

Sylvie's Walk

When Sylvie passed through the gate she paused briefly and turned back to the school where her teacher stood leaning against the door. Shyly, Sylvie waved goodbye, but the teacher ignored her gesture, head bowed, her eyes unmoving from the base of the doorway.

Sylvie always looked forward to her walk home, regardless of the weather. It's not that she didn't like school, she did. Every day was an adventure, so many things to learn, the names of far-off places she dreamed of visiting. But after school was Sylvie time.

She would usually stop at one of the market stalls to cajole a small treat for her mother—something different every day. Occasionally, she and her sister would get caught up kicking the ball around until Sophie would warn Sylvie that if they stayed one more minute Abu would scold them.

Normally Sylvie would wait around in the afternoon for her sister since Sylvie got out an hour later than middle school. Sylvie was proud. Next year she would be on the same schedule as her sister. But today Sophie wasn't there. Sylvie remembered she had gone on ahead.

Their group turned off the main road and headed through a pasture. Even though the land was now parched, Sylvie could remember how vivid the colors were in the spring. Before they slid down the bank into a dry wadi, she caught sight of smoke on the horizon and just the faint hint of meat. *Bagina must be roasting another boar*, she thought. Then she recognized the distinctly pungent odor. *The Janjaweed!* So as to not panic and help focus her mind, Sylvie nervously began to sing as she shuffled her feet

forward through the dust. She couldn't understand why none of her friends would join her.

As she ascended the embankment, Sylvie stepped on a thorn. She hopped on one foot to remove it, a thin drop of blood forming. She looked down the rise to the soccer field, now bulldozed nearly halfway across. But there was no time to think about playing. She must hurry to her destination.

She was prodded forward until she reached the edge of the pit. The soldier made her kneel down. Looking to the tree line, Sylvie's eyes caught those of a huge white bird with black shoulders perched precariously on the highest limb. She felt a particular bond with this fowl, appropriately named a Kite. *Fly away little friend. This is no place for you.*

Dropping her gaze slightly to her right, she caught the eyes of her sister, now a dull, cloudy gray. But it was one last thing that comforted her. They would be going home together today after all.

She never heard the shot that took her sight, never saw the white bird startle at the sound, then rise slowly into the air, escaping the killing ground.

CNN reported that 287 people had been killed in Darfur that day. That brought the toll of this senseless war of feudal extremism to over 400,000. This was just a statistic to most of the people who heard it—a momentary pause and a sigh in their busy day. But not to Sylvie, who was the last to die that day. And yet tomorrow there would be 287 more victims in another country, 287 the day after that somewhere else. And another 287 every day until there were no more school girls left to dream.