

the drawer

by m. christian rossman

The drawing came into the family just before World War II. Though simple, there is something about it that draws you in. It couldn't have taken the drawer more than a few minutes to sketch it out, but there is something so natural about it. People say it actually speaks to them, though nobody really agrees what it says.

The boy who drew it was actually color blind. He gave it to my great grandmother, who lived alone in the French countryside. What makes the picture so interesting, and valuable, I don't really know. The words written on the back have always perplexed me – *“In the end it is simply a question of lighting.”*

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Bilal and his father lived alone together, in a small cottage several kilometers outside of Bordeaux. Julian constructed the wood and stone structure with the last of his savings, which was not very much, after his teaching post was undeservedly taken away. For several years, Julian raised Bilal with little influence from the outside world, seldom receiving visitors. That changed when rumor of Bilal's talents spread through the City.

Their home was situated on top of a sharp-rising hill, which steepened quickly as the elevation rose. On days when the cloudy mists hung low in the valley, they were high enough that they could see the church spire spiking through the vapors from within the City. This hill commanded a great deal of energy to climb. The crooked upward path was packed hard and pockmarked by both small pebbles and large rocks. But the spring rains would render the path a river

of thick mud, and it was virtually impassable for anyone other than Julian and his son, who were accustomed to the slope, which they traversed several times a day. Their artesian well was at the bottom of the hill, as such wells must be.

The flat area at the top of this peculiar hill could accommodate little more than the cottage, along with a fenced off vegetable plot. There was also a small worn patch for their animals, which consisted of a goat and a few sheep, whose excessive grazing habits left not a hair of natural vegetation on the hill, excepting, of course, the fenced off vegetable plot, which provided Julian and Bilal the good majority of their food. Sometimes they could coax milk from the goat, but not often.

Behind the house was a shallow grave, marked by a plain headstone with two shadowy figures drawn on it. They appeared to be touching hands as they passed by one another.

Living up on this windswept and treeless slope would have been particularly undesirable to most people, considering the daily climbs and open exposure to the elements. Though Julian may actually have held such sentiments, he never uttered a word against the hill. To him there was a sacredness in this place, as to others there was in the far off church whose steeple broke through the clouds.

Inside, the single room was well lit when the window hatches were open, but always quite dim when they were closed. It was furnished with little more than their straw-stuffed mattresses, a table and three chairs, and a wood burning stove, with its chimney pipe running up through the ceiling. It was not infrequent that their goat or one of their sheep would nudge its way in through the door when it was cold outside for some heat off of the stove.

Julian had worked hard to complete construction of this cottage before Bilal was born. In his haste, he greatly compromised the initial plan of construction and employed substandard building technique and unskilled labor. Though latent deficiencies revealed themselves in subsequent years, Julian so valued having a home into which Bilal could be born that the perpetually dripping ceiling and unstable floors did not bother him in the least.

Not only did Bilal come into the world through that cottage but that is also the portal through which his mother, Belleanna was delivered from it. Her death followed a tortuous labor, during which the crude practices of the midwife did little to abate the onset of an infection so severe that in her last days delirium and pain supplanted any joy or relief that might have otherwise accompanied the birth of her baby.

The giving and taking of life in that little cottage was so nearly simultaneous that the spirits of mother and son almost seemed to touch one another as they crossed the threshold of mortality.

On the night his wife died, the wind drove the rain hard against the cottage walls. The thunder claps echoing through the valley below and startling lightning flashes did not move on and abate as usual, but seemed to hover eternally all around the family. Though Julian could have descended the hill to summon the doctor, it would have been pointless, as the old doctor could have never accomplished the ascent up the muddy path. Julian also believed that this was not his screw to turn.

A few burned down candles broke the darkness of the room. The animals were huddled near the new born baby in the warm perimeter of the stove. The acute smells of new life and death within that room would have overwhelmed men of less mettle.

Julian held his wife's hands and touched her face as she closed her eyes and departed. He could not weep. Instead, in between the thunder, Julian heard the far off bells out in the church tower chime.

He calmly turned away from the still body, dipped his fingers in a bowl of goat's milk on the table, and pressed them against the lips of the baby, who was entirely unaware that anything was out of the ordinary.

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Bilal hardly spoke for many years. This did not concern Julian. The boy communicated quite effectively in other ways.

He drew pictures. Thousands of them, if not more. He had an extraordinary ability to transpose what he saw inside his mind onto paper, canvas or anything else which might absorb the mark of a pencil or brush.

When he could not communicate with hand gestures, his eyes, or through the various subtle and subconscious means we have at our disposal, he would simply draw a picture and pass it on to his father. So many were his pictures, and so beautiful and perfect Julian found them, that the inside walls of the cottage were entirely collaged with them.

The outside walls were engraved in permanent etchings, dug deep into the wood with Bilal's rudimentary etching tools. These hieroglyphics, from afar, were hypnotic when illuminated by the low sun beams that often blazed in the evening beneath the clouds and up toward the home. It was not uncommon for some of the villagers to gather at the base of the hill at dusk and gaze up at the structure, as it faded into the darkness of night. The changing light against the etchings intoxicated them.

There was no color in his works, because Bilal could not see color. His drawings were therefore cast only in shades of grey and black. When there was any emphasis on hue, it seemed accidental and out of place. This colorless technique was unlike anything the artists in the City would ever employ, as their masters emphasized the use of brilliant color schemes. Nonetheless, something about Bilal's simple drawings spoke to all of us. Even the empty spaces on his canvas communicated something, as would a brow being furled or a lip being parsed in the midst of conversation.

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Before Bilal was born, Julian had been a professor in the college. In those days, there was a strong thirst for education and professors were in very high demand. They received a salary and stipends commensurate with the highest paid public servants. This allowed Julian and his young wife to live quite comfortably in the City.

More than his salary, Julian valued his position within the college. He cherished the opportunity that it gave him to study the subject matters of his choosing, and he found great joy in sharing his ideas and thoughts with the students. There was no vocation he would have preferred, and that it provided him economic comfort was a miraculous benefit.

However, their comfortable miracle in the City was not long lived. As a result of some undefined political machinations upon the arrival of a new Chancellor, the positions within the University were affected in such a way that his post was eliminated. The reasons, undefined as they were, for the casualty were by no means the result of anything within Julian's control, as is so often the case.

After the prospects of the post reopening disappeared, Julian and Bellanna had no choice but to leave the City. He owned a cottage on some land in the countryside. An uncle had left it to him years earlier. When Julian was first vested with this small sliver of property, he thought nothing of it. He buried the deed in a drawer and the idea of the property in the recesses of his mind. He never visited the place until it became their destination upon leaving the City.

When they first arrived at the property, the sun was sinking below the horizon, and Julian did not see the cottage he remembered standing up on top of the tall hill.

“Where is the cottage Julian?” Bellanna inquired. “Perhaps this is not the hill we are looking for.”

“No, this is the hill. Perhaps it cannot be seen from here, let’s climb the hill, it must be just over the ridge,” Julian replied, with an unsettling smile, knowing that what he was saying was untrue. “Come now, let us climb.”

Upon reaching the summit, Julian could not deny the matter further – truth supplanted his fiction. They saw that the cottage had been denigrated by abandonment and time. Rotted and having fallen in on itself, they were stranded.

That night, with no other destination, they remained up on top of the tall hill. They laid together outside in the soft wind and warm darkness. They spoke little, as the space between words spoke quite enough to them. They listened and they conceived what was to come.

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Building on the top of this tall hill and Julian's dwindling resources slowed construction of the new cottage greatly. Though they worked very hard, the long climb, wet weather and doing much of the work themselves slowed the process. Adding to that, Belleanna was pregnant and as the months wore on her ability to traverse the hill with construction materials was diminished.

In the meantime, they took up residence in a nearby farmhouse, where they rented a room from a widow who had known Julian's uncle. The widow refused to accept the small amount of money which the young couple offered to pay for their stay. Julian promised to repay her.

As soon as the construction of the cottage was completed, they moved into it. The move did not take very long. They had very little.

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By the time Bilal was about 14 years old, so great had his reputation grown for his artistic abilities that from time to time students and professors trekked out to the cottage from the college to marvel at his drawings. Julian knew some of the professors from his earlier life. Some of them had even been his students.

Word spread of the color-blind boy who drew in the countryside. His works, though largely unseen and hung nowhere but within the cottage, were held in the highest regard. Perhaps it was the curious rumor of them which created such interest and value.

Julian always obliged the visitors, and Bilal found them a refreshing departure from his pastoral routine of study and chores – especially when the mud on the path was deep and this overindulgent

bunch struggled to make their way up the hill, arriving with their fashionable outfits covered in mud. The professors offered Bilal professional education and training, and Julian intended to take advantage of this and send the boy away to the University at the appropriate time.

The drawings ultimately peaked the fancy of the Bourgeoisie in the City. It became a sort of contest among this indulgent class as to who could be the first to own one. The problem for this bored herd was that despite their efforts and offers of money, Julian refused to sell or trade away any of his son's drawings. His refusals were polite. He was not one to offend. But he was steadfast in his belief that the boy's drawings were figments of Bellanna's and Bilal's shared spirit. To sell them would corrupt what in his view was pure. Suitors raised their eyebrows when they heard this.

At the height of the fervor over the young man's drawings, Julian received a request to meet with the Chancellor of the University. The Chancellor's letter to Julian was scant on details, but clear in its aim. It requested that Bilal and Julian meet with him in his office at a time and date unilaterally chosen by the Chancellor. The letter also stated that they bring with them a selection of Bilal's most recent drawings.

It had been the arrival of this man, the Chancellor, which set in motion the events which ended Julian's tenure at the University. Now, it was this man who could reinstate him, should his whims so dictate. As the letter foretold, Julian had something he wanted. Bilal's drawings.

It was no secret that this man achieved his chancellorship through his wealthy lineage alone, and not as a result of any qualities or abilities he might have possessed. His holding this position was

further confirmation, as if it was needed, of the manner by which commerce permits certain men to assume positions of power and rank, when it would otherwise be impossible within any naturally occurring system of selection.

Julian did not intend to refuse this audience with the Chancellor, or the request for the production of drawings.

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The cart ride into the City was slow and difficult. It had rained steadily for days, and the mud on the road was thick and deep. So frequently were they required to dismount and help push the cart out of a swampy rut that it seemed they helped the old horse more than it was helping them along their way. Early on in the journey, it became apparent that they would be very late to their appointment, and it in fact may have been quicker, and certainly less strenuous, to have walked themselves into the City, but they could not abandon the poor cart driver who would have been stuck in the mud if not for the pushing by his two water logged passengers. When the cart driver finally arrived at the University, Julian thanked the man and gave him a few coins for his troubles, which the man gladly took.

So taxing and demanding was the journey that Julian did not have the opportunity to talk to his son along the way. He had intended to use the time to explain his cause in going to the City with the drawings. As the cart driver drove off, Julian began to hurriedly speak as they climbed the long stairway to the entrance of the University.

“Do you understand why we must do this, with your drawings?” Julian asked, as his wet clothes hung heavy from his limbs.

Bilal shivered from the cold damp air and turned toward his father. The boy curled the left side of his mouth sharply toward the sky and drew both eyebrows in toward the corners of his eyes. His expression gave Julian pause. They stopped climbing. Julian took both of his son's hands in his and shook them as he spoke.

“Bilal, listen to me, all these years alone, up on our hill, your drawings they speak to me, they are your voice. And they are your ma'ma's voice, for you hold part of her spirit in side of you,” he said, touching the boy's breast. “They are a gift from God. I believe that.”

Bilal said nothing.

He continued, “but, my son, in the cold, in the darkness, when we have no food, I ask myself, how can we go on, hungry, all alone, and with nothing?” He looked down at the stone stairs. The wind whipped against their damp garments.

“So many times, many offers we have turned away. You know that. But, now, my boy, but now, I am so sorry, I have had too much taken away, too much, and now for this tiny sliver of what we do have, I can take back part of what I did have.”

“It's alright if you do, Papa, it's fine,” Bilal replied.

They continued their climb, up through the marble entranceway, and into the maze of snaking halls with hard floors that Julian knew well. Their wet footsteps echoed through the empty air of the building.

When they walked through the stone archway leading into the office of the Chancellor, a clerk appeared from around the corner, expecting them.

“Hello governors,” the clerk cackled sarcastically in a strong accent, “right this way governors.”

He led them inside, into the Chancellor’s oversized office. The Chancellor was looking out the large window with his back to the door as they entered. He was an immense, very well fed man with a tremendous girth. So great was his size that as he turned away from the window, the dark room brightened as his near complete eclipse of the window’s light was removed. As he moved toward them, he removed his pocket watch and looked at it, suggesting his displeasure with their untimeliness.

“Thank you both for coming. It looks as if it was a difficult journey, no doubt,” he said, looking at the pair’s soaked and dirty clothing.

“It was pleasant enough.”

The Chancellor paced across the room, which was no small effort, to move his great girth. He breathed heavily, almost panting like a dog. His heavy chin fell over the collar of his coat so that it appeared he had no neck, and his large cheeks drooped off of his skull toward the floor. Julian and Bilal followed him with their eyes, and said nothing.

“Your son, Bilal, is that his name?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Hello boy.”

Bilal nodded politely.

“My boy does not speak very often, I am sorry,” Julian said.

“Yes, I have heard that, curious indeed, but the boy draws, correct?” He asked sardonically.

Seemingly out of energy, the Chancellor settled into his huge padded chair. “How many years has it been since you held your post in the College of Letters?” The Chancellor asked.

“Many, it has been many years, at least fourteen,” Julian said, his son listening.

“Yes, I was reviewing your papers and I see you were retired from your post upon, shortly after my arrival, yes shortly after.”

“That is true, I remember it well, sir.”

“Yes, you do know that I am presently considering solicitations to fill the only vacancy that I have left in the College of Letters, right now, your old post as it so happens, has reopened.”

“So I have heard.” Julian replied.

“Now, Julian, that brings me to the drawings, the paintings that your boy does I understand they are quite fine, quite remarkable, many people are talking about them.” The Chancellor remarked, motioning to the package Bilal held under his arm.

“They are, yes, they most certainly are. It is a great gift that he has.”

“I see. You know, it would mean a great deal to me to own but a piece, a single piece, of these works, one drawing perhaps.

“I know that many have offered to pay for these drawings, but you will not sell them. What I am offering is different. I will accommodate you in any way my power permits. Anything you like, for just one painting. Money need not change hands, nor should it.”

“And what is it, specifically, sir, you will give in return?”

The Chancellor was irritated by the question, for it would have been unethical for him to openly offer the position within the University to Julian in exchange for the picture. This was one of those transactions that was supposed to occur without being reduced to words. Instead, the meeting of the minds was supposed to occur through innuendo and subtle intuition. But this was not happening.

“As I said, anything you want that is within my power, and it is yours for just a single drawing.”

Bilal removed a drawing from under his arm and handed it to the Chancellor, who took it eagerly, like a child might take a piece of candy or a shiny thing. He pulled it tight against his breast and let out a hoarse sigh. Julian was close enough that he could smell the man’s rank breath.

Bilal’s brow furled and he tightened his lips.

The Chancellor asked, “Now then, what is it I may grant to you? What is it that you would like, one thing, anything.” He said, laughing, the drawing sinking deeper into his enormous torso under the weight of his thick arms.

“Go on then, Julian, let me know what you would like, one thing, say it.”

Julian held both of his hands out and said, “I ask that you return the drawing to my son.”

Enraged, the Chancellor granted the request. He removed the drawing from the drawer and threw it at their feet. Bilal picked up the drawing and left.

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The walk home was miserable, until the rain stopped and the sun came out. They did not talk, but they took turns carrying the drawing. As they neared the hill, they passed the old widow's house, where Julian and Belleanna had stayed when they came out to the countryside with no money. Bilal knew the story, and they left the drawing at the door.

Finis

