

Between the Living and the Dead

"They dance with the bones?" I asked.

Vevy, our guide, nodded. I stared as our bus bumped past a crowd of people dressed in swirling robes; reds, greens and blues melting together like a flock of tropical birds. Rainbow tombs with elaborate decoration lined the dirt track - a concrete aeroplane; Grecian columns; hundreds of zebu skulls. A sign that in Madagascar, people invest more in the afterlife than their time on Earth.

The crowd were celebrating *famadihana*. When I looked it up, the English translation was "funeral". But it is nothing like the sombre affairs of the West. Every seven or so years, families gather for a bone-turning ceremony. The remains of their loved ones are exhumed and re-wrapped in fresh linens. Families dance with ancestors, long since passed. The bond between the living and the dead is very much alive. I looked away from the crowd. What if I saw the body? What about dignity? What about solemn handshakes and quiet contemplation?

My grandma's funeral was black, white and grey. The droning chords of Abide with Me played as her closed coffin disappeared into the incinerator. We said our final goodbyes, our grief compacted into a single day. It would have been needlessly painful to open up those wounds again every seven years and let the sorrow bleed out. But, in Madagascar death is not the end. The line between life and death is blurred, like tears bubbling into laughter over home-made rum at *famadihana*.

The subject of death was resurrected at lunch.

"At the end of the river cruise I will point out the *razana* tomb from the boats," Vevy said.

There is no English equivalent of the *razana*. They are dead but still have power over the fortunes of the living. Vevy called them The Ancestors.

"Can we walk up to the tomb?" I asked, thinking of the elaborate sculptures I had seen from the bus.

Vevy lowered his voice.

"It's not easy," he said. "There are sharp rocks and you must go barefoot. It's very high up; a long way to walk with no shoes. The journey must be made with a descendant of the family tomb."

"But it's possible?" I asked.

Vevy nodded.

We glided down the murky river in wooden dugout canoes. Vevy had found a descendant in the village. He sat at the front of the boat in a faded Bob Marley T-shirt and torn red shorts. Untrained in tourism or guiding, perhaps he was a fisherman or mechanic. Vevy had found him playing dominoes.

The boats bumped against the riverbank. We hung our shoes from the branches of leafless trees. Rocks cut my fleshy soles as I struggled up the side of the cliff. The descendant didn't wait. His soles must have been as hard as a zebu's hide from years of barefoot pilgrimage.

We stopped at a hollow in the cliffside. I could see the whole river gorge, tinged pink by the setting sun. The ancestors had a good view. Skulls and femurs spilled out of crooked, wooden coffins. My breath caught in my chest, maybe from the hike, or perhaps from the shock of seeing human remains in the open. The smell of dried leaves and honey-sweet flowers hung in the air; no hint of decay.

In the UK we bury our dead; our skeletons hide under earth or skin. I thought of my grandma's grave at home, in a town that my family no longer lives in. The last flowers to be placed

had wilted and died years ago. In Madagascar you will have terrible fortune if you neglect the *razana*.

The descendant let out a short, sharp call. A cross between a dog's bark and an owl's screech. He began his prayer, almost singing in Malagasy, shuffling from foot to foot. I looked at old ariary notes, crumpled like dead leaves, and rum bottles turned cloudy with age placed by the coffins. My gaze lingered on anything but the unending stare of ancient skulls. Guilt crept into my bones.

At the end of his prayer the atmosphere was church-quiet. I placed some sweets into the wooden bowl as an offering. The primary colours looked childish against the earthy tones. At least they wouldn't wilt. The descendant smiled and said something to me in Malagasy.

"The ancestors have blessed you," Vevy translated.

I felt a shiver of relief.

The descendant showed me along the cliff's edge where more coffins lay open. He tenderly touched the cloth covering the bones, as if tucking in a child. His eyes didn't shy from his ancestors. This was not death, not as I knew it. Hope fluttered through me. Just as *famadihana* is not a funeral, the *razana* are not gone.