

PARDON-SPEAKING BLOOD, a short story

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MICHELLE BUTLER HALLETT

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Pardon-speaking Blood

O, pardon-speaking Blood!

—Albert Orsborn, “I have no claim on grace,” song 211, *The Song Book of the Salvation Army*, 1953 edition.

Snow filled Salvation Army Major Geoffrey Feltham’s footprints and obscured the trail he left as he walked home for supper. He was chilled, worn and hungry. His day had begun with administrative meetings alongside Dr. Cassius Noble at the St. John’s Grace Hospital, then rapidly passed with pastoral visits and paperwork. Even his copy of the new 1953 *Song Book* tucked in his coat pocket felt like a burden. He scowled. *Buck up, Feltham. Supper and tea is all you need.*

Geoffrey took three steps into his small rented house on Penneywell Road and tripped over the telephone cord, which was stretched taut to a closet. Behind the closet door, his son Daniel murmured to his fiancée. Daniel’s four sisters were taunting him, Olive and Myrtle, the two teenagers, leading the chant, Beulah and Anne, the two schoolgirls, echoing response. Geoffrey glanced at the closet door in sympathy. Daniel was shy. That he’d fallen in love was no surprise. That he’d proposed was a delightful shock. The girls

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made kissing noises, called out about love and marriage, asked what kind of wedding cake Daniel wanted. Geoffrey was about to rein it in when his wife, Catherine, ordered the girls to set the table.

—Honestly, great girls like you, and I’m doing all the supper work myself?

Recognition and guilt: Geoffrey watched the immediate effect on his daughters. They scowled and backed away from the closet door, Anne asking, as usual, why Daniel was exempt from housework. This inspired debate.

Catherine banged a pot. —No sulking.

Geoffrey recalled travelling to their posting at Riddling Harbour, when Myrtle was five weeks old. Catherine, thin and yellow, was months from recovery. She barely opened her eyes, curled in a hammock with Myrtle most of the voyage, willing herself to stay perfectly still even if the water would not. Each pregnancy a trial, joy and duty tangled up in nine months of misery and bile. Geoffrey, holding the little hands of Daniel and Olive, had whispered to Catherine how sorry he was. Catherine had said only *No sulking*.

Now Geoffrey knelt down and beckoned the younger daughters to him. His voice soothed, as it had soothed people all day. —Girls, girls, settle down. We all have our duties. And your mother is a wonderful woman.

The girls sighed.

Geoffrey stood up and knocked softly on the closet door on his way to his bedroom. —Daniel. Supper.

When Geoffrey returned from hanging up his uniform jacket, the serving dishes were on the table. He peeked under a lid, a transgression that earned everyone but him a tongue-banging from Catherine. Creamed parsnip, one of his favourites. Butter-fried chicken, the skin crisp and delicate. Carrots tossed in butter and pepper. Catherine had gone to quite some trouble, and Geoffrey was more grateful than he could say. It was nearly eight o’clock, yet everyone had waited for him. He smiled at Catherine, who lowered her

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chin and smiled back, brown eyes warm. Geoffrey wanted to snatch the moment, hold it in front of his daughters: *See? There is the woman I fell in love with.*

But the girls' eyes were shut, their heads bowed, as they waited for the late blessing.

Daniel, who always moved as though uncertain he deserved whatever kindness or courtesy was shown him, finally took his seat.

Geoffrey blinked at a vision of his son in a priest's collar and robe. Had they been a Catholic family, Daniel would likely have welcomed the obligation of priesthood. Earlier that year, back in June, Geoffrey had gone for a walk from the Salvation Army barracks on Adelaide Street and ended up near the Presbyterian Kirk. From there he maundered on toward the Catholic Basilica, unintentionally following a young man in shirtsleeves who walked with anxious purpose. Then Geoffrey recognized Daniel and followed him a few minutes more, startled and annoyed when his son entered the Basilica.

Because Daniel was a Feltham.

Yes, Daniel was a musical prodigy, taking lessons from Sister Katherine Dooley. And yes, Daniel was now a steadfast Army bandsman, playing first cornet. But the Felthams has been Salvationists since the first revival meeting in Port au Mal in 1897, when the locals threw the visiting lady officer into a pond and one Aubrey Feltham helped her out. Prejudiced against Catholics? Not at all, but Daniel, like his sisters, had been dedicated to the Salvation Army, and those promises, like Christ's, were sure.

Geoffrey stopped to catch his breath.

Such wide steps at the front of the Basilica, so many doors, and statues at either end. St. Patrick on the left, St. Francis of Assisi on right, not precisely welcoming Geoffrey—their gaze was nine feet high and fixed elsewhere—but daring him. Geoffrey frowned. *Daring me to do what? Question? Harangue? Accuse my son?* Some of Geoffrey's colleagues would take their child's presence in a Catholic church as a gross affront, even a betrayal. Catherine would certainly have words on the issue. And nothing withered Daniel faster than his mother's disapproval. What had it cost Daniel in nerve alone to make this visit?

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And what could Major Geoffrey Feltham's public response be? *Explain my son's diversion, as you call it, Brigadier? I cannot speak for another man. I can only offer that Christ is Christ.*

Hot beneath his uniform, Geoffrey waited another moment, then entered the Basilica.

Quietly. So quietly.

Faint smells. Candle smoke? Incense?

The Basilica, this house of ritual, this apotheosis of Booth's disgust with outward tokens of grace taken for grace itself, of Booth's disdain for symbol instead of meaning, was palatial. The ceilings so high. Polished wooden pews, altar of white stone. The Army barracks on Adelaide Street were draughty and bare, spartan, as suited an army, and built on honest hardkneed petition and self-denial.

Yet Christ is Christ.

Geoffrey spied his son in a back pew, on his knees. Daniel sighed on his prayer and spoke much of it aloud. Geoffrey strained to listen.

Charity?

Chastity.

And Geoffrey had retreated, ashamed of so much at once. *If I cannot recognize when a man is at prayer, then I have no right to set foot in any house of God.*

Butter and pepper. Geoffrey's stomach growled.

He said the grace. —Lord, bless this food which now we take to do us good for Jesus' sake. Amen.

The family's response was still at *ah* when the phone rang.

—Geoffrey? Rowena Shute at Sunset Lodge.

Geoffrey glanced back at the table, motioned to Catherine they should go ahead without him.

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Captain Shute continued. —I'm sorry to bother you at home, but Major Pritchett's having a very bad day, and now she's worked up to one of her spells. Could you come round and talk to her?

Geoffrey said he'd be at Sunset Lodge as quickly as the weather allowed. He did not need to explain to Catherine where he was going, or why. She sighed but caught herself, then reminded the children to eat properly, Beulah not too much, Daniel not too little. She put food on a plate for her husband. —It shall be warm in the oven when you get back.

Outside, pulling his collar up and his cap down, Geoffrey considered how it had been several weeks since he'd visited Major Eva Pritchett, and at least four months since her last spell. Eva Pritchett—*the Major*, usually, especially to anyone under forty, and then with proper tones of respect—had long run The Anchorage, a shelter for unwed mothers, and she had been a force within the Grace Hospital. Patients joked they got better for fear of disappointing the Major. Eva Pritchett stood six feet tall, had always made her own uniforms, and until entering Sunset Lodge wore black lace-up boots, as she could rarely find shoes to fit. Like Catherine Feltham, she intimidated many; even more than Catherine, her strong face was usually stern. Yet she'd been beautiful, like the figurehead of a ship, more than one man had said, wistful. Eva Pritchett had feared no drunk, no wife-beater, no wretched weather and no long walk. Dismal stories did not confound her. Unmarried and nearly seventy, Eva was now a permanent guest at Sunset Lodge, having checked herself in one January afternoon. *God bless you, Captain Shute. Bitter cold out. Now could you tell me if there's room? This morning I glanced in the mirror to pin back my hair and said aloud "Who's that," knowing perfectly well at the far end of my mind it was me. I've begun to forget, so there's no going back. Dear God, is this how my girls felt coming to The Anchorage?* Then she'd wept, silently, and Rowena Shute noticed the Major was barefoot.

Geoffrey was half a mile gone before he realized he'd forgotten his galoshes. His shoes leaked.

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Rowena Shute took Geoffrey's coat. —You look half frozen.

He nodded. The walls shimmered slightly, as though he were feverish or dreaming.

Eva Pritchett had her back to the door when Geoffrey entered the room, and her whispers, with Geoffrey's footfall, were the only sounds in the hall. Eva wore her uniform and stockings. Knit slippers were on her feet. Her black hair had gone coarse steel grey, but it was still pinned back in practical modesty. In her whispers, she addressed someone the way Catherine sometimes addressed the girls, names strung together.

—GabrielRaphaelMichaelUrielEffie.

Geoffrey spoke. —Good evening, Major Pritchett.

She turned, startled. Then she adjusted her spectacles, which had slid to the end of her nose. —God bless you, Major Feltham. About time you got here. I've been muttering archangels. Some contagion of popishness. Tea?

—Please. And how are you keeping, Major?

Eva poured from a small teapot into mugs. No steam rose. —Not well today. I've been a bother.

Geoffrey sipped from his mug: stale tap water.

Eva sampled hers, then threw the teapot against the wall as though it were a discus. It smashed. —Is it to much to ask for proper tea? Am I not to be trusted with proper tea!

Geoffrey almost said *No sulking*. —Adam's ale suits me fine, Major.

Eva finally sat down. —There is something dreadfully important that I'm afraid to tell you. It will come back to me in a moment. How is...Heavens. How is your wife?

—Mrs. Feltham is quite well.

Geoffrey wished then he'd had the sense to supply her Christian name, but the Major rarely went beyond surname and rank. Unmarried women were surname only, officers or no.

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—God bless her. She was a Burry. Yes, Catherine Burry. Little too prone to temptations of the flesh. I worried some nights I'd see her at The Anchorage door. Prayed I wouldn't.

Geoffrey kept himself from raising his eyebrows. —Are you thinking of someone else, Major?

—Burry. All proud of her new shoes one day. Each one had a tiny bow on the upper. And her stockings here nearly transparent. You could positively see her ankles and calves. A love of beauty, Major Feltham, including her own. Passionate, too. She came to me for cups of tea and talks of self-denial, before she got married.

Catherine? Bows? On cold nights she wore her black stockings beneath her nightdress. Wait, the bow on the bonnet. One Sunday morning, Geoffrey had caught her fixing it just so in the mirror until it rested prettily near her cheekbone. Seeing her husband's reflection then, Catherine had flushed and walked off, tut-tutting about some mess the children had made. And he'd nearly grasped her round the waist. Wanted to push the bonnet back and kiss her. But no one else. Surely, Catherine had glanced up warmly at no other man. Had she?

—Daniel Feltham is yours?

Geoffrey's stomach fell away. Did the Major know about the Basilica? Or was this another question about Catherine? —Yes. He's engaged now.

—Captain Shute tells me the most wonderful stories about his playing. Cornet, is it?

—Cornet, trumpet, fluegel horn.

—Endless brass. Wind in winter. Call to arms, call to mope by the widow at grey snow.

—Do you think so, Major?

—Effie Dunne, yes. Pardon me, Major Feltham, but the room is full of uninvited guests. I must clear them out. The poor barman tried to close two hours ago.

She stood on her chair, head gracing the nine-foot ceiling.

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—Now then! You’ve had your fill. This honest businessman wants to close shop and go home to his wife and children. Get gone. Go home, the lot of ye.

Gazing up at her, Geoffrey regretted that the Major had never sung solo—a mighty alto in that deep chest. Down the hall, Captain Shute calmed another guest.

Eva Pritchett sat calmly. —Dr. Noble will be by later, probably with another sleeping pill. Normally I argue with him, and he leaves me the pill, my choice. I flush it away. This evening, I may not. He used to look in at my girls at The Anchorage. Did I tell you how I solved my wartime predicament?

—Which predicament was that, Major?

—I ran out of beds. The Anchorage was packed. Girls slept in the parlour. In the kitchen. And still they knocked on the door. As if our own lads weren’t worry enough, then we had the Americans with their broad shoulders and fine teeth. I might as well have hoisted the Star Spangled Banner outside.

Geoffrey chuckled.

So did Eva. —As I said, girls sleeping in the kitchen, two very small ones in my bed, and—

Geoffrey had not heard this part before. —Where did you sleep?

Eva waved away the question. —Well then, I said, this won’t do. So I paid a call on...Mrs. Doe, shall we say. Mrs. Doe had married well, was living quite prosperously, and a few years before, when she was Miss Roe, she’d been one of my girls. Mrs. Doe and I shared a proper pot of tea, no skimping on the leaves—that woman understands how a cup of tea could save your life, God bless her—and I spelled out the trouble. Then I spelled out an answer. *Hire one of the girls as a maid until her time*, I said. *Let her live in your house. And persuade your wealthy friends to do the same. I leave God’s task with you, Mrs. Doe, and I trust you to do the right thing.* And she did. Mrs. Doe placed eight girls, two at her own house. She even helped with the adoptions. Redemption. Yet Paul keeps me awake.

—Paul?

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—Are you not listening to me? Paul to the Ephesians: *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.* In my small eyes, Mrs. Doe merits grace. Will she receive it?

Geoffrey murmured, almost singing. —*I have no claim on grace, I have no right to plead.*

—Orsborn. Made it into the new *Song Book*. Captain Shute brought me one. *Lamp unto our feet...* Forgive me my nonsense. I need mercy, for there are giants in this room.

—Giants, Major?

—*And I must make good my right to be a pilgrim.* That made it, too. About time. No reason for the C of E to have all the best ones. One of the girls at The Anchorage. I failed her.

—Surely not.

—I failed more than one, Major Feltham. Stern, always so stern. Kept them busy. They needed the work, six months or more in hiding. I could have been kinder. But this one girl...Do you remember my father?

—George Pritchett. Indeed I do. An old blood and fire Salvationist, gusto defined. Always wore that scarlet waistcoat.

—Did he ever tell you he saw auras?

Geoffrey recalled George Pritchett telling a young songster in a snowstorm outside the Adelaide Street barracks that she had the most beautiful aura that evening. George Pritchett's voice and words were unmistakable. The commanding officer hushed him. —I heard tell.

—I see them, too. Not always. Yours, for example. Steady glow, like a stoked fire. Glittering a bit when you came in, almost brittle, but it's settled down since. Sometimes I saw them around the girls, sometimes not. At the hospital, whenever a patient's aura went grey, like rainclouds, I'd send word for the family to come.

Geoffrey finished his mug of water.

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Eva sighed. —Effie Dunne came to The Anchorage in '45. Hardly spoke. All the girls talked, especially after the first few days. Friendship in there might never be acknowledged again, and in truth the strongest allies may have hated each other, but the friendships and talking were there. But with Effie, it didn't matter who tried. She said little more than her name. My guess? She was brutalized. But she told me nothing, and I wasn't about to pry it out of her. Her baby...there was no baby. Belly big, milk coming, no baby. Dr. Noble never knew what to make of it. Of course, my girls weren't allowed to give birth at the hospital, and Dr. Noble wanted to bring her there. Hospital would have done nothing. After the labour, Effie had a second aura. Smaller, near her head. She's in the Waterford now.

Dizziness lapped at Geoffrey. If asked to stand at that moment, he'd collapse on weak legs. *Simple hunger, Feltham. Ignore it. He who would valiant be.*

Eva had folded her hands in her lap as though posing for a photograph.

—Two years ago, Major Feltham, I forgot something at the Grace, so back I went and nearly tripped over a man fallen in the street, right outside the hospital, like he'd been trying to get there. Judging by his wheezing, he'd been brewing pneumonia the past week, and the heat of his fever burned through his clothes. I picked him up, tried getting him to walk, but he was far too weak. So I bent down, slung him over my shoulder and took him in. Pneumonia, sure enough. We got him down to 102. I sat with him a while, because clearly I'd been meant to find him. Once, when I sponged his forehead, he laughed. Then he told me his name was Bill Harnum, and he asked, *Am I going to die?* I told him it was not for me to say; I told him nothing of his aura being weak. Then he said, *If I'm going to die, I might as well tell someone.* It had already been a troubling day. My cousin had written to me that she'd gone Catholic, *returned*, she said, and was I not cleaving to delusion? And on the top of her letter, four names, written as a cross: Gabriel, Raphael, Michael, Uriel. She could always madden me. And now a sick man in fear of his soul wanted to confess something. I asked first if he wanted a priest, but he seemed not to hear me. I didn't think Harnum was a Catholic name, but one can't presume. And he told me something he'd witnessed but did

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not condone, but neither did he stop it. A man named Breen, he said, raped a girl named Dunne. Over and over. When Harnum first saw her, she was bound to a bed. How thoughtful, looking after the girl's comfort so. When he saw her again, she'd gotten loose and stumbled out of the house at night, hardly able to stand. Harnum said he caught her, dropped her, then poured rum all over her and abandoned her like refuse.

Geoffrey sighed. —Dear God.

—And I abandoned him.

—Major?

She said it loudly, as though teaching school. —I abandoned him. Too disgusted to sit there a moment longer. I left his bedside, and I walked down the empty corridor so I couldn't hear his little mewls against solitude. Harnum, Breen, Dunne. Were they responsible for Effie Dunne? And that baby, Major Feltham, where is that baby? And where is the justice in my accidental mercy to this fellow Harnum?

Geoffrey waited a while before rebuking the Major. At first he wasn't sure he should; many times, the Major had rebuked him. He said it softly. —Pride.

—There are stars in my blood, glittering like they do in any other woman, and I fill a bed by myself.

—Despair.

Eva scowled. —I did not follow in constancy. I left Bill Harnum sick and alone. If I'd nursed him, visited him, I might have found out more about his man Breen. But no. I judged Mr. Harnum unworthy of my small attention, and I failed Effie Dunne a second time.

Geoffrey had no words for this, so he took Eva's hands: calluses and swollen knuckles. She grasped him hard, whispering the archangels' names.

Then she tore away, as though Geoffrey's touch were somehow improper, and stood up, wetfaced, composed. —Sometimes forgiveness is silent. Sometimes it is delayed. No matter. With you beside me, I can say to the beings in my room, horned and hoofed and in

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the mufti of everyday St. John's, yea I can say to them: Gentlemen, I cling to the Rock, and I will not be moved. But, Major Feltham, please, pray for the strength of my hands.

A man with a sad face knocked on the doorjamb.

Geoffrey wondered how long Dr. Noble had been there.

Dr. Noble straightened his shoulders. —Major Pritchett?

—God bless you, Dr. Noble. About time you got here. I was hoping we might have a word about sleeping pills. Mind the broken glass. Have you met Major, Major...forgive me, I've forgotten your name.

The house still smelled of supper.

The girls had gone to bed. Daniel was in the basement, practising scales on the fluegel horn.

Catherine was sitting up in the front room, wrapped to the chin in nightdress, housecoat and blanket. Her hair was unpinned and flowed over her shoulders. —Is the Major all right?

—She's a pilgrim. She'll find her way.

Catherine went to the kitchen to get her husband's supper from the oven. —She frightened me a bit when I was younger. I do believe she was once jealous of a pair of shoes I wore. Not a delicate woman.

Geoffrey ran after Catherine, grasped her round the waist from behind, leaned down to smell the top of her head. Knees weak, he didn't care his feet were numb, didn't care where Daniel prayed, almost didn't care if Catherine pulled away. Such tiny worries.

—Geoffrey. You're crying.

He buried his trembling hands in her hair. —Love is not delicate. It fights with giants.

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"Pardon-speaking Blood" links to a story in my 2006 collection, [The shadow side of grace](#) (Killick Press), called "Tricks of radiance."