



## FACING GRACE WITH GLORIA





Facing Grace with Gloria

I was sleeping in this mission after being discharged from the psych ward at DC General, and some hophead stole my cash from my veteran's disability checks that had piled up while I was so rudely and unjustly incarcerated. So I dropped by my best buddy, Arthur, who lived in two side-tilted Dumpsters at the edge of inner Washington, DC.

"You got any cash?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"I want to visit my mother."

"She write to you?"

"Not yet. But she needs me. Came to me when I was inside."

Mother was in Eureka, California. At least her spirit was, and her ashes were, too, in an urn in my older sister's bungalow; I hoped they were out of reach of her two young children by her second husband. My sister refused to see me, but Mother cared that I

came to visit. I slept in a cardboard lean-to near Route 101, and I could feel Mother in the air, even when it rained.

“I need money,” I said.

“Work the monument,” Arthur said.

“That’ll take weeks.”

“Hey. You might get lucky.”

I cleaned up best I could in the restroom of a discount trade mart, and headed on down to the Potomac River.

I put my cardboard sign up on an intact discarded painter’s easel: “Crash site. Tours. Flight 63. \$1.00. Kids free.” I waited.

A few folks dribbled by but they gave me wide berths and blank stares. After an hour three ladies came up – I’m blessed, from my mother’s side, with a right-on feeling about people – and I knew at least two of these broads were trouble: cranky oldies who were dressed, one in brown the other in gray, like spinster twins, in ankle-length dresses with long sleeves, probably from a Midwest town too small to have a library. These were women who cut their own hair without looking in a mirror. But the third was a girl, maybe nineteen- or twenty-years-old. She had even-edged shoulder-length hair and a round face like one of those angel paintings by Italians you see in the gallery near the toilets in the museum on a free night. She wore this short skirt that didn’t cover her cute little knees – all puckered with dimples and curves like little midgets laughing. And she moved as if she had no weight. Her name was Gloria.

They paid their three bucks; I’ll give them that. I took them to a riverside grove of trees that hid the shrine that was a waist-high pyramid of round and oval rocks worn

smooth and cemented together. Some rocks were gray or brown, but others were dried-blood red or almost white. A few glittered with mica. On top, I had supported with loose stones a plastic yellow flower with a red center and green leaves on the stem.

“The plane came down right over there.” I pointed to the river, very wide at this point. We were in comfortable shade, now, about seventy-five yards from the bridge.

“You saw it crash?” Brown said.

“Yep.”

The gray lady scowled. “Liar! We had loved ones on that flight. It went down nine miles from here.”

“I take exception,” I said firmly. “Plane came down late fall.” I told them about the pregnant woman and all the little children.

“We must insist you discontinue this scam.”

I took out two pictures of the crash and rescue from my pocket. Each was a newspaper clipping laminated with drugstore plastic and trimmed to fit the hand. But they ignored my photos.

“What exactly is *that*?” said Brown nodding at the shrine.

“A shrine to a man who sacrificed himself for another,” I said with the genuine pride Arthur had taught me. “You want to take a free picture? You’ll never see another one like it.”

“Using a tragedy to make money,” said Gray. “Disgraceful.”

“We’re in Washington for a settlement,” brown lady said. “We were appalled by your sign.”

“You must stop,” Gray sputtered.

“I’ve already settled,” said the girl.

Wow! This might be luck.

“A shrine to honor a real hero,” I said, pulsing to the potential, looking directly to the girl, watching those eyes for the faintest touch of sympathy for the dead. I saw the flash of caring!

The other two glared on.

“You’re lying to people,” said the girl.

“I was there! A little upstream,” I admitted. “But I saw it.”

“You’re sick,” the girl said, not with hate, but sad. Real sad. And her eyes shifted – washed with a cringe of fear I often see – as if I was a lunatic. Well, the last shrink I saw thought I was bipolar. She was a medical student and I said, “It’s schizophrenia, doc! We’re like Mensa, Harvard Divinity and Yale Law. Not lazy and not crazy. A disease of the genes!” But the doc shook her head and said I had a lot to learn. You can see my conundrum. Gloria had cash to give but she had no respect for me, and I just wasn’t clear on how to tap her reserve; but I was clear that this wasn’t the group to pass our best moneymaker to - my red-painted shoebox with the slot in the top for donations to the families’ --our best moneymaker--“relief fund.”

I followed them back to the bridge. My heart sank as they walked away. At the other side of the bridge, the girl said something to the two oldies, broke away, and returned to me as the others walked on.

Some driving need had overtaken her; I could see it in her walk. Up close, she stared as if I were some mysterious gift wrapped up in twice-used Christmas wrapping. I

was panting with the possibilities for a trip to Eureka. And she was so pretty! She brought a flood of happiness like too many suds in a bubble bath.

“You really were at the crash,” she said. “One of the flight attendants was pregnant. She told me herself. But no one knew.”

I let her believe.

“What month?” she asked.

“February.”

“Day?”

“Fourth.”

“I mean day of the week.”

“Monday.” All that was in the clippings.

“I was there!” I said with conviction. “Me and my buddy were sleeping in a crevice under the bridge. It’s been filled in now.”

“Oh, no!” She started sobbing. “You weren’t really there.” She slipped down into a crossed-legged position like a monk. I couldn’t bend like that so I stood and tilted over a little bit. Nothing came into my head so I let her weep it out.

“I know that bridge. There was no place for people to sleep. I know every inch. I thought you might have really been there, in spite of all these lies.”

I tried to hold back, but something about this sweet innocent thing reminded me of Mother and told me it was time to paint a little truth. It wasn’t easy.

“I wasn’t there,” I said. “Only Arthur, my buddy was there. But he’s real sick and waiting on word from a class action suit on Agent Orange. So I’m the only one to honor the hero. He told me every detail.”

I decided not to tell her that Arthur, who glued the rocks onto government property, believed he'd seen the miracle face of God the night of the crash and did these shrine tours for free for years, passing a hat for donations of course. He began charging when his cough-spit turned red and he really needed doctor cash.

She didn't look surprised. Just disappointed. "I wish you had been there," she said. "I want to know about the man. Can I talk to Arthur?"

This was where experience counted.

"Arthur is a loner. Keeps his peace, mostly," I said, my head down and not looking at her.

"Is he here? In the city?"

"He's on the edge."

"I want to talk to him."

"I can't take the time," I said turning away. "I've got to stay the day."

She grabbed my coat sleeve near the patch. "I'll pay. I've got money."

"No way."

"Please take me?"

She reached in her purse and peeled off two tens from a roll of bills—a *big* role of *big* bills.

Owwee! But I shrugged with disinterest. She added two more.

It's cash from the crash, I thought. Probably more than she needs.

Then she peeled off two, three, four . . . biggies!

"Okay!" I said. "But the cab's on you."

I grabbed the flower and my laminated shots, slipped my sign in my plastic trash bag, grabbed my easel and we were on our way.

The cabby dropped us off two blocks from Arthur's abode. The cabby said he didn't drive into the valley of sure death for anyone.

"We can walk," Gloria said brightly. A sweet girl totally unafraid and unaware this wasn't Main Street, USA. Sure enough, on the way I saw human movement in the shadows of an abandoned warehouse, and I grabbed her arm and hustled her along so she never knew.

Near a landfill, she stared in wonder at Arthur's two discarded Dumpsters tipped on their sides, angled like the open jaws of a dinosaur skeleton's head, and covered with tarps and cardboard sheets held down with rocks and bits of concrete. He had a discarded PortaPotty, with no door, out back. He was asleep, sitting up in his aluminum chair, with tubes curving under his arm and over his chest and plastic wraps over his oxygen tanks.

"That's him," I told my new friend.

"Is he alive?"

Arthur coughed in his half-sleep. Then he gave up a wet one.

"Don't stand too close. You get hit with the spit."

She moved back a step.

"Arthur," I said. "Meet and greet. You got company."

Arthur shook his head so his gray-streaked beard wagged like a broom on front. He was wearing only shorts and torn sandals with straps and soles smoothed by some long-gone hippie. Sweat glistened on his forehead.

Although he was half-blind, I waved my cash behind Gloria as she stared at him, trying to get him on board my Gloria train. Arthur didn't have my instincts for the big deal.

"You were at the crash? Air Florida 63?" she gushed. Arthur missed my cash wave behind her head.

"Why do you ask?"

"My father was on that flight. Flight 63."

Arthur finally saw me and gave me a glare. I put away the cash. "Sorry about your dad," I said.

"I'm having a little trouble understanding your purpose," Arthur said.

"I saw the shrine. I thought you saw the crash!"

"A hero," Arthur said.

"Tell me. I want to know!"

Arthur coughed as if to get the story spirited into his voice. He pushed up in his chair and leaned forward slightly. He'd told it before. The DC bard, he was. This was going to be great!

"It was just before midnight, wet snow coming down almost like rain. The jet had iced wings and lost altitude after takeoff. The pilot tried to land on river ice to miss people on the ground. The plane slid on its belly and stopped. Survivors crawled out the

exits and slid into the frozen river grasping for anything – but there was only ice. The plane sank, slow at first, then faster. Like the Titanic.”

“In the Atlantic,” I said.

Arthur ignored me. “Poor souls lost, some bodies never found.”

“What about the man?” she asked.

“The rescue chopper arrived and let down a line with a clamp. It wasn’t a chair or anything fancy. The man grabbed the line and could have saved himself but he turned to a woman – a stranger I learned later – holding onto a piece of ice about fifty feet away. The man shoved the line toward her but the chopper downdraft blew the line away. The man pointed at the line; it stopped in midair. With a slow motion of his hand he willed that line to move to her. ‘Strap it around your chest’ he yelled, ‘Under your arms! Snap the clamp!’ The chopper-people pulled that woman into the aircraft, a spotlight still fixed on this man who was glowing like a light bulb filament. I watched him. The rotor air wash splashed water on the ice and he couldn’t hold and he went under. The chopper flew off.”

“A miracle,” I said.

“A tragedy,” Arthur added wisely.

“Could you see him?” the girl asked of Arthur.

“Yeah. I was maybe two hundred feet away.”

“Was he old?”

“What do you mean, ‘old’?”

“Fifty?”

“Yeah. I could see his face. About fifty.”

“Could you see his hair?”

“Like the color?”

“Was he bald?”

“Bald. I could see he was bald,” Arthur said.

The girl eyed Arthur as if he had just parted the Red Sea. I thought that was a good sign for closing the deal, sort of just payment for the true scoop.

“He was a big man,” Arthur said.

“With big shoulders?”

“It was hard to know with him in the water. But I could tell by his neck he was large.”

“He was a big man!” she said as if in a dream. Then the kid started crying.

“Your father?”

She nodded.

“A son of God.”

“He died for a stranger,” I said. “A real hero!”

“To do that for another human being,” Arthur said. “A man blessed with the grace of God.” I thought Arthur had gone too far bringing the grace of God into it.

She wiped her nose with the short sleeve of her blouse. “I didn’t know my father well. My folks were divorced and I lived with my mother. She says it couldn’t be my father who saved that woman.”

Arthur let go with a lung-turner of a cough. His face turned red. The bald dome on top of his head flushed. “That’s the story,” he finally said.

The girl dug in her bag. She wanted to give Arthur five of her big bills. Behind her back I gave Arthur a one-man high five. Crazy Arthur said “no.” He’d never accept anything from the daughter of *him*, he said. Goddamn! Arthur had always been a little slow to embrace opportunity, but this was ridiculous.

Gloria sat motionless for a while. Her wad must have had a thousand dollars. Just a little of that would make an easy round-trip bus ride to Eureka, if added to what I had. I felt like bawling. When she had collected herself, she thanked Arthur again, said she was grateful to know.

“Walk her down to that motel near the expressway. They’ll call her a cab,” Arthur instructed.

I protested but Arthur had fallen asleep again.

We were on our way – me , and Gloria, and her cash.

“What’s Arthur’s last name?” Like she might send him a thank you note or a little gift in the mail.

I wasn’t feeling up to chatting. “I’m not sure. O’Leary, maybe. I forgot his lot.”

“Will he die?”

“I ain’t a doctor. But he looks dead already.”

We walked without talking. She had a new spring to her stride. She was smiling to herself, as if someone had given her warm cocoa on a cold night. I hate children, but if I had to have one, I’d have chosen Gloria.

We were close to the motel. She stopped, opened her bag and asked if I needed more. Maybe not all was lost. I could make it to Eureka, and maybe get Arthur out of the VA clinic to a real doctor, too.

“That’s a lot of dough,” I said, eyeing her stash.

“You’ve been so kind.” She offered me at least five hundred.

I was fighting with myself inside. More money than I’d seen in years. Maybe I wouldn’t tell Arthur; he would never know, and I deserved it after all I’d been through to set it up. Ideas were bouncing around in my head like Ping-Pong balls in a rotating lottery cage. One crazy idea kept popping up! If she did pay, she would soon wonder if Arthur’s story was true and whether it was really her dad or not.

“It’s yours,” she said.

I shook my head no in a moment of insanity. I just wasn’t up to erasing Arthur’s graffiti from this girl’s blackboard.

The sun was gone, rubbed out by a rain cloud, and the roar of an eighteen-wheeler downshifting blasted us from the overpass of the expressway. I saw her to the motel lobby sliding door that was stuck on closed and I pried it open for her. I turned quickly. There was no need for long good-byes.