

# Love and Death in the Kingdom of Swaziland



An Excerpt

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For

Ana Maria and Speranza

## *Prologue*

Once upon a time in the Kingdom of Swaziland, life was as good as it was going to get. The folk in the country lived in little round houses of mud, sticks, and reeds. They planted gardens and let their cattle wander around. The folk in the city found jobs, ate imported food, drove imported cars on paved highways. On Sundays, they went to church. They laughed a lot. They drank the tap water. In February, everybody got drunk on home-brewed amarula fruit hootch. In the rainy season, it rained. In August, everybody watched bare-breasted maidens perform the annual reed dance. The king would be there, perhaps to pick another wife. The Swazi culture, millennia old, kept everyone knitted together in a handful of vast families. Orphans were genealogically impossible.

They had their unspeakable side: black magic, witchdoctors, social paranoia, chattel-women, abominable sacrifices. They used the same word for like, love, fornicate, and rape. But this culture, dark and bizarre by the standards of the white world, somehow worked to sustain them in a place of thorn bushes, pit vipers, and wars fought with spears and knobkierrie clubs. Seventy percent of the population was rural, and the level of ignorance wasn't advanced much beyond the dark ages. Illiteracy outside a couple of cities was general, beliefs almost prehistoric. Though Protestant and Catholic churches claimed over 80 percent of the population, age-old beliefs ran deep beneath the veneer of Christianity.

For many years Swaziland benefited from the racial nastiness of the neighbor that bordered the kingdom on three sides. When the world refused to do business with the South African apartheid regime, companies from that country set up camp in the little kingdom four hours east of Johannesburg. Though the country was landlocked and without train line through South Africa or Mozambique to the coast, the economy boomed. King Sobhuza II reaped plenty of revenues and used them not only to take good care of himself, his 70 wives, and his 210 children, but to pass out food, sponsor clinics, support schools, fill potholes, and keep cities livable. He worked with the chiefs of chiefdoms to keep people happy. When he dispensed with the constitution the British colonizers had imposed, no one cared. Everyone loved King Sobhuza.

Sobhuza died in 1982, but his successor, one of many sons, was only 14 years old. Two queen mothers ran the country in succession until the boy turned 18. He was in high school in England

when they called him back to be groomed for the throne. In 1986, a week after his eighteenth birthday, he became King Mswati III.

Mswati didn't have much time to learn to be a king. In 1992, drought descended on Swaziland. In 1994, apartheid collapsed, the international boycotts stopped, and the South African companies went home. And then everybody started dying.

# Chapter One

## *The Dust of the Place*

Everybody was dying. That's what Sister Ana Maria de Oliveira said on the phone to her province superior, Sister Diane Dalle Molle, when she heard that the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a.k.a. the Cabrini Sisters, were retracting her mission from Swaziland.

"We can't leave now," she pleaded. "Everybody's dying. *Everybody.*" And she started crying. All the babies she and Sister Speranza D'Ambrosi had delivered, educated, raised to adulthood, and trained for a job were all dying. The work of three decades, a whole generation of people, a little impulse of hope for the struggling kingdom, was wasting away.

Sister Ana Maria said, "All we can do is go out to the homesteads and bring them some food and sit with them while they die. Children are everywhere. What are we going to do with all the children?"

Sister Diane had no idea what to do with the children. She was overseeing missions in several countries, from the United States to Australia to Taiwan. That was in 1997. Average life expectancy in Swaziland had already declined from sixty-something to 56, and projections were tilting down at a Titanic angle.

The Sisters of the Sacred Heart had been in Swaziland for 30 years, maintaining a school and convent near Manzini, Swaziland's largest city, and a clinic in the harsh, dusty outback of the Lubombo district, a parish-based outpost called St. Phillips. Things had been going so well in the country that the Sisters no longer felt needed. The world had more desperate places.

But then Sister Diane got a call from her superior general in Rome. She'd heard of the decision to pull out. She said to Diane, "Don't do it."

And Diane asked, "Why not?"

And the Superior General said, "Just don't."

She had grabbed Diane's heart, but her managerial brain needed a reason.

"I can't give you a reason. We just need to stay if we are ever to do the work that God wants us to do. We have to stay in places that seem impossible."

Sister Diane went to see the situation. She flew into Johannesburg, then took a little plane into Swaziland, then took a car an hour down paved roads, then an hour down a bumpy dirt road. She found St. Phillips above the west bank of the Mhlatuze River, which, in the ongoing drought, often barely qualified as a creek. The mission consisted of a few low buildings that housed a little clinic, some staff, the parish priest, an elementary school, and a high school. The church was a dome supported by concrete arches, built, it would seem, to echo sweet Swazi hymns.



*The old schoolhouse is a kindergarten today. Behind it are the church and the priest's house.*

And there she found just about everyone dying. Ana Maria took her to some homesteads out among the thorn bushes. The average homestead was a small, circular wattle-and-daub house with a reed roof. A fence of stick, stones, and thorny branches might surround the place. A few head of cattle and goats might be wandering around the scrub. A scarred and skinny dog might be sleeping in the dust. A few gristly chickens might be scratching around in search of infinitesimal bits of something edible. The houses had little or no furniture or even room for furniture. Rare was the house without at least one person slowly dying on a reed mat on the dirt floor. At one they found three girls lying on mats outside the house. They were 16, 17 and 18, all in the fourth and last stage of AIDS, all infected by the same man. One girl's uterus was distended from her body and covered with fungus. All three had fungal growths around their mouths and down their throats. Their mother was trying to care for them, but there was little she could do.

Cabrini's little clinic didn't have the technical capability to diagnose what the Ana Maria and Speranza knew to be the problem. Even if they could, they had no way to treat HIV/AIDS. Every day more leathery black skeletons staggered in on their spindly knobkierrie staffs. But treatment

was superficial at best. The best the sisters could do was alleviate some of the symptoms. The people had to drag themselves back home to die.

And it was time for the sisters to go home, too. Anna Maria was 75, Speranza 85.

Diane wasn't one to walk away from dying people. She had to go back to New York to plead for Swaziland, but something tied her to St. Phillips. As she boarded the little plane to Johannesburg, she was still covered with grit. It was even in her teeth. When she pulled her shoes off to shake them clean, she realized that she loved even the dust of that place.

Back in New York, she became more conscious of the oppressive enormity of her job as province superior. Though a nurse by training, she was overseeing 20 hospitals, clinics, and other institutions. Her congregation's hospital in New York – 1,100 beds, 500 employees – was struggling in the industry's maelstrom of regulations, law suits, restructuring, union demands, technology, AIDS, and soaring costs amid widening poverty. She was spending more in a month than the mission in Swaziland could spend in 20 years. She wanted out, and the outback of Swaziland was about as far out as a Cabrini Sister could get. She wanted to go there, she said, to save her everlasting soul. Her work in New York was God's work, she knew, but it felt like she was walking the other way.

Her board approved an extension of the mission. Anna Maria would go back to her native Brazil, Speranza to New York. Diane would replace them, downshifting, she thought, into a simpler life. She was 61. That was in 2004. Life expectancy in Swaziland had declined to 37 and was still dropping.

But Swaziland wasn't so simple. Instead of lawyers, bankers, union officials, consultants, administrators, and government regulators, she faced plague, drought, corruption, decimated families, legions of orphans, endemic rape, black magic, and ignorance rooted in an impenetrable culture. The government, medieval in its structure and its disregard for its people, obstructed any change to any status quo and showed no concern for the wellbeing of citizens. Dr. Henk Bos, the director of laboratories at the Cabrini hospital in Australia, who had been at St. Phillips for a couple of years, had no words of optimism, no illusions of a problem solved or solvable as he handed the mission to Sister Diane. He told she would never be able do what she'd come to do, that the problem was impossible to solve. She didn't know what she was doing, didn't know what she had gotten into. Then he got into the little plane to Johannesburg and flew away.