

# The gift of peace

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**H**is curls, golden as the sun, swirl like a spring eddy as the wind whips them, his head askance. He laughs delightedly in my arms as I twirl his three-year-old body in circles while the trees of the verdant park watch like silent sentinels.

Today, I hear my nephew's song of joy.  
Today, we play.

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Her dark curls fell languidly on my arms like untamed brush in dry summer air. I carried her from the tent. Her arms, dangling and limp, foretold nothing of the grief she would feel.

That day, we did not play.

She had come screaming to us earlier that morning. Tears flowed like a flooded river down her soot-caked face as we brought her into the operating room. Shrapnel pierced her chest, abdomen, arms and legs. Fissures of blood knifed the softness of her flesh. We laid her gently on the table.

An IV, already in place, served as the vessel to introduce momentary peace. The theatre became a cathedral of calm as we prepared her for the sacred ritual of recovery.

Her wounds were cleansed, washed of the horror that had brought her screams. She lay silent. We scoured her wounds with practised ease and removed the piercing metal left by the exploding grenade.

She was a child of three. She lay before me; she was my nephew in a different place.

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We operated in a small surgical tent that cooked in the desert heat as the battle between adults raged on. Helicopters flew overhead to birth explosions of death in the name of conquest of a people who had asked to play no part.



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Daily, we carried the bodies of broken children. They came to our tent with their burned arms, splintered bones, rendered guts and shattered skulls. In and out they flowed like traffic on a busy highway, entering and exiting our home of second chances. But many children never crossed the threshold of our healing tent. And even those who did never left whole. A world as mangled as they were awaited their return.

With our work complete, we gave them back to adults who had no homes, money or partners. Those adults, with arms stricken pencil thin by famine, cherished them.

I learned that these emaciated adults had little capacity for hope.

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Today, I see my nephew race down the street, curls of hair alight, excitedly searching for the local park.

He wants to ride the red slide.

Again and again, down and down, he will go in ecstasy.

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As I carried her quiescent body to the recovery tent, I heard the nearby shrieks of a nine-year-old boy. His arms were imprisoned in metallic orthopedic devices and his head was partially caved in. I can still see his mouth spread in unending terror whenever the helicopters flew overhead. With the sound of their flight, he relived it, watching his father frying in the fire lit by their bombs. He shrieked in the local language expressing words of grief I could never understand.

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Tomorrow, I'll watch my nephew dart around the corner while my fingers graze the edges of his shirt. As he escapes my grasp in a game of chase, his light curls

will bounce and he will sing a song to tease me: “You’ll never catch me.”

The unspoken message in his song: he’ll always feel safe when caught in his uncle’s arms.

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When she finally woke after surgery, it was in another tent, amid faces she did not know. The sun fumed mercilessly outside. She was surrounded by strangers, and her dark curls agitated violently with the screams of her resurrection.

Just like when she had first arrived, her voice heralded a message of terror.

Finally, she was delivered into the loving arms of kin. A wraith-like hand reached up to brush the dark curls from her face and tuck them behind her ear. Those arms wanted nothing more than to shield her from the viciousness of the world and protect her from what she didn’t deserve.

I saw the shrapnel wounds on her mother’s arms.

That day they held her. Earlier, they had saved her from death. A mother’s arms can save but are powerless to shield from pain.

Grenades care for no one.

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His light curls bounce when we play.

Her dark curls bounced when she screamed.

Through him, I see her face. Though I see it tranquil and pure, as it was while she slept, the curls of her hair are coloured with the unwashable stain of war.

I see her in my nephew and I weep.

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This article has been peer reviewed.

This story is part of processing my experience of working during a conflict as an anesthetist in a surgical project with Médecins Sans Frontières.