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IN THE MIDST OF TRAGEDY...A SOFT, SWEET SOUND

The scene: A courtroom in South Africa.

On trial: A security official. The witness: A victim's wife.

She is a black woman. Elderly. Seventy plus. Frail. Facing her across the court are several white security police officers. One, Mr. Van der Broek, has just been tried and found guilty of participating in the murders of her son and her husband two decades before. He had taken her only child, shot him at point-blank range, and then tossed his body into a bonfire, while he and his fellow officers partied nearby.

Several years later, Van der Broek and his cohorts had returned to take away her husband as well. For many

months she knew nothing of his whereabouts. Then, almost two years after her husband's disappearance, the hate-filled Van der Broek came back to fetch the woman herself. In the courtroom, she relived each moment—being taken to a place beside a river, where she was shown her husband, bound and beaten, lying on a pile of wood. The last words she heard from his swollen lips as the officers poured gasoline over his body and set him aflame were, "Father, forgive them. . . ."

* Article was circulated on the Internet.

Now she stands in the courtroom and listens to Van der Broek's confession. A member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission turns to her. "So, what do you want now? How should justice be done to this man who has so brutally destroyed your loved ones?"

"I want three things," the old woman says calmly. "I want first to be taken to the place where my husband's body was burned. I want to gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial." She pauses.

"My husband and my son were my only family. I want, therefore, for Mr. Van der Broek to become my adopted son. I would like for him to come twice a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me, so that I can pour out on him whatever love I have remaining within me for the rest of my years.

"And finally," she says, tears welling in her eyes, "I want Mr. Van der Broek to know that I offer him my forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive. This was also the wish of my husband. And so, now, I would kindly ask someone to lead me across the courtroom so that I can embrace Mr. Van der Broek, and by that let him know that he is truly forgiven."

Two court officials arise and, one on each side, gently guide her toward Broek. As she nears him, Broek faints. As he slips to the floor, time seems suspended. All movement stops. Then from the visitors—her friends, family, neighbors—victims all of decades of oppression and injustice, a sound. Soft. Sweet. They have begun to sing: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. . . ." □



AP/Wide World photo