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Patrick

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Patrick had to go. I decreed it. I had allowed him to move into my garage one winter but then I evicted him. Not immediately, but after his tobacco and other noxious habits had begun to unsettle my equilibrium. Also, it was becoming unsanitary for reasons I'm sure I need not explain. I granted him refuge and then I ejected him. I sent him back to the streets, towards a world of bandits with no suburban carport for safe harbour.

However, when I stood outside my house, arms akimbo for courage, I said nothing of my personal discomfort. In truth I said that I was worried about the way he struck matches and smoked while lying beneath my car. I recall no resistance, only mute acceptance. He left a bag of things – aging plastic packets, a woman's wide-brimmed straw hat now lopsided and limp, food I'd given him days before. He'd return periodically to tell me he would be back the next day to remove it. Every 'next day' I circled his midden, noting how its contents had expanded: a shoe, a few more plastic bundles, food I'd given him the day before, an empty matchbox. Then quickly I walked away from its smell of Patrick. I was walking away from my own shame but, being the one more mute, knew not how to say it.

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If you can believe God, God can help you. Most of the times Patrick said this to me, and he said it often, I observed by way of response a cynical silence. Now that he's gone, this is the line that echoes in my mind's ear. If you can believe God, God can help you.

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What are reasonable business hours for beggars? According to my glass of sauvignon, it's ten to eight and I've shut up social shop. Also this sandwich bar is closed. These are my misanthrope hours. I realise work is a 24/7 (pre)occupation for those in the busking trade, but not even my students would succeed in getting hold of me right now. I take the glass outside where the sound of mosquitoes partially obscures the sound of Patrick banging on the door.

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A list of comments about begging:

- In a society divided by wealth, the poor outnumber the rich.
- The rich will be few but they will own almost everything there is to have such as high-end mobile phones, big cars, and mines; they will also live behind high walls to stop the contents of their huge houses from escaping, and so that people can't knock on the door.
- The Fourth Pillar of Islam, aiming to address the needs of human dignity, requires the giving of alms to the poor.
- Buddhists, believing all life to be inter-connected, believe people should share their wealth to alleviate poverty.
- Jesus said the poor would always be with us.
- When it comes to poverty, the aforementioned parties are theologically pretty much on the same page.

- Despite this, the path with most adherents appears to be capitalism. I have a house and a car, and a job at a university that deals in ideals, and I'm on the fence about if I can believe God.

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There's a profound difference between voluntary poverty (with a view to getting closer to God) and enforced poverty (the aim of which is to survive another day). I say this not to join the moral philosophers and theologians who discuss the matter, but to point to the confusion I experience whenever I encounter Patrick. My idealistic side (which imagines a society based on economic fairness) is at war with my realistic side (which knows our leaders are too invested to make this so). And my education, delivered via unfair political advantage during apartheid (i.e. to the cost of others), clashes with my Calvinist enculturation, which believes I got what I have via hard work (i.e. not from bumming off others).

This means that whenever I encounter a person who is begging, whether by choice or by circumstance, I am bothered for they are doing something that alarms me. They are performing commitment, demonstrating their reliance on a force outside of their own. I look at Patrick and see everything that mortifies me (economic dependence, no discernible future) and a lot of what I lack (commitment to a cause, a fierce priority of the self). Encounters with him always lead me to spiritual warfare. Damn you, John Calvin.

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'Patrick, you said you wouldn't come back for three months. It's been one day!'

'No, listen ma'am, listen, I respect you. I don't want to do crime. But listen ma'am, I got a problem. Don't make me cry.'

'I boiled you an egg. Would you like it?'

'Only eight rand…' and so the dialogue plays out on my internal memory drive. I set the wine glass down, move towards the door to quell the banging fist.

'Patrick, you said you wouldn't come back for three months. It's been one day!'

'No, listen ma'am, listen, I got a problem.'

No threats of crime today, nor crying. Instead, a lecture about Thembisile, a young man who – according to Patrick – is bad, and who – according to Patrick – knocks on my door and whom Patrick advises to keep away because 'my mother is sleeping'. Perhaps I do know Thembisile by sight. I assure Patrick that he, Patrick, is the only person I engage in conversation. I try also to explain that although sometimes I do sleep (such as before 6am, an hour when Patrick has been known to thump on my door), I am usually working or 'praying' or just out of earshot and therefore unable to answer the door. But the beatific smile that greets this line of information indicates my speech missed its target.

'Somebody gave me some eggs and I boiled you one. Would you like it?'

'Only eight rand. Please madam.'

'Life on the margins of existence is dedicated to the present moment and having room in it for only two feelings: despair and hope,' argues philosopher A.C. Grayling.[1]

I note the green shield bug in Patrick's dreadlocks, wonder what the creature makes of its present moment. Think: that bug and I have more in common than meets the regular suburban eye.

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To trust divine providence is to live a Christ-like life, a way of radical Christianity. But I and the other burghers of this town are not divine. And I cannot know if this lifestyle was Patrick's aim or choice or path. But still I wonder: If I close the door on him am I banishing Christ? And immediately I wonder: What ludicrous fear is that? The shame of ambivalence engulfs me. If it is better to give than to receive, as the Bible[2] proposes, then how come I never feel better but Patrick usually does? He skips off with a clean t-shirt and a sandwich while I withdraw indoors, back to a glass of wine suddenly sour.

In what world does so little provide so much? In *this* world, where however much the gift can be, it can only ever be too little. In such moments my lower self feels victimised by a system tipped against me. In this scandalously unequal society, I can never give enough. I try to remember that shame is just a fear of losing the contest – and all capitalists are players in that game. Losing is unthinkable. But if you aren't in a contest, you can't be stalked by shame. Patrick wins every time.

* * *

Saturday 5pm. Through the blinds of my study, I can see but not be seen. I watch Patrick lay down his container of cheap wine (just an inch or so of urine-coloured liquid remaining in the depths of a soda bottle) in the grass some yards away. He has chosen this hour as the time to tell me of his plan. He has decided to go home to King William's Town, an hour's drive north-east of here. He plans to go to his family and not come back. For this he needs forty rand though sixty will be fine too. Also a shirt, as robbers have beset him and once again taken the shirt off his back. How can he return home without a shirt, he asks reasonably though slowly. Enunciating this many words takes time. I discover he has a twin sister, Sizeka, who has eight children and who will be mighty pleased to see him as he has lived in Grahamstown/Makhanda for 24 years. However, he has opted not to tell her he's on his way.

The hole above his left cheekbone is fully healed now, if a taut circle of black parchment with pink undertones can pass for scar tissue. And his shabby anorak is off, in anticipation of a new shirt. I weigh up the solemnity of this occasion. Patrick has long known he has AIDS. His open acknowledgement of this has been a vital component of his professional success in an environment that continues to stigmatise the illness. As he is not without intuition or intelligence, it is very possible that he is starting to act on the profound instinct that impels creatures home to die. But it is Saturday evening, the bottle concealed in the grass is nearly empty, and catching a ride to King must surely belong to the distant future. To tomorrow, say, or to another epoch altogether. Which is a measure of how dim is my intuition.

'Also, I want for your name and your surname and your address and phone number. Please madam. If it's trouble, you know me.' This request adds gravity to the moment. Perhaps he really is planning on going. 'You never see me again!' Of course, of course.

On the other hand, 'never' is an extension on the recent three-month promise. Another sign, possibly, that the inevitable is close enough to feel. I know there's a twenty rand note in my purse. Before I turn to go inside, I mention this fact as a way of preparing Patrick for disappointment. I retrieve the rice and fish I had saved for him, throw salt into its packet, and find a t-shirt. If this really is my last encounter with him, it would be nice if both of us could think of it fondly. But I don't want to go over the top. Otherwise, if he returns, the terms of our engagement would have a new precedent.

'Beggars should be abolished: it is irritating to give to them and it is irritating not to,' claims Nietzsche.[3]

Patrick peers into the packet of food. 'You got spoon for me?' I counter-offer with a fork, saved from a recent takeaway for such an occasion. He accepts. 'And your number for phone. And name and address. You write it. For me. Cause I going now. You never see me.' He tucks the money into the sock on his left foot. Inside my house, I write my first name in pencil on a scrap of paper. Then I write my office number. He inserts that paper into the sock on his right foot. 'Bye!' he beams, 'byee!'

From behind the slats of the blind, I watch again. He is peering into the rice. He locates a pocket for the plastic fork. Stands up. Steadies. Can he feel the two pieces of paper against the skin of his feet? He tries a step or two. Checks his fly buttons. Step, step. He stops under the jacaranda to retrieve the bottle. Then he looks over his shoulder towards my house.

He walks on.

If you can believe God.

* * *

It's one thing to know whom you admire, even what it is in that person you admire, but for me to know why I admire this particular man is an altogether different – far tougher and more elusive – thing. For a while my psychotherapist became very animated when I started with another Patrick story. But even his lines of professional questioning failed to deliver me any closer to knowing what lies at the heart of our attachment.

I don't know if Buddhists or Muslims or Hindus – the other major faiths practised in my town – would have an easier time trying to make sense of a relationship with such a man. But Christianity is the moral inheritance I was heir to, by birth and by initial education, and so it is the influence that governs – albeit incompletely – whatever moral response system I may now possess. That, and the gross inequality of my homeland. Little surprise, then, that I should attempt to ameliorate Patrick's plight, to realise too slowly that he did not see his life as a plight, and that I now seem fated to never resolve who he was for me nor what I might learn from knowing him. However, I am learning that there are some answers we were born to have elude us.

* * *

Monday. Rubbish day. Meaning: the day municipal workers collect household garbage. On this Monday there is less spilled garbage than usual. Either it's been a neat shift or there were fewer donkeys scavenging or the pickers have picked more cleanly than usual.

Late in the afternoon, I drive up Market Street. Rolling across the road ahead of me is a feather boa, peacock green, feathers animated by the wind. It caterpillars across the tar taking a diagonal line. If Patrick saw it, he'd seize upon it. He'd sling it around his slender body like a line of bandit's bullets. He could coil it on his hat. Maybe. Patrick wasn't one of the garbage pickers in these parts. He asked, people gave.

Besides, Patrick is in King William's Town now, out of daily sight for months. Also, I begin to acknowledge, out of mortal sight.

He had gone home.

* * *

Poverty, once upon a time seen as a societal problem that required regular almsgiving, gradually became institutionalised as a moral failing. A few hundred years ago in England, for example, begging and vagrancy became punishable, a development not unconnected with manumission. In the new world, recently freed slaves could be arrested for appearing in public with no discernible means of support.[4]

'Poverty,' wrote philosopher A.C. Grayling,[5] 'is not a virus, a natural disaster, or an accident. It is man-made.'

* * *

On the tenth day of Christmas, my door knocker gave to me one Patrick, pretty clean but very lean.

'I just want nine rand to go to Joza.'

'Patrick? Is that really you?'

'Just nine rand. Pleeease.'

'Where have you been? I thought you were… you know.'

'Look here.' He points to the embroidered logo and text of the provincial Department of Health. It adorns the upper left quadrant of the blue track top he wears. 'I been hospital, they give for me. Is mine! They give me.'

'You've been in hospital all this time?'

'Four months! Now God is bring me here.' He is shaking like a palsied person, gripping the bars of the front door security gate. 'Fifteen rand is all, for my rent. OK twenty. Twenty rand for me.'

'Do you remember coming to say goodbye? I thought you were dead.'

'Twenty rand, pleeeease madam. And bring for me a shirt. I got nothing clean to wear.'

Damn him! He's not hearing what I'm saying. Slighted and indignant, I hear my voice harden. 'I haven't been saving clothes. I thought you were dead.'

'OK, twenty rand then. And shoes.'

'You started at nine, then 15, now 20. What's the deal?' I'm bloody irritated.

'Twenty, I need to go home now.' Wait, *I* need you to go home now.

I pass him two tens which he secretes with impressive speed and co-ordination. I also give him a banana.

'Nothing clothes for me?'

'No, I told you, no clothes. But the banana is easy to eat. It'll make you a little bit strong.'

'God can keep you. Bye!'

'Bye.' Sullen and morose, I muster one syllable.

'Bye! God can keep you well. Bye!'

I watch him negotiate the curb. 'Bye Patrick.'

'BYE!'

'Okay Patrick, bye.' He stops, looks back at me; I am waiting behind the security gate. He has to stop for the swivel because the now-permanent shaking disallows forward movement simultaneous with a turn of his head. I raise my hand in farewell. How long before he's back?

'God can keep you!'

'And God can keep you,' I reply gruffly. If you can believe.

Off he lurches, clutching the banana.

* * *

'One of the measures of a good society is how it treats the poor. It is not always easy for those who are not poor to know how to do this well,' writes A.C. Grayling.[6]

* * *

A list of things I rob from Patrick if I don't accede to his demands:

- Hope.
- Complicity – that sense of community that comes when you feel part of a larger social organism.
- Agency.
- Security.

A list of things I feel his demands rob from me:

- Calmness of mind: it is both annoying and burdensome to be asked to solve a public problem in a private interaction.
- Privacy: how dare he bang the brass postal flap like that to peer into the interior of my house?
- Agency.
- The illusion that I might be a kind person.

* * *

Patrick Sobukwe lived on the streets and, with our collusion, off people like me. He knocked on my door, banged on it and thundered against it. Sometimes he just sat across the road from it. He also would sit next to it, perched on the flowerpot like it was a bus shelter seat.

Most weeks I'd see him three or four times, persuaded to open the door to his thumping upon it by reasons I now cannot recall but they would have had something to do with what used to be called 'white guilt' by certain South Africans and now is simply a consequence of having a safe home, a bleeding heart and a susceptible imagination.

Most weeks I could sustain seeing him three or four times. Then he started to come several times a day, so frequently in fact that I began noting the times on the kitchen board: 5.20am – 6.10 – 7.30 – 8am. I noted these times as a way of reassuring myself I was not imagining this besiegement. Then he moved into my garage and the door thumping abated.

* * *

My garage is really a carport: three sides covered in creeping ivy and a roof. The general effect is to render a vehicle more dust-ridden than if it were parked on the street but the fourth side of the garage is a lockable gate so it's supposedly a safe space. The estate agent said that secure parking added R40 000 to the value of a house in Grahamstown/Makhanda so, locally, the carport is a good thing. But every night that winter when Patrick slept in it, closing the gate felt like I was shutting him in a cage. He asked if I could leave the lights on for warmth and I did, even though two 60-watt bulbs could have made no material difference on a brick floor in winter with only foliage for walls.

When he moved in, he explained how he'd like me to park the car: a few feet away from the garage's innermost wall so he could recline in the gap between front bumper and wall. This position put him out of sight from the street, which increased his safety, but it also put him in line with my bedroom window. As I lay in bed a few feet distant from him, I could hear his rumbling monologues in which, I took from their pitch and tone, he processed the day's injustices and answered back to his bullies with well-judged ripostes that came to him long after the moment but sounded gratifying to replay. He would leave at first light, carefully closing the gate of his cage so that all would be as I left it, except for the filthy plastic bag of odds and ends he kept safe there: food I'd given him days before, empty matchboxes, a battered straw hat with a wide brim and a wonky artificial flower. At nightfall, he let himself back in and lay down in the space between front fender and far wall.

* * *

In 1810 people from all over Europe went all the way to England to see Sara Baartman's half-naked body.[7] They paid to see her in a human zoo. She was kept in a cage about one-and-a-half metres high. She died in France in 1816, 26 years old. Her remains returned to her homeland of South Africa in 2002. Laid to rest, finally, nearly two centuries on.

Just the other day, in 1931, something called the Colonial Exhibitions[8] travelled to Marseilles and Paris for a second time because the first, in 1907, had been such a runaway success. The Colonial Exhibitions consisted of several hundred indigenous people in cages. Over six months, 34 million people travelled to see them.

For the Colonial Exhibitions to succeed so fantastically, someone would have had to shut those cage doors.

* * *

Patrick always noticed the colours of my clothing, remarked on them, sometimes complimented me on them. Usually, I was happy to reciprocate with bashful thanks because only then could our conversation begin, the conversation about his need for fifteen rand, or twenty, or eight.

Patrick liked colour. I had the sense that when he was particularly thrilled with a new acquisition, he looked forward to showing me, would strike a pose on the street for maximum effect, and await my glee. I remember his purple coat, which he twinned with a baby-pink crocheted beanie, and I remember his red pirate hat which lent a swashbuckling air to our irascible negotiations.

I remember the day he saw the edges of my tattoo for the first time. After my mastectomy, I elected to adorn my altered chest with a colour tattoo of lilies. Like all lilies, they emerged in warm weather to bloom. They had been made in winter, incubated in the dark of many jumpers. Julia! This is what he called me and therefore what I answered to when he called out. Julia! I opened the door. Patrick! His eyes dropped to the colours and petals inked on my skin. I watched him falter and myself recoil. He should not have been looking at my chest. Decorum prevented him from commenting even though, in the days after the surgery, he had been fulsome in his expressions of good health for me. But to be truthful, the tattoo (my version of flowers on a grave) is indeed divine and he, Patrick, lover of beauty and colour, was in its thrall. 'Oh, that is beautiful,' he said eventually. And then, quickly, 'I have one too,' and thrust his inner wrist towards my face. I admired the dark blue outline of a wonky little Africa, souvenir of a prison stay perhaps or, considering his surname, simply the mark of political allegiance. The moment could have gone horribly wrong but we held it for its delicacy, just for a moment, and then we began wrangling over money and food.

* * *

Calvin, Christ, God. All of them are just confusing me. Patrick's state of being had nothing to do with any of these things. No, what I saw in Patrick was what I wished for in myself: an absence of abjection. He never apologised for being who or what he was: Patrick Sobukwe, a beggar, pursuing well his human calling.

Almost every beggar on the streets of my town starts their panhandling with *sorry m'am*. Patrick began always with *Hello meddem!* and *How are you!* Or: *Yoh! you are beautiful today!* Exclamation points stung his patter. Sometimes he had questions and they would be thoughtfully pointed. *Where is your sister?* was a line of questioning he pursued for several weeks following her visit from England with her blasé approach to currency conversion. Not once did I hear him say *sorry m'am*.

A list of things about Patrick I now concede I admired:

- He had no abjection.
- He was obdurate, bloody-minded and wilful.
- He really knew how to stick it to The Man.

'True compassion,' said Martin Luther King,[9] 'is not haphazard or superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.'

* * *

I've leaned on a lot of erudite men to guide my frail relationship with poverty. But the person who has guided me towards myself most consistently is Patrick Sobukwe.

He never really threatened the safety of my car by lighting matches underneath it, yet he tolerated eviction from my garage. He refused the ambulance I once called for him when he was barely conscious outside my house. When he found over-ripe tripe he brought it to me to cook for him (I, vegetarian, did as commanded, gagging at the smell which then lingered for days). He never called on me without inflaming my shame but he never left without coaxing a smile from me. He was some sort of mobile benediction.

'I'll ne-e-ever come again,' he chanted every time he called and he was right. One, he has no peer, neither in this unequal society nor in my imaginarium. And two, he has indeed now gone.

He will ne-e-ever again lounge in the sun on the sidewalk, waving airily to neighbours who return home before me. I will ne-e-ever again drive round extra blocks to avoid arguing with him. He dressed rakishly whenever he got the chance, he played to the house, he did what he could with what he had. I am infuriated to find I miss him.

* * *

Souling is a medieval word that's fallen into disuse but I need it now. Rooted in All Souls Day, when neighbours knocked on doors asking for soul cakes, it then referred to the practice of going about asking for donations of food, etc.

The Oxford Dictionary[10] adds the 'etc', and it's probably the best term for Patrick's diverse requests which never actually included food. It was my annoying desire to treat him well but on my terms that forced upon him food he didn't always want but which, because of his grace, he seldom declined.

Over the centuries, souling, i.e. the practice of going about asking for donations of food, etc, evolved into modern-day trick-or-treating carried out annually on the same date which had been reserved for remembering all souls.

Now Patrick really has died, and I still can't say which of us was tricking, where we treated. Although I do believe that between us, on our best days, there was soul. If you can believe God.

ENDNOTES

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7. https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/sara-saartjie-baartman and http://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/about-us/saartjie-baartmans-story/
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