WHAT SHE WANTED

A sacrament in the dust.

By Caroline Kurtz

Women all over Nile Province wanted sewing machines. Only men had sewing machines in the old Sudan. In the new Sudan it was going to be different. I was the new women's development advisor so I was the source of sewing machines. Or sugar, tea leaves, thermoses, and cups, so they could run tea shops on market days. Never mind that they didn't have fabric for sewing machines, or that tea leaves and sugar had to be flown in on charters at three thousand dollars a flight, or that all these women had was what grew out of the ground, mostly the sorghum they ate year round if warlords didn't burn it in scorched-earth fighting.

But that's what the women wanted, sewing machines, so when Sudanese pastors chartered a flight to Waat I told them to throw on a couple of sewing machines and I'd go along. Two weeks on the ground, my first trip in country.

Men filled the C-47 cargo plane with bundles of blankets and used clothing. Fighting had broken out between Dinkas and Nuers on either side of Waat over a year before, and no one who couldn't walk there had been to Waat since. Refugees said the village was destroyed. The pastors wanted to help the people of Waat rebuild their church, and to pay for poles and thatch and labor with what people needed most: clothes and blankets.

Now, on a hot afternoon, sunlight blazed between gaps in the walls of a meeting room the size of a closet. The oldest deaconess leaned forward, resting her hand on my knee. Her hair was gray and wrinkles channeled down to her lips. She was probably about forty-five, like me, but she had carried water on her head since she was four years old. She has spent decades hoeing sorghum with fire-hardened sticks, harvesting it by hand and grinding it between two rocks. Her body was worn out. Four other Sudanese women sat with us in a small sweaty circle on the floor. Guy Lual, the only man, sat beside me to translate.

"We hear you are a teacher," the deaconess said. "Stay here and teach us to read."

I thought I was just bringing them what they wanted, sewing machines. It took me a long time to answer.

Men had unloaded the sewing machines from the plane when we landed on the dry grass in Waat, and they had ducked with the machines, bristling with jute tied every-which-way to hold the cardboard packaging, through the door of a storage hut next to the charred half-walls of what was the church. I never saw the sewing machines again.

This meeting room, where we had officially given and received the vanished sewing machines, was a lean-to made of sorghum stalks pushed into the dry soil and bound together with strips of bark. Beside me, a young mother shifted her squirming baby and pulled her breast out the top of her blouse to nurse. We sat, as we always did in chairless Waat, on the ground, with nothing to rest against. And we sat like polite Sudanese women sit, with our legs straight out in front. The backs of my knees burned.

"Stay with us," the deaconess said. I shifted, trying to get comfortable.

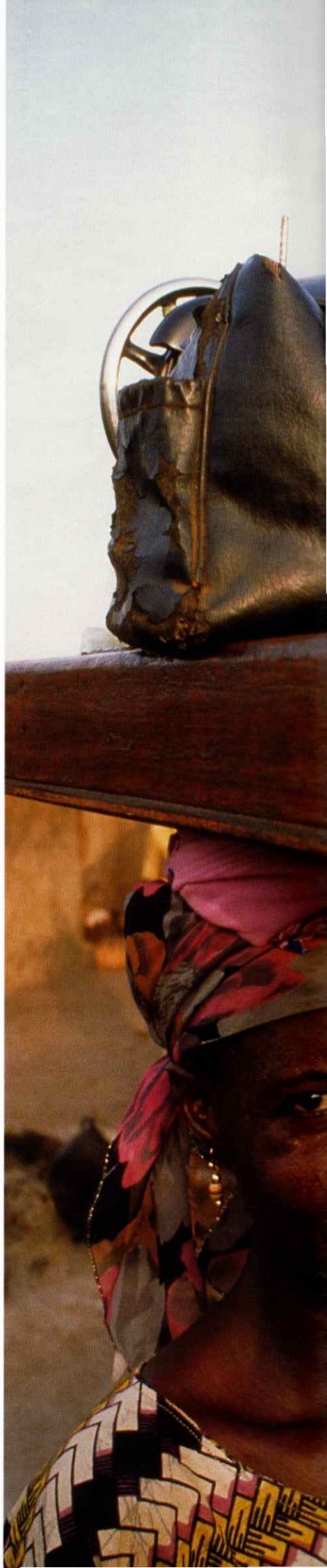
The two sewing machines were an embarrassing gift, now that I saw for myself how people lived, but the deaconess had graciously bowed as I gave her the packet standing in for the machines: scissors, brown paper for patterns, thread, pins, bobbins.

"We want to make school uniforms, because our boys will go to school naked," Guy Lual had translated. "Girls will stay home."

Dust had left ashy gray splotches on the women's ankles and calloused bare feet. "Maybe the United Nations will donate fabric," said a pregnant woman, her belly pulling tight the pink nylon nightgown she wore as a dress. "Maybe the UN will buy the uniforms back from us and we can help the poor women. Women whose men are lost."

"Teach us English," said the deaconess.

I was still scrambling to find a polite and respectful *no.* Guy Lual had



taught me how to say no in Nuer: *caing bin nhok, it wouldn't please me.*

Everywhere I went in Waat, people demanded my pen, my notebook, my clothes, my shoes, my tent. And honestly, it would not have pleased me to give away my second-hand silk blouses, fading on the shoulders in tropical sunlight like a dusting of powdered sugar, or my Indian skirt with the busy pattern that didn't show dirt. I needed them when I traveled so I'd have room in my duffle bag for a tent, sleeping mat, and flannel sheet. It would not have pleased me to be left, as the Sudanese are, with nothing for writing. I wanted notes and vocabulary lists. I also wanted to be the kind of personal hero who would be pleased to settle down in one small village and do one concrete thing to make a few people suffer less. But really, it would not please me to stay in Waat. And if I lived in Waat, every night I would lie awake and stare at the darkness gathered in the conical top of my thatched *tukel,* worrying about all the other women in all the other villages in all those vast plains. Teaching in Waat wouldn't be enough.

In Africa it's never enough. To work there we have to find ways to survive despair. When I was a child in Ethiopia, missionaries had started a leprosarium. They treated active cases and taught people handiwork skills. They built housing, but they couldn't build enough for all the lepers.

All I wanted at that moment in the sorghum lean-to in Sudan, the best I could hope for, was some way to get rid of my guilt with *I'm sorry.* Guy Lual had taught me that in Nuer it had to be in my tone of voice.

"I have spoken to teacher Nyang," I said. I stroked the mat I was sitting on, a gray food bag from some famine aid drop. "He knows a literacy teacher. I will send materials." It was a lame offer. Maybe *I'm sorry* was in the way I winced when I said it.

The deaconess pounded on her knee.

"When I was a girl my brothers went to school," she said. "My father said *why does a girl need education?* After my husband paid the bride price I bore him three daughters and two sons. Now I know that my father was wrong. I would give up everything for an education."

Guy Lual covered a smile with four fingers. The lean-to rustled as all the women, including me, shifted, taking in such an outburst. A Nuer woman doesn't have anything to give up. She's a beast of burden who farms and cooks and bears children, daughters to bring her husband cattle wealth and sons to bring him immortality. By age eight Nuer boys can chant their father's names back fifteen generations, because a man lives on as long as someone remembers his name. So who was she kidding?

"I would give up my husband, I would give up my children, to learn English," she said.

Beside the deaconess a young woman in a plaid blouse and floral skirt fell over sideways, giggling. The deaconess just looked at me, her face crinkled around her eyes.

"When peace comes," I said. When peace comes there would be currency in south Sudan again. There would be trade. Fabric. Tea leaves. Sewing machines. Schools. I cleared my throat, but it was closing. I could barely whisper. "When peace comes, even old women will learn English." Everyone clicked agreement in the backs of their throats. *When peace comes.* A puff of hot air blew dust through the wall. □

Caroline Kurtz, raised in Ethiopia by missionary parents, returned there in 1989 with her husband and children to teach English. They then worked in the Sudan for years before returning to Oregon where she is a writer and teacher in Salem.

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