The Mysteries of Porto Vecchio

Bede Scott

One hundred and twenty-three years ago, in 1874, a fisherman from our village pulled in his net to find, lying among the cod, the squid, the red mullet, and sardines, a black Christ on a black cross. After returning to port, the fisherman carried the cross, still covered in sea anemones and oyster shells, through the streets of the village to the Church of Sant'Angelo, which stands on the northern side of Porto Vecchio's main square. As he walked, bearing this strange object over his shoulder, a cloud of seagulls gathered in the sky above – forming, so the historians tell us, the Greek letters I and H and Σ. That was the first miracle. Once he arrived at the church, the fisherman leaned the black protomartyr against the altar and blessed himself three times. At that moment, two streets away, his son, who had been crippled by polio from an early age, spat salt water into a bowl by his bed, threw off his blankets, and without the use of crutches, without swaying in the slightest, took his first tentative steps toward an impossibly distant toilet. That was the second miracle. And in the years that followed there would be many more. Ugly men marrying beautiful women, deaf-mutes reciting the *Purgatorio*, insomniacs sleeping for days on end, illiterates writing odes to full moons and frangipani trees.

Every year on the third of July, to commemorate its discovery, a procession carries the black cross through the flower-strewn streets of our village. And on that day, every year, countless maladies are miraculously cured – most commonly those of rheumatism, shingles, allergic rhinitis, infertility, and vertigo. After a while, of course, the scientists came. They examined the cross and told us what kind of wood it was carved from and how old it was. They studied the currents of the sea and told us where it had originated and how long it had been drifting. Then the academics came. They measured the cross and made sketches of it. They wrote monographs on it and gave it a name. But we couldn't understand anything they told us about it. Then the bureaucrats came. They had it valued and catalogued and told us it was theirs, the property of the state, but also, paradoxically, that it was part of our national heritage, and so belonged to all of us. And then, once a year, on the third of July, the tourists came. They bought postcards and took photos of it. Some young men stopped fishing and began carving replicas of the cross out of driftwood and old chair legs; but there weren't enough tourists to sustain this industry during the off-season, when the weather around here can be rather unpredictable, so eventually they went back to fishing for cod, squid, red mullet, and sardines.

It was one of these young men, Alessandro Vieri, who found the first human body part, a woman's torso, lying in his net sometime early last year.

The torso was the only thing not moving among the cascading silver scales and undulating tentacles. It was the same colour as the famous cross, he later said, but its texture was different. Whereas the cross was hard and unyielding, polished by the sea's currents, this was soft and porous, like a sponge. Its skin was coming off, and one of its breasts had been eaten away. Alessandro didn't know what to do with the torso, so he left it where it was, caught in his net, and returned to port.

Our village is small; we have a mayor of sorts, a postman, and a priest. The nearest police station is seventy kilometres along the coast. So when Alessandro Vieri came back that day with his torso, he decided not to go to the authorities. The other men in the Bar Garibaldi agreed. The woman was clearly dead. She had been dead for quite some time. There would be no fingerprints. There was no point checking dental records. Her identity was forever lost. So why complicate matters? Why bring in the police, who would only impound their equipment, their nets and boats? Why subject themselves to prying questions, to endless whys and wherefores? After some debate, it was decided that, first thing the following morning, Alessandro should throw the torso back into the sea. Until then, they would wrap it in blankets and put it in the cellar of the bar, behind the crates of empty bottles and stacks of old *La Repubblicas*. So they did just that, and the only notable thing that came of this discovery was the sudden disappearance of Salvatore Greco, the local tobacconist, whose wife had gone missing in suspicious circumstances two months earlier. Naturally, this disappearance seemed to explain the decomposing torso found in Alessandro Vieri's net.

Otherwise, life went on as usual in Porto Vecchio – until, three days later, another fisherman hauled a floating body part from the sea. This time it was unmistakably and unmentionably masculine. The fisherman, like Alessandro before him, decided to leave the object in his net and return to port. After more discussion at the Bar Garibaldi, they agreed to put the matter into the mayor's hands. They wrapped the object in an old newspaper, left it on his doorstep with an anonymous note explaining what had happened, and waited. Days passed and nothing came of their delivery. Nothing came of it because the mayor hadn't read their note. He had opened the package first and, seeing what lay inside, felt a sudden twinge of fear in his lower intestines. Dropping the object into the toilet, he had immediately written out three identical letters – judiciously terminating his relations with two married women and a recently engaged girl.

Once more, life returned to normal, although there was not enough time for a child to be born or an adult to die before another body part was found in a fisherman's net. On this occasion it was a hand. Like the others, the fisherman who found it brought it in to port, still clinging to his net. It was a strong hand, broad and calloused – the hand of a peasant. Only, this time the men in the Bar Garibaldi decided not to keep their discovery secret. They put the hand on a table and, in the hope of identifying it, told everybody in the village to file past, one after the other, as if they were attending Mass at Sant'Angelo's. Unfortunately, none of us recognized the splayed fingers and strong wrist, the frayed cuticles and wrinkled knuckles. But later that night, Fiammetta, or Little Flame, the bar owner's daughter, had a nightmare. In it she saw her fiancé, who had left for Buenos Aires only a few weeks before, standing against a background of coloured lights. The lights were strung the length of a huge ocean liner – a floating city of orchestras and dining rooms, libraries and ballrooms. As Little Flame watched, however, something was slowly lifting it all out of place. The dust jackets of old books could be seen gliding through empty ballrooms. Clarinets and double basses were playing themselves, disturbing the silence of the libraries. Something was animating the cutlery in the dining room, and in the first-class cabins the silk sheets were being lifted off the beds. Suddenly, Little Flame realized what was doing all of this. It was the same thing that she could now see filling her fiancé's lungs, plucking at his hair, pulling him down into itself, into the same thing that was rising through the corridors, through the portholes, playing the pianos and plastering the carpets to the ceiling, into the same thing that she could now see encircling his hands, his calloused, peasant's hands.

That night, Little Flame walked down into the cellar of the bar, the cellar where they had kept the woman's torso wrapped in blankets, the cellar that was full of old bottles and stacks of *La Repubblicas*, and, using the cord from an electric hairdryer, quietly, efficiently, hung herself. Her father found her the next morning, swinging above a pool of her own grief.

As one might have predicted, the following day also brought a postcard from Little Flame's fiancé. It said that he was alive and well and had already rented a small room with a shared toilet in a neighbourhood of Buenos Aires called Pacífico.

After this tragedy, a meeting was held in the Bar Garibaldi. Something had to be done about the body parts. A number of the village's inhabitants suggested they tell the authorities. Others insisted they keep it quiet. The same old arguments emerged from both sides. If they didn't inform the police, then they too would be guilty of whatever crime had led to such a terrible holocaust. It would be a sin of omission. A sin multiplied by the population of their village, by hundreds – every man, woman, and child

harbouring the same horrific secret. From the other side there came a less theological argument. Didn't they remember what had happened because of the famous cross? Didn't they remember the plague of scientists, academics, and bureaucrats that had descended on their village? This time it would be worse. This time it would be a plague of police, and everybody would be a suspect. Statements would be taken, equipment impounded, witnesses examined and cross-examined. Perfectly good fishing days would be lost. Against this logic, it seemed, there could be no argument, and so it was decided – they would say nothing.

Over the months that followed, the fishermen kept fishing; the seasons of guava, prickly pear, and pomegranate came and went; and every so often another body part would be found caught in a net. Sometimes it was a jaw or an arm, sometimes a leg or a head. But the fishermen got used to these once-human catches. Always careful to separate the human bone and body parts from the red mullet and sardines, they would tip this ungodly refuse straight back into the sea. Nobody knew where the bodies were coming from; they just kept coming. The secret was a heavy burden to bear, however, and at times they came close to confiding in outsiders – relatives from other villages, itinerant workers, even tourists. The tourists still came for the fish restaurants, for the lemon groves and vineyards, for the greenhouses and prehistoric caves, but most of all they came for the annual procession of the black Christ through the streets of the village. In July of that year, on the day of the procession, everybody in the village prayed that the curse of the human remains would be lifted. And for some days it was. But before long they were once more fishing thigh bones wrapped in jeans and heads without eyes from the enigmatic sea.

After this failure of communal prayer, this clear sign of divine indifference, a woman from the village went to see the local priest, Father Giovanni Lojacono. She found him standing in the baptistery, stroking his scarred head.

"Father," she said, "it's about the bodies."

The priest raised his eyebrows.

"You know about them, of course."

"Unfortunately, yes," the priest said, still stroking the thin white lines. "I've been told about it."

Father Lojacono had been absolving the sins of the villagers since before the war, and it seemed that for every confession he heard, his balding scalp mysteriously acquired another scar. Despite lifetimes of conjecture, not one of the villagers had ever guessed the simple truth behind the priest's strange stigmata. His kitchen was full of sharp, stainless-steel edges, and he had the unfortunate habit of standing up too quickly.

"None of us understand why it's happening," she said, "and I thought you might be able to tell me, Father."

The priest's face grew solemn. "It's God's commentary."

"God's commentary, Father?"

"Yes, God's commentary on our village."

"Not . . ." She looked down at the circular patterns on the terrazzo floor. "Not His judgement?"

"No," the priest said. "Our village is not worthy of His judgement."

"But, Father, in what way have we sinned?"

He thought for a moment. "They are not real sins. They are merely faults."

"So the torsos, the hands, the teeth, the jaws . . . They are all God's commentary on our . . . faults?"

The priest nodded and at the same time closed his eyes.

"And . . . what are our faults, Father?"

He opened his eyes.

"Restlessness, a love of secrecy, parsimony, loneliness, an inability to learn other languages, an addiction to nicotine, irritability, indecisiveness, misanthropy, a refusal to learn from past mistakes . . ."

The woman was staring at him.

"Those are our faults, Father? All of them?"

"And many more, I'm afraid." The priest smiled. "Those are just my own."

Know a man by his reaction to body parts found in fishing nets. That seemed to be the moral of this story. The tobacconist had disappeared, carrying with him a forever guilty conscience. The mayor had taken fright, terminating countless languid siestas in other men's bedrooms. Little Flame had stepped from a crate of empty Peroni bottles into eternity, having misinterpreted the watery symbolism of dreams. And the local priest had attributed everything to the peccadilloes of a small fishing village on the southern coast of Sicily, thus demonstrating a rather limited, medieval view of the world. But these weren't the only reactions. People stopped gossiping; and gossip, in our village, had always been a good thing, a sign that other lives were worth prying into. They stopped eating red mullet and sardines. They stopped dreaming – Little Flame's had been the last. They even stopped hanging anatomical ex-votos from the miraculous cross, as these miniature body parts too closely resembled the real thing. Indeed, the cross itself stopped being miraculous. Beautiful women spurned ugly men, deaf-mutes remained silent, insomniacs sleepless, and illiterates ignored full moons and frangipani trees. Things had become so intolerable, the culpability of our shared secret so stifling, that we were almost relieved when, one day earlier this year, a stranger got off the bus from Palermo and started asking questions about body parts being found in fishing nets.

The stranger, it turned out, was a journalist working for *Il Tempo* in Rome. Two days before, a fisherman from another village just down the coast had pulled part of a disintegrating ribcage out of the sea. The ribcage was still clad in a padded jacket, and in the jacket's pocket there was a plastic identity card. The fisherman had informed the police; they had contacted the coastguard; and one of the coastguards had called *Il Tempo*. On his first day in the village, the journalist, Pietro Salgado, told us this. He said he was investigating rumours of other body parts being washed ashore in our area. Did we know anything about these remains? One after the other, everybody in the village said no – no, they didn't. The only things they had ever pulled from the sea were red mullet, sardines, and a black Christ on a black cross. But the journalist didn't give up. He kept asking the same thing in slightly different ways, changing the words, inverting the clauses, searching for the right way to phrase his unanswerable question.

Although some of us have our theories, nobody knows who finally gave the secret away. Some say it was Alessandro Vieri, the fisherman who had found the woman's torso almost a year before and been haunted by his discovery ever since. When he closed his eyes during the day, he could still see that festering, blistered thing hanging in his net, contaminating the cod and squid and red mullet and sardines. And sometimes at night, when he looked at his wife's body, he would see the same decay – her skin peeling away from her bones, her organs shrivelling, her breasts reduced to a cluster of ducts, like the seeds of a passionfruit. Some say it was the mayor, impatient to resume his philandering; others that it was Little Flame's father, mourning the loss of his daughter to a dream; still others claim it was the priest, Father Giovanni Lojacono, who felt that God's commentary had gone on long enough. Whoever it was, though, they certainly opened the floodgates. For almost a year, nobody had said anything about the curse of the human remains. Now they talked to anyone who would listen – and that person was Pietro Salgado. Stories multiplied, feeding on themselves. Stories of heads falling off bodies and hands moving of their own accord, some playing piano scales in the fish guts. Stories of practical jokes, of disembodied feet found in people's shoes and heads propped on lampposts. Stories of the same torso being caught three days running, of fingers being discovered inside fish, of two corpses found holding hands. The journalist quietly listened to all of this, and when we had finished talking, in the sudden, eerie silence that followed, it was his turn to say nothing.

According to Salgado's article (*Il Tempo*, 23 February 1997, p. 12), the plastic identity card found with the ribcage had belonged to a young man from a village called Bou Hadjar. This was a village, not dissimilar in size

to ours, located on the coastal plains of northwest Algeria. The young man's name was Khaled Alaoui, and he was seventeen years old. Alaoui had been one of two hundred passengers who had each paid a lifetime's savings to board an old freighter, the *Haji Ali*, bound for our auspicious country, with its gallerias as big as cathedrals and its squares named after the heroes of the Risorgimento. As the freighter approached the coast of Sicily, however, after four days at sea, the crew had forced the migrants into a smaller boat designed to hold less than half their number. The smaller boat, a boat with no name, was unable to support this weight. Although they threw their belongings overboard, and some clung to the side of the departing *Haji Ali*, it sank within minutes. If you have read Salgado's article, you will know that roughly one hundred and seventy-five people drowned that night, surrounded by old wedding photos and ghostly white shirts and floating Qurans.

For almost a year, we had kept this secret – silently returning the bodies, the sons and daughters of this distant village, to the sea. Why had we kept quiet about it? It's sometimes difficult to remember the reasons. Something about a plague of police, about impounded equipment. Something about questions and witnesses, about losing perfectly good fishing days. Of course, this curse wasn't even a curse. It had nothing to do with missing wives or sly infidelities, nothing to do with drowned fiancés or divine commentaries. It had nothing to do with us, other than the fact that we were the ones who found these remains. These human remains.

Last night, somebody forced the lock on the church door and stole the famous cross. They took it from its place and carried it down through the streets of the village to the port, retracing its first, legendary journey. But this time there were no seagulls in the sky and no Greek letters. They took it to the very end of the pier, beyond the jostling fishing boats and the nets strung up to be mended, and there, where the darkness began, stopped walking.

There would be no more miraculous cures in Porto Vecchio. No more deaf-mutes reciting poetry, no more odes written by illiterates, no more insomniacs sleeping for days on end.

Facing away from our village, silently, without saying anything, I threw the cross as far as I could into the darkness.

Some places, you see, don't deserve miracles.