

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

March 27 - April 12, 2020

IN OUR OWN BACKYARD - Part 24



When a rare African worm mysteriously vanished, a terrified homeless orphan tried to hide the truth.

HOW HELPLESS AND HOPELESS CAN A HOMELESS CHILD FEEL?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

REPORTING on homelessness is on hold. If the recent Major Disaster Declaration the President granted Governor Gavin Newsom works, Monterey County Fairgrounds will soon host homeless campers. As of Wednesday, the governor was in the process of procuring trailers for counties with the greatest need, and had secured hotel rooms in San Francisco and Los Angeles. No local hotels or motels had offered rooms at deadline time, but Lake El Estero and the Monterey Transit Station were potential temporary self-isolation sites.

Is COVID-19 scary? You bet. Especially for homeless kids like Serena! Here's her fictional story about fear.

Any resemblance to frightened children of any age is not coincidental.

African Butterflies

"Which of you has my pet?" Father Justin demanded. "If you have it, speak up now!"

Never in her six years of life had Serena suffered such a tummy ache. She felt like Father Justin's fists were squeezing her middle. The white man who called the girls "lassies" and the boys "lads" had cheeks redder than his thinning hair. She couldn't breathe.

Serena remembered Zulus with painted faces and knives invading her village on a steamy day like this. The priest's green eyes reminded her of the black man in a jungle cat mask who slaughtered her parents with a machete.

Father Justin called the survivors "my children" and gave each mission-school orphan a Christian name. Simbarawani became Serena. "With faith, my children, we'll all survive this hell," he swore. "Sister Teresita will teach you basic English."

Serena was four when she saw her parents beheaded, just old enough to remember how her mother loved to sing, laugh and dance barefoot in the dust, clicking her tongue against her teeth in rhythm. Serena had followed, swaying, and spinning until a part of herself seemed to fly like a butterfly.

“We’ll have no whirling dervish nonsense in this House of the Lard,” Father Justin glowered when he spotted Serena swaying during her first Mass. “The Lard sent me here to save you, not send you to the dancing devil!”

Serena neither spoke nor danced again.

Now Father Justin stood beside Sister Teresita, the wrinkle-faced white teacher from California. His gaze pierced the circle of large eyes the color of teakwood pebbles.

“Which of you has it?” he repeated.

Serena held her breath.

“Father’s sharing a miracle with you,” Sister Teresita stuttered “A worm will transform--perform a tranfir... transgriv... “The c-c-cater-pill..”

Father Justin broke in. “The caterpillar is a rare African, uh. . .” His eyes sought Sister Teresita’s face for help, but the old lady shrugged to indicate she couldn’t remember.

“It’s an African Zimbezi,” he said after what seemed forever. “It transforms into a beautiful creature, like Christ... I want you to witness what Transfiguration means, because that’s what will happen to you when you go to Heaven. But you’ll never get there if you lie. Now who’s got my caterpillar?”

Serena choked as she remembered the fat black, white and yellow-striped worm with two black horns that had been passed around. She was gazing into its twelve wraparound eyes. Then she sneezed. When her eyes reopened, her hand was empty.

“Holy Mary, Mother of G-G-God, p-p-please tell the -t-t-truth,” Sister Teresita squeezed her rosary beads.

No one spoke.

Serena knew she’d swallowed the big worm. She felt its hornlike antennae ripping up her insides.

“Did you take my caterpillar, lassie?” Father asked.

Serena hung her head.

Father Justin’s pink finger poked Serena’s brown shoulder “Look at me, child.”

“Father, sh-sh-she’s shy. She’s st-still recovering. . .”

“I know,” the priest said, moving on with his inquisition.

When no one admitted having the caterpillar, Father Justin made the children kneel in group confession. “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. . .” Serena doubled into a mute knot, like a snake trying to wriggle through the dust. It was the worm, she knew, trying to get away just like she wanted to do.

“Well, the Lard works in many mysterious ways, His wonders to perfarm.” the priest said. “I’d ask you to walk carefully. We wouldn’t want to squash a miracle in our midst now, would we.” He lifted Serena to her feet.

The strange new God of these white people really had her tongue now. She had never eaten a worm before. Grubs, yes. Her mother cooked the swarming soft-bellied sweet white delicacies that melted on Serena’s tongue, but this bitter taste in her throat was like fire.

Serena hardly ate anything that night or the next day or the next.

Sister Teresita would sit by the child's cot and feed her water, bits of fresh fruit, and tiny pieces of meat. Neither spoke.

One day Father Justin whispered to Sister Teresita, "The child's starving to death. You can see it in the way her stomach's bloating like a balloon."

Serena knew the secret truth. The caterpillar had grown almost as big as she was.

"This poor lassie's burning up...it's close, Sister..."

"The last rr-r-rites?"

"Yes, dear Lard..." The priest raised his chin toward the thatched roof of the hut where Serena lay on a cot. Suddenly his green eyes grew wide. "Sure and begorrah! Would ya look at that!"

Sister Teresita's mouth fell open. Serena looked up.

A fat teardrop-shaped green sac was wriggling on an overhead post. "It's a cocoon!" Father Justin gasped as it split open, and a pair of glistening wet black antennae emerged. "Sister, run. Get the children. We've found our missing caterpillar."

The old woman's face shone like the sun. "Why, it's a California Monarch! Praise God," she remembered without a trace of stutter.

As the children gathered to watch Father Justin's miracle, the butterfly stretched its wet wings and dived. Flapping toward Serena, it landed on her finger and looked into her eyes.

The child saw her mother's face flash a broad, loving smile that meant in their own language, "All is well."

Then the baby butterfly flapped its wings.

Serena rose on one arm and begged, "Don't go..."

As if answering, the creature rose like a circling dervish, higher and higher over Serena's cot until it danced through a crack.

Serena's laughter followed it into the jungle, and then she realized her tummy was empty, so she said, "Father, I'm hungry."

That's when she learned green eyes can also dance.

—

Courage, friends. We'll get through this. May the Muse be with you.

###

Photos of Monarch caterpillar (Left) and butterfly (Right) courtesy of Google Free Images.

This column appears weekly in the Cedar Street Times at www.cedarstreettimes.com.

The original version of "African Butterflies" by Wanda Sue Parrott won The Sunny Edition of Hodgepodge Literary Journal's summer 1999 contest.

Contact Wanda Sue Parrott at amykditchenerfdn@hotmail.com, 831-899-5887

Copyright 2020 by Wanda Sue Parrott

