

The Prize Bull

July 2005

It's another beautiful day in Uganda. The sky is blue, the sun is shining, the wind is gentle, and it's not too hot. Children are in school, babies are being born, and people die. Our joy is always mingled with tears.

Most of you know by now that the children are my inspiration. Every day they wake up in homes that most Americans would find miserably appalling, put on uniforms that they themselves have washed in basins, and walk to school, some for great distances, many without breakfast, most in ill-fitting shoes. Yet they are unfailingly cheerful--laughing, playing, eternally hopeful.

Sharon and I have become involved with a family of orphans, nine of whom live with their bent-over *Jjalja* (Grandma) in a small house squeezed between a busy road and a swamp. Every day they walk two kilometers to school—first moving along a busy highway, then up busy, dusty streets until they reach the school building. On Sunday we sent them off on a school field trip while we attended Visitation Day at a local high school here on the hill where we live.

The high school's four "houses" competed in drama, singing, traditional dance, and other events. First prize was a bull, second prize a goat. The prizes were tied up on campus as we walked by. We were there at the invitation of Mary M., an orphan who lost her parents some years ago. Sharon has become a mother to her and we were honored to be there with the other parents. Mary turned out to be quite a talented girl, and had a lead role for Atim House in every competition. All the teens did a great job, full of energy and creativity. I'm glad I wasn't one of the judges--it would have been difficult to choose.

By late afternoon, I noticed that primary school children were filtering into the audience, including our own kids. They must have arrived back at their school and their ears followed the sound of drumming. I was sitting on the ground in front of the judges' table, trying to get some video footage of the dancing. I removed my eye from the viewfinder and found Fiona, Henry, Bertram, and Irene surrounding me in the dirt. Aisha and Andrew had found their way to Sharon in the seats. The children were fascinated by the traditional dancing, such an exciting diversion from the bleak sameness of their everyday lives. I didn't want to end it for them, but eventually it began to get dark and they had a long way to walk home.

There was no way I was going to let these kids walk home alone in the dark. I told Fiona (the oldest of this group, in third grade) to round up the little ones and off we went. By the time we reached the dirt street by our hospital it was totally dark, and we had been joined by a little girl who lives near them. As we walked downhill on the rutted street, dodging traffic and pedestrians, I kept up a constant count to seven so I wouldn't lose anyone. We arrived at the trading center just off the main highway and it was total chaos. These seven little people were huddled around me, while adults, bicycles, motorcycles, cars, and minibuses swirled around us. I wanted to take a *matatu* (14-seat public taxi) the last mile to their home, but each one seemed to be full, and when one stopped with a few available seats, grownups pushed past us and scrambled into the vehicle.

By the grace of God, I was filled with an amazing peace and certainty that somehow we would get a ride. More vehicles came and went, and after about another five minutes a taxi pulled up and the milling mob parted like the Red Sea. The conductor jumped out and motioned us in. I didn't see eight open seats, but my kids scampered up and in with me following. We went careening down Hoima Road toward the swamp and I could see absolutely nothing outside the van. I told Fiona to watch for her house and to tell me when she spotted it. She did, and when I called out to the driver to stop, the other passengers were much amused by this crazy *muzungu* speaking *luganda* accompanied by all these kids in their school uniforms.

We still had to cross Hoima Road to get to *Jjalja's* house and the kids automatically took my hands and each other's. They've done this before, many times, though usually not at night. Traffic opened up for a moment and off we went, a chain of eight running across the highway and over the guardrail. The chain exploded like popcorn as the children seemed to run off in all directions around and into the little house. I started to leave, but one of the boys said I had to greet *Jjalja*. She came running out of the house, bent over at her usual 90 degrees, grabbed both my hands and began ululating and jumping up and down, in the dark, in the mud, headlights rushing past us just over the rail. Her *luganda* was so fast that I couldn't quite follow, except that there were a lot of "thank yous" and a brief description of some medical problem that she was experiencing. Eventually I extricated myself from her grip, but she insisted on climbing back over the guardrail with me and held my hand until I boarded a return *matatu*.

And Atim House won the bull!