

“Act of God”

by Joan Baxter

The wind blasted through the louvres like the cold breath of death, waking Jillian up. The red numbers on the radio alarm flashed—3 a.m. A crack of lightning coincided with the thunder and a gust of wind that shook the house. Sheets of lightning thrashed at the sky.

Then the power went out. No more red flashing lights to tell her what time, no light to remind her what century it was.

She lay awake, suffocating in the dark, listening to the storm recede, disappointed that it had not unleashed its torrential rains on Talon. The harvest would fail if the rains didn't come soon. She had asked the women farmers with whom she worked in the villages what they would do then. “We will suffer,” they said. “Sometimes when God has given us too many gifts, He has to take some back, so we will know how to suffer.”

The blackness was complete. She dreaded the depth of the night here. It crowded her, brought fears and doubts. What if the people really hated her, the foreigner come to “help” them? What did those smiling market women really think of her? Did her African co-workers on the rural credit project secretly resent her being there, collecting a salary ten, fifty times higher than theirs, money her country was ostensibly giving to theirs? Was this guilt a Western medicine, a placebo to replace real suffering?

She wondered what lay behind the smiles of her counterparts on the project. Had all the friendly village women welcomed her to their country with open arms only to shut her out of their lives?

The neighbourhood cocks were silent—even the sounds of the night insects were muted as though the crickets were downcast by the betrayal

of the storm that came without rain. The doubts and undefined fear kept her awake until dawn shone its faint grey light through the windows.

In the kitchen she turned on the tap to fill the kettle and nothing happened.... Another water cut. Water cuts threw her into confusion - disrupted the routine that permitted her to fabricate a sense of belonging here. The power was still off and the refrigerator was already defrosting on its own, leaking water onto the kitchen floor. Power outages soured her mood the way they soured the milk in the silent refrigerator.

She searched for batteries for the radio and found only an empty package. Threw it on the floor in despair. That meant no morning news. Without those short-wave newscasts from world capitals, the isolation grew. Detached, dispassionate voices reading news helped her remember a world where she had once belonged.

She slammed the kettle into the sink. “No power. No water. Do you want me to die in this... hole?” She was shouting now. She wanted to fill the silence, the loneliness, the vacuum in the house with her rage.

She put a hand over her mouth. What if someone was passing? A watchman perhaps, going home from his night's work? What stories would start to circulate? “White madam be lunatic-o, and proper.”

If she complained at the office about the lack of power and water, people would commiserate. Bukari, her driver, would say, as he always did, that the water and sewerage corporation was making some extra money again by shutting off the pipes so that the Talon water mafia—the men who owned tanker trucks—could sell water to people and “grow fat.”

He told her that people in Talon could always go out to fetch water at Independence Valley. That was the name they had given to a half finished two-storey warehouse on the outskirts of town. It had been started under the country's first president after independence. "But then the money was finished like always because the Big Men chop it," he told her. "Underneath that building, there's water. They wanted to store grain there, it was going to be a silo. Now it's just full of water from the rainy season. It is not good water, but the people go down there whenever the water is off. It's not nice, the stairs are steep and the girls fear the place."

Bukari was the one who recommended and then found a water tank for Jillian to keep on her compound for these emergencies. But Bukari was a rebel, someone who, at least in his mind, tackled the criminals who were the authorities. When she asked Mary, who cleaned and washed twice a week for Jillian, about the water shortages, Mary would shrug and smile and say, "It be an act of God, Madam. God no be blind. He see what awful thing people do nowadays-o. So he send the storm, but the rain do not fall."

Jillian picked up the kettle, slipped on her flip-flops and went out into the grey gloom of the early morning. Dark clouds scudded past on the dawn breeze. Above them was the pale blue promise—threat—of another sunny day. She longed for a week of rain, the kind of weather that made people back home complain because it spoiled summer barbecues and days at the beach. She walked around the house to the water tank that was settled unevenly on four bricks behind the garage, mentally thanking Bukari for his foresight and ingenuity. She fiddled with the lock on the faucet, thinking that if things worked here—if the water corporation provided people with water as it was supposed to—she wouldn't have to lock the faucet on the tank to keep all the women in the neighbourhood from helping themselves. In fact, she wouldn't even need the tank.

There were so-called experts out in the villages working on wells and dams; in town, where there was a water system, it didn't work because of corruption and neglect. So why did *she* feel so guilty? She had been fighting the guilt since she came a year earlier. But the only defence she had against guilt was anger, and that didn't help.

She tossed the padlock to the ground and squatted to fill the kettle.

"Morning, morning, Madam."

Aisha, the tomato girl, was standing a few feet from her, smiling. The metal tray of tomatoes on her head dipped as she bowed. Jillian wanted to tell her to go away. Normally she rather liked the visits of the tomato girl, who came most days in search of a few coins in exchange for a few tomatoes. But right now Aisha irritated her, standing there in her rags, cloaked in need.

"I don't want any tomatoes this morning," Jillian said. Aisha grinned.

She understood almost no English. She lifted the plate of tomatoes from her head and began to select the best ones, firm as Madam liked, from the little tomato pyramids arranged so neatly on the tray.

"Fifty fifty," said Aisha, holding up four tomatoes.

"Okay," Jillian said finally, kicking the tap closed. "Give me two piles. For one hundred coins." She went inside, put the kettle on the stove, lit the flame, then searched the basket of odds and ends on her table for a hundred-coin note. She tried to make out the face on the bill, but the brown note was caked with grime—she wondered which of the country's leaders it was.

She was studying the note as she came around the garage, looked up in surprise when she heard the sound of water running and saw Aisha squatted beside the tank.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Jillian shouted.

Aisha looked up, startled. She leapt away from the water tank and upset the jug she had been holding under the tap. She and Jillian stared at the yellow plastic jug that had once held motor oil. It lay on its side and vomited the water out in glugs that sounded human.

“Watah, Madam,” said the girl, timidly.

“No water,” Jillian said.

“No watah,” said the girl, pointing across the main road to her neighbourhood of mud and thatch huts.

Rage flared inside Jillian. It was not reasonable, but rage never was. It moved away from the small and fragile girl, snarling like a fanged beast as it turned back on itself at its source somewhere deep inside her. There was something new and dark and awful in there, in her gut, more malignant than cancer.

She picked up the padlock and snapped it shut on the faucet. The girl flattened herself on the ground, flinging one arm over her head in self defence. Jillian’s rage evaporated; shame flooded in, nauseating her.

She sighed. “It’s not that I don’t want to give you water, Aisha,” she said, trying to sound gentle. “But I can’t give water to everyone. I know you need water, but if I give you water, I have to give everyone water. You should all march to the sewerage corporation and break it down. As long as you can come to me, the real problem will never be solved...”

The girl was crawling away from her, trying to get the tray of tomatoes onto her head and to retrieve the water jug at the same time.

“No, don’t do that. It’s okay. I’m sorry.” Jillian moved towards her, wanting to make amends, to stroke the girl’s small bony shoulders that poked out through gaping holes in her pink T-shirt. But Aisha

lunged out of her reach and started to run. Tomatoes rolled off the tray, and the empty water jug swung from her hand as Aisha ran towards the gate.

“Come back, I’ll give you some water,” Jillian said, but the girl was already through the gate and across the road, too far away to hear. Jillian picked up the fallen tomatoes, cradling them against her stomach, and wondered what had happened to her, when she had become so hard.

The power came on at dusk, but the water was still off when she got up the next day. She listened vaguely to the morning news from former Yugoslavia. Did she care what happened in Herza-something? What world *did* she belong to?

Then she headed out for a day in the villages, where she would explain, again, the credit system and how the repayment had to be made. The money, even the few dollars the women’s groups were allocated, always came with rules attached.

On the way home that evening she engaged Bukari in another discussion about local corruption, asked him how the water corporation could get away with the deliberate water cuts.

“They’re just wicked people,” he said. “They want to chop our money, that’s all.”

“But why don’t the people do something about it?” she asked. “I mean, demonstrate, or...”

He didn’t allow her to finish. “The police will shoot us or arrest us. They always do.”

She thought that over, wanted to reply but couldn’t find anything to say. Instead she stared out the window at the crumbling mud houses, leaning on each other, one after the other, home to thousands. Stones were laid in rows on top of the sheets of tin roofing to keep them from blowing off. The rusted heaps of tractors, the rusted containers and the wrecks of cars made her angry at her own world that foisted machinery, doomed to

break down, on the country and turned it into a junkyard. Discarded plastic bags, in which peddlers sold water, were caught up in the dust devil ahead. Mangy dogs loped across the road with its valleys and humps, not a road at all any more. Gangs of boys, bare but for scraps of cloth that were once shorts, chased tires they propelled with sticks. They were laughing, and they waved as she passed.

She noticed that the concrete skeleton they called Independence Valley looked deserted. “There doesn’t seem to be anyone fetching water there, Bukari. Does that mean the water came back on?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Three girls fell in yesterday. They were fetching water from below and there was some pushing because the stairway is very narrow and they fell in. One of them couldn’t get out. So no one will go there now.”

“That’s terrible,” she said. Jillian turned around to look again at the abandoned half-finished building in that gravel wasteland, but her view was obscured by the cloud of red dust their Land Rover¹ left in its wake.

The next morning, she was up early to watch the sun splash light and early heat across the compound. She ran from the kitchen when she heard the “Morning. Morning!” She tore outside, barefoot, to catch Aisha and make amends for her behaviour two days earlier.

It wasn’t Aisha. This girl was smaller, even thinner. The plate of tomatoes looked as if it could squash her. Aisha’s junior sister perhaps. “Tomato,” said the girl.

“Where’s Aisha?” Jillian asked. “My tomato girl?”

“Fifty fifty,” said the girl.

“Aisha *bene*?” Jillian persisted, trying out one of the few Goroni words she had learned over the past year.

The girl cocked her head to one side and answered in Goroni. Jillian held up her hand. “Wait, I’m coming,” she said, dashing inside to find her Goroni–English handbook.

“Now,” she said, “say that again, *biala, biala*.” Slowly, slowly. The girl repeated herself, slowly. Aisha ... something. Just one word. Jillian flipped through the dictionary, looking for a word that resembled the one the girl kept repeating: *Ofieme*.

There it was. *Ofieme*. “Drowned?” she whispered.

The girl nodded and the plate of tomatoes tipped dangerously. “Fifty fifty,” she said.

¹ A versatile jeep-like vehicle often used in rugged terrain.