

Transfusion

It was a trick. That's how I came to think of it. Some might have called it a curse, others might have called it a gift. To me, it was simply a clever trick.

It was a Wednesday night and I was coming back from break. It was quiet, as quiet as an airport terminal can be and then there was a rush. First came the thud and then rush. Shoes and stretchers and blue went past me. Someone yelled and the echo came and went and came back again. I followed the crowd.

It was him, the man from Liberia, Joseph. I didn't know him and I didn't know where he'd come from, but I saw his arm outstretched between trainers, heels, sandals and wingtips. The fingers opened and closed around the pink palm. I thought he was calling me, or more accurately, summoning me. Years later, I still haven't decided, was he aware of me, even as he struggled to live? I would be late for work and I'm not a gawker. Not even on the freeway - in fact, I would speed up, just to prove my indifference.

But that day, I was not in my car. I was out in the open without any place to go. He looked at me as they lifted him onto the stretcher and I tried not to look back. It was just like so many of the movies I'd seen, all the sounds become muted and time slows down.

It wasn't like what you're thinking - it wasn't a love at first sight thing. It wasn't love at all. And, now I wonder, do I love him or hate him.

I somehow wasn't aware of it, but I ran right up the stretcher and took his hand. He squeezed my hand just once and then the grasping was gone. I tried to run alongside, but someone directly behind me kept telling me, between sharp, sucking breathes, to get out of the way. Joseph kept responding hoarsely; his voice was fearful and no one could hear him. As a last triumph, he managed an authoritative "no," a deep voice I've heard many time since then. So often in fact, that it has become a comfort, even when the memories are not.

After that, they let me stay. I stayed in the ambulance and at the hospital until he died. They said it was that illness spreading around his country and they quarantined me and everyone else who had been on the plane. I stayed at the hospital a full week before they let me go. And that's when the memories started. But I didn't call them memories at first, they started out as dreams and later as visions.

After only a few hours at the hospital, he was gone. There weren't even tubes and wires and oxygen machines. He was beyond all that. After all the doctors and police officers and security agents came and went, there was just a nurse whose shoes squeaked. She kept staring at me and I couldn't blame her. Joseph and I were strange companions.

I didn't know it then, but the transfusion had already started. I'm certain of it now because I just kept sitting there hour after hour holding his hand and feeling as though I'd known him all our lives.

He never looked at me again - he laid perfectly still with his eyes closed and erratic breaths until the very end. But his grip never weakened.

I think it was about 6 p.m. when he passed. Then all the agents came back to see me in quarantine. They wanted to know how I knew Joseph, how I came to be with him at the airport, and finally why I got into the ambulance. I sensed that quarantine was not my only problem.

Agent MacArthur was against me from the beginning. I could say nothing to satisfy him. During quarantine, he came every day to speak to me through the glass.

“You’re asking me to believe that you came to the hospital with a highly contagious man and held his hand for five hours despite the fact that you just met him and don’t even know his name?” he would ask me. I would just shrug. He couldn’t be convinced anyway.

On the second day, as he walked back and forth on the other side of the glass, forming his next question, I saw a woman dying in a simple two-room house. It was very hot and she died quietly on a dirty mattress. The wailing that came next was unbearable. It came from inside the house and from all the surrounding houses. It came from me.

I immediately covered my ears. MacArthur was staring at me. “It’s the crying,” I told him. “Don’t you hear it?” From the way he looked at me, I knew he couldn’t. The doctor was there in less than five minutes, completely suited up.

She came in and asked me about the noise. I knew what she was thinking. Her gentle voice and slow movements told me that she already had visions of padded cells. Hallucinations were not a side effect of the virus, after all.

I told her everything there was to tell about what I saw. She asked, “have you ever been to Liberia, or anywhere else in Africa?”

“I told MacArthur ‘no’ about 20 times now,” I said.” I’d never even left the state.

“How did you know him? You must have known him, otherwise you would not have stayed so long.”

“I’ve never met him before. That’s what I’ve been saying.”

“We need your help to determine who he was. We need to know how he got here and why he came.”

“Maybe he was a refugee.”

“Maybe, but we still don’t know who he was.”

“Is there a fly in here?”

“No, certainly not.”

“Can’t you hear the buzzing?”

I can’t be certain, but I’m sure that’s the moment she decided to send me to psychiatrics as soon as the quarantine ended.

She visited me everyday in quarantine and I didn’t mention noises again. But they were there. And the visions were there too. Someone had died and left a baby with a big round belly. They said it was AIDS.

People came and went wailing and crying for two straight days in the sickening heat and then a young woman took the baby in a dirty sling.

At first I hadn’t wanted to go to psychiatrics, but then I didn’t want to leave. On the second day, I could see that my eyes were bloodshot. I wasn’t sleeping well thanks to the heat and the flies. And the sadness.

Dr. West had been there the day before and introduced me to Dr. Grant. He looked strikingly like Joseph. Tall, lanky and bald with a wide nose. But the eyes were dead. They weren’t open and pleading like Joseph’s. I think Dr. Grant must have been selected for me on purpose.

That first day, he asked me mostly about the airport and how I came to work there. I told him about college and hospitality work and my 10-minute commute.

“For someone who’s never traveled before, the airport is an interesting choice for work,” he remarked. “Have you ever thought of taking a trip?”

“No.” That was the truth. I was what they call a homebody. I commuted to college and was perfectly content to drive two hours north to camp for vacation. I loved my town and the life I had there. I never wanted to go to Africa and save the world.

Later we got into the requisite therapist topics, my childhood, my parents, etc. But, I had nothing to hide when I told him that my childhood had been very uneventful and I wasn’t angry about anything. And, no, I had not experienced significant trauma.

When another memory came, I saw the whites of Joseph’s eyes, already impossibly large against his dark skin, but this time, there was no crying. There were clanking dishes, cigarette smoke and unintelligible chatter. The young woman who took him, glided between tables, stirring up dust, while he, a toddler now, played with sticks and bugs down the road. When the sun set and radio was shut off, she carried him home on her back. He was sleeping and happy.

After a few more days they let me go, with a series of follow-up appointments on my calendar. I had almost asked to stay. One morning I woke up and was determined to tell Dr. Grant everything. I thought I would start with, “I’m having visions” But, I was uneasy about the word “visions.” Somehow it didn’t seem accurate. That’s when I began thinking of them as

memories. That's when I determined not tell anyone. If they were in fact memories, they weren't something that should be done away with. Even if they weren't mine.

At home, on my porch, I knew I couldn't go back to work at the airport, but I also knew there was nothing else in particular that I wanted to do. I spent the next few days sleeping in, reading and drinking tea.

During that time, I remembered that as a young boy, Joseph saw his guardian - aunt I think - gang raped and left for dead behind the cafe. After that, he joined the guerilla fighters in the jungle and became a man at the age of maybe 8 or 9.

When I wasn't remembering, sleeping, or trying to fall asleep, I was online. I was reading about AIDS, Africa, civil wars, and death.

A week later my sister came to the door. I was in my pajamas at 3 in the afternoon.

"You saw a stranger die," she told me. "It's not the end of the world. People die all the time."

I went back to the couch and squinted at the light she was letting in. "He seemed like more than just a stranger." It was about as close to the truth as I could get.

She threw her designer purse on the chair and went into the kitchen. "The fridge is empty," she called. "What are you eating?" I listened to her heels click back and forth on the tile. They made me remember the gunshots that gave Joseph his first kill.

“Cereal,” I told her. “Check the pantry.” There were about four boxes of cereal in there.

“Come shopping with me before I have to pick Keira up,” she demanded, reappearing in the doorway.

“Shopping for what?” I scowled at her.

“Whatever you want,” she said. “Shoes are always my fall back.”

I pointed to three pairs of flats in a pile by the door. “I think I’m all set.”

“You know, there’s a new bookstore right by the shoe place.”

I dragged myself off the couch and twisted my stringy hair up in a loose bun. Although I do love bookstores, I was also motivated by the realization that if I stayed home, she would stay too - and lecture me the whole time.

I can still remember all of this clearly now even though I have so many memories jumbled together that I’ll never be able to tell you which ones belong to me and which ones don’t. Actually, I’ve decided that they all belong to me, but I can’t tell you which ones I saw with my own eyes. What I can tell you, is that it was the last time I saw my sister.

At the bookstore, I went right for the literature section. I wandered around touching the books, but not noticing the titles or authors. Finally, I found myself in world cultures right in front of stacks of books on Africa, when I overheard a conversation going on across the aisle.

“This outbreak is devastating the country,” a woman was saying. “We’re still trying to determine how to respond to the airplane incident.”

“What incident?” I asked before I was even aware of what I was saying. I wanted to know, and yet I didn’t want to know, whether they meant Joseph.

The woman and the man standing next to her both looked up, astonished. The woman shook her armful of bangles. “It is so good to hear my native language. But how did you learn? You must have spent time in Liberia.”

“No, I’ve told everyone that I’ve never been to Africa a million times now,” I said. “And what are you talking about, ‘your native language?’”

“Liberian English of course,” she said. “I must know how you learned.”

“Look, everything I’ve been saying is plain old American English. I’m leaving.”

The truth is, I was frightened. I knew I couldn’t control my memories anymore, and I was beginning to accept that, mostly because know one else knew. But if I could no longer control

my speech, people would certainly know. This whole thing was now beyond my ability to conceal.

“Would you like to check out?”

I was almost to the door, but a salesperson was in my way.

“Check out what?” I asked.

She frowned at me and pointed to my hand. I hadn’t realized I was even holding a book. I looked at the title. “A Traveler’s Guide to Western Africa.”

“Why the fuck not,” I said.

I headed to the cash register, as the salesperson stared at me.

Since then, I’ve been to Africa several times. I’ve met Joseph’s family, seen the wars, watched people die. But I’ve also seen amazing acts of sacrifice, love and loyalty that I’d never seen at home. And when I come back here, it isn’t long before I’m planning my next trip, which is always longer than the last.

People got to know me. Only a few really know the story of Joseph and the memories. But, many people know me as an activist and even an expert. The few people who know the truth

believe me, because this kind of thing has been documented a few times before. I've never met any of the other "recipients" (as I've come to call us), but I'm determined that I will.

The trick is a burden. It's changed my life. Some days it's a heavy burden and other days it's light. I still can't tell you if it's been a change for the better or not. That's a question I won't be able to answer, maybe not even until after I'm gone.