



## CROSSING OVER





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My name is Agnes Swaggert and I work in this nursing home for next to nothing. I do good things for old folks like Mr. Wiggins who has been with us for two months. He lost his hair to radiation, his eyesight to Cadillacs, and his voice to a trach. He moans non-stop, drools and spits, shits five times a day so the sheets got to be changed. I don't think he ever sleeps.

I go to sit for a moment at the nurses' station, put my arms on the counter. I got scars on my right arm, and I set to thinking, as I often do when I feel like this. Them scars make me think about my kin – grandma mostly. Mr. Wiggins moans but I pay him no mind. Mr. Wiggins will be number fifty-nine.

Funny how I can see every one of them. I think goodly about each one, being as I knew them so well. Like being down front in the movie theater and the lights go on and you turn around and there they are lined up row after row. Sometimes I think I'm a mother duck, all of them waddling behind me, crossing over the road to the other side. Mr. Wiggins is whining real good now, so I think about Grandma. What the woman she was. I'd be guessing I liked her more than momma or daddy.

It was my granny who taught me, after momma had left for work and it was bed time.

“What is that grandma?” I said to her one night.

“You’re mother will never teach you.”

“No. No. What’s in your hand?” I had expected she had a peppermint stick hidden for me. But it was only a cigarette. She lit up, took out the cigarette from her lips, and picked a piece of tobacco from her tongue.

“When can I smoke?” I asked.

“When you’re old enough to know what’s right and wrong.”

“I know what’s right and wrong,” I said.

“You don’t no-how. Your Momma ain’t teaching you the ways of Lord.”

“She told me, Grandma! She told me how Jesus had this fish and when lots of people come, he kept cutting up the fish and he fed a whole crowd. And then they wanted bread, and Jesus had this loaf that when you sliced it just kept coming until everyone weren’t hungry no more.”

“It’s the suffering, precious,” she said. “That’s where the real learning is. Jesus taught us to suffer unto me. It’s the suffer part you’re mamma don’t know nothing about. She’s Godless and I ain’t going to tell you about it so don’t ask.”

“You mean ,,cause Daddy left?”

“I don’t knows I blame your mother, what with her troubles and all. You too young to understand.”

“She taught me, grandma. She did!”

“We must know ourselves,” grandma said. “Jesus went into the dark and it was hot and dry and he stayed there for a long time like none of us could. And when they put them spikes through his hands and feet. He never cried out once. Never!”

“I know,” I said, but I really wasn’t sure.

“You don’t know nothing,” she said. “I can make you into a real woman.”

“I’d like that,” I said.

“Hold out your arm,” Grandma said.

I did as she commanded, putting out my arm, pulling back my nightie sleeve.

“Sit up on the edge of the bed,” she said.

I shifted my legs so they hung over the side.

“Don’t you flinch,” she said. She took two strong draws on a cigarette till it was glowing and she put the tip on the white part of my arm and pressed down. The pain went shooting up, not like lightning, but like when you get a finger shut in the door. I sat there looking at grandma and never flinched, never cried. Grandma counted.

“One. Two. Three. Four. Five.” Then she pulled the cigarette away. “That was real good,” she said. “Real good. Now we do one more time tonight.”

And over the next month I got to know how Jesus, our Savior, handled the pain, 'cause he was like God’s son and it made him special. I got to where Grandma could count five or six times. “Real good,” she said, “I’s proud of you. You is a good learner.”

Well, old Mr. Wiggins is alone again now. I wait till after the night shift comes on. The only nurse is on the second floor. I can hear when she moves; it’s so quiet at night except for Mr. Wiggins whiney moan. Loud he is tonight bless his soul. Past being able to suffer like a real Christian. He moaning like a heathen now.

I don’t need my medicine syringe for this. I just take away the breathing machine, hold my hand over his mouth, and pinch his nose. I got sterile gloves on, of

course. He's in restraints and at first he wiggles like a fish out of water on a dry dock. Then, in three minutes it's over. I put the breathing machine back on.

"God bless you," I say to Mr. Wiggins as he is crossing over. "God bless you."

I go out and clean up Mrs. Sampson. She's got bladder problems.

"How you making it?" I say to her.

She tries to smile. I like that. Even though she's suffering, it's like she ain't giving in.

"Could you get me some water, Agnes?" she says.

I look at her. "Don't you fret, dear. I bring the water soon as I drop Mr. Wiggins dirty sheets by the laundry."

"Hurry," she said.

I can tell you this, I heard the first sound of whine in her voice, the first sign of her not taking her suffering like the good Christian woman she used to be.