A Never-Ending Story in South Sudan
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IN THE PIBOR REGION, SOME EXPECTANT MOTHERS TOWARDS THE END OF THEIR PREGNANCY LEAVE THEIR REMOTE HOMES AMONGST THE NOMADIC CATTLE HERDS TO SLEEP IN THE MOTHERS’ WAITING HOUSE WHERE THEY ARE JUST METRES FROM MSF’S MATERNITY WARD. ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE IN THE REGION IS SO LIMITED, THAT THIS IS ONE OF THE ONLY WAYS THEY CAN ENSURE THAT THEY’LL HAVE THE SUPPORT OF TRAINED MIDWIVES WHEN LABOUR BEGINS.

IN MY CASE, IT WAS A PLANE, HELICOPTER, 4x4 & PAIR OF GUMBOOTS THAT CARRIED ME FROM MY HOME IN THE UK TO THE MOTHERS’ WAITING HOUSE IN SEPTEMBER 2019. MANY OF THE WOMEN IN THE WAITING HOUSE HAVE HAD LITTLE INTERACTION WITH MODERN TECHNOLOGY. THEY MAY NEVER HAVE ENCOUNTERED FOREIGNERS & VIEW US & OUR CAMERAS WITH ANXIETY.

MSF INVITED ME & MY SKETCHPAD TO THE MOTHERS’ WAITING HOUSE IN THE HOPE THAT WE’D BE MORE WELCOME...

BABY MARIA’S MOTHER LAITO & GRANDMOTHER CHACHA WERE CURIOUS TO SEE ME SKETCHING, & SOON HAPPY FOR ME TO DRAW THEM.

AS I SKETCHED, THEY TOLD ME THE STORY OF MARIA’S BIRTH...
IT WAS THE MIDWIFE WHO DELIVERED MARIA who translated the story of her birth for me. Local to Pibor, she trained with MSF to become a midwife.

COME! SIT WITH US! LISTEN I’LL TRANSLATE FOR YOU

I’m midwife Maria Isn’t that the baby’s name?

They named her Maria after me.

We come from the village of Maloddin, many days walk from Pibor.

Quieter?

No problem!

What’s happening? Is she going to be okay? Is the baby okay?

I’m so sorry I don’t know what’s wrong. In Gumuruk town there might be MSF midwives who can help...

But it’s many days walk from here... I don’t think she’ll make it...

Laito is strong—we’ll get there.

Laito was pregnant with her first child...

When her contractions began, called our neighbour who is skilled with births.

She came to our house in 24. For 3 days we tried to help Laito to deliver

But still the baby would not come.

Hello! We’ve been expecting you. See you’ve already met Laito & Chacha.
BEFORE SUNRISE

We started walking. The contractions were so bad that Laito couldn’t walk alone so I had to support her always. It is rainy season, and the path was full of water so that sometimes we were wading up to our waist.

“When darkness came, we were still walking & I worried that we’d have to sleep by the path.”

“They were strangers to us—But when they saw Laito was pregnant they welcomed us into their home.”
The next morning.

Our host blessed our journey.

They blessed us like this.

What does it feel like? To be hungry like that?

Your head becomes so heavy.

Like this, everything spins outwards.

Dots dance in your eyes.

But we are no strangers to hunger.

When Laito fainted, we'd stop to rest in the shade of a tree.

The ground falls away until everything fades to black.

By now we were very weak, for days we'd had no food.

Since the contractions began, Laito couldn't drink much water otherwise the baby's head would have grown soft.

Here she goes again with these silly ideas.

I remember hunger when Laito was a child.

There will be hunger again.
Despite Laito’s weakness, I knew we had to keep walking.

How was the path?

Would you describe it?

(Well...)
Eventually we reached a river too deep to walk. I paid two men to help us cross. They had no boat—only a plastic cloth. The men placed the plastic on the water & swam it across—

We are not able to swim—

Only this thin sheet supported us.

There was too much water—

I thought the sheet would hold & we would fall—

Then the crocodiles would come.

Or we'd just sink deeper & deeper until all three of us drowned.

Laito was so afraid.

No, I wasn't!

Maybe just a bit.
IT TOOK US TWO DAYS TO WALK TO GUMURUK. BUT AT THE CLINIC THEY COULDN'T HELP US.

I'M SO SORRY YOU HAVE TO GO TO PIBOR WHERE THEY HAVE BETTER FACILITIES. IT'S POSSIBLE SHE NEEDS A SECTION.

THE PATH'S FLOODED, WE'LL NEVER MAKE IT. I'LL MESSAGE MSF PIBOR THEY'LL SEND A BOAT.

ALL WE COULD DO IS WAIT & HOPE.

Perhaps they will not come. Perhaps the baby is already dead. Perhaps I will lose Laito too. We waited two days & then Maria came!

MSF sent me incase Laito delivered on the journey. The river was too thick with weeds - the only way was by helicopter.

After the helicopter arrived, many things started to happen very fast.

Then, when it seemed the contractions had lasted eight seasons instead of eight days.

Everything came to a standstill - except for her - & she was the only thing that mattered.
LAITO IS MY ELDEST. BUT I ALSO HAVE 6 OTHER CHILDREN. MY CO-WIFE IS LOOKING AFTER THEM (ALONG WITH HER OWN 4) BUT MY YOUNGEST CHILD WILL BE NEEDING MY MILK.

But Laito's beads are NOT the right colours.

Here! You draw it.

D'you think it looks like Laito?

I don't know how.

I can do it!

I also need to go home now. I'd like you to keep these.

I also need to go home now. I'd like you to keep these.

Yes.

All of her is me.

WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR YOUR BABY'S FUTURE?

That she grows healthy so that a good man will give my husband many cows to take her as his first wife.

Oh.

Well... I wish you all health & happiness.

You'll always be welcome in our village. Just ask for Laito & Chacha...
But as I was drawing it, I received an MSF field update:

The worst floods in living memory had hit Pibor, sweeping through MSF’s clinic & taking my ending with them.

In the aftermath of my field visit, I tried so hard to show Pibor as I’d really seen it, but for weeks now I’d been drawing a place that no longer existed, listening to recordings of people who, perhaps god forbid, no longer lived.

Maria informed us that Chacha, Laito & their baby safely returned to Gumuruk 3 days before the floods.

But after that... who knows.

Pibor town was entirely submerged leaving almost everyone to seek shelter on the only remaining island of high land. Increasingly congested with only one borehole & no latrines, living conditions rapidly deteriorated.

When the floods eventually recede, a resurgence of intercommunal tensions would spark a new wave of violence, forcing local communities to flee their homes again.

Real stories don’t have endings - at a certain point we just stop telling them.