

Dancer

From "Monk In The Cellar," Brother Jesse's account of a life of confusion and faith.

*T'was Grace that brought us safe thus far... and
Grace will lead us home. - John Newton*

The flight to Washington with thirteen souls aboard lifted off the tarmac in swirling gusts of snow and immediately ran into trouble. The airplane struggled upward through the air, slipped to the side like a tipsy man on ice, righted itself and fell sideways again. I began to wish I had taken the bus. We leveled off, but the tail of the commuter aircraft dropped as if pulled down by an invisible force that refused to let us go. I was reminded of stopping at the top of a Ferris Wheel when the gondola tipped back and my toes swung up as high as my nose. I heard the landing gear come up to streamline the plane and then the pilot made a wise decision. He got us back down fast. We belly-landed on the snow covered runway. The propellers flew to pieces, a chunk coming through the cabin over my head. I was amazed to see we were not slowing down very much as the plane now tobogganed down the icy strip and flew off the end of the runway, a steep drop-off 120 feet above a narrow valley of farm fields.

Just as we shot from the cliff and became airborne again, a tower supporting navigation lights rushed at us and ripped off a piece of the starboard wing. Twisted sideways, we careened out of control over a field. My mind automatically turned to the impossible problem of maintaining flight without two full wings while a snippet of a song played in my head, "Bye, Bye Miss American Pie."

The snow covered field appeared soft and inviting as it rose up at a crazy angle to meet us. The frozen ground slammed into the crippled aircraft and tore it apart with a vengeance. The impact knocked most of us unconscious, some for only a few seconds. What was left of the plane exploded.

It was all very sad. One part of me was transfixed with terror, but another part calmly and with sorrow acknowledged my life was over at age 25, a sober assessment I never imagined would be part of my death.

For some reason I saw myself as a little boy, maybe the son I never had. And I longed for him, yearned for him. I didn't want to lose my life so soon. I wanted to see my mother again. I wanted to hug my little brother. I wanted to breathe deep and to savor food and drink. I wanted to watch a sunset and sit by the ocean and see a woman smile again.. I wanted to live.

The flames were everywhere, burning, searing. Run. I had to run. Now. I didn't know if we were on the ground yet. But I knew that in minutes I'd be nothing but a grease stain in a blackened and burned out wreck sitting on a beautiful hillside of tender white snow. Go. Get up and dance, like the fellow in the cowboy movie spurred on by the bad guy shooting at his feet.. Move. Keep moving. Don't stop. Even as hands reached out to me for help, Faces lying on the floor looked up and pleaded, but were crunched under my feet. Don't stop. Deal with it later. In fact, I would. For the rest of my life.

The ambulance was full and I was all but thrown into an airport limo. I somehow got the window down during the trip to the hospital and held my burned hands outside in the rush of cooling air. Soon we pulled up to the ER's sliding doors. An orderly tried to put me in a wheel chair, but I shouldered him aside and staggered in by myself. I was barely able to stand. Adrenaline still pumped through my veins and I demanded pain medication. A young woman in scrubs refused me and said they wanted a skull x-ray first. I must have collapsed. I next remembered being on a stretcher and a nurse cutting my pants off as I tried to get up and leave.

"Lay back. Settle down," she said. She cut her way up my leg.

"Be careful," I told her.

And then weeks of lying in pain. When I eventually became more aware of my surroundings, I asked the orderlies to move my bed farther away from the hospital room's window. If a plane crashed into the building I'd be engulfed in a fiery explosion, I told them, just like two weeks before. They looked doubtful. They moved my bed about two feet deeper into the room.

The early part of each day became a little easier after the doctors out of pity doubled my pain meds for our morning routine. A short time before the crew arrived to change the bandages covering my burns, a tall freckled nurse breezed through the door, carefully pulled back the bed sheet and plunged two hypodermics of Demerol into me. How lovely was this angel of mercy. I waited for her each day after breakfast. How sweet the juice she pumped into my body. How wonderful did the world become as the ambrosia worked its magic in my brain, sweeping up the pain and dread and ushering it out onto the sidewalk like a guest who had stayed too long. Twenty minutes after the girl gave me my morning potion, the burn unit team arrived for our daily ritual of skin debridement, bandage changing and excruciating pain. But I was tree-top high by then, laughing and all but singing. Addiction nipped close at my heels, but I couldn't have cared less.

It wasn't long before they took away my Demerol.

"Gotta do it," said the doctor. "You'll still have the pills." True, and the pain was much less by then, but I missed my sacramental mid-morning high, my relief from a fear so strong it brought the taste of frozen dirt to my lips and the smell of burning flesh and aviation fuel. .

At night a strong concoction of chemicals sent me blissfully off to sleep, shooting me instantly into an abyss of nothingness. But in the morning at dawn, I lay and watched the light creep through the window, like something searching for me, exposing me, always ready for the opportunity to pull me out the window and throw me four floors down to the street. Dashed to the pavement, with those pleading faces hovering around me, hands still reaching for me.

In my twenties I had without warning made the awful discovery I was mortal. A local newspaper told of the few on our airplane who miraculously eluded death. But I hadn't truly escaped. I shuddered as I saw the figure of death stalk me. I remembered his cold arms wrapped around me, clutching me to his lifeless heart as I tried to run away and escape the dismal waltz.

Death was real. He promised he'd be waiting. Someday he would win. He scared me awful.

A young student nurse helped me out of bed and into a nearby chair. Her name was Grace and she wore the old style white uniform still popular among nurses that year, before colorful tops and scrubs became the style. Grace was attractive, not pretty. Adorned in pure white she appeared soft and angelic. A sweet rustling of starched garments could be heard when she moved. The fledgling nurse had been assigned to give me a foot washing. I'd always thought the ritual was limited to religious ceremonies. I was surprised to find myself slated for the ablution in a hospital. What could the staff be thinking? Maybe there was a checklist for student nurses that mandated tasks to be completed before graduation. I hoped foot washing was somewhere near the bottom, and preferably optional. I sighed and told Grace my bed baths given by an ancient nurse were sufficient, but she just smiled and brought an enamel pan out from the cabinet under the sink.

I didn't want a junior nurse washing my feet for school credit. I'd never even met anyone who'd had a foot washing. Besides, having been brought up in a family of men, aside from my mother, I was never very comfortable around females, especially as a young man in a religious order. Being alone with a woman in an elevator made me nervous, because it was hard for me to believe that a girl couldn't guess what was racing through my mind while I stood near her, and for my thoughts I was usually embarrassed. I had been intimate with a young woman ... I think ... only once. That affair happened while in college and we were both totally drunk. I used to joke that the only girl who ever swooned over me also threw up on me. Since then I had maintained a distance from women. After all, I was a normal male and the tipping point of my sexuality occurred somewhere around 18 inches from a woman. Any closer, except for a quick Hello hug, my mind turned to procreation. Wishing to be true to my vows, I always maintained a safe distance from women who crossed my path. A young female down on her knees before me washing my feet did not fit that picture.

Beyond my aversion to the foot washing, I was being generally uncooperative with everyone responsible for my care. Frankly, I didn't want to make any headway in my recovery. Better to stay in bed and pretend I wasn't improving, so the doctors would relent and give me back my Demerol. My need for the drug wasn't for the physical pain, which lessened each day, but to help me deal with a twisting dread building up inside me, wrenching through my gut. I wanted my drugs, thank you, and Grace could please go away and not fuss over me with her feminine touch that would only make me desirous of her.

I wanted to be left alone to deal with my fright and anguish, to figure it out and fight it, to master it in a direct frontal assault. Something awful that I could feel but not define was watching and waiting. I was scared, more afraid than any time I had

known in my life. I so much needed to rise like an Iron Man, and I was trying my damndest to figure out how to command myself to do so. I didn't want someone to soothe me. If anything, I wanted to smash something. Or hit somebody. But God, please, not trample across bodies and over faces again in a panic to escape.

Grace lifted the large pan and placed it in the sink. When the vessel was filled halfway with warm water, she placed a towel over her arm. Carrying the foot bath against her body, she came to me and knelt down on the floor at my feet. She smoothed the apron covering the front of her uniform and laid the towel over my lap. I felt my face grow warm and I was sure it turned a bright shade of red.

This seemed bizarre, a young woman kneeling before me, preparing to wash my feet. I did not want such an anointing. The intimacy embarrassed me. It made me feel helpless and weak.

I told her, "You don't have to do this."

She looked up at me, not in surprise, but in acknowledgement, and I wondered if the bath might be awkward for both of us.

"It will be all right," she half whispered.

I looked through the window to the outside, where I would eventually have to return someday.

"It will never be all right," I said.

She lowered her head and began her work. Grace pushed the hem of my hospital gown back just above my knees. She began to place my foot in the water and I tried to help by doing it for her. She glanced up, her eyes telling me she would take control. I let go and followed, waiting for her touch to signal when I should help to move my limbs. I was reminded of being taught to dance many years before. I didn't need to know the step. I just had to wait for a light touch to show me when and where to move.

Grace led us through slowly, as she tenderly and carefully washed each foot with a washcloth. When finished, she took the towel from my lap and pulled it over her legs. She lifted my feet and moved the pan out of the way. Sliding her body closer to me, Grace placed my feet into her lap. That step loosed the emotion welling up in my heart. I began to cry quietly.

"You're doing fine," she said.

"I'm not doing anything," I replied.

"There's no need to," she said.

As Grace bent down and dried my feet, lightly massaging them with her hands, I felt her breath on my bare knees. A different chord was touched in me, and I felt a stirring. Our ritualized intimacy had been crucial to the dance, but could go no further. The moment was over and Grace stood. Leaving my feet wrapped in the towel, she turned and carried the foot bath away.

Returning in a moment, she handed me a tissue. As I wiped my eyes, Grace knelt at the side of the chair and took my hand.

"Thank you," I said, without looking at her.

She said nothing, although for a moment I thought she might. Then she squeezed my hand and left the room without saying a word.

I felt immensely better. Somewhere deep inside where I could not go a switch was thrown. I couldn't see it nor name it, but I felt it snap. I never knew whether it was spiritual or psychological. It wasn't only symbolic. It was real.

The young woman had taken the time to minister to me in a way that was totally unexpected. Her act of simple compassion had buoyed me up from the depths of my agony. My mind discovered no solutions to my plight that day, but some part of me was set free. I would go on from there to realize that my recovery needed my participation and awaited only my consent for it to begin. Most important, I would eventually learn to not always face my fears alone, but to listen to the song of others around me, to hear more than only what was in my head. There would be times when I'd lead, but just as many when I remained open to the gentle nudge of someone wiser.

Death still awaits me. It always has. On mornings when I awake early to see the dawn open itself over the world and I watch the light creep through my window, I sometimes feel a momentary fright for what is beyond the pane waiting for me that day, and what inevitably waits for me at the end. I bring to mind the foot washing. I never saw Grace again, but in our short dance of forty years ago, I began the life-long process of learning to reach out for the hands of an eternal dancer. To wait for the light touches of direction and to listen for the voice of the one who knows the way. The one who laughs in the face of death.

-o-

Foot washing in some quarters is known as the Mandatum ... the mandate or great commandment ... from Christ's "new commandment to love one another." The Lavabo, Latin for "I shall wash," is a ritual associated with the washing of hands when asking for a blessing. Over the years I've wondered if more took place that morning than either Grace or I realized. There is an economy in the realm of the spirit. An event seems never to be singular, and nothing happens in only one space, or for the benefit of a single person. As the washing of my feet somehow signaled the beginning of my recovery, it may also have served as Grace's Lavabo, a ritual washing of her hands to invoke the help of an unseen power in her future life's work, her nursing career. What better way to ask a blessing than by cleansing one's hands as we wash the feet of another.

copyright 2009 by David Griffin

The Windswept Press

Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

www.windsweptpress.com