

A Stone Is A Strange Thing

A story about Ebola, grief and loss and how friends can help



A Children for Health book

Acknowledgements

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A stone is a strange thing

A stone is a strange thing. You step on it, kick it, throw it. You never think about it. Ever. Except now. I do. A stone is a way to remember too. Do you know how? Let me tell you.

I live in a village with my family. It was like any other village. The elders guided us, the market sellers sold us goods we needed for prices that we sometimes did not need, the teachers taught us, the neighbours helped each other and gossiped about each other, the grandmas always fed us and were always trying to marry us off. It was like any other village. And we were like any other family. I went to school and helped at home and got annoyed with my baby brother. His name is Daniel and he had just learned to walk and he was messing all my things. My books, my clothes and even my pencils! Life was normal. But I never thought about that either.



Then one day my mother was ill. It was a fever so we did what we had been told to do when someone had a fever. We kept her cool, gave her lots of water which has been boiled and cooled and Jelly water from coconuts but she got worse. Then she vomited blood and everything suddenly changed. Our neighbours told me that they could not look after Daniel for me while I looked after my mum.

‘We are afraid,’ they said, ‘our children might fall ill. Your mother does not just have fever. Yesterday she was vomiting blood. That is dangerous.’

I heard other stories about other people who were ill. Many children were also ill. It was a new kind of disease. They called it ebola. It was dangerous. Everyone died from it. People also said something about not touching anything belonging to the sick person. There were rumours you could not wash the bodies of people who died. You should not touch them. How could that be? I did not understand. But I was too busy trying to look after mama and my little brother Daniel.



In just one day, everyone knew my mother had ebola. I stopped going to school. There was no time. And anyway, I heard our teacher was also ill. My friends did not come near me or talk to me, the neighbours left food near our hut but would not come in, the market people told me to stay away. It was like my mother's illness had put a net around us and we were caught in it. She kept asking for water. And now I had to go to the well in the evening because no one would let me go in the day. I took Daniel with me. I carried him and I carried the water. It was not easy, but I did it! There were other people who were ill too. Sometimes other children came to the well late like I did and we talked a bit. More and more people were falling ill. Some were hiding in the woods. There were new people in the village. Doctors or nurses or health workers but they dressed in strange clothes. I wondered about all of this. And we had to check ourselves for fever every day.



Then suddenly one day some people came home. They looked strange and wore big, orange glasses that made their eyes look strange and masks on their faces that made it hard to hear what they were saying. They looked like giants wearing two or three pairs of clothes and something I later learnt were called gloves on their hands. They came to our hut and they took mama away. Just like that! They did not explain they did not let us go with her or get her things together.

‘Keep away, keep away,’ they said, ‘don’t let the baby go to her. Do not touch her.’

They sprayed some horrible smelling liquid everywhere. On the walls, on our clothes, on the mattresses, on the floor, the pots. Everywhere! Mama looked frightened and sad all at the same time. But she tried to smile.

‘Look after yourselves Hanni,’ Mama said faintly, using the name she always used to tell me she loved me.

‘Look after your brother. Live well my children, live well. We shall meet in the other world.’ ‘Mama!’ I cried, running to her.

‘No, no. Don’t touch me my child. My beloved Hanni .’

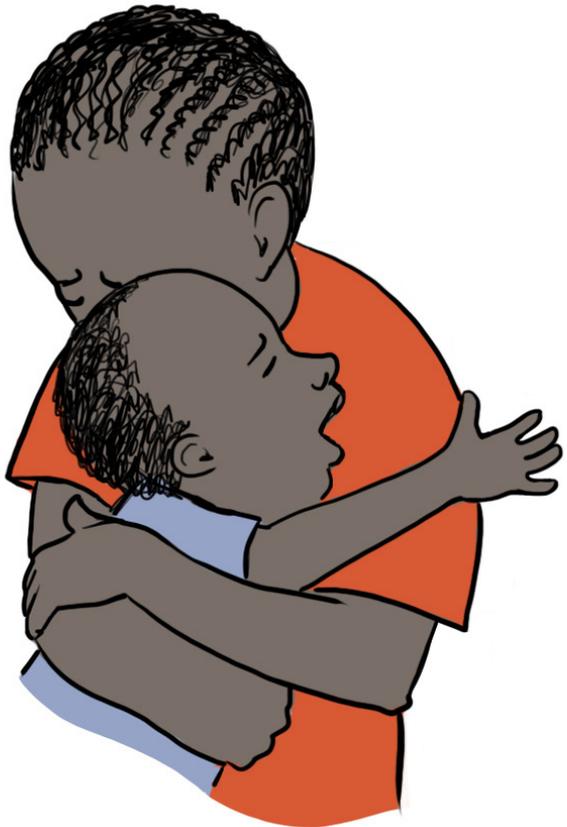
Her voice was gentle but she shrank from me. I was hurt. I did not understand. What did she mean? Her words hit me. They fell on my heart like so many stones. I stopped and stared at her. ‘Hanni, Hanni, be a mother to Daniel,’ she held out her arms as if she was hugging me but shook her head to say I could not go near her. I was scared. What did she mean?



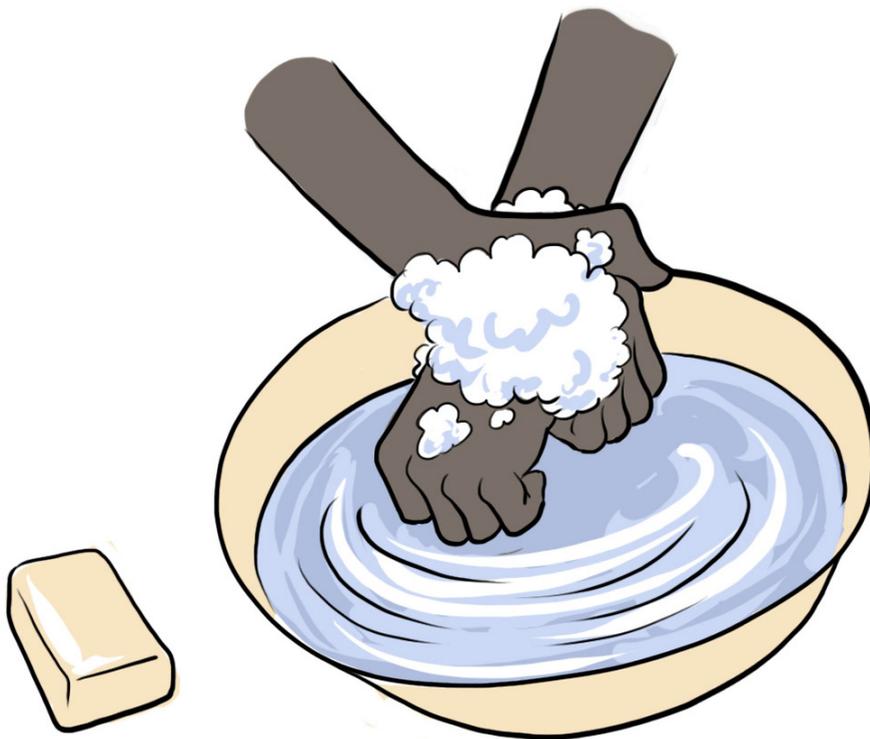
And then she was gone. Out of the hut, out of the compound and out of our lives.

My baby brother, Daniel had been sleeping and he now woke up. He looked left and right. He looked for mama but she was not there. He cried and cried. I tried to comfort him. But he wanted our mother. He wanted her warm breast and feed. He wanted to hear her heartbeat against his cheek, to smell her smell, to feel her arms holding him. But she was not there. He would not drink the water and the milk I tried to give him. He would not eat that day. He would not lie still in my arms but twisted and turned and cried and cried. He cried so much that he fell asleep from tiredness. I checked but he had no fever.

I was alone in our home now. It was getting dark. I lit the lamp but the shadows now seemed to crowd around me calling, 'Don't touch ! Don't touch !' I checked Daniel and myself for fever. We did not have it but would it come suddenly? What made it come? Why could it not be stopped? Should I go to the woods and hide also? But the health worker had said to go to the checkpoint to be checked every day. And I knew that is what I had to do. I felt alone in my heart as well as in the hut. The next few days were like a bad dream. Daniel cried a lot.



He missed Mama . I missed Mama too. I did not know how to look after him alone. Mama always guided me with her soft words and smile. Now she was gone. Suddenly gone! It was as if someone had thrown a huge stone on my life. It was as if my life was made of glass and someone had thrown a stone at it and shattered it into a hundred pieces. Sharp pieces that cut into my heart. I did not know till then that it was a glass life that I had. I had lived happy and hopeful. So what if we could not have many things like other people. We still had each other. So what if I did not have nice toys like some children. I still knew how to sing. But now our lives were broken into little pieces by something called ebola. A little virus that can die if you just wash your hands with diluted Dettol, or diluted Rexoguard or ordinary water and soap. And yet it had taken away my mother and many other people. How can such a thing kill so many? How can it break lives as if they were just so many glass bubbles?



Three days later the health visitors came back. 'Your mother is very ill,' they told me, 'we are so sorry. But if we had not taken her away you would be in danger too. We now want to test you and your brother. We will check you now and we need you to come to the health centre every day with your brother. He is lucky that you are old enough to look after both of you. Do you have anyone else who can help?'

I looked at them. I was angry. What did they mean about being 'lucky'? What did they know about looking after a young baby? What did they care if I now could not go to school and didn't know how to find the money to buy our food? Whom could I ask for help? What did they know about being alone and isolated in your own home, your own neighbourhood? Who did they think could help? Everyone was afraid of ebola. Even the neighbours would not come in now. They now left food for us quietly and then knocked to tell us it was there. I looked at the health worker as anger and sadness fought inside of me. I screamed. It frightened my brother but I could not help it. I put my face in my hands and screamed and screamed and screamed. They waited till I was quiet.



Behind the white plastic mask a woman's voice told me, 'I know it's very hard for you and very frightening but try to be brave. I will try and come back in two days. We have a message for you from your mother. She is very ill. Do you understand Hannah? She will not come back to you. I'm so, so sorry about that. This ebola is taking everyone away. But she asked us to give you this. We have washed it properly so it is now safe for you to hold.' Her voice was gentle and sad. 'She says she is sorry she is not here to be with you. She is sorry you have to become a woman when you are only a girl. She said to tell you she loves you both and asked you to be a mother to your baby brother. She said she knows one day you will understand.'



It was a stone. An ordinary, old stone. I took it and the anger grew.

'What does she think I can do with this?' I asked, 'eat it?'

The woman said, 'I will try and see if I can get you some help. I know you must be lonely and frightened. We have to do these tests on you and your brother first and then I promise I will come back.'

I looked at her. I was tired. I felt weak and faint. Then suddenly I felt nothing at all. No anger, no sadness, not even fear. I nodded. And I carried on, finding my brother some mushy bananas and other soft food to eat. I cooked the last of the rice we had. From now on I would have to eat whatever the neighbours might bring me. I tried to keep our hut clean like mama used to make me do after school. We did not always work when I got back from school. We talked, we sang, mama plaited my hair. Sometimes I used to help her cook. But now all that was gone. Like a dream. Just gone.



The woman did come back. She knelt by me where I sat and looked into my eyes through the thick mask. She told me to be strong. I knew what she was going to say before she said it. My mother had died. We were not ill so she took us to a special care centre where they fed us and tried to set up a kind of school for the older children. We all took turns at looking after the younger children so that we could go to the lessons. They called it a 'roster'. Daniel slowly stopped crying so much and began to put on weight. He laughed when he saw me after school and I tried to be happy for him. I sang him songs and played with him. But my heart was turned to stone. It was heavy and colourless and dead. I kept the stone my mother had given me. I looked at it sometimes as if it could help me to understand what this was all about. Why did it happen? Why did no-one stop it? Why? Why? Why? But after a while I stopped asking. There were no answers but at least now I knew a bit more about this strange illness called ebola.



The teachers at the centre told us about ebola. When someone has ebola you should not touch them. Ebola is caused by a virus. A virus is like a germ. It is invisible. The virus travels through any liquid like tears or a bit of spit or blood. So you can't use the spoons and dishes that the ill person uses. They say even their sweat may carry the virus so you can't share their bed or their clothes. Keep them and anything they use, cups, plates, towels, separate from you. That is hard for you if it is your mother or brother, but it is also hard for them. They feel alone too, so it is good to talk to them, to tell them the news and to tell them you love them.

But do not touch or hug them or their clothes or their beds. Because then the virus could pass to you. The virus passes through 'bodily fluids'. This means spit or sweat or urine or faeces or blood or anything that is liquid that comes out of our bodies. If you can, make sure anyone with fever that might be suspected of ebola has a lot to drink (water, or jelly water). That can help them to fight the virus. Keep the cups separate and wash, wash, wash your hands and face and try to keep clean. When you pass them food or water, put it on the table or the floor and push it towards them to make sure you don't touch them by accident. And remember, never touch them no matter how much you want to. Even if they are sad and crying. Just tell them all the time that you love them and care for them.

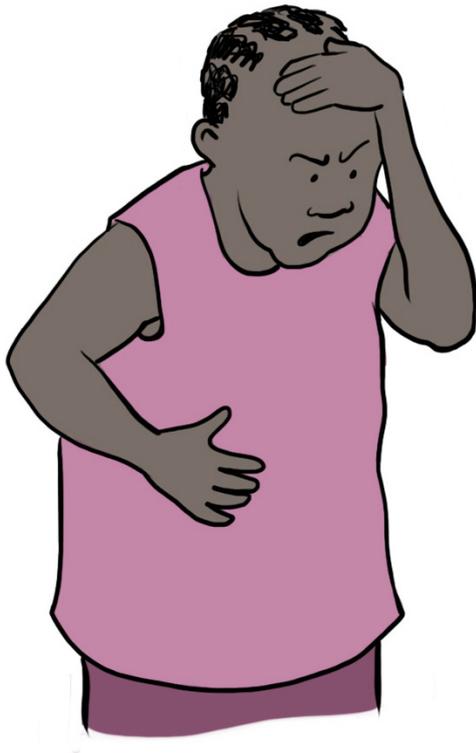


‘But how do you know someone has ebola?’ one of the children at the centre asked the teacher. He was Joseph and he had lost all his family because of ebola.

‘Well if people have a headache or fever or are vomiting or have diarrhoea, it could be ebola, so you must make sure they go to a clinic to be tested. If it is not ebola, then that is fine. If it is, then they must be separated from everyone else who is well and all the relatives should be tested too.’

‘Why should they be tested?’ someone else asked.

‘Because the ebola virus can be inside you for three weeks before you get any signs such as headaches and vomiting and fever. But it is not dangerous for you or others until you begin to feel the symptoms, I mean signs,’ she added quickly, looking at our scared faces. ‘If you make sure people go to the clinic to be tested, then everyone is safer.’



I wished they would stop talking about all of this. What was the use? My mother had died from it anyway. And they had not let us take the body or wash it or bury her properly. I felt so bad about that. But the other children had questions and so I had to sit and listen. I did not want to ask anything. I never wanted to speak much anyway these days.

‘Why can’t we see our people when they are dead and wash the bodies and do all the things we should do for our people who have died?’ one of the older girls asked quietly. She had lost her mother and her younger sister and was alone now. Like Joseph

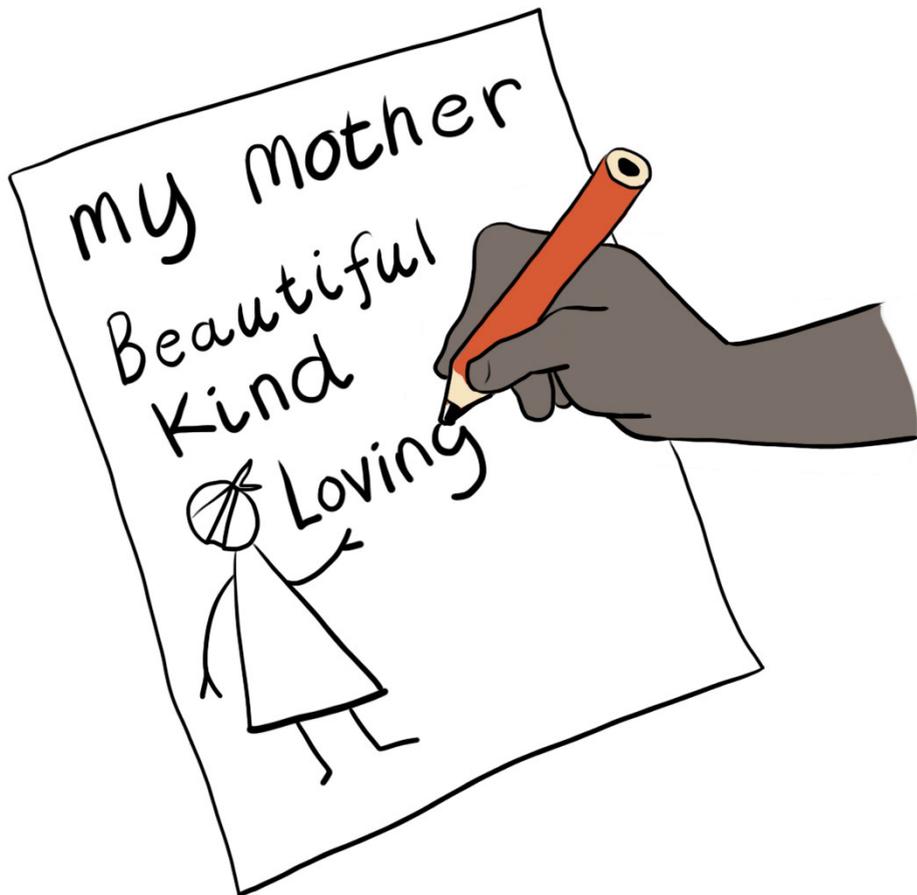
‘Because the ebola virus is still in the dead body and would make anyone who touched the body ill as well. The virus is still alive even though the body is dead. It looks for living people to go to live in their bodies,’ the teacher answered gently. Then she sighed.

‘I know we have to do certain things when people die,’ she continued, ‘but I think this is such an unusual situation, that the ones who are dead would not want us to do the ceremonies and then die trying to do them. They too would want us to live.’ She stopped and looked at us. She knew we were not sure about what she was saying. You had to do the ceremonies for the dead. Otherwise they can’t rest in peace.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘If you were ill would you want to make others ill? Think about it and learn not to be too angry with yourselves for not doing the ceremonies. Everyone, including those who have passed away, would understand and would not want you to die. There are other ways of remembering our loved ones and we’ll make some new ones for ourselves shall we?’



She was a good teacher and was trying her best. And she found us new ways of remembering the people we loved and who were gone. Through drawing our people, through the songs they had taught us, through remembering something they had said to us or tried to teach us, through making something they had taught us to make. She asked us to tell or write the stories our families had told us or something nice that had happened. She tried to make it better. We tried too, although sometimes some of the children cried as we remembered. I did not cry. The teacher helped us to feel better and we tried to help each other. But there was still a big stone in my heart.



At the centre, I met Odomo. He was the same age as me. He seemed to know when I was feeling really bad. He never said anything but he walked with me or sat with me in silence. I liked that. I could not have talked or answered questions. But I was glad he was near me. One day he brought me a little bird made from wood. I was so pleased.

‘It’s beautiful,’ I said, ‘thank you. How did you make it?’

‘I like making things from wood and from stone. From natural things. You know there is a lot of beauty in ordinary things.’

I sighed. Just as I thought I had found someone to understand, he was going to lecture me about how I should be grateful for the ordinary things.. .. but I was wrong. Odomo did not do that.

‘Come,’ he said, ‘let’s take Daniel for a walk.’ And on the way, he picked up things. Leaves and twigs and he showed me the patterns and the different colours on them when I had thought they were just green or brown. And the different shapes.

I looked forward to seeing him after that. But most times there was no time for walks. Odomo helped me with Daniel and sometimes we sat and ate together. He showed me many things and I began to look at ordinary things with different eyes.



And then, one day, after a long, long time, I took out the stone my mother had given me and which I had wrapped in a bright cloth tied in a tight, angry knot. I took it out. I touched it. It felt cool and smooth and round. I put my hands around it, held it to my cheek. And suddenly it was wet. I found myself crying. I had not cried before. I had screamed out in anger, I had sat in silence, but I had not cried. The stone my mother had given me, finally made me feel as if she was speaking to me. And my heart was breaking.

I saw that the stone was not just brown but it had little dot-like marks on it. It was smooth and round and it rolled and filled my hand as my fingers curled around it.

‘I am beautiful if only you will look at me,’ it seemed to say. ‘I am not ordinary. Look!’

And I saw the shades of colour and pattern upon it. I looked around me and I saw other stones that I had never looked at. I looked back at my stone.

‘I carry your fire in the kitchen in me and keep your food warm,’ it seemed to say,’ You use me to build your home, to grind your flour. Even to play games. And to get the mangoes from the tree. I am strong and warm and gentle all at the same time. And, yes, if you throw me, I can break something. But only if you throw me. I can also carry a message for you. From your mother whose love was as strong as a stone and is still around you. Your mother, who wanted to give you something that would remind you of her, whose love is around you as the stones are and who wanted you to know that the ordinary things in life, the ordinary moments and friendships are precious. Treasure them.’

Of course the stone was not actually talking to me. It was just that these thoughts came into my mind when I held it. I had not noticed that Odomo had come into the hut and sat quietly beside me as I wept. I felt him look at me gently.

‘Are you ready to talk about it all now Hannah?’ he asked.

I looked up and dried my eyes.

‘Yes,’ I said and felt the stone that was in my heart slowly move. Just a little.



