

Washing The Flowerpots

by

Prue Phillipson

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Washing the Flowerpots

“It’s spring! Grandma will be getting ready to wash the flowerpots.” They were all looking at the hills so I shouted it down as loudly as I could from the top of the stone steps. “It’s washing flowerpots time!” They’d got to look at me, not at the hills.

Mum called up. “Get your bare feet off that cold stone, Eric. Dress yourself.” There was cold stone in her voice when she said that, “Dress yourself.”

I shouted louder. “It’s not cold. It’s a warm day. You’ve got to take me to Grandma’s to wash the flowerpots.”

Of course the stone was cold. The sun had only just put long gold fingers over the eastern plantation. But I smelt the change. The change had to be life, not death.

I haven’t been back – I haven’t been allowed to – but I remember well how we would get a day like that one in early March – up there where we lived under the loom of the border hills; a day when the wind shifted from the north west and came like a soft breath from the south east; a day when the snow shrivelled up from the tops and the hills that had been white under sooty clouds shone brown against a blue sky.

“Do what your mother says.” Dad had never shifted his binoculars from the hills. I could hardly see my brothers backed against the side of the barn in the cold shadow. They were in black from head to foot. Furious tears scalded the back of my eyes. They never so much as glanced round at me.

I came right down the stone stairway and stood in the yard. Blobs of mud welled up between my toes like black beads. Mum plodged over in her wellingtons and swung her arm. I fled. I could hear my brothers laughing. I dressed, gulping with anger, and had to come down through the house because my boots were at the kitchen door. There was an old trunk on the landing, the lid up but nothing inside. Behind the kitchen door, burying my boots were two black kitbags, like giant slugs. I kicked then and pummelled them and then rolled them over with all my strength and pulled my boots out from underneath.

Dad was still staring through the binoculars. Mum looked at me. “Eric, Grandma’ll not be washing the flowerpots this year.”

“Forget it,” Dad said, not turning round.

“Why?” They didn’t answer. Mum just looked at me and shook her head. I said, “Because Grandpa died last autumn?” My brothers laughed again. I saw for the first time that they had guns in their hands.

I turned back into the kitchen and tore a hunk off the loaf on the table and scattered it at the door for Hetty, my favourite hen. She came clucking at a run with a whirr of brown feathers.

“Don’t you go wasting that loaf,” Mum shouted at me.

Peter roared, “Let him make Hetty fat,” and he pointed his gun at her. “She’s the one we’re going to eat first.” I made a trail of crumbs into the kitchen so Hetty would hop over the sill and then I slammed the door shut and pressed my back hard against it.

I heard Dad say, “They’re there all right. They’re dug in. Look, boys.”

I put my hands over my ears and thought about Grandma. Nothing, I could swear, would stop her washing the flowerpots. Grandpa had died quietly of a heart attack. He was eighty-two. Grandma hadn’t wept at the funeral, not that I’d seen anyway.

“Best for the old to go now,” she said when I asked her if she was sad. “You’re not old, are you, Grandma?” She just smiled. She was only as high as Mum’s shoulder but she was very straight and her hair was a mix of grey and auburn like rusty iron. She was strong. She always knew what she wanted to do.

When she was ready to spring-clean the greenhouse she would phone Mum and Mum would drive me into town. I'd been washing the flowerpots every year since the year after I was born. That's how important it was.

Grandma called me her resurrection child because I was born on Easter Day. She told me she had all her cleaning done that year before Holy Week so she could look after Peter and Carl while I was born. But the next year she told Mum to bring me to stay and go shopping in the town herself. She was going to clean the greenhouse. I was eleven months old and she put me on a mat on the patio beside the old washtub and I played all afternoon splashing the flowerpots in the water. And I'd never missed since.

Of course she would do it this year. She couldn't put fresh seed in dirty pots with cobwebs in the greenhouse. She gave plants and cuttings that she had raised herself to all her friends and neighbours. "I like to give living things," she said. "I like to spread life." Mostly they remembered to give her back the pots ready for next time.

Each year the games I played with the flowerpots grew more complicated. First they were as simple as babyhood, before I even noticed there were two colours of flowerpots – the black and the brown. Later they became football clubs. And when I could count properly I divided them into sets of eleven to see which club could field the most teams.

I remembered how last year when Grandma had finished in the greenhouse she sat down on a deckchair beside me. "So which club's won this time?" "The browns. They've got thirty-six players. The blacks have only got twenty-eight." "More isn't always stronger," Grandma said. "I'm ready to bag them now so pile them up and I'll show you what I mean." Making towers of them was fun too. Grandma would check they were clean and then she encased each tower in a new bin-bag and tied the tops and stood them in a corner of the disinfected greenhouse till the day she started planting in about mid-April. This time she watched me as I put one pot inside the other, and if she could see a way of fitting them together more snugly she said, "Try that one underneath. It's fat and squat." And so we made our towers as short and strong as possible. "Now let's look at them," she said. I sat back on my heels. The brown tower was taller but the black pots had dovetailed better. A wisp of wind came swirling round the whitewashed walls of the house and the brown tower rocked and tumbled onto the mat. I laughed. "I wanted the blacks to win."

"They work well together. They're in harmony," Grandma said, tapping the pile. "That's the secret."

Grandma took an interest in me and my games. That was the great thing about her. Peter and Carl just said I was too young. Whatever they did they were better than me but Grandma said, "We're not here to compete with each other. We're here to do the will of God. My resurrection child has a great work to do. I feel it in my bones."

I liked the way she talked too. I once asked her why she sounded different from Mum and Dad. "My father came from over the border to work in the town. The border was nothing then – a line in our school atlases. We used to climb up and picnic on it."

"It's still nothing," I said.

I think it was when I was remembering this that the first shell landed. All I heard was a sort of crump and the door at my back quivered. I jumped out of the way as Dad and Mum and the brothers hurtled inside. Hetty flapped twice round the kitchen, squawking, before she found her way out.

"Put your clothes in that trunk on the landing," Mum bawled at me.

"Where am I going?"

"Grandma's, of course."

“Oh great!” Now they were talking. They’d seen sense. So I was going to wash the flowerpots this year after all!

Peter and Carl whirled the black kitbags onto their shoulders as if they weighed no more than slugs. They bent to kiss Mum. Her eyes looked past them, like dead brown pebbles when the shine of the burn has dried off them.

“You’re not fighting for me,” she said. “I’ll live under anyone’s government if they’ll let me stay here and feed the chickens and see my sons farm the land and take wives and give me grandchildren.”

Peter shook her by the shoulders. She was no more than a rag doll in his arms. “Let you stay? D’you think they want the land with people on it? This is Bosnia over again.”

Carl said, “You’ll live to thank us.”

I hated them both because Mum had to be right – whatever it was – and they couldn’t see it. But she didn’t stop them. They went to the door and took the black berets from their pegs and put them on. Then they picked up their guns and looked into each other’s eyes and grinned.

Dad just gripped each by the arm as they went out past him. They looked back, still grinning, as they crossed the yard. They were seventeen and eighteen. Behind them I saw a feather of smoke rise from one of the hill farms.

I pretended I was packing to go on a holiday. I put in my books and a new jigsaw. Mum kept hurrying me. Dad let the trunk slide down the stairs and then he and Mum put it on the barrow and wheeled it to the vegetable lorry. Dad’s arms were strong but he had a crippled leg. It happened when he had a much bigger farm. A buggy he was driving rolled over on top of him. Peter and Carl said they’d get back the land he’d had to sell. What we had on the valley floor was no more than a smallholding but he still had rights for sheep grazing up on the hills.

Grandma told Dad, “God gave you three sons to make up for your leg.”

But lately Peter and Carl had been saying the man who sold Dad the buggy was responsible for his accident. He had the same accent as Grandma and was the father of Robert, my best friend at the village school.

As I climbed into the lorry I wanted to ask Mum when I would see Robert again. But Dad got in to drive, so I said nothing. I sat between them and watched the road ahead. Dad and Mum said nothing either. Mum didn’t even complain when Dad drove like a rally driver down our track, though the cab swung and my head banged first one side and then the other and the trunk skated in the back like a wild thing at every bend.

I would have been sick but we came to the main road at last and there we were halted by a great torrent of traffic heading for the town.

Then Dad looked over my head at Mum. “If it becomes necessary your mother could resume her maiden name. Then you and Eric will be covered by her, living in her house.”

Mum gave him a strange burning stare. “You know what she says of marriage. She and my father were one.”

“Well, he’s dead now.”

Mum shook her head. “She’d never do it.”

Dad clicked his tongue against his teeth. He forced the lorry between two cars and we crawled forward. It was an age before we reached the top of the hill from which the town was visible, all white and sparkling in the valley below. Every road and lane leading in was a coloured creeping snake of vehicles. I thought of all the neat parking meters in the town centre.

“Where are they all going to go?” I asked, turning from Mum to Dad and back again. Mum just shook her head. We were stationary again and Dad was staring at the town through his binoculars.

“Look, look there,” he said to Mum, pointing. He gave her the binoculars.

She focused them and then snorted, “Remember Bosnia.”

“What is it?” I reached for the binoculars. She yielded them to me. I pointed them where she’d been looking and the chunky tower of the town hall jumped out at me. I could nearly read the clock. Over the tower a pale blue flag was flying.

“What does it mean?”

“It’s the United Nations. You and Grandma will be all right.”

The next thing I remember is the argument. The sun was burning through the cab windscreen as we crept metre by metre down the road but the heat flying between Dad and Mum hurt more. I was on Mum’s side and I knew she would win but the heat weighed on me so much that at last all the tears inside me just welled up and flowed down my cheeks and I could do nothing to stop them.

When they noticed it Mum put her arms round me. “You understand, Eric? There are four of us now, your Dad and me and you and your grandma. We’ve got to pair off. It wouldn’t be fair to be three snug in the town and one alone up there.”

“I know that,” I said. “It’s the heat. I’m thirsty.”

Dad went over it all again. Our house would be a sniper post, part of the ring of outlying farms. He had to be there. He could use an automatic weapon. What use was a woman except a temptation to rape? She didn’t even want to fight for the land.

Mum set her jaw. “I never believed this could happen in our country. Even Peter and Carl have had their minds poisoned. And I” – she gave a short laugh like a bark – “if I get a weapon in my hand, who knows what I might not do?” Dad looked at her, his face full of pain. Sweat was running down the lines the pain had made.

It was well into the afternoon before the lorry pulled up at Grandma’s white gate. I always felt ashamed when we arrived at her house in the lorry with its great mud-encrusted wheels. It seemed as if her neighbours, who clipped hedges in the tiny cul-de-sac, had their backs turned on us in disgust.

Dad and Mum descended in their spattered farm boots and lifted down the scratched old trunk. I opened the gate and we scrunched up the pink gravel path.

Grandma was a long time opening the walnut front door with the brass letterbox you could see your face in. And then there she was, smiling, serene with a deep cool quietness after the heat in the lorry. “I was in the garden,” she said.

“Cleaning the greenhouse?” I asked, full of hope.

“Praying,” she said. “And here you are. I stopped standing at the window two hours ago.”

We took our boots off on the mat and then Dad struggled up the narrow stair, dragging the trunk, with me pushing it behind. I could smell his feet sweating in his thick socks. Before we turned into my little room I heard Mum say, “Peter and Carl have gone to their unit. I’m going back, Mother.”

“Of course,” said Grandma. “Your place is with your husband.”

Dad set down the trunk next to my bed. It took up all the floor space there was. I looked at him with the sunlit garden behind him. His face in the shadow was craggy and drawn. There were white hairs among the black of his beard. He jerked his head at me. “Downstairs, Eric. Your mother and I are going straight back.” He put his hand on my shoulder as we went down. I can see his fingers now, gripping me, thick and strong. Black hairs sprouted from the thumb below the joint.

In the living room with the French windows open to the garden Mum and Grandma were sitting at the tea table. On the white lace cloth were a plate of cheese and cress, a home-made loaf, part cut and buttered, the two-tiered cake-stand with gingerbread below and scones above and the silver teapot wearing its embroidered cosy.

I looked across the patio to the greenhouse. Last year's pots stood about on the shelves, black and brown in sociable groups under the canopies of cobwebs. I grinned at Mum but she wasn't looking that way. Her eyes were on Dad's face.

He said, "We must get off. It'll be dark anyway before we're home."

Mum rose at once. Grandma put a cup of tea into Dad's hand and while he drank it thirstily, standing up, she slipped cheese and cress between slices of her bread, fetched two plastic bags from the kitchen and filled one with sandwiches and the other with scones and gingerbread. It was done before Dad and Mum had got back into their boots at the front door.

Mum stood on the mat and ate me up with her eyes. They were shining now, a deep chocolate brown. I was a little ashamed of the stains on her black anorak and a tear in the pocket. I remember thinking that if they'd stopped five minutes Grandma would have taken out her needle and made it like new again.

Suddenly Mum held me so tight in her arms that I squirmed to be free. Then they both turned and almost ran down the path, Dad jerking up and down the way he did with his crippled leg when he hurried.

"The Lord go with you," Grandma said, like a command.

The white gate clicked behind them. The lorry started up. Mum was driving – Dad's leg must have been paining him. She managed the turning, only backing once. I was proud of her doing that. For a few more moments the diesel fumes hung in the still warm air.

Grandma and I went inside and shut the door. I was glad she'd left two pieces of gingerbread and four scones for me. I was very hungry by then. When I'd eaten and helped her wash up I thought of asking about washing the flowerpots tomorrow, but the mild March day died suddenly in a swirl of dusk wind, sharper and cooler. Besides, I was afraid. I didn't want to hear her say I hadn't come for that.

* * *

We had three weeks of sleet and rain and wind. Classes were arranged for village children in a room under the church. They were taken by two teachers, one who talked like Dad and one like Grandma. On the first day I saw my best friend Robert there and I was happy and sat beside him. He said he was staying with a great aunt two streets away so we went to the church together every day. But after a little while he seemed scared all the time. I didn't see why because a lot of the children were from our own village.

One day some of the boys scratched their initials on the wooden cross on the church wall. Robert copied them, cutting his deeper than anyone's, right across the centre.

"Go on," he said to me. "Put yours on. They'll get you else."

I didn't and they shouted that my grandma was a brown top like the teacher who'd left suddenly. I didn't know they meant the berets the soldiers wore. I thought it was the colour of her hair. I wanted to ask Grandma about this because the teacher was fair. I thought she was beautiful and the soldiers with black berets whistled after her in the street.

But Grandma's hair – before the grey grew into it – had been that strong red brown, the colour of the flowerpots, the colour of the soldiers' berets from over the border. My brothers were black-haired, thick black like the night in our yard below my window. Mum and I were in-between – a dark brown. But Mum's could glow like copper when she stood smiling with the low sun behind her as I came running from the school bus in those olden days. In those days I never heard brown tops and black tops mentioned and nobody minded whether you went to church or not. In the town there was a mosque and a Hindu temple and all sorts of things, Grandma said, as well as a church.

After school on the cold wet days of Lent, Grandma and I played games indoors. She had games from her own childhood – beautiful cards with families on, a round wooden board with marbles in little dents, a square board with carved figures. I loved the feel of these in my hands, the smooth round heads of the little ones, the crinkly crowns of the kings and queens. I wanted to play late every night past my bedtime but she didn't let me.

One day when we came up out of the schoolroom, aid workers were carrying stretchers into the church. Each soldier had a brown beret lying on his stomach. Someone said they'd been trying to take the radio station. I didn't tell Grandma.

Grandma listened to a little radio in her bedroom late at night when she thought I was asleep. Sometimes she talked in a soft voice to neighbours over the hedge at the front. I knew she was asking questions. She said she couldn't telephone to Mum. Something was wrong with the line.

On the Monday of Holy Week there was a ring at the doorbell. I was reading and Grandma was mending my shirt where Robert had torn it. He said if he pretended to bully me the others would leave me alone. I peeped round the front curtain. On the doorstep was a soldier in a pale blue helmet. Grandma spoke with him for a few minutes and then came back into the room. She held her head up but her chin was quivering like a rabbit's nose.

"What did he want?" I asked.

She paused as if she was gathering herself to find words. "He told me they've set up a camp for people like me, to protect us from harassment. He thought I might like to go and live there."

I stared at her. "What did you say?" Panic suddenly made me feel empty inside.

"I told him this is my home. These people are my neighbours. We take turns in the queues." She sat quietly down. "He seemed satisfied." She picked up her needle and held together the sides of my torn shirt. "Who did this?"

"Oh just my friend, Robert. We were fooling around."

She nodded and smiled at me. Her spectacles bounced a little on the tip of her nose. How could I have thought even for a second that she would go away and leave me! But I peered at her sideways from the page. Her hands gripping the shirt were trembling. I thought, the man with the blue helmet said more than that. He answered questions. I could tell by the way he looked back over the hedge and up into the sky, avoiding her eyes. He brought bad news.

She wasn't sewing at all. The needle was stuck through the fabric. Then she laid the shirt on her lap. She knew I was watching her. She smiled. "I was praying, Eric."

"What for?" I asked.

She sat very quiet for a long minute and I thought she wasn't going to answer me. "For your father and mother and Peter and Carl. And for peace." She seemed to be willing her voice not to tremble. "You must learn to pray, Eric."

“I do. Mum told me when I was little to say, God bless Grandpa and Grandma, Dad, Mum, Peter and Carl and me. So I do every night.” I didn’t mention the peace bit. I was blotting out the war till after Grandma and I had washed the flowerpots. After that I might even act it out myself like the other kids, only I didn’t know whether to join the black tops with Robert or stick up for the browns. I couldn’t bear to look at some of the things they did to the kids who talked like Grandma.

“Pray for peace too, Eric,” Grandma said.

“Will God make it happen if I do?” I’d been praying that I’d wash the flowerpots this year but I didn’t admit that.

She had got hold of her voice now. “Eric, you have sheep dogs up at the farm. The best ones learn to obey because they want to please your father, don’t they?”

I said, “Once we had one called Trouble – he never learnt.”

Grandma smiled. “I remember Trouble.” I thought her eyes were very bright now and she stopped to blow her nose. “Well, Eric,” she said, “we human beings are both better and worse than dogs. We plan terribly evil things but we can also be very close to God, closer even than your father’s best dogs are to him. When we love Him we know what we ought to do. But He doesn’t force us or where would be the love? Your father’s dogs are not toys to pull on a string and nor are we.”

“Dad went out in the snow once when Trouble was lost.” I remembered how he’d brought him back in his arms, half drowned from the tarn where the ice had given way under him.

“I know. We’re trouble to God too most of the time but He is always going out to seek us.”

“He died on the cross for us, didn’t he?” I said. “That’s next Friday – Good Friday. The teacher who left told us about it but I don’t think they liked her doing that because next day she wasn’t there any more.”

Grandma sighed. “I heard. They are calling all religion superstition now. But it is the truth I’m telling you, Eric. You can see what’s happening when we stop loving God. We mark this person out as someone we like and that one as someone we hate.”

It was so much what was happening at school that I cried out, “I know, but why? Why?”

“Pride, fear, suspicion, Eric. A long history of not forgiving. Everything but love.”

“How do you love people when they sit on you and make burn marks on your bottom with cigarettes?”

“Eric! Have they done that to you?”

“No.” Her eyes were so full of grief and horror that I said it vehemently and didn’t add “Not yet.” But if I didn’t scratch my initials on the cross soon it might happen, even though I didn’t talk like Robert and my brothers were fighting in the black tops army.

“God forgive us!” Grandma said. “What have we done to our children?” Her hands lay loose on my shirt, palms upward as if she was making a sort of despairing offering. “We’re all guilty. We can only break through this by loving God so much that our hearts yearn for our fellow human beings, whatever they do to us. Jesus’ heart went out to his torturers even while they were killing him. Eric, we must tell everyone that God is love. Even if we die, the fruit will be borne one day. Eyes will open and people who have been drunk with vengeance will see again.”

I wanted very much to ask her if that would be soon so that ordinary happy things like washing the flowerpots could happen again, but I was afraid to hear her say – as Mum and Dad had said – “You won’t ever do that again.”

Suddenly she took up my shirt and began to stitch quickly and when she had mended it we played a game of chess and I let myself be happy because school had finished for Easter – funny really because we weren't meant to believe in Easter any more, but it was habit I suppose, stopping school for it.

Next day was my birthday. They hadn't fixed Easter Day then so my birthday fell sometimes before and sometimes after.

Grandma said, "Your mother left a little parcel with me." It was a shiny black pen in a case and it wrote as smooth as silk. I said I would write a letter to thank them. I wanted to ask them why I hadn't heard from my brothers.

Grandma said, "The post boxes are being emptied but letters to some places are not being taken." For her present to me Grandma had given me the games, all of them, for me to keep. I was almost frightened, they were so old and sacred.

It was wet and stormy most of Holy Week. But on Easter morning the sky was the colour of a duck's egg and a soft breeze was back in the south east. I opened my window and looked down into the little garden, the grass as bright as new beech leaves. And there was the greenhouse against the back wall, with the low morning sun showing up the dusty roof panes.

I heard Grandma call me. It was early and so quiet outside that I couldn't pretend any longer that the rumblings in the distance were the wind or the rain. I wondered why the church bells were silent on Easter Day.

Grandma greeted me with, "Jesus is risen." Her face was bright and flushed but she was dressed all in black. She took me in her arms. "My resurrection child." It was unusual for her to hold me like that and the black dress frightened me. "That's when you'll see your father and your mother and your brothers," she said in a rush.

"When – soon?"

"In the resurrection."

I pushed out of her arms and made her look at me. "Tell me? What d'you mean? Tell me."

Her eyes burned into mine, just like Mum's when she had stood on the doorstep.

"It's hard to know anything for certain, Eric, but the United Nations officer said all the outlying villages were overrun. A few refugees reached the town. If your parents had been among them they would have come here. I went to the hospital one day when you were at school. They weren't there."

"You knew. You knew days ago."

"Resurrection Day was the right day to tell you."

"You said to them, "the Lord go with you"."

"And so He did."

Looking back I know I didn't feel grief. Not at the time. Anger and bewilderment, yes, which made me all the more determined to push the war away, so that the pattern of life Grandma and I had formed together could go on for ever – or at least through the school holidays. But when she spoke the words I stared at her, thinking how red her eyes looked. And I thought of Hetty, the hen, whose eyes had red rings round too. Perhaps strange hands had wrung her neck and eaten her.

I felt a stab of fright. "What are we going to do?"

Grandma straightened up and looked down the garden through the kitchen window. "I know what we'll do. Today spring has come. After church I shall clean the greenhouse and you shall wash the flowerpots."

"Oh Grandma! Today!" I'd been willing her to say it when I saw her looking, but I hadn't dared to hope.

All through the service I was excited. There were crowds there, more than I'd ever seen in church before, not just brown tops either. Some of the boys who'd done the cigarette burns had been brought by their parents and were looking round furtively as if wishing they were invisible. I didn't wish I was. I was glad. Easter hymns were joyful and I sang about the resurrection at the top of my voice. I know I didn't think about not seeing my family till then because I'd have broken down and howled. My joy was all wrapped up with going back to Grandma's and washing the flowerpots after lunch.

When we came up to the communion rail and I could see the wooden cross in front of me I realised it had been scraped down so that the initials had gone and someone had re-varnished it, a rich golden brown, but the brown didn't mean anything. The cross was for everyone. I knelt beside the boy who called himself the black top commander in our school and I knew it was for him too and I tried to love him.

As we came out after the service I found myself close to Robert and his great-aunt. I didn't tell him what I was going to do that afternoon. Washing the flowerpots was too private a thing even for my best friend.

He whispered to me, nodding at Grandma's back, "They're saying she's a spy." The minister was holding her hands and murmuring to her. Robert said, "They keep daring me to do things."

"You don't have to be stupid," I said. But my thoughts were not on what he was saying but on washing the flowerpots.

We had eggs and a piece of bread for lunch and then Grandma assembled everything she needed just as she'd always done – two buckets, a long mop and some cloths and a bottle of precious disinfectant for her work in the greenhouse. And for me two cloths, the old tin tub with soapy water in and a spoonful of disinfectant, a mat to sit on and the piles of grubby flowerpots, black and brown beside me on the patio.

For a few minutes I just sat with my hands round my knees, thinking about the day having come round after all. I hoped Dad and Mum knew they'd been proved wrong. Apart from that I didn't think about them at all. I just thought about the fun of starting, of plunging the first flowerpot in the soapy water. I liked to do them alternately, one black, one brown and set them upside down, each colour to a paving stone till each paving stone was covered, a black square and a brown square and so to the next stone, as many as they would cover.

Then I would contemplate them and rearrange them according to size, experimenting with the shapes and patterns I could create. Then I would progress to the football teams, lining them up in elevens, tiny ones for the colts, big ones for the captains, coaches and managers.

Grandma put on a red plastic apron and tied her hair up in a blue and white cotton scarf. On her hands were yellow rubber gloves. From being a pillar of black with a brown rusty top she had bloomed into colour like a winter tree suddenly breaking into flowers. I laughed out loud I was so happy.

First she stood on a pair of steps and washed the outside of the greenhouse all over with the long mop. Then she came round to the doorway and noticed me still sitting on the raised patio hugging myself with the joy of anticipation.

"You must begin. The sun's getting hot."

I nodded and picked up the first pot, the smallest black one, the newest recruit. And suddenly I knew that this time they were not to be football teams. They were armies.

There was a breathless tension now as the companies formed, platoon by platoon. I gave each platoon ten men and I could see as the washing progressed that there were more brown men than black. But I remembered last year. It wasn't the bigger force that was stronger but the one that worked better together.

Grandma saw the pots were drying quickly in the sun. She laid two bin-bags on the patio beside me. She was nearly finished in the greenhouse. She climbed back onto the steps to hook up one of the wires for the tomato plants she would plant in May.

I could hear footsteps in the back lane beyond the end wall. The garden door was bolted. No-one could stop us. I'd know soon who was going to win. I began to pile up my towers. I was thinking, there's no wind. How will I be sure which is the stronger tower?

Grandma paused on the steps and smiled round at me. Then she saw the black tower and the brown tower and her smile died.

"No, Eric, mix them up this time. Put black and brown together." Her voice was urgent. Her whole mind was on what I was doing. If it hadn't been she might have seen the brick coming. I saw it rise over the wall as in slow motion and curve towards the greenhouse roof.

My mouth opened to shriek but the crash came first. The brick knocked her sideways off the steps and rained glass on her. She lay, curled like a child, with blood pumping out of her, spreading over the washed floor, creeping out towards the patio.

I saw it coming at me like a tidal wave. It mustn't get up the step to me. I drew the bin-bags towards me because they were dangling over the step and they were clean and new. It mustn't wash over the spotless flowerpots. I seized one tower and then I knew what I had to do. Someone had killed my Grandma but she'd said the towers had to be mixed up, brown and black together. It was the last thing she was ever going to say.

Not looking at the spreading blood and Grandma lying quietly pumping it out, I took a flowerpot alternately from each pile, made two new towers and slid them into the bin-bags. It didn't matter now which was bigger or stronger. I clasped the tops in my hands. The special ties she used were on a shelf in the greenhouse. I didn't look back. The sight of her was burned on my brain forever.

I ran through the house and out of the front door. No-one was in the cul-de-sac. I went on running a long way till I saw a white van and a man with a blue helmet beside it. I gabbled to him, holding out the bin-bags.

"I did it like she said, the brown and black together."

He looked inside. "Flowerpots! Clean new flowerpots." He grinned at his mate in the van.

"They've killed my grandma," I said.

* * *

That's how I became a refugee. My friend Robert is in the same camp. He has too much time now to think about throwing that brick. I have too much time to think that if I'd called the neighbours they could have stopped Grandma bleeding to death.

No side has won in five years of talks, cease-fires and more fighting. The UN draws lines on maps and puts barbed wire between the armies and men with blue helmets walk up and down. Only we orphans are mixed together – as I mixed the pots up at last. People come and make films to show how integrated we are but when we

go out from here after our sixteenth birthdays it's another story. Those in whom hatred still smoulders will find weapons and the war will blaze afresh in them.

Unless . . .

I'm sixteen today, Easter Day. I don't know if there'll ever again be greenhouses and washing the flowerpots or if I'll ever have grandchildren to tell about it. But today the dawn reaches gold fingers through the wires and I am Grandma's Resurrection Child. I tell no-one what is happening to me, not even Robert, for fear of the cold breath of disdain. But inside me, God is building a strong tower of love.

When I go out from here I will be sent to wash dishes in the hotels where the conferences meet. There I will set up his tower.

Now I am going to the camp chapel. I know we'll pray for peace, but God has made it already, waiting for us. If we accept the risen Jesus, peace will flow from us and around us – like a river in a thirsty land.