

A Mother's Face

I shall never forget her face.

She looked an old lady. Or was she? Life can make you old at thirty here! She sat motionless in a wooden armchair whose every last vestige of upholstery had long since vanished, Beside her lay a famished mongrel, panting in the torrid heat, its ribs rising and falling beneath its tight stretched skin.

Behind the woman a doorway opened into the darkened interior of a typical African village dwelling. The shuttered windows covering openings in the mud-brick walls, hid the starkness of just a single bed on a hard earth floor. I caught a movement of a white hen's wings. The hen shared the woman's room - though not for long. These were hungry times.

As we approached the tiny village of a dozen huts we had passed through barren fields, scorched and untended. Charred stumps of mango and orange trees stood together with burnt palms like mourners at a funeral. The men had gone... to fight to die.. There could be no harvest this year.

I noticed little else of the detail. I could not take my eyes from her face. Framed in a tattered shawl, that face held a thousand human feelings. Dark, deep eyes of painful sorrow - eyes both empty and full. Broad lips set firm under her flattened nose spoke of determined resignation. Her gaunt cheeks were made up of hundreds of wrinkles, falling like flakes from the deep furrows of her brow. And yet... was it my imagination? Was there just a hint of a smile breaking through the sadness?

What stories lay hidden there? Even if those tight lips had wanted to release the imprisoned horrors of her memory, language made a barrier between us.

A troupe of children ran behind me, dragging a string of rusty tins. No longer inquisitive about the stranger, they simply called out as they ran on through the village. The woman's head turned slowly, eyes following the children. I watched her tears run into the deep brown wrinkles of her face, and fall from her chin into her lap. Beads of perspiration stood on the furrows of her brow like notes of music on their staves. Melodies of hope and love? Deep tones of anxious fear and hollow pain?

Later, I learned the music of that face - a sad, sad song. The cruel song of a war shattered soul. This young woman, once happy in her poor plenty; this woman, content to be a wife and mother; this woman, like so many other, resigned to burying two of her four sons in shallow graves behind this hut after simple childhood illnesses took them from her; this woman who had seen the rebels come.....

They arrived suddenly in the early morning. She had watched them loot her home. They brought her husband back from hiding in the bush. He was almost senseless when they dragged him bound into the village. Hanging him by his feet over burning embers, they mutilated him with their bayonets before finally ending his misery. He had tried to protect her and his children, but his suffering had not saved her from the rebels' lust. When they had finished with her, the youngest boy ran away from his sister's hold to run to his mother. The older son called out and ran to catch him. Both fell together as the gunfire gave way to silence.

The woman squinted as sunlight searched under the tin-roofed awning. Were those questions in the wrinkles of her face? There were many questions I could ask. Why such inhumanity? Is this the way of life my people brought to this beautiful land? Are these guns the tools of war my people sold? How long will the world's suffering continue? When will love conquer the self and greed which holds the whole world to ransom?

She turned her face to me. It seemed she understood my thoughts. These were matters beyond words. The wrinkles formed a smile while squeezing a last tear down her cheek. I heard that smile say, *'Love is not dead.'*

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