



From Africa with Love

For the past five years, **Virginie Brouard**, owner of Edinburgh's Le Di-Vin and La P'tite Folie has been fundraising for the Missionaries of Charity Mother Teresa orphanage in Addis Ababa, and also Daughters of Charity – a mission of 60 nuns who run orphanages in Ethiopia's impoverished Tigray region. She shares the compelling diary from her most recent trip to the country, where she also adopted her four-year-old daughter, Genat

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Leaving home is not easy. Genat is crying and wants to come to Ethiopia with me. I try not to worry – I've organised for the kids to be well looked after while I'm away, and they've both agreed to share their mummy with less fortunate children. I let them fill my bags with presents to give to the children.

Stepping out of the plane and feeling the heat is nice, but I quickly realise it's actually unbearable in the car taking me to the hotel. The air is hard to breathe, and the smells... welcome to Addis Ababa.

My three days in Addis are all about memories of my eight weeks here with my son Pierre during Genat's adoption.

I'm always emotional when I return to The Missionaries of Charity's compound (Mother Teresa), as it's the place where I met Genat for the first time. I am delighted to see everyone remembers me. This is the place where Genat's eyes met mine for the first time and I knew then that everything would be alright for her, my daughter.



Taking Genat home

Mek'ele, Tigray Region

What a pleasure to meet Sister Medhin at the airport. I do feel at home in the Daughters of Charity compound, a haven of peace in a troubled Ethiopia. Sister Medhin warns me of the difficulties of returning to the refugee camp. Things are not so good and security is an issue. After a visit to the Kebele (government office) where I'm asked millions of questions, I'm told that I will not be allowed to speak to any of the refugees. So instead, I give my time to the charity's clinic, especially the feeding centre for malnourished children.

There is a drought just now in northern Ethiopia. I think of the rain and how it did not come this year. No rain in this desert area promises drought, and with drought comes famine – a certain death for millions in a country where 90% of the population are farmers.

The first morning I arrive at the clinic, I notice so many people waiting at the gates. The beggars, the mothers bringing their sick children – all waiting in silence to be taken in. Doctor Mehari at Wukro Clinic is expecting me. This clinic has 90 beds and has been slowly renovated over the last 10 years. I spend all of my days and some of my nights here, mainly with the children. Every morning, we welcome more malnourished children.

We have a meeting with staff from the World Health Organisation and a member of the UN, who tell us that 11 million Ethiopians are facing starvation. What is worrying is



Sister Medhin, coordinator at Daughters of Charity

that no rain is expected before July. Because of the heat (40 °C) diseases like typhoid, cholera and TB are increasing. Lots of children suffer from pneumonia.

All the children I see at the Therapeutic Feeding Centre have skin sores, especially around the mouth and eyes. Most have chronic coughs. Five of them have severely swollen bellies, feet and hands. I also notice their slightly reddish hair, which indicates that their bodies are lacking sufficient protein. Their joints are so swollen that it hurts them to move. They cry only when I carry them. Most of the time, they sit in silence.

As well as the medicines they need, every few hours they are fed a small syringe of balanced, liquefied food through a tube placed in their nose and going directly into their stomach. Putting a tube in their nose is not something I enjoy assisting with, but then I remember it is for their benefit, and children quickly forgive and forget.

Another problem we have is that some vaccines are not efficient because of the heat. A vaccine has to be kept cold right up until it is used, otherwise it deteriorates. We often have power cuts, and generators can take ages to start. I feel angry. Why didn't the staff at the clinic think of a solution to keep the vaccine cold? I could swear...

I also have to measure the children's mid-upper arm circumference. The measurement is used to determine their level of malnutrition. Anything under 12.5cm is considered severe. The first child I measured was just above 6cm.

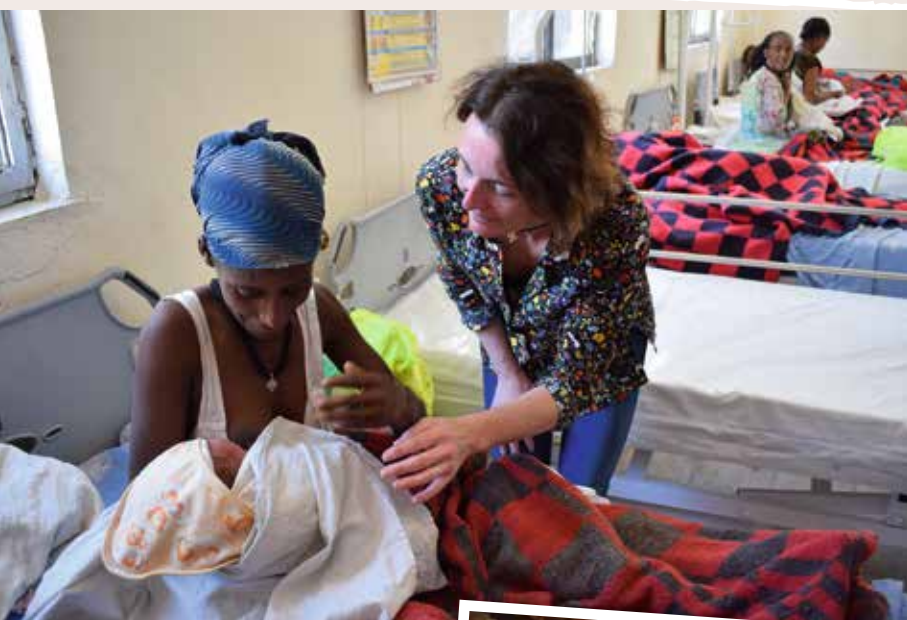
I do find it difficult refusing treatment for a child. In my eyes, all the children need treatment, but the clinic cannot afford it. It is hard to look a mother in the eye and tell her that her child is not sick enough.

There is no worse nightmare than holding a starving and dying child.



A prayer before lunch

"I want to believe I come here to make a positive impact on the world of these children, but they are the ones impacting on my world."



Walking the streets here is an interesting experience. Yes, people stare at me and make me feel different, but not in a bad way. The noises are constant. So are the gasoline and diesel fumes. Everywhere there are piles of rotting rubbish and pools of stinking black water. Barefoot children. I even see a group of kids with distended stomachs playing with the carcass of a goat. I notice animal skeletons and bones everywhere. Why can we not give a roof or shelter to all of these people?

What represents a humanitarian act? Are we not meant to offer assistance and protection? We are asked as humanitarians

The task is enormous and I admit, I sometimes feel despair. I want to believe I come here to make a positive impact on the world of these children, but they are the ones impacting on my world. People here suffer unspeakably, yet their smiles are wide and genuine. I have come to appreciate as never before what a precious gift life is. Here it is so tenuous and fragile.

The streets of Mek'ele are crowded with beggars. As I'm white, they all come to me for attention. Polio is rampant – every street corner is literally crawling with people who have limbs paralysed from the disease. I was told that it is better not to look and to ignore those people – advice from a well-trained humanitarian worker. There are people in the streets wearing nothing except a few ragged shreds of cloth to protect them from the ground and the cool nights.

I feel guilty for walking away and ignoring them. Do they hate me for being born in a privileged place? Each time I see a little girl begging or working in the streets, half-naked, eyes and mouth infected, I can't help but think of my Genat. So many little girls here look like her. As a parent, my heart aches for the children living in the streets. The poverty can be so severe that there seems to be no choice for parents other than to send their children off to work. Others are forced onto the streets because both parents have succumbed to disease, leaving them with nowhere to go. Their lives become a living hell.

I notice all the armed guards outside banks, government offices, at the gates of hotels. This brings it all into perspective for me. Ethiopia is a country peacefully at war with itself because of extreme poverty. People here bear their burden so gracefully. They have felt it for so long, they probably feel numb.



to remain independent of political, religious and economical objectives. We are also asked to remain neutral to the political causes of poverty or conflict. But how can we remain silent in the face of war crime and corrupt governments? We cannot remain silent about the plight of the victims, genocides and massive violation of human rights. Government here in Ethiopia is certainly working hard to hide those violations.

While in Ethiopia, I also visit two very poor schools (government schools). I promise myself I will help them financially. The first school I visit has 540 children, no water, one toilet, no tables, no chairs and no books. It is hard to believe. I'm told that some of the children collapse on their way into school because of the heat. There is also a water shortage.

Through Daughters of Charity, 800 children are being fed daily in two different locations while attending school. They receive a nutritious meal at lunchtime and biscuits at break time. It is often the only food they receive in a day as their parents are all from very poor backgrounds. It's reassuring to

see smiling and mischievous kids after the misery witnessed earlier on in my trip. The charity are doing a fantastic job with the children. The level of education is excellent and all the children are taught English.

Unfortunately, thousands of others are left behind. There is a lot more to be done and every year, thanks to our donations, the nuns at Daughters of Charity are trying their best to feed and educate more and more children. **SW**

