for the big carts at the grocery store, the ones that were mounted on large, plastic car frames, big enough for Rebeka to sit in. When there were no big carts, I would plop her in the basket or let her sit underneath, where her ultra-flexible body, a by-product of the arthrogryposis, would easily fold in half. It became a game, figuring out how to make life work. I realized we may have looked strange or different to curious onlookers, and I didn't really care. We were busy going about the business of life, figuring out how that looked, making it work any way we could.

Rebeka spent almost eleven months with our family, and the longer she was with us, the more I realized that she wasn't the only one with a disability. The first time I saw Rebeka, my insides shivered. It was the same shiver I had felt when I had visited nursing homes as a child, on a field trip with a class. Or the way I felt when I was in first grade, and there was a little girl in my class whose arms were half as long as the rest of ours, stuck at a constant 90-degree angle. I realized that I had a disability, too. I was unable, or unwilling, to connect with people who had to go about daily life in a different, sometimes awkward, sometimes uncomfortable way. I felt incapable, ill equipped, and fearful in a way I had never been forced to admit or deal with.

After caring for Rebeka, I was able to recognize and deal with my disability. I was able to step beyond fear, to confrontation and understanding. As I cared for her physical body, rubbed lotion on her feet, massaged the scars on her ankles, and held her hands before she was wheeled off to surgery, my fear turned to both compassion and a sense

that underneath her disability, this girl was no different from my own children, or myself. If she could deal with her disability, embracing the challenges as they arose, so could I.

Ten and a half months after coming to America, Rebeka went back home. On June 24th she returned to six sisters, a brother, a mother and father. While the doctors had been unable to treat her arms or hands, she was walking on the bottoms of her feet. It was a huge victory, and a massive life change for her. She will be able to walk for the rest of her life, keeping up with her friends more easily and someday able to take care of a family or have a job. But her limp arms and stiff joints that the doctors were unable to treat will always mark her as different, disabled. She will still be stared at, and there will be people who feel that same tremor of fear and uncertainty I experienced the first time I saw her.

I no longer shiver inside when I see someone with disabilities. I recognize that it's nothing to be afraid of. We're all strangers in someone else's strange land. We all need to take steps into strange places where we may, at first, be uncomfortable with unfamiliar. I've learned that once I take that step, on the other side, I find not a stranger, but a person who has a lot to offer this world, with a personality that's been overshadowed and sometimes defined by a disability. Back in Austin, we framed Rebeka's tiny shoes made of tire. She won't need them anymore, but I do. They remind me of the steps I took alongside a brave little girl who taught me to see past the disability to the person.