

Movie Star in a Mental Ward

by Joey Delgado

He was a beautiful older man, late sixties, who reminded me of a movie star with a thick mane of silver hair parted neatly from left to right and eyes the color of that stretch of Pacific Ocean between San Pedro and Catalina Island, the calming blue of a carefree weekend getaway. He was out of place in there and should have been luxuriating poolside in a Beverly Hills palazzo, sipping iced tea, surrounded by beautiful women far too young for him, women whose laughter scraped away the age from his face like a sculptor's chisel picking at a block of time-worn granite. The hospital issue robe hanging limp from his tan shoulders should have been a wine colored smoking jacket, silk, buttoned at the navel, and in place of the plain white tee stained with gravy from a Salisbury steak lunch, there should have been an ascot, fixed to a Ralph Lauren dress shirt with a pearl tipped pin made of solid gold. The fear behind those true blue eyes and the bandages carefully wrapped around both wrists did nothing to dilute the fantasy world brewing in my head.

His contributions to our group therapy sessions were stories of a man facing those last years of his life with no direction, with no sense of accomplishment. They were stories of a man with a failed romantic past and grown children who showed no appreciation, no understanding, and worst of all, no interest in who he was. His admission told the story of a guy terrified his only legacy would be hospital stays, depression, and two failed suicide attempts. He spoke of visions, newspaper obituaries clipped and pasted to the last page of a scrapbook, nine sentences of pure cautionary tale. I wanted to grab his shoulders and shake him, wanted to scream, "No, you're peddling fiction. What about the time you were smacked across the kisser by Jane Fonda for pinching her seventeen year old ass at a Hollywood Hills industry party? What about the time you and Burt

Reynolds paid a barkeep five hundred dollars to extend last call to four in the morning and left a Sunset Boulevard dive laughing, bloodshot eyes searching the predawn corners for something to stick your dick in?"

He was frequently seen in the day room reading a bible, a plain, black, leather-bound King James edition, most likely bought in the days or hours before dragging a kitchen knife down his blue, pulsing radial veins. He probably picked that bible because it most closely resembled the picture in his head of what a bible ought to look like. Having been in similar moments of desperation, I knew it was natural to crave the truest form of the thing you decide will save your life; if the saving grace is romantic love, the image in your mind would be a post-coital embrace with declarations of devotion from your partner; if you imagine parental love to be the thing to pull you from the abyss, your mind will visualize your mother bringing you homemade chicken soup and kissing your forehead; if you think your savior is the Savior, well, ready your nightstand for a black, leather-bound King James bible.

He flagged me down from the doorway of his room one morning. He was leaning against the wall, arms crossed. In one hand he held his bible, thumb jammed in between the pages, saving his spot somewhere in the New Testament. The good book aside, he looked more out of place than ever with his tall, lean frame, strong jawline, and dimpled chin. His head was bent down slightly, but his eyes looked up at me as if amused by how I walked or presented myself, ever charmed by lesser men and their substandard masculinity. I felt like a pimple-faced mail room clerk to his corner office executive.

"Joey," he said, his voice surprisingly soft, "you seem to know about things." The irony that we were both patients in the same mental institution seemed to be lost on him.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "Tons." He ignored the self-deprecating sarcasm in my voice. It occurred to me he believed real men shouldn't use sarcasm as a measure of avoidance. Real men should say what they mean.

"I have a question for you," he continued. "Jesus wasn't always called Jesus Christ. It was tacked on later. Who do you think was the first person to call him Christ?"

In the moments between him asking the question and me giving a very uneducated answer, I saw a change. The facade of an aged Hollywood matinee idol began to melt, and I saw the man underneath the fantasy I created. He became the man from the stories I heard in group therapy, a man in an enormous amount of pain who was searching his past for something good he did to rationalize the last six decades of his existence. He became the defeated man struggling to believe he had enough time to right a lot of wrongs, and maybe even ensure a legacy of triumph over tragedy. I could tell from the lost look in his eyes that he wasn't preaching or attempting to challenge my own beliefs, none of which he knew. He needed an answer, something concrete to which he could ground his chosen method of recovery.

"Probably St. Peter," I answered. To this day I have no idea if St. Peter is the correct answer.

He smiled and nodded his head. Relief came off his body in waves, so much it was infectious, and I, too, felt relief. It was as if the stakes to my answer were so high if I had given the wrong one something terrible would have happened to both of us.

"That's what I think, too," he said. "Why do you think that?"

"I dunno. I think 'Christ' means 'chosen one' and Peter was starting up the Catholic Church. In terms of business, he was giving his product a tagline. It's good advertising."

He laughed and pat me on the arm.

"Thank you," he said.

I left him standing in the doorway. When I looked back I saw the movie star again, Cary Grant in a hospital robe. I spoke to him a few times more before I left, listened to a few more of his stories about an old man fighting against the darkness. My last glimpse was him sitting in the day room pouring over his bible. I could see his eyes moving wildly as they scanned the pages, searching. The light was

flickering, the movie star fading. I remember hoping he found the answer he needed to sustain him another day.

