

## **I Will Be Back**

An extraordinary life changing experience happened to me during a visit to a small orphanage in Ethiopia. I had no idea that the thirteen hour flight to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, would bring me face-to-face with an experience that would alter my thinking indefinitely. A trip to the country of my parents' origin, that was supposed to be a chance to meet my extended family, morphed into an opportunity of substantial growth for me. This maturation occurred as fate brought me into one of Addis Ababa's orphanages. Nothing could have prepared me for what I heard, saw, and felt.

In a language and gesture quite alien to me the warmest greetings were extended to me from the charming lady administrator of the orphanage. She had a gracious and comforting glow about her, and wisdom etched into the wrinkles of her face. However, behind that glowing face and inside the dilapidated rooms of the orphanage, the story was quite different. Occupants of the orphanage, probably a few hundred of them, were separated by age and gender. Most disturbing was the sight of babies and infants just a few weeks old, sleeping two or three to a crib. The cribs were cage-like with metal bars, burning hot to the touch in the African summer heat. Children's cries sometimes meet no recognition due to overpopulation and understaffing.

Mixed emotions washed over me as I reached my hand into a crib and felt one reach back to grab mine. My eyes met those of a little boy. They were deep, dark, soulful and pleading. He couldn't speak, but in this exchange of glances, I felt as if he was imploring me to take him away, give him a home and a bed that didn't come with a crib-mate. Tears welled up in my eyes and poured down my face. No sight, however, grabbed my attention like that of the little girl who was brought in that morning. She had no name, no information, and at just two days old, she had been pulled from one of Addis Ababa's mountainous trash heaps. Goosebumps materialized

on my arms despite the baking heat of the African sun. She was frail, meager, and shockingly still. A striking thought that she may not make it through another night was traumatic enough to send me into another bout of intense bawling.

This was a stark reminder of what I cried about over the years; insignificant things such as falling off balance beams in my gymnastics practices, or not getting the modeling gig I wanted. These children, however, were crying from the hunger pangs, loss of parents, abandonment- real life issues. Attracted by their misery, my conscience forced me to provide some help on volunteer basis before my return home.

Finally, upon my return, I took jobs in restaurants in my town. But the joy of being a teenage worker was wiped out when I saw the disturbing amount of food being wasted, while children are dying of hunger elsewhere. There is no feasible way of providing this food to those kids, but the desire of doing so is still burning within me. The echo of their cries and whining still rings in my mind. Their agony has filled me with the urge to return and accomplish even more. After my graduation from UMBC, I certainly will be back to help.