

THE VOICES OF THE STREET

Stories of Abandoned Children



CHAPTER 1

THE CALL OF THE LAND

March 2022.

Kinshasa was bathed in blazing sunlight, wrapped in its daily chaos, alive with a restless energy where hope and hardship intertwined.

I had just arrived there for the first time, my heart heavy with uncertainty, yet driven by the excitement of a project that meant everything to me: a piece of land, simple and raw, by a small river on the outskirts of the capital.

This project was not only an ecological venture, but also a dream for my daughter, whose deep and invisible roots were beginning to intertwine with those of the Congo.

I had traveled far, crossed countless paths to finally discover this land with a friend.

A place waiting patiently to be transformed, to be awakened to life.

Everything finally seemed to fall into place. The purchase was completed, and I was preparing to return to Switzerland before coming back in July to lay the first stone of this project, marking the beginning of a new era — the beginning of a childhood dream.

A mission accomplished, I thought at the time, as I walked through the dusty streets of Kinshasa, my mind already elsewhere, already in Switzerland, where my grand-daughter's first birthday was fast approaching.

I was staying at Sainte-Anne's Procuracy, a temporary refuge that, each day, confronted me with a reality that froze my blood: homeless people, starving children, bodies weakened by life on the streets, faces marked by abandonment and distress.

They surrounded me with urgent pleas, followed me, looked at me with eyes hungry for life, eyes hollowed by hunger — a hunger they expressed in a constant cry:

“Nzala, nzala, nazali na nzala makassi, mundele...”

“I am hungry, very hungry, white woman...”

CHAPTER 2

MOÏSE 7 YEARS

April 4, 2022.

Like every day, I hurried my steps to escape that oppressive misery. But this time, something held me back.

A child. Alone. Limping.

He caught my eye. His eyes, sad and resigned, stared at me like a silent plea. His foot, infected, was oozing. Flies clung to it, and he tried in vain to chase them away. That gaping wound in his flesh tore at my heart.

An inner voice urged me to look away, to forget, to keep walking.

Then another voice, softer but persistent, rose within me—stronger, more insistent: “Take a chair. Sit down.”

I resisted this strange command, seeking refuge in reason, in the noise of my thoughts.

The next day, the image of that child would not leave me. His eyes. His wound. That voice... again.

I passed the same crossroads.

This time, an elderly woman in a wheelchair stopped me. She murmured in Lingala, a language I did not understand, but she pointed toward the child with insistence, as if his destiny had now become tied to mine.

His name was Moïse.

He was there, just a few meters away, crying.

And suddenly, the voice within me became an order. Impossible to ignore: “Take a chair. Sit down.”

I gave in.

A crooked, dirty chair, barely holding together, became the anchor of that decisive moment.

Moïse, limping painfully, collapsed into my arms.

He was burning with fever. He was dirty, his body marked by life on the streets.

But in that moment, I no longer saw any of it.

MOÏSE 7 YEARS

I saw nothing but his despair and the urgency to act.

I understood that I could not leave.

My flight, my commitments in Switzerland, my granddaughter's birthday... everything was fading in the face of this reality.

I had to stay. For him.

For this 7-year-old child, on the autism spectrum, born into misery and neglect.

Three weeks later, after relentless care, Moïse was saved.

And with him, something greater was being born...



CHAPTER 3

A SCHOOL? AN NGO?

During the three weeks of Moïse's care, I did some research, and what I discovered took my breath away: more than 50,000 abandoned children, left to fend for themselves on the streets of Kinshasa. An official number, but a far more brutal reality.

One question haunted me.

What do we do for them?

What do I do?

I didn't know where to begin, so with a friend, we made an almost crazy decision: to create a school, right there, in the street. It seemed unrealistic, but a friend told me, "We have street schools too in our country. Go for it. Start." So we began, simply, with a few wooden benches.

And the children came.

From everywhere.

They arrived by the dozens, exhausted, hungry, dirty. Some fell asleep on the benches in the middle of class, as if, for the first time, they had found a place where they felt safe. Others were so hungry they didn't even have the strength to listen.

The school grew, maybe too fast. We were overwhelmed, and the problems came just as quickly. The locals looked at us with suspicion, the gang leaders saw us as a threat, furious that we were "taking" their children, as if hope belonged to them alone. They attacked us, people insulted us, I was called a witch.

I had become a target.

At every corner, someone ready to push us back.

But despite everything, we were there.

Standing.

Because these children needed everything: to be welcomed, protected, fed, educated... but above all, they needed to exist.

CHAPTER 4

JEEP N° 16

One day, while we were in the middle of a lesson, everything shifted. The police forces stormed in without warning, and panic instantly spread among the children. Cries broke out, tears filled the space, and in the middle of it all, Jeep No. 16 stood there, implacable, ready to take them away.

I felt my chest tighten as I understood where they were being taken: Lufungula, that bleak, filthy prison where so many disappear. The scene was nightmarish. Hundreds of children crammed into a confined space, like a cage, their hands reaching out to me through the bars, their voices calling me, piercing through me.

“KoKo Ya... KoKo Ya...”

Their cries echoed in that heavy atmosphere of fear and distress, as I realized how weakened they already were, how lost they already were in the shadows of that place.

Accused of vagrancy, these children were trapped in a relentless cycle. Always the same ones. Always the most vulnerable. Far too young to carry such a burden, yet facing waves of injustice far beyond them.

After these arrests, I fought. I fought hard. Through relentless effort, I managed to secure the release of 25 children. I mobilized UNICEF, lawyers, and child rights defenders. A victory, yes... but a fragile one, almost illusory.

A few days later, it all started again.

That's when I understood I had to act differently, to act in the shadows. I prepared porridge for them, brought protein, and quietly passed on medication. Some children, those who could still slip through the cracks, came back to me with news from inside: injuries, illnesses, muffled cries, violence unfolding out of sight.

I hid the medication in bottles and prayed they wouldn't get caught. In there, there is nothing: no care, no food, no protection.

The strongest make it out.

The others... are never seen again.

CHAPTER 5

CONGO RIVER

The nights were growing heavier, and the cries of despair never left me. They echoed inside me, persistent, like a memory that refused to fade. I was deeply shaken by the story of four children: a sixteen-year-old girl and three younger boys, on the run, chased by the police, running with no way out, until the river became their only escape.

They threw themselves into the water.
They could not swim.

They disappeared, swallowed by the river, as if their entire existence vanished with them.

To the world, they had never existed.

And yet, they had names, faces, stories. My only consolation was to believe they had found refuge elsewhere, in God's house, held in His arms of love.

I wanted to understand, to search, to know what happens to these children carried away by the river. But very quickly, reality caught up with me. Some truths are too heavy to carry, and sometimes the questions we ask disturb far more than the answers we might find.

This river is everywhere in their lives. They wash in it, despite the filth it carries. Many cannot swim, and the currents take them without warning. When they are thirsty, they drink this polluted water, saying that with a little sugar, it becomes bearable, as if softening the bitterness were enough to survive.

This same river that washes them...
is also the one that carries them away.

Or the one that poisons them.

CHAPTER 6

BOMBE

In the streets of Kinshasa, a new threat had taken hold. Invisible, yet brutally real. They called it “Bombé.” A homemade drug, made from black dust scraped from exhaust pipes, mixed with medications like diazepam, cannabis, and even makeup powder. A toxic, unstable mixture that seeped into bodies and slowly destroyed minds.

The children fell into it.
And never truly came back.

Their movements slowed, almost mechanical. Their eyes emptied. You could see these drifting silhouettes in the streets, wandering, sometimes collapsed on the ground, as if suspended between two worlds. Some fell asleep standing, trapped in a strange haze, as if their soul had left their own body.

It felt unreal.
And yet, it was everywhere.

The youngest child I ever saw under the influence of “Bombé” was named Ebenezer. He was barely seven years old. Seven... and already carrying the eyes of a child worn down by life. He had been chased out of his home, accused of witchcraft. His “crime”? Stealing 1,000 Congolese francs — just a few cents.

At that age, he had found only one escape: this drug.

When I found him, he was dying. His breathing was shallow, almost imperceptible. His small body trembled, as if still fighting, somewhere deep inside, against something far bigger than him.

He was just a child.
Barely more than a baby.

And already broken.
Broken by a life too harsh. Too unjust.

CHAPTER 7

JOSUÉ

Josue slept beneath the drains of Boulevard du 30 Juin in Kinshasa, where indifference and street misery meet in a crushing silence. His refuge? A dark, damp hole, infested with rats, where filth clung to him like a second skin. Above him, life went on—loud, indifferent.

That day, traffic was at a standstill. Horns screamed, but nothing moved. Then everything shifted. An old man had his phone stolen. The air tightened instantly.

Drivers stepped out of their vehicles, grabbing whatever they could find: bars, hammers, axes. The thief slipped toward the drain, where the children slept, and shouted:

“The thief is over there!” The crowd followed.

They were many. Too many. It was Josue—the oldest—they grabbed.

They dragged him out of his shelter. And they struck.

Without seeing.
Without thinking.

Blows rained down—on his head, on his fragile body. He was nothing more than a child, crushed beneath the violence of a crowd turned into a mob.

Then they forced a tire around his neck. Fuel was poured over his body.

Like so many before him.

But that day, something shifted.

The police arrived in time.

Just in time.

CHAPTER 8

LEAVING THE STREET

At some point, it became clear: the streets had become too dangerous. For them. And for me. We had already been attacked. Several times. I could no longer continue as before.

So I made a decision. To leave. With them.

There were twelve of them.

Twelve children I took away from the streets, to a plot of land in N'Selé. A construction site in progress. Three dome houses, still unfinished. No doors. No windows.

Just concrete. No water. No electricity. No gas. Nothing.

But it was a roof. A beginning.

We arrived there together, in difficult conditions. The land was open, without any fence. At night, everything felt fragile. So I made another decision: to get a dog. Kymia, who became the children's guardian.

She arrived as a puppy. We raised her together. She became a presence. A protection.

And little by little, things began to take shape.

Loyal friends helped. Some were moved, and they took part. The sale of my paintings also helped us keep going.

Then a decisive step was taken. Birth certificates. Twenty-six children were finally officially recognized, thanks to the support of a Swiss association.

The foundations were there. Fragile. But real.

CHAPTER 9

NSELE

Once we arrived, something shifted.

The younger ones were enrolled in school.
The older ones joined the construction site.

In the mornings, everyone had a place. The younger children went to school. The older ones learned with their hands. They made bricks, built walls, painted, and took part in the electrical work. They discovered biogas, understood, tried. Nothing was perfect, but everything was alive.

We learned together. We also did simple things. Bread, meals, jams. Then we began to grow our own food, and we built a chicken coop.

They had books. They learned to read, to write. To exist differently.

In the afternoons, everything changed. They became children again.

They played. They ran. They played football. They swam in the river. They laughed.

Finally.

Those moments... were precious.

At night, we were alone. Them in their dome. Me in mine. And during the day, workers would come. There was no real structure, but there was transmission. Little by little, everyone found their place.

It wasn't perfect.

But it was real.

And it was already immense.



CHAPTER 10

BACK TO SWITZERLAND

In 2024, my body collapsed.

A bite. An infection.

At first, I held on. I tried to treat myself, to stay with the children, to keep going no matter what. But the pain settled in. Deep. Alarming. I could feel that something was beyond me.

Each day became harder. My body was weakening, but I refused to leave. The children were there. I didn't want to abandon them.

A friend came to get me.
She took me to the hospital.

I left without really leaving.
With the intention of coming back.

But during my absence, everything collapsed.

The site was emptied.
Everything we had built, gathered, was gone.

It was no longer just material things.
It was a part of what we had held together.

And above all, the children were left alone.

A neighbor alerted me.
We had to act quickly.

Irène, who had just opened a home, proposed to take them in.

They were brought to safety, and they are still there today.

CHAPTER 11

CONTINUING DIFFERENTLY

Today, I know that I will not return to build this project in Congo. Perhaps one day, another door will open. But for now, the path lies elsewhere.

After a period of recovery and reflection in Switzerland, a new direction slowly emerged. **Togo.**

I structured this project by creating an association in Switzerland and another in Togo, with local partners. A country where I hold nationality. A more stable environment. A place where it is possible to build differently. This decision was not born from an idea. It came from what I have seen.

With the children, I understood.

When they were building, their eyes changed.

When they were planting, they waited.

When they were harvesting, they understood.

They saw that something could grow. That their lives could change too. That they were not condemned to the streets. That's when I knew. We had to continue... but differently.

At the end of 2025, I went to Togo for three months to train in compressed earth brick construction and to look for land where I could continue this project that is deeply close to my heart. Because abandoned children are not only in Congo. And what I witnessed there could not end there.

A piece of land revealed itself. Six hectares, near Kpalimé. Bare land. Land waiting to become an ecological village for entrepreneurial training. A place to learn, to build, to cultivate, to pass on. A place to rise again.

And hopefully, one day, to meet them there again. The children from Congo.

Older. Stronger.

To build, together.



Agou – Kpalimé, Togo — 6 hectares of land for the project



Moïse. The beginning of everything

I am a Swiss painter.

My work was born from a need for transformation. Very early on, I was confronted with injustice, and it shaped the way I see, create, and engage.

For several years now, I have been working alongside abandoned children and survivors of war. My art has become a language to make visible those who are unseen, to carry stories that are too often ignored.

In the Congo, they call me “KoKoYa,” a name given to me by the children. I carry it as a responsibility.

Today, I continue to create, to support, and to build projects that connect art, transmission, and autonomy.

A lived and written story by Yasna Kohlbrenner