

FLYING FOR THE WAY-MAKER



# Immeasurably More



LIZ PARKER

**10** Publishing



For my mum – my inspiration,  
and very great friend

*Let this be written for a future generation,  
that a people not yet created may praise the LORD.*  
(Psalm 102:18)

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*Prologue:*

**SOUTH SUDAN, 8 JULY 2016**

Bang! Bang! The sounds of heavy gunfire ripped the air apart. Each new volley of shots made me jump. My legs were shaking, but I was determined not to let my fear show. I plastered on a smile and turned to my children. I was grateful for my long trousers – hopefully they couldn’t see how my limbs had turned to jelly.

The gunfire continued, loud ‘pops’ interspersed with booming undertones. From the street came the sounds of rubber soles hitting the paving at speed – local people running, trying to get to safety. No one wanted to be caught in the crossfire. The ground shook as another armoured vehicle sped past on the road outside. Just a low wall and a leafy, green hedge separated us from

the menace on the streets of Juba, the capital city, that evening. *Leaves don't offer much protection*, I thought, as I scanned the outside yard of Quality Hotel where we were gathered.

Across the yard, I caught my husband's eye. Normally laid-back and relaxed, Andrew's expression was anxious, worry creasing his eyes. This was supposed to be a pizza night with friends and colleagues at our favourite local restaurant. Our food had already been ordered when the distinct sounds of gunfire shockingly interrupted our conversation. We were a large party of fourteen adults and thirteen children, but before we could make a collective decision about whether the first gunshots were serious, the security guard at the entrance to the hotel locked the doors. Now we had no choice but to stay within the confines of the hotel – and who knew how long we would have to remain there?

A longer burst of gunfire spurred us into action.

'Get the children to safety!' someone yelled.

Parents started to round them up. I herded my three children – ten-year-old Esther, eight-year-old Ben and five-year-old Joel – into the hotel's bar, the first building that opened on to the yard. We began to line the children up along the brick wall, but the bricks each had a decorative hole right through their centre. *This is not going to prevent bullets hitting them*, I thought in distress.

Someone must have had a similar idea because, a few minutes later, a tense staff member in white uniform ushered us into the bathroom. Hot, flustered

and confused, we tried to fit into the small space, but it simply wasn't big enough. The next thing I knew, hotel staff were fumbling with keys and managed to open a door leading to an inner courtyard. Our party surged through to an enclosed area. At least here we had the protection of solid walls.

It felt like hours, although in reality it was just over one hour, while guns blazed less than two kilometres across town – the occasional shot erupting much closer. Fear was tangible, but so was the determination of the parents to stay calm for their children. I stood near my good friend Nathalie, while Esther and Ben sat at our feet with her children – their friends – on the cool paving stones of the courtyard.

'When's our pizza coming?' enquired hungry children. There was no answer. The chef had stopped cooking as soon as the gunshots began. The people of Juba are sadly too familiar with the deafening sounds of hatred. Gunfire halts normality.

Over by the wall, Andrew stood among the other men of our party, their faces serious as they discussed possible plans to get us to safety. Joel stood close to Andrew, the man he felt safe with, his blond head tilted as he looked up at his dad. 'But we'll be all right, won't we, Daddy?' he asked, his blue eyes full of concern.

Andrew couldn't answer and that hurt his heart. We had no idea how this would turn out – how could he give his son honest reassurance when echoes of danger filled our ears?

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What we did know is that God had never let us down – so we prayed urgently for His protection, confident that He could hear us above the gunshots.



Part One

*Where it all began*  
**1967 - 2004**



1

# A legacy of love for Africa

The confidence underlying my prayers on that South Sudan day didn't come from me alone. It was inspired by the generation before me.

Stories of God's help and protection, His faithfulness and guidance had been passed to me from my earliest days. Tales were told and photos shown of when our family first forged links with Africa – before my birth. Now I was the one standing on African soil, praying urgent prayers to the same God who took my mum, Ann, from London to Uganda in the mid-sixties. Just as my mother had done before me, we would see God's faithfulness, even in those terrifying moments when I stood with my children, listening to the threat of civil war in a country that was not my own.



My mum's calling was different from mine, but in time our stories were beautifully woven together, in ways we never imagined. Her calling was to work as a teacher in Karamoja – those vast, wild grasslands of north-eastern Uganda. A land where the savannah stretched as far as the eye could see, where the light of the relentless sun lent a gilded quality to the sandy earth. The occasional thorn tree and a scrub of bushes punctuated this seemingly endless landscape. Heat shimmered over the baked earth, dry dust settled on the land.

It was an unexpected calling. My mum had a British friend, Sylvia, who suggested that Mum join her as a teacher at a new girl's school in Kotido, a small settlement of Karamoja in Uganda. Sylvia needed a British colleague to work alongside her in this remote region and felt that God was calling Ann to be that person. 'Kotido?' my mum asked. 'I don't even know where Uganda is, never mind Kotido!' Sceptical, Mum wrote by airmail to tell Sylvia that she would not be coming.

Sylvia, however, was convinced that God wanted my mum for the job. 'Have you prayed about it, Ann?' her next letter asked.

'I suppose I could pray about it,' thought Mum, and she did exactly that. The more she prayed, the more she started to wonder whether Sylvia was right. Cycling across town one day, she was incredulous when a billboard caught her eye. It was advertising a documentary to be shown at the local cinema: *Karamoja, Land of Naked People*. It was simply too amazing to be a coincidence. From then on, my mum

felt like she had received confirmation of God calling her to far-off Uganda and, specifically, to Karamoja.

Mum took my grandmother with her to watch this one-off film, which neither of them ever heard about again. As they settled into their seats, Mum was fascinated by the black-and-white documentary, which demonstrated the time-honoured traditions of a fierce warrior tribe of pastoralists. They were a people steeped in a culture totally different to her own. The naked men and children, the women wearing only animal skins, the cattle raids, the thatched homes woven from wood and mud: each image evoked a world apart. At the end of the film, my grandmother turned to my mum, shocked by such an unfamiliar lifestyle. 'Ann, you are *NOT* going there!' she exclaimed.

But Ann *did* go, setting off in August 1967, convinced of God's call to teach in the Kotido school. My grandmother recognised my mum's unshakable conviction – and decided to give her daughter her unwavering support. As Mum embarked on her first flight from London to Uganda, her trust was founded on words she had read in the book of Isaiah: 'you are precious and honoured in my sight, and because I love you... Do not be afraid, for I am with you... I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no saviour' (Isaiah 43:4, 5, 11). These words of promise also gave her the desire to share the news of this Saviour with her students in sun-scorched, remote Kotido.

As a child, I loved to turn the pages of Mum's hard-backed photo album and enter into this African world,

which was a million miles and a generation away from our Liverpool vicarage. It couldn't be more different from the built-up city outside our windows, where factories, apartment blocks and tight terraced streets hemmed us in. Where inclement British weather cast shadows on the concrete and where the climate could hardly be described as hot.

Even better than the photo albums were the slideshows Mum organised. She invited members of our Bootle church to come and hear her testimony of God's faithfulness, to learn about a still-neglected area of Uganda and to pray for a people she continued to hold dear to her heart. Mum left these people in 1969, when she returned home to England to marry my dad, David. She was heartbroken saying goodbye to her beloved students and her beloved Karamoja, believing she would never see either again, but at least she could tell us about them.

I sat spellbound on the carpet of our vicarage lounge as black-and-white scenes from Kotido flashed up on a huge screen. My dad, the local vicar, helpfully operated the old-fashioned projector, which whirred noisily in the background, while my mum's voice rose to explain each image. Men and women from St Leonard's Church sat attentive on their chairs, watching 1960s Uganda come to life in 1980s Liverpool.

First of all, the photographs transported us to Kotido Girl's School, where my mum worked as one of four teachers. We saw her students, their broad smiles reflecting hope as education opened its welcoming door. Mum

described how much she enjoyed teaching these girls with their keen minds and energy. She spoke of their beautiful, traditional singing.

There were challenges – she related sadly how Monica, a sweet girl with a sweet smile, failed to return to school one term after being forced into a polygamous marriage to an older tribal chief. Mum regretted how choice had been stripped away from Monica. For other girls, though, getting an education gave them options beyond tradition. We heard about Okia, one of her brightest students and after whom my earliest doll had been named. Mum's passion for education shone through.

We gazed in wonder at Karamojong warriors, standing lithe and proud, adorned with colourful beads, metal armbands and astonishing lip-plugs. We learnt that Karamojong family groups lived in *manyatta*, a cluster of round, thatch homes, enclosed within a woven thorn fence. Mum described how she had to crawl in through a small gap – the entrance was designed this way to keep out threats. Goats, dogs and chickens made up part of the lively community within each *manyatta*, but most important of all were the cattle. For this tribe of pastoralists, cattle were wealth.

Mum introduced us to Rachel, an older lady wreathed in wrinkles. Rachel grinned at the camera, revealing gaps where teeth were missing, confidently at ease with my mum as she snapped the photograph. Rachel's clothing was the simple hide of a cow wrapped around her waist, with a blanket loosely knotted across her bare breasts

and hanging off her shoulders. We were sorry to hear how, in a place without doctors, her young son died of meningitis. The only treatment had been a traditional one: a long gash cut across his forehead ‘to allow the evil spirits out’.

Another image depicted a group of children, some kneeling, some sitting with their legs outstretched on the brittle, parched grass. Most wore nothing except a string or two of beads around their neck and metal bands around their ankles. Some wore loincloths. Nearly all had distended bellies, a sign of malnutrition in a region prone to drought and failed crops. Happy smiles, though, showed their enjoyment of their weekly Sunday School class, held under the shade of a tamarind tree. Some of Mum’s students held the class in Karamojong, a language my mum never mastered. ‘The one song I learnt clearly in Karamojong was, “Zacchaeus was a very little man” – and I can still sing it today!’ Mum laughed. It was a story of a man who found peace and friendship with Jesus – something Mum prayed her Sunday School class, her students and her village friends would find.

We heard how God protected my mum from an unscrupulous fellow traveller. Early one morning, as the pale dawn sun slipped effortlessly into the African sky, she boarded the bus from Moroto to Kotido, a route which passed through wild, forsaken bush. There was one other passenger – and he sat right beside her, the young, single foreigner. The man became threatening, placing his hand on her knee. Too close for comfort, he leaned in to inform

her that she would become his wife, but that if she didn’t agree to do as he wished, he would throw her off the bus, leaving her alone and unprotected, prey for wild animals: a very real threat. Afraid and vulnerable, Ann sent up a prayer for help. Suddenly inspired, she declared, ‘I am the daughter of a King! God is watching over me. There will be serious consequences if anything happens to me.’

Her unwelcome companion raised his eyebrows in surprise, but stubbornly continued his threats – until the bus suddenly pulled over. Another man climbed aboard. To Ann’s immense surprise and relief, she recognised the new passenger. He was a teacher from Kotido Boy’s School, with whom she sometimes worked. Ann enthusiastically greeted her Ugandan colleague and her aggressor got up and left her in peace. She was no longer easy prey for his ill intentions.

It was good to hear that my mum safely reached her home that day, but she was still shaken by the ordeal. However, feelings of peace washed over her when she read with astonishment the Bible passage recommended for that specific day by her daily devotional. Her eyes fell on these beautifully relevant words: ‘pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people... the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one’ (2 Thessalonians 3:2–3). Reassurance wrapped its kindly arms around her. She had just experienced this exact truth.

Decades later, we listened as my mum related this story to encourage us. Difficulties may come, but God answers

prayers, God protects His people in times of need, God's timing is perfection – these were the truths she passed on. Those faith lessons stayed with me right into – and out of – South Sudan.

Each story she told, each image I saw stirred in me a passion for adventure in faraway lands, confident that God would go with me. As a teenager, I made my own commitment to follow Jesus, this faithful One who cares for all people, in all nations. This was the start of my own unique journey, as our God took me out of Liverpool and into Africa, and proved that He is greater than all we might ask or imagine.



2

## Mr Right and a wild promise

Mine was a fun, lively, Liverpoolian childhood. Like all childhoods, it flew by. I grew up alongside my brothers, Stephen and Ian, in an enormous vicarage in Bootle, Merseyside. Our home was constantly buzzing with people. Sometimes it felt like I was growing up in a busy train station because there were so many visitors passing through our doors, but it was very welcoming, filled with love and laughter. The vicarage itself – an ancient, rambling house, with creaky staircases that linked its three storeys – was full-brimmed with adventure. The top floor boasted a self-contained flat with windows cut into the eaves, offering views over the industrial docks and the choppy waters of the River Mersey.