

Step by Step

*How The Gambia Stole My Heart
and Gave Me a Family*

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A Note to My Gambian Family

This book was first written in Dutch for my family and friends in Belgium. But from the very beginning, I knew it also belonged in The Gambia. Because these are not only my memories. They are our memories. Thank you for opening your homes, your hearts and your lives to Bea and me. Without you, there would never have been a story to tell. This book belongs to all of us.

With gratitude,

Patrick Geysels

Dedication

For Bea.

Because one postponed honeymoon unexpectedly led us to a second home.

For all the volunteers of Warne Gloed and Moobeta Foundation.

Because every achievement began with people who believed that even the smallest act of kindness can make a world of difference.

And for our Gambian family.

You taught us that true wealth is not measured by what we own, but by what we are willing to share.

We are not remembered for what we own.

We are remembered for the warmth we leave in the hearts of others.

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Prologue

November.

The sun slowly disappears behind the Atlantic Ocean.

A gentle breeze drifts across the beach in The Gambia. Children laugh as they chase a worn-out football through the sand. A few fishermen pull their brightly painted boats ashore. The smell of charcoal and grilled fish mingles with the salty sea air.

It seems like an ordinary evening.

But for me, nothing about this country is ordinary anymore.

I gaze at the horizon and find myself thinking back to a journey that was never meant to end here.

Seventeen years earlier, Bea and I were thousands of kilometres away.

Not in Africa.

But in Jamaica.

We were celebrating our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary with a honeymoon that had come many years later than planned. We visited Bob Marley's home, enjoyed the music, the breathtaking scenery and the relaxed atmosphere.

Yet it wasn't Bob Marley who would change my life forever.

It was the stories of slavery.

The stories of African men, women and children who arrived in the Caribbean after an unimaginable journey across the Atlantic Ocean.

I couldn't stop wondering where they had come from.

That question stayed with me.

I began to read.

To search.

To discover.

Eventually, my search led me to a small country in West Africa.

The Gambia.

At that time, it was just another name on the map.

I could never have imagined that, only a few years later, this country would become my second home.

That I would find friends who would become family.

That I would laugh there.
Cry there.
Doubt myself there.
Witness hope taking root.
And, together with many others, try to make a small difference.
This is not the history of Warne Gloed.
Nor is it a travel guide.
And it is certainly not a list of projects.
This is a story about encounters.
About people.
About trust.
About dreams.
About success.
But also about disappointment.
Above all, it is the story of what The Gambia has done to us.
Because, strange as it may sound...
We thought we were travelling to The Gambia to give something.
In the end, we received far more than we had ever dared to dream.

"Everything begins with people."

Before we begin

People often ask me why I decided to write this book.

The answer is actually quite simple. Because memories fade.

Not all at once, but little by little. Names become blurred. Dates are forgotten. Small moments that once seemed so important slowly disappear into the background.

I didn't want that to happen.

That is why this book has become much more than an account of the projects of Warne Gloed and Moobeta Foundation.

It is a story about people.

The people Bea and I met along the way.

The people who placed their trust in us.

The people who made us laugh, moved us deeply, or sometimes left us speechless.

When we finally went on our honeymoon in 2009, we could never have imagined that this journey would become the beginning of an adventure that would change our lives forever.

Even less could we have imagined that a small country like **The Gambia** would one day feel like a second home.

Since our very first visit, we have travelled to villages where tourists had never set foot. We have met village elders, school principals, nurses, farmers, fishermen, teachers and hundreds of children who welcomed us with the brightest of smiles.

We witnessed poverty. But we also witnessed extraordinary resilience.

We met people who, despite having so little, found reasons to smile every single day.

And we learned that true wealth is not always measured in money or possessions.

Over the years, chance encounters grew into lasting friendships.

Bai Dodou Jallow became far more than a project partner.

Lamin Dampha became a friend.

The Sonko family even gave me a new name and welcomed me as one of their own.

Those are not things you can plan.
They are gifts that life places in your hands.
Of course, this book is also about water projects, school gardens,
computer classes, ambulances, solar energy and many other
initiatives.
But in the end, these were never the goal.
They were simply the means.
The real purpose has always been the same:
To give people opportunities.
Not by doing everything for them, but by working together to find
solutions that will continue to exist long after we are gone.
That is why you will not only read about success.
You will also read about projects that did not go as planned.
About disappointment.
About moments when we had to rethink our ideas and change
direction.
Because that, too, is part of development work.
Anyone who tells only the beautiful stories is not telling the whole
truth.
I hope this book takes you on a journey.
Not only along dusty roads, colourful markets and remote villages,
but above all to the people who touched our hearts.
Perhaps, along the way, you will discover that Bea and I are not the
main characters in this story.
The true leading roles belong to the people who welcomed us,
inspired us, challenged us and taught us what trust really means.
This book is dedicated to them.
And to everyone who believes that even the smallest act of kindness
can become the beginning of something truly remarkable.
Welcome to our story.

Patrick Geysels

Hallaar, Belgium

2026

Chapter 1

The Journey That Changed Everything

"Some journeys take you to a different destination. Others take you to a different life."

"Did we ever actually have a real honeymoon?"

It was one of those questions that suddenly comes up on an ordinary evening.

Bea looked at me for a moment.

She didn't have to think very long.

"Not really."

Like so many young couples, we had stepped straight into everyday life after our wedding. There was a house to pay for, work that demanded all our attention, and before long, children became part of our lives. A honeymoon was something we always said we would take "someday."

Only...

Someday kept being postponed.

Until, in 2009, we suddenly realized that we had already been married for twenty-five years.

Our silver wedding anniversary.

Perhaps that was the perfect moment to finally take the honeymoon we had put off for so long.

For me, the destination had already been decided.

Jamaica.

Not because of its white sandy beaches.

Not because of its luxury resorts.

Not even because of its tropical climate.

I wanted to visit Bob Marley's home.

His music had been part of my life for many years.

Not only because I loved his songs, but because they spoke about freedom, equality and hope.

Those were values that resonated deeply with me.

So Bea and I boarded a plane for Jamaica, carrying nothing more than our curiosity and a sense of adventure.

It turned out to be an unforgettable journey.

We explored the island's breathtaking landscapes, met its warm and welcoming people, and, of course, visited the house where Bob Marley had lived.

I still remember how special it felt to walk through the rooms where so much music history had been made.

But during that journey, something else happened.

Something I could never have imagined would shape the rest of my life.

During several excursions, we learned about the transatlantic slave trade.

We visited places where, centuries earlier, African men, women and children had first set foot after an unimaginable voyage across the Atlantic.

People who had lost everything.

Their freedom.

Their families.

Their homes.

I found myself thinking about it far more than I had expected.

Not only about what had happened to them.

But about one simple question.

Where had they come from?

That question stayed with me.

Even after we returned home.

I started reading books.

Searching the internet.

Watching documentaries.

Again and again, the same name appeared.

Kunta Kinteh.

The central character in Alex Haley's world-famous novel *Roots*.

Through that book, millions of people discovered the history of slavery.

But what fascinated me most was where the story began.

Juffureh.

Albreda.

Small villages on the banks of the River Gambia.

Suddenly, my search had a destination.

The Gambia.

A country I knew almost nothing about.

At that moment, I could never have imagined that just a few years later, its name would hold such an important place in my life.

Even less could I have imagined that I would find friends there who would become family.

That I would meet children who would refuse to let go of my hand.

That I would learn to sleep on a mattress stuffed with dried peanut leaves.

That I would cry.

Laugh.

Doubt.

And dream.

All because one simple question refused to let me go after we returned from Jamaica.

Where had this story really begun?

Sometimes, a single question is enough to change the direction of an entire life.

For me, everything started with that one question.

And the answer was not in Jamaica.

It lay more than six thousand kilometres away.

In the smallest country on the African mainland.

The Gambia.

"The most beautiful journeys never truly end. They continue to live in your heart."

Chapter 2

When The Gambia Called

"Some destinations are chosen by us. Others seem to choose us."

After we returned from Jamaica, life quickly settled back into its familiar rhythm.

Work.

Family.

Friends.

Weekends.

Like so many people, we were soon caught up again in the demands of everyday life.

And yet...

Something had changed.

I noticed that my thoughts kept returning to the same question that had occupied my mind throughout our journey.

Where had the African slaves departed from?

I began reading everything I could find.

At first, it was simply curiosity.

But the more I discovered, the stronger my fascination became.

Again and again, the same name appeared.

The Gambia.

A narrow strip of land stretching like a ribbon along the River Gambia.

A country where history still feels alive.

Where stories are passed down from one generation to the next.

Where Juffureh and Albreda still stand.

Villages forever linked to the story of Kunta Kinteh.

Slowly, the idea of travelling there began to grow.

Not to start projects.

Not to change the world.

Simply to see.

To understand.

To discover the story behind the story.

In 2011, that journey finally became reality.

Bea and I boarded another plane.
This time, not for the Caribbean.
But for West Africa.
I still remember how curious we were.
What would we find?
How did people live?
Would The Gambia really be as different as we imagined?
As the aircraft began its descent, I caught my first glimpse of the
winding River Gambia.
From above, it looked like a lifeline running through the entire
country.
Only much later would I realise just how symbolic that image truly
was.
Because it is not only rivers that connect people.
Water does too.
And perhaps something even more powerful...

Trust.

The moment we stepped out of the airport, we entered a
completely different world.
The warm, humid air wrapped around us like a heavy blanket.
Unfamiliar languages filled the air.
People moved calmly from place to place.
No one seemed to be in a hurry.
Even time itself appeared to move at a different pace.
During the drive to our hotel, I hardly took my eyes off the window.
Small roadside shops.
Market stalls.
Children playing along the road.
Women effortlessly balancing large bowls on their heads, as though
it were the most natural thing in the world.
Men sitting beneath the shade of a tree, talking for hours.
Everything was new.
Everything fascinated me.

What I didn't know then was that this country would never let go of me.

That one day I would meet people who would become family.

That I would visit villages where no tourist had ever been before.

That I would learn to eat from one large communal bowl.

That I would teach computer classes to children.

That I would help build water systems, school gardens and medical clinics.

That one day I would even be given a new name.

No...

At that moment, Bea and I were simply two curious travellers.

Searching for the beginning of a story.

We had no idea that our own story was about to begin.

Because sometimes a life doesn't change because of one great decision.

Sometimes everything begins with a single encounter.

One glance.

One conversation.

And that was exactly the kind of encounter waiting for us.

An encounter that, even today, I will never be able to erase from my memory.

"I never heard a voice. Yet somehow, I knew I had to return."

Chapter 3

The Encounter That Changed Everything

"Sometimes a life is changed not by what you say, but by what someone silently asks of you."

Our first days in **The Gambia** were filled with discovery.

Like so many visitors, Bea and I explored colourful markets, walked along the beaches and immersed ourselves in the country's history.

Everything was new. Everything caught our attention.

Yet it didn't take long for me to realise that it wasn't the buildings or the landscapes that fascinated me most.

It was the people.

Wherever we went, we were greeted with genuine warmth. Children waved enthusiastically as we walked past. Adults would stop for a friendly conversation. We were struck by how easily people connected with one another, even when they shared very few words of the same language.

One day, we took the ferry between Bara and Banjul.

It was crowded.

People sat close together, some carrying luggage, others balancing baskets filled with goods. Children wandered around, curious and playful. For many passengers, this crossing was part of everyday life.

For us, it was another new experience.

We stood among the crowd, quietly observing everything around us.

Then a woman approached us.

She smiled warmly and began speaking.

We understood very little of her language, but through a few English words, gestures and shared expressions, we somehow managed to communicate.

Standing beside her was a small child.

Curious eyes looked up at us.

The woman gently placed her hands on her child, looked straight into my eyes, and with calm, deliberate gestures made it clear what she was trying to say.

She wanted to know if I would take her child with me to Belgium.

For a moment, I thought I had misunderstood her.

I looked at Bea.

She had understood exactly the same thing.

The woman repeated her gestures.

Not hesitantly.

Not desperately.

But with the quiet conviction of a mother who wanted nothing but the very best for her child.

She truly believed that her son or daughter would have a better future in Belgium than she could ever offer herself.

A knot formed in my stomach.

What do you say to a question like that?

How do you explain that such a thing is impossible?

How do you comfort a mother who isn't offering her child because she no longer wants to care for them, but because her love is so deep that she believes someone else might be able to give them a better life?

I couldn't find the words.

Perhaps there simply weren't any.

The ferry continued its journey.

The water flowed gently around us, as though nothing extraordinary had happened.

But for me...

Time stood still.

When we finally reached the other side, it was time to say goodbye.

I turned around one last time.

The woman was still standing there.

Holding her child close against her.

That image has never left me.

Some memories fade with time.

This one never did.
If anything, it became even stronger.
Even today, so many years later, I still feel a shiver run down my spine whenever I think about that moment.
On the journey back, Bea hardly spoke.
Neither did I.
We both needed time to process what we had just experienced.
That encounter changed our holiday.
More than that..
It changed the way we looked at the world.
Until then, we had seen **The Gambia** as a beautiful country filled with kind and welcoming people.
From that moment on, we also began to see the daily struggles hidden behind so many smiles.
We realised that no one can solve all the problems of the world.
But we also realised something else.
Perhaps you don't have to change the whole world.
Perhaps it is enough to make a small difference for one village.
One school.
One family.
That thought never left me.
For the rest of our journey, it walked quietly beside us.
Without even realising it, the first seed had been planted.
The seed that, a few years later, would grow into **Warme Gloed**.
It wasn't born from a grand master plan.
It wasn't created around a meeting table.
It was born from the gaze of a mother.
And from the love she carried for her child.

"A mother's love is measured not by what she holds on to, but sometimes by what she is willing to let go."

Chapter 4

Why The Gambia Never Let Us Go

"Some countries you visit only once. Others keep calling you back."

After our first journey, Bea and I returned home to Belgium.

At least physically.

In our hearts and minds, we were still in **The Gambia**.

Friends and family asked us about our holiday.

We told them about the sunshine, the beaches and the warmth of the Gambian people.

We showed them photographs of colourful markets, fishing boats and children running towards us with joyful smiles.

But somehow, every conversation led back to one particular story.

The woman on the ferry.

The mother who wanted a better future for her child.

It was as if that single encounter overshadowed everything else.

Not because it was tragic.

But because it made us realise how different two worlds could be.

Yet there was something else we kept talking about.

The warmth.

And I don't mean the temperature.

I mean the warmth of the people.

Never before had we experienced strangers greeting us so openly.

Children taking our hands as if we had known each other forever.

People inviting us to sit with them, expecting nothing in return.

In Belgium, we often live **next to** one another.

In **The Gambia**, people live **with** one another.

That difference stayed with us.

Every single day.

Looking back at the photographs from that first journey, I noticed something else.

Almost every picture contained a smile.

Not only ours.

But especially the smiles of the people we had met.

People who possessed so much less than we did.