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Blood

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Abstract

I who have lived here for so long I cannot remember my home of olive trees and brown valleys, and when a letter comes from my brother in Tuscany it seems like a hoarse whisper from another planet. I who have prayed with the pious and the wicked and helped the dusty children with their torn books -when I think of this story I want to weep. And there are things I do not come near to understanding unless I turn to Almighty God and the Blessed Virgin and I know as I say Mass chewing the Zulu with my Italian accent, that there are strange powers I do not seek to grasp. It is Faith that matters.

LIZ GUNNER

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I who have lived here for so long I cannot remember my home of olive trees and brown valleys, and when a letter comes from my brother in Tuscany it seems like a hoarse whisper from another planet. I who have prayed with the pious and the wicked and helped the dusty children with their torn books – when I think of this story I want to weep. And there are things I do not come near to understanding unless I turn to Almighty God and the Blessed Virgin and I know as I say Mass chewing the Zulu with my Italian accent, that there are strange powers I do not seek to grasp. It is Faith that matters.

The church I built there; we worked hard and it was sturdy. We painted it in glistening white that shimmered in the midday brightness and yet when you entered your bones chilled and your muscles froze. At first we thought it was the bats because they kept slickering their way in, finding little spaces between the ceiling edge and the roof. As we prayed, sometimes we could hear the thump and rustle of their strange wings, their high shrieks. The stench of their droppings filled the church with a sweet, foul odour. But then once, as I was leaving after the congregation had gone and the robes of the servers were folded away, I heard a cry – and there was nothing – nothing at all to be seen. When I asked them, 'What is it? What is wrong with this church? What happened that makes the flesh go ice-cold as you enter this place of God? You must tell me? No? Until you tell me, how can we have peace?' I could not read their faces, except I saw unhappiness rising to the surface of their eyes and they pushed it down and turned away from me. And then I felt so angry, hopeless and powerless. 'The terrible stink of the bats we can cure,' I said, 'But this other "smell", where does it come from? And you will not tell me!' And I turned and left them.

'I have cast myself off from my own high brown cliffs and the steep wooded valleys of deepest green and now God has set me in this wilderness and I am lost for ever. I will wander and end my days a stranger amongst strangers,' I thought, for a moment, just for a moment, and then I swept those evil, useless words out of my head and Love came back.

'Father,' she said, when I came back a few days later to pray with the mothers, the stench of the bats nearly driving us from the cool inside out into the burning sun, 'Don't be angry that we couldn't speak to you. This

is it. It's not easy. It was a death and a horrible dying. It wasn't our doing, but we knew and we did nothing.'

So she told me. It took the rest of the morning. At first we sat in the tiny porch and as she talked she looked down. She cried just a little and then her voice became stronger as if she knew that whatever it was, she had to finish its telling.

'It was the moving, Father. We are not from here although now we see it as our home and we go happily to the hills beyond here to cut the *ikhwani* grass and sleep under the stars. So – we were strangers, and then, the boy ...'

'Stop!' I say. 'Rest, walk and show me the chicken house you've been building. Then we can go on.' What I cannot say is that I too need to pause. I feel as if my chest will break and my breath has stuck deep inside me and I have to pull it out. I have my own memories to keep down, far down.

'Now you see the graves – mounds the length of a man and the neat stones on top – and they lie next to each other. Blood, Father. And you know if you see a new grave this side of the road, within the week if you look on the other side you will see one there too. The same stones, the same mound. In the grave a different man. Look at the soil, Father!' She points down. She makes me fix my eyes past the deep purple of her *bayi*, her strong legs, on to her earth. She stoops down and brings up a piece between her fingers. It is pink-orange. 'This is our blood. First, the boy's, and they killed him cruelly.'

I breathe slowly. Now, now I will know and from within me I will seek the power to turn away this heavy cloud.

She whispers, she turns her face away from mine: 'You know Jik – in the thick plastic bottle and when you pour it comes out heavy, white? One morning early, when we were sleeping far away under the spiky stars with dawn not far off, they found him, alone, guarding the place for us. They woke him and said little. They poured the Jik into a pot – the pot should have been for beer, water, not for death. "Drink," they said. "Drink! This is our present to you for stealing our sister." And then they left him. We were too far to hear his screams as it burnt and tore his stomach like fire.'

'We buried him, quietly, alone, with our heavy knowledge. The girl disappeared, taking her broken heart and her life far from those hard men. And then – the fighting began. His people. Her people. And the guns. Underneath it all the foul stench of that first killing. And we cannot pray. There is only anger and heaviness. The smell is not from the bats, Father.'

So I know that it is the blood from that story and the young man's cruel dying that sits in the roof of the church. I will have to exorcise it. We will pray, and like a tidal wave rising high and smashing the thick crust of

rubbish stuck high up on the shore, our prayers must surely dislodge the blood. Cleanse it. Let the boy rest in peace. And yet, and yet, so much blood in this quiet place. So many, many voices stumbling up from the dark. Sometimes I stand at night and look at the throbbing stars, falling, shimmering as if they want to speak to us, and the land is shining and white. I hear the voices of those who have gone before us. No not those who have died peacefully at home after an honourable life and a good old age. No. So many who had their bones crumble into earth in their bright youth. So many battles, close to where I stand. Majuba, twice, not far from here to the north. South of us, and a little west, Isandlwana. Near, very near, Ulundi and the last battles of the doomed Zulu king. I do not ask them to speak to me – I do not want to overhear their screams and whispers, calling their mothers, in so many languages, Zulu, Welsh, Afrikaans, Sotho ... And the boy, does he also call?

I am a weak man. How can I pray for them all?

It is hot; so very hot that the canopies of thorn trees seem to rise and fall as we look down at them and the ridges in the distance move. In the centre is the small white church and there is a bright crowd there singing, stamping, even weeping, a few of them. They are mostly women. Leading them is the white man with a big body and stooping shoulders. He is dressed in a white gown and a shining cloth of green and gold and he carries a silver cross. Slowly they move inside and we hear the song bursting from the walls. We watch, we listen, sitting silent like a swarm of bees, in peace.



Dublin Fusiliers' graves, Tchrengula/ Nicholson's Nek, N.E. Ladysmith
(battle of 30 October, 1899)