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ELMORE LEONARD

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that will keep you
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Author of *Be Cool*

PAGAN
BABIES

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"The greatest crime writer of our time, perhaps ever!"

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AND

PAGAN BABIES

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Pagan Babies

For Jackie Farber

PAGAN BABIES

1

THE CHURCH HAD BECOME a tomb where forty-seven bodies turned to leather and stains had been lying on the concrete floor the past five years, though not lying where they had been shot with Kalashnikovs or hacked to death with machetes. The benches had been removed and the bodies reassembled: men, women and small children laid in rows of skulls and spines, femurs, fragments of cloth stuck to mummified remains, many of the adults missing feet, all missing bones that had been carried off by scavenging dogs.

SINCE THE living would no longer enter the church, Fr. Terry Dunn heard confessions in the yard of the

rectory, in the shade of old pines and silver eucalyptus trees.

"Bless me, Fatha, for I have sin. It has been two months from the last time I come to Confession. Since then I am fornicating with a woman from Gisenyi three times only and this is all I have done."

They would seem to fill their mouths with the English words, pro-nounc-ing each one carefully, with an accent Terry believed was heard only in Africa. He gave fornicators ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys, murmured what passed for an absolution while the penitent said the Act of Contrition, and dismissed them with a reminder to love God and sin no more.

"Bless me, Fatha, for I have sin. Is a long time since I come here but is not my fault, you don't have Confession always when you say. The sin I did, I stole a goat from close by Nyundo for my family to eat. My wife cook it en brochette and also in a stew with potatoes and peppers."

"Last night at supper," Terry said, "I told my housekeeper I'd enjoy goat stew a lot more if it wasn't so goddamn bony."

The goat thief said, "Excuse me, Fatha?"

"Those little sharp bones you get in your mouth," Terry said, and gave the man ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys. He gave just about everyone ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys to say as their penance.

Some came seeking advice.

"Bless me, Fatha, I have not sin yet but I think of it.

I see one of the men kill my family has come back. One of the Hutu *Interahamwe* militia, he come back from the Goma refugee camp and I like to kill him, but I don't want to go to prison and I don't want to go to Hell. Can you have God forgive me before I kill him?"

Terry said, "I don't think He'll go for it. The best you can do, report the guy to the *conseiller* at the sector office and promise to testify at the trial."

The man who hadn't killed anyone yet said, "Fatha, when is that happen? I read in *Imvaho* they have one hundred twenty-four thousand in prisons waiting for trials. In how many years will it be for this man that kill my family? *Imvaho* say two hundred years to try all of them."

Terry said, "Is the guy bigger than you are?"

"No, he's Hutu."

"Walk up to the guy," Terry said, "and hit him in the mouth as hard as you can, with a rock. You'll feel better. Now make a good Act of Contrition for anything you might've done and forgot about." Terry could offer temporary relief but nothing that would change their lives.

Penitents would kneel on a prie-dieu and see his profile through a framed square of cheesecloth mounted on the kneeler: Fr. Terry Dunn, a bearded young man in a white cassock, sitting in a wicker chair. Sideways to the screen he looked at the front yard full of brush and weeds and the road that came up past the church from the village of Arisimbi. He heard

Confession usually once a week but said Mass, in the school, only a few times a year: Christmas Day, Easter Sunday and when someone died. The Rwandese Bishop of Nyundo, nine miles up the road, sent word for Fr. Dunn to come and give an account of himself.

He drove there in the yellow Volvo station wagon that had belonged to the priest before him and sat in the bishop's office among African sculptures and decorative baskets, antimacassars in bold star designs on the leather sofa and chairs, on the wall a print of the Last Supper and a photograph of the bishop taken with the pope. Terry had worn his cassock. The bishop, in a white sweater, asked him if he was attempting to start a new sect within the Church. Terry said no, he had a personal reason for not acting as a full-time priest, but would not say what it was. He did tell the bishop, "You can contact the order that runs the mission, the Missionary Fathers of St. Martin de Porres in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, and ask to have me replaced; but if you do, good luck. Young guys today are not breaking down the door to get in the seminary."

This was several years ago. Terry left the bishop shaking his head and was still here on his own.

THIS AFTERNOON the prie-dieu was placed beneath a roof of palm fronds and thatch that extended from the rectory into the yard. A voice raised against the hissing sound of the rain said, "Bless me, Fatha, for I have

sin," and started right in. "I kill seven people that time I'm still a boy and we kill the *inyenzi*, the cockroaches. I kill four persons in the church the time you saying the Mass there and you see it happen. You know we kill five hundred in Nyundo before we come here and kill I think one hundred in this village before everybody run away."

Terry continued to stare at the yard that sloped down to the road, the clay hardpack turned dark in the rain.

"And we kill some more where we have the road-block and stop all the drivers and look at the identity cards. The ones we want we take in the bush and kill them."

The man paused and Terry waited. The guy wasn't confessing his sins, he was bragging about what he did.

"You hear me, Fatha?"

Terry said, "Keep talking," wondering where the guy was going with it.

"I can tell you more will die very soon. How do I know this? I am a visionary, Fatha. I am told in visions of the Blessed Virgin saying to do it, to kill the *inyenzi*. I tell you this and you don't say nothing, do you?"

Terry didn't answer. The man's voice, at times shrill, sounded familiar.

"No, you can't," the voice said. "Oh, you can tell me not to do it, but you can't tell no other person, the RPA, the *conseiller*, nobody, because I tell you this in

Confession and you have the rule say you can't talk about what you hear. You listen to me? We going to cut the feet off before we kill them. You know why we do it? You are here that time, so you understand. But you have no power, so you don't stop us. Listen, if we see you when we come, a tall one like you, we cut your feet off, too."

Terry sat in his wicker chair staring out at the rain, the pale sky, mist covering the far hills. The thing was, these guys could do it. They already had, so it wasn't just talk, the guy mouthing off.

He said, "You going to give me my penance to say?"

Terry didn't answer.

"All right, I finished."

The man rose from the kneeler and in a moment Terry watched him walking away, barefoot, skinny bare legs, a stick figure wearing a checkered green shirt and today in the rain a raggedy straw hat with the brim turned down. Terry didn't need to see the guy's face. He knew him the way he knew people in the village by the clothes they wore, the same clothes they put on every morning, if they didn't sleep in them. He had seen that green shirt recently, only a few days ago . . .

AMONG THE stalls in the marketplace.

This one wearing the shirt and three of his friends

drinking banana beer from a tin trough, the trough long enough for all four of them squatting around it to stick reed straws into the thick brew, lower their heads and suck it up warm, the beer giving them a glow that showed in dreamy eyes looking up at Terry walking past the open stall, Terry catching the look and the one in the green shirt commenting as the others laughed, his voice louder then, shrill, following Terry to a man who was roasting corn in a pan of hot coals. This was Thomas, wearing a yellow T-shirt Terry had given him some months before. He asked Thomas about the guy with the shrill voice and Thomas said, "Oh, the visionary, Bernard. He drinks banana beer and our Blessed Mother speaks to him. Some people believe him."

"What's he saying?"

"As you go by, 'Oh, here comes *umugabo wambaye ikanzu*,' calling you 'the man who wears a dress.' Then he say you come to buy the food your Tutsi whore cooks for you, the one you are fucking but don't want nobody to know it, you being a priest. Bernard say the Blessed Mother told him what you doing. Now he say he isn't afraid of you. '*Oli enyamaswa*.' You were sired by animals."

"I don't even know him. What's he up to?"

"He talks to dishonor you in front of the people here. He calls you '*injigi*.'" Thomas shrugged. "Telling everyone you stupid." Thomas raised his face in the sunlight as he listened again. On the front

of his T-shirt were the words THE STONE COYOTES, and on the back, ROCK WITH A TWANG. "Now he tells everyone he saw you and you saw him, but you don't do nothing."

"When did I see him?"

"I think he means during the genocide time, when he's in the Hutu militia and can kill anybody he wants to. I wasn't here or I think I would be dead." Then Thomas said to Terry that day in the market, "But you, Fatha, you were here, hmmm? In the church when they come in there?"

"That was five years ago."

"Look," Thomas said, "the visionary is leaving. See how they all have machetes? They like to do it again, kill the Tutsis they miss the first time."

Terry watched the green shirt walking away.

TODAY HE watched from the wicker chair, the green shirt on the stick figure walking toward the road in the rain, still in the yard when Terry called to him.

"Hey, Bernard?"

It stopped him.

"I have visions, too, man."

FRANCIS DUNN heard from his brother no more than three or four times a year. Fran would wire funds to

the Banque Commerciale du Rwanda, send a load of old clothes and T-shirts, a half-dozen rolls of film, and a month or so later Terry would write to thank him. He'd mention the weather, going into detail during the rainy season, and that would be it. He never sent pictures. Fran said to his wife, Mary Pat, "What's he do with all the film I send him?"

Mary Pat said, "He probably trades it for booze."

Terry hadn't said much about the situation over there since the time of the genocide, when the ones in control then, the Hutus, closed their borders and tried to wipe out the entire Tutsi population, murdering as many as eight hundred thousand in a period of three months: a full-scale attempt at genocide that barely made the six o'clock news. Terry didn't say much about his work at the mission, either, what he was actually doing. Fran liked to picture Terry in a white cassock and sandals gathering children around him, happy little native kids showing their white teeth.

Lately, Terry had opened up a little more, saying in a letter, "The tall guys and the short guys are still giving each other dirty looks, otherwise things seem to be back to what passes for normal here. I've learned what the essentials of life are. Nails, salt, matches, kerosene, charcoal, batteries, Fanta soda, rolling paper and Johnnie Walker Red, the Black Label for a special occasion. Electricity is on in the village until about ten P.M. But there is still only one

telephone. It rings in the sector office, occupied by the RPA, the Rwandese Patriotic Army, pretty good guys for a change acting as police.”

There was even a second page to the latest letter. Fran said to Mary Pat, “Listen to this. He lists the different smells you become aware of in the village, like the essence of the place. Listen. He says, ‘The smell of mildew, the smell of raw meat, cooking oil, charcoal-burning fires, the smell of pit latrines, the smell of powdered milk in the morning—people eating their gruel. The smell of coffee, overripe fruit, eucalyptus in the air. The smell of tobacco, unwashed bodies, and the smell of banana beer on the breath of a man confessing his sins.’”

Mary Pat said, “Gross.”

“Yeah, but you know something,” Fran said, “he’s starting to sound like himself again.”

Mary Pat said, “Is that good or bad?”