**The Blessing**

Rebecca Jung

I remember when my sister Leslie was dying. It was 1958, and my family and I were living in Bukavu, in the Belgian Congo.

In Africa, you take a lot of things in stride, like health problems, for instance.

It wasn’t unusual to see someone with elephantiasis, a disease that blocks the lymphatic system, leaving the victim with grossly enlarged limbs, mostly the legs, that could swell to the size of tree trunks. A lot of the Congolese children had distended bellies from Bilharzia, or snail fever. If they had distended bellies and their hair was a rusty orange, they were malnourished.

Often, the only available medical care was at missionary posts, which could be far from civilization. Some of the missionaries were medical doctors, but they had no schedules. You could drive all day only to find they were out in the field.

We were lucky to have a traveling dentist who sometimes swung by Bukavu. His name was Dr. Hulbert and he was a Methodist missionary. He had no schedule, so when he came to town, we dropped any plans we’d made and trooped into Paul and Dorothy Hulbert’s living room.

Paul was Dr. Hulbert’s son, and he’d gone into the family business – he and his wife Dorothy were also Methodist missionaries. As the only Protestant minister in town, every Sunday my family and I sat in folding chairs Dorothy had set up in their living room and listened to Paul’s sermon. I’m pretty sure we were the only ones there.

The living room was also where the Dr. Hulbert set up his vintage dental apparatus. There was a treadmill attached that Dr. Hulbert pumped with his foot to power the drill. There was no dental assistant to wipe the drool from your mouth. There was no small sink with a constant flow of water for you to spit in.

There was no Novocain.

If you missed Dr. Hulbert when he came to town, you were out of luck. And if you didn’t miss Dr. Hulbert when he came to town, you were still out of luck.

So, when my sister, Leslie, complained of a stomach ache on a weekend drive to the Reserve Nationale d’Itombwe to see eastern lowland gorilla, my parents thought nothing of it. But, when she couldn’t sit up in the backseat of the car anymore and could only curl up with her knees tucked to her chin because of the pain, they began to worry. Then she began to vomit green bile.

I remember we were on a dirt road and had no idea where the next village would be, or if there would be a next village. We finally came to a few shabby shops where my dad pulled the VW over and stopped.

He jerked up on the safety brake so hard it squeaked. He yanked the keys out of the ignition, he kicked the car door open, which bounced on its hinges, and he got out. I remember he looked calm, but I knew he wasn’t. He walked quickly, almost ran, from one person to another.

“*Y a-t-il un docteur* … is there a doctor?” he asked.

The villagers looked at each other and shook their heads. “*Non*.”

“*Missionnaires* … missionaries?”

“*Non*,” they said.

My dad never rushed, he always moved deliberately. I’d never seen him panic or be afraid. But I knew he was afraid in that village.

But what I remember most are the Congolese women huddled around my mother, who was sitting with her legs out of the car holding my sister Leslie, who was a chalky gray and her eyes were closed. She hardly breathed. My mother pressed her cheek to Leslie’s cold face and cried. She rocked back and forth, holding my sister’s limp body close to hers.

And those Congolese women rocked and cried with her. They stroked Leslie’s face and body. They touched my mother, laying their hands on her in a mothers’ blessing. They bent their long necks, like black swans, and touched their heads to hers.