



For Isatou and all who are "being the change" --M.P.  
For all the crafters of the world --E.Z.

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# ONE PLASTIC BAG

ISATOU CEESAY AND THE RECYCLING WOMEN OF THE GAMBIA

MIRANDA PAUL  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
ELIZABETH ZUNON

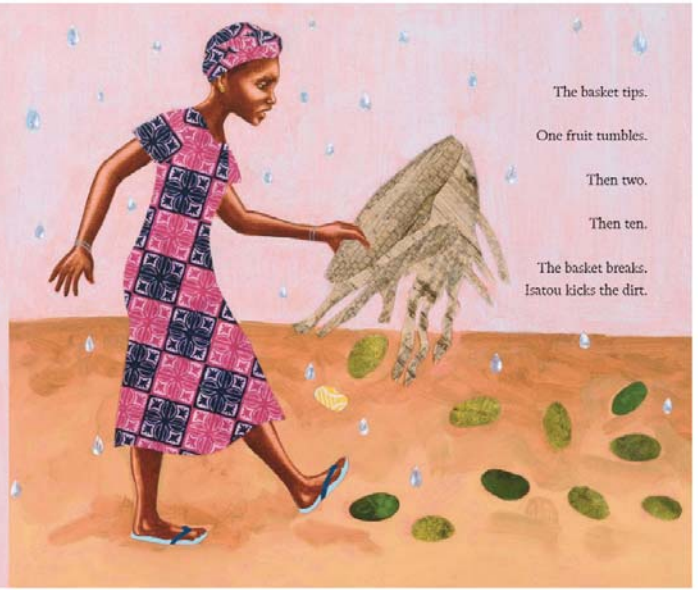


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*Njau, Gambia*

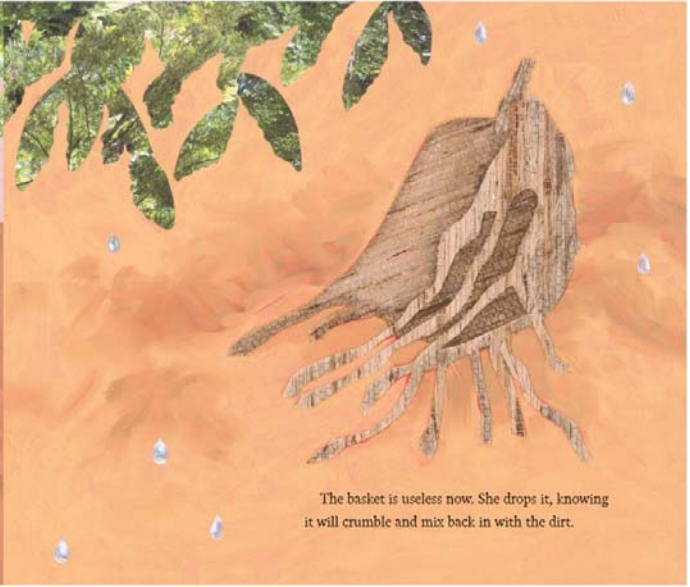
Isatou walks with her chin frozen.  
Fat raindrops pelt her bare arms. Her face  
hides in the shadow of a palm-leaf basket,  
and her neck stings with every step.

Warm scents of burning wood and  
bubbling peanut stew drift past. Her  
village is close now. She lifts her nose  
to catch the smell.

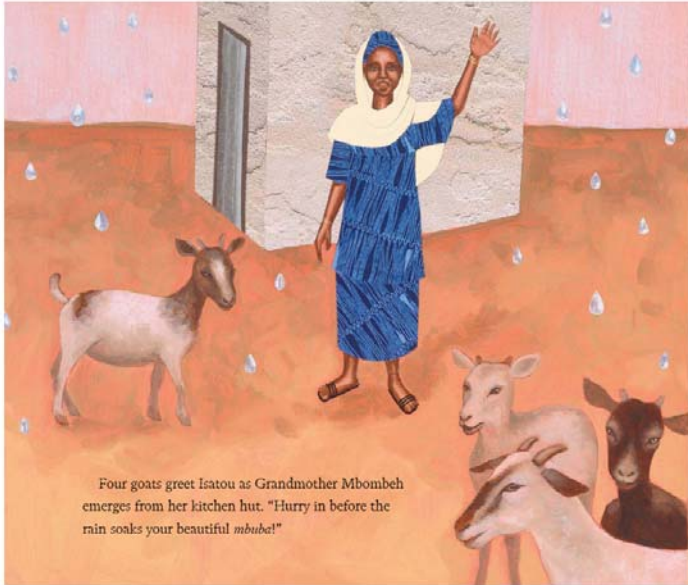


The basket tips.  
One fruit tumbles.  
Then two.  
Then ten.  
The basket breaks.  
Isatou kicks the dirt.

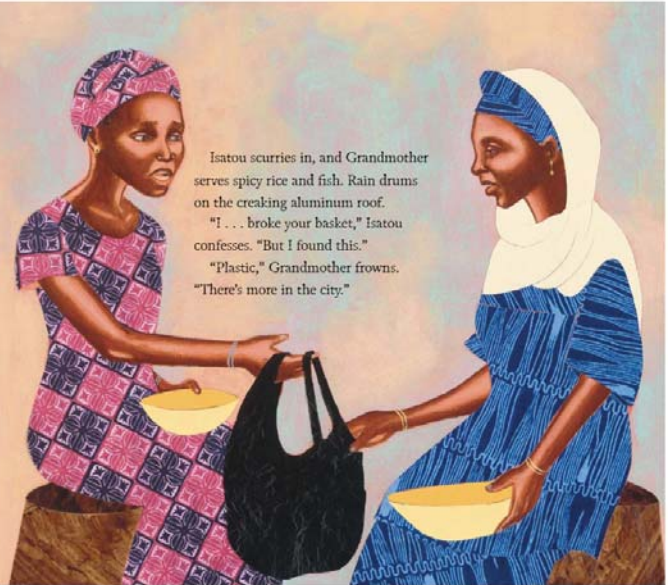
Something silky dances past her eyes, softening her anger. It moves like a flag, flapping in the wind, and settles under a tamarind tree. Isatou slides the strange fabric through her fingers and discovers it can carry things inside. She gathers her fruits in the bag.



The basket is useless now. She drops it, knowing it will crumble and mix back in with the dirt.



Four goats greet Isatou as Grandmother Mbombeh emerges from her kitchen hut. "Hurry in before the rain soaks your beautiful *mbube*!"



Isatou scurries in, and Grandmother serves spicy rice and fish. Rain drums on the creaking aluminum roof.  
"I . . . broke your basket," Isatou confesses. "But I found this."  
"Plastic," Grandmother frowns.  
"There's more in the city."

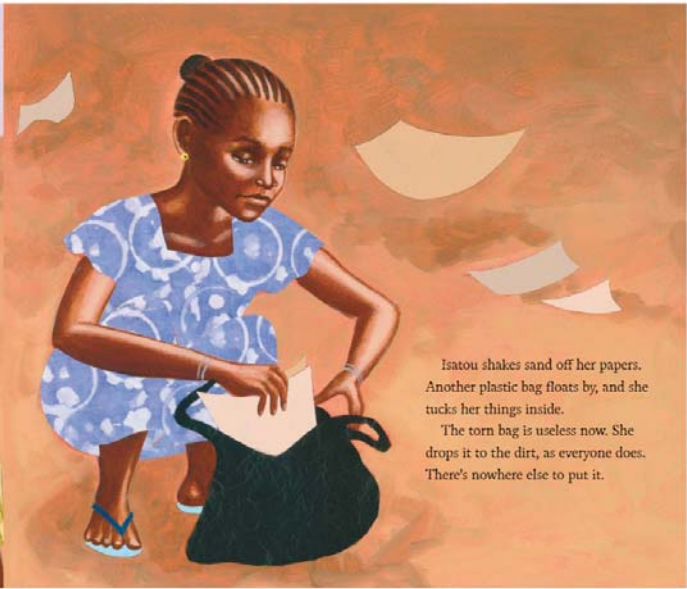
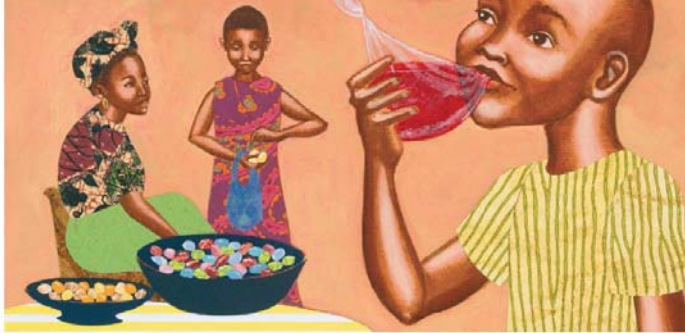
Day after day, Isatou watches neighbors tote their things in bright blue or black plastic bags. Children slurp water and *wanjo* from tiny holes poked in clear bags. Market trays fill with *minties* wrapped in rainbows of plastic.

The colors are beautiful, she thinks. She swings her bag high. The handle breaks.

One paper escapes.

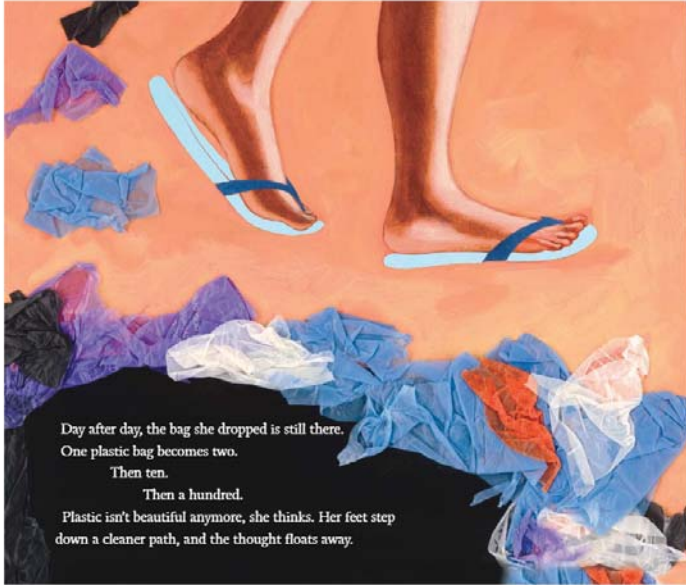
Then two.

Then ten.

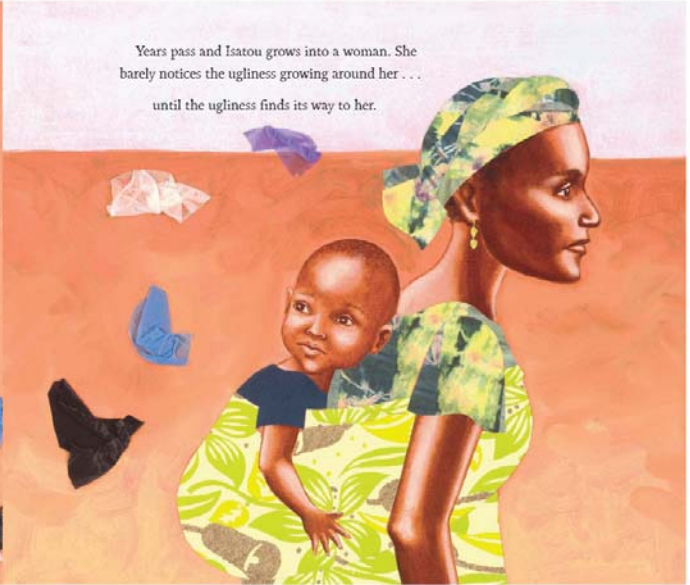


Isatou shakes sand off her papers. Another plastic bag floats by, and she tucks her things inside.

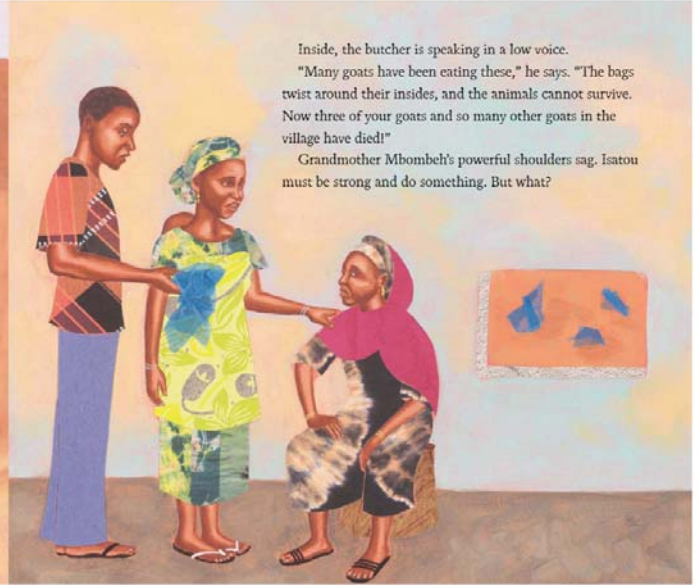
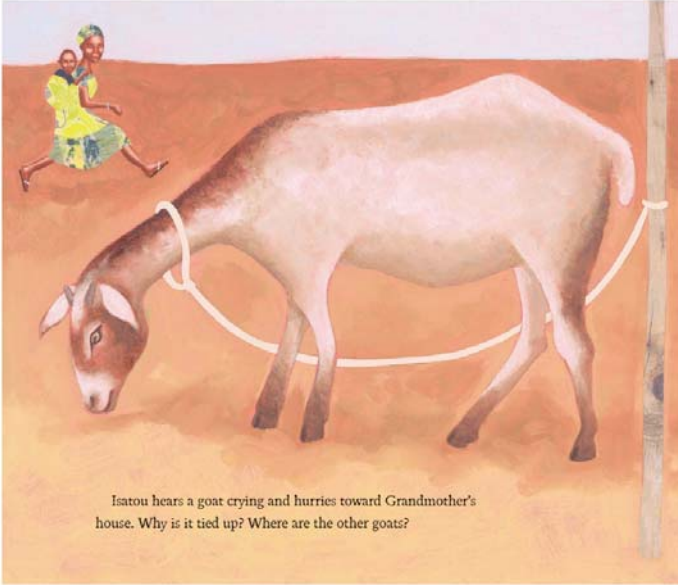
The torn bag is useless now. She drops it to the dirt, as everyone does. There's nowhere else to put it.

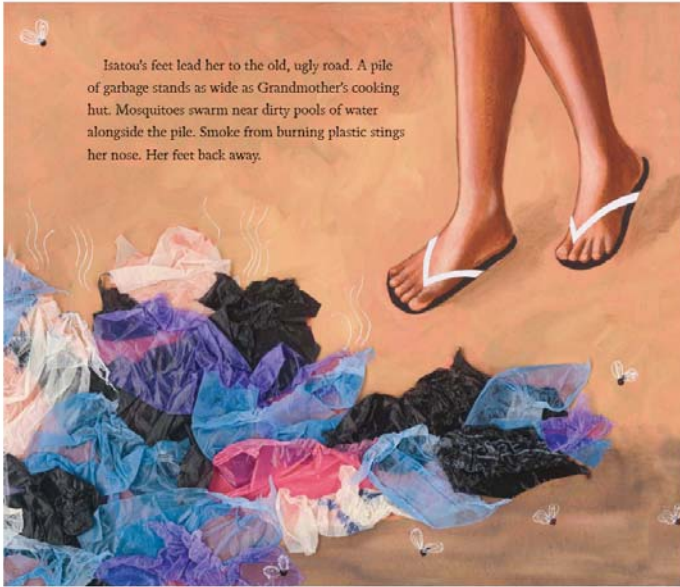


Day after day, the bag she dropped is still there.  
One plastic bag becomes two.  
Then ten.  
Then a hundred.  
Plastic isn't beautiful anymore, she thinks. Her feet step  
down a cleaner path, and the thought floats away.

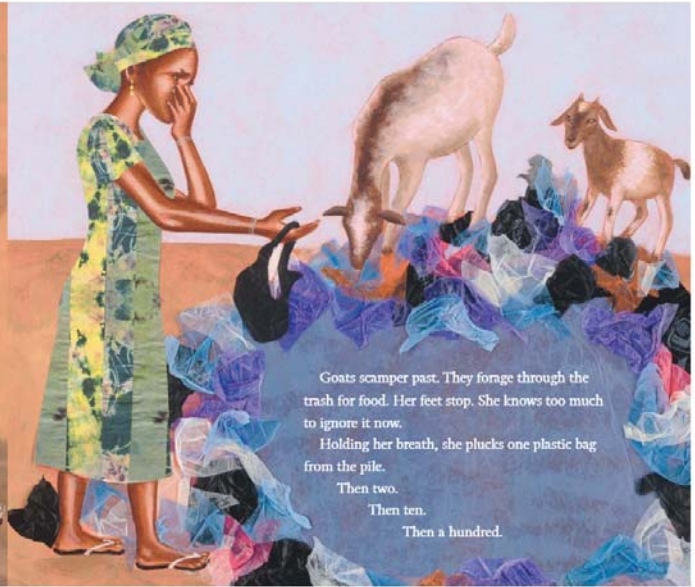


Years pass and Isatou grows into a woman. She  
barely notices the ugliness growing around her . . .  
until the ugliness finds its way to her.





Isatou's feet lead her to the old, ugly road. A pile of garbage stands as wide as Grandmother's cooking hut. Mosquitoes swarm near dirty pools of water alongside the pile. Smoke from burning plastic stings her nose. Her feet back away.



Goats scamper past. They forage through the trash for food. Her feet stop. She knows too much to ignore it now.

Holding her breath, she plucks one plastic bag from the pile.

Then two.

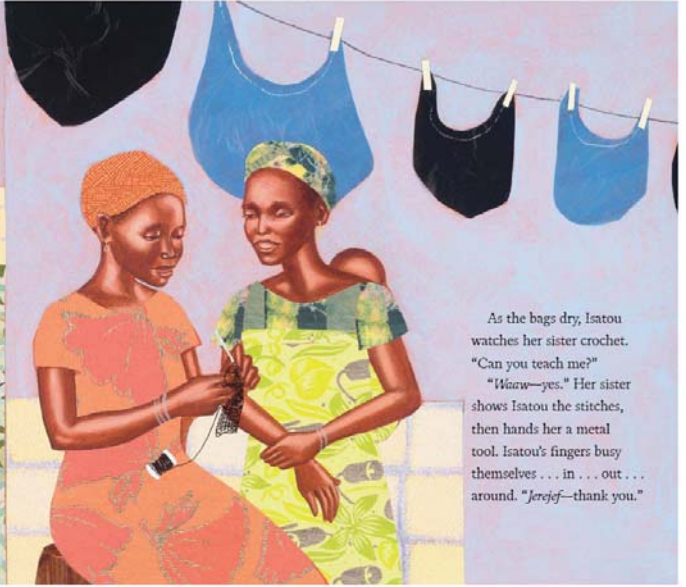
Then ten.

Then a hundred.

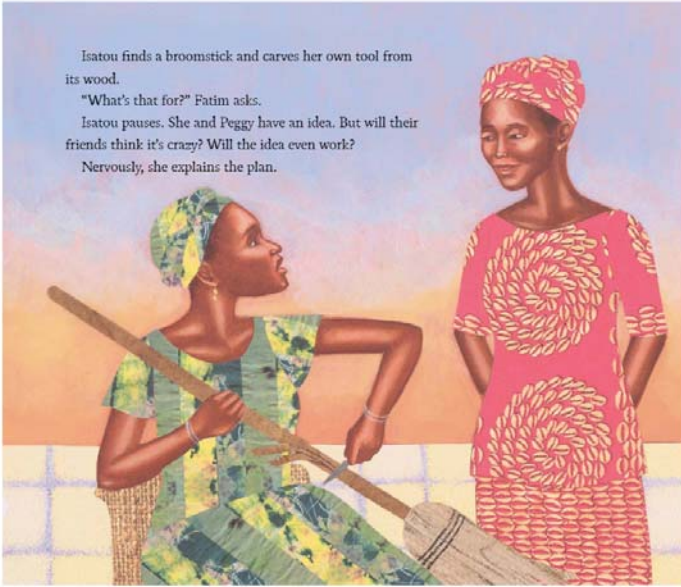
"What can we do?" Isatou asks her friends.  
"Let's wash them," says Fatim, pulling out  
*omo* soap. Maram grabs a bucket, and Incha  
fetches water from the well. Peggy finds  
clothespins, and they clip the washed bags  
on the line.



As the bags dry, Isatou  
watches her sister crochet.  
"Can you teach me?"  
"Waww—yes." Her sister  
shows Isatou the stitches,  
then hands her a metal  
tool. Isatou's fingers busy  
themselves . . . in . . . out . . .  
around. "Jerejef—thank you."



Isatou finds a broomstick and carves her own tool from its wood.  
"What's that for?" Fatim asks.  
Isatou pauses. She and Peggy have an idea. But will their friends think it's crazy? Will the idea even work?  
Nervously, she explains the plan.



One friend agrees to help.  
Then two.  
Then five!  
The women cut bags into strips and roll them into spools of plastic thread. Before long, they teach themselves how to crochet with this thread.

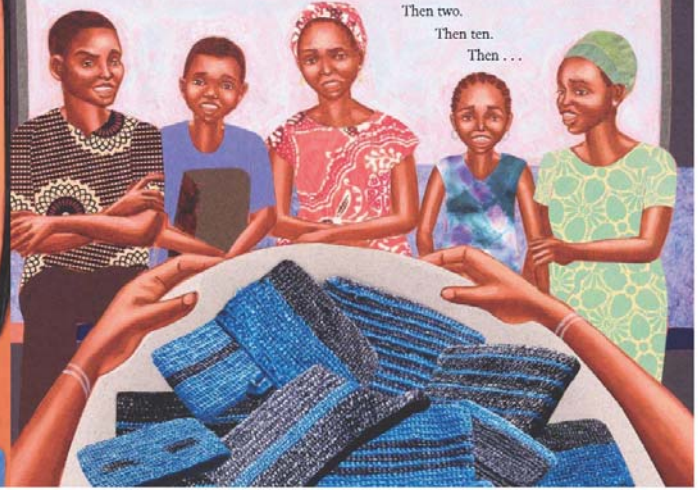


"*Naka likey be?*" asks Grandmother. "How is the work?"  
"*Ndanka, ndanka,*" answers Isatou. "Slow. Some people in the village laugh at us. Others call us 'dirty.' But I believe what we are doing is good."  
The women crochet by candlelight, away from those who mock them . . .

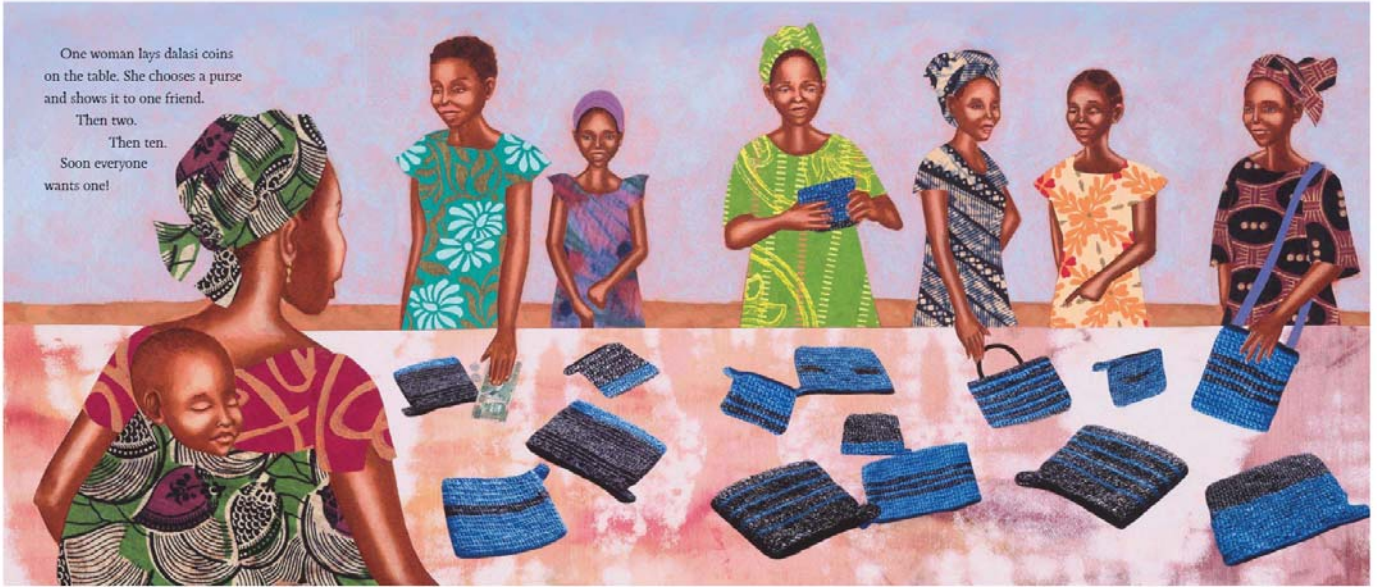
until a morning comes when they will no longer work in secret.

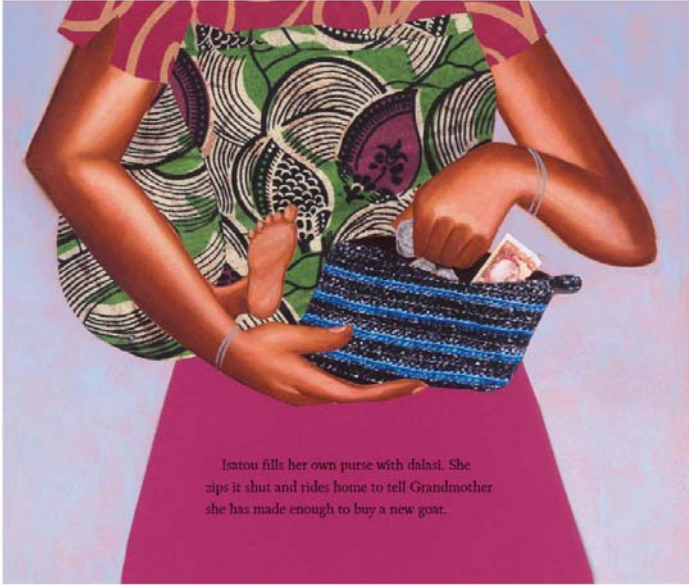


Fingers sore and blistered, Isatou hauls  
the recycled purses to the city.  
One person laughs at her.  
Then two.  
Then ten.  
Then . . .

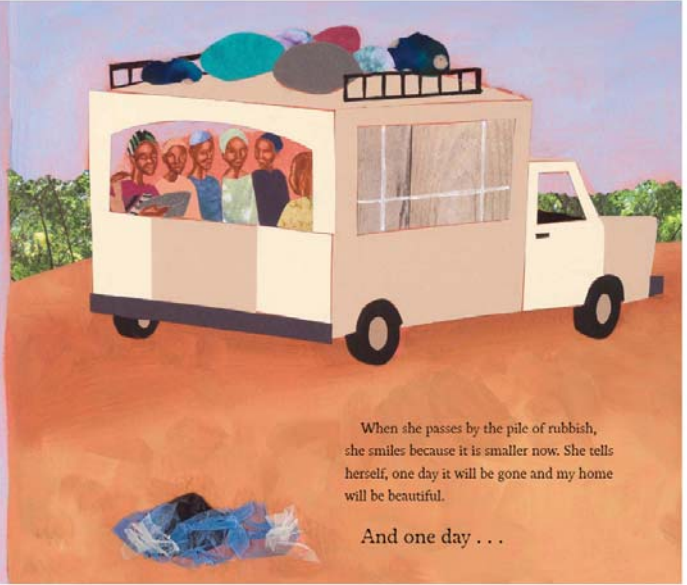


One woman lays dalasi coins  
on the table. She chooses a purse  
and shows it to one friend.  
Then two.  
Then ten.  
Soon everyone  
wants one!





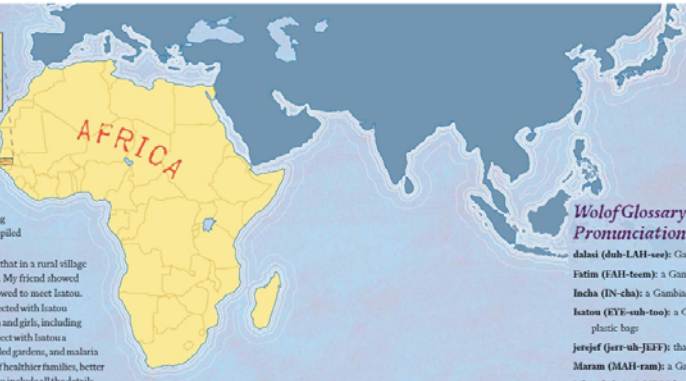
Isatou fills her own purse with dalasi. She zips it shut and rides home to tell Grandmother she has made enough to buy a new goat.



When she passes by the pile of rubbish, she smiles because it is smaller now. She tells herself, one day it will be gone and my home will be beautiful.

And one day . . .





**Author's Note**

I first traveled to the Gambia, West Africa, in 2003 as a volunteer teacher. I had an amazing experience, but something threatened to ruin my memory of it all—the heaps of garbage piled everywhere.

The problem seemed too big to fix. Then a friend told me that in a rural village a woman named Isatou Ceesay was doing something about it. My friend showed me a beautiful purse made from recycled plastic bags, and I vowed to meet Isatou.

During my third stay in the Gambia, in 2007, I finally connected with Isatou and visited her home in Njan. There I interviewed many women and girls, including the original Gambian women who had begun the recycling project with Isatou a decade earlier. They shared past stories of dead livestock, strangled gardens, and malaria outbreaks linked to the trash. But they also shared new stories of healthier families, better income, and increased self-confidence. Although I wasn't able to include all the details about the women and their project in this book, I believe the story I've shaped captures their spirit and inspirational accomplishments.

Today, Njan is much cleaner, the goats are healthier, and the gardens grow better. Residents from nearby towns travel there to learn the craft of recycling. People from around the world continue to purchase the recycled plastic purses, and the women contribute some of their earnings toward an empowerment center where community members enjoy free health and literacy classes, as well as learn about the dangers of burning plastic trash.

In 2012, that center also became the home for the region's first public library. By the time you read this book, I hope that a copy of *One Plastic Bag* is shelved there and that it will be checked out once . . . then twice . . . then a hundred times!

**Wolof Glossary and Pronunciation Guide**

- dalasi** (doh-LAH-see): Gambian money
- Fatim** (FAH-teen): a Gambian girl's name and one of the original recycling women
- Incha** (IN-cha): a Gambian girl's name and one of the original recycling women
- Isatou** (EYE-suh-too): a Gambian girl's name and the first Gambian woman to recycle plastic bags
- jerejef** (jerr-uh-JEFF): thank you
- Maram** (MAH-ram): a Gambian girl's name and one of the original recycling women
- Mhombob** (mBOH M-bo): a Gambian girl's name and one of the original recycling women
- mhuba** (mBOO-huh): a long dress
- minties** (MIN-tees): hard candies
- Naka hgey be?** (NAH-kuh lee-GAY bee): how is the work coming along?
- ndanka, ndanka** (nDAHN-kuh, nDAHN-kuh): very slow
- omo** (OH-mo): stop
- waww** (WOW): yes
- wanjo** (WAHN-joe): a red drink made from hibiscus
- Wolof** (WUL-off): one of the native languages of the Gambia and the Senegal



Two of the women who began crocheting purses with Isatou in the late 1990s.



### Timeline

- 1970s Plastic bags become a serious problem in Gambian cities.
- 1972 Isatou Ceesay is born in Njau, Gambia.
- 1980s-1990s Plastic bags become a serious problem in villages such as Njau. Goats begin to die, and gardens struggle to grow in the trash-filled soil. Villagers burn their plastic trash to try to get rid of it.
- 1998 Isatou and Peace Corps volunteer Peggy Sedha, along with four other Gambian women, begin the Njau Recycling and Income Generating Group (NRIIGG). They work mostly in secret for over a year, until people become aware of the income and impact they are making.
- 2000 Isatou is named to the language & culture staff with the US Peace Corps in Gambia. With donated funds, the women build a skills center, where they can work, learn, and form a community focused on better health for people, animals, and the environment.
- 2002 Isatou is promoted to assistant technical trainer for environment for the US Peace Corps in Gambia.
- 2005 Isatou is named an assistant field worker for women's empowerment with Future in Our Hands (a Swedish nonprofit organization). Isatou and other NRIIGG women begin to train people from nearby villages about the dangers of plastic and creative ways to reuse it.
- 2007 With nearly seventy women now active in NRIIGG, the women of Njau begin marketing their products internationally.
- 2008 NRIIGG wins a grant for sewing machines, and the women begin offering a tailoring/sewing workshop as well.
- 2011 Solar panels are installed at the NRIIGG center, and the site is chosen to house the region's first public library.
- 2012 Isatou wins a World of Difference 100 Award from the International Alliance for Women (IAW).
- 2014 NRIIGG is incorporated as a registered nonprofit and is renamed Women Initiative Gambia (WIG).



Women of Njau learn about the fair-trade movement (2007).

### For Further Reading

Kamukwamba, William, and Bryan Mealer. *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. New York: Dial, 2012. This picture book tells the true story of a fourteen-year-old boy in Malawi who built a functioning windmill out of junkyard scrap in the face of a terrible drought.

McBrier, Page. *Beatrice's Goat*. New York: Atheneum, 2001.

Beatrice lives in a small Ugandan village and cannot afford to go to school. But when her family receives the gift of a goat, they sell the goat's milk to help her dream of attending school become a reality. The story is based on real events.

Milberg, Katie Smith. *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference*. Yonkers, NY: Kids Can Press, 2008.

In this story inspired by the life of Swabena Darko, a boy named Kojo turns a small loan into the largest poultry farm in his region of Ghana.

Napoli, Donna Jo. *Mama Mitti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya*. New York: Paula Wiseman Books, 2010.

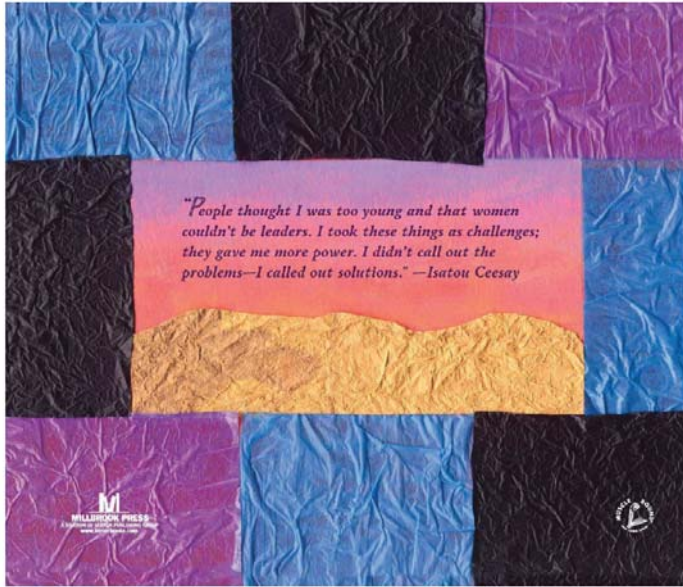
This book chronicles the work of Wangari Muta Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, and her environmental efforts in Kenya.

Thompson, Laurie. *Emmanuel's Dream: The True Story of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah*. New York: Schwartz & Wade, 2015.

A picture book biography of Emmanuel Ofosu Yeboah, who bicycled across Ghana with only one leg, changing how his country treated people with disabilities.



Isatou Ceesay in 2012



*"People thought I was too young and that women couldn't be leaders. I took these things as challenges; they gave me more power. I didn't call out the problems—I called out solutions." —Isatou Ceesay*

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