

## Devil's Child

### Asmat Twin Babies

One afternoon, Sister Priscilla, the hospital nurse, reported that a patient was in labour. The patient was admitted in the morning but the progress was slow, with no sign that the baby was ready to come out anytime soon. Usually Sister Victoria, the senior nurse who was also a midwife, who evaluated women in labour, but she was in Basiem village giving a training to village health workers. Therefore, I had to evaluate the patient this time. My examination of the patient confirmed Priscilla's report. I decided not to perform any special procedure until the following morning.

The next morning the baby still "refused" to come out into the world. I gave the mother an intravenous infusion of oxytocin to stimulate uterine contraction to help push the baby out. As Priscilla had never done this procedure before, I left instructions for her for how to drip the medicine properly and then left for Kajerin. Correct dripping is crucial: too fast could cause uterine rupture or tearing that might kill the mother; too slow made the medicine no effect at all and cause intrauterine foetal death. It is a rather dangerous procedure, but I had to trust her because one week before I had promised to give health service to the people of Kajerin.

Kajerin is the closest village to the Mission Hospital at Bayun. It is "only" a 4-hour walk along the coast of the Arafura Sea at low tide, but unreachable at high tide because the coast is then about two-meters underwater.

Once in Kajerin, I monitored the communication between Priscilla in Bayun and Father Antonius van der Wouw in Basiem, who was known by the nickname "Father Ton". I was not able to be involved myself because the radio in Kajerin was just a transistor radio that could only receive signals, not a communication radio that was able to transmit signals.

"Where is Doctor now?" Priscilla asked even though she knew the answer. She knew that I had left Bayun about five hours before. Moreover, Father Ton could not have known where I was as nobody could communicate with him from Kajerin. Priscilla then stated: "The patient is in pain. What should I do?" I could sense her panicked voice. Her stress led her to forget to say "over" when she was finished talking.

"Calm down. Doctor will come back soon. Just wait, don't do anything. Over," said the voice of Sister Vic.

"Ya, but what should I do?", asked Priscilla. I knew Priscilla very well. She was a good nurse but lacking in confidence. She had never studied nursing formally and had only finished 9<sup>th</sup> grade in junior high school. She had learned how to treat patients from Victoria and from me.

I cut short the visit to Kajerin and hurried back home. "The baby was already born, but there is another one inside," Priscilla told me when I arrived in Bayun.

"What time was the first baby born?"

“A little past 12 o’clock.” That was six hours ago. Normally the second baby should come out not longer than fifteen minutes after the first one.

Having changed out of my wet clothes, I rushed to the delivery room. The placenta of the first baby was still inside the womb. The amniotic sac of the second baby was still intact. I pinched the amniotic sac with forceps until the amniotic fluid came out. Five minutes later the second baby emerged. I was relieved, but not for long.

“What do you want to do with the babies?” I asked the parents. They looked at each other and then talked in the Asmat language between themselves.

“We want to give them to the Sisters.” The answer was not surprising to me.

The Asmat people believe that one of the twins is a devil’s child—I forgot to ask how they decided which one belonged to the devil. In the past, they killed the devil’s child, but now they could no longer do that, at least openly, because it was against the law and against the church’s teaching. Anyway, even without this belief, there was no chance both of them would survive. I had never seen any Asmat adult twins.

Taking care of one baby was already difficult for the Asmats; two at once was almost impossible. It would surely be impossible for the two twin girls to survive because the family already had three girls. The parents had hoped for a warrior, not two more cooks or firewood collectors, who were productive in supporting families.

I was in a muddle about how to save these babies. The Bishop did not allow nuns to adopt children. Simon, the local teacher from Muyu in Merauke, had already a dozen children, most of whom were still young. The other teacher was still single. I felt responsible to save the twin baby girls because I had helped them to enter this world. In the end, I decided to commit to a risky rescue.

“If you agree, I will take one and you take the other.” The parents looked at each other for a moment and discussed my offer in their Asmat language.

“You can have both of them,” the father said. His suggestion, actually, was better than my offer, but I could not imagine leaving Bayun for an unknown place with two young babies—my contract would be finished within three months.

“I cannot take both of them because I don’t have a wife yet,” I said. They finally agreed that one baby would be for me, while the other would stay with them. They looked happy, and perhaps were honoured to have their daughter adopted by a doctor.

Although I adopted only one baby, I kept both babies and their mother in the hospital until I left Bayun. “My baby” needed breast milk but her family’s village, Yaptambor, though not too far from Bayun, is too difficult to visit on foot; we had to walk for about two hours between mangrove trees with our legs in the mud up to mid-thighs. It takes three hours rowing, which is exhausting even for local people. The other reason for keeping them longer was to protect the other baby. Her parents might neglect her, or let her die from malaria.

The family occupied one ward and we gave them free food for three months. If it had only been their one family of seven, it would not have been so costly. But, we also fed their visitors, who often stayed for days. Besides sago, the palm bark starch, we also gave them rice. The price of rice was 3 -4 times than it was in Java and even so it was often not available.

My baby's name was Oktaviani, or Ani for short. Her sister's name was Oktiviana. Once my contract ended, I had no idea where I would be going or what I would be doing with Ani. Worst case scenario, I planned to give them to the orphanage in Java where I used to work as a volunteer.

## **Goodbye Bayun**

Three months later my contract finished. On the last morning, the Sisters and people of Bayun saw me off at the beach. We were all silent most of the time. Two years living together in a very isolated place had made us very close to each other. The only person who was not quiet was Angi, an old Asmat woman I had often joked with. She cried the way that Asmat women do, wailing and running around the village. Priscilla was sobbing. Victoria did not cry. She never cried in front of people, but her eyes filled with tears, something that I had never seen in all the time we were together.

Ani was put in a plastic basket that I used for laundry. Karel, my male nurse from the puskesmas (government primary health center) in Kamur, held the basket on his lap in the boat. It was a small open boat made of aluminum. I sat in the back handling the motor. The center and front were full of boxes containing my belongings. I left most of my books behind because it was too expensive to carry them all in another boat; my replacement could use them when he came. We covered the boat with two canvases. Priscilla passed me a small plastic basket. It contained Ani's milk and a hot water thermos.

The boat was slowly pushed towards the open sea. We had to be pushed for more than 200 meters until the water became deep enough that I could put down the engine. I drove slowly because the sea was rather rough and the sky was cloudy. It was going to be a tough journey. I kept looking back until I could not see the people waving at the beach. It was so sad to leave the people who had been kind to me in a very difficult and isolated place. Bayun was not a paradise, but it was not a hell either. Legions of millions mosquitoes surrounding us for 24 hours and the malaria knocked me down every two months—bedridden one week and lost 4kg each time—were the hell. Life without pressure from schedule, appointment and agenda; the pristine tropical rainforest; and beach full of various birds were the paradise. The simple tribal peoples, though sometimes frustrating with their behavior, had brought peace into my mind and made my life simple. I had just followed the rhythm of nature, without an agenda or tight schedules or work objectives. There was no need of a calendar or clock except to know the sea tide before travelling. I had a very few wishes or desires because so little was available there.

## **Devil's Child on the Arafura Sea**

It was monsoon season, the most dangerous time of the year on the sea. Even a big ship could be sunk by the strong wind and gigantic waves. The waves were playing us like a doll, kicking the boat up and letting it crash to the surface, banging my buttocks and back against the metal bench.

The god, or perhaps the devil, of the sea seemed unsatisfied with the pain in my buttock and back. It tortured more by splashing sea water into my face. The poncho was not so useful. I was completely wet and cold. The waves became crazy when we reached the area where the Siretz and Betz rivers meet. They are two of the longest and widest rivers in the southern Papua, so wide that we cannot see both of their banks at the same time. We were sailing in a vortex of water and struggling to keep as far as possible off the shore to avoid being stuck in the mud. I had to climb the waves at a 45 degree angle. If I went directly into the waves, they would throw us up in the air after hitting us very hard and then land us violently on the surface in precarious positions. If a wave struck us broadside, then it could roll us upside down. I could barely see the incoming waves because the waves raised up the front hull and blocked my view. And, heavy rain, which came and went, made me drive the boat blindly. My heart beat fast and I felt it would be the end of my life.

I prayed that there were no big logs floating in front of us. If there were, it would be over. If we struck a log, most likely the propeller blade would be damaged. If we were lucky, only the pin that connected the propeller blade to the shaft would be broken. The worst, the shaft itself would be broken, which is a nightmare. Even if it were only the broken pin, we would still have been in big trouble because to replace the pin, we need to lift up the shaft and release the pin lock. This operation requires the boat still, which was impossible under the conditions we were in. To avoid the disaster of striking floating log, I had to stand up while holding the horizontal tiller as there was no steering wheel.

While I was struggling to keep the boat upright and moving forward, Karel was busy, using an old can, with shoveling the mixture of sea and rain water that was rapidly filling up the boat. He only stopped doing this for calming the crying baby on his lap.

Once we passed the vortex, the waves were much smaller, but the rain was much heavier. Although not as painful as the waves hitting my face, the rain drops still hurt me. I was trembling from being drenched for so long with cold water. I prayed again that no log was in front of us because I could see nothing ahead.

Only after the rain stopped could I pay attention to Ani. She might had been crying the whole time and must be freezing and hungry, I thought. Four hours had passed since we left Bayun. I felt guilty for not feeding her for so long. I opened the thermos and poured its content into the plastic bottle. The thermos contained only hot water, not milk! I asked Karel to hold the tiller while I looked for the cup and spoon in the bag that Pris gave me, but they were not in there. Searching them on the shaking boat was not easy, but I finally found the cup of milk powder and the spoon in different bags. I poured the milk powder into the bottle and added hot water and shook it. It would be rather salty because some sea water splashed into the bottle, but it was fine because a baby also needs salt. And, Ani seemed satisfied with the milk and fell asleep after finishing it.

## **The Baby Sitter Sister**

The sun was low on the horizon but we were still on the sea and could see nothing but the vaguely long and black shadow on the right side. What we needed to see was a river "mouth." I was relieved when I finally saw a lighthouse. We were close to Ewer, the village with the airstrip. We had travelled over

bumpy water for seven hours, three hours longer than the trip usually took. Our journey took so long that our wet clothes dried on our bodies, only to get wet again and then dry off again.

I was worried about Ani. During the last hour of our trip, Ani did not stop crying even with the milk bottle in her mouth and dry clothes on. I wondered if she had sunburn. But I felt very lucky that the engine had not halted during our journey.

Two nuns were already standing by the pier before our boat docked. “*Aduuh*, we have been very worried about you. Father Ton said Doctor left at 10 o’clock. At two o’clock, we still hadn’t heard any sound of an outboard engine,” Sister Annun said. Father Ton had sent the message by radio.

“Big waves, Sister. We had to move slowly,” I said. “We didn’t want to stay overnight at the bottom of the sea.”

“Is this the baby, Doctor? Let me carry her.” Karel gave Ani to Sister Liz.

For another six days Sister Liz and I took care of Ani together in the Ursuline house. Taking care of a young baby was not easy. We could not sleep through the night. Every two to three hours we had to wake up to feed her and change her diaper, which was a skill that I had to learn from Sister Liz. She had no children, but she had taken care of her younger siblings. The most difficult time was when Ani refused to drink milk and kept crying even though she had dry clothes on. She only stopped crying when we hugged and rocked her. However, this did not always work either. I guessed it was because neither Liz nor I had the soft comforting breasts of a nursing mother.

The day of departure came. Initially the pilot of the Twin Otter aircraft (16 seats) refused to take Ani because he said she was too young. It was an old aircraft and the pressure inside the cabin was about the same as the outside air pressure. Low oxygen levels might harm a young baby. However, the pilot let Ani come on board after Sister Cecilia, another Ursuline nun, told him that I was a medical doctor.

## Single Father

Although the sky was rather cloudy, the pilot managed to land in Wamena, the capital of Jayawijaya Regency in the Grand Valley of Baliem. It lies 1500 meter above sea level and is surrounded by high mountains. I was happy that we were able to land after flying for nearly two hours because there was a possibility that if the weather conditions had been too bad that we would have had to return to the same airstrip from which we had taken off. The aircrew said we would stay for about an hour for refuel.

I went down to the terminal. It is always interesting to see the Dani and some other tribal peoples around the airstrip and at the market opposite the terminal. Many of the men still wore *koteka* (Indonesian) or *holim* (Dani language), the local names for penis gourds. The size and form varied. Based on the *koteka* that a man wore, we could guess his tribe. The body height and facial characteristics, along with the style of the penis gourd, provided enough information that we could guess the man’s tribe with a 90% chance of being correct, even though we did not understand their conversation. But to first-time visitors, all the different tribal people looked alike, with their dark skin and curly hair.

After one hour of walking around with Ani—under the curious stares of many people—I returned to the plane. Another hour passed before the aircrew told us that we had to stay overnight in Wamena because of the bad weather between Wamena and Sentani, the airport of provincial capital Jayapura. Disaster! But there was no use to complain; it was not their fault, it was the Nature that had a plan for me. However, being alone with so many heavy bags and boxes and a three-month-old baby was a nightmare. There was a hotel opposite the terminal, but I had to save money because there was not much left from my USD 50 salary for two years.

When I entered the terminal, I was the center of attention: a straight-haired man with a curly-haired baby. They could be thinking that I kidnapped the baby. I just ignored them because I had to watch my luggage carefully. Stealing was the most common crime in the Valley. I was an easy target this time because if anyone stole from me, I would not be able to chase him with Ani in the basket. I could not rely on the airport security guards because they were too few. The terminal was not restricted to passengers; everyone was welcome.

With a rental car, I went to the convent of the JMJ (Jesus Maria Joseph) Sisters. Anywhere I went in Indonesia while on a limited budget, I looked for a convent. I never failed to request a free room and meals from nuns, even they had never met me. I might look like a priest to them. Indeed, they often called me Father or Brother by mistake when I visited them.

It took only five-minutes to reach the convent by car. I pulled down the little bell by the door. An old nun opened it. She was astonished to see me and the baby. Sister Yacinta recognized me. “Whose baby is it?” she asked.

“My baby,” I answered with a smile.

“Don’t be kidding.” She lifted Ani out of the basket. “Come on in. She must be freezing.”

“I am,” I said.

She looked at me. “Why don’t you put on a sweater?”

“I did not plan to stay in Wamena. I was on the way to Jayapura.”

“Poor Doctor!” Typical of a nun’s words. Some are sincere; some are just in the habit of saying that clichéd phrase. “Let me take care of the baby. Doctor, help yourself to the drink on that table.” She pointed at a small table in the dining room.

I felt relieved. Sister Yacinta, who was around 60 years old, was from North Sulawesi but had spent many years in Papua. She was a loving nun, one of the kindest nuns I have ever known. “I had a lot of young brothers and sisters. I am used to taking care of them,” she said while rocking Ani on her chest. Ani was quiet. Sister Yacinta’s chest must have been more comfortable than mine because Yacinta was rather ‘heavy.’ Then the bell rang and I took over rocking Ani.

Ani cried again, very loudly I think, because I then heard a woman ask “Whose baby is that?” A baby in a convent is always suspicious and attracts interesting gossip. Celibacy is not natural to human beings and a very difficult practice to stay true to. Scandals in monasteries or convents are a classic movie theme.

A moment later Yacinta came in accompanied by three people - a Papuan woman, a girl about eight-years-old, and a boy about five. The woman was big and she was perplexed as she looked back and forth between my face and Ani’s. “Your baby, Doctor?”

“Yes,” I smiled and enjoyed her bemused looking.

“Where is her mother?”

“In Asmat.” She stared at me harder. She must think I was a bad man, abandoning a Papuan woman after having a relationship.

“She is an Asmat?”

“She is.”

Sister Yacinta smiled beside her and said, “Enough, Doctor. He is single.” And then she told Rummy, the woman’s name, the history of Ani.

“What are you going to do with her,” Rummy asked.

“No idea. I have to find a family who wants to adopt her.”

“Mama, take her!” the young girl suddenly said. She seemed understand our conversation.

“Hush, be careful with what you say.” Rummy reprimanded her daughter, Ika. Ika’s skin was much lighter than Rummy and her hair was not that curly.

“Mama, take her. I want a sister.”

“Can you take care of her?” By then Ika had already picked up Ani and was holding her.

“I will, I will.” The same words came out of two mouths; Denny, Ika’s brother, had joined Ika in wanting to keep Ani.

“Ask the Doctor if he will give her to you.” They looked at me but did not dare ask. Yacinta lead them back to the guest room. She returned a few minutes later and told me that Rummy really wanted to adopt Ani. She then told me who Rummy was.

Rummy was the first Papuan headmistress of a public junior high school in Wamena, the only public school at that level. As a Papuan woman, she was lucky. Her parents let her study in Java on a scholarship from the Catholic Mission. She returned to Papua with a certificate and a Javanese husband! The husband had a car for rent or used it as a public transport. They had one girl and one boy.

I did not respond to their request immediately. I asked Rummy to discuss her wish with her husband. Rummy and her children went home and soon came back with her husband. His hair was curly too, but not as curly as his wife's; his skin was light. I talked to them for a while, and then decided to let them take Ani home. I gave them her basket and all her clothes. I felt relieved, but at the same time I felt empty. It was stressful to have a young baby on the road, but it felt good to see her looking at me with her innocent stare.

## Adoption Papers

One year later I went back to Wamena for a health seminar in Pyramid, a Mission station one and a half hours drive west of Wamena. Rummy came and asked me to sign an adoption paper under the "biological father" section. It would not cause a problem in the future, I thought. Both Rummy and Ani look Papuan. However, the problem was that Rummy told everybody in the town that she was adopting an Asmat child. Everybody in her church knew Upik, Ani's new name that meant "little girl." She was much loved, even spoiled, by her father.

"The wife of the Head of Regency asked for her, but I did not give Ani to her," Rummy said proudly. Some of her friends asked her to check if I had other children for adoption. Indeed, it was not too difficult to find children for adoption in the interior of Papua. But to take them out is not either easy or cheap. Moreover, I did not want to change the destiny of so many human beings. Living in the civilized world does not always guarantee happiness. I came to regret letting Rummy adopt Ani when I found out what happened to Rummy six years later.

## Life is Unpredictable

In 1998 I ran a malaria research project of US NAMRU (Naval Medical Research Unit) 2. During the preparation period, I stopped by Rummy's house. It had not been in good condition before, but it was in even worse shape now. The metal wall was dirty and dented in many places, as was the door. I knocked the door and a little Papuan girl opened it. "Are you Upik," I asked her. She looked at me and ran into the house.

"Who is coming, Pik?" a woman's voice. The voice was still the same, but not the body. She was very thin now.

"Do you still remember me?" I asked.

She stared at me and then said, "Doctor?" I would have been surprised if she hadn't remembered me. My face and the shape of my body had hardly changed for many years. People who haven't seen me for years can usually recognize me within a few seconds.

"Upik, come here. Say 'hi' to Doctor Ating." Upik did not come. Rummy went in to fetch her so I had a chance to look around. The light in the room was dim; the walls were faded; the sofa had many holes where the foam came out; and things were everywhere—on the floor, on the table, on the desk and even under the sofa. There was less furniture now than six years ago.



“Say ‘hi’,” Romy was pulling Upik towards me. Upik was tall and dark-skinned; definitely taller than most girls in the Valley for her age.

“It is OK, *Bu* Romy.”

“If there were no Doctor, you would not be here.” If I had not been in Asmat, she might have been in heaven, happier than being in Romy’s family. Later I found out the reason why Romy looked unhealthy and the house was in bad condition.

Sister Methilde, who was in the convent when Upik was adopted, told me that Romy was no longer the headmistress; she had been caught of corruption. Since then she did not come to the school every day anymore and had become sickly. Her husband was looking for a job after selling their car, but he could not find any. They were really broke.

The future of Ani was gloomy, the very opposite of my expectations from six years before. I was curious about her twin sister in Asmat. Was she happier than Upik? Or perhaps she might not be in the world anymore. One day I will look for both them to see the impact of distinct environments to the personality of the twins.