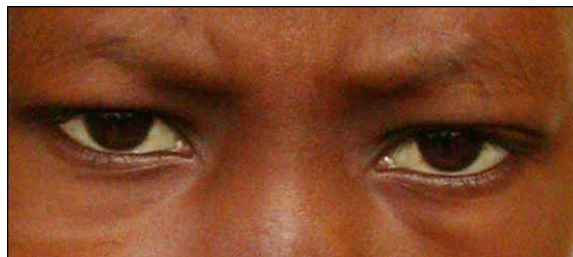


# Alfred by Grace

by Scott Harrison



They say the eyes are windows to the soul. If so, for 14-year-old Alfred Sossou, they revealed a soul wrought with such unspeakable horror one would be forced to turn away, reeling in shock, terror, and disbelief.

Alfred was ten when the tumor appeared that would take over his life and slowly seek to suffocate him. Like many boys his age, he'd been in a fight with an older cousin, and returned home with a sore jaw from a well-placed jab. Unlike many other boys, that same week, he developed a cemento-ossifying fibroma - a rare rapidly growing facial tumor. It began a frightening metamorphosis that would make Kafka cringe or Hugo's hunchback smile at the mirror.

Tokpa-Daho is a small fishing village on Lake Aheme in Benin, West Africa. The Sossou family lives on less than a dollar a day in a mud hut without electricity or running water. Fervent practitioners of voodoo, the religion of their ancestors and neighbors, they understood Alfred's expanding face to be the result of witchcraft - a curse that required the immediate attention of the village witch doctors.

Holes in the young boy's face were made with knives. Pastes and compotes of plants were boiled and spread. Chickens were sacrificed. Idols and ancestors were beseeched for healing. Dances were performed. Money changed hands. Alfred's tumor, however, had a mind of its own and refused to obey, pushing Alfred's tongue back into his throat and forcing the floor of his mouth down and away from his face. The tumor grew larger and more colorful and soon absorbed the teeth in his bottom jaw.

The family brought him to St. Luke's hospital in Cotonou, the largest city in the country. Doctors examined him but could offer no treatment. Their suggestion: another trip to the witchdoctors.

So more witchdoctors were consulted, hope shoveled out, more leaves and potions concocted until an uncle decided to stop the madness and take him to another hospital in Lokossa, a larger town nearby. The doctor there prescribed four bi-monthly intravenous drips sure to work.

The tumor drank them greedily. It didn't soften or shrink, and two months later a confused Lokossa medical staff referred him to yet another hospital, this time across the border in Togo.

Alfred's father, Bessan, catches fish. His mother cooks them and sells them in the market. Bessan has three sons and four daughters to support. There was no more money to spend. Fifteen witchdoctors had taken all the family's money with empty promises. More money seeped through the tubes of an IV that might just as well have delivered saline. Death loomed.

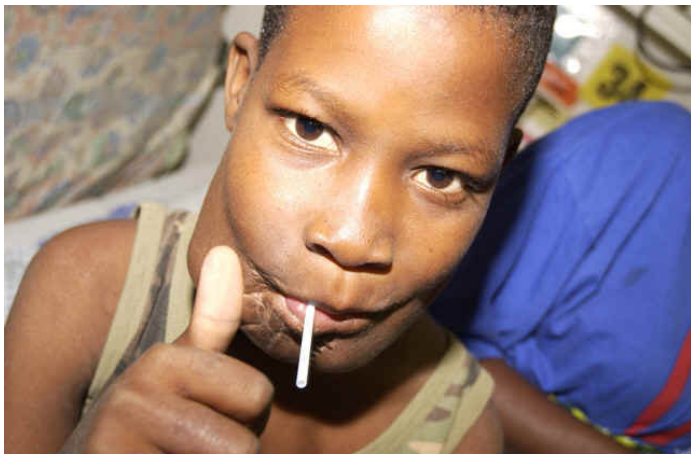
Alfred was tired, too. His eyes glared back with rage at anyone who dared make contact. His brothers and sisters were certain he was close to the end. His father had finally given up hope and relinquished the boy to death.

The tumor had now become monstrous, filling and then spilling out of his mouth, almost the size of a basketball. To eat, Alfred would force a hand between the oozing pink mass



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and the roof of his mouth, then shove food into an unspeakable void.

Slowly dying of starvation, Alfred weighed only 44 pounds; his tumor five of them.

Last fall, a visiting pastor, moved with compassion by Alfred's plight, offered an alternative to the witch doctors: his church would pray for an answer and a cure. The next morning, Alfred said he'd been told in a dream that "his helper would come."

The pastor began to bring Alfred to church with him. Alfred would try to cover his loathsome face with cloth, yet despite his deformity the people of the church treated him kindly and gently. They prayed for him and gave him a few dollars. Yet the tumor ruthlessly grew larger and Alfred thinner and closer to death.

Three months later, the pastor returned to the house to tell Alfred and his family that a ship was coming to Benin, with a hospital and team of doctors who might be able to help. The family was skeptical. They had already spent too much money, gambled more than they could afford and seen no results. Alfred's father chose to cut his losses. There would be no journey to the ship. Alfred's mother, however, sensed the pastor was right. She argued vehemently with Bessan until he relented and finally pulled together the \$10 taxi fare.

One Monday in November, Alfred joined more than five thousand ailing people outside the Cotonou sports stadium waiting for doctors in scrubs to arrive from the white ship. In the dark hours of early morning heat, he was soon noticed and brought inside to be examined.

Experienced reconstructive surgeon Dr. Tony Giles prodded the tumor gently and knowingly while Alfred's penetrating eyes searched for hope. The tumor was tested by a pathologist on site and determined to be benign. Alfred was scheduled for surgery the following Thursday.

Alfred Sossou shifts gears and steers from the middle seat as he helps me drive the white Mercy Ships Land Rover home, two hours west of the port. His eyes are alight with hope and exhilaration as he sits high above the road feeling partial control of the vehicle and his life for the first time in five years.

"Pas trois, cinq!" I scold as I place my hand on top of his and guide it over and up. He looks up at me bashfully; he has an affinity for third gear but wants badly to shift correctly.

He's been on this road before, years ago. Heading home to more witchdoctors, rituals and cuts after rejection at St. Luke's Hospital. Yet this time his eyes reveal something different. A softness and sweetness, a gentleness hard earned by both small and great acts of mercy and kindness onboard the ship.

His tumor fought the scalpel of Mercy Ships head surgeon Dr. Gary Parker for three hours and lost. It lay silent on a metal tray next to Alfred's operating bed, no longer to be fed - no longer able to shock or horrify.

A month later in an operating room down the hall, two accomplished British and German surgeons took two ribs and pieces of bone from Alfred's hip and grafted them to the titanium plate that now formed his lower jaw. The excess skin formed by the bulging tumor began to shrink, and he learned to speak again. He weighed in 20 pounds heavier.

The pastor was right. His helper had come after four years of waiting. Four years of lacerations, dead chickens, well meaning but inadequate hospitals and doctors, Four years of dead ends and disappointment.

The eyes that met mine through a telephoto lens months ago now gleam mischievously as we downshift and hear the engine rev. Two nurses that cared for him on the ship's ward giggle in the back seat, and his father grins as we pull onto the road that leads to his village.

Alfred is a celebrity. A testimony to hope and healing and mercy in a cruel African world of disease and poverty that knows little of such things.

People stare in wonderment and shock and are met with eyes that have stared into the abyss. Eyes that have seen unspeakable horror. Eyes that were given a second chance. Eyes that are now windows to a soul filled with grace.



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