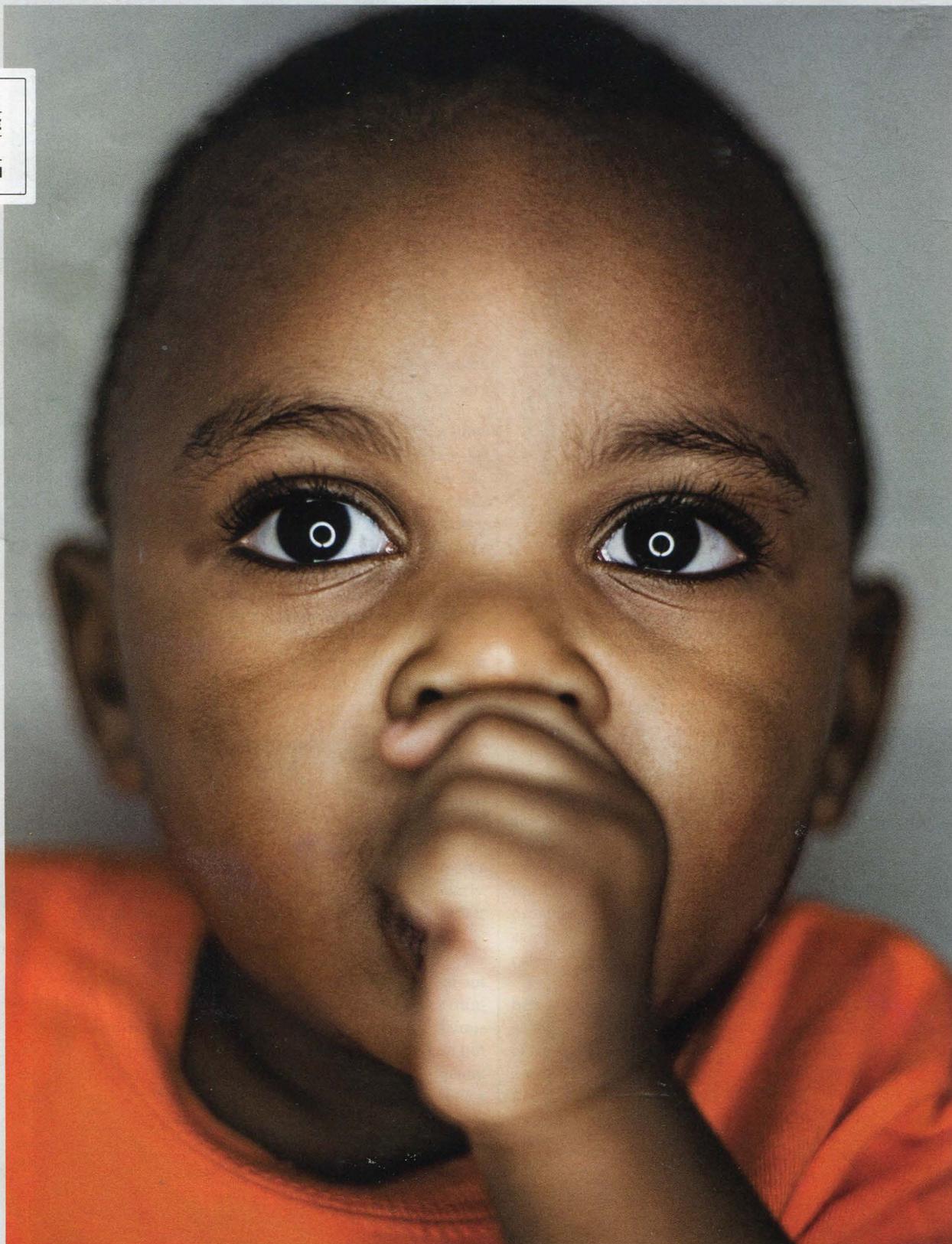


THE
LIFE
OF
MAN



1 RUBIN BIELELI

(b. 2012) AMERICAN

MR. PRESIDENT

TO THOSE WHO WOULD IMMIGRATE TO THE U.S., OURS IS NOT A FADED GLORY: AMERICA IS STILL A PLACE WHERE ANY CHILD CAN GROW UP TO BE ANYTHING HE OR SHE WANTS TO BE.

BY TOM JUNOD

There is a boy in Baltimore whose name is Rubin. He is a year and a half old. He lives in a small apartment with his father and mother, three sisters, and a brother. His father works a variety of shifts at a hotel. His father's car has been stolen twice in as many years. Many of the cars parked in front of their building bear bumper stickers with the exhortations against violence and crime common in violent and crime-ridden cities.

Yet look at Rubin Bieleli. Listen to his father and mother, Mbunza and Kalanga. They will tell you something about America and America's chances.

For Mbunza, Baltimore is not violent or crime-ridden. For Mbunza, Baltimore represents one word—"Peace. There is no fighting. There is no gunfire at night."

For Kalanga, Baltimore represents something even more basic. "It is the first place in the world where we have been welcome."

They are not from Baltimore. They are from the Congo. They have been despised.

They do not speak very much English—they speak French and the language of their tribe, Hema. Like many people in the Congo, Mbunza also spoke Swahili, but he had to be careful about whom he spoke Swahili to, because he spoke Swahili like a Hema. He had to be careful not to speak Swahili to a Lendu, because the Lendu despised the Hema, and he did not want to reveal himself.

Mbunza was a tailor—in the French he spoke to his guests, a *couturier*. He had his own shop. Back then, he had three children and a fourth eight months in the belly of his wife. Then Mbunza made a mistake. He spoke Swahili to a customer he didn't know. That night, a Lendu gang burned down the shop, with Mbunza inside. He caught on fire, from his ankles to his neck. A police officer saved him by driving a car through the walls of the building, and then a friend took him to Uganda. Kalanga did not know what had become of him. Shortly after Mbunza was burned, Kalanga was raped in front of her children and their house burned down. She fled to Uganda in the bloody shreds of the dress she was wearing during the attack. When she found her husband, they realized that the Lendu were in Uganda, so they sought refuge in Nigeria. There, her contractions started. Kalanga went to a hospital on the back of a motorbike, and when she arrived no doctor would touch her—in part because they had no money, in part because the risks were too great. At last,

a nurse took pity on her and commanded, "Push."

Her baby was born on June 3, 2005. They called her *Mianda*—Hema for "a child born at great risk."

Kalanga cries three times as she tells her story. Her sobs are so racking, so piteous, that an American who is listening tries to offer comfort in the only way he knows how, saying, as if by habit, "But you are in America now."

It sounds ridiculous at first—or worse, a hollow assurance made for one's own relief rather than hers. What do those words even mean in 2013, when America has proven so vulnerable both within and without? But Kalanga nods. The Bielelis, as it turns out, know exactly what those words mean.

They filed for refugee status with the UN when they were in Nigeria. Their application was accepted, and after five years in limbo, they flew to the United States in 2010.

There were members of the International Rescue Committee waiting for them at the airport.

This has been their experience of America. When, on the morning of May 4, 2012, Kalanga told Mbunza that it was time for her to go to the hospital to give birth to the baby they'd already named Rubin, there were people waiting for them when they arrived. Nobody considered them untouchable. And nobody treated them like animals.

Mbunza Bieleli. He is an American father now, so he knows what each of his children wants to be: "One wants to be a doctor; one wants to be a musician; one wants to be a soldier." Rubin, of course, is too young to say what he wants, so he is the only child for whom Mbunza speaks, in English:

"He is an American, so he will be president."

A photographer comes to take Rubin's picture as he sits in a big chair that surrounds him like a throne, and his family, to make him smile, cheers him on with an innocence made raucous by the fact that it's an innocence restored. Rubin is a calm child who combines the expressiveness of his mother and the gravity of his father—he has a decal tattoo of Curious George on his face, and he's wearing an orange onesie emblazoned with the words LET'S GET CRACKIN'! but he's almost regal in his repose. "Mr. President!" Mianda calls to him, and then they all do. They whistle, they shout, they clap their hands, they call out "Mr. President!" over and over again, and if the Bielelis from the Congo had sparklers, it would be the Fourth of July. ▀