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Charcoal Scrawl

The guard situated himself in the center of the small courtyard, directly over the nightly beating ground. The blood of that place was streaked across the cement in fantastic swathes, serving as a terrible, constant witness to the inhumanity of mankind. Standing in the courtyard, surrounded by crumbling brick walls and barbed-wire fences, I realized I had crossed a threshold where it no longer mattered what passport I carried, that I was young and loved, or that my skin was supposedly not of a color meriting torture. The names were listed off for roll call; everything seemed grey and empty.

Shoving us back into a rough line, the guards herded us once again into our one-room cell. Collapsing on a mat, I stared into the shadowed, dark, stifling emptiness. A bare yellow bulb hanging from its wires scarcely illuminated the charcoal scrawl covering the bleak whitewashed walls of the small cell. Words like *Justice*, *Allah* and *Freedom* stared back at me, their meanings lost in the emptiness. Names and dates served as the last testament to prisoners who had been transferred, released, or dragged out at 4 a.m. and shot. “God, what a terrible place,” I thought, “where are you in the...” I was suddenly jarred out of myself by the prodding elbow of Arouna who sat next to me on the grass mat. “I have another story,” he said as he leaned his back against the cold concrete. “There was a man from Burkina Faso in here. The guards came in and took him; they beat him till he was all blood. When they brought him back to the cell he was screaming, he wouldn’t stop. He screamed until they took him out. He didn’t come back. I am very afraid they will take me soon.” Something about the grey-white walls still echoed those silent screams, and I wondered which word might be his.

Something like deep grief overwhelmed me when I heard these hard words, spoken so simply that I knew Arouna did not care anymore. He was a refugee from Sierra Leone and had been in SRI Prison for 11 months because he had \$210, and one of the guards wanted it. He was a slight man with hard-cut features and sad, dark eyes. Arouna seemed to embody the prison, as if he were formed from the red brick and rusty iron bars. He absorbed the darkness of the cell, though he despised it.

Lying there, in the midst of a suffering I did not understand, I questioned the Spirit's leading into such a place. I had always believed that the silence of God denoted a lack of His presence and an erring from obedience. My journey through Central African Republic had been chaos and had finally landed me in a place where men are forgotten. I felt abandoned and saw that feeling mirrored in the dark, sad, faces around me. The five boys circled in the mat next to mine stared at the cement floor with eyes of understanding far beyond their years. Across the room, a lanky individual slumped against the wall, staring, unmoving. If not for the intermittent rise of his chest, I would have thought him dead. An older, portly man in a stained white skullcap offered me half a smile, a gift happily accepted by a faint nod of my head.

You cannot keep track of time in a cell. The weariness of inaction is only broken by the intermittent roll call. Long after the night had set in, the guards burst into the cell, yelling in French and throwing kicks in every direction. Arouna grabbed my hand, and I could not tell if it was him that was shaking, or me. I could not breathe. My eyes followed the men as they approached the group of five teenage boys accused of stealing a goat. A boy in a ripped white t-shirt was pointed out and summarily pulled by his ankles,

yelling and clawing at the floor. It was terrible. He was dragged into the small courtyard and beaten.

None of us moved; many of the prisoners were used to this inevitable occurrence. Rolling into a ball, I stared into black nothingness as I heard the sickening blows fall again and again. No words can describe the horror of those sounds. Nor can words be found to justify the inhumanity and depravity of our own souls. When they threw the youth back in the cell, I saw his bloody face as a symbol to a suffering world that I do not understand. The dehumanization of that terrible scene challenged my belief in transcendence. Are some men just beasts? Where is God in the midst of this?

I do not understand His ways, but sometimes, in my better moments, I do understand Him, and that is enough. The love that is God enables us to step where we cannot see and to undergo what we do not comprehend. I do not understand why God puts good fathers in the world who must watch their families starve. I do not understand why God places children in the world only to be beaten by angry men. I do not understand why a refugee's most permanent home has been a prison, when he has done nothing criminal. No, these things I will never understand.

When I was speaking with Arouna my first night in captivity, he told us that when I walked through the cell door, the 40 crammed men began whispering amongst themselves, "There is a good spirit on Him." Arouna then asked me what this was. My only response was to tell him of the love beyond which flows through me. At that moment God's love was the only thing I did understand.

Arouna told me once, "To suffer alone is the worst kind of suffering. There is a different kind of pain which comes from the ignorance of the whole world. I want people

to acknowledge my humanity; I need to know that other people see this as wrong.” I then asked him, “Is it enough to know that God sees you and is with you as you suffer?” With his habitual melancholy smile he answered my question with a question, “I know that God is someplace, but do you really think He is here?” I cried at that moment, not out of hopelessness or despair, but rather from the wearying effect of seeing too much evil done to fellow humans and the idea of estrangement from the Father. In that moment, I felt His love, more intense and profound than I had ever before. There was an assurance that God was right there, among us, suffering.

I once believed that if I was walking in the Father’s will, the presence of God would be especially close. I heard this preached from the pulpit, read it in books, and had witnessed it firsthand in the life of my mentor. I knew that God had called me to travel through Central African Republic, but the five-week journey and all its madness had almost destroyed that firm belief.

Men say that Jacob experienced God and walked away with a dislocated hip, something he carried with him to his dying day. My encounter with God and spiritual limp came from four days of staring at concrete walls covered with the scrawlings of previous prisoners. It came from three nights of lying on grass mats, wondering if I was the next one to be taken out at 4 a.m., not to be heard from again. My limp came from wrestling with the Almighty over a suffering world that I do not understand.

Lying on the tattered grass mats, surrounded by the silence of 40 prisoners, I truly doubted. It was in that doubt that God revealed himself as the servant, the guide, the comforter, the lover and the sufferer.