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THE SAD TRUTH OF HIS DESIRE

By Todd Robert Petersen

JOHN HAD NEVER DEDICATED A GRAVE AND DID not expect to be called to do it so soon after joining the Church. He had not been a member for very long and was still frustrated with it. White leaders didn't seem to understand why he would be. Still, writing down the name of the village on a scrap of paper, he accepted the branch president's charge. He knew a white American would be afraid to venture into the African countryside, even with U.N. troops on patrol.

The branch president said John would know what to do when he got there. That was unsettling somehow, but as he prepared for the journey west of Kigali, he read the instructions in the priesthood manual which said to: address Heavenly Father, then state that the ordinance is performed by the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood, dedicate and consecrate the burial plot as the resting place for the deceased, (if desired) pray that the place will be hallowed and protected until the Resurrection, ask the Lord to comfort the family, express thoughts as the spirit directs, and finally close in the name of Jesus Christ. Simple. A prayer, really. That's all. He thought there might have been more, something not in the book because prayers from books still seemed dead to him. For John, spirit had always flown more freely in the breeze.

John had been told that Marie Dusabumuremyi's husband, Immanuel, had been killed by Hutus. This was not the factional murders of Nephites and Lamanites; neighbors killed one another with dull machetes, left each other faceless in the dust. John was not surprised to find that no one spoke of these things in the General Conferences. Perhaps the trials of the American pioneers were more important. Marie had found her husband hanging upside down in the low branches of a tree yesterday, his ankles tied to the limbs with electrical wire. The branch president had been told that Immanuel had been gone all night and also how Marie and her husband were new to the Church, and how they had met two American missionaries in

Pretoria, where they were baptized. The branch president told this and more to John and said that Immanuel and Marie had been saving money for a journey to the temple in Johannesburg. He also told John that at night, people in the Dusabumuremyi's village spoke of hearing gunshots and Jeeps tearing around. He spoke as if such things were unimaginable.

JOHN was wearing a white shirt and took along his scriptures, the manual, and a half-loaf of bread. He didn't want to have to depend upon the hospitality of others. When he stepped off the bus which took him to the edge of Kigali, he saw two boys sitting on crates and tires and sniffing at rags they held under their noses. He thought of telling them to go home, to do something decent for their parents, but he just walked on, wondering if someone would find them in the morning curled up into two little cold balls.

After twenty minutes, a truck came by and the driver offered him a ride. He climbed in back, and as they drew farther and farther from Kigali, John began to wonder why Jesus Christ had never come to Africa and why blacks hadn't been allowed the priesthood for so long and why God had suddenly changed his mind. John remembered it was these kinds of questions that had turned people against Samuel the Lamanite, so he turned his thoughts toward the missionaries who had taught John that God was the same yesterday, today, and forever.

It is strange, John thought, that twenty years ago, he couldn't have blessed a grave. The American would have had to do it himself. Being Zimbabwean, John could more easily move around—something the branch president took into account, no doubt. Still, the American did not seem to understand that things were yet different for blacks than for the whites in this church. Perhaps he was too young to know. The American had apologized for the Church and for these things that seem to have taken so long, and John told him that the times were the times. The president had paused before saying that John was too simple for the world of today. John said that he guessed he was, and followed his remark with silence. The branch president had seemed vexed that John was, at the same time, oddly resistant and strangely compliant.



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JOHN looked out from the back of the truck upon the sun which was just starting to burn down into the clouds. What glory was that? A slow death in dust and filth? The day was being led to slaughter. Using what light was left, John re-read the instructions in the manual, memorized them. It seemed wrong to read it from the book when the time came. There were no priesthood holders in that village, African or otherwise, and John was the closest as far as that branch president knew. There had been one man, but he had taken his family into Tanzania, working in Dar es Salaam to get enough money to take them all to Salt Lake City. He wanted his children to grow up in the American Zion. The man should have

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known that since blacks finally have the priesthood, it needs to stay here in Africa, John thought, but he knew that he couldn't hold escape against anyone.

Most of the small shacks in the Dusabumuremyi's village were covered with rusted metal roofs; only a few had windows. Marie's home was nowhere near where the branch president had told John it would be. When he finally found it, the widow was not there. A nervous neighbor said Marie had gone to mourn with Immanuel's family. They said if John went up the road, he would find their house near the water pump. It took John only a few minutes to get there. He knocked, and called, "Marie?"

A voice said, "Go away."

It was not Marie's, but an old woman's reedy voice.

John said he had come from Kigali to bless Immanuel Dusabumuremyi's grave. Silence followed, and he glanced at the still darkening sky. A few clouds flared orange in the low sunlight, and across the way, a mother strolled somewhat cautiously toward her house, a child clinging to her bosom. She eyed John. He smiled back at her. She lowered the basket from her head and ducked into her house just as a breeze rustled the leaves of a tree that rose up out of the middle of the village. Some unknown and alien bird called out while a bat swooped into view, changed direction suddenly, and disappeared back into the abstractions of trees and rooftops.

John sat down outside the house and asked God what he would have him do, and as he did, the sky continued to darken. After an hour, stars began to shoot across the firmament. After another still hour, a latch rattled and the thin door shuddered open. An old, leathered face appeared. Her eyes were yellowed at the corners. Her hair was almost completely white. She was wearing a T-shirt with a sunflower printed in the center, a threadbare cotton skirt, and dirty canvas tennis shoes.

"Go away," she said.

Behind her, someone who could have only been Marie lifted her head. She held a bundle in her lap, and she was looking straight into John's eyes. Nervously, John scrambled to his feet.

"Go away," the old woman repeated; then she closed the door.

A girl with an empty basket against her hip walked by. John grimaced slightly and looked

down. In the distance, a flare seared a white line across the night sky, burst brightly, then fell back to earth. As darkness settled back around, stars reappeared. The wind changed, and John caught the sickening smell of garbage. He hung his head and asked for God's help, but when he said amen and opened his eyes, the door was still closed.

He knocked again.

Nothing.

A neighbor peeked out of his door and stared at him. It was still impossibly hot, and John wished he had worn a thinner shirt, but it had seemed right at the time to dress formally. He looked down at the cuffs, and where the white cotton stopped, John saw only the vague outline of his arms disappearing into the darkness. Suddenly, quietly, he realized he should ask the neighbor what he knew. As John approached, the man's wife pulled him inside and closed the door.

John wanted to turn back and go home, but it would have been at least a three-hour walk to Kigali. Some sleep before the Church meetings tomorrow will erase most of this, he thought. Looking into the sky, he threw up his hands, squatted down in the pathway, and waited. No one came out of the house. He opened his bag and took out the bread. As he unwrapped it and lifted it to his mouth, John was stopped. He tilted his eyes upward then wrapped the bread back up and stood.

A slight breeze started up as he crossed back over and knocked on the door again, not thinking it



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would open. It rattled, and in the skewed, yellow light, the old woman appeared again. John gave her the bread and turned away without catching her eyes. She closed the door, but before John had gone five steps, it opened again.

"Mormon," she said.

He stopped. "My name is John," he said, turning to face her.

"You love God, John?" she asked, tucking the bread under her arm.

He said yes and, though it didn't itch, he scratched the side of his neck.

"You love Jesus?"

He nodded.

"Then why do you say you will be a God one day? Marie says she will be God and have her own planet, and I tell her God is God, who else?"

John shrugged and said that he was not sure. "I just believe it because it is true," he said.

"What did you come for?" she asked, pointing her chin at him.

"I came to bless Immanuel's grave," he said.

"Do you know Immanuel?"

He shook his head. "I know *of* him," he said.

"Why then?" she asked. "Why come to do this?"

He shrugged and said, "An angel will cut off my head if I do not do what I am told." John did not know if this was true, but it seemed like the kind of thing God would tell an angel to do. At least, it seemed like the right thing to say.

The old woman opened the door a little wider. Her face was twisted and her breathing heavy.

"It is Immanuel's church too," he told her, and from inside, he heard Marie start to speak. The woman quieted her and then dug one knuckle into her ear. "We will bury him tomorrow. You will come pray then," she said nervously and somewhat dismissively.

John told her that he would, and then he waited for something more to be said. Marie rushed up to the door, but the old woman shut it, leaving John to stare at tin corrugations in the darkness. In the black air, he imagined the white of Marie's teeth and eyes and the dark loam of her skin. She was beautiful. He looked around at the quiet village, took off his shirt, walked over to the fence, and draped it over the wire. He lay down in the dirt alongside the house. It was cooler there. With his head resting on his bag, he closed his eyes and wondered when the gunshots would start.

HE dreamt that Marie came to him. He was lying on the banks of a river, half-in and half-out of the water. She rose up out of the current with her arms crossed and her hands covering her breasts—that was all he could remember at first.

Dawn came slowly and without color. He stood slowly, trying to work the knots out of his neck and back. It was not yet hot, but it was going to be—worse than yesterday. He brushed the dirt off his chest, shoulders, and thighs. He was hungrier than he had ever been. The whole town, he could

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see, was set about in slender trees, and at the west end of this road was a well with a rickety wood and sheet metal covering.

He walked down shirtless and ran the hand pump until the water flowed out. He ducked his head underneath and drank until his belly hurt. He stopped and gave thanks for the well and for the quiet of the night. Then he went back and put on his shirt. It was still clean and white, and he imagined that somehow he wouldn't look like he had slept in the dirt. A few women and children went down to the well and filled up old cans and plastic jugs and shuttled them back into their houses. They were all shoeless and cautious as gazelles. Without looking, they seemed to know right where John was.

"Mormon," he heard someone say from across the road.

The neighbor woman from the night before called to him, and he went over. "Take this," she said, handing him a small cornmeal cake and then disappearing back inside her shack.

John said thank you to the door and started to eat the cake.

As he turned around and raised it for a second bite, a naked boy, perhaps three years old, looked over at him from the pump. John lowered the cake and motioned for the boy to come over. His sister was busy with the water and did not notice her brother had wandered.

"We should share it," John said, breaking the cake in two and handing the boy one half. He looked tenuously over at his sister and back at John, then took it. "There," John said. "You have some."

John ate his part quickly, watching the boy, who was careful and deliberate with the food, catching falling bits with



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his other hand and scooping them up to his mouth. When his sister was done with the water, she looked over with some alarm and called the boy back. John stood and told him to go along. She came up, and without looking, took her brother's hand and dragged him up the road and around the corner.

John's dream from the night before was beginning to follow him around. Marie's hair had been coiled on the top of her head with small sea shells woven into the braids. Wide gold hoops trembled in each ear, and her lips were pomegranate red. As she approached, he rose up to meet her and found that his hands and feet were stuck down in the mud, which set around them like concrete. Struggling against it, he looked up at her in time to see her navel rise above the water. A cloud of birds circled behind her head and landed on a shoal in the center of the river. More birds took the place of those that landed, and the sky sizzled pink on blue. The wind generated from the bird wings blew waves of river water up onto his chest. As Marie continued to rise, she dropped her hand from one breast and covered herself below. Strange modesty for a goddess. Some beast roared in the distance like a hippopotamus. Rifle fire cracked from somewhere across the river.

AT the Dusabumuremyi house, John opened his scriptures and sat down to read from the Book of Helaman when he noticed that the neighbors were beginning to gather in the street.

"Mormon," the old woman said, "come with us."

A small procession filed out of the house. Marie was veiled and hunched over. Fumbling with his books, John rose and followed. The whole village filed quietly and ceremoniously to the south, past a small church with a small, crooked cross on the roof peak. A cemetery populated with small headstones and grave markers of carved wood fanned out behind the church where a single grave had been dug. It was surrounded by small mounds left above the freshly dead.

Immanuel's body was wrapped in a white cloth and bound with strips of the same material. John could not remember ever seeing such a burial. The old woman beckoned him, and he came. Bowing his head, he began the prayer and became lost in it, saying things he didn't afterward recall. He closed in the name of Christ, and when he looked up, he saw that everyone was looking at him. When he said, amen, they echoed him, and four men came forward and meticulously lowered the body on thin sisal ropes, which they hauled back out once Immanuel had settled at the bottom.

After coiling the ropes and passing them to one man, the four turned and left. So did Marie. No one cried, not during the funeral and not afterward. In normal graveside ceremonies, John had seen at least one woman rocking back and forth wailing, but this time, he was dumfounded, not recognizing anything that had happened. It was altogether alien to him, but somehow, not strangely so.

As John walked back out of the village, he stopped to stare at the Dusabumuremyi's house. The sun burned above the trees, and he winced at its brightness. The moon and the stars would have been better for him at this point, the coolness of

night time and the freedom of dreaming. Walking past the pump with the damp smell of the mud, John recalled his dream. He tried to think past it toward what might have come to pass were it not a dream. He would leave this village and return home to Kigali, a lone man in East Africa. As he walked, he thought about the temple and if he would ever find a woman of his faith and race, or if he would ever be married for the eternities as the missionaries had promised. The only free woman he knew was mourning the death of her husband, yet she had not been sealed to him. Upon that thought he was instantly of two minds. Suddenly John was spinning in the wide mouth of infinity, falling in and out of love with Marie, or at least with the idea of her. Would he meet such a woman again? Would it ever be decent of him to return to this village to see her? These thoughts swarmed him. His heart divided and recombined. It occurred to him that in order to go on with any grace he might have to sacrifice love for peace, and that knowledge made plain the sad truth of his desire.

As he left the village, he looked as though he might stumble. He stretched forth one of his hands as he walked on, trying not to look back, his whole self ascending skyward and spiraling back down like a man quietly but decidedly torn. ☞



AFTERBIRTH

When my son was born one April,
my mother came down to help
and made her usual
sweet breakfast wreathe
for Easter morning.
We were so tired that she said,
"We'll just cover the dough
and let it rise all night,
punch it down
and shape it for baking
in the morning."

My son's cries
awoke us at 2:00 A.M.
and in the humid Southern night
bread dough oozed down the legs
of the kitchen table,
yeasty and warm,
spread across the floor.

I sat on the kitchen stool
in hot, desolate tears,
more spongy and out-of-control
than I had ever felt
in my lifetime.

—ANNE WILSON