

Dancer

It was Grace that brought us safe thus far... and Grace will lead us home. - John Newton

I was scared, just plain scared. 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. Like I had been two weeks before. They looked doubtful. They moved my bed.

Mornings were a little easier now, since the doctors doubled my pain meds. An hour before the crew arrived to change the bandages covering my burns, a tall freckled nurse breezed through my door, carefully pulled back the bed sheet ... any jarring movement sent me into a whirlwind of pain ... and plunged two hypodermics of Demerol into the fat behind my hip. How lovely did this angel of mercy quickly become, as I waited for her each day after breakfast. How sweet the juice she pumped into my body at the hip. How wonderful did the world become, as the elixir worked its magic on my brain and swept up the dust of pain and dread, ushering it out on the sidewalk like a guest who had stayed too long. Ten minutes later when the burn unit team arrived for our daily ritual of excruciating pain and bandage changing, I was tree-top high, 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, the pain was much less by then, but I missed my sacramental mid-morning high.

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, as I lay and watched the light creep through the window, I shuddered as I saw the figure of death stalking me. I knew death. I had recently met him. I still remembered his cold arms wrapped around me, clutching me to his lifeless heart, my legs tangled among his tentacles, fighting, clawing to escape his macabre waltz. A local newspaper told of the few on our airplane who miraculously eluded death. But only for a time, I knew. At twenty five years of age, with little warning, I made the awful discovery I was mortal. Death was real, and he promised me that someday, somewhere, he'd be waiting. He scared me silly.

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, 1970, before colorful tops and scrubs became the style. Grace was attractive, not pretty, and in her clothing of 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 supposed that ritual was limited to religious cults, and was surprised to find myself targeted for such in a hospital. I imagined a checklist that student nurses might follow, containing mandated tasks to be completed before graduation. Foot washing would be somewhere near the bottom I hoped, and preferably optional. I sighed and told Grace I'd wait to take a shower, but she just smiled and took an enamel pan out from the cabinet under the sink.

I didn't want a junior nurse washing my feet for extra credit. I'd never met anyone who'd had his feet washed. 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. Being alone with a woman in an elevator made me nervous. 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 that I was usually embarrassed. Only with my wife was I intimate. The tipping point of my sexuality occurred somewhere around 18 inches from a woman. Closer, and I thought of little else but procreation. Wishing to be true to my beloved, I always maintained a safe distance from women that crossed my path in the daily business of existence. A young woman washing my feet did not fit that picture.

And frankly, I didn't want make any headway in my recovery just yet. Better to stay in bed and pretend I wasn't getting any better, so the doctors would relent and give me back my Demerol. My need for the drug wasn't for the physical pain, which was lessening each day, but to help me deal with a twisting dread building up inside me, wrenching through my gut. Better that Grace go away, and not fuss over me with her feminine touch, which would only make me desirous of her. I wanted to be left alone to deal with my anguish, to figure it out, to fight it, to master it in a direct frontal assault. Something awful was watching and waiting. I was scared, more afraid of it than anything I had known in my life. I so much needed to rise like a statue made of iron, 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.

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 as 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 out 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 lovingly and carefully washed each foot with a washcloth. When finished, she lifted my feet and moved the pan out of the way, sliding her body closer to me. Taking the towel from me, she pulled it over her legs and placed my feet into her lap. That step broke 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."

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 an uncomfortable 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. 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 had discovered no solutions to my plight, but some part of me had been 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. More important, I would eventually learn to not face my fears alone, and to listen to the music of others around me, rather than hear only what is in my head. There would be times when I would lead, but just as many when I should heed the gentle nudge of someone wiser.

Death still awaits me. It always has. On mornings when I'm awake early to see the dawn open itself over the world, and watch the light creep through my window, I sometimes feel a momentary fright for what is beyond the glass waiting for me that day, or what inevitably awaits 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, the one known for light touches of direction, the one who laughs in the face of death.

Foot washing 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 of us realized. There is an economy in the realm of the spirit. An event seems never to be singular, and nothing ever happens in 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 the great work of her life, her nursing career. What better way to ask a blessing, than by cleansing one's hands while washing the feet of another.

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