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God's Very Small Throw-away Miracle

Ellen Einterz and Myra Bates

CAMEROON

It was the grandmother who knelt by the bed and leaned forward until her face nearly touched the baby's, Zogolo's. The mother sat at the foot of the bed, a safe distance, and watched. The grandmother clucked her tongue and sucked her cheeks, and the sound produced, the song, caught the baby's ears and for a moment the infant stopped writhing. Her skin still had the smoky dullness of the seriously ill, and her eyes were sunken in shadow. Budding from a cotton cord around her neck, an olive-sized leather pouch nestled between the knobs of her collarbones. In its pit was a scrap of paper penned with the Koranic verse meant to save her life.

She was her mother's eleventh child, and the only one alive. In an act of defiance or submission, her parents had named her Zogolo, which means Throw-away. It was their way of letting God know that they were prepared to lose this one too, should He dare to make that His will. She was twenty-five days old and had spent most of those barely clinging to life.

When Zogolo was yet in the womb, a conclave of village elders met and decided that the mother's milk must be bad, for why else would she lose so many children, and so when the baby was born they lifted her, still sticky with blood, from her mother's breast and placed her in the wrinkled arms of the old woman.

The grandmother did her best, but the cow milk and rancid butter she fed the child wracked the fragile intestine and within days Zogolo fell violently ill. The elders brought her to the *marabou*, the Muslim holy man, and to the *guérisseur* and to the *féticheur*, and finally, once their flame of hope had cooled to cinders, they packed up their mats and pots and sacks of millet and trekked twenty miles, crossing two rivers and a border, to Kolofata in Cameroon.

We treated the baby's numerous ailments and we stopped the cow milk and the butter and set about trying to convince the mother and the grandmother and the



Dr. Einterz at work in Kolofata, Cameroon.

whole village entourage that the mother's milk was not bad, was not *mula*. This task took days to accomplish, for the proof before them — the ten dead children — seemed irrefutable. *Mula* is the name given to the milk of a woman who has lost several offspring, and although it looks and smells and tastes no different from other milk, it is ascribed mystical powers to kill. Debunking the notion of *mula* means erasing a traditional belief that goes back to the beginning of time. In our setting, a child deprived of breast milk is destined to die, but this terrible truth has no bearing on the ancient, entrenched taboo.

Trembling with trepidation, the mother took her child in her arms and fed her for the first time. Hesitantly. Haltingly. Letting the infant suck and then pulling the breast away. Giving again, then pulling away. Her shoulders shook and tears crept down her cheeks. It was okay, we told her, it was okay, let her baby feed.

Sometimes in the course of a very sick child's illness one can witness the moment when the relentless descent toward dark-

ness and death skitters to a stop and the climb back to light and life begins. The fists unclench. The forehead unfurrows. The panicky breathing slows. The eyes lose their blind, fearful gaze. In hospital, the mother is often the one who sees it first and senses what it means and who tells us, as we make our morning rounds, that her child is better, much better now.

One morning we came to Zogolo's ward and found her cuddled in her mother's embrace, feeding happily at the breast. The grandmother sat beside them, clearly pleased. How, we asked, was Zogolo.

"Zogolo?" the mother replied, chuckling and shaking her head and smiling down at her daughter. "Zogolo is here. Zogolo is fine. Zogolo will not leave us now." She had watched ten of her babies fall sick and fade, and she had buried them all, but this child, this girl born to be thrown way, would be the one God let her keep. ■

Ellen and Myra are VICS volunteers in Kolofata, Cameroon. Fellow volunteers work in 23 other countries worldwide.