



Lotti Latrous seen here
with the little orphan
Emanuel who was born
in a prison

Proof of Love

How Lotti Latrous showed me the true meaning of happiness

BY GABRIELLA BAUMANN-VON ARX

THERE are stories one cannot ignore, stories that leave a lasting impression because through them one realises that happiness is not found in a million dollars, a flashy car or in diamonds. But in the laughter of a child. In the flutter of the wings of a butterfly. In the smile of an old man. In a faded rose. In being able to breathe in and out. In the present moment. The story that has taught me this starts as follows:

Lotti Latrous, 52, the wife of a businessman, had everything other people only dream of: a chauffeur and a cook, a villa with a swimming pool and gin and tonic served to her in kid gloves. A contented mother of three and a happy wife, Lotti accompanied her husband, an employee of a large firm, from Saudi Arabia to Nigeria to Egypt and to the Ivory Coast.

She started working in the Mother Teresa Hospital – in Abidjan – and was driven by the suffering she encountered. Her experiences also drove Lotti away from the hospital,

to the heart of the slums.

Together with her husband, Aziz, she created a mobile clinic out of nothing in one of the slums, Adjouffou. The Centre Espoir was soon finished thanks to Aziz's suggestion to use old



Hundreds of patients come to the mobile clinic every day

shipping containers. On February 1, 1999, Lotti, Aziz and a dozen co-workers, including a doctor, celebrated the opening of the centre.

From the start, sick people came to them in droves. The ability to help them changed Lotti's sense of happiness. "Previously," she says, "I was happy, very happy, in body and mind, because of my husband and children and our way of life. But afterwards I sensed happiness in my soul as well."

GABRIELLA BAUMANN-VON ARX, is the author of "Lotti, La Blanche" and "Madam Lotti" which topped the Swiss bestseller list for non-fiction.

Shortly after the opening of the "Centre of Hope" the Latrous were informed that they were to be transferred to Cairo. This was a serious test for the family that could easily have ended in a divorce.

It took months to find a solution. The two older children, Selim and Sonia, went to the hotel school in Lausanne, Switzerland; Sarah, the youngest, stayed with her father in Cairo and Lotti remained in Abidjan.

At first Lotti tried commuting: two weeks Abidjan, four weeks Cairo, then two weeks Abidjan, two weeks Cairo. Finally, she left the slum only when she wanted to and not when she thought she had to – and that saved her marriage and her family.

"Long ago," Aziz remembers, "Lotti spoke about her wish to care for people. I always knew that I would respect her greatest wish and that I would help her fulfil it later. The operative word was 'later'. But it happened earlier. For a long time I thought it was too early. But things happen when they must."

LOTTI LATROUS is certain it was no coincidence that when she went to Geneva as a 16-year-old she met the mechanical engineer Aziz. "It was not love at first sight, but he was and is the love of my life. Thanks to him I can do today what I must do," she says. "We are not together every day but when I visit him and he fetches me at the airport with my youngest daughter Sarah we spend wonderfully relaxed days together. Just the three of

us. Sometimes friends visit us, but there are no cocktail parties or social engagements.” She is not interested in small talk any more and likes eating out even less. (This makes a lot of sense, as Aziz is an excellent cook.)

“Aziz is my closest adviser,” says Lotti. “It was his suggestion to open a hospice next to the mobile hospital. Aziz let me go my way – and there isn’t a more beautiful proof of love.”

It is this proof of love that allows Lotti to give *her* love, day by day, in a place where two-thirds of all HIV/Aids infected people of the world are living – Africa. Here, where in the midst of abject poverty there is no progress, and often even a deterioration of the situation. Here, where a third of the population suffers from famine, where over 15 percent of children succumb to HIV/Aids before reaching their fifth year, and every day 6 000 people die of the disease.

Through Lotti Latrous I got to know one of these 6 000 people, Aïcha, who died of the consequences of HIV/Aids on June 17, 2003. The first thing I noticed about Aïcha was her fragile youth. She had a beautiful face, in spite of the hollowness. When I saw her the first time, I told her how much I liked the song that sounded like her name, performed by the Danish band Outlandish, it had topped the European



Lotti Latrous holding Aïcha, who died of HIV/Aids

hit parades. I asked her if she knew it and sang the refrain to her: *Aïcha, Aïcha écoute-moi* [Aïcha, Aïcha listen to me].

She did not know it, she said and smiled impishly. “But I like listening to you. Come sit on my bed.” I sat down but could hardly bear the sadness in her that made her beautiful black eyes far too dark. I did not look away and saw that there was something bright behind the darkness, something that was resisting the war raging in her body. Watching from the door, Lotti nodded at me, encouraging me to remain seated and just be there. Aïcha did not have the strength to speak nor the concentration to follow my halting



A doctor's visit in the women's ward of the Centre Espoir

Lotti. Lotti fed her, found her parents and told them that Aïcha wanted to see her mother, but not her father.

Lotti promised Aïcha that she would fulfil her greatest wish, to hold her hand

French. She was just lying there holding my hand, and now and then, when she coughed up phlegm from her lungs, I passed the bowl to her.

At that time Aïcha had just turned 19 and her story, told to me later by Lotti, has not left me to this day. At 13 she ran away from home because she could not bear her father's beatings any longer. She turned to prostitution to feed herself. In order to be a prostitute, she pumped herself full of drugs. Condoms and sterilised needles were not part of her life. Five years later she developed diarrhoea so badly that her roommate left her. For days Aïcha waited for her return while her condition deteriorated. The loneliness made Aïcha gather her last strength, go out to the nightclub where she used to work and where she now hoped her friends and former co-workers, perhaps even one of her former clients, might help her. Three days later she was found in the gutter by the aid organisation Caritas and was taken to

an entire night so that she could sleep better. Lotti knew that she had to keep her promise very soon. She did it the next night. Two days later Aïcha began to breathe shallowly and could hardly speak. Lotti put her hand on her forehead and sat down next to her on the bed. I sat on the chair. I stared at Aïcha for a long time and started speaking to her in my mind.

Aïcha, Aïcha, écoute-moi, listen to me: you are lying there, breathing shallowly and I have the feeling that your next breath could be your last. I don't know yet that at least four hours would pass between your next breath and your last. I do not know yet that the expression "to breathe one's last" is entirely inappropriate. You are the first person whose death I witness. The first I am accompanying to her death. I want you to know that I shall try to tell many people about your death.

On your night table there is a magazine. The open page shows a smiling, cheerful Nicole Kidman. It shows a

young girl's dream come true. Why do dreams in Africa not come true as well? For example, the dream that you should continue your life.

Lotti measures your pulse. One hundred and eighty beats a minute. Your young heart is too strong to die. Your lungs are too powerful. Despite your irregular breathing they provide your body with enough oxygen. Breathe in. Breathe out. It seems to me that every time you have done that you are one step closer to delivery through death.

I am sitting here and am helpless, also because I promised you yesterday to be with you again today to hold your hand. I should have taken the time yesterday. Should have! Too late now.

Too late? Perhaps you are still aware of us now. YaYa has come and Felix, Monique, Chantal, Solange and Monsieur Konaté. Everyone who looked after you so lovingly in the last months is here with you.

IT WAS NOT Aïcha who made me cry now. It was the nurses who helped Lotti achieve the near impossible every day. People who are there, who are simply there, whose faces will never appear in glossy magazines but who give a new face to humanity every day.

Lotti had her cellphone with her and answered when it rang. After the call she smiled. "A donation. It often happens that I get promises of donations at the bedside of a dying patient."

From minute to minute Aïcha's features were losing their softness,

making her look even more vulnerable. She reminded me of what she really was, a little bird that had fallen out of her nest too soon. A fledgling found and nurtured, but who did not have the strength to fly.

The steps Aïcha took on her way to the end got weaker and weaker. Now and then she would miss a breath. She appeared so exhausted, as exhausted as someone who has to climb the highest mountain and collapses just before reaching the peak. Her pulse raced. Two hundred beats per minute. But, she was not at the goal yet. The last metres have to be completed. Aïcha fought on, every breath from her lungs was a struggle, with longer and longer pauses in between and then, at last, she arrived. From the smile accompanying her last breath, I could tell how beautiful it must have been.

That was something I had not expected. That the struggle would end so peacefully. It seems to be that when people enter the world they cry and when they depart they smile. At least that was how it happened then. That was a consolation for me. And it is a consolation today that I could keep my promise to her that I would tell many people about her. But I did not only give her a last gift, she gave one to me, too.

In Africa there are 30 million people who are HIV-positive. Tens of thousands die of HIV/Aids, hunger, malaria and TB every day. Apart from Aïcha, I met many others who gave a face to the anonymous statistics. Little

Antoine, for example, or Arlette and her two children, the orphan Emanuel, Felix who was blind and Noël who found wisdom far too young.

Antoine is a seven-month-old baby; his big eyes make him look like Walt Disney's Bambi. Lotti told me that Antoine did not have HIV/Aids, but his

"her" troop of children, and prays. But she does not ask God for anything. She thanks him. For being able to help Lotti.

Emanuel, a double orphan today, was born in a prison and with Arlette's help he came to terms slowly but surely with his traumatic experiences.

Until the age of two he had never played with other children, had never heard music, only the noise of screaming people and clanging chains.

Felix, a blind Nigerian, died of malaria shortly after his 62nd birthday, which he celebrated with candles and cake, for the first time in his life.

Noël was scarcely 18 years old, but the look on his face told me that young people who have an incurable disease and are given a long time to die, grow wise exceptionally quickly. Shortly before his death he confided

in me that he knew that everything God does is good. "*Tout ce que Dieu fait est bon,*" a statement with which many Africans counter the injustices of this world. Noël made me realise that only those who doubt God despair.

In the slum of Adjouffou I met people who possess less than nothing and I realised with surprise that these people laugh more heartily and joyously than many people who possess more than enough. To have met these people, to have slept in the slum and



Lotti tends to the dying Noël

parents had rejected him. That was bad, she said, but also understandable. "Perhaps they have five other children whom they can't feed because the father does not have a job."

Arlette fled with her children from the war in the north, found shelter with Lotti and today she is the foster mother to all the orphans whose mothers have died here. In a bright dress that emphasises her silky black skin she kneels down every day in front of

sat at the beds of the dying, to have played ring-a-roses with Arlette and the children, to have drunk a Flag (one of the best beers I have tasted) with Lotti one evening at the night market of the slum, to enter a hut with her the next morning in which we did not even allow dogs to sleep, to have witnessed her bending over a young man lying in his own excrement to wipe his brow without the slightest sign of

disgust – all of this made me realise that happiness is not found in a million dollars, a flashy car and not in diamonds. But in the laughter of a child, in the flutter of the wings of a butterfly, in the eyes of an old man, in a faded rose. In breathing in and out. Here and now.

For more information on the Centre of Hope visit www.lottilatrous.ch.

COME AGAIN?

When the Hecker Pass, in Gilroy, California, had to be closed to widen the shoulder, no one really knew how bad the situation was. That is, until the local paper announced on its front page, “Major route will close for 40 days in August.”

MARILYN MITRI

It's *Night of the Living Dead* all over again! *The State* (Columbia, South Carolina) reported, “The funeral business has launched a national effort to boost repeat business.”

J. FREEMAN

Not crazy about a word? Change the meaning. That's what the Acupuncture Board of California is doing. Its recent policy statement review stated, “The board proposes to amend Section 1399.480 to change the definition of one hour.”

TERRI BEALS

IN THAT CASE, WE'LL WALK TOO



A friend and I were visiting Israel, when we decided to take a cruise on the Sea of Galilee. The boat operator quoted us an astronomical price.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” yelled my friend.

“But these are the waters on which Christ himself *walked*,” the man protested.

“And no wonder, if that’s how much it is to take the boat,” my friend shot back.

DANIEL LANNON