

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## A Signature

### – In Blood –

*Based on a true story*

**Chalsey Dooley**

Like waking from a dream, his remembrance of childhood difficulties faded, locked where young children's memories are kept as they awake with growth and maturity.

Carl was a strong middle-aged man. After hiking and climbing for an hour, he had at last reached the spot depicted in the photograph. He looked carefully at it. It was of a young woman sitting on a rock atop a mountain at a sunset. This was no ordinary mountain. It was deep in the ancient Rock City of Petra. Countless tourists visit each year to take in the unusual sights and setting. But this late in the day, at the highest point of the city, it was quiet. Carl settled on the very rock his parents had. He'd made it in time before the sunset began its panoramic painting on the sky's canvas. He needed to be alone just now. It was a sacred moment.

Hoping to find relief for his grieving heart, he pulled out the cherished jar. A tear attempted to fall, but was quickly danced away in the wind – along with the precious ashes he tipped out. Fond memories flooded his mind.

Carl clenched in his hands the torn out pages from his mother's old diary. Her story had been his reason for coming here. He'd wanted to see it for himself. Unsure of whether or not to believe what she'd written, he read over it again. It intrigued him. And he wanted to feel her near once again.

\* \* \*

I leapt out of bed to the startling sound of a child's scream. It wasn't the first time, nor was it to be the last. The agony, the mystery, the gripping pain that summoned all my sinew in the pre-dawn hours. Like trying to stop a phantom ghost in a dark room, there was little that could be done to rid our lives of these torturous attacks.

I couldn't stop my son's crying. I attempted to hold him as he writhed in pain on his bed. It was a nightly struggle – sometimes lasting a minute, sometimes an hour. The cause was unknown; the cure escaped us. The best the doctor could do was instruct us to merely try what worked. How many more of these emotion-wrenching moments my motherly heart could survive, I didn't know. Night and day I was devoted to giving my young son the best, and discovering the cure for his ailment as soon as was humanly possible.

Telling him stories was the most effective way to cope. As the bout was subsiding, and the sun began to rise I chose on that day to tell him of the mysterious Rock City of Petra, where my husband and I had our honeymoon. There was little of that memorable time that I could share with my three-year-old, apart from a few points of humour and geographical interest. However my memory takes me back now to the full experience.

The Flower Hotel holds a unique memory of its own. The name scarcely resembles the reality of the accommodation. The air was thick with the feeling that we were not alone. It seemed the ancient dwellers from millennia past haunted the area yet. I tried to brush off the feeling while setting down my bags in the room.

'A Signature – In Blood.' Chalsey Dooley.

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Already edgy, I squealed as an unexpected guest ran across the room, out of sight, out of reach. 'Perhaps the lizard will help to lessen the mosquitoes ...' I was straining for something to calm my senses.

'There won't be any hot water ... nor breakfast served ...?' My husband was on the phone to reception. The lone hotel manager declared a vacation of sorts, blaming 'The holy month of Ramadan' for the lack of service.

The bathroom appeared to have been well used, and that more recently than any maid servicing. The delicate curled remains patterning the floor demonstrated the fact clearly.

The sheets seemed clean, but the air uncomfortable. I always was rather sensitive in that way – feeling what didn't meet the eye in the physical. I slept lightly.

After warding off relentless humming pests, we made it through the night. But as the light peered into the room, what I saw on my pillow gave me no relief. The eerie atmosphere seemed to envelop me. I froze slightly.

My initial thought was, 'Whatever or whoever is haunting this room has left their signature on the white pillowcase!' I tried to brush off the unsettled feeling with a quick mental explanation, 'I must have smudged a mozzie in the night, in my sleep.'

I didn't want anything to mar our time together in this exotic place, as we took the first steps of our marriage. I wanted to be happy and relaxed. I reminded myself to be just that. I was married – finally. I was on honeymoon. Soon we would be off hiking where I had long wanted to explore – the ancient Rock City of Petra! *Think happy thoughts!* I tried the best I could.

The day started out crisp, but not for long. As our trek began I donned a native head covering to shield me from the strong Middle Eastern sun that relentlessly burned down.

We walked down a narrow passageway – a split between two tall, towering sheer rocky walls. There was no other way in. The safety and security of the city in times past depended on guarding this narrow entrance.

Soon the city's unique design began to come into clear view. This city was one of the most spectacular ancient dwelling places I've ever seen. There were cave-like rooms and large temple-sized buildings carved out of the rocks, surrounded by stark formations and geographical design. Remains of delicately carved pillars showed both the artistic talent of a bygone people, and gave a pictured glimpse into times past. There was more to be seen than could be fully observed and studied in one day. It felt like a trip back in time as we made our way along the wide path, as if a mere veil of time passage was shrouding our ability to see and hear its former occupants from long ago. One could almost feel their presence yet.

The hot sun burned down. Discretely we drank water, since it's against the customs of the land to have even a sip during the daylight hours at this time of their year. It was the holy month of Ramadan, during which they fast food and water for religious reasons, till sundown. For lunch we sat out of sight in the remaining ruins of some former building structure.

We walked on and soon began our hike up the rocky rough pathway up the mountain. Besides seeing all that could be seen, our plan was to reach a certain point before sundown. Wanting to please, I went along with my husband's wish to watch a spectacular sunset from atop the highest part of the Rock City of Petra, overlooking a vast valley. If I had known what it would have meant later on, I may have thought

more about it, and perhaps objected.

With a race against the sun we made our way up as quickly as possible to the summit. The path was made of rough, natural rocky steps. As vigorous a climb as it was, we couldn't linger, giving place to fatigue. We powered on and reached the top in perfect timing. I think my husband enjoyed the view more than I did. The sheer cliff overlooking the breathtaking abyss wasn't completely comfortable. But in its own way it was exhilarating. The perfect rock was chosen to pose on and photograph the experience.

With pictures taken in the chosen locale, and the sun sinking fast into the horizon, we made a dash for it. We had to get down the rocky and precarious pathway before dark. Thankfully we made it safely down just in time, to the wide and long pathway leading out. But the adventure wasn't over.

In the light of day, it could be a brisk fifteen minutes return walk. But in the pitch dark, it seemed to take forever. You've never known blackness, thick darkness, till you've been far away from any city lights, surrounded by tall sheer natural rock walls that block out even what faint starlight could have lit your way.

Without a flashlight, nor as much as a stick, we held onto each other and took one small step at a time, hoping to make it safely to the end before too long.

There are natives that live in the area, taking up residence in some of the rock-carved places. We suppressed the fear that tried to grip us, reminding us how totally defenceless we were – to man or beast. We sang every song we could think of. Occasionally we looked above to see the overhead ribbon of starry sky that wasn't blocked by the towering rocky sides of this pathway. It was our only guide to show the way to go.

Our confidence took a blow when we suddenly noticed a group of men sitting silently in the pitch dark, right where we needed to pass. We trembled, and held hands tightly. Their presence was known to us only when we suddenly heard them try to hush us, and light their cigarette lighters to see who was passing by. We can only imagine it was some type of spiritual experience they were attempting to have. We held our breath as we kept walking, wondering if this was to be our last moment. Nothing untoward happened. With relief we continued our whispered singing, once far enough down the pathway.

Then at last! Ah, light never looked so good. The dim street light at the end of the tunnel-like pathway looked nearly ethereal. We had made it, alive and safe. We felt greatly relieved.

Somehow that experience almost felt like a message or prelude to our marriage and our future life together. It was as if that experience was saying to us: Things won't always be easy, you may not see clearly what to do all the time, you might just have to take one step at a time, but just keep holding on to each other, and keep looking up. You'll make it.

I didn't mind the hotel room as much that night. We were safe. After braving the freezing shower in the cool night air, I slept well from the long tiring day.

I wouldn't have thought too much more about it, as the years went on. But what happened next is inexplicable. In a chilling way it reminded me of the dusty book on my grandfather's shelf that seemed to come to life when I dove into its pages. Perhaps it was more than a book. Perhaps it was an experience, a reality, and had returned to haunt me.

When young I would curl up by the fireplace and read my favourite parts again and again. It told of love and hate, of princes and princesses, of villains and of a hero, who defended his ladylove, to the death.

*Screams and ugly taunts called to the princess from the shadows. Hideous creatures slithered, lurched and lunged at her. Fangs and venom flashed in her view with every bolt of lightning. She had to make it back. The castle on the hill seemed so far away; the night so long and dark. All she held was one sword. Using it deftly it seemed to take on a life of its own. Those after her, were forced back.*

*She could see the prince ahead, faintly, as the moon cast his shadow on the pathway in front of her. He knew the way, and had walked it before. He had the confidence of a conqueror.*

*One foul claw grabbed suddenly out of the mire and caught hold of the princess' dress, attempting to drag her into the slime; in a moment of panic she dropped the sword and screamed out. In an instant, all that remained to be seen of the beast was the claw that dared to harm her. The warrior prince had moved quickly.*

*'With dress torn, wounds bleeding, she trembled and wept in gratitude. The prince picked her up, and carried her the last stretch till they had arrived at the castle. He kissed her and said:*

*'I told you I'd return.'*

*She nodded. Remembering well that terrible night, when he had been surrounded by those very beasts that nearly took her life. They taunted, beat, and seemed to kill her valiant prince. As she saw the blood flowing from her dying hero, she was beyond despair.*

*She was to marry him. And he was to rid the realm of all who sought her life. Without him she was now prey to unrestrained horror. Echoing her soul-wracking cry, came the evil laughter of the beasts. 'She's ours now,' they said with delight, drooling at the thought of victory.*

*Springing to his feet, as if finding a second life, he told her the way to escape, and promised to defend her should anything befall her. Swiftly she began her trek to the refuge of the castle. And after all that had happened, now together, they had made it.*

It seemed more than a story. Was the castle real? Perhaps I was the princess or would be one day, I fantasised. Should villains attempt to capture me, I hoped to be rescued valiantly. My young mind would dream of a wonderful life with a perfect prince. But what type of life *would* unfold for me? And would I have a hero to defend and rescue me?

The clock of life ticked on. I grew up, married and started a family. I have an enviable life in many respects. Even the toughest moments in a day could seem like yearned-for bliss to those who have little or nothing. But regardless of state or fortune, life works its magic on us all, and to-the-man, at times we all can feel we're tackling or enduring things that take us to our limit, and perhaps a bit beyond. None are exempt from growth or heartache, from sorrow or pain, from loss or loneliness, from

health struggles or accidents, or from being handicapped in some way – physically, mentally, socially, financially, health wise or whatnot. My life is no exception.

I finished my short version of the humorous and educational aspects of my story about our trip to the Rock City of Petra while telling it to my child, now pulling out of one of his early morning bouts. I told of the funny lizard in the room, houses carved out of rock, of a pretty sunset, and the beautiful stars at night. I kept everything very light and upbeat. I was trying to cheer him up after all. He liked knowing about us, his parents, and about interesting places to explore.

Grateful his pains had fully subsided, it was time for us to rise. The day now upon us, there was plenty to do. With my toddler also now awake, there were children to dress, beds to make, a breakfast to cook, laundry to wash, and on the list went. Good sleep or not, I had to be up and running, and giving the young children my best. The race of the day was on, to give the best care possible, and hope that it would improve the following night's sleep. There was always a chance, a hope, that things could improve; that the solution could be discovered, if I tried hard enough.

But I was oh so alone. The doctor, the dietician, my husband, my friends, my parents – no one knew what would alleviate the troubles. Since the bouts struck at night, I was the sole soldier at the battlefield, and face to face with, exactly what, I didn't know. I was as good as told, by some, that it was my imagination. 'The children are fine! What are you talking about?' friends would say.

I cried so many bitter tears. The aching lonesomeness was nearly as painful as dealing with the condition itself. I wrestled it day and night, convinced I was the only one who felt the relentless scourge of the mysterious battle that my oldest, and then my second child as well were struggling though. However, I was proved wrong that morning. Nothing was farther than the truth. I wasn't alone.

Something inexplicable caught my attention while tidying up the room. I looked over at the wall next to my bed – the place I wished I could have been warmly, comfortably sleeping in till morning. Instead of wrestling for relief with my brave son.

There it was again – this time on the white wall. The same signature that had been on my pillow that morning in the Flower Hotel. Sure, I tried to tell myself at that time that it was nothing but a mosquito smudge. But I never really convinced myself. I've lived in the tropics, and I have struck too many mozzies to count. Never once did the scarlet remains shape a finely written letter of the alphabet. I knew better than that.

I looked closely at the wall. I was speechless. Coincidence indeed, after recounting parts of the story to my son that very morning, to see it again: the unmistakable letter, 'Z' written in blood. And this time with the sword of Zorro drawn likewise beside it. It was a delicate signature and symbol, as clearly identifiable as it was mysterious.

This time, rather than feeling fear, a hint of an amused yet puzzled smile played on my face. Then followed a flood of tears. I felt a warm comforting feeling. I wasn't alone fighting the countless, heroic battles that all mothers do. Perhaps I was being watched over. Perhaps I had a personal 'Zorro' who cared for me. I felt renewed strength.

As I went to sleep that night I felt reassured. The reminder on the wall next to me was what I needed. No, I didn't have that longed for serene night. The situation didn't change. My children's pains continued to startle us from sleep and torture my emotions for the next two years. But I felt a new surge of strength. I could cope. We were going to make it through, and in time, when the time was right, find consistent relief.

I sit here now today. A couple years have passed. Solutions have been found. My children now, thank heaven, sleep peacefully through the night. Though time has gone by, the fortitude that the experience imparted to me still strengthens me, as I tackle each new challenge of life. I hold on to the memory that a 'Zorro' stepped through the laws of physics to let me know he was with me. He had returned, as the story promised.

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Carl paused the reading. He didn't have much time as the daylight was fading fast. He tucked the diary pages away and began his quick descent down the rocky steps.

He missed his mother, but comforted himself with a thought and half a chuckle. 'I guess it's just that she made it to the castle.'

With his large flashlight Carl lit the pathway and made it swiftly down the mountain. Stopping under the street light, as he reached the end of the trail, he read the last portion. He needed his mother's reassurance. His life had twists, turns, and new challenges of its own.

His mother's entry concluded: 'The next time trauma shakes our serenity – with pain, illness, fear, bitter loneliness, catastrophe, loss – I'll remember my hero, to whom these feelings were no stranger. We'll make it.'

Joining him now in the dim light was a strong-hearted and beautiful woman – his wife, and their son. Together they pushed the wheelchair back to the hotel. Carl put his arm around her, and patted his son's shoulder. As if reading his mind, his wife whispered, 'We'll make it.'

He knew they would.