1-1-2009

Every Drop Counts: Short Stories on Global Water and Sanitation Issues

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University of Pennsylvania

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Environmental Studies 2009.

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Every Drop Counts: Short Stories on Global Water and Sanitation Issues

Abstract
Educating young adults (ages 10-16) in the United States on global water and sanitation issues requires using various resources. Lectures loaded with facts and figures are not engaging enough for young students. A tool for hooking young students’ curiosity on an environmental topic is through stories. Once they show interest to the issues and formulate emotional responses as well as critical thoughts, facts and figures would become more tangible. This creative project includes short stories that were based on interviews from water professionals, volunteers, and those who experienced water burdens in their childhood. Young readers are encouraged to think critically while reading the stories through the questions asked. These stories serve to grab young students’ attention to global water issues and to inspire them to volunteer in their communities or in organizations. These stories are best used in conjunction with lessons or lectures on environmental advocacy, policy, and studies dealing with water and sanitation issues.

Disciplines
Environmental Sciences | Physical Sciences and Mathematics

Comments
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Every Drop Counts: Short Stories on Global Water and Sanitation Issues

Nalat Phanit

Fall 2009

Readers: Elaine Wright
Kathy Schultz
ABSTRACT

EVERY DROP COUNTS: SHORT STORIES ON GLOBAL WATER AND SANITATION ISSUES

Nalat Phanit

Primary Reader: Elaine Wright

Educating young adults (ages 10-16) in the United States on global water and sanitation issues requires using various resources. Lectures loaded with facts and figures are not engaging enough for young students. A tool for hooking young students’ curiosity on an environmental topic is through stories. Once they show interest to the issues and formulate emotional responses as well as critical thoughts, facts and figures would become more tangible. This creative project includes short stories that were based on interviews from water professionals, volunteers, and those who experienced water burdens in their childhood. Young readers are encouraged to think critically while reading the stories through the questions asked. These stories serve to grab young students’ attention to global water issues and to inspire them to volunteer in their communities or in organizations. These stories are best used in conjunction with lessons or lectures on environmental advocacy, policy, and studies dealing with water and sanitation issues.
# Table of Contents

Introduction (and more) .................................................................................................................. 4

Fetching Water ................................................................................................................................. 11
  Behind the Story: *Fetching Water* ................................................................................................. 29
The Year Without the Water Pump .................................................................................................. 32
  Behind the Story: *The Year Without the Water Pump* ................................................................. 53
The Fight for the Mekong River ...................................................................................................... 56
  Behind the Story: *The Fight for the Mekong River* .................................................................... 82
The Price of Water ............................................................................................................................ 85
  Behind the Story: *The Price of Water* ......................................................................................... 105
Making a Difference ......................................................................................................................... 109
  Behind the Story: *Making a Difference* ....................................................................................... 121

Challenges and Tips ......................................................................................................................... 124

Resources/Engaging your school ...................................................................................................... 129

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... 132

Analysis of Every Drop Counts: Short Stories on Global Water Issues ...................................... 134

Works Cited ..................................................................................................................................... 139
Pop quiz (didn’t expect to find one in a book did you?). Don’t worry, you’re not being graded for this. The following questions will help determine if you are a water-conscious person. “Water-conscious” means that you know when you are being wasteful with your water resources, you know of global water issues, and that you care enough to help solve local and not-so-local water problems. If you are not a water-conscious person, reading the stories in this book will help you become one. If you are a water-conscious person, reading the stories will give you new insights and new resources. Bottom line, read the stories to become water-conscious-smart.

1) What cycle is responsible for the earth’s water distribution?

2) True or False: Water distribution in the world is even. Every human being has access to clean drinking water.

3) Of the water in the world, what is the percentage of fresh water available?

4) Where do most people in the United States get their water from? Where do some people in developing nations living in poverty get their water from?

5) The water that comes from your faucet, is it clean? How is water cleansed?

6) According to the United Nations Development Programme, what is the second leading cause of deaths in children?

7) Is the world on track to meet United Nation’s Millennium Development Goal 7 on access to proper sanitation?

8) Is the world on track to meet United Nations’ Millennium Development Goal 7 on water accessibility?

9) Why is it important to conserve water? What can you do to conserve water? (list three)
10) Do you believe there is inequality in this world when it comes to access to clean drinking water and proper sanitation? What can you do to help erase the injustice?

Answers to the questions are on the next page. If you correctly answered at least seven questions, then you are “water-conscious” and by reading the stories, you will find out how you can use your knowledge and skills to help others in need. If you answered less than seven questions correctly, that just means that the stories will be an exciting and eye-opening experience for you (it’s better than reading your science textbooks!).

Whether you are water-conscious or not, it’s important to know that it always helps for you to critically think about the world that you live in. If you see injustices taking place (in this case the suffering of those in poverty when it comes to water and sanitation issues), ask yourself and others why such injustices are taking place and what is being done to solve them.

Ask yourself how you can be part of the solution. Every person (especially middle and high school students) has the potential to impact the world and make a difference (see the story Making a Difference). One way to create change is by volunteering. By giving some of your time and energy to a cause, you are showing yourself and the world that you are a global citizen and that you care enough to help those in need. In return, you will have a deeper appreciation of what you have in your life and find new friends along the way. By doing your part as a volunteer and living your life water-consciously, you will help ensure that in your lifetime, and in future generations’ lifetime, there will be enough water resources for you and your loved ones to depend on.
Answers:

1) Hydrologic cycle. This cycle is like the earth’s plumbing system. When it rains, the water is fed into surface water systems (like streams and rivers), the rain is absorbed by plants, it percolates through the ground and into the groundwater system. Whatever that was not used by the land runs into the sea. Evaporation from the sea and transpiration from the forests forms clouds, which then precipitates when there is too much moisture in the clouds to hold. The cycle then starts all over again. It’s been doing so for billions of years (Christopherson 246-248). Of course, the hydrologic cycle is a lot more complicated than the description provided with much science behind each step. To find out more, visit United States Geological Survey website on hydrologic cycle:


2) False. Water distribution in the world is uneven. Here’s an illustration from “Earth’s Water Distribution” by the United States Geological Survey:

Most of the water is in oceans. Freshwater is mostly trapped in icecaps and glaciers. So this leaves only a small amount where human beings can access freshwater.
Water is also distributed unevenly in different nations. This is due to varying climate zones and rainfall distribution. In areas where there’s hardly any rain, people face drought and have water scarcity issues. Some of these places also have poor sanitation, which increases the likelihood for whatever water sources that they have to be polluted. Other factors that determine whether or not a region has water issues include urbanization and deforestation. Forests and jungles use rainwater and replenish the underground water system. If an area becomes sparse with trees, rainwater would just run off into nearby streams and oceans. To find out more about the world’s climate zones and rainfall distribution, see SD Dimensions by Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) website: [http://www.fao.org/sd/EIDirect/climate/EIsp0002.htm](http://www.fao.org/sd/EIDirect/climate/EIsp0002.htm).

3) 3% of the world’s water is freshwater. See question 2 for the distribution illustration.

4) In the United States, most people get their water from their faucets. The source of the water may come from wells (which is the access point to the ground water system like an aquifer), rivers, and lakes. In developing nations, especially in poverty-stricken areas, people do not have faucets or even toilets in their houses. Some would have to walk for miles to the nearest water pump or well. Others would walk to mountain springs, streams, rivers, for their water needs.

5) You would sure hope that the water from your faucet is clean! Municipal water is heavily regulated. The water that you get from your faucet may come from nearby rivers or lakes that have gone through a water treatment plant. Find out more about your local
water department and you can ask them how safe your drinking water is. For those that get their water from aquifers (you would know this if you have a well on your property), your water most likely would be clean. Nature has a way of naturally cleansing rainwater and surface water. The water that seeps through the ground gets filtered by the dirt, rocks, sand and other subsurface contents to provide clean aquifers. There is a risk, however, that your aquifer may be polluted if a factory or some other industrial structure far away is dumping chemicals into the ground. Those chemicals may eventually find its way to your aquifer. It’s best to research your area for any illegal dumping cases and find the quality of your aquifer (contact your local water department for information).

6) According to the United Nations Development Programme’s 2007 report, diarrhea is the second leading cause of death for children. About 5 billion children are diagnosed with diarrhea each year and 1.8 million children die because of the water-borne disease (Hastings 12). If you’ve ever had diarrhea, you would know that it is an easily treatable and preventable disease as long as you have proper sanitation and access to clean water. For children in poverty however, unsanitary conditions, water contaminated by bacteria and viruses, and malnourishment, makes diarrhea a deadly disease.

7) In 2000, world leaders set out eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were to be reached by 2015. Part of MDG 7 is to “halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation” (Millennium 45). For the sanitation part of the goal, the world is off track. From 1990 to 2006, 1.1 billion people in developing nations have access to improve sanitation
conditions (proper toilets, latrines, etc). 1.4 billion more people will require sanitation facilities in order to reach the 2015 target. Around 1.2 billion people openly defecate, posing health risks to their communities (Millennium 45). More work and help is needed to provide people in developing nations to receive proper sanitation facilities.

8) The world is on target to reach MDG 7 in terms of access to safe drinking water. However, 884 million people still depend on unsafe water sources (such as streams, ponds, rivers) where surface waters are contaminated. Those with access to wells and piped water are not guaranteed that the water is of safe conditions as set up by the World Health Organization. Most of these people live in poor rural areas (Millennium 46-47).

9) It’s important to conserve water in order to help ensure that within your lifetime or in future generations, there is enough water to serve the people in your area. There are several ways to conserve water: turn off the faucet while brushing your teeth, wash your clothes when there’s a full load, fix water leaks in and around your house. You can find more conservation tips on “100 Ways to Conserve” webpage:


10) There is no right or wrong answer to this question. It is the author’s hope that after answering the previous nine questions, you will understand that there are inequalities in the world when it comes to water and sanitation issues. In the United States, children and adults take water for granted. Some people would jump into swimming pools or let the water run without realizing that water is being wasted when it should be treated like a
precious commodity. For those living without access to clean water, they understand that water is finite and important and that they need to be mindful of how they use it. In most cases, those living in poverty suffer from the lack of access to water and proper sanitation. Whatever water they receive most likely contains bacteria and viruses that will make them sick or even kill them. They do not have the choice or the privilege to get clean water or proper latrines. There are several ways to help those in need. You can donate to humanitarian organizations that help build water systems or latrines in developing nations. You can volunteer with such organizations. You can also help educate your peers, family members, neighbors, local politicians on global water issues, and the importance of taking care of your water resources. The act of the individual can help change the world.

*All over the globe, world leaders, philanthropists, students, children, adults, and so many others are helping improve water and sanitation conditions. Be part of the solution by learning more about the issues, educating others, and live your life water-conscious-smart!*
I was cozily sleeping on my mat when the old rooster crowed in its raspy voice. That old rooster never misses a morning ever since I was born. Mama said that without the rooster, I would sleep until the sun goes down. I suppose she’s right. Mornings are not my favorite time of day. Morning chores are even worse.

“Dalila, it’s time to get up,” Mama said in her groggy morning voice. I let out a moan and rolled over to my side with my back to her.

“Come on Dalila, you don’t want to be late for school again do you?” Mama was already beginning to fold her blankets and roll up her mat. “Hey, Jomo, you too.”

My little six-year-old brother rolled on his blanket. I let out a sigh and more groans while lifting my tired body up from my mat. My back was aching, and so were my arms.

“Come on, Jomo, we have to go get water. Don’t want Miss Abasi to yell at us again, do you?”

Jomo grunted as he kicked his blanket out of retaliation. He let out a loud sigh before getting up from his mat. I helped him fold his blankets. Jomo likes to rush through things. If I don’t help him, his blanket will be crumpled into a ball.

“I’m still sleepy,” Jomo said softly with his eyes half opened.

“I know,” I said. “The walk will wake you up.”

This was the fifth time that Jomo learned of his new chore. When he was younger, my mother and I were the only ones fetching water. Now that’s he’s older and a bit stronger, Mama said that Jomo could help me carry water from the stream. At first he liked the
chore. For him, it meant more time that he could see his best friend, Chitundu. He’s only a few months younger than Jomo and I suppose that’s why they get along so well. Chitundu and his sister, Paka, would wait by our door so that we could all walk to the stream together. Whenever we were late to class, we were late together.

“Aren’t you excited to see Chitundu?” I asked Jomo, hoping that will cheer him up.

“Yes,” he replied, “but my arms and legs hurt.”

“Don’t worry. You’re new to the water chore. When you’ve gotten a lot of practice like me, it won’t hurt anymore,” I lied. I didn’t want to tell him that this will be his chore for many years to come. I didn’t want to tell him that his back and arms will ache even more when Mama tells him that he’s strong enough to carry five times the amount of water he carries now.

“Good morning, Dalila. Good morning, Jomo,” Paka greeted us when we opened the door.

“Good morning,” Jomo and I replied.

The cool early morning air lingered on the mountains and fields of Keiyo Valley of northern Kenya. The glossy black and blue starlings were making a racket with their sharp high-pitched calls in the nearby fields. I could smell the faint refreshing scent of purple orchids that grew near our home. Mama always thought that the orchids added a nice touch to our humble village. Paka and I walked together and were a few steps ahead of Jomo and Chitundu. She had a weary look on her face.

“What’s wrong, Paka?” I asked.

“Oh, I was just wondering if I will ever be taller than this.” Paka answered in a soft
voice. Paka has been wondering about why she’s the shortest student in the class. She’s a year older than me, but I’m four inches taller than her. It is odd that a twelve-year old girl is only slightly taller than her six-year-old brother.

“Don’t worry, Paka,” I attempted to comfort her. “You’ll get taller. You have six more years to grow. Some doctors even say that you have nine more years to get taller.”

She gave me a weak smile.

“She said that it’s because of carrying the water all these years that made me short. She said she and my father were short, and so were my grandparents. So I’m destined to be short. But carrying the water makes me even shorter.” Paka’s voice was quivering a bit. I could tell that she was fighting back tears. “I asked Mama if I could stop carrying water, but she said no. She said that it’s important for the family and I’m the only one that can do it since she can’t walk much anymore.”

Sometimes I forget that Paka’s mother stayed home most of the time since she broke her leg a few years ago. Her mother was walking up a mountain during the dry season one day, to look for water in the spring. She came across a herd of cattle that were also making their way to the spring. Then something must have spooked them because there was a stampede. Paka’s mother was knocked down and trampled by the cattle. The villagers said that it was a miracle that she survived with only a broken leg. I remember Paka sleeping over at my house for two weeks when her mother went into the city to see a doctor. I heard Paka crying every night that she was there.

“Well, Paka, it doesn’t matter if you’re short or tall when you’re a doctor.” I didn’t know what else to say. All I knew was that whenever I talked about her growing up to be a doctor, she feels better.
“That’s true, I suppose.” Paka’s mood seemed to be lifted. “It doesn’t matter how you look when you’re a doctor, it only matters if you know what you are doing. Besides when a patient comes in with an illness, they don’t care if you are short or tall. They just care if you can help make them get better.”

“That’s right!” I gave her a slight nudge on her arm. “And you’re going to cure me of my illnesses for free right?” Paka and I burst out laughing. Talking about what we wanted to be when we grow up always cheered us up. I wanted to be an architect. I saw some pictures of tall buildings and beautiful houses in some books and just fell in love with the idea. I would tell Paka that when I’m an architect with lots of money, I’m going to come back to the village and make it beautiful. There would be little gardens for every house, each house would be painted with bright colors and have clean windows with new roofs, there will be parks for kids to play in. The school will have many classrooms, where the younger kids are separated from the older kids by grades. The classrooms will have lots of windows and desks that don’t squeak and chairs that don’t wobble. Miss Abasi will also have a big desk in the corner with a small plant on it. It’ll look just like the drawings of an American classroom in my textbook.

The cool air vanished as the sun came up from the horizon. My dress was sticking to my back as beads of sweat rolled down my face. The sand under my barefoot was getting warmer and I could feel the coarse grains sticking between my toes. Jomo and Chitundu were far behind us, walking slowing. I could hear the clank, clank, clank of Jomo’s empty plastic canister lazily hitting Chitundu’s aluminum jug. Jomo wiped sweat from his neck and face with his already dusty shirt.

“We’re almost there!” I yelled at them. Jomo looked at me and pouted.
The stream flowed softly with brown water that barely lashed at the shore. A long
legged secretary bird stopped drinking as we approached the stream. He flapped his black
wings and within moments, he flew out of my sight.

“The water is lower than yesterday,” Paka commented. “The dry season is coming
soon.”

“I hope that this year won’t be too bad.”

“Me too.”

Paka and I laid down our 5-gallon plastic jugs and unscrewed the caps. I tipped my
jug so that its spout just skimmed the water surface. Mama said that water on the surface
doesn’t have as much sand as the water at the bottom of the stream. It takes longer than
just submerging the jug, but I wanted clean water.

_Splash! Splash!_

“Jomo, Chitundu, what are you doing?” I yelled. Paka stopped filling her jug and
walked over to her little brother.

“Chitundu, Jomo, get out of the water!” Paka yelled as she grabbed Chitundu by his
arms.

“No!” Chitundu yelled back and wiggled free as he ran upstream, splashing water at
me. Jomo was giggling uncontrollably.

“Jomo! You’re getting your clothes wet.” I raised my voice.

“I want them wet!” He yelled back. “It’s too hot. I want to take a bath.”

“We don’t have time for a bath. Besides, we didn’t bring soap. We need to get water
and bring it to Mama then go to school, remember?”

Jomo pouted again and crossed his arms.
I walked over to him and tried to pull him from the stream, but he was being stubborn.

“Come on, we don’t have time for this.” He stared at the ground. “Okay, why don’t you fill your can up? Yours will fill up before mine because it’s smaller. And when you’re done, you can splash around all you want while you wait for me.”

Jomo sighed and picked up his canister and dunked it in the water.

“Now, Jomo. You know that’s not how we’re suppose to do it.”

He squinted at me and pouted some more before letting out a sigh. Reluctantly, he skimmed the water with his canister.

Paka and Chitundu returned and we filled our jugs. Chitundu and Jomo were done before we were and started to splash in the water around us.

“Not here!” Paka yelled at them. “You’re making the water dirty and getting sand in our jugs. Go a bit downstream.”

Paka and I looked at each other and shook our heads. Little brothers can be annoying sometimes. By the time our jugs were full and we hoisted them up to our heads, the sun was well above the horizon. I suspected that we only have an hour before school starts.

“Looks like we’re going to be late again,” Paka sighed.

“Come on Jomo, Chitundu. We have to hurry back,” I shouted at them. They had big smiles on their faces now that their clothes were soaked.

Walking back with a full jug of water on my head hurts my body. I could feel the weight of the water crushing my skull, neck, back, and legs. Paka and I usually hum a tune whenever we go back to the village. It kept us focused on walking and balancing at
the same time. Jomo was having difficulty with his canister. He kept shifting it from his right side to his left and back again. The two boys drifted behind us.

The sun was beating down on us mercilessly as the land remained quiet. Even the birds seemed to have stopped their singing and found shelter underneath some trees. I prayed for there to be a cool breeze but it never came. I was walking in front of Paka when I heard two loud thumps behind me. When I turned, Paka was on the floor and her jug was rolling away from her.

“Paka!” I yelled as I dropped my jug and ran towards her. Jomo and Chitundu also dropped their canisters as they ran.

“Paka! Paka!” I kept yelling as I shook her still body. I reached for her jug and tried to pour some water. But it was too heavy for me to lift. Jomo came and tilted the jug as some cool water filled my cupped hands. Chitundu was shaking his sister’s body and yelling out her name. I splashed some water onto her face. Nothing.

“Some more water, Jomo.” He obeyed and poured some water in my hands. I splashed it on her face and neck.

“Paka! Paka!” Chitundu was yelling.

Paka lifted her hand to her head and let out a soft groan.

“Paka!” I yelled. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she whispered as she tried to pull herself up. “What happened?”

“I think you fainted,” I answered her. “Can you get up?”

“I think so.” She took my hand as I pulled her up. Chitundu held on to her arms hoping that would stabilize her.

“You need to get home fast.”
“Okay,” Paka whispered.

“Jomo, Chitundu,” I turned to them, “go on ahead and tell Mama what happened. I’ll walk with Paka.”

Jomo and Chitundu ran back to grab their canisters and quickly walked pass us. The excitement of the morning must have made them forget how heavy their canisters were because they went out of my sight within minutes.

I hoisted up her jug on my head.

“Wait, what about yours?” She asked.

“I’ll come back later. You need the water more than I do.”

“Thank you.”

Paka slowly stumbled next to me. I could tell that she was not yet ready to walk home, but she needed to be in the shade soon and the sparse thin trees nearby would not have relieved her of the morning heat. I offered her to drink some water from the jug but she refused. She said that she will need to make that jug last for the whole day and evening for her family because she doesn’t think she will be able to fetch any more water later.

We were near the edge of town when Mama swiftly walked to us. Mama held on to Paka’s shoulders and looked into her face.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.


“Dalila, walk Paka home and then go to school.”

“Okay, but I left my jug on the road. I couldn’t carry both at the same time.”

“It’s okay, I’ll get it.”
Paka was about to apologize to Mama but she had already started walking towards the stream.

“I’m so sorry,” Paka said to me.

“Don’t worry,” I said, “You’re my best friend. Of course my family and I are going to take care of you.” I smiled at her as she smiled back.

I dropped Paka and her jug off at her house and told her not to worry and to rest up. She smiled and gave me a nudge on my arm. It’s one of our ways to let each other know that we can always depend on each other. I ran to my house to change into my school uniform. Mama was not home yet, but I supposed it would be a while before she gets there.

When I got to school, Miss Abasi had already started on the second lesson of the day. She usually gives the latecomers a stern look and talk, but today, she just nodded at me. Chitundu and Jomo were sitting on the far side of the room and they looked at me with concerned faces. I smiled at them to let them know that Paka was okay. Chitundu sighed as if he had been holding his breath all this time.

It was nearing the end of school when I got in trouble (again). I was lucky to have a seat right by an open window. The cool breeze that I prayed for finally came. It wisped across my face and relieved me from the heat of the day. Miss Abasi droned on about a mathematician as my eyes were getting heavy. The cool of the ground caressed my bare feet and soothed them of their pain. My head felt heavy, so I had to lay it down on the desk. But I made sure to prop up my book so that it seemed like I was reading.

THWACK!
A sudden burst of air pounded on my forehead. Standing over me was an angry Miss Abasi. Her ruler was resting on my desk, less than an inch of where my head was. My classmates stared at us.

“Dalila, how many times do I have to tell you that there is no sleeping in my class? If you want to sleep, stay home. Your parents pay lots of money for you to be in school. Don’t waste their money and my time by sleeping here when you should be doing your assignment.” Miss Abasi’s eyes were steadily fixed on mine and I got chills down my back.

“Yes, Ms. Abasi,” I spoke softly. “I’m sorry.” I hurriedly picked up my book and intensely read the text. Miss Abasi lingered around my desk for the rest of the school day.

Jomo and Chitundu were laughing when I came to the schoolyard. They looked at me and laughed even harder.

“What are you two laughing about?”

“Dalila, I can’t believe you fell asleep again!” Jomo laughed through his words.

“Well, you didn’t have to carry as much as I did. I’m tired. Now, don’t go telling Mama or Father this. You know I’ll get you if you tell,” I threatened him. I didn’t want my parents to yell at me again.

Jomo continued to laugh.

“Hey, if you and Chitundu don’t hurry, Father will yell at you. You know you are supposed to go straight to the field when classes are done.” The two boys continued to laugh as they walked to the field.

When I returned home, Mama wasn’t there. I changed out of my school uniform and hung it on the door. There was a patch of dirt that stuck on my dark blue skirt which I
tried to rub out. Looks like I will have to wash my clothes soon. I grabbed a jug and walked over to Paka’s house.

“Hi Dalila,” Paka answered the door. She was still pale.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better. Still a bit weak, but much better.” She gave a smile. “Your mother is so nice. She’s been fetching water for us.”

“Ah, that’s why she’s not home. Well, I just wanted to see how you were before I head to the stream. See you tomorrow?”

“Yes. Thank you, Dalila.”

I smiled and waved at her as I walked to the stream. Almost halfway down the road, Mama waved at me. She was carrying a full jug of water. Her lips were bleeding and her skin was dry. Mama must have been to the stream ten times today. For a skinny woman, she’s quite strong. I think her big heart is what makes her so strong.

There were other students in my class at the stream, filling their jugs.

“Hey, sleepy head!” Fathiya teased me.

I nodded my head at her. The water was getting lower, and I could barely find a spot on the shore to fill my jug. I had to walk further upstream to get water. There were cow feces on the shore. The women complained to the farmers about keeping the cows away from the stream, but they didn’t listen. The water is a precious resource for everyone here, even cows. It’s a silent competition between us and the cows. We can’t live without cows and cows can’t live without the stream. I walked further upstream.

By the time I got home, it was twilight. Mama was cutting up some tomatoes and sweet peppers for dinner. She was waiting for my jug of water.
“I heard you fell asleep in class today,” Mama looked over her shoulder as I entered the house.

“Who did you hear it from?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” she gave me a stern look and put down her knife as she assumed her angry stance by placing her hand on her hip. “Dalila, you know we don’t have much money. You can’t keep falling asleep in class. If you are going to sleep, then I won’t let you go to school. And Miss Abasi said that your grades are falling.”

“Mama!” I shrieked. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep. I want to go to school. I want to be awake. But, I’m just so tired. I can’t help it!”

“That’s what you said the last time you fell asleep, and the time before that, and the time before that! I should have pulled you out of school two years ago and saved so much money.”

“Mama,” I pleaded as tears ran down my cheeks. The thought of not being able to go to school was terrifying. “I won’t fall asleep in class again. I promise. I’ll ask Miss Abasi for extra work to get my grades up. Please Mama, I want to go to school,”

Silence fell between us but her cold stare was still fixed on me.

“Dalila, why can’t you be like Paka or Fathiya and stay focused on your lessons?”

“I try to do all my work but I get so tired at night that I fall asleep before I get it all done. I really try, Mama.” Every time we had this talk, I felt that my dream of becoming an architect was fading away.

“Go do your homework. I’ll prepare dinner tonight.”

I was relieved to not have to cook. My legs were tired from walking and the thought of sitting and doing my homework cheered me up. I just finished my math homework
when Jomo came back home. Father was spending the night in the field again. For several weeks now, Jomo helped out my father in the field. He came back with dirt on his shirt and trousers. I will have to wash those too when I do my clothes.

UGH!

“For such a little guy, you sure give out big sighs!” I teased him.

“I’m so tired, and Miss Abasi is giving us a math test in two days,” he complained as he began to flip through his book.

“After dinner, I can help you. I’m almost done with my homework.” He smiled. We worked on our assignments in silence as I heard the clinks and clanks of pots and pans in the kitchen.

Several days passed by and Paka did not return to school. Whenever I went over to her place, she would open the door, but she was getting thinner and paler. She didn’t know what was wrong, but she knew she was sick. One evening, when we just finished washing our dishes, Paka knocked on the door. Standing beside her was a glum-looking Chitundu.

“Hi, Paka,” I was excited to see her. “How are you feeling?”

“Not so good, Dalila. My mother’s leg is acting up again and we have to go to the doctor’s tomorrow. I have to go too, I’ve been sick for too long now,” she said wispily. Her sunken eyes were tearing up.

“How will you get to town?”

“Mama has some money saved for us. She also borrowed some from her brothers and sisters. She said that we’d walk early tomorrow morning to the next village and then take a bus from there. I was wondering if you can look after Chitundu for a few days.”
Chitundu was sobbing and his face was pointed towards the ground. I pulled him through the door by his shoulders and he was sobbing louder.

“IT will be all right, Chitundu,” I comforted him. “Your mother and your sister are just going to the doctor’s. They’ll be back soon. And you’ll have lots of fun with Jomo here.” He continued to sob.

Paka smiled and gave Chitundu a hug. She and her mother left hours before the old rooster even woke up.

* * * * *

Weeks then months then a year passed by. Chitundu was still at our house and Paka and her mother had not returned. Chitundu would always stare at his house, hoping that there were signs that his sister or mother was inside. But there were none. The house remained empty and dark. The villagers had gone into the house and took whatever they wanted. There was no sense in letting the things in there go to waste. Mama was worried, I could tell. Her face was thinner and her eyes were duller. Both Mama and Father worried about having another mouth to feed, but they were grateful that Chitundu was so helpful around the house and the field. Eventually, they loved him like a son, and I loved him like my little brother.

One evening, the village elder called for a meeting. We gathered in the schoolroom. The desks were stacked up and pushed against one wall as people sat on the floors and stood around the room. A crowd gathered outside, craning their necks to hear the elder speak.

“We all know that this drought season has been absolutely horrible,” he started as the men and women nodded their heads and murmured in agreement. “I and the other elders
have pleaded to the government for help, but they have done nothing. The stream is dry and the only source of water is the spring in the mountain. Now, it has been brought to my attention that there have been fights over this mountain spring. Farmers are fighting against farmers, women against women, and farmers against women. I understand that times are tough, but we only have that mountain spring for the whole village. We need to share. We need to also face the reality that our village is dying.”

The murmurs got louder. Wide-eyed children looked at their parents, not believing that their home was dying.

“The cows are dying of thirst,” continued the village elder. “The goats are dying, the chickens are dying. The plants are drying up.”

“What should we do?” yelled out a man’s voice from the crowd.

“I suggest that those who are young and willing should go to the city and start a life there.”

The crowd burst out into a commotion. Leave our homes? Go to the city? What will we do in the city? We have no money. Some were shaking their heads and repeating no, no, no. Others nodded and shrugged their shoulders, what else can we do?

My head was a buzz throughout the whole meeting. I couldn’t imagine leaving home. I have never been to the city, but I heard that it was crowded and dirty and that rural people like us were not treated with much kindness. Mama and Father told us to go to bed when we got home. They sat outside, talking. I couldn’t sleep so I looked up at the dark ceiling, listening to the hushed voices through the walls of the house.

The old rooster crowed and I excitedly got out of bed. The restless night left me feeling exhausted, but I couldn’t fall asleep either. At least walking to the stream and
“Dalila,” she whispered to me. “Are the boys up?”

“No,” I replied.

“Let them sleep a while longer, I want to talk to you.” She dropped the needle and thread on the table and walked me outside the house.

“Dalila, we have to pull you out of school.”

I started to protest but she raised her hand to hush me and shook her head.

“We also have to take Jomo and Chitundu out of school. We just don’t have the money. I’m so sorry Dalila.” Her lips quivered as the tears that formed in her eyes glistened by the sun’s first rays. “I know that you love school and that you’ve been trying hard to get good grades. But we need to save whatever money we have right now.”

My eyes were blurred by tears and a swell formed in my throat. Mama placed a hand on my shoulder.

“We are leaving for the city in a couple of days. Remember Aunty Shani?”

I nodded. Aunty Shani left our village when I was only seven-years old. She married a city man and never came back to visit us.

“Well, Aunty Shani said that she’s willing to take us into her house for a while. Aunty Shani said that she already got me a job cleaning some offices and houses. Her husband also found your father a job in the mines.”

“You’re going to work?” I asked her incredulously. I never thought that Mama was going to do anything else besides take care of me, Jomo, Chitundu, and our home.

“I have to. We need to bring in money.”
“What about me?” I asked her.

“You’re going to have to take care of the house and the boys. Always be helpful to Aunty Shani, okay? She said that she will see if you can go to school somewhere in the city. But that might not happen for a while. It depends on how much money we make.”

Tears rolled down my face. The uncertainty of not being able to go to school frightened me. Everything that she said scared me.

“Dalila, we have no choice. Go fetch water and come back to pack your things. I will tell the boys when they wake up.”

I nodded and slowly went to pick up the jug and started on my last journey to the mountain spring. As I walked up the dusty road, there was a sinking feeling in my stomach. *What will happen in the city? Will I make new friends? Will I still see my old friends?* The pink lily flowers along the side of the road seemed to nod at my every question. I said goodbye to the lilies and the orchids. I said goodbye to the starlings and the sparrows. I even said goodbye to the coarse sand that my feet have grown to know so well.

The time came to leave the village. None of us were able to sleep that night. I wanted to sink into my mat and into the house’s floor forever. I went through all the memories that I had of this house and this village, all the good and bad. Trying to cheer myself up, I thought of Paka. *Maybe I will see her when in the city? Maybe she’s in school working on becoming a doctor? Maybe she met a nice city boy and married him?* The old rooster let out his raspy crow. *I’m going to miss that rooster.*
We weren’t the only ones leaving the village that day. Father built a cart for our donkey to pull our things to the city. He charged two other neighbors a small fee for putting their things in our cart.

“Jomo, go get the rooster,” Father told him. Jomo ran to the back of the house to find the rooster. Shortly, Jomo walked back dragging his feet with his head bowed down.

“What’s wrong?” Mama asked.

“The old rooster is lying on the floor. I think he’s dead.”

“Well, I guess it’s about time,” Mama said. One of the neighbors walked to the back of the house. I suppose he went to get the rooster. It’ll be his dinner.

We were ready to leave before the sun came up. The donkey dragged the cart as I followed Mama and Father. I held on to Jomo’s and Chitundu’s hands as we all cried. Coming upon the now dried stream, I remember how just a year ago, Jomo and Chitundu were splashing in the water. Paka was right beside me filling our jugs. For the first time in my life, I crossed the stream and came upon the other side. I gave a final look back at the stream and the road that I knew so well. A cool breezeed brush against my face drying my tears, urging me to keep on walking forward.
Behind the Story: Fetching Water

Water chores are given to young children, especially young girls. It’s not something that the children like to do (after all, they are chores) but it’s something very important to the livelihood of the family. From the time a child can carry something, usually around six-years-old, children in rural parts of some African countries are given containers to fetch water (Fonjweng). Children and women walk long distances in the heat of the morning, day, and evening to get water from dirty streams, ponds, and mountain springs. Joseph ole Tipanko, a member of the Maasai tribe in Kenya commented:

*The ladies mainly fetch the water. They carry 50 liters of water (about 13 gallons) at a time and walk 5 to 10 miles to go and search for water. They carry with their backs, hands, or heads, walking up and down paths. [It is] unsafe to walk [during] the hot hours, especially for young girls.*

The water chore is done multiple times throughout the day. This is an exhausting chore for young and old. In a rural village of Mali, Kate McArdle a Peace Corps volunteer talked about the water conditions of the village:

*[There was] a murky, green, pond water that my village counterpart’s wife was drinking last year because the well was dry. I was shocked that someone could willingly drink this water; there is a pump even further away but she didn’t have time or energy to fetch water from the pump. Seeing this water and realizing what she and everyone else in the village were drinking really made me understand the importance of having water in the well year-round...[when they did have their well] they use a rubber bag on a rope to pull water out of the well and put it into buckets. They carry the buckets of water, usually about 20 liters (5 gallons), on their heads up a hill to their houses. It is not the hardest of their work, but it is tiresome when they have to fetch water 5 times per day.

It is disheartening to know that women and children have these back-breaking chores in order to fetch water that might contain bacteria and parasites. When Tony Sauder and his son Joshua went to Cameroon for a water project, Tony Sauder
recollected seeing two little boys carrying jerry cans to a pond: “They walked through cow piles to get water. The excrement was right there.” The boys filled their cans from the pond because they had nowhere else to go. One of the local officials that talked to Mr. Sauder commented: “We’re tough, we’re used to it.” Mr. Sauder replied, “that’s because who wasn’t strong, died from diarrhea or something like that.” The United Nations estimated that 884 million people still rely on unsafe water sources for their everyday needs. Eighty-four percent of those people live in rural areas. The majority of the people who suffer from the lack of access to clean drinking water live in Sub-Saharan African countries (Millennium 46).

Those who were lucky enough to survive water-related illnesses suffered from stunted growth. The weight of the water that children have to endure multiple times throughout a day along with malnutrition disables children to grow to their potential height (Fonjweng). When a well or piped-water is brought into a community, the water chore becomes less of a burden. The hour or two hours spent on fetching water is reduced, meaning that the children can use that time saved to do something productive. That means that they can get to school on time, they will attend school regularly, they will have more time to study and finish their homework. The energy saved can also mean that children will stay alert and focused in class as well as in the evenings when they are working on their assignments.

Every child has a dream. No matter rich or poor, every child thinks about what they want to be when they grow up. In Keiyo valley of northern Kenya, the children there have dreams. They want to be doctors, lawyers, teachers, and even politicians. They have big dreams, where they can be leaders (Korich). The children also yearn to learn. The
classrooms walls may be bare, they may have to share textbooks, they may not have computers, but the children are focused on their studies (Densen). Each child may strive to get good grades, to dream big, to become responsible adults at an early age. But when they finish school, the potential of these children is lost due to poverty. Without money to further their education, without jobs where they can apply what they’ve learned, the children stay in the village and continue their rural lifestyle, closing a door on the dreams that they once had.

When you look at yourself, do you see what you have? Do you see the immense amount of resources that you have at your school, in your homes? Do you use these resources for yourself and the good of your community? When I asked Kate McArdle, what inspired her to help people in developing nations solve their water issues, she wrote:

I have always felt the unfairness that not everyone in the world is given the same opportunities to make what they wish of their lives. I feel extremely blessed with the opportunities I have been given.

What inspires you to help those in need?
I should not have drank that cup of water, thought Sanu, as she stared into the still-dark morning sky. She had been holding her sides, crossing her legs, twisting her hair for the past two hours. Sanu looked at her mother and her older sister peacefully sleeping on the mat on the floor of their modest house. I should have listened to them. They told me not to drink water before going to bed. But I couldn’t help it, I was so thirsty. After waiting for a few more minutes, Sanu quietly crept out of the house.

Sanu’s mother had warned her not to leave the house when it was dark out, not even to go to the toilet. Lately, in the crowded slum of Bamako, there was news of young girls being kidnapped and sold to the sex trade. Sanu is a twelve-year-old confident girl. She had imagined countless times of how she would defend herself if a man were to drag her away from her home. She would kick the man, punch him, twist his arms, and yell at the top of her lungs. Sanu had even practiced these moves with her friend, Amadou, a scrawny ten-year-old boy who lived two houses down the narrow street.

Sanu tried her best to walk quietly to the back of the house. However, it had rained earlier and the streets were wet. The gutters that take away sewage from her house, and hundreds of other houses in that area, were filled with dingy putrid water. Her thin sandals barely kept her foot dry and with every step she took, her sandals let out soft tat tat tats. She reached the toilet, well more like the back wall of her house that is cornered by two rusty aluminum fences. Her mother said that it’d be a while before she could get a
large piece of cloth to hang from the fences to create a door to the toilet. No one had thrown out a big enough cloth yet.

There were old pee stains on the wall.

“Amadou” she whispered to herself. “I told him to aim at the ground, not the wall.”

Sanu took a look around her. She squatted and relieved herself. For those of you who ever held your pee for twelve hours, you would know how hard and long it is to actually relieve yourself. Sanu squatted until her thighs began to burn and yet she was not finished. Her being worried about being caught did not make things easier either. When she was finally done, she stood up. Sanu might have stood up too quickly, considering she lost her balance and fell to the ground, hitting her head on the aluminum fence, creating a loud and resonating BANG! The sound echoed long enough for Mama to wake up from her sleep and run out of the door towards Sanu.

“What are you doing?” Sankolo harshly whispered at her daughter. “What did I tell you about going out at night?”

“But it’s morning, Mama,” whispered Sanu.

“Don’t talk back to me.” Sankolo was no longer whispering. She was staring down at Sanu. “Don’t you know it’s dangerous around here when it’s dark? Have you not listened to me at all?”

“But Mama, I really had to go. If I didn’t, I would have gone all over myself in the bedroom.”
“If you really had to go, you wake me up or Bintu. Never go alone in the dark. It’s too dangerous.” She glared at her daughter with piercing but caring eyes. “What is that you are sitting on?”

Sanu had not noticed that she fell on something and squished it. When she got up, she let out a gasp and began to squeal, “ewwwww.”

“Sshhh,” said her mother. “You’ll wake the neighbors up. Is that yours?”

“No, I didn’t poop. I just came out to pee. It was here when I got here. It must have been Amadou’s. He came by yesterday and went to the toilet for a long time. It must have been him!” pled Sanu.

“All right. At least he remembered to do it in a plastic bag this time. I have to talk to him. It’s not nice to leave bags of crap lying around. They need to be thrown in the ditch.”

“I tell him that every time he goes to the toilet here. He just says that it’s too long of a walk to throw out one bag of poop. If he collects more, he’ll walk to the ditch,” Sanu said, feeling relieved that she’s no longer in trouble and that her mother’s anger was on Amadou.

“He said that?”

Sanu nodded.

“I will have a word with him. All right, get inside and clean up. We have to start breakfast soon.”

Morning broke and the city began to fill with the everyday hustle and bustles. The air was getting hotter, thicker, and stickier. Already, Sanu’s shirt was sticking to her back, and beads of sweat formed on her forehead. As she stepped outside her house, she
was greeted with sounds of *tat tat tats* as slum dwellers left their houses to their spot of peddling. Some sold old clothing that were salvaged from garbage dumps; some sold stolen jewelry and cameras. Sanu’s mother worked as a food peddler on the city streets where school children would buy snacks on their way to and from school. Sanu envied the school children. They wore crisp white shirts and shoes that covered their feet from the mud and raw sewage that flowed through the gutters.

“Come on, Sanu” said Bintu, “we have to go get water.”

Sanu and Bintu carried two big plastic containers to the water pump. Along the twenty-minute walk, Bintu chatted with the other women on the street. Sanu wished that Amadou could help her fetch the water. Carrying a filled container always hurts her back and arms. But Amadou would not come home until late afternoon. He was off with his older brother to beg on the streets where the rich worked.

As always, there was a long line at the water pump. Sanu and Bintu took their place at the back of the line. Bintu chatted with the women around her about the latest development of a popular soap opera that she would sometimes watch from a TV outside a grain shop. As she chatted, Sanu began to daydream.

*It’s morning and it’s my first day of school. Mama had hung my crisp white shirt and blue pleated skirt on the door for days now. She even shined my new black shoes for me, which are now neatly placed by my school bag. Mama was so proud to have me go to school, that everyday, she would check my shirt that it’s still crisp and that my shoes were still shiny. Bintu is making breakfast. Ever since we got running water in our house, Bintu would wake up early, take a shower, and make breakfast for all of us, and head into town to work for a fashion designer. Mama doesn’t need to push her food cart and sell anymore. She just cooks everything inside the house and goes to our front porch and open shop. Amadou knocks on our door. He has never looked so good in his school uniform and short haircut. We were walking to school together, like the rest of the children in this city.*
“Come on! What’s taking so long?” yelled out an impatient woman on the line. She had broken Sanu’s daydream. “We’ve been waiting here for fifteen minutes. What are you doing up there?”

“It’s not working,” said a woman near the pump. “There’s no water coming out.” Groans and gasps broke out; concerned looks were on everyone’s face. Everyone was in disbelief of how their once reliable water pump has suddenly stopped giving them water.

“How am I going to cook today?” cried out a desperate woman.

“What will my children drink today?” yelled another woman.

Everyone was heading towards the pump to see what was going on and tried to make the pump spill water. Impatience turned into concern, which turned into fear. Women and children were asking questions that no one had an answer to. Sanu and Bintu peered through the crowd to see a horde of women trying to turn knobs on the pump, lift the lever, check to see if it was clogged.

“Take my hand Sanu,” said Bintu, “we’re leaving.”

Sanu was dumbfounded. Leaving? Without water? But Bintu was not leading her home. She was leading her to a stream that was a few miles away from the slum.

The stream was dominated by cattle and goats. The farmers who brought their animals to the city had brought their herds here to drink the water. There were women and children bathing in the water and doing laundry. Some were filling their canisters up with the stream’s water.

Bintu found a discarded cup on the shore and washed it in the stream. She began to scoop up the water and fill her canister in silence.

“We’re drinking *that*?” asked Sanu.
“We have no choice. If it’s safe for the goats and cattle, it’ll be safe for us too,” answered Bintu. “Sanu, before you were born, I drank this water because there were no water pumps in the slums. It was only until some foreigners came to visit our slum that they built a pump for us. We lived off of this stream. We can get by with it today too. Don’t worry, I’ll boil the water before we drink it.”

Sanu swallowed down a tear. She never knew that Mama and Bintu had to drink this water before. She always thought that they had clean water from the pump. Sanu began to scoop water with her hands into the canister that she had. As she was stepping into the stream, she accidentally trampled upon cow dung. It was hidden underneath the murky water.

“Ewwwwww” cried Sanu.

“Just wash your feet in the stream,” said Bintu. “Get your water over there, away from the cattle,” she said as she pointed to a nearby nook down the stream a bit. Sanu walked towards the nook, carefully avoiding the cow and goat feces that lay by the shore. She stooped down and filled her canister with water.

Walking back to their house took more than an hour. The weight of the canister did not allow Sanu to walk without stopping for rest. Along the way, they met the women who were at the water pump. They were heading to the stream as well. Bintu talked to one of the women and was told that the government had shut down the pump last night. The government was told that the well water in the area had been polluted with a broken sewage line and that it was unsafe for people to drink the well water. They posted signs up, but the rain must have washed them away. Besides, the people wouldn’t have been able to read the signs, considering most were illiterate.
“When will we get water again?” asked Bintu.

“They don’t know. They don’t know how long it will take to clean the water. If they’re even going to do anything about it,” answered the woman.

“Why do you say that?”

“They don’t care about us. We’re slum dwellers. The city folks get to drink water bottles. The water they have in their houses come from the government water facility which they can afford to pay every month. We don’t pay the government. We just pay Habib each week to maintain the pump. He’s gone now. Some say that he knew well in advanced that the government was shutting the pump down. He took the money that he got and ran out of town last night. The government man that came to see the pump this morning said that there’s nothing more he could do. The government has no money to fix the pump yet. We just have to get our water from the stream.” With a disdainful sigh, the woman said her goodbyes and left for the stream.

When Sankolo came home, Bintu told her what happened to the water pump. Immediately, Sankolo’s face became even more tired and worrisome. This meant that she will have to get up earlier to walk to the stream, fetch the water, and cook the snacks to be sold on her food cart. Sanu and Bintu will also have to leave the house early in order to fetch the water for breakfast. Some days, they will have to go to the stream three or four times just so that they can wash their clothes, wash themselves, get enough cooking and drinking water. During those days, both Sanu and Bintu would go to bed with aching backs and limbs.

* * * * *
Sanu woke up with chills. She never felt so cold. It was still dark and Mama and Bintu were sound asleep. Sanu wrapped herself up with the thin blanket that normally lies on the foot of her mat. She shivered silently. When Bintu came to wake Sanu up so that they could go for their water run, she was shocked to see Sanu wrapped up in her blanket, shivering. She immediately called for Mama.

“Sanu, what’s wrong? Talk to me,” Sankolo urged Sanu in a gentle tone.

Sanu couldn’t open her eyes, no matter how hard she tried. Trying to lift her arms, her muscles would not respond except for piercing her body with aches. She was weak.

“Bintu, go to Aunt Jikuru’s house and ask her to come here. Tell her that Sanu is sick.” Bintu obeyed and quickly left the house.

Sanu was embarrassed and scared. She had never felt so defeated, so useless. She was also scared that her mother would be angry with her. The sun has already come up and Sankolo was not yet dressed to go food peddling. She thought that because of her, Mama had to skip work and that Bintu would have to fetch water all by herself.

Hurried footsteps entered the room. Sanu felt someone kneeling down besides her and placing a cold hand on her forehead.

“Sankolo, she’s burning up. Here,” said Aunt Jikuru, who has been Sankolo’s childhood friend and a good aunt to Sanu and Bintu. “Boil her some of these herbs and let her drink. That should bring the fever down.”

Throughout the morning, Sankolo frequently kneeled down beside her daughter and checked her temperature. She wiped Sanu’s sweat away and told her that things will be all right. Bintu had to go to the stream three times already to get water, while Mama boiled the herbs. When the medicine was ready, Sankolo encouraged Sanu to get up and
drink it. Sanu groaned, she could not lift herself up from the mat. Bintu had to cradle Sanu in her arms as Mama poured the medicine down her mouth. Sanu gulped at the bitter medicine trying hard to keep it down, but failed. She vomited all over herself as tears ran down her cheeks.

*What is happening to me?* Sanu thought. *What did I do wrong?*

Later in the evening, Amadou came to visit. He did not know that Sanu was sick and wanted to see if she wanted to play soccer with him. Sankolo shooed him away. No matter how much Amadou begged to see Sanu, Sankolo would not let him in the house. Desperate, Amadou crept to the side of the house and peered through a dirty glass window. Sanu was lying on the floor, covered in blankets. He tapped on the window and whispered her name. Sanu tried to lift her head, but was only capable of moving it slightly. He tapped and called for her again. She did not move. Disappointed, he returned home.

Sanu woke with sounds of voices and *tat tat tats*. Someone was carrying her in the middle of the night. She could feel the cool night breeze running through her hair, and the rapid heartbeat of her carrier.

“I’m sorry, Sankolo,” said Aunt Jikuru. “The herbs are not enough. She needs to see a doctor.”

“I know,” replied Sankolo. “I don’t know how much the doctor will charge me, but I have some money saved from my food peddling. I just hope he’ll be able to help her.”

“Here, take this.”

“Jikuru, I can’t. I won’t be able to pay you back.”
“It’s okay. You can pay me back when you can.”

“Thank you, Jikuru.”

They came to a stop.

“It’ll be faster if you and Salif go to the doctor. I can take care of Bintu and Amadou,” said Aunt Jikuru.

“But I want to go too! I can help!” cried Amadou.

“Sanu will be all right, Amadou. Stay with Bintu. She needs help getting the water for tomorrow,” said Salif, Amadou’s older brother, in a soothing voice.

Sanu felt a small hand grab hers and squeezed it tight.

“Sanu, get better. I’ll be home waiting,” whispered Amadou.

Sanu felt her head was getting heavier and she was losing her senses. Sounds were muffled; her body numbed, and smells vanished. Darkness settled upon her.

* * * * *

A few days passed and Bintu was giving Sanu her antibiotics every six hours. Sanu was well enough now to walk around the house and eat some rice porridge with okra sauce without vomiting. Amadou came to visit everyday, recounting how he was woken up in the middle of the night by Bintu, and how Salif had to carry her to the doctor’s office as he ran behind them. He also complained how hard it was to help Bintu and Aunt Jikuru fetch the water from the stream three times a day.

“I’d rather go out begging,” he would conclude his stories.

Sanu enjoyed her times with Amadou and Bintu. They both were extra nice to her. She hadn’t seen Mama much though. Lately, Sankolo would come home late in the night and leave early in the morning. Bintu said that Mama found a second job cleaning
offices, and that’s why she’s rarely home. Bintu didn’t have to say it, but Sanu knew. Mama had to get a second job in order to pay for her medicine and to pay back Aunt Jikuru. Guilt-ridden, she tried to help around the house as best she could. She made her bed every day, swept the floors, washed the dishes. Her biggest accomplishment, she thought, was when she found a trampled blanket on a street. She washed it and hung it up by the two aluminum fences of her toilet. Now, her family can go to the bathroom with privacy.

“Bintu, let me go with you to the stream and help you get water. I feel well enough for the walk,” said Sanu, hoping to get out of the house.

“Sorry Sanu,” her sister replied, “but Mama and the doctor said that you need to get better. They said that you need to stay in a clean place until you get better all the way. The stream was how you got sick in the first place.”


“I don’t really know exactly, because I couldn’t understand some of the words that Mama used. But she said that you had something called Lepto-, Lepto-something,” she paused as she squinted her right eye, meaning she was thinking hard, “Leptospirosis. That’s it. That’s what you had.”

“How did I get Lepto – spi –rosis?” asked Sanu as she tried to sound out the word.

“Mama said that people get that disease when they drink bad water or when they touch bad water. She suspected that the water we got from the stream was probably polluted by animal feces that had the bacteria that caused you to be sick. Either we didn’t boil the water long enough or you had a cut on your leg when you went into the water. That’s how the bacteria got in and how you got sick.”
“But, if we still need to get water from the stream, wouldn’t that mean you and Mama can get sick too?”

“Maybe. But we have no choice. The stream is the only place we can get water. The pump has not been fixed yet. Don’t worry though, Amadou and I walk an extra mile upstream, away from the cattle and goats. The water we get now should be better than before.”

As Bintu and Amadou left their house to make their two-hour long water errand, Sanu was left with the responsibility of cooking dinner. There weren’t a lot of options. There was rice for porridges and peanuts and sweet potato leaves for the sauce. Aunt Jikuru came by every evening to check up on Sanu. She would also bring a bagful of vegetables and grains, and sometimes meat for Sanu’s family. Aunt Jikuru had just got a new job down at a wet market. Usually there’s something left over from the market, and she would share her groceries with Sanu. Sanu was so thankful to have a sister like Bintu, a mother like Sankolo, a friend like Amadou, and an aunt like Jikuru.

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Months passed by and Sanu regained her health. Bintu worked with Mama to help sell snacks. Mama said that working two jobs exhausted her and she needed Bintu to help with the business. To Sanu’s delight, Amadou was now living with them, which meant that he could help her with the water errands. Salif found a job in a coalmine, a long way from the city. He comes back every two months to visit, and to bring money to Amadou. The money helped pay for food and household necessities, but it was not enough to pay for school. Every morning, as the two children walked towards the stream, Amadou and Sanu would stare at the students walking to their schools.
“I like math,” announced Amadou to Sanu as they passed by their old non-functioning water pump. “Solving problems with numbers is fun.”

“What do you know about math?” asked Sanu, thinking that Amadou has no idea what he’s talking about.

“Lots!”

“Yeah, like what?”

“I know how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide! I learned it from the old storekeeper down the street. When you were sick and your mother wouldn’t let me in the house, I would go and talk to him. He would sometimes give me candy. But most of the time he taught me math.”

“Why did he do that?”

“Because he wanted to see if I could do it. He said that if I was good, he’ll hire me to help with his shop when I get older.”

“But in order to work in a shop, you need to know how to read.”

“Why?” asked Amadou. “I just take money from the customer and give them the right change. I don’t need to read anything.”

“Yeah you do,” protested Sanu. “You need to at least read the labels on the boxes of the stuff you are selling. You need to know what you are selling. What if someone comes in and ask for something specific? Don’t you think you need to be able to read in order to find whatever the customer is looking for?”

Grudgingly, Amadou agreed with her.
“I wish we both could go to school. Then we both would know how to read. You can help the customers find their stuff, and I can take their money. We’ll make a good team,” said Amadou thoughtfully.

“Yeah, we would.” Sanu smiled.

For several days, Sanu and Amadou would talk about how they would open shop one day and make lots of money. They fought over what they would sell, what kind of customers they wanted in their store, and what kind of music to play on the radio while they worked. Their talks about their future store would be their usual water errand conversation. Every day, she would feel hopeful and truly believed that their store would become a reality. Sanu would always remember her days with Amadou as the best childhood days of her life.

* * * * *

It started with a headache. Amadou refused to get out of bed one day because of the throbbing headache that he had. It was so bad that he would flip and flop on his bed like a fish out of water. Sometimes he would cry silently as he tried to hide his tears behind his blanket. Sanu ran to the wet market that day to see Aunt Jikuru.

“Sanu, I can’t leave my work right now,” said Aunt Jikuru. “But here is some money. Go to the herb store and tell them you need something to cure a headache. They’ll give you a packet of herbs for you to boil. Give it to Amadou. I’ll come by when I get out of work.”

When Sanu got home, Amadou was nowhere to be found. Panicking, Sanu called for him and searched through the house. Silence.
**BANG!** The resonating sound of the aluminum fence hit hard by something rang throughout the house. Sanu rushed outside to the toilet. Amadou was lying on the floor, struggling to get up.

Sanu managed to carry Amadou back into the house and put him to bed. His body was burning and he could barely walk.

“I’m gonna boil some medicine for you, Amadou. Stay here and try to rest.”

Sanu started to boil the water and the medicine. Every few minutes, she would peek inside her room to see if Amadou was sleeping. He was lying on the mat, wrapped up in his blanket. She could hear him cry. Not wanting to make him feel embarrassed, she let him cry as she tended to the medicine. Amadou was better at taking the medicine than Sanu. He drank most of the herbed drink in the cup without throwing up. Hours passed and his headache was no longer severe. His fever, however, worsened.

Aunt Jikuru came by later that evening and the next day. She brought herbs to have Sanu boil for Amadou. It was supposed to bring the fever down. But Amadou was still burning up. Bintu and Sankolo were getting more and more worried with each passing day. They finally put together some money to call Salif at the coal mine he was working in. When he got the news, he immediately left work to make his three-day journey to see Amadou.

When Salif arrived, Amadou ecstatically hugged him. Salif reassured Amadou that everything would be okay. After five days, Amadou still had a fever. The herbs were not working and Sanu and her family felt desperate. They decided to pull in their money and take Amadou to the doctor. Sanu insisted on going, but was told to stay home with
Bintu and Aunt Jikuru. She waited impatiently, staring outside her window, throughout the day and night.

It was two o’clock in the morning when they came home. Sanu pretended to be asleep when Salif laid Amadou down on the mat and covered him. Sanu crept towards Amadou and felt his forehead. It was still hot, but not burning. A cry was heard through the door. Sanu quietly cracked open the door to see Salif crying on Mama’s shoulder.

“I don’t know what to do. We don’t have enough,” cried Salif.

“It’s all the medicine we could afford. I thought that whatever money we gave was enough, but the doctor upped his price,” Mama said in a sullen voice. “Typhoid fever. It’s common around here. The doctor saw it as an opportunity seeing that lots of people were coming in with typhoid and needing the medicine.”

“That doctor is no good. He lied. How can a doctor not have enough medicine for his patients?” sobbed Salif.

“He said that the shipment has not come in yet. Whatever he has left, he’s selling it three times as much as what it would normally cost. He knows that people are desperate and will pay for it,” said Sankolo. “I’m sorry. But two days worth of medicine was all we could afford. Maybe he’ll get better by then. We can’t lose hope.”

Salif nodded and muffled his cry on Mama’s shoulder. Salif was only thirteen-years-old and had already lost his mother. The prospect of losing his younger brother was too much for him to bear. Sankolo pet his back as a tear ran down her face. It was the first time ever that Sanu had seen Mama cried.

Amadou’s fever was coming down. Sometimes, during the day, he was well enough to sit up on his bed and talk to Sanu. They would talk about their store, how it
would be decorated, what the name would be, what they would do with the money.
Amadou’s frail body seemed to disappear underneath his brother’s old t-shirt. He hadn’t been eating much, always full after the third spoonful of rice. His eyes were hallowed and his face was pail. Despite all of this, he smiled and had a hopeful face whenever they talked about the store.

It happened in the late afternoon, when Bintu and Sankolo were not yet home. Salif was out getting water as Sanu was preparing dinner.

*Thump!*

It came from the bedroom.

Sanu opened the door and let out a shriek. Amadou was lying face down on the floor a couple of feet from the mat. As Sanu picked him up, his skin was almost burning her hands. He was unconscious.

“Amadou!” she yelled as she shook him.

“Amadou! Say something!”

Silence.

She ran into the kitchen and poured cold water into a bowl and dunked her handkerchief into it. Sanu brought the bowl and the wet cloth and started to wipe Amadou’s arms, face, and legs. She methodically dunked the cloth and wiped him, trying to cool him off. The cloth and the water in the bowl were getting warmer. She made three trips to the kitchen and used up all of the water in the canisters. Amadou was lying in a pool of water, still burning up. Sanu’s vision blurred as tears poured out.

Everyone anxiously sat around Amadou. Sanu was holding Amadou’s hand as Sankolo wipe his sweat away from his face.
“I have to get the medicine. Amadou needs it,” declared Salif.

“How?” asked Sankolo “We don’t have money.”

“I’m gonna beg for it. I was born a beggar. I will do it.” Salif left without saying goodbye.

Hours passed and Salif had not come home. Amadou’s breath was getting shorter and shorter and his fever was rising. Suddenly, he let out a gasp and a long sigh. His hand became limp in Sanu’s grip.

* * * * *

There was no funeral. Amadou’s body was simply wrapped in a white cloth and Aunt Jikuru carried him away. Sanu did not know where, but Aunt Jikuru said that she would take care of him.

Salif was still missing. He did not know of his brother’s death. When Sankolo went to the doctor’s office, she was greeted with contempt.

“That boy deserved what he got!” yelled the nurse in the waiting room. “He tried to steal the antibiotics from the doctor. But I called the police and that boy got what he deserved. He’s probably rotting in jail.”

Sankolo left the office with a heavy heart. She wanted to go visit Salif, but she also knew that she had no money to get him out of jail. She also knew that the police would not invite her in, seeing how obvious it was that she was a slum dweller. The best that she could do was save as much money as she could so that one day she could free Salif.

For weeks, Sanu was in disbelief. She would sometimes think that she heard someone tapping at her window or knocking on her door. She expected Amadou to
appear and for them to fetch water together. Whenever she walked to the stream, she would imagine that Amadou was talking to her about the store that they were going to open. Every night, she would roll around and expect to see his sleeping body next to Mama, peacefully dreaming about the store. Every night, she would cry in silence.

* * * * *

Foreigners came to the slums. They came with heavy bags, notepads, hats, and cameras. They also came with an interpreter. While walking to the stream, the interpreter stopped Sanu and asked her what she was doing.

“I’m going to the stream to fetch water,” answered Sanu.

The interpreter said something to one of the foreigners who replied in an odd language. The interpreter asked, “Why do you go so far to get water? Isn’t there a water pump you can use?”

“No. It’s broken. It’s been broken for a year now,” answered Sanu. To her surprise, her eyes were watery and she tried hard to fight back tears.

“Why are you sad?”

“It’s all because of the water pump. If it were not broken, I would not have been sick. If it were not broken, Amadou would still be here. We would have had our own store.”

Curious, the foreigner asked the interpreter to ask Sanu of what she meant. She told her story starting with the day the pump broke. At the end of her story, the foreigner thanked her. Sanu walked away feeling light, as if a burden had been lifted from her shoulders. Maybe what she needed the most was to tell her story to someone who cared to listen to her. This way, Amadou’s death does not go untold.
Two weeks after the foreigners came, government workers came to the slum and fixed the water pump. They also installed another one on the other side of the slum. They even installed public latrines that each family had to pay a small but appropriate amount for the upkeep. Social workers came in and handed out soap and pamphlets with pictures to every house. A social worker and the foreigner that Sanu met came to her house. They told Sanu that it was important to wash her hands every time before eating and every time after she goes to the bathroom. When Mama asked the social worker why all this was happening, the worker replied, “the foreigners who came were part of a group that works with local organizations here on water issues. When they heard of the cholera and typhoid situation, they raised some money to help the people here. They also heard Sanu’s story. They brought it to the government’s attention and the government gave them permission to solve whatever water problems you have here.”

The foreigner whispered something to the social worker.

“Yes. Dr. Joseph said that Sanu’s story was a truly touching one. She regrets that she and her team have not come sooner to help save Amadou. She wants to know if Sanu will be willing to share her story to other people, to other organizations. Sanu will be financially compensated for every story she tells.”

Sanu’s eyes widened up and her heart was beating faster.

“Will my daughter have to leave home?” asked Sankolo. “We don’t have much money to pay for her traveling expenses.”

“We will cover all her expenses. Dr. Joseph will be in town for the next month, teaching a seminar at the University of Bamako. She would be honored if Sanu could come in to her class and talk about what she has gone through. Sanu’s story would
greatly educate the university students on the truth behind life in the slums. After that, it is up to Sanu whether or not she would like to travel outside the country to share her story. We feel that a lot of people in this world need to know about water and sanitation issues that some people have to endure. Sanu’s story would shed light on these topics and will encourage people to help solve these problems.”

Sankolo, Bintu, and Sanu looked at each other in silence.

“How about you talk about this tonight? I know that Sanu is still a child and that it would be hard for her to leave home,” said the social worker. “We’ll come back tomorrow morning.”

After the guests have left, Sankolo sat down with her daughters.

“Sanu, what do you want to do?” asked Mama.

“I want to do it, Mama,” said Sanu, “for Amadou. For us. For this community.”

“Mama,” said Bintu, “this is her chance. She can break away from this life. Talking to university students, traveling with all expenses paid for, is better than living here.”

“She’s just a child,” answered Mama. “Sanu, you’re my baby.”

“I’ve grown, Mama,” said Sanu. “I am a strong woman.”

“She’s already been through so much. She can handle this,” encouraged Bintu.

“Please, Mama. Let me tell my story and Amadou’s story. Let his death not go untold.”

With tears in her eyes, Sankolo reached over and hugged both her daughters. Sanu was crying. For the first time, they were tears of hope.
Behind the Story: The Year Without the Water Pump

Let’s talk about crap! There are many words for feces: poop, pooh, crap, crud, doo, dung, s**t, etc. Everyone defecates, but no one wants to talk about it in public. Defecation, especially open defecation, is a public issue. In areas where there are no proper latrines to separate people’s excrements from living areas and from water supplies, fecal matter poses health risks to everyone. In my interview with Anastasia Shown, a Coordinator at the African Studies Center of the University of Pennsylvania, she said that in her travels through Cameroon, Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, and Ghana, most of the people she met wanted running water in their houses. However, what they do not realize is that even if there are a hundred taps in a family compound, people will still get sick if their neighbors openly defecate (Shown). It is estimated that 705 million people in rural parts of southern Asia practice open defecation. This practice is brought about due to the lack of access to proper sanitation facilities. Water supplies will get contaminated and people will get water-borne illnesses unless open defecation is stopped (Millennium 45).

In areas stricken with poverty, especially in slums, people go to the bathroom in various methods. Some would wait until night in order to venture to the fields or bushes to relieve themselves. Others would do their business inside their houses in a bucket and empty the contents into an open drain when no one is looking (Black). “Flying Toilets” are also a common practice where people defecate in plastic bags and throw the bags into a dump.
The lack of a proper sanitation system is more of an issue for girls than boys, especially when young girls are menstruating. “Before the school had toilets we used to hide under the bamboo when we had to go,” recounted Sabina Roka from Simle, Nepal. “During menstruation it was really difficult, and we used to stay at home instead.” In Nigeria, a mother said “During the day we must walk far into the bush if we do not want to be seen. At night there is a danger from snakes and scorpions. Sometimes men follow us and that also makes us afraid” (Plumb). What some of us consider being a simple act of going to the bathroom can be a difficult and dangerous task in some parts of the world.

What is it about crap that is so deadly? According to New Internationalist’s “Toilets – the Facts,” in one gram of feces, there can be:

- 10,000,000 viruses
- 1,000,000 bacteria
- 1,000 parasitic cysts
- 100 parasitic eggs

In slums, where thousands of poverty-stricken people are crammed into a small area, with no proper sewage system or water system, diseases travel quickly. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, some diseases caused by drinking polluted water include cholera, typhoid, diarrhea, dysentery, and Leptospirosis. Children are most affected by these diseases because of their weak immune system due to malnourishment, which is due to poverty. Some may say that poverty is caused by the lack of access to clean drinking water and a sanitation system. When children are forced to spend most of their days fetching water, they cannot go to school. When children drink contaminated water, they become sick and some even die, robbing them of their opportunity to get an education. Without education, these children cannot get themselves out of poverty.
In an ideal and uncorrupted world, governments would help those in poverty. In certain countries, however, government agencies turn a blind eye against those living in slums. It’s too much of a problem and too costly to deal with, so slum dwellers continue to live in poverty. The reality, however, is that whatever goes on in the slums affect the wealthy and the country as a whole. If there’s a cholera outbreak in one slum in a city, the whole city population is at risk. It’s in the government’s interest that the people are healthy. Mel Payne, who traveled to Kenya to work on a water project with Keiyo Soy Ministries, said, “People are the most precious commodity you can have. Without human beings, nothing can happen.” He further explained that countries develop and grow because of good infrastructure. Having clean water for people to drink means that people will be healthy enough to create the infrastructures that are needed (Payne). Because governments are corrupt and the poor tend to be forgotten in policies, foreign aid is important to encourage changes. International humanitarian groups can help improve drinking water quality and sanitation quality in slums. It is up to the inhabitants, though, to maintain the improved facilities after the foreigners have left. Education is key to breaking through poverty.

You can find out more about global water and sanitation issues through “Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene” on UNICEF’s website: http://www.unicef.org/wash/index.html.

To help build toilets around the world, visit World Toilet Organization’s website: http://www.worldtoilet.org/.

To find out more about Keiyo Soy Ministries and their projects, please contact:

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The Fight for the Mekong River

Bprayee was born in the forest, that’s how he got his name. The Cambodian forest by the Mekong River was his home, the only home he ever had. His mother would recount the day that she gave birth to him. It was when the Mekong River reversed its flow due to the start of the monsoon rains. The forests were flooded and the fishermen were happy. It was the season that meant everyone had dinner to eat and enough fish to sell at the market. The fishermen would go out in the flooded forests, and catch tons of fish. If they ever happen to catch the giant catfish, the women would sprinkle it with perfume to pay respect before releasing it to the wild river. Usually, that family would be blessed with a prosperous catch that season. One day, his mother was angry with his father and decided to paddle the boat into the forest. It was there that Bprayee wanted to be born and she gave birth to him all by herself. She was in so much pain but so proud of herself at the same time.

The days when the nearby forest was flooded and fish could be caught on tree branches no longer exist. The elders of the village would talk about the days when the Naga fireballs would rise out of the river during the full moon in October. Foreigners and city folks would come to the river and watch the fireballs. Locals would make money from selling local foods and handicrafts to the tourists. Those days were long gone. The elders watched the forests that they once lived off destroyed and reminisced about the past.
Bprayee was a tree-logger. He and his father had many quarrels over his profession.

“How can you destroy your own home?” yelled his father. “Without the forests, where would we fish? What will you eat?”

“You can still fish in the river if you really want to,” argued Bprayee. “The days of fishing are over. There’s hardly any fish left. The good business is in tree-logging.”

“What will you do when the trees are all gone? Where will we live?”

“We can work in the rice paddies. We can live there with the rest of the villagers.”

“You can do that. I will not be confined to some rice paddy.” His father hardly spoke to Bprayee. Even during dinnertime, the two would not look at each other. His mother would try to strike up conversation but it always ends in silence.

The village was dwindling. The young had left their families to find work in the city. The old fishermen only fished to feed themselves. There were no more fish markets. The tree-loggers were the only ones making money. Every day, Bprayee would cut down about ten trees, which was quite impressive for a sixteen-year-old with an ax. The company provided his lunch and he got paid every day. This is a good business. My dad should be proud of me, Bprayee thought.

One day, his parents left for a one-week fishing journey to one of the few flooded forests left. When they came back home after dark, Bprayee surprised them with a well-lit house.

“What is this? What’s going on here?” asked his mother.

“I made enough money to get electricity for the house,” answered Bprayee. “We can now see at night.”
“Oh Bprayee, we were okay with using the candles and lanterns. There’s nothing to do at night except sleep anyway,” said his mother. “But thank you. This was quite a surprise.”

His father did not say a word. He looked at the light bulbs and the radio that was softly playing folk music before heading to his bedroom. His father walked past without even turning his head to look at his son.

“Don’t worry, Bprayee,” said his mother. “He’s just not used to having so much light at night. We had a long journey and we’re quite tired. Get some sleep, son.” She patted him on the shoulder as she left for her bedroom. Bprayee looked at the house with a smile on his face. He would be the talk of the village tomorrow. It’s the first house to have electricity.

What a buzz it was! All day, Bprayee was asked by his friends, women, and children about the electricity in his house. How was it made? Where did it come from? How could he afford it? What does he do at night with all that light? In the evening, neighbors would come by to see the house. There were whispers of curiosity and wide-eyed children who enjoyed the sound of the radio. Bprayee would greet them warmly as his mother served them hot tea. His father stayed in the bedroom.

* * * * *

A few years passed. The forests were now rice paddies. Bprayee and his mother left to work in one of the fields and lived in the compound. His father refused to follow and left to live by the river. The owner of the rice paddy tore down Bprayee’s house. Apparently, that land was never officially bought by his great-grandfather. His family just settled there and assumed that as long as their house was there, it was their land. The rice
paddy owner bought the land and made a deal with Bprayee. He and his family could work on the field as long as they left their home peacefully. It was hard for Bprayee to see his house torn down. All that work to bring electricity to the place was gone in seconds. His mother cried for days. It was more than just a house. It was her sanctuary. It was where she got married, where she raised her child.

Bprayee and his mother would work the field from morning until dusk. Ever since his father left, his mother lived in silence. Then, it just seemed that she decided to give up.

He waited outside for his mother. It was part of their routine to walk to the field together. He didn’t have a watch, but he knew that too much time had gone by. She should have met him by now. Bprayee walked towards the house that she was living with the other female workers and knocked on the door. A worker answered.

“Bprayee,” said the worker. “Good you are here. Your mother is sick.”

Bprayee removed his shoes before entering the house. His mother was lying on the mat with a thick blanket over her.

“Don’t worry, Bprayee” feebly spoke his mother. “It’s just a fever. I’ll feel better in no time. You should go to work, you’ll get in trouble.”

She turned and closed her eyes. Bprayee said his goodbyes and left for work.

That evening, he visited his mother again. The fever had not broken yet. She tried to sit up, but could not do it on her own. He had to lift her up and held her so that she would not fall. For the first time in years, they had a long talk.

“I had the oddest dream,” began his mother. “I was in the Mekong River, swimming. I was so fast. I think I was an Irrawaddy dolphin.” She smiled.
“A dolphin!” Bprayee laughed. “Those are extinct.”

“Normals say that they died a long time ago, around the same time those dams were built upriver. Around the same time the Naga fireballs stopped appearing.” Her eyes twinkled as she remembered. “Oh Bprayee, I wished you could have seen the Naga fireballs. Your father and I would go to see it every year before you were born. We would pray and make a wish for every fireball that we saw.” His mother put a hand on her forehead. “Anyway, in my dream, I looked out of the water and saw you and your father on the shore. You were both smiling.”

“How are you feeling?” Bprayee asked.

“Oh,” sighed his mother. “Just a headache and my muscles and joints hurt. It’s just my old age, I suppose. My body can’t handle hard work anymore.” She gave out a short laugh before she started to cough violently.

“Just rest mother,” said Bprayee as he helped her to lie down. “I’ll come by to visit tomorrow.” She nodded and patted his back.

For three days, Bprayee worked and visited his mother in the evenings. During those visits, his mother would tell him of how their village used to be before he was born.

“There was plenty of water in the river, and plenty of fish,” she would tell him. “There was also plenty of rain. Remember the big water urns that we had in our backyard? We would store rainwater in those urns and used it to cook and drink. Rainwater tasted sweet. And the sweetness lingers in your mouth and throat. You can’t get the same experience drinking these tapped water.” She coughed.

“I don’t remember the water urns being filled,” said Bprayee. “Sometimes, you made me walk all the way to the river to get water.”
“Well, that was when it stopped raining. The world has changed much. It doesn’t rain so much anymore. The river is not as wide and deep as it used to be. The elders say that it was all the dams that they built. Not just here, but all the way in China. For every dam built, there is less water coming to us.”

“I remember the elders used to say that someone should just blow up the dams,” recounted Bprayee. “And then there was one time that someone did do just that. The elders said that it was a disgruntled fisherman who went to one of the dams and blew himself and the dam up. It created such chaos. Rice paddies were flooded, landslides destroyed homes, the officials were left in fear and confusion.”

His mother nodded. “I remember that. For a month, the fishermen fought with the government. There were protests at every dam, all the way to China even. The fishermen also fought with rice paddy owners. So many lives were lost, all because they just wanted their river back.”

By the fourth day, his mother was too weak to speak. Bprayee called for a doctor. He waited outside, pacing impatiently.

“Will she be all right?” asked Bprayee when the doctor opened the door.

With a concerned look, the doctor cleared his throat.

“Bprayee, your mother is old and she’s lived a hard life.” He cleared his throat again. “She has Dengue fever.” Bprayee gasped. Dengue fever was common around the village. The mosquitoes are vicious and would infect children, adults, and elderly with the virus. Hospitalization is necessary to ensure the survival of its victims.

“What should we do?” asked Bprayee.

“I recommend taking her to the hospital.”
“But we don’t have money. And it will take a full day for her to get to the hospital.”

“I don’t know how else I can help, Bprayee. Give her plenty of water and let her rest. I gave her medicine to relieve the pain, but that’s not enough. She should go to the hospital. But, I will be frank with you. The virus has taken a toll on your mother, and I’m not sure if she will survive even if she gets to the hospital.”

As the doctor left, Bprayee’s mind was spinning. His heart raced and it suddenly felt cold. He did not want to believe that his mother was dying.

“Bprayee,” whispered his mother. “I know that I don’t have much time here.”

“Mother,” Bprayee said, “I’ll take you to the hospital tomorrow. I’ll ask the boss for some money. I can pay him back later.”

“Don’t waste your money on me,” she replied. “I’m too old to fight this. The doctor said that I might already have some internal bleeding.”

Silence fell upon them. Bprayee had always remembered his mother being strong. She was a woman that could command a whole army if she wanted to, could strike fear in enemies’ hearts. At the same time, she could be so kind and caring that makes any son feel comforted and safe.

“What can I do?” Bprayee asked.

“Please get your father tomorrow. I want to see him,” his mother replied.

Bprayee nodded. “I will”

Meeting his father was not an easy task. They did not see each other for three years. Bprayee arrived at his father’s makeshift bungalow by the river late morning. It was empty. *He’s probably out fishing*, thought Bprayee as he waited by the dock. It had
been a long time since he had seen the Mekong River. When he was a child, he would swim in it during the hot season. His father would join him, as his mother sat on the dock and weaved the flowers she collected into a wreath. Things were peaceful and happier back then. They didn’t have to worry about money. They lived off of the river and the forest. When the forest flooded, they would eat fish. When the flood was gone, his father would still bring home fish from the river. On occasions, his mother would catch pheasants in the forest. Almost year round, they could collect enough fruits and vegetables to feed the family and even guests. The world has indeed changed. The mighty river rarely roared anymore and trees had fallen. Bprayee felt guilt weighing on his shoulders and in his stomach. His father was right. He helped destroyed his own home.

Sounds of oars rhythmically splashing in the water interrupted Bprayee’s thoughts. His father was approaching the dock. From what he could tell, it was a bad fishing day. There were only two small fish lying by his father’s feet.

“What are you doing here?” asked his father in a harsh tone. He tied the canoe and hoisted himself up onto the dock.

“Father,” said Bprayee, “I came here with some bad news.”

His father looked into Bprayee’s eyes. Bprayee couldn’t remember when was the last time his father had looked him straight in the eyes.

“It’s Mother,” Bprayee began, “she’s ill.”

“What does she have?” asked his father, still piercing Bprayee with his cold stare.

“Dengue fever. The doctor says that Mother might not make it. She already has internal bleeding,” Bprayee swallowed hard. “She asked me to come to you today. She wants to see you.”
Bprayee wasn’t sure, but he thought that his father’s eyes became softer, gentler.

“Let me change out of these clothes and grab some money. We’ll leave soon.”

Bprayee nodded as his father ran towards the house. While waiting, a mountain dove perched on a rock nearby. It let out a soft and pleasing chirp. He remembered the days when he would be woken up by the sounds of the mountain doves. He used to hate them, because it meant that he had to get up and start his chores. But this time, he was in awe. Ever since the forests fell, he hardly heard them anymore. How this one survived, he didn’t know.

“All right, let’s go,” announced his father as he swiftly walked past Bprayee.

It was late afternoon when they arrived. His father went into the house as Bprayee waited outside, pacing. Hours drifted by. The sun had set and the stars were coming out. Bprayee was getting hungry, but then he remembered that his father must be starving. His father had left the fish he caught on the dock and that was supposed to be his breakfast. The hawks probably stole them already.

“All Bprayee,” his father called. “Your mother wants to see you.”

Bprayee removed his shoes and entered the house with his father.

His mother’s voice was quivering as she reached her hand to give him a pat on the shoulder, “Bprayee, you’re a good son.” She gave a weak smile. “Don’t be sad. I lived a full life and am ready to go. I won’t be in pain anymore. You’re a strong man now, ready to take on the world. You will always have my blessing.” She patted him before letting out a violent cough.

He and his father sat by his mother throughout the night. His father recited some prayers as his mother listened to him with her eyes closed. She passed away peacefully in
the early morning hours. As the women workers cried over her body and wrapped her in a white blanket, Bprayee ran out of the house and into the field. He did not want anyone to see the tears streaming down his face. He fell down to his knees and sobbed. As he looked up at the orange sky and he thought he heard a mountain dove singing a song nearby.

* * * * *

Another year passed by. Bprayee worked in silence and kept to himself. His father returned to the river. They hadn’t seen each other since the day his mother’s body was incinerated in a nearby temple. It seemed that a curse fell on the land. The rains should have arrived a month ago, but not a single drop fell from the sky. Villagers were talking about how the Mekong is nothing but a mere stream. Rice paddies dried up and the workers migrated to the city. One day, Bprayee and fifty other workers were told to leave the compound. There was not enough work for them. Bprayee left, knowing of only one place to go to.

When he arrived at his father’s house, the river was indeed just a stream. The dock sat on dry land surrounded by grass. Like every morning, his father went fishing. His father’s canoe came into view and Bprayee stood up. Bprayee couldn’t muster up the courage to look at his father.

“What are you doing here,” asked his father. His voice quivered and his eyes were hallowed. Deep wrinkles shaped his darkly tanned face.

“I,” Bprayee took a swallow and paused. “Um, I lost my job.”

“And?” said his father.

“I was hoping to stay here for a while until I can get a new one.”
“What job are you thinking of? Tree-logging? There are no more trees. Work in another rice paddy? It’s all dried up. Fish? The fish are gone. What’s next? Convert the fields into townhouses so the rich city folks can have vacation homes?” His father laughed disdainfully.

“I don’t know,” replied Bprayee. “I’ll talk to the villagers tomorrow and see what they know.”

“Fine,” his father stepped closer to Bprayee. “You can stay here. But there’s no electricity. I can’t afford it and I don’t want it anyways. Electricity can’t put food on the table or give you fresh water to drink.”

Bprayee nodded and followed his father to the house. The days passed by with awkwardness. Bprayee would go into the village and ask for jobs. His father would go out fishing in the morning. When they returned, they both bore heavy burdens on their shoulders. His father had not caught a single fish in weeks. Instead, he had gone fruit picking and bird hunting in an orchard some distance down the river. He knew that it was illegal and that he could be thrown in jail if he was caught, but luckily, the orchard was big and there wasn’t any security. Bprayee would sometimes find day jobs hauling sacks of rice unto pick-up trucks so that it could be shipped and sold overseas. *It doesn’t make sense*, Bprayee thought, *we barely have anything to eat. Yet we’re shipping rice to foreigners.*

The young villagers had much anger and discontent in their hearts. One of them was Rithisak. Bprayee never met him, but heard rumors. Rithisak was the son of the man who blew himself up on a dam. The villagers would tell the story:

*The day before Niran went north, he caught a giant catfish. It was so big and strong that it dragged his boat upriver for days. Niran tried to cut the net and even stab*
the fish, but nothing worked. When the catfish stopped, it was in front of the newly built dam. The catfish surfaced and looked Niran straight in the eyes. It was told that the catfish talked. “My home is upriver. My family is upriver. I can’t get past this barrier. If I don’t go home, there will be no more fish for you or your children. The river was meant to run wild, so were our kind. This is not your river, you can’t keep us from swimming freely.” Somehow, the catfish got out of the net and disappeared. When Niran got home, he grabbed whatever money he had and left. He did not say his goodbyes, he just left, and blew himself and the dam up.

One day, Bprayee was invited to his coworker’s house. To his surprise, he was joined by ten other men and women. They were sitting in a crowded circle. One of the men was Rithisak.

“The time to act is now,” said Rithisak. “The Chinese are pressuring the Burmese government to build another dam on the Mekong. My contacts in China and Myanmar said that the dam would bring electricity to a new industrial town. Both countries will share the profits. Now, I’m not against these countries’ plans to build a strong economy, but I am against them selfishly building a dam without considering what will happen to the countries down river. If another dam is built, our Mekong will be nothing but dry mud.”

“What about our government? What are they doing to stop them?” asked a young girl with a long scar on her neck. Bprayee had heard of her too. Chantrea was born to a wealthy family. Her father worked for the government. One day, he didn’t come home. Her uncle came to the house and told her mother to hide. His father had stumbled upon a conspiracy plan plotted by someone within the government. He was captured and possibly killed. While Chantrea and her mother escaped from the house, a group of armed men attacked them. She was cut on the neck and her mother was stabbed. Chantrea ran into the woods and fell into a gorge. An elderly man found her body and brought her to his house. Ever since then, his family took care of her like one of their own daughters.
“The government said that they’ve talked to the Chinese and Burmese,” answered Rithisak, “but those governments refuse to back down. They said that we have no say on what they do to their part of the river. I think that we’re left on our own. The government doesn’t care about us. There’s hardly any fishing villages left along the river and the rice paddies are drying up. They want us to abandon our land.”

“What should we do?” asked Chantrea.

“We bring down the dam,” Rithisak said. The room broke out into a commotion of cheers and jeers. Some men and women were shaking their heads, while others clapped.

“Are you crazy?” cried out a man from the crowd. “They’ll kill all of us. We don’t have an army like they do.”

“Yeah!” Cried out another man. “And we’re not crazy like your father to go and blow ourselves up!”

Rithisak and Chantrea gave a cold stare to the men who yelled. He backed towards the wall, hoping that he could somehow just melt through.

“Listen!” Rithisak’s booming voice hushed the crowd. “I won’t lie to you. This is a dangerous task. Some of you will not survive. But if we don’t do anything, we will lose our village, our land. Without the river, we cannot survive.”

Four or five men and women snorted out a laugh before standing up and leaving the house. Others sat uncomfortably, deciding whether or not to stay.

“We will need all the help we can get,” continued Rithisak. “I want all of us to gather as many men and women as possible. Talk to your parents, your brothers, your sisters. Encourage them to join the fight with us. We will all march north towards the
dam. My contacts will lay out the safe trails for us and meet us along the way. We will start in three days.”

Rithisak stood up and thanked everyone for coming. The rest of the audience made their way out the door. Bprayee left along with the crowd. He and his friend walked in silence for a while until they came to a fork in the road.

“See you in three days, Bprayee.” Before Bprayee could have said anything, his friend walked away.

_Three days?_ Thought Bprayee. _Why does he think that I’m going with him on this crazy fight?_ Bprayee shook his head and walked home.

His father was sitting on the porch, with his feet dangling from the edge. He was smoking a pipe.

“I haven’t seen you smoke since I was a child,” Bprayee said to his father.

“I found the pipe and some tobacco in your mother’s box,” he chuckled. “She must have taken these and hid them from me when she told me that I was smoking too much. If I remember correctly, that was the day she stole my boat and went into the flooded forest. She gave birth to you all by herself.” His eyes looked up at the darkened skies that were paved with stars.

Bprayee sat next to his father, also dangling his feet from the porch. They sat in silence for a while until his father broke the silence.

“What’s on your mind?”

“I,” started Bprayee. “I was just thinking about what I heard tonight. Father, I saw Rithisak tonight.”

“Hmmm,” responded his father. “What did he say?”
“He said that a new dam was being built upriver. He wants to bring it down. He wants all of us to join him and fight.”

“Hmmm.” His father blew a puff of smoke into the darkness.

“It’s ridiculous,” said Bprayee.

“What is?”

“Him wanting to travel all the way to another country to blow up a dam. Him expecting the village to support him.” Bprayee was feeling his heart beating faster. He wasn’t sure what he was feeling. Bprayee thought that it was a lofty idea to fight but at the same time, it was an exciting thought.

“When people are desperate and have nothing to lose, they are most courageous then.” His father blew another cloud. “Tell me Bprayee, when they build that dam and Rithisak’s mission fails and when the Mekong dries up, what will you do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, think about it.” A short silence separated them for a moment. “When will Rithisak begin his journey?”

“Three days from now.”

“Well, Bprayee, I don’t know about you, but I know that I have no where else to go. This is my home and it’s being taken away from me.” His father stood up and looked down at his son. “I’ve led a full life. I am no longer a fisherman and I lost my house and my wife. I have to steal fruits and birds from an orchard in order to have something to eat. I am a desperate man, with nothing to lose. What do you have to lose? What is life, without a home?”
His father walked away, leaving Bprayee to the darkness of the night and his thoughts.

* * * * *

Bprayee did not expect to find himself standing in a crowd of twenty-three men and women by Rithisak’s house. But seeing how determined his father was and thinking about what he said convinced Bprayee that engaging in the fight is better than staying home and stealing food from orchards and begging for jobs. It was midnight. Rithisak said that it would be safer if they traveled at night.

Everyone had a bag tied to their backs. Rithisak had instructed them to carry as much food, water, and clothes as they could. Bprayee brought dried fruits, dried fish, a small blanket, and a change of clothes. With the forests that once spread along both sides of the Mekong gone, it would be hard to find food. Bprayee’s father was not the only elderly person there. There were men and women in their late sixties that carried canes and heavy bags. One man showed Bprayee a knife that was concealed in his cane. They were all ready to fight.

During the first couple of days, the travelers were filled with excitement. For most, this was their first time leaving their village. The idea of entering another country was exhilarating. Most were in good spirit, striking up conversations that had to be carried out in silence. Rithisak and Chantrea were the quiet ones. They did not speak unless to tell the travelers to hush, take a rest, or sleep (which they did during the middle of the day). During the long night hikes, Bprayee would stay close to his father. They would sometimes talk, mostly about their past. His father liked to think about how things were before Bprayee was born and what their family did when Bprayee was still a child.
They would sometimes laugh and sometimes fall quiet whenever a story came out about his mother. Bprayee was deeply grateful to have come on this journey. It was the chance for him to get closer to his father and to find out that his father had forgiven him for abandoning the fishing business a long time ago.

“You know that word, ‘sustainability?’” asked his father.

“Yeah, I heard some city folks in town use it often. I don’t know what it means though.”

“You may not know what it means, but we’ve practiced it for generations. It’s the balance between what we take from the land and what we give back. Before the dams, before the tree logging, and before the rice paddies, we took only what we needed and only what the land had to spare. We fished to survive and to make some money. We cut down trees to build modest but comfortable homes. But things changed. People became greedy and they wanted more than what nature could spare. During my lifetime, I saw my childhood forests flattened and my clean streams polluted. People demanded electricity even though they don’t need it to survive. That’s why so many dams were built.”

“Is that why you didn’t like it when there was electricity at our house?” asked Bprayee. His father gave a slight smirk.

“Life changes every day. You never know what’s going to happen. You did what you had to do in order to survive in this modern world. Your mother and I were just old folks hoping that our simple lives would last forever.” His father quickened his pace. Destroying the dam would be his way of rebalancing nature.

Two weeks passed by and the travelers were exhausted. Their food supplies have dwindled and their clothes were wet. The rain came without any warning and did not stop
for four days. Many developed coughs and some had fevers. Two lives were lost. Hansa, a lady in her late fifties died in her sleep. Everyone suspected that it was Yellow Fever on account that wherever they went, there were swarms of mosquitoes. Daeng, only fourteen, broke his leg on one of the rainy days. It was so slippery that he tumbled down a hill and hit a tree. One of the men bandaged his leg up and carried him for days, but Daeng died anyway.

Another week passed by. Hardly anyone spoke since Daeng’s death. Bprayee could feel that his clothes were much loser on his body than when he had started the journey. His food was all gone, so was all the food that other people brought. Everyone’s pace was slower, and their eyes were fixed to the ground. One morning, Rithisak stopped and told everyone to find food and rest up. He expected to reach the meeting point by early tomorrow morning and wanted everyone to feel rested for the meeting.

The travelers dispersed in the forest in search for food. Bprayee and his father ate handfuls of termites that they found in a rotting log. They ate unripened rose apples and mangoes. They didn’t care about the taste of their food, as long as there was food to be eaten, they were happy. The feast ended when noon came around and the travelers settled for their sleep. With aching limbs and back, the cool soft dirt had never felt so comfortable to Bprayee.

The sun made its journey to the horizon as the travelers packed their things and moved forward. Bprayee could sense a bit of excitement from his father, considering that he was talking again.

“Never been to another country before,” whispered his father. “Wonder what it will be like. Wonder if there’s still fish in their rivers.”
“After all these years of eating fish, don’t you want to try something new?” joked Bprayee.

“I tried bird and they had no meat,” answered his father, “fish meat is sweat and it’s good for you. How come you think I haven’t keeled over yet? It’s because I’ve been eating fish all my life!”

Bprayee and his father shared a laugh. Like his father, Bprayee too wonders what lies beyond the forest. Are the people that much different from him? Are the girls pretty?

It’s a good thing that Rithisak did not hear Bprayee’s thoughts. Every second since they’ve left the village, Rithisak’s mind was focused on the mission. He had gone over the plan hundreds of times in his head. *This will not fail*, he thought. His pace quickened.

Rithisak raised his arms.

“Sshhh,” Chantrea commanded.

Everyone stopped in their tracks and tried to peer through the darkness. A barn swallow made a soft call. Rithisak cupped his hand to the side of his mouth and answered with another barn swallow call. Within moments, footsteps were heard coming through the trees. They were getting closer.

A young man approached Rithisak. He was holding a long rifle, pointing at the group. The travelers were getting weary since none of them had a gun. Rithisak held his hand up as if to say “hi.” The young man dropped his rifle to his side and a big smile appeared on his face. Rithisak smiled back. The young man spoke in a language that Bprayee and his father did not understand. However, Rithisak was well versed in the language and translated everything to the travelers.
“Our camp is just a few miles away,” Rithisak whispered to the crowd. “We will eat and rest there.”

The young man led the group to the camp. Coming into a clearing, Bprayee could see tents, fire pits, and clean laundry hanging on tree branches. There were fifty other people at the camp and they seemed to have just started breakfast. The young man gestured to Rithisak and the travelers to put down their bags and join the crowd. The campers had been waiting for them for a week and prepared breakfast in their honor.

It was the best breakfast that the travelers had in weeks. There were dried fish, grilled chicken, rice, and sweet fruits. The campers came from all over the region. There were the Chinese who found new homes in Thailand and Cambodia. There were Burmese, Laotians, Vietnamese, Thais, and Cambodians that camped and worked together. They arrived at different times during the month. Rithisak and his group were the last ones to arrive.

“This is bigger than I thought,” murmured Bprayee’s father.

“Yeah, I didn’t expect this many people from so many countries to be here,” said Bprayee.

“These people were affected by the dams like we were,” interrupted Chantrea. Bprayee was surprised to see her standing right behind him. “The Mekong is a long river, and has been the livelihoods of so many people in six countries. When the dams were built, the people suffered the same way like we did. We’re all here with one purpose. To stop the new dam.”

“Why are the Chinese and Burmese here?” asked Bprayee. “I thought that they wanted the dam to be built.”
“These are farmers and fishermen,” answered Chantrea looking straight into Bprayee’s eyes which sent chills down his back. “Their livelihoods depend on the river. They have no intention to join the industrial workforce, and that’s why they are here.”

Bprayee swallowed and averted his eyes from her glare.

“Bprayee,” Chantrea still had her eyes piercing into his. Bprayee was surprised that she knew his name and could feel his heart racing. “These will be your brothers and sisters for the rest of the fight. If you want to survive and if you want this mission to be successful, you must work with them. Where they come from does not matter.”

Three days passed by and the campers were well fed and well rested. The leaders of each group met during the three days, updating each other on new developments on the dam and finalizing their plans. The dam was near completion and much of the workforce had left. There was a tight security at the dam, but nothing that should hinder the plan. It was after an early dinner when Rithisak and the other leaders stood up and called for silence.

It was apparent that the young man that came to meet Rithisak and his group was the mastermind behind the whole plan. He stood in the middle, had a straight posture, and the only person to have a rifle dangling from his shoulders. He spoke, as the others translated.

“In the morning, when it is dark still, we will go to the dam and plant explosives,” Rithisak translated. “Hong’s team and Noi’s team will be on the south side and create a distraction. The workers and the guards on the dam will be too distracted to see us come in from the North side. Ye’s team will plant the explosives as our team and Samnang’s team give them cover. When Ye’s team lights the explosives, that will give us only a few
minutes to run for safety before the explosion. Run to high grounds. Since this camp will most likely be flooded, we will regroup fifty miles down the river. I will wait for you there for two days.”

Ye paused as he looked at the crowd. In a softer tone, he spoke and Rithisak translated.

“I know that many of you traveled a long way to be here. Some of you have lost your friends, your family on your journey. But this is the moment we’ve been waiting for. This is the time to take back our river. What we do today will determine whether or not our children will have the Mekong in their future. Please, get some rest. We will make history when the morning comes.”

Ye gave the crowd another look and a firm smile. He turned and walked into his tent. Bprayee and his father sat in silence, looking at the dirt.

“Well, son,” his father said, “I never told you this, but I’m darn proud of you. Your mother was too.”

Bprayee turned his head to look at his father. He wasn’t sure if his ears were fooling him. His father met his gaze and smiled.

“You were always a fighter, even if you didn’t realize it,” continued his father. “When you saw that the fishing business wasn’t going anywhere, you found new jobs to bring home the money. You always took care of me and your mother in whatever dire situation we were in. You made us into celebrities when you brought electricity into our house.” He smiled and gave Bprayee a firm pat on the shoulder. “Get some sleep. Big day tomorrow.” Bprayee nodded as his father stood up and walked away.
Bprayee continued to stare at the dirt. He couldn’t believe what he just heard. All this time, he thought his father never approved of him and his decisions. He looked up at the night sky and was greeted by millions of twinkling stars. *Mother, if you could hear me, please watch over me and father. Let us be safe.*

* * * * *

Morning came too soon. Bprayee was anxious and excited that he had not fallen asleep yet. But Rithisak came into the tent and ordered everyone up. As Bprayee stumbled out of the tent, he was awakened by what he saw. Rithisak, Hong, Ye, Noi, and Samnang were passing out rifles and guns to their teams. Bprayee had no idea where the weapons came from. Rithisak handed Bprayee a rifle.

“No, do you know how to use this?” Rithisak asked.

“Yes,” replied Bprayee. He had used rifles to shoot birds and squirrels with his friends when he was thirteen years old. He felt horrible for killing those animals. His father once beat him up when he found out that Bprayee had been hunting for fun. He said that it was wrong to take any animals’ life away unless it was for food.

Bprayee walked towards his father who was also holding a rifle.

“Never thought I would have to fire one of these again,” his father said. “Be careful, son.”

“You too, Father”

When everyone had gotten their weapons, Rithisak instructed them to follow Ye to the north side of the dam. It took an hour for them to reach the dam. When they got there, Rithisak raised his arm and told everyone to be quiet. They were waiting for the signal.
A makeshift bomb made of kerosene, a beer bottle, and a lit cloth stuck in the bottle crashed onto one of the huts at the foot of the dam. The hut quickly caught fire as men ran out in their pajamas. More fired beer bottles crashed into the compound as security guards left their posts on the dam to hunt down the perpetrators.

Rithisak and Samnang waved their arms to signal their team to head for the dam. Ye’s team followed closely.

It all happened so quickly. Bprayee was standing on the east side of the dam when gunshots were heard beneath him. Hong and Noi’s team must have been discovered and were being shot at by the security guards. Bprayee had his rifle ready, aimed at the compound which was engulfed in flames. One of the security guards turned around, and Bprayee could have sworn that he looked straight into his eyes. The guard yelled and started firing at them. Bprayee and his father fired a couple of shots before having to duck down to reload.

“Back away!” yelled Rithisak. “Get to high ground!”

Bprayee and his father sprinted for the mountain that flanked the dam. Shots rang past his right ear and he could feel the wind of the bullet skimming his head. Ye shot a flare gun. Bprayee looked back and saw the orange flare flying casually in the dark sky. Ye and his team were now sprinting towards the mountain.

A series of explosions shook the still night’s air and the earth rumbled. Bprayee lost his balance and fell face-first into the muddy ground. He could feel a strong hand lifting his left arm.

“Run, son! Run!” His father yelled.
Bprayee obeyed. His calve muscles were burning but he kept on running. And then it seemed like the earth cracked open and gave way to gravity. The dam crashed into the earth as the pent up water rushed towards its new-found freedom. Trees fell mercilessly to the force of the mighty river and sides of the mountains were stripped away. The sounds of the rushing waters were so deafening that Bprayee could not hear the cries and of his fallen comrades.

* * * * *

Bprayee and his father had been walking on the mountain’s ridge since the sun came up. They were alone. His father had stopped to rest while Bprayee went to look for fruits. Since dinner, they had not eaten anything. They were exhausted, but Bprayee knew that in order to make it to the meeting point in time, they had to keep on walking. Curious to see the river, Bprayee made his way to a ledge that extended from the mountain’s side. He could not believe what he saw. The Mekong River was gushing with turbulent water. The shorelines and once-dried rice paddies disappeared and the waves lapped up against the sides of the mountain. I can’t believe we did it. The Mekong is flowing again.

By late afternoon, Bprayee and his father came to the foot of the mountain. The water was flowing gently as if it had been doing so for years. As they walked by the shore, his father hummed a tune. Bprayee could not remember the last time he heard his father hum anything.

“What song is that?” Bprayee asked.

“It’s an old folk song, about the Mekong River. It praises her of her glories and warns people of her fierceness.”

“I never heard it before,” Bprayee said.
“I supposed you wouldn’t,” said his father. “It was popular when I was a teenager. I sang it to your mother when I first met her.” His father smiled and continued to hum. A splash interrupted his tune.

“Oh, how lucky we are,” whispered his father.

The Irrawaddy dolphin poked its head through the waters. It was smiling at them.
Behind the Story: The Fight for the Mekong River

Countries have gone to war over oil. Politicians are encouraging industries and people to use alternative energy so that we don’t need to be dependent on foreign oil reserves. Unlike oil, water has no substitute. What happens when we run out of water? Will we go to war in order to secure water from another country?

The Mekong River runs through six countries. Its water starts off at the Tibetan plateau and runs southward through Chinese provinces before making its way down to Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Nguyen 3). For centuries, the people that lived along the Mekong thrived on fishery and rice cultivation. During the monsoon season, the rush of water added to the river floods its tributaries and reversed the flow on the Tonle Sap in Cambodia. The water spilled out of the river and the lake and into rainforests. For five months, these forests were fish nurseries until the river resumes its normal flow, flushing out the now fat fishes. For months, fishermen along the Mekong thrived (Pearce 95).

It wasn’t until the late twentieth century that hydropower dams were built along the Mekong. The dams disrupted the ecology along the river as well as the livelihoods of those dependent on the river. Giant catfish and Irrawaddy dolphin populations decreased. In 1993 and 2003, with the filling of the Manwan dam and the Dachaoshan dam in China, there were “unusually low flows on the Mekong all the way down to the Tonle Sap, and with poor fish catches” (Pearce 102). More dams are being built along the river. These would “change the river’s hydrology and ecology and block fish migrations, with repercussions for food security and livelihoods throughout the basin” (Middleton).
had been protests against building new dams and series of meetings between dignitaries. If tension continues to rise over the control of the Mekong River, who knows what can happen.

There are other rivers in the world that feed more than one country. The Jordan River is important to those in Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. In June 1967, Syria had started to dig a canal that would have diverted the waters away from Israel. Ariel Sharon, Israel’s former prime minister, wrote,

*the Six-Day War really started on the day Israel decided to act against the diversion of the Jordan. While the border disputes were of great significance, the matter of water diversion was a stark issue of life and death.* (Pearce 168)

This showed that water is a precious commodity and that battles will be fought if water sources should be taken away. There are other rivers which run through many countries. The Nile flows through nine countries, the Amazon through seven, and the Tigris-Euphrates through four countries (Bouguerra 72). In the United States, in the parched southwest, the Colorado River runs through seven states before ending in Mexico. By the time the Colorado River is tapped in by cities, suburban residences, and farmers in the southwestern states, there’s barely enough for the farmers of Mexico. With increasing development, flows to Mexico have been irregular (Pearce 196-197). The Rio Grande is also in trouble because it is drying up. Farmers are drilling wells to feed their crops (Pearce 9-13). But what will happen when the river stops flowing and the wells are dried up? Will wars break out? Or will the dire situations force countries to find a peaceful solution?

The word “sustainability” is being thrown around in the political and economic arena. It has various meanings, but the key idea is that there are perpetually enough
natural resources for future generations. Water is an essential element to survival. By ensuring that there is enough clean water for generations, you are ensuring the survival of the human race. Conservation is key to water management. It is important that everyone conserves and be considerate of how much water is being used. Your actions will prevent future water conflicts in your town, city, and even nation. Simple acts of turning off the faucet while brushing your teeth can help ease the water burden. Talk to your local water department and politicians and see what is being done to ensure that future generations have enough clean water to use. Talk to your friends and family and educate them on water conservation and its role in alleviating water-related tensions. Take the opportunity to prevent water conflicts from forming by learning of current local water issues and exploring possible solutions.
The Price of Water

Teaching high school students is a tough job. Inspiring them to volunteer for non-profit organizations is an almost impossible task. Luckily, the school that I’m working with requires students to do community service for graduation. I came to the high school one day upon the request of my colleague. They were learning about global water issues and what I’m doing to help people in poverty get clean drinking water. I usually talk to the students about the various water projects that I worked on throughout the years, like drilling wells, piping water from a mountain spring to a village, educating students on water and sanitation. I would also tell the students that it’s important for everyone to conserve water and be mindful of every drop that they use. One day, a student asked me, “what inspired you to work on water projects?” That was a tough question. I never asked myself that before.

Ever since Travis moved to college, Mom and Dad were on my case about my schoolwork. I was just a freshman in high school. College was the furthest thing on my mind. The conversation usually came up during dinner. Mom would go on and on about how well Travis was doing in college, that he was being inducted to an honor society and that companies were already recruiting him for jobs. She was in denial. I know my brother. He was probably having a great time flirting with girls and going to parties. He could sweet talk his way out of trouble, he had been doing that since middle school. But Mom was just proud that her eldest child was in college and was now a grown “man.” If he was a man, he wouldn’t be bringing home his entire closet so that Mom could wash his dirty clothes. He would have done that on campus. He wasn’t that great, just a smart, conniving, older brother.

“So, Lily, have you thought about college yet?” Whenever she asked this, she would put down her fork and give me a long stare. As if that stare of hers was going to inspire me to research about colleges after dinner.
“Mom, I’m still struggling to survive high school. I’ll think about college later.” That’s my usual response. And her usual response would be a loud sigh.

“We’re just trying to help,” Dad said. He was usually the one that could sense the tension between my mother and me. He tried not to take sides, but I think he had to take her side if he wanted to sleep in his bedroom. “It’s not too early to think about college. We can take our time visiting colleges and looking into financial aid options.”

As Mom talked more about Travis and how wonderful it would be to have both her children in college, I gulped down my dinner.

“Well, I’m done with dinner. I would help you clean up, but Ms. Mitchell wants us to write to our pen-pal tonight. And you know me, I’m a slow writer.” Before my parents could say anything, I dashed out of the room.

I didn’t lie to my parents about being a slow writer. Every time I sat in front of the computer, I just stared at the blank white document. Then I would make the mistake of checking my e-mail, chatting with my friends, checking my webpage. The next thing I know, it’s midnight and the only thing on the document was my name. I know I shouldn’t be distracted, but I just couldn’t help it.

Ms. Mitchell went to Kenya last year doing some volunteer work. She said that a few years ago, there was a severe drought and a lot of the families left the village. Ms. Abasi, the teacher in the village, stayed because she had nowhere else to go. She was the one who contacted some American humanitarian organizations to have water tanks built in the village. Ms. Mitchell was one of the volunteers that helped build the tanks. While Ms. Mitchell was there, she met a bunch of students and planned a year-long project where our class would contact the Kenyan students and exchange e-mails at least once a
week. At the end of the year, we would compile all our e-mails, and write a ten-page report on what we learned. I think the ten-page report was overkill. We’re already writing every week, why do we have to write a report? I would bring that up in class, but Ms. Mitchell was not the kind of teacher that you could negotiate with. In fact, she was the only teacher that Travis could not sweet talk his way out of handing in assignments late.

My pen-pal’s name is Kioni. According to Ms. Mitchell, she’s a year younger than me and very curious about American culture. I’m supposed to write an introductory letter tonight.

   Dear Kioni,

   No, how about,

   Hey Kioni,

   The blinking cursor stayed by the comma for a while.

   Hi Kioni!

   No, too perky,

   Hello Kioni,

   There, that’s right. Now, what to write?

   I was dying to check my e-mail. Maybe she wrote to me first and all I had to do was answer her questions? But I knew that was not true since Ms. Mitchell said that we would be the ones initiating the e-mails. Okay, I need to get this over with.

   Hello Kioni,
   My name is Lily Weatherfield. I am a freshman at Hudson Valley High School. How are you? I am doing okay. Hope everything is well and talk to you soon!
   ~Lily

   I sent the letter and felt relieved. That was one homework assignment out of the way, and I wouldn’t need to write another e-mail to her until next week. I was working
on my history report, well, more like going onto different websites, when the electricity went out. The sudden darkness startled me. The howling wind and torrential rain that was pounding on my window did not help lighten up the mood either. Dad came in the room with an electrical lantern.

“Here you go, Lily. Guess you’ll be sleeping early tonight.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I smiled as he left the room. I was really hoping that the electricity would not come back on. That meant that I wouldn’t be able to do my homework and my teachers would have to give me an extension. For once, my wishes were heard. Midnight rolled around and I could hear Mom stumbling around the kitchen. She hated leaving dirty dishes lying around, so she was tidying up the kitchen in the dark. Dad, like me, was enjoying the darkness. I could hear him snoring. I was spending the time reading my magazines by the lantern until I got sleepy. Turned off the lantern and dozed until morning.

I’m a heavy sleeper. I will not wake up unless my alarm clock is set on the loudest setting. Since the electricity did not come back on last night, my alarm clock sat in silence. It was dark and rainy out, the birds were hiding in trees and the sun was taking a day off. I woke up to the sound of my mother pounding on the door and frantically yelling, “It’s seven o’clock! You’re suppose to be dressed and out of the house by now!”

“Okay,” I said in my grumpy and groggy morning voice. I am not a cheery morning person.

By the time I got dressed and packed my bag, I already missed my school bus. As I made my way downstairs, Mom yelled from the kitchen.

“Lily! Are you ready?”
“Yeah, I’m putting on my shoes.”

She appeared by the door, fully dressed in her fall jacket and boots.

“Okay, I packed breakfast and lunch.” She opened my bookbag and stuffed down a brown paper bag. “I’ll drive you to school.”

“Oh, I thought Dad took the car. I was going to take the bus.”

“No, you’ll be really late if you take the bus. Dad’s in the basement. It’s flooded, so he has to wait for the handyman to come. Let’s go. Don’t forget your umbrella.”

Mom shoved a repulsive pink umbrella into my hands.

“Eww, Mom, it’s pink!”

“It’s an umbrella. Deal with it.”

Before I could protest some more, she nudged me through the door. It was still pouring out. The autumn leaves littered the road. The once black paved driveway was now a mosaic of yellows, reds, oranges, and browns. It felt like I just stepped into a Monet painting.

Unluckily, I made it in time to Ms. Mitchell’s class. As I settled down, I could hear my classmates whispering to each other about their e-mails. Justin wrote a page long e-mail about being on the swim team. Crystal was showing a printed out copy of her e-mail and her pen-pal’s response. I just stared at the chalkboard, hoping that I could vanish.

“So, I trust that everyone sent out their introductory e-mails last night?” Ms. Mitchell asked the class. Some of the students nodded, others said “yes” under their breaths. I continued to stare at the chalkboard. “Now, as you know, because you sent the
e-mails out through the classes’ web account, I can see what you’ve written. It’s a way to make sure that you are doing your work and I can see the quality of your work.”

My stomach began to churn. I forgot that Ms. Mitchell could check the e-mails.

“I was delighted to see how some of you really put some thought into your e-mails. Remember, the Kenyan students want to learn more about you and about American culture. You also want to learn about them. So don’t feel shy asking questions.” She paused and I thought that she was staring at me when she said this. “The more you write and the more meaningful questions you ask, the better your grades will be. I don’t want a simple ‘how are you’ question.”

A chill ran down my back. I had to look away, so I pretended to write something in my notebook. I really hope nobody noticed me squirming in my seat. It’s only my third day of class and I already managed to get on Ms. Mitchell’s bad side.

It was still raining by the time I got home. Mom seemed less frantic now that there was electricity in the house. She was taking the opportunity to vacuum the carpets. I went to see Dad in the basement. He was wearing his rain gear and the water reached his knees.

“Hi Dad. Hi Tom,” I yelled from the basement stairs.

“Hey kiddo.” Tom liked to call me “kiddo.” I think it might be because he forgot my name. He’s not very good with names.

“How’s school?” Dad asked.

“Oh, the usual. Nothing much,” I tried to suppress the nauseous feeling when I thought about Ms. Mitchell staring at me. “What’s up with the basement?”
“The pump broke. I guess it couldn’t handle all this rain,” Tom said. “Don’t worry, your dad and I installed a brand new one and you’ll have a dry basement in no time.”

I smiled and left for my room. I couldn’t remember the last time I went for a whole night without checking my e-mail. Excitedly, I turned on the computer and waited for the webpage to load. I wonder how many e-mails I got. I wondered if Tris finalized the concert plans yet.

My e-mail account was full of junk.

Try out the latest weight loss plan for free!
There are available singles in your area! Free first month’s membership.
Get your degree in just 14 months with the Garber Institute!
Shop for free when you sign up!

No e-mails from Tris. It would be a while before dinner was ready, so I decided to check my account on my class’s web page. Next to an image of an unopened envelope, was a message written in capital letters: HI LILY! THIS IS KIONI.

Wow, I guess she was really excited.

Hi Lily,

Thank you for your e-mail. I am so excited to be part of the pen-pal program. I never talked to anyone from America before, except to Ms. Mitchell when she visited us last year. She’s a great teacher, we had so much fun when she was here. You asked me how I am doing. I’m doing okay, nothing new (except for the pen-pal program! I get to use the computer at school every morning and afternoon. It’s usually something that the older kids get to do, but since Ms. Abasi knew I was a slow typist, she allowed me to come here twice a day!). How often are you on the computer? Are you a fast writer?

Today, we learned about the hydrologic cycle. I didn’t really understand everything. The picture that Ms. Abasi showed seemed simple. The water from the ocean goes into the clouds, it rains, the water goes through the ground, and back into the ocean. I don’t think that cycle exists where I live. It hardly rains and there’s no ocean. Have you ever been to the ocean? Is it really as blue and big as the sky? How does it smell? How does it taste? Is it also true that the water you drink is sweet? My friend said that Americans have water in their homes and can drink the sweet water whenever they want. He said that you have so much water
that you can wash yourself every day, in the privacy of your own home. But how can you have running water in your house? Wouldn’t the water splash everywhere and make a mess? Is there a hole in your floor where the water comes up?

I have so much to ask you! But it’s getting late and I still need to fetch water before going home. I’m really excited to hear back from you. Take care!

Your friend,
Kioni

My heart was beating quickly and my mind was buzzing. So many questions, and so much excitement. I couldn’t believe Kioni was taking this assignment so seriously. Didn’t she have something better to do? And what the heck was a hydrologic cycle? I’m a believer in minimalism. Don’t do anything beyond what you are required to do. That’s why I decided not to write back to Kioni. Ms. Mitchell said that I just needed to write at least once a week, and since I already did it this week, I didn’t need to write back yet.

Mom called for dinner and I just turned off my computer. I didn’t check my school’s e-mail until the following Monday.

There was an unopened e-mail from Kioni.

Subject: Hi Lily! Are you okay?
Hi Lily,

It’s been almost a week and I haven’t heard back from you yet. My friends all got their e-mails from your classmates. I was wondering if you were okay. Are you sick? My mom has some good herbal recipes for colds and stomach aches. Let me know if you need them and I’ll send you the recipes!

Hope you are okay.
Your friend,
Kioni

I felt like a big jerk. Kioni must have checked her e-mails everyday to see if I responded. She was waiting for me and I just ignored her. Guilt made my stomach queasy, so I went downstairs to get seltzer water. Dinner was ready so I couldn’t get back to my room until I finished my food. The chicken cutlets didn’t taste good. It wasn’t my
mother’s cooking, it was because my mind was on the e-mails that Kioni wrote. She actually thought that I was sick because I didn’t e-mail her back? She didn’t even know me, and yet she cared enough to worry about me and offer her mother’s herbal recipes? I wanted to go straight to my room but Dad said that I had to help Mom clean up. Cleaning the dishes was never fun for me. It was worse today, knowing that I needed to write back to Kioni right away. Once I put the soap and turned on the dishwasher, I crept to my room.

Dear Kioni,

I’m sorry for not getting back to you sooner. My house lost electricity and I couldn’t check my computer. (I know, it’s a lie. But I couldn’t tell her that I was a lazy jerk!) I’m not sick, so don’t worry about the recipes. To answer your questions, well, my computer is in my bedroom. I usually go on it every afternoon when I come back from school. I do my homework on the computer and talk to my friends on it as well. I’m a fast typist, but a slow writer. What I mean is that it’s difficult for me to write papers. It’s not my favorite part of being a student.

I wish I could send some rain over to you! It’s been pouring non-stop for the past two days now. My basement is flooded. My dad and a handyman are still fixing the pump. They said that the water should be pumped out soon. But the things that we stored down there, like my old clothes, my mother’s shoes, the Christmas decorations, are probably all ruined by now. It’s okay though, I had no plans to use those things anymore.

I usually go to the ocean every summer. It’s about a two-hour drive from my house. My dad would rent a beach house and we would stay for a week. I’ve heard of oceans as big and blue as the sky, but not the ocean that I go to. I mean, it’s huge, don’t get me wrong. It’s the Atlantic Ocean after all. But it’s not blue. More like greenish gray. I don’t think it’s very clean. Sometimes I would see plastic bags floating around. So I would just sunbathe and occasionally walk on the shore. It’s salty water, so it smells and taste salty.

I don’t understand what you mean when you asked about my water tasting sweet and about having water in my house. Water just tastes like bland. I mean there’s soda and fruit juices where sugar is added to the water which makes it sweet, but the water from our faucets has no sugar added to it. We don’t have a hole in the ground where water comes up (well, except for the flooded basement, which is not normal). We have faucets. When we want water, we just turn on the faucet and water flows out into the sink. The dirty water or water that we don’t use goes down the drain. Don’t you have water in your house? You don’t shower every day? I have to do that, my mom makes me do it ever since I was little. What do you mean you have to fetch water? You have to go to a well?

~ Lily
Two days passed by and Kioni did not respond. Now I know how she felt. On the third day, I was excited to see an unopened e-mail in my mailbox.

Hi Lily,

I’m sorry that I didn’t reply to you sooner. I missed school for about three days now, because it’s that time of the month (you know, you’re a girl too!) and there are no latrines around school. It’s just a hassle and so embarrassing to go to school and have to go to the bushes every few hours. Sometimes I wish that I was born a boy, that way, I can go to school everyday. But every girl in my village misses their classes whenever their monthly friend comes along. Anyway, I’m sure you don’t want me to go into further details about that!

To my embarrassment, I didn’t know what a basement was. I asked Ms. Abasi and she told me. I can’t imagine having a room underneath the ground. We have nothing like that here. I am sorry that it was flooded, but isn’t that a good thing? That way, you have lots of water to use when it doesn’t rain. I wish I had a room full of water. That would save me so much time during the dry season. I wouldn’t need to go get water.

To answer your questions, Ms. Mitchell and other volunteers came to our village and installed water tanks in our compounds. When it rains, the water gets stored in the tanks. We use that water during the dry season. So my family and I use the rainwater for cooking and drinking. Now that the tanks are dried, we have to go find water. We don’t have a well, so we go to a stream that’s about an hour walk away. It’s my responsibility to get the water from the stream every morning before school and every afternoon after school. But lately, the stream has dried up. So we look for water further upstream and in potholes for leftover water. My sister and I went to the mountain yesterday where there was a spring that cows drink from. It took us the whole day to get the water! I hate the water chore, but it’s important. Since there’s so little water at home, we have to wash ourselves and our clothes in the stream when it is running.

Ms. Abasi showed me a picture of a tap. I think it’s also called a faucet, right? It must be wonderful to have that in your house! So what do you do with the time that you saved? I imagined that if I had a tap in my house, I would have more time to read my books and write my papers. That way, Ms. Abasi wouldn’t give me such bad grades!

Your friend,

Kioni

One day in class, Ms. Mitchell wanted all of us to share one or two things that we found interesting from the e-mails and what we learned from our pen-pals. I sunk deep
into my chair hoping that she would forget that I was there. The first person up was Jenny. She was shaking a bit as she stood up in front of the class.

“So, my pen-pal is Gathee. One interesting thing I learned was that after school, he goes to the field and help his dad with the cattle. He stays until late afternoon and then he has to get water from a stream to bring to his mom. He would have dinner with his family, but not his dad. Gathee said that since there’s not a lot of food, his dad would eat three times a week. But because he was still young, he gets to eat dinner every day with his sisters and mother. The sad thing is that when he gets older and works in the field more often, he won’t be able to eat every day.”

Jenny paused and looked around uncomfortably. “Um, that’s it.”

“Thank you, Jenny,” said Ms. Mitchell. “You can go back to your seat. Todd, you’re up next.”

Todd was as nervous as Jenny. He was shaking and spoke softly.

“Uh, my pen-pal is Makena, and….”

“Todd, I can barely hear you and I’m three feet away. Speak louder and lift up your head,” Ms. Mitchell interrupted.

Todd squirmed a bit before he continued with his presentation in a slightly louder voice. “My pen-pal is Makena, she’s a girl. Um, an interesting thing, um, it’s also about dinner.” Jenny smiled and gave Todd a nod. “Well, Makena said that when they eat dinner, it’s from one big bowl. It’s not like over here where everyone sits around a table and has his own plate. There, they sit on the floor around a big bowl. There’s a girl bowl for all the girls in the family, and a boy bowl for all the boys. They would just dig in, with their hands. But you can never use your left hand, only your right. She said that your
right hand is for eating and the left hand is for when you go to the bathroom. So, it’s very important to wash your hands before eating. The only thing is that there’s no soap. They would use soap if they could afford it, but it’s expensive over there. So, I told her that I would send her some soap. I just need to go to the post office tomorrow.” He stared at the floor for a while and then turned his head to Ms. Mitchell.

“Good report, Todd,” said Ms. Mitchell. “I’m sure she’ll be excited to receive your mail. You can sit down. Jeannette, you’re next.”

When Jeannette walked up to the front of the room, all the boys held their breath and followed her slender body in a tight sweater dress. You can say she’s the popular girl in school where all the boys want to date her and all the girls are jealous of her. Jeannette was confident, always thriving in the limelight.

“My pen-pal is Ngare,” said Jeannette loudly. “He talked about the water tank that was recently installed on his family’s compound. The tank stores rainwater for them to use during the dry season. I asked him how he would get water before the water tank was installed. He said that his siblings and him would sometimes miss school so that they could walk and find water on the roads or streams. I mentioned to him that when I went to Argentina for an exchange program, I walked into a hut in a rural area. When it began to rain, the children and the mother would scramble to find pots and pans and put on the hut’s floor. The rain that dripped through the roof was collected in the pots and pans. Children will also go out into the field and scoop water up from potholes and ditches. The water collected was carefully portioned during the dry season. Ngare said that it was similar to how he used to collect water before the water tanks were built. I guess the lack of clean water for people in rural areas is a global issue.”
“Thank you, Jeannette” Ms. Mitchell said. As Jeannette walked back to her seat, I sunk deeper into my seat. *Please, let me be the last one. I don’t know what to say.*

“Lily, you’re next.”

A tight knot formed in my stomach. I hesitated a bit before clumsily getting out of my chair.

“My pen-pal is Kioni.” Pause. “Um, one of the things that stuck in my mind was that she missed school for several days because…” I could feel my face getting red.

“Yes?” said Ms. Mitchell.

“It’s a little embarrassing,” I replied as I swallowed hard.


“Well, she missed school because she had her period.” I could hear snickering all over the room, especially from the boys. “Kioni said that it’s normal for girls to miss their classes when they had their period because there weren’t any bathrooms in the school. The children go to the bushes to do their business, and it’s embarrassing and a hassle for her to do that when she has her period.” The laughter was getting louder.

“Be quiet!” Ms. Mitchell yelled at the class. “You are all lucky to have bathrooms in schools and in your houses. But the students that you communicate with in Kenya don’t have that luxury. It’s even worse for girls when they menstruate.” Kyle snickered.

“Yes Kyle, women menstruate. It’s a fact of life and you should try to be sensitive to the women in your life. Anyway, girls in the community find it embarrassing to go to school when they have their periods, so they stay home and do their chores. It’s a different lifestyle than ours and we should not laugh at them.” The room hushed. “Go on, Lily.”
“Well, Kioni didn’t go into details about it. I guess it was embarrassing. But she mentioned that because water was scarce she couldn’t shower every day. The water she collects is used for drinking and cooking. In fact, she goes to the stream to wash herself and do laundry. But because it’s the dry season, the stream nearby dried up. So she has to walk up a mountain to a spring and collect her water from there. I told her about my flooded basement and she thought that I would be excited because it meant that I had water stored for the dry season. I didn’t understand her at first, but now I get it. For her, every drop counts. For her, there is a price on water that she has to be mindful of. For me, I just get water whenever I want straight from my faucet.”

“Thank you, Lily. Good job,” Ms. Mitchell smiled at me. Walking back to my seat, I felt relieved. My footsteps were light and moved effortlessly.

Ten other students presented after me. I knew I should have paid attention to all of them, but it was nearing lunchtime and my stomach was growling. Only Zach’s presentation caught my attention. Zach was part of the school’s track team. He’s a pretty good athlete, and quite handsome too. I’ve had a crush on him since middle school, but he barely knows that I exist. Who would notice a plain girl wearing t-shirts and jeans and beat up sneakers all the time?

Zach cleared his throat and spoke with his now deepened voice. It resonated like a perfectly built cello. “I asked Matu why the school had computers and access to the Internet when the village didn’t even have enough water and food to survive. Matu said that it’s because the telecommunications company bought the government. Almost every family in the village has a cell-phone. Some of them even have TVs. The government would encourage farmers to have these technologies and even helped pay for the services.
Matu said that the company would make so much money and so would government officials whenever they sell a new cell-phone or provide Internet access. But when it comes to water issues, the government all of the sudden turns deaf or blind. Matu said that water issues are harder to solve than setting up computers or cell-phones. So the government leaves it up to individual farmers to find their own water. I think it’s wrong that Matu and his family can’t get help from the government when it’s clear that they are struggling to get their basic needs met.”

“Thank you, Zach,” Ms. Mitchell said. “So what would you suggest to Matu in order for him to have access to clean water?”

“I don’t really know,” said Zach. “Um, maybe, the village can protest to the government. Or they can get outside support, like from our school or organizations that help villages in need. That way, their water problems will be heard by the government and the officials may be more inclined to help.”

“Good idea. Now class, due tomorrow, I want you to write up ideas of what you can do here in order to help your peers in Kenya.” Ms. Mitchell had perfect timing. Once she finished her sentence, the bell rang, and the students rushed for lunch. It’s a bit ironic isn’t it? We just spent the whole class period talking about how students in Kenya don’t have enough food and water to survive, and yet we rush out to lunch in our school’s cafeteria that is filled with various foods and drinks, forgetting all about our pen-pals. 

* * * * *

The end of May arrived quickly. The school year was coming to an end and students were excitedly talking about their summer plans. Jeannette was spending a month with her parents traveling around Europe. Zach got an internship in Washington,
DC. Todd was going to Kenya with his family. He told me that he was going to visit Makena and already bought cases of soap for her. As for me, my summer was going to be a boring one. Dad was busy working and Mom visited the hospital everyday because of Grandma’s health. Travis got a summer job in Paris, lucky him. I looked for jobs, but no one wanted to hire me. I was looking forward to lying on the couch watching TV all day, every day, but Ms. Mitchell made a suggestion to my parents and they had been really pushing me on it. She suggested that I volunteer for Save the Water organization which does advocacy work in water conservation and raising funds for water projects in villages around the world. I hate parent-teacher nights.

Kioni and I kept contacting each other through our personal e-mails. We shared stories about school and family. She said that a group of volunteers from America came and installed water taps in her family compound. The water is piped down from the mountains, meaning that the village will have a continual source of water throughout the year. It now only takes her five minutes to walk to the water pump and get water. Kioni asked her mom if she could take showers everyday now that they could get water whenever they wanted. Her mom yelled at her for being wasteful. She said that the water might not last forever, one day it might go dry. So Kioni showered every three days and still cherished every drop of water she got. With the time that she saved from fetching water, she was able to do well in her classes. Kioni said that Ms. Abasi gave her high marks, the highest ever since she’s been in school. I bought a new pair of shoes and backpack for Kioni. She said that she was only allowed to wear shoes on Sundays when she goes to church. She walked barefoot on other days in order to save her shoes from
wear and tear. I hoped that she would like her gift. Todd said that he would give Kioni
the gift when he goes to visit the village.

My first day volunteering was awkward. I was the youngest one in the group.
Everyone was over forty years old. They asked me why I was volunteering. I told them
the truth, “Because my teacher suggested to my parents that I should and they forced me
to.” Most of them just laughed when I told them that.

Ms. Johnson was my mentor. She’s a nice lady. Never married and doesn’t have
kids. One day, while we were folding letters and stuffing them in envelopes, I asked her,
“Why are you volunteering?”

Ms. Johnson replied, “because I’ve been so lucky in my life that I feel I should
give back to those in need.”

“But you’re not getting anything in return. You’re not being paid and you don’t
get gifts. So why do all this work for free?”

“It’s true. I don’t get anything in return, well, nothing materialistic anyway. It’s
the feeling of doing something worthwhile, doing something important, that fulfills me. It
makes me appreciate the life that I have more and more every day.” She smiled as subtle
crow’s feet appeared around her eyes. For a seventy-year-old, she looks pretty darn good.
I guess volunteering kept her young.

That summer, we had a drought. Our local government officials appeared on the
evening news, encouraging people to conserve water. The water reservoir that fed the
town was running low, and we had a dry spring season. People were told not to water
their lawns, take short showers, turn the faucet off when brushing their teeth, fix leaks in
the house, flush toilets sparingly. The news anchors would repeat the old rhyme: If it’s
yellow, let it mellow. If it's brown, flush it down. To my mother’s dismay, she would let the dirty dishes pile up in the dishwasher until there was a full load. She would also let the laundry pile up until she could do the biggest load on the washing machine. Our lawn was dusty and brown, my mother’s roses wilted in the sun. At the dinner table, she would complain about our neighbors.

“The Robinsons were watering their lawns again. I woke up early and saw that their sprinklers were on.”

“Oh, honey, let it go. There’s no need to spy on them,” Dad replied.

“I wasn’t spying, I just happened to see their sprinklers on.”

“Look, are you going to be the one that tells them that they can’t water their lawns?”

“No,” Mom looked away, “I’m not the police. But the police should give them a warning or something. They’re sucking up precious water from the reservoir.”

“The police will probably notice that they are the only ones with the green lawn on our block. I’m sure they’ll get their warning soon.” Dad sneaked a smile and winked at me. It was his way of lightening up the mood during dinner.

Some of our neighbors installed well pumps in their backyards. The government officials said that they do not encourage people to do this since the town is on top of a non-renewable aquifer, meaning, once the water is taken out, it will take a very long time for the aquifer to fill up again, perhaps millions of years. The aquifers should be used as a last resort, when the reservoir is completely dried up. But our neighbors got the wells anyway. They said that it’s underneath their land and that they can tap into the water if they wanted to. Besides, it’s not like they are going to use all of the water up. This might
be true, but they did not consider that their children or grandchildren might not have water during their lifetime. This town will be abandoned if there is no water.

Save the Water was swamped with projects. Every day was a new project that I worked on. Ms. Johnson and I would go to summer school and teach the kids there about the drought and how to conserve water. The kids didn’t care, they didn’t want to be in school in the first place. But we taught them anyway and handed out materials. On other days, we would go into the street and reminded people to conserve water. Most of the time, people would just rush by without even turning their heads to look at us. The mean ones would tell us to mind our own business or that we were being annoying.

“Ugh, this is so frustrating!” I complained to Ms. Johnson one day. “We’re out here, trying to spread the message for their own good, and nobody listens. I bet you they go home and still take long showers and water their lawns.”

“Some people just don’t understand that individual actions determine the community’s future. They just don’t get that this is a community problem and that everyone needs to pitch in to help solve the water issue.” Ms. Johnson was breathing heavily in the heat. She volunteered everyday and talked to those who would talk to her.

“So why are we still here when it’s not doing any good? Why don’t we form a group and demand the government to do something?”

Ms. Johnson chuckled a bit. “Oh, I remember I used to be spunky like you when I was young. Always wanting to demand the government to do things. Well, it’s true, they should do something. But they can’t make it rain. They can’t put more water in the reservoir. They can’t solve everything. But, they do understand the situation and that is why they are working with us and other organizations to tell people to conserve water.
They understand that it’s a community effort. You know, we are lucky to have the local government on our side. In some countries, they just turn the other way.”

Her response made me think about Zach’s presentation on how the government ignored water issues that had stricken those in rural areas. Kioni and her community had to rely on foreign volunteers to help them build a water system. We were lucky in that the government was working with non-profit organizations to help our community through the drought. I just wished that the people here understood how lucky they were to have running water in their houses and a government that cared about the community. The people who walked by Ms. Johnson and me wouldn’t survive a day in Kioni’s shoes.

“Just keep on educating people.” Ms. Johnson said. “One day, they’ll understand.”

I suppose that’s how I came to work on water projects. I kept on teaching and talking to people. Kioni and I still talk to each other. She’s getting a degree in London and started a water project group at her university. She’s leading a team to her Kenyan community to build more water tanks and systems. It’s the little people that have big hearts that can make a difference.
Behind the Story: *The Price of Water*

This story encompasses several experiences from people from different regions. For example, when Kioni asked Lily how she had running water in her house and if that would make a mess, that was based on Godlove Fonjweng’s experience as a child. Mr. Fonjweng is one of the founding members of the Philadelphia Global Water Initiative. As a child growing up in Cameroon, he had to fetch water from streams before and after school. Sometimes, children would meet up with their parents after school in order to help with the farm. Before returning home in the evenings, they would go to a spring and bring the water back to the house. He heard of water taps in houses, but didn’t really understood how it worked:

> When I was very young, I heard that some people had water in their house. I had this imagination [of] how water could be in their house. And I wondered why the water was not splashing all over the place and making [it] messy. I didn’t really understand the concept of the tap where you can open and close...of course, it eventually became clear to me later on what it was. But I thought it was interesting that I felt sorry for those who had piped water in their homes.

In arid climates, rainwater is precious. Joseph ole Tipanko is a member of the Maasai tribe in Kenya. He explained that the tribe depended on rainwater and water ponds. Women would walk 5 to 10 miles to search for water. When they got the water, they would carry 50 liters back home. With the installation of water tanks, they could harvest rainwater. Each tank holds 4000 liters, which serves the village for a month. Water tanks were installed on school compounds. This meant that school children spent less hours outside of their classroom and more time studying. The water tanks are short term solutions. During droughts, the tanks will be dry and the villagers will have to spend their whole day finding water.
In a different part of Kenya, a community once suffered from severe droughts. Now, with help from Keiyo Soy Ministries and its partners, the community has gravity-fed water systems, providing a part of the population with continual source of water. This was an inspiration for the part of the story about Kioni’s village receiving foreign help. This was based on Dr. Elijah Korich’s Katumoi Water Project. Dr. Korich grew up in impoverished conditions and explained about the hardships:

*We would spend half the day going long distances to get water. [We] even travel[ed] to get water in potholes or the river [if it was not dried up]. We would bring dirty water. Water that you don’t even want to wash your hands with. But that’s all the water we have.*

As a child, he had to worry about food and water. Instead of going to school and worrying about his studies or doing his homework, or even having fun, he said that “some of us didn’t have a childhood because life was hard, we didn’t have any time for fun. We struggled for survival, struggled to live.” Dr. Korich knew from an early age that water was a precious commodity. The water collected was used for cooking and drinking. The villagers would go to the river to wash themselves and do their laundry there. But they always brought water home. He left for the United States and founded Keiyo Soy Ministries. For several years, he went back to his Kenyan community and worked on a water project that brought water from the nearby mountains to the community’s compounds. Dr. Korich could see the change in the landscape and the spirit of the people after receiving the water system. People grew small gardens of fruits and vegetables. Women were saying that they were healthier and that their teeth were cleaner. You can contact Dr. Korich and find out more about the water project on Keiyo Soy Ministries’ website: [http://www.ksmministries.com/](http://www.ksmministries.com/).
There are other parts of the story that are based on real accounts. Makena’s dinner story was based on Sami Buisson-Daniel’s experience in Mali. She was traveling and volunteering in a remote region and would join the women of the village for dinner. Ms. Buisson-Daniel explained that it was important to wash her hands before digging into a big bowl of food that she shared with her friends. It was also very important to remember that the right hand is for eating and the left hand is for wiping oneself after doing his/her business in the bushes. Perhaps that’s where the customary handshake with the right hand came from!

The Argentinean story was also true. Vivian L. de Vignaroli is the Director of the Department of Education at Asociación de Amigos de la Patagonia. She once led a group of students from Buenos Aires to a very dry, rural, and poor area in Argentina. The humble huts were made from cow manure, soil and water. The students entered a small hut when it began to rain. The family members that greeted them started bringing pots and pans and putting them everywhere in the hut to collect the rainwater. Even the children went out to collect water in ditches. The students understood the meaning of “every drop counts” that day. You can find more information about Asociación de Amigos de la Patagonia here: http://www.aapatagonia.org.ar/.

One of the volunteers that traveled with Dr. Korich to Kenya for the Katumoi Water Project mentioned that everywhere she looked, no one had shoes on. Kelly Densen attended the water tower opening ceremony and helped taught lessons in the community’s school. She noticed that the children did not have shoes. In the morning, she could see children walking a few miles to school, with their bare feet. It was explained to her that most of the children and adults in the community only have one pair of shoes. In order to
prolong the life of the shoe, they only wear them on Sundays when they go to church. For her, this was a humbling experience. She brought three pairs of shoes on her two-week trip. At the end of her trip, she came back with only the pair of shoes that she was wearing.

When we have a plethora of food, water, and even shoes, we tend to become wasteful. Some forget that being able to turn on the tap and have crisp clean water running endlessly is a privilege and not a right. Because it is in our lifestyle and habits to keep the faucet running when brushing our teeth, to always water our lawns, or to take long showers, it is hard to think that one day, the abundance of water that we have will be gone. It is even harder to break the wasteful habit and conserve water for the generations after us. Those who have to fetch water and decide whether or not they should save the collected water for drinking or cooking for the day know the value of water. They know that every drop counts and they make every drop count. For those who currently have an abundance of water, conserve it, prolong the abundance for your children and grandchildren. Help those in other nations that do not have access to clean water. As Dr. Korich once said to me, “we either live together, we survive together, or we die together.”
She felt trapped. Sleet pattered on Asha’s bedroom window casting tiny droplet shadows on her face. She frowned at the quaint New England street that laid undisturbed on this dreary Saturday winter afternoon.

“If only, if only” Asha kept repeating in her head. “If only I had money, I would travel all over the world. If only Mom could see things my way, this wouldn’t be so hard.” Three knocks on the door interrupted Asha from her thoughts.

“Asha, another one came today,” her mother said excitedly as she handed Asha a hefty white envelope. “That’s five schools that sent you acceptance packages. Do you know which one you want to go to?”

Asha walked towards her mother, slowly taking the package away. Walking towards her desk, where a small pile of packages occupied a corner, she threw the new one on top of the pile and let out a sigh.

“Honestly, Asha,” her mother raised her voice as she lifted her hand to her hips. “Most people would be excited to get all of these acceptance packages. It’s been two weeks! Every day I ask you, you say that you’re thinking. Thinking is fine, but not talking about it is ridiculous! What if the deadline already passed? We need to choose the best one and work out the finances. Everything has a deadline and you haven’t decided yet?”
“Mom,” Asha fixed her eyes on her mother’s fuzzy blue slippers, “we’ve been through this. College is not for me. I’m not ready to jump into four years of studying, papers, exams.”

“Not for you!” Her mother took in a long breath before letting out a loud and angry sigh. “Asha, you have the opportunity to go to college, something I did not have. It’s the smartest choice for you. What will you do if you don’t go to college? I can’t support you forever. What, you’re just going to stay at McDonald’s flipping burgers all day? That’s not a career, and you can’t get a career unless you go to college.”

“No!” Asha lifted her dark brown eyes and made eye contact with her mother. A cold chill ran down the back of her neck. Her legs seemed like it was suddenly made out of lead, planting her firmly on the carpeted floor. “I,” Asha shrugged, “I just know I won’t like college. I was so happy to know that I’ll be done with high school soon, that I’ll be able to go anywhere in the world, to see the world. I want to get out of this town and just meet new people. But you keep forcing me to go to college, and…”

“Forcing you!” Her mother was on the verge of screaming at her daughter. “I did not force you to do anything. I did not strap you to your chair and make you fill in those application forms.” Her mother took a step closer to Asha and lifted her chapped skinny forefinger at her. “I will not give you money so that you can waste by traveling around the world. What good will that do? College is an investment. When you get a college education, you have a good chance of getting a good career, a good start in life. I already paid for all the application fees to the colleges that you chose. You will go to college!” Before Asha could put in another word, her mother had already stormed out of the room.
Turning towards the envelopes on her desk, a tear fell down her face. An unexpected splurge of rage that once lied dormant in her screamed in her head. Asha’s hands grabbed the envelopes and swung them at the floor. *I don’t want to go! I don’t want to go!* She kept repeating to herself through her clenched teeth and now wet face. Tears fell from her chin and splattered on one listless envelope under her foot. Sobbing and trembling from anger, her hands closed on a corner of the envelope. She remembered that Mr. Jones, the college counselor, once asked Asha, “What are you passionate about?” All she could say was that she didn’t know if she had a passion for anything.

After a quiet dinner with her mother, Asha reluctantly took out the folders from the packages and laid them on her bed. Looking from one colorful cover to another, she began to remember.

Last summer, she worked at a science camp. She was assisting the children in their lessons on the ecosystem of the area.

“I didn’t know anything about the ecosystem!” she told Mark, another worker there. “But Ms. Brown said that there’s a two-week training course for me. They were paying me to learn about the ecosystem. Then they paid me to teach the kids. It was great!” It was Asha’s first summer job and she loved the idea of being paid to hike through the woods with the campers.

Mark was the Nature trail instructor whom she assisted. One day, they walked to a green pond. The children were going to catch some bugs and other organisms and identify them.

“Ewwww!” said one of the campers. “I don’t want to touch that water. It’s dirty!”
“It’s not dirty,” Mark replied. “It’s just duckweed. Ducks and swans love them. If you want to see dirty, go to a rural village in Mali and see what they have to drink. Now, that’s some dirty water, but they still drink it, and it didn’t kill them. I think you can manage to get a little of this pond water on you.”

While eating dinner in the mess room, Asha asked Mark what he meant when he told the camper about the dirty drinking water condition in Mali.

“Did you actually go to Mali and see people drinking dirty water? Or did you make that up to convince the kid it’s okay to touch the pond water?”

“Oh, I didn’t make it up.” Mark was surprised that Asha thought that he lied. “About five years ago, I joined the Peace Corps and volunteered in a small village in Mali. My project was to build two wells for the village. You see, Asha, before the wells were built, the people would go to a stream and get their water from there. During the dry season, the stream would run real low, even stop running. So they walk to a pond and get their water from there. Now, the water is untreated. Animals go to the pond and stream and drink from there, even do their dirty business there. So you can imagine how bad the water is. When I went, the children were sick, they were dying.”

“That’s horrible!” Asha was dumfounded. She couldn’t believe that such a place existed where children died because they didn’t have clean water. Surely the government had to fix the problem, she thought. If the children in my town started dying, there would be an uproar and things would get fixed.

“That’s why the Peace Corps sent me there with four other volunteers. I worked on wells and water systems before, so they wanted me to build a water
system for the villagers. It took two years to get the wells. The villagers didn’t have much money or expertise, so it took a lot of talking, planning, and negotiating. But when the wells were done, you should have seen them. They were crying for joy.”

“They were crying, just because they now have water?” Asha asked in disbelief.

“Of course! They were happy because they now know that their children won’t die from drinking dirty water. They were able to get water within ten minutes walking instead of hours.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Asha splurted.

“Um, what is?” Marked asked, confused as to what Asha thought to be ridiculous.

“That such a thing can exist in today’s world.” Asha flushed with anger. “We have bottled water, sodas, juices, liquor. We have so many water products to choose from and you’re telling me that in some parts of the world people don’t even have water? Plain old water? I mean, if you said that this happened a hundred years ago I would understand it. But today, still?”

“It’s unfair, I know. But they live in impoverished conditions. The government has forgotten them. They want to get clean water, they want to pull themselves out of poverty, but they don’t have the resources or opportunities like we do.”

“So they’re stuck in some kind of vicious cycle?” Asha asked incredulously.
“Something like that.”

Asha’s mind was racing. She still couldn’t believe that such inequality existed. *Men have gone to the moon. Humans found different ways to create energy. People created nuclear bombs. And yet there are children out there that can’t drink clean water? Have we misplaced our priorities?*

“How did you do it? Why did you go?” Asha couldn’t believe why anyone would choose to live in poverty for two years.

Mark fell silent and dreamily looked at the ceiling as if the answer was written there. “Honestly, I was bored. I was bored with working in the office, doing the same things every day. The pay was great, but, I wasn’t happy. I wanted to do more, feel better about myself. I wanted to prove to myself that I am a worthy person. So I went, in hopes that by helping others I could help myself.”

Ever since that day, Asha had hoped to join the Peace Corps. She was bored with school and the same routine that goes on in her life. Nothing was exciting anymore, she didn’t feel the passion that some of her classmates felt when they talked about college or what they wanted for a career. Life was a monotonous mindless task.

Breakfast on Sunday morning with her mother was as quiet as the dinner from the night before. Asha gulped, straightened her back, and lifted her head.

“How,” she said loudly, “I know you want me to go to college. But, I want to do something good for others first. I want to join the Peace Corps.”

Her mother’s eyes widened as her lips thinned. Slowly placing the newspaper that she was reading down on the table, she took in a deep breath. “Asha, the Peace Corps is a
good organization. But, it’s too dangerous for you. It’s not easy. And, you will be gone for years. You’re too young.”

“But, I want to do something important. Something good. Like a week ago, Mark, you remember the guy I worked with at the summer camp? Anyway, he sent me an e-mail about this boy in Malawi that built a windmill to make electricity for his house. I think his name was William. Anyway, he was only fourteen and all he had were old tractor parts and a bicycle. But he made electricity! And he didn’t even finish high school. He had to drop out because he couldn’t afford the tuition. Then he started building more windmills for other families, and now, he’s making lots of money, traveling the world, telling his story.”

“That’s a good story, an inspiring one, but Asha, how will volunteering help you get a good job. How will it help you pay the bills? Why can’t you volunteer later, after you retire?”

“Because, Mom,” Asha was getting desperate, “I don’t know when I’ll die. I could die tomorrow. And if I do, I’ll regret for not doing the things I wanted to do.”

“Asha! Don’t talk like that. You’re not going to die tomorrow.”

“But I could. No one knows when they are going to die. Haven’t you heard of the phrases, ‘seize the day’ or ‘live in the moment?’”

Her mother’s lips curled on the side. It meant that she was holding a laugh. Seeing that this was her opportunity to convince her mother, Asha continued.

“Mom, I can make a difference out there. There’s this eight-year-old kid, Ryan from Canada. He came home one day, bent on building a well. He just learned from his teacher that there were people in the world that were dying because they didn’t have
clean water. Ryan raised $70 and sent it to an organization that built a well in a Ugandan village. But the well cost more than $70, so he got his friends, neighbors, his community to raise the rest of the money. And now, he has his own organization, building wells around the world. Mom, I want to be able to make a difference too!”

“I know, but honey…”

“I’m good with kids and I’m a fast learner. I’m tough. You see how I can work part-time and go to school full-time without ever missing a class. You see how I get good grades and get all these acceptance letters from colleges. I can make it in the Peace Corps. And you know, colleges and employees will see that I’m a well-rounded person. Not only do I do well in school, I help others out. I get work experience by being in the Peace Corps, I get to meet new people, I get to see the world. It’s an investment.”

Her mother looked at her daughter who had suddenly seemed to have grown up right before her eyes. She was proud, but very worried.

“Asha, you are a good person. You have a big heart. But I just don’t think it’s safe for an eighteen-year-old to go live in some run-down village with diseases and little food and water. What about the people? How do you know if they will be nice to you? What will you do if you get sick? Is their doctor good enough to help you? It’s a big risk. And besides, you’ll be gone for over a year, to a place where it would be difficult for me or your friends to visit you. And when you come back, your friends would already be well on their way to land their first real job, and you’ll be lagging behind. Have you really thought this through?”

In truth, Asha hadn’t thought it through. Her idea of being in the Peace Corps was more romantic than practical. She never thought that she wouldn’t be able to see her
friends for years. It never crossed her mind that she might not be able to see her mother either. A bit scared and confused, Asha fell quiet. *I still don’t want to go to college, but Mom’s right. I’m not ready for the Peace Corps yet.* She felt as defeated as the half-eaten bagel that sat cold on her plate.

“I had a friend who joined the Peace Corps, years ago,” her mother continued. “I think she was in Vietnam. Anyway, I would remember getting letters from her telling me how hard life was over there. She missed her bed, her shower, her friends and family. But she felt like her expertise in education really helped the community, and that’s why she stayed. Asha, the Peace Corps is hard to get into. You need to be able to offer them skills that they want. You’re just becoming an adult, just learning of your skills. Go to college, get your skills. And if you still want to join the Peace Corps, I wouldn’t object. Okay? For now, let the volunteers help build wells and such.”

Her mother looked at her daughter with warm gentle eyes. Asha took a bite of the bland and stale bagel and finished her orange juice.

“I have some homework to do. Thanks Mom.” Asha hurried off to her room, softly closing the door behind her. Pacing around the room, twisting and untwisting a small part of her long black curly hair around her finger, she began to talk to herself.

“Mom’s right. I hate it when she’s right.” Asha sighed and crossed her arms around her chest as she paced some more. “I know I want to volunteer, but I don’t think I’ll last for two years. But I don’t want to go to college, not yet anyway.”

Frustrated, she went on the Internet to look at the Peace Corps’ website. Just looking at the information section showed that a lot is required from a volunteer. Asha wasn’t so sure anymore if she wanted to join. She typed in *Peace Corps alternatives* on a
search engine and saw a list of websites. One, caught her eye, *Global Volunteer Network*. There were various programs to choose from and they had different time commitments, from a week to six months. *Now this is something I can do.*

“Asha!” Her mother yelled from downstairs. “Lunch!”

Asha had lost track of time. She spent the morning looking at different websites and at the different schools that accepted her. The rumbling in her stomach encouraged her to go downstairs.

“Well?” Her mother asked.

“Um, what?” Asha was confused. Was she supposed to answer something?

“You didn’t answer me when I asked you if you were going to go to college and wait to join the Peace Corps. You just left.”

“Oh.” Asha chewed on her curry chicken and rice as she tried to think of something that might convince her mother. “I understand your concern, Mom. And you’re right, the Peace Corps is hard. It requires a lot from me. But I still don’t want to go to school.” Her mother placed her fork down. “Not yet anyway.” Asha quickly inserted that in to stop a fight that she could feel was brewing. “Maybe if I can just volunteer for a few months. Then go to school. I looked at the acceptance letters, and most of them allow me to start in the spring semester. I won’t lag far behind my friends. Besides, the volunteer work would help me decide what I want to do for my career. I’ll choose a school that offers a lot of majors. That way I can have plenty to choose from.”

Picking up her fork, and carefully chewing her food while deep in thought, her mother gently asked, “where do you want to go? What do you want to do?”

“South Africa. I want to teach the kids there about health.”
“I thought you wanted to build wells?”

“I do. But, I don’t have the skills. I wouldn’t even know where to begin. But health and water issues are related. Clean water save lives. But health education ensures that lives will continued to be saved.” Asha was intently cutting the chicken with her knife and fork that she couldn’t have seen the big smile that briefly appeared on her mother’s face.

After lunch, Asha asked her mother to go to the bedroom with her. She wanted to show her an e-mail from Mark.

Dear Friends,

I am back with the Peace Corps, this time in India. The rural village that I am in are suffering greatly from the lack of clean drinking water. They have a well, but it’s polluted. Women and children are sick. Most of the people here don’t even have enough money to feed themselves, let alone see a doctor. I am sending you this e-mail asking you to donate whatever amount you can to help us build a safe water system here. We will also purchase LifeStraws for people to use while they wait for their water system to be built. Attached is a picture to show you how desperate these people are.

Thank you,
Mark

The picture was of a young woman who was holding a bundle of cloth. The caption read:

A young mother holding her dead child. The child died from diarrhea. Diarrhea, easily treatable, is the second leading cause in infant mortality worldwide, especially in regions without clean drinking water.

“Oh, that’s terrible,” Asha’s mother spoke softly.

“Mom, just look at her face. She’s not sad and she’s not angry. She looks…”

“Defeated,” her mother could not have chosen a better word. “It’s as if this wasn’t the first time she had loss a child to diarrhea. She’s giving up.” Her mother sighed.

“Asha, I’m happy and proud that you feel like helping others. But I’m just concerned
about your safety. Can’t you just raise some money here for, whatever that life straw thing is, and send it to Mark? Why do you have to leave?”

“Mom, first of, LifeStraws are awesome. They’re literally straws that you carry around and they filter whatever water you are drinking. You can stick the straw in a pond and suck up the water and it gets filtered.” Asha couldn’t believe that her mother didn’t know what LifeStraws were.

“Okay, so LifeStraws are great. We can raise the money and buy a whole bunch and send it to Mark.” Her mother was exasperatedly trying to convince her daughter to not embark on what she considered to be a lofty and dangerous mission.

“No, Mom. I don’t want to just raise money. I want to travel. I want to help people with my bare hands.” This was the only thing she ever felt passionate about and the thought of not being able to pursue it was frightening her. “I found an organization, They have volunteer programs for up to six months. I’ll come back in time for school. Mom, I really want to do this.”

“I know you do.” Her mother continued to stare at her daughter, not knowing how else to convince her to stay. “Why don’t we talk more about this tonight? Get more information about the volunteer work, get the forms, choose the school you want to go to, and we’ll sit down and sort things out. Okay?”

“Okay,” Asha smiled as her mother kissed her on the forehead before walking out of the room. Returning to her window that was covered with water droplets, Asha looked out at the empty street. So this is what passion feels like. I love it.
Behind the Story: Making a Difference

The idea that one person can make a difference in the world may seem far-fetched. However, it has been known to happen. This story was inspired by extraordinary people whom I came across while I was doing research. The story of William’s windmills is true. According to “William’s Story,” William Kamkwamba is still active today in building electrical sources for his community. Ryan’s story is also true. Ryan Hreljac first started a water well project when he was only eight years old. He is now an adult and still has the passion to build wells in countries where water is scarce. He created the Ryan’s Well Foundation which has built 518 wells in 16 countries and serves 640,000 people (Ryan’s Story).

The picture that Asha saw of the young mother holding her dead child was based on the documentary, Runny Dry by Jim Thebaut. I saw this documentary when I took my Global Water Issues class during my graduate studies. The image of the young woman laying down a dead child whom had been bundled up in white cloth, unto what seemed like a back of a truck already filled with other bodies, stuck with me. Her expression surprised and saddens me. So many children in the world are dying because they don’t have access to clean drinking water. To me, that is a great loss in humanity’s potential. The children who died could have been the next William Kamkwamba or Ryan Hreljac. They could have been the next influential figure of the world. They could have been the ones to help so many others and to bring their country out of poverty and create peace. But we will never know if they could have become those things, because their lives were taken away so quickly by something that could have been easily prevented.
The LifeStraw is a new life-saving technology that costs less than ten dollars each. Each LifeStraw lasts for a year and it filters out most water pollutants, bacteria, and viruses. Although it doesn’t cost much, those living in poverty cannot afford to buy them. You can find out more about the LifeStraw technology and what you can do to donate LifeStraws to those living in poverty here:

http://www.vestergaard-frandsen.com/lifestraw-p-donations.htm

While attending the Fifth World Water Forum in March 2009, I met Rebecca West, the President of Water Environment Federation based in South Carolina. She shared a story with me that made me realize how precious water is to some people. I asked her what was her most memorable experience in her years of implementing water projects. She said:

*The day that a drinking water well was completed in a village outside of Iringa, Tanzania. The people in that village were ecstatic and thanked all of us on the team that helped with the well. Their children were dancing and the elderly ladies in the village were so excited. The thought that a well could provide such joy is amazing. This vividly reminded me that we take so much for granted, especially in the US and have so much to be thankful for.*

It is important to mind our own water resources and to take care of them so that future generations can have water to drink. It is also important to help others in need because there is only one planet that we live on, and we all need water. Some may ask, why is it important to help others in a different nation? One reason is for economics. The United States depends on various countries for oil and food. For example, the US gets some of its oil from Nigeria. If the people of Nigeria are dying because of the lack of clean water, the US’ economy will be affected. The United States depends on developing nations for food. If the people of that nation are ill and cannot harvest the rice, wheat,
nuts, and other commodities, the United States will not be able to have those foods for their citizens. Another reason is for health concerns, especially outbreaks. It is uncommon for disease outbreaks to come from the United States or a developed nation. It usually stems from developing nations with poor water systems. Diseases know no boundaries and will travel throughout the globe. By helping other nations with their water issues, you are ensuring your own safety (Fonjweng). By helping others, you will also gain an invaluable experience and a deeper appreciation of the life that you have. Perhaps you can find your life’s passion when you help others less fortunate than you.

To see how you can help, you can check out these organizations:

Global Volunteer Network provides short-term volunteer programs all over the world. Volunteers can choose to work in various fields such as nature conservation, teaching health and hygiene, providing medical assistance, and other options.
http://www.globalvolunteernetwork.org/

The Peace Corps engages in various volunteer program worldwide. Most projects are long term and require you to already have experience and skills in certain industries. You need to be over 18 years old in order to join.
http://www.peacecorps.gov/

The Philadelphia Global Water Initiative works with Engineers Without Borders and other organizations to help bring water systems to certain villages in the developing communities. Volunteers can also apply for their Water Ambassadors Program where students are trained to raise global water issues awareness to local high schools.
www.pgwi.org

The Rotary Club of Fort Lauderdale has a LifeStraw project where you can donate money to the purchasing and delivering of LifeStraws to people in Tanzania, Kenya, Malawi, and Ghana.
http://lifestraw.123yourweb.com/
Challenges and Tips

You’ve just read some stories on global water issues and how some people in the world are suffering simply because they do not have access to clean water. Now, what are you going to do with what you have learned? Below are some challenges, tips, and resources that you can take advantage of. Live your life water-consciously everyday and remember that the smallest act can lead to something great.

Challenges (or Things to Think About)

- Allow yourself 5 or 6 gallons (around 20 liters) of water each day for a week. This water is to be used for drinking, cooking, cleaning, etc. Do you think you can make it for a week? The United Nations Development Programme believes that a human being needs a minimum of 20 liters of water per day in order to survive (Hastings 10). The unfortunate truth is that some people have access to less than the requirement. Some have to walk for miles to a stream or water pump several times a day for their water needs. The water that they drink is most likely dirty, something that is far less potable than the clean water you get from your tap, or even your toilet.

  A Greater Challenge: Collect as much rainwater as you like. Use only this collected water for all your needs. You can boil it for drinking, but you cannot replace it from your faucet. Use the collected rainwater for a month. At the end of the month, you have the choice to turn on your faucet. Will you turn it on? Most of you will just go back to your old
lifestyle, but keep in mind that some people don’t have the choice to turn
on their faucet. They don’t have faucets. Some people depend on
rainwater in areas that don’t rain often. What will you do to help these
people? (Payne)

➢ Turn on your faucet when you are brushing your teeth. Let the water run into a
bowl. When you are done brushing your teeth, turn off the faucet. Find out how
much water is in the bowl. Multiply that number by the people in your house and
you can see how much water is being wasted by your family just brushing their
teeth without turning the faucet off. You can also multiply the amount of water in
the bowl by your town’s population or by the country’s population (Fonjweng).
That gives you a rough idea of how much water is being wasted when people let
the water run as they brush their teeth. (Now use that water in the bowl to wash
your dishes or water your plants. Don’t just throw it in the sink!)

➢ Go to “Water Science for Schools” webpage by the United States Geological
Survey to calculate how much water you use per day:

http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/sq3.html. Keep in mind that some people have access
to only 5.28 gallons of water a day. Are you over this amount? If so, by how
much? How many lives can be saved with the amount of water you wasted?
(Amount of water used in one day – 5.28 gallons = amount wasted. Amounted
wasted/5.28 gallons = number of people you could have helped)

➢ Fill a 5-gallon jerry can and carry it for a mile (don’t hurt yourself!). This will
give you a sense of what a water chore feels like. Consider yourself lucky that you
don’t have to do this every day. Some children carry full cans for miles, walking
barefoot, walking up and down hills. Some even have to do this several times a
day. (Remember to reuse that water in your can!)

- *Imagine:* How long does it take you to take a shower? When you turn on the water
to fill a glass, how long do you let it run into the drain for? What would happen if
the only thing coming out of your faucets was air? What would you do?

(Fonjweng)

- Get a rectangular plastic, glass, or aluminum container. Get some wet soil and
wrap that with a plastic sheet. Cut some holes in your plastic sheet to expose some
of the soil. Place your soil on one side of the container to represent your “land
mass.” The parts that are wrapped in plastic represent all the driveways, roads,
and other surfaces that water is not absorbed into the ground. Stick some twigs
and leaves in the soil to create a “forest.” If you have plastic animal figurines, put
them on your “land mass” for ambiance. Now, it’s time for you to pollute your
land! Sprinkle some mayonnaise (represents oil spills, oil runoffs into water
sources), mustard (represents human and animal wastes), cigarette butts, bits of
paper (represent litter), crushed dried leaves (represent organic litter and
agricultural runoff), and anything else that you think represents pollutants. Now
take a cup to two cups of water and pour it on your land (represents rain), letting
the water wash the pollutants from the soil. Carefully pour the now polluted water
into a clear cup. This cup of polluted water represents what some people in the
world have to drink because they do not have access to filtered and treated water.
Would you drink this polluted water? (Abington High School)

- When you see someone wasting water, how would you convince them to stop?
➢ Contact your local water department and see if they give group tours. Convince your teacher to take a class trip to the local water department or treatment plant. By seeing where your drinking water comes from will give you a better sense of how clean your water is compared to those living in poverty. It will also convince you that buying bottled water is a huge waste.

➢ Find out if there are local water issues in your area. Ask local politicians or officials how you can help solve the issues.

➢ Contact local politicians and ask them what is being done to ensure the safety of the water and that future generations will have enough clean drinking water in their lifetime.

**Water Conservation Tips**

There are hundreds of ways that you can conserve water. Here are just a few:

➢ Turn off your faucet while brushing your teeth.

➢ Take short showers. You can even brush your teeth and wash your face while in the shower. Turn off the water while brushing and lathering.

➢ Flush your toilet when you go number 2. Keep in mind: *if it’s yellow, let it mellow. If it’s brown, flush it down!*

➢ Only run the dishwasher on full load. If washing by hand, fill a large container or the sink with water. Use this to rinse your dishes when they are already soaped and scrubbed.

➢ Fix leaks in your house and around your house.

➢ Instead of having a lawn, especially one with water-thirsty Kentucky bluegrass, plant native shrubs, wildflowers, and native grasses. These tend to be sturdy
alternatives for your climate. If you already have a lawn and want to keep it, then avoid watering it during the daytime when most of it would be lost to evaporation.

You also do not need to water your lawn every day, especially when it’s going to rain.

➢ Collect rainwater and use this to water your plants or even wash your car.

You can find more tips at “100 Ways to Conserve”:


At the Water Pump (Mali)
Picture taken by Sami Buisson-Daniel
Resources/Engaging Your School

Have you heard about World Water Day (March 22) and World Toilet Day (November 19)? These are important days that you can raise awareness in your school/community about global water and sanitation issues. You can find out more about these two days here:


If you are interested in learning about water conditions in specific countries, The World Water Assessment Programme conducted case studies since 2000. Its newest publication is The United Nations World Water Development Report 3, Case Study Volume: Facing the Challenges which you can find on UNESCO’s website:


Want to learn more about global water issues? Want to find projects that you and/or your school can do? Check out the websites below.

Global Volunteer Network provides short-term volunteer programs all over the world. Volunteers can choose to work in various fields such as nature conservation, teaching health and hygiene, providing medical assistance, and other options. [http://www.globalvolunteernetwork.org/](http://www.globalvolunteernetwork.org/)

The Groundwater Foundation is a nonprofit organization aimed at raising awareness about protecting and conserving groundwater. There are educational resources for children, young adults, and teachers that are available for free. [http://www.groundwater.org/](http://www.groundwater.org/)

H2O for Life is a nonprofit and volunteer based organization that links schools in the United States to several schools in developing nations to complete WASH-in-Schools
projects. To find out how your school can be involved in a water or sanitation project, visit their website.
http://www.h2oforlifeschools.org/

Keiyo Soy Ministries is a nonprofit organization that aims to improve living conditions of the people living in the Keiyo region in Kenya. The goals are to provide clean drinking water to the people, establish health care clinics, assist in training young pastors, and other endeavors. Almost every year, Dr. Korich arranges a humanitarian trip from the United States to Kenya for projects.
http://www.ksmministries.com/index.htm

The Peace Corps engages in various volunteer program worldwide. Most projects are long term and require you to already have experience and skills in certain industries. You need to be over 18 years old in order to join.
http://www.peacecorps.gov/

The Philadelphia Global Water Initiative works with Engineers Without Borders and other organizations to help bring water systems to certain villages in the developing communities. Volunteers can also apply for their Water Ambassadors Program where students are trained to teach global water issues awareness to local high schools.
www.pgwi.org

ProjectWet is a nonprofit water education organization that reaches out to children and adults. They produce educational materials, workshops, and events. Visit their website to learn about global water issues and get teaching materials. They also have a list on how to conserve water.
http://www.projectwet.org/

The Rotary Club of Fort Lauderdale has a LifeStraw project where you can donate money to the purchasing and delivering of LifeStraws to people in Tanzania, Kenya, Malawi, and Ghana.
http://lifestraw.123yourweb.com/

Traveling Mercies Organization was founded by Aldo Magazzeni to aid in humanitarian efforts in various nations. Mr. Magazzeni also speaks with high school students around the Philadelphia area about global water issues and the projects that he has worked on.
http://www.travelingmercies.org/

Water Advocates is a US-based organization that seeks to raise funds for water and sanitation projects worldwide. Funding comes from US Government, businesses, philanthropic organizations, faith-based groups, and other private sources. They also have Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)-in-Schools programs where you can help improve water and sanitation conditions in schools in developing nations.
http://www.wateradvocates.org
WASH-in-Schools: http://www.wateradvocates.org/forschools.htm
Water For People aims to improve the quality of life of those living in developing countries through water resources, sanitation facilities, and education programs. The organization works with local organizations to solve local issues. They also have” The H2O Challenge” in which they partnered with The H2O Project. The challenge is that for two weeks, you would make water your only beverage choice. The money that you would have spent on other drinks (coffee, tea, soda, etc) is to be contributed to Water For People or an organization of your choice.

http://www.waterforpeople.org/
The H20 Challenge: http://www.theh2oproject.org/

By the river (Mali)
Picture taken by Sami Buisson-Daniel
Acknowledgements

Over the course of two years, I have met some amazing people that inspired me to write these stories. Although most of them did not make it into my stories, it is still important to mention them.

Stan Laskowski was the person that enlightened me on global water issues. I took his class at the University of Pennsylvania and was shocked by how many people were suffering from water-related illnesses and the lack of access to water and proper sanitation. I also volunteered for his organization, Philadelphia Global Water Initiative, where I met Christiaan Morrsink. He taught me the importance of being a global citizen.

Through Philadelphia Global Water Initiative, I met my interviewees. Aldo Magazzeni, who founded Traveling Mercies, worked in Afghanistan, Mexico, Italy, and other places on humanitarian projects. Arun Deb educated me on the arsenic problem in drinking water in India. Vince Uhl shared his years of experiences as a hyrdrogeologist who has worked in numerous countries. Tony and Joshua Sauder shared their impressions and stories on their visit to Cameroon while working on a water project. Godlove Fonjweng, who grew up in Cameroon, spoke to me about his childhood and his endeavors to help his community. Dr. Elijah Korich, who founded Keiyo Soy Ministries, shared some of his childhood experiences while growing up in Kenya. Marty Shanzt, Kelly Densen, and Mel Payne volunteered for Dr. Korich’s Katumoi Water Project and graciously shared their stories with me. Matt Owens, an engineering student at the University of Pennsylvania and a member of Engineers Without Borders, spoke with me about his involvement in various water projects. Anastasia Shown also shared with me her stories and opinions on some water issues faced by those living in poverty in various
African nations. I also met Joseph ole Tipanko at an annual conference where he shared his stories from the Maasai tribe. Through Joseph, I met Sami Buisson-Daniel who shared her stories, experiences, and pictures as a volunteer in various African and Asian nations. Kate McArdle is an alumna of the University of Pennsylvania and is doing some great works in Mali as a Peace Corps volunteer. Rebecca West, whom I met at the 5th World Water Forum, shared her experiences while working in Tanzania. At the forum, I also met Vivian Vignaroli who taught me the importance of appreciating water and her experience with working in Argentina with youths.

Thanks to Susan Stranahan, former professor at the University of Pennsylvania, who inspired me to write about the environment. For writing support, I’d like to thank Elaine Wright, Kathy Shultz, and Barbara Riebling. Special thanks goes to Tracy Byford and the Jabberwocky team for helping me understand children’s literature.

To my grandmother, a great storyteller, who inspired me to tell stories. To my family and friends for their constant support throughout my education. And finally, to my husband, for reading and critiquing all of my stories and encouraging me to write.
Analysis of Every Drop Counts: Short Stories on Global Water Issues

The inspiration for this project came about while volunteering for Philadelphia Global Water Initiative. It was surprising to see that most of the active volunteers of the organization were over twenty-five years old. If children were the ones that suffer the most from water and sanitation problems, it would make sense that young adults of developed nations have the interest to help their peers that live in dire situations. The organization had just started its Water Ambassadors Program where college students were trained to educate local high school students on water issues. While participating in the program, the author saw that the main material used was a PowerPoint presentation that is loaded with facts and figures. It is in this author’s opinion that although statistics and graphs help illustrate the seriousness of water and sanitation issues, they do not necessarily make the young students care to help solve the problems. Stories are intriguing and they provide a hook to students’ curiosity on the topic. Once they show interest to the issues and formulate emotional responses as well as critical thoughts, facts and figures would become more tangible. The introduction, stories, and other components to the book are written in an informal voice to engage young students in thinking critically while reading the book as well as afterwards. These stories serve to grab young students’ attention to global water issues and to inspire them to volunteer in their communities or organizations. These stories are best used in conjunction with lessons or lectures on environmental advocacy, policy, and studies.
The series of short stories in this compilation are divided by different global water issues. This decision was made so that teachers can distribute the stories according to the day’s lesson. It is important to note that water issues do not exist in a void. For example, the lack of access to clean water is related to water conflicts; poor sanitation is related to water pollution and water-borne illnesses. Although each of the stories has a main issue that it is focused on, other relatable water issues are also mentioned.

To formulate the stories, interviews were conducted with those who had water burdens in their childhood, water professionals, and volunteers involved in water projects. These accounts provided the basis for the stories as well as the emotional and vivid imageries. Other sources were used to provide explanations on certain water and sanitation issues. Facts and statistics were used to emphasize that these fictional stories were based on real situations and to show the immensity of the issues. The stories were meant to be entertaining and educational.

*Fetching Water* illustrated the hardships of women and children in some nations, in this case in the Keiyo region of Kenya, when it came to the lack of access to clean drinking water. Worldwide, 884 million people rely on unsafe water sources (Millennium 46). Although the world is ahead of schedule in meeting the Millennium Development Goal on access to clean water, the success is unevenly distributed across the world. Sub-Saharan African countries, especially in rural areas, lag behind other regions in providing improved water sources. The story was also based on interviews with those who grew up in areas without access to clean water and those who worked on water projects. Their accounts provide the vivid and emotional aspect of the story behind the number “884 million” that suffer from the consequences of not having access to clean water.
The story *The Year Without the Water Pump* focused on the link between poor sanitation and water-borne illnesses. The purpose of this story is to illustrate to the young readers that it is vital to solve both sanitation and access to clean water issues in order to prevent water-borne disease outbreaks such as typhoid fever. It is important to separate sewage from water sources because fecal matter may contain viruses, bacteria, and parasitic eggs (*Toilets-The Facts*). In slum areas where people are crammed to live in tight spaces with raw sewage running by their houses, diseases are spread into groundwater supplies as well as surface waters. Diseases such as cholera, typhoid, diarrhea, dysentery, and Leptospirosis affect children the most because their malnourished bodies hinder them from fighting the illnesses (*Water-related Diseases*). Although the world is making progress in lowering the amount of people living without proper sanitation systems, 2.5 billion people still need access to sanitation facilities if the Millennium Development goal is to be met (*Millennium 45*). If people are still living in poor sanitation conditions, no matter how many access points to clean water sources a community has, people will continue to suffer from water-borne illnesses.

*The Fight for the Mekong River* focused on water conflicts, especially between rural inhabitants and proponents of hydropower dams. Other issues mentioned in this story included deforestation and the lack of environmental awareness which led to the depletion of natural resources. The Mekong River runs through six countries: China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam (*Nguyen 3*). The story mainly took place near the Tonle Sap river of Cambodia where monsoon rains reversed the flow and flooded nearby forests. The local fishing industry depended on the flooded forests because it served as fish nurseries (*Pearce 93-95*). In the late twentieth century, dams
were built along the Mekong River. Locals blamed the dams for poor fish yields and scientists noticed the decline in Irrawaddy dolphins and giant catfish populations (Middleton). The Mekong River Commission manages the development of the river and ensures that the livelihoods of the locals and the ecosystem of the areas are safe. Unfortunately, China and Myanmar did not join the Mekong River Commission and their actions could not be regulated by the organization despite the effects that their actions have on those down river. This story warns that violent acts can occur when people are desperate and their voices are not heard by leaders and decision makers. The story also advocates the importance of conservation of water and other natural sources.

In *The Price of Water*, the character Lily learned about water conditions in a rural village in Kenya through her pen-pal Kioni. Lily’s character was based on the author’s own naiviness before learning about global water issues. The character grew from a callous teenager whose main goal was to simply finish an assignment to a character that cared and acted to help solve social injustices. The main point of this story was to illustrate how some Americans take advantage of water and not realize its value and contrast it to those living in poverty and understanding the preciousness of the commodity. The story also touched upon the political issues associated with access to water such as a government’s lack of interest in helping the rural poor. This story stressed the importance of water conservation as well as asking the readers to become water advocates and educators in their community.

The last story, *Making a Difference*, was written to inspire volunteerism in students and to give reasons of why one should volunteer. It is possible that one person’s action can impact thousands of lives. The story of William Kamkwamba and Ryan
Hreljac were included to show that young adults have the power to influence change. The LifeStraw was mentioned in the story to show that new technologies are available to help those in poverty. The LifeStraw does not cost much; a middle or high school student can easily afford one. But a person living in poverty in a developing nation does not have enough money to purchase one. Young students can donate to various organizations to provide LifeStraws to those who need it. Some young adults have asked the author why they should care or help those living in poverty. The answers “because it makes you feel good” or “because it makes you a better person” are vague and may be intangible to the youth because nothing materialistic is received. Even this story of Asha feeling passionate and fulfilled from wanting to volunteer may be incomprehensible to some readers. In the Behind the Story section, the author mentioned that by volunteering, donating, or helping people gain access to safe drinking water or sanitation facilities, the youth was ensuring the future of his/her nation’s economy and security. With safe water supplies and sanitation, those living in developing nations can grow food and create other products that the United States import. Healthier people also mean fewer outbreaks of diseases that might impact those living in the United States. If youths are not inspired to volunteer because it “makes them a better person” then perhaps they will volunteer because they want to take care of their home and their future.

The experiences of researching and writing the stories have been an immense but eye-opening one. Talking to various people from an array of backgrounds confirm that water and sanitation issues are pandemic problems. It is the hopes of the author that her stories will serve as educational tools for American students and to encourage them to volunteer in their communities and beyond.
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Picture taken by Sami Buisson-Daniel