

AND COME TO DUST

by Drew Bacigalupa

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Drew Bacigalupa lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His writings have been featured in local and national magazines and newspapers, and for four years he was a weekly columnist of *The Santa Fe New Mexican*. His short stories and essays have frequently won first-place prizes in both the *New Mexican* and *Santa Fe Reporter*. His book *A Good and Perfect Gift* (1978) was adapted to film by Franciscan Communications, Los Angeles, and shot on location in Truches, New Mexico. Other published works include *Franco and Pirata* set in Rome; a collection of essays *Journal of an Itinerant Artist*; and the novel *For Having Offended Thee*.

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Epigraph

**Fear no more the frown o' the great;
Thou art past the tyrant's stroke;
Care no more to clothe and eat;
To thee the reed is as the oak;
The Sceptre, Learning, Physic, must
All follow this, and come to dust.**

—Shakespeare

AND COME TO DUST

I

During the first week of January we moved into a small village just inside the border. The village consisted only of about fifteen sprawling farmhouses, half of which had been commandeered by our military. The houses were low, of a sturdy but ugly stone construction. They closely bordered the narrow, rough dirt roads that twisted through the village and led to the farms and the highway. They had small, shabby gardens to the sides and backs of them, and a few boasted dilapidated barns and storehouses. There was only one store in the village, a bakery, and the military government commanded its proprietor to remain open and to furnish his remaining neighbors with their daily bread.

Our headquarters was set up in a six-room house at a crossroad within short distance of the highway. The commanding officer, his executive and adjutant, and his administrative staff worked here. There were two rooms in the attic suitable for enlisted men's quarters, and I shared one of those with Trapani. From our window, we could look across the road to the bakery, and to the right of that, our officers' quarters. Farther down the road, we had taken over more buildings to be used for mess hall, dispensary, and quarters. Only our headquarters staff remained in the village. The rest of the battalion was scattered at various positions throughout the countryside, and I seldom saw most of my old friends from the outfit. Nights, when tracer-fire from their guns and the beams of their searchlights pierced the sky, I sometimes wondered which crews were at work and how they were doing out there.

I had little to do in the village but pull extensive guard duty. I walked guard and slept at very uncertain hours, this taking up most of my time. Trapani worked with the Sergeant Major, and therefore worked days only, could sleep nights. He was fastidious about our room, always

AND COME TO DUST

straightening up behind me. He managed to get quite a supply of liquor from secret sources and proved to be a good friend. Each night he would bring me gossip picked up while he worked with the Colonel and Major. Most of it was rumors about which he liked to speculate. He also acquired a radio from one of his officers, and we had music at all times in our room. He was tiresomely determined to make that room as comfortable as possible. In addition to the radio, he managed to find two overstuffed chairs to place before the windows, a small writing table for the center of the room, a mirror, and quite a few books. The only thing he couldn't overcome was the strong odor of manure which settled through the whole house; but after all, the entire village was steeped in the odor.

Days, while Trapani worked, if I had free time, I liked to stroll the roads and see as much as I could of the civilians. They seemed friendly, many of them smiled at me. I do not remember smiling back. I know I did not trust them, went nowhere without my rifle. One day I saw some of them placing flowers on the fresh graves of their dead. This time they did not smile, but gave me one long look, then went on about their business. The women were, for the most part, dressed fairly well and quite active. They seldom kept to their houses, remained outdoors most of the day until curfew compelled them to go inside. Then they would post themselves at windows and watch what our men were about. On bright nights we could see their faces peering out at the bombardment in the sky.

Snow fell. Keeping warm became our chief concern but still the civilians would tramp the roads by day. I never knew for what purpose. Possibly arrogance. I used to see one man of about thirty, the only young man left in the village, ride his horse up and down the narrow roads each day. He was not dressed warmly against the weather, but the cold didn't seem to bother him. He sat his horse well, handsomely. He cut a grand, proud figure and was well aware of it. We had been told by our officers that he was an idiot and not to be harmed, but there was little about him

AND COME TO DUST

which looked idiotic to me. I suppose he really was, or he would have been with his own troops long before. In any event, his sole purpose for the daily rides was to antagonize our men. He would not dismount his horse until precisely five minutes before curfew, then would slowly walk the animal to the barn. At one minute before curfew, he'd cross the yard and stand before the door of his house. But not until the village bell tolled the exact hour would he open the door and enter. And all this under the eyes of our guards, only a few paces away across the road. If he had slipped up just once, only once, long enough to remain in that open doorway after the bell had stopped tolling, we were authorized to shoot him on sight. But he never did. He always closed the door just in time.

AND COME TO DUST

II

There was not much privacy in Trapani's and my room as the staff officers and men would wander from their offices downstairs up to the attic. At first they did it merely out of curiosity, but later because they realized what a comfortable room we had and because we afforded them diversion from the boredom of their desks. Someone was in and out all day. Trapani complained that they cluttered up the place, but I didn't mind. If I were sleeping, I'd sleep too soundly for anyone or anything to disturb me; if I were not, someone in the room annoyed me not at all. I'd long since given up all illusions about privacy in the army.

One morning I was scrubbing myself down, using a bucket, when Captain Davis walked in. We had no tubs or showers at the time and had all taken to these bucket cleansings as the only means to keep from becoming lousy. We called them whore baths, and Captain Davis used the expression now, laughing at my awkward maneuvers to get fully rinsed. I had squatted, precariously, over the bucket and was scooping up great handfuls of water that were intended for my stomach and groin. Most of it managed to hit the floor. I reached for a towel and began to dry myself.

"Whore baths," repeated Davis, laughing. "Where in hell do you men pick up such apt terms for everything?"

"Don't tell me you haven't seen the little ladies clean up after each session over here," I said. "'Fraid I have, 'fraid I have," said Davis. He was a small man, slightly under medium height, lean, hard of body. I'd heard he was in his early thirties, though he looked older. His complexion was flushed and splotchy from excessive drinking, and there were tight, hard wrinkles all over his face. He had large dark eyes, a straight short nose, full soft lips. His hair was combed as a small boy's, parted on the side, brushed flat against his head. He was cheerful most of the time, and

AND COME TO DUST

would have presented a more pleasant countenance except for the tell-tale scars of dissipation. He was more popular with the enlisted men than with his fellow officers.

He went to the table while I dried myself, began to examine the books Trapani had stacked there. "Mind if I borrow this?" he asked, holding up a collection of Thurber stories.

"It's yours."

"Might have time to read it," he said, dropping into one of our chairs by the window. "If the Colonel ever decides to give me five minutes rest."

"Busy down there?" I asked.

"Going around in circles. How about swapping places, Drake, letting me walk guard while you straighten out Intelligence below."

"Not a chance. I love my work."

He turned his attention to the window, and I saw his eyes scan the skies. Many planes had been coming over since the Bulge in our northern lines developed, but this day there'd been no sign of any. The skies were gray, a few snow flurries had fallen. "Maybe we'll get some rest tonight," the Captain said.

"Maybe."

I checked the small stove in the corner of the room, loaded it with more coal and opened the draught. Trapani had a bottle of burgundy under his bed, and I decided to down a few drinks before it was time to walk guard. We had two large decorative steins on our table; I offered one to the Captain.

"Don't mind if I do," he said.

I poured my own wine, then handed him the bottle to pour his. I sat in the chair opposite him and watched him drink. He closed his eyes as the wine went down.

"It's good," he said. "Where'd you get it?"

"Trapani gets all supplies around here. Some of his buddies in B Battery liberated a distillery last week and had this sent back to him."

"He has excellent friends."

AND COME TO DUST

"Yes."

"You have a nice set-up here. Most of it Trapani's work?"

"Not mine. He likes his comfort."

"I wasn't joking, Drake, when I said I'd like to swap jobs with you. What more could you want -- this comfortable room, very little duty (although, I'll grant you, walking guard is none too pleasant), and few, if any, heavy responsibilities."

"Right. I found a home in the army. And I wasn't joking when I said I'd not care to swap."

"You know," he said, "back in the States, I worked hard for my commission. Thought it would mean everything. Now I find I don't want it."

"You do your job well. Don't let rank bother you."

"It's not the work itself. It's what I'm missing. What you boys have. What you and Trapani have, what two of you always have. They way you get along. Have you ever seen officers of this battalion work and live together as well as you men do."

I had not.

"I miss not having good comrades, Drake," the Captain continued. "I don't like being the black sheep on their roster."

"They're jealous of you. They envy mostly all those good times you have behind you in England and France."

"Envy me! I doubt it. I'm continuously referred to as their resident drunk and whore master, and I'm certain the Colonel will have me transferred at the first opportunity."

"Perhaps transfer would be better for you. Have more wine."

"A little. And remind Trapani that I can get a bottle of cognac for him if he wants it." The Captain began to speak of the war, of our bad losses in the Bulge, of reports that prisoners were being murdered in the snow there. I had hoped the wine would lift his spirits but it did not. I didn't feel like listening to war talk, and he sensed it. "Okay, Drake," he said, "I'll not bore you any longer. Must get back to work, anyway."

AND COME TO DUST

I watched him rise listlessly from the chair and walk wearily to the door. I heard his tired tread on the stairs. Then the voice of the Major boomed out. "Davis! Where the hell've you been? We've been looking all over for you. You better get some goddamn work done today." I took another swallow of wine.

When Trapani came in at noon, most of the wine was gone. He looked at the bottle, then eyed me critically. "Why didn't you come to chow?" he asked.

"Wasn't interested. What'd you have?"

"Dehydrated eggs, dehydrated potatoes, peas, apple-sauce."

"Sounds great."

"Delicious."

"Still snowing?"

"Yeah. And you're on guard duty soon."

"Let me forget."

"Lay off the wine. You don't want brass smelling it on you while you're on duty."

"Pour me a little more, will you."

"Pour your own."

I was lying down, my arms propped behind my head, and I watched him move about the room. He checked the stove, lowered the radio, reached for a broom to sweep up.

"Leave it," I said. "I'll do it later."

"You do everything later. Nothing now."

He swept furiously, and I lost interest. I closed my eyes and listened to the radio. Music from the American Network in Paris, new music of the States with which we weren't familiar, popular music that was popular over there while we were over here. I'd liked to have heard some of the older tunes we all knew.

Trapani's bed squeaked, and I looked over to see him stretched out on his back. He sighed heavily. "Ah," he said. "This is more like it."

"Go to sleep," I said. "I'll wake you at one o'clock."

"Yeah, I know. At one o'clock you'll be as sound asleep as ever. No thanks, Drake, I'll wake you."

AND COME TO DUST

I wished he would sleep. His Sergeant Major kept him busy. It was no easy job doing administrative work in a large outfit like ours. Trapani constantly complained about the endless stacks of War Department forms, the inevitable red tape, the incomplete files and incorrect records. He was thoroughly prejudiced against the US Chief of Staff.

Trapani was an Italian-American, a little guy from Milwaukee. There was a strange dark melancholy handsomeness about him; and though he was one of the most cheerful men in the battalion, his sensitive features made him look perpetually troubled and sad. When he smiled, he was a different person. I liked to see him smile. His parents and all their children were American-born, but that hadn't spared him racial persecution. Trapani used to say: "Wop! That's what I've been called all my life -- after two generations of the family in America. Wop at school, wop at work, wop everywhere and by everyone until I was ready to be drafted into the army. Then suddenly I'm as good as every other American. Then we're all good Americans, white and black, gentile, Jew -- all the same when it comes to cannon fodder."

I stopped thinking about Trapani, went to sleep. At one o'clock he woke me. "Get up, *Bambino*," he said. "You'll be late for duty."

I closed my eyes, inviting sleep again.

"Drake, move your ass. And dress well, it's cold out there."

"Okay, Pani. Go away and leave me. I'll be up in a minute."

"No, you won't. You'll go to sleep again."

Of course he was right. I could feel the wine claiming me and didn't want to go out into the cold. I caught the faint strains of *Stardust* from the radio. More like it, the kind of music they ought to play.

Trapani raised me to a sitting position and put a lighted cigarette in my mouth. "Want a drink?" he asked.

"Why not. It'll wake me."

He handed me the stein with more wine in it. I drank it

AND COME TO DUST

down. "If you get too cold out there, stop by the office and I'll give you a shot of brandy."

"Okay. Thanks for waking me, Pani."

"I'm your nursemaid, *Bambo*. Are you wide awake now?"

"Wide."

"Then I'll get back to my illustrious desk."

"See you later."

"Ciao."

He picked up some waste papers from the floor, threw them into the fire, and went back to work.

III

Days became monotonous. I walked guard and I read and I slept. The cold crept into my bones so that after two hours in the snowy road, I returned to our room, refueled the stove and lay down to rest. I drank more and ate less. I saw few of the men except the guard reliefs and Trapani. I stopped watching the village Germans.

Trapani worried about me. He wanted to get me other duty. "Anything, *Bambino*, but this consistently walking guard. You have brains, can do other duty. Why not let me try to get you into Communications or Intelligence. You like Davis, could work with him."

"No, Pani. Thanks, but no."

I couldn't convince him that I did not want other duty, couldn't make him understand that I was through with the war, would take no initiative in it.

"Through! What the hell does that mean! You're in it for as long as the rest of us. Why freeze your balls off walking guard when I could get you behind a warm desk somewhere."

"I'm through, Pani. I was through after Normandy. It's not my show anymore."

"But you're in it -- here! -- one way or another."

"Yeah. But I don't have to think about it. I don't think about it when I walk guard."

"What do you mean it's not your show?"

"Have you ever stopped to consider how many of us do useless tasks, how millions of us in the army do a day's work without effect on the goddamn war one way or another?"

"We have to have a rear echelon. Do you want us all to be infantrymen, Drake?"

"I don't want anything. I'm just through with it."

He would let the subject drop only to bring it up again a

AND COME TO DUST

day or two later. He worried about me a good deal.

One morning he came up from the offices with news. I was sleeping, and he sat on the bed, put a cigarette in my mouth and forced me awake.

"*Bambo, Bambo*," he said, "there are women living in the bakery across the road!"

I spat out the cigarette and tried to go back to sleep. He sat me up in the bed.

"Listen," he said. "I tell you there are women in the bakery."

"So?" I said. I wanted to take a swing at him for waking me.

"These are *women*, two of them, sisters maybe."

"So?"

"They don't look hostile to American GIs."

"How do you know all this, Pani?"

"I was in the bakery just a while ago. I saw them. I smiled and one of them smiled back. She was very pretty, the other not too bad."

"What were you doing in the bakery?"

"The Major has to check their rationing of the bread once a week to see that it's fairly distributed. This morning he asked me to come along. I had to take the name of each civilian and the amount of bread he was given."

"Who else lives in the bakery?"

"Only an old man. Probably their grandfather."

I laughed at him. His eyes were merry and he was smiling, the sadness gone from his face. "Your Latin blood churning?" I asked.

"One of them is really quite pretty, *Bambino*."

"Okay. We'll have to work on it."

"We'll have to work fast before the officers beat us to it."

"Okay. We'll work fast."

Later in the day I saw one of the women. My post was before the entrance to Battalion Headquarters and up and down the road so far as I could see. The bakery was directly opposite me. There was little activity over there. The bread

AND COME TO DUST

ration had been given out earlier in the day and no one came to the store now. I didn't even see the idiot and thought he'd not brave the biting cold until the hour of curfew drew nearer. I watched the bakery for a while but then lost interest. If anyone were watching me from behind the dark windows, I couldn't have seen them anyhow. Then, shortly before my relief appeared, I heard a creaking sound and looked up to see one of the second-story windows across the road being flung open. A young blonde woman leaned over the sill and emptied a pail of water into the road. She paused for a second and smiled at me. I smiled back. She drew in the pail, shut the window and there was only the blackness to look into once more.

I tried to remember what she'd looked like. I could remember nothing but the blonde hair and the smile. It seemed to me that she had smiled out of sympathy for my lonely vigil in the cold. I wished she'd return to the window but she did not.

I reported this to Trapani. "Good work, *Bambo*," he said. "Now we must find a way to speak to them."

In the mess hall that evening, I stopped to speak with Captain Davis after chow. I asked if he'd seen the women in the bakery. "They're all the talk in officers' quarters," he said. "But it's dangerous, Drake."

"Do you know their names?"

"No. I don't want to know them. All I need is for your Colonel to catch me violating the non-fraternization rule now."

"Pani and I would like a try at it."

"It's your business, Drake, but be careful. No one will be able to help you if you get caught. Fraternization with Germans can mean court-martial."

"We'll take the chance."

"As you will," Davis answered. "Only be cautious. And good luck."

