

THE LOST GIRLS

Still haunted by the Lord's Resistance Army's brutal 1996 abduction of 139 young students, **Susan Minot** reveals the hold their story had on her.

The snow was falling outside the eight windows of the shingled Cape house as I fed the baby, and even then the slow-blinking eyes of the girls came to me. I was walking on the shale rocks by a green summer sea and would see mothers gathered together on a porch in the African dusk waiting for the girls' return. As credits rolled up on the screen after a movie, I would drift off in the dark and think of the girls in the shadow of a fig tree.

I did not know these girls, but I knew their story.

I had written about them a decade before, but they wouldn't leave me. So one day I took my pen—a nib pen dipped in ink (old habit)—and spent the next seven years writing about them. But let me go back.

Sixteen years ago I went to a dinner at the loft of some friends in Tribeca. I could have easily not gone to this dinner; I could have easily been out of town since, being single, in my early 40s, and free, traveling somewhere was where I usually was.

At the dinner party I listened to a woman tell the story of bandits storming the dormitory of a Catholic boarding school run by Italian nuns and kidnapping girls between the ages of eight and eighteen. One intrepid nun followed the children into the bush, caught up with the leader, and, rosary in hand, asked him to give her back her girls. He showed her his rosary and they prayed together. He invited her to tea. They chatted through the afternoon. Again she asked him to release the 139 girls bound together with rope. He scratched a number with a twig in the dirt: 109.

I will give you these, he said. Then he scratched another number, 30. And I keep 30.



IN HER HEART
THE AUTHOR, IN AN
ALTUZARRA DRESS,
AT MORANDI, NYC.

No, said the nun, whose name was Sister Rachele Fassera. Take me. And let my girls go. The commander shrugged. Deal or no deal.

So Sister Rachele led away 109 girls, and 30 were left behind. One of those left behind was a girl named Charlotte. The woman telling the story over the dessert plates in the nicely appointed loft was Charlotte's mother.

A silence followed. Do we know about this? a guest asked. Charlotte's mother could not answer that question.

The boarding school was in Uganda and the bandits were a group that called itself the Lord's Resistance Army. When I traveled there in 1998, Joseph Kony, their leader, had not yet been the subject of a video that went famously viral in 2012, and so his name was not recognizable to the general public, but the LRA had been terrorizing the north of Uganda for over ten years, making thousands its victims.

At the time I heard this story I had recently returned from East Africa, where I had had a remarkable, in fact quite life-changing experience—having just been UP FRONT >346

there, I did not find the story so foreign. Charlotte's mother, an undaunted woman named Angelina Auytum, had started a group called the Concerned Parents Association and was in the U.S. to raise awareness for her cause. Before this incident, nearly 10,000 boys and girls had been torn from their families, forced into sex servitude, and made to kill. It seemed like no one was doing anything to stop it. (And indeed it would continue on for nearly 30 years to this day, though Kony is barely active and some reports have him hiding in the wilds of Congo.) I thought perhaps I could write about it. I decided to try.

It was not the first time I had heard of atrocious things happening to innocent people. Why Angelina's story was so affecting I couldn't have said then, but looking back I see that I was searching for a way to delve into someone else's experience.

The abducted children were unable to speak for themselves. If writing is a way of bearing witness, I thought why not try bearing witness for those who lacked the means to do it themselves? Those are some of the impulses that I see drove me, though I cannot explain why I did not let the impulse to *do something to help* drop away, the way it had many times. Somehow my resolve held together, and I pitched the idea to a magazine.

This was not the sort of story I usually wrote. The ones I'd done had taken me rafting down the Salmon River in Idaho, skiing in Switzerland, or on walking safaris in Tanzania. My conception of the piece would therefore incorporate my lack of journalistic credentials. I hoped to make this story come alive in a new way, and show the distance between us and them, the way it is: not so great after all.

I went to Uganda. I spent less than two weeks there, but every moment I was spellbound and absorbed. I visited St. Mary's in Aboke, where the bars of the girls' dormitory window had been chipped out of the concrete and used as a ladder. The campus was walled in with a green quadrangle and towering trees and porched buildings ruffled with purple bougainvillea.

I interviewed three of the 30 girls who had escaped. They spoke frankly about what they had been through; great feeling showed in their faces

It was hard to imagine the children in their blue-and-white uniforms being led off into the bush. A pink-and-yellow chapel had survived fire during the attack. I met Sister Rachele and had lunch with her fellow nuns, who displayed their Italian respect for culinary arts by serving all homegrown food, including coffee from their own beans. I listened rapt as Sister Rachele told the story from her perspective. I was not the first journalist she had spoken to. She had told the story before, but she told it well, with feeling. At the end, she brushed away tears. "I am saying these words like this, but the pain. . ."

I interviewed three of the original 30 girls, who had escaped in the last year. (The LRA is such a slipshod operation that

children could make a run for it when their captors weren't watching. The price was high, however; if caught, they'd be killed as an example.) The way these girls told their story was excruciatingly moving. Their soft lyrical voices described unspeakable things. Their eyes looked out with clarity, then glanced shyly down. They spoke frankly about what they'd been through—rape, murder, enslavement—and while great feeling showed in their faces, their smooth cheeks swollen with sadness, they did not look beaten-up or furious. Perhaps they were a little numb, but they spoke of their experience not as victims but with a straightforward kind of disbelief, and as a communal experience, not a personal one. A photographer friend who'd covered the genocide in Rwanda, among other atrocities, told me one of the few times he wept in the field was when he listened to the girls of the north.

The fact that so many escapes occurred meant there was a growing population of surviving children having to cope with trauma. A number of rehabilitation camps had been established in the north, and children were brought there upon their return. Helping them to recover was a laudatory impulse, but it appeared the reality could not keep up with the demand. One camp I visited had some 200 children overseen by four or five counselors. Under the shade of trees, children were leaning on cereal boxes, drawing with pencils pictures of huts on fire and people with hacked-off limbs—art therapy. Stopping Joseph Kony was one goal, but now here was another: to assist the thousands trying to return to interrupted lives. Some children, having been forced to kill, were no longer welcomed back by their families. Many girls were suffering from AIDS. Other children would escape to find their families no longer alive, their villages burned. The terror of the LRA expanded like ripples in water.

At one rehabilitation camp 70 boys slept in a large white tent donated by a Norwegian charity, and there was an outdoor shop where the children built musical instruments and repaired bicycles. They watched us, the visitors from outside, as we walked among them. Their gaze slid over us, or stared straight on, but seemed to take little in, as if too inwardly engaged. Their foreheads were cut with frowns. In my notebook I wrote, DON'T FORGET THESE FACES, DON'T FORGET THESE EYES.

On the back porch of a grocery in Lira, I met with the members of the Concerned Parents Association, an understated title, I thought. These mothers wondered each day if their children were still alive. They spoke of their missing daughters, how they were certain they were not being fed enough. One parent who came to the meetings sat with her back to the group. I had seen a prayer poster earlier across from one of the many churches in the small town: ONLY GOD KNOWS MY PROBLEMS SO SHUT UP AND LEAVE ME ALONE. Even still Angelina Auytum was saying things like, "Nothing for the good of humanity is lost."

At Lacor Hospital as night fell I watched nearly 1,000 people carrying bedrolls and blankets and babies shuffle through the gates of a hospital complex to sleep in the open courtyards, protected from the rebels. Then UP FRONT >360

at dawn, raising a red dust from the soil, they shuffled out again to return to their villages or jobs in town.

It was a stunning story of horror and neglect, so it was not surprising that other journalists had been covering it. These reporters were mentioned at the offices of the NGOs that I sought out in Kampala. I would see their names beside their sponsoring publication in the visitor logs of the rehabilitation centers. They came from Denmark, Germany, England. Sadly their stories were not galvanizing people to action.

Leaving the fenced-in centers, I felt the shame one does after encountering another person's suffering. A pocket of despair was waiting at the end of each day. Falling asleep at night I would feel shame for even having the luxury to feel shame.

On either side of my visit to the north, though, I was not penitent. I drank with animal conservationists in an Italianate villa on the shores of Lake Naivasha. I went swimming in the green waters of the Nile with some bawdy rafters, and water-skied on Lake Victoria past Idi Amin's abandoned compound south of Kampala. There were parties dancing to techno music around bonfires. The juxtaposition of the different worlds was, to say the least, disturbing.

Unlike the girls held captive, I could return home. I wrote the story. It was published in *McSweeney's*, "This We Came to Know Afterward," in summer 2000. It was also included in a travel anthology edited by Paul Theroux.

When I write a piece of fiction, I don't expect a response. I send out a book in the same spirit that I read it, that of anonymity. Reading, said the writer Henry Green, is an intimacy among strangers. I like that. But this story was different. I had hoped that at the very least, it might inspire awareness that a seemingly impossible thing was happening, even if it were a continent away. But after this story was published, I heard nothing. It bothered me.

Then life intervened. I moved to a small island in Maine. I became a mother. I got married. I had a child and husband and a new life. Writing took a backseat. I still put nib pen to paper but, as a mother, I found the thought of writing one sentence after another, much less one page after another, had a faded-out appeal. For five years I used paper for screenplays, poetry, and painting watercolors, all things I found I could manage while my daughter played nearby. I followed the story of what was happening in Uganda, and it was never encouraging news. Occasionally I wrote something more about the situation there, and always silence followed. It was in that peace and tranquillity that the children reappeared to me. When I was finally moved to begin a book I found the girls there waiting, seemingly as undiscovered as before.

The novel is called *Thirty Girls*, and is done at last. It was not an easy book to write. I had to make the daily hurdle of having the gall to write from the point of view of a young African girl.



SHADOWS ON THE GRASS

FROM TOP: THE COVER OF ONE OF MINOT'S WINTER 1998 NOTEBOOKS; THE AUTHOR VISITING CAMP KIRYANDONGO, NORTHERN UGANDA; MINOT'S WATERCOLOR OF LAKE VICTORIA OUTSIDE KAMPALA.

But I was a young girl once, too. Esther, my Ugandan heroine, and I have that in common. And that is the point.

Around 2006, Kony moved out of Uganda and later decamped to South Sudan. But his group of followers started to weaken and grow smaller. Over a year ago, reports had him disappeared into Congo, where even a long-overdue dispatch by Obama of Green Berets to track him down in the barely mapped jungle has yielded no results. He remains hidden, but far less active.

Of the original 30 girls from St. Mary's, four died in captivity, and the other 25 managed to escape over the years. The last returned after thirteen years. Angelina's daughter Charlotte Awino escaped from the rebels in 2004. She had two sons. One is named Miracle. Her story of recovery continues. □

KIRYANDONGO: HUGER FOOTE. ALL OTHERS: TIM HOUT.