



UNBREAKABLE

By Lindsey V. Corey

Relatives were stalling, but Jeanette refused to wait any longer.

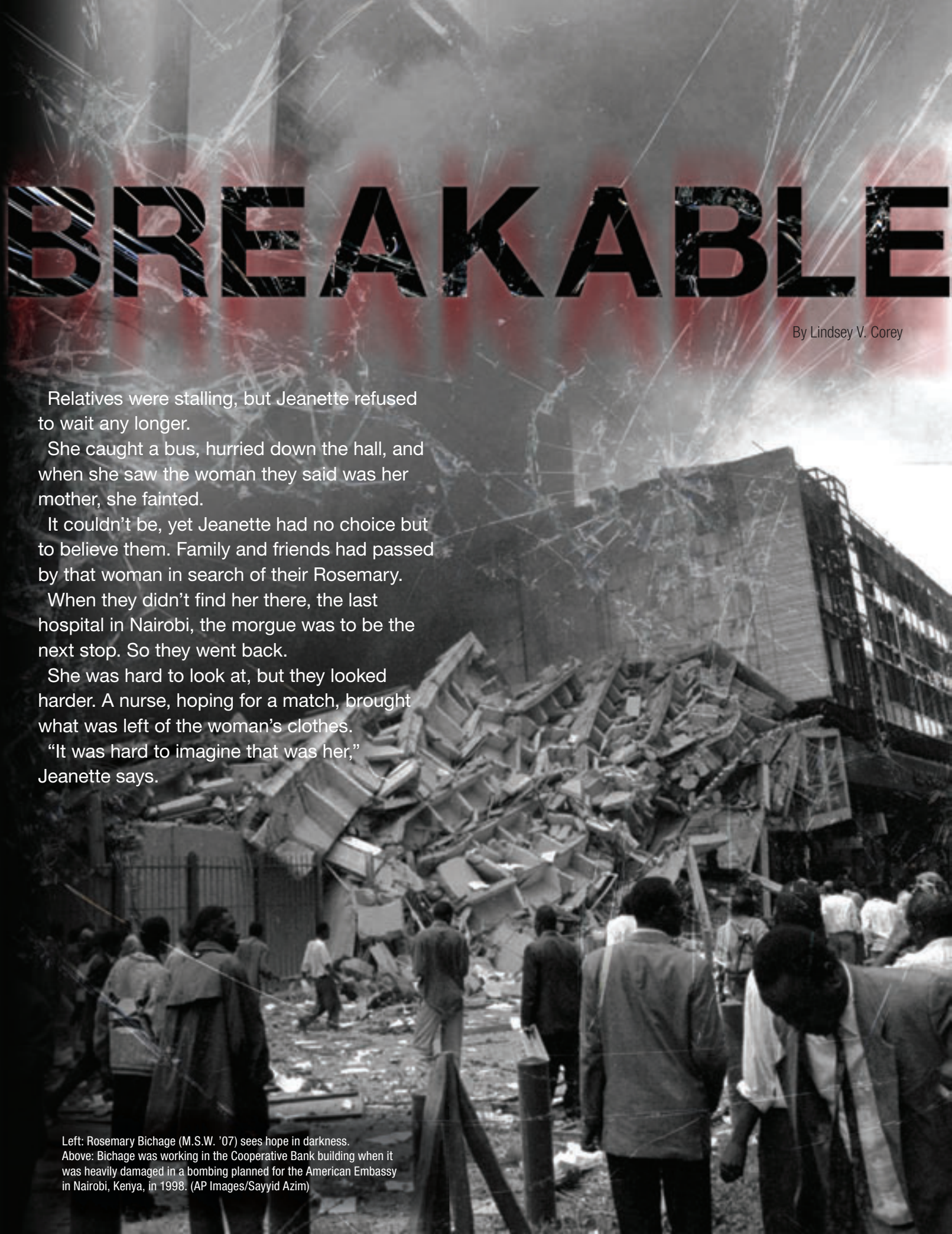
She caught a bus, hurried down the hall, and when she saw the woman they said was her mother, she fainted.

It couldn't be, yet Jeanette had no choice but to believe them. Family and friends had passed by that woman in search of their Rosemary.

When they didn't find her there, the last hospital in Nairobi, the morgue was to be the next stop. So they went back.

She was hard to look at, but they looked harder. A nurse, hoping for a match, brought what was left of the woman's clothes.

"It was hard to imagine that was her," Jeanette says.



Left: Rosemary Bichage (M.S.W. '07) sees hope in darkness.
Above: Bichage was working in the Cooperative Bank building when it was heavily damaged in a bombing planned for the American Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1998. (AP Images/Sayyid Azim)

Rosemary Bichage had fallen four stories. Debris seared her skin. Glass invaded her organs. The impact knocked her teeth out.

"Her head was shaved and as big as a watermelon, all lopsided with no facial features," Jeanette shakes the image from her head. "And the burns... She was just pink. She didn't have any flesh left."

Jeanette had seen her mother the day before, Aug. 7, 1998, just hours before terrorist bombs destroyed the American Embassy in Kenya and the adjacent bank where Rosemary worked as a credit manager. Two hundred fifty seven were dead, 5,000 injured.

And now Rosemary was lying there, burnt and broken in a protective bubble. Doctors had done all they could do; they said it was only a matter of time.

"Two days later, I was still not dead," Rosemary says, shaking her fist and laughing.

Ten days and countless operations later, Rosemary was airlifted to Germany, where hospitals were more advanced and less overwhelmed. There, she was treated for free beginning with a 17-hour surgery to repair internal bleeding and remove the remaining pieces of bombs and buildings.

But she was still in a coma, had been ever since a stranger drove her lifeless body to the first hospital.

"I was in a lot of peace, a lot of peace," she says.

And then, four months after the bombs hit, Rosemary woke up.

"That's when my peace ended," she says. "No more peace, just pain, pain, pain. I hurt everywhere. I didn't know where I was or why. I just saw all these white people in white robes."

Her first words were a prayer, the first thing she remembers since her phone went dead at the bank: God, forgive me for all the



Jeanette, Rosemary and Linda Bichage after church in Kansas City.

Rosemary wasn't so sure.

"I wake up from a coma, and they tell me I'm going to therapy," she remembers. "Are you kidding me? Where will they start? I don't look like anything. I am just bits and pieces of a human being."

At first, of course, there was a lot of "why me" and "what if," but Rosemary pushed herself past all that and through the pain.

"When they told me what happened, I knew if I'd taken just 30 minutes at home with my kids I would not have been found by that bomb," she says. "That's why you cry, when you see how much is lost and how much you're starting over. Then one day you

say, 'OK, it happened,' and you do your best to reconstruct your life."

She knew that meant more than learning to walk again, but in Germany she had to focus on physical healing.

When she was discharged in March 1999, she could take two steps. Rosemary was able to rest at home for two weeks while staff of the reorganized embassy coordinated her continued care at Saint Luke's Hospital in Kansas City. She assumed Kansas City was in Arkansas because she'd heard of that.

"Medicine stops at a particular point in Africa, but I had big hopes for the medical technology in America," Rosemary says.

But even doctors here couldn't save the leg she'd been fighting to keep for months.

"It was killing me, but I couldn't imagine what I would do without it until they brought in amputees who showed me I'd be able to do everything for myself," Rosemary remembers.

She was in and out of the hospital and an assisted living facility for almost a year. She lost track of how many surgeries but "definitely more than 50 and probably less than 100."

Somewhere in the midst of her recovery, Rosemary found resolve.

"I remembered my dream from not long after I woke up," she says. "I had told myself if I ever become whole again, I'm going to school because I was feeling so stupid because my brain was damaged too. Looking at myself, I was wondering am I a dreamer? But let me dream big. Anything can happen."

As she regained strength, she started looking at universities in the region "to revitalize my brain and reward myself." Rosemary already had a bachelor's degree in business but wasn't sure what she wanted to study when she visited UMKC's School of Social Work.

"I figured out I wanted to tell people all is possible even when you've gone down to the basement of your life," she says. "This was the place for me."

She enrolled in the master's in social work program while still being treated for injuries related to the bombing two years earlier.

"Sometimes I wondered if I was strong enough, but somewhere along the line I really didn't want to give up," Rosemary says. "I was working harder than ever to make the grade. From time to time I would be sick but ignore my health because I really wanted my dream to come true."

She shared the same dream for her daughters, then 18. Linda left Nairobi in 2001 to join her mother at UMKC. Jeanette transferred here the following semester, and the three shared a small apartment just off campus.

"It was weird because since the bombing happened we were kind of on our own so we were feeling pretty grown up and

“I've been surviving every bit of the way and plan to continue surviving.”

—Rosemary Bichage

independent, and then suddenly there was someone to tell you to do your homework," Jeanette remembers. "But I really enjoyed it. It felt like I had a mom again."

"In spite of everything, she was a mom to us that we could depend on. She denies herself for our sake and supported us through college because that's just my mom."

The girls earned bachelor's degrees in business in 2006 and went straight to work on their M.B.A.s, also at UMKC.

"Mom was beaming the whole day," Linda recalls. "She was so ecstatic to be able to witness us graduating because there was a chance she might not have made it."

And then came Rosemary's turn in 2007. She walked proudly in the procession from the UMKC Administrative Center to the commencement ceremony site in Theis Park.

"I was smiling all the way, thinking my dream has come true," she says with a triumphant laugh. "You should see the pictures."

A few months after graduation, Rosemary was hired as a family advocate at Jewish Vocational Service, a nonprofit agency.

"It felt so good to read 'M.S.W.' on my card," she says displaying it with a smile. "This was it, my chance to give back."

But two days before she could share her new business cards with clients, Rosemary had to be hospitalized. She had passed out while shopping for an outfit for her first day at her first social work job.

"We got a message that Mom was in the emergency room and got this sinking, horrible feeling all over again," Linda says. "She'd just graduated, gotten a job and finally become a resident of America so things were

going well for her. And now we're back at the hospital, but she's just smiling and joking about fainting."

That's Rosemary's way.

"I didn't want them to see me crying," she says. "These kids have been through enough."

So Rosemary cried at night, when visitors weren't allowed.

"Mom always protected us from the hard stuff," Jeanette says. "She's so strong that it takes the weight off of you."

When tests revealed she was bleeding internally, Rosemary was transferred to intensive care, where she was still insistent on chasing her daughters out to go to class.

Scans revealed a tumor in her stomach that had spread to the liver. More tests proved it was cancerous.

"She was finally on her feet again after almost a 10-year ordeal of regaining her life after the bombing, and then this diagnosis," Jeanette shakes her head. "It just didn't seem right that my mom could be so sick again."

But Rosemary has been surviving since the start.

She was born in a cell and raised by relatives until her wrongly imprisoned parents were freed and Kenya was granted independence. Her story of survival was featured on Oprah Winfrey's show alongside Sept. 11 and land mine victims.

"In Africa, you are born with a struggle," Rosemary says. "I have to remember how far I've come. I've been surviving every bit of the way and plan to continue surviving. I'm not going to give in to dying."

If it weren't for the pills their mother takes morning and night and the weekly blood tests and scans, Rosemary's daughters say they could almost forget about the cancer. She manages a full caseload and cooks for them often.

"When the doctors were telling us it was late stage, it didn't sound very hopeful, but now that there's no one telling her this is impossible, she's very positive," Linda says. "People can't believe she's so spirited while battling cancer. I wonder if I'd ever be able to take any of the things the way she does, to be able to survive it all."

Every day Rosemary endures.

"I just live my dreams and wake up to live another one," she says. "Sometimes I don't know how, but I'm here for a purpose. I still need to make a difference for somebody." ■

Saving grace

Rosemary Bichage was just 12 credit hours short of her degree and shorter on tuition money.

"An angel of the Lord talked to someone who knew another lady who was my saving grace," Rosemary says.

Her donor heard about Rosemary's struggles and felt called to help.

"To be so close after all she'd been through, it would have been such a shame for her not to finish her degree," says the donor, who wished to remain anonymous.

The donor provided scholarship funds to help Rosemary complete her final social work courses as she continued to support her daughters, also studying at UMKC. The donor remained anonymous to Rosemary until August 2006.

"Then she called to meet me, and I was shedding tears of joy. I couldn't believe my eyes, this blessed lady," Rosemary remembers. "We exchanged experiences. She had been injured in the Hyatt disaster (in 1981) so we had similar circumstances. And she was able to come to my aid when I needed it."

Rosemary's donor attended her master's hooding ceremony, and they remain in touch.

"Too often people look at their circumstances and give up," the donor says. "But you do what you have to do, and Rosemary has pursued life beyond having a disability. Her e-mail is 'superrosemary,' and I think she is."

Rosemary says she will always be indebted to the woman who helped her fulfill her dream of earning her master's degree.

"Up to this day, I shake my head and wonder what I'd be doing if she didn't help me," she says. "She saved my life and is still my friend to this day. It's a very precious thing to me. God lined up angels for me when I was in despair."



Jeanette, Linda, Rosemary and oldest daughter Moraa Bichage celebrate Rosemary's graduation day.

“We couldn't understand how they could possibly put her back together.”

—Linda Bichage

things I have done and forgive the people who have done wrong. Please take care of my children.

"They wondered if that was my last breath," she says.

Her children wondered what was next.

"We couldn't understand how they could possibly put her back together," says Jeanette's twin, Linda. "Things still looked really bad, but I just had this feeling she was going to make it. I was just positive she'd beat this."