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News

Posted on Sun, May. 08, 2005

TELL ME A STORY | A MOTHER'S SACRIFICE, A DAUGHTER'S SEARCH

Rebuilding a life lost half a world away

JERI FISCHER KRENTZ -- STAFF WRITER

Rebuilding a life lost half a world away Davidson woman looks for the answers

to the decades-old puzzle of the past

Maryline Roux knew little about the weary-looking woman in African dress in the black-and-white photograph on her nightstand.

So many years and so many miles separated mother and daughter. Maryline grew up in France and later settled in a country club neighborhood in Davidson. Her mother lived in a poor village in the Ivory Coast.

Now, on a January morning in 2004, they would hear each other's voices for the first time since Maryline was a baby. It had taken months to arrange the long-distance call. Maryline, 37, planned to ask all the questions that had unsettled her for decades:

Did you and my father love each other? Why didn't you leave your village and come with us to France? How could a mother let her baby go?

Most of all, she wondered when they would finally meet.

That's how this Mother's Day story begins: On a journey of love, a daughter searching for the mother she never knew.

At first, Maryline Roux had only skimpy details to hold onto.

She knew she was born on a November day in 1966 in the Ivory Coast on the western bulge of Africa.

Her mother, Therese Yei Meledje was 18, black and poor a village girl. Maryline's father, Yvon Soulard, was a French Caucasian who worked in the Ivory Coast as a chemist.

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When she was 6 months old, Maryline got very sick and Soulard took her to his home in France for medical care. Her mother stayed behind.

Maryline's father died when she was 7. His sister and her husband raised her in a suburb of Paris, along with their two sons.

But as she grew up, she felt more of an outsider. Her brothers were studious; Maryline hated school. Everyone around her was white; with her light brown skin, children teased her for being a "Negro."

In 1984, when she was 18 and living on her own, she sent a letter through the Ivory Coast Embassy in Paris to start searching for her mother. Months later, an envelope arrived with a black-and-white photograph.

Maryline had always imagined what her mother looked like. But here was a sad, tired woman. With her own long, straight hair and stylish clothes, Maryline saw no resemblance.

Instead of feeling a connection, she remembers feeling disappointed, looking at this stranger from Africa.

Therese Yei Meledje

After marrying in 1993, Maryline's husband, Patrick Roux, urged his wife to learn more about her family in the Ivory Coast. Maryline dug through boxes of pictures to find the photograph. Patrick framed it as a surprise on their first Christmas together.

Since her mother couldn't read or write, Maryline mailed letters to her mother's sister, Augustine. She recalls sending pictures of her wedding in a chateau in France. She sent news of moving to America and having her first baby, Cheyn, in 1995.

Augustine sent letters back on thin, lined paper. Maryline's mother lived in a straw hut in a village called Vieux-Badjem, in a part of the country that was tropical forest and farmland. She had 10 other children, Maryline's half brothers and sisters. She still worked in the fields; her husband was the village chief. She liked to dance and run -- just like Maryline.

A voice on the phone

For years, Maryline tried to figure out how to meet her mother. But the Ivory Coast seemed so far away, each time she planned a visit something always kept her home: her three babies, civil unrest in West Africa. She and her mother agreed to meet in France -- but her mother didn't have a passport, so the reunion was canceled.

For that one long-distance call a year ago, Maryline's mother took an eight-hour bus ride to a big city, then to a cousin's house, where there was a phone. Maryline was alone in her family room, thinking of what she would say. Did you love my father? Why didn't you come with us?

Maryline says her mother's voice sounded timid, like a child's. The cousin was there to interpret her African dialect.

But Maryline was too overwhelmed to ask her questions. And her mother broke down in tears.

That night, Maryline wrote in her journal. "She said, 'I love you.' Just writing it makes me feel warm. I know we're going to meet soon."

Nov. 6

Top: Maryline Roux is surrounded by her three sons: Cheyn (from left), 10, Tevenn, 5, and Donovan, 2, and husband, Patrick, in their Davidson home. **Top:** Maryline, as a baby. (DAVID T. FOSTER III, Staff)
Bottom: Maryline Roux's biological mother, Therese Yei Meledje, holding an unidentified baby. Maryline keeps this photograph on her nightstand. (COURTESY OF MARYLINE ROUX)

On a Friday morning last October, Maryline's telephone in Davidson rang. Her cousin's husband was calling from the Ivory Coast. Maryline could tell in his voice that something was wrong. I have bad news. Your mother died yesterday.

It had taken Maryline years to find her mother, even longer to feel her love. Now they would never meet. Maryline stayed in bed the entire weekend, burdened with regret. She felt her journey had ended.

But her husband convinced her it was just beginning. It's too late to see your mother, he told her. It's not too late to meet your siblings and see the life your mother left behind.

He was right, Maryline decided. She must go.

Maryline flew out of Charlotte on Friday, Nov. 5, and stopped in Paris to pick up her childhood friend, Lydia Caillaba. They flew to Casablanca in Morocco and on to Abidjan, the Ivory Coast's commercial center.

After traveling 7,000 miles, they would arrive in her mother's village on Nov. 6 -- the same day, 38 years earlier, that Maryline was born.

The adventure begins

On his home computer in Davidson, Patrick tracked his wife's flight on Royal Air Maroc from Paris to Casablanca. He knew a cousin would be at the airport in Abidjan to meet them; he called the cousin's cell phone as they waited for luggage. Maryline sounded excited.

It was after midnight. Outside the airport, the city seemed dark, ominous. Clusters of people roamed the sidewalks. Military tanks lined the wide boulevards.

As Maryline's driver sped to a hotel, he warned that he wouldn't stop at red lights. Stopping was an invitation to thugs.

Maryline's excitement turned to fear. The hot night felt dangerous, as if something bad could happen.

Praying for it to ring

On Saturday, the day after Maryline left Davidson, Patrick had a call from her brother in France.

Have you heard that nine people are dead?

In the Ivory Coast -- which had been a French colony until 1960 -- a war with rebels was erupting. A French base was hit, killing nine French peacekeepers and an American aid worker. Within hours, French forces had wiped out Ivory Coast's new air force, sending thousands of citizens into the streets, rioting and looting.

News reports said Abidjan was on fire. Mobs armed with clubs were ransacking foreign-owned businesses and homes; crowds were said to be going door to door looking for French citizens. Two French schools were burned. Several European women reportedly were raped. France was urging 9,000 expatriates to evacuate.

With their French passports, Maryline and Lydia were in danger.

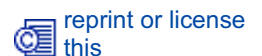
Patrick knew Maryline planned to leave Abidjan that morning and drive to her aunt's house, then on to the relative calm of her mother's village. But what if something delayed her? What if the roads were already too risky?

He dialed Maryline's cousin's phone, but couldn't get through.

Over the next 48 hours, he dialed once, twice ... 40, 50, 60 times.

The phone never rang. FIRST OF TWO PARTS Coming Monday

Maryline Roux struggles to learn about her mother while trying to stay safe as violence rages in the Ivory Coast.





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