

# Form & Splendor

by

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The old woman walked the street alone, with the sun blazing down relentlessly, invading the dirty cracks of the trash-strewn sidewalk. Homeless dogs and men huddled in doorways, watching her silently as she made her unhurried saunter, a thin patchwork sweater covering her small frame. She moved with her head held high, lucid eyes shifting neither left nor right—on track, target acquired and locked, like some kind of sophisticated fighter jet. She knew these streets far too well to worry about those that hid behind shadows or dark shutters as she moved by. No, she was not to be hurried or harassed. She had been here far too long—much, much longer than any of the others.

Up ahead, the carcass of a lifeless car leaned into the broken up sidewalk. Held up by half crumbling cinder blocks and one lone tire that had long since gone flat, the windows, doors, even hood and trunk had been confiscated. What remained was a former shell of its original being. One could barely tell the original color—the harsh elements: rain, sleet, strong gusts of wind, and finally, time, the merciless of all, had worn the paint down to nothing more than a rusting hunk that teetered on its concrete slabs. People, mostly homeless or drug addicts looking for their latest fix, meandered around it like it had been there forever—a monument to their existence—like a majestic oak tree that was nurtured lovingly, and grew until it towered over everything else.

She slowed her already unhurried gait and glanced left then right. On both sides of the dirty, glass-shard infested street were a string of abandoned storefronts. A liquor store with its rusting, cast iron bars covering windows and doorways; a family run grocery store—Korean run judging from the sign that hung at an obscene angle from above; a paint store; a few narrow three-story row houses the color of dark mud; on the other side, more of the same—a few non-descript storefronts long since boarded up; a corner hardware store; and a narrow, unremarkable, hardly divine church, with a faded painting of Christ on a cross that was missing its lower half . . . The woman knew these markers by heart, but slowed to take in their detail anyway, as if passing by without pausing might somehow forever erase the memories from the forefront of her mind, or worse, offend her former neighbors, who had long since passed on.

The woman crossed the street slowly, pausing to look both ways, more out of habit than anything else. It wasn't like anything alive or with

cylinders pumping was coming her way. Her destination was finally within sight. For the first time that morning, a smile formed, creasing her aging face. Not too far now, she could see it, the thing that brought her strength, like her God, whom she prayed to twice each day without fail. Yes, that thing that moved her in some silent, unfathomable way, stirring in her feelings and emotions of a place and time long since gone.

Up ahead was a crossroads of sorts—a place where two slabs of dirty, aging concrete lay. At one time they had touched and been like Siamese twins or fervent lovers that slid against each other with a heightened sense of longing and urgency before giving in to the heat of their passion. But time and age had forced them apart, like the strong roots of an elm tree that pushed and created upheaval and conflict within concrete or anything else in its way. And at the epicenter of this serrated union was the object of her affection—a lovely, almost perfect form of a flower—a most beautiful thing. It stood a mere foot tall, mostly long, lush-green stem. A bold contrast—unparalleled beauty among so much rank and filth. But what always took her breath away was the flower itself, this fleshy, pulpy thing of such exquisite beauty—warm flecks of purple and yellow petals interlaced at odd intervals that could only have been made by the hand of God. And what was most lovely about this creature (and yes, for the woman, this thing lived and breathed as surely as you and I) was the lone, slender stem inside. Gracefully ending with a nectar-producing bulb of bright orange—like firelight, it was surrounded by those wonderful, long petals that protected its heart from harms way. Each morning she would walk and pay homage to this thing of beauty, a flower, a simple thing, yes, but a thing of splendor. And for this woman, it was a sign of life and hope among things long since departed on this dead-end street.

She slowed her step, reaching into her deep pocket for the spray bottle she carried with her each morning. She bent down slowly, arthritic limbs and synapses firing slowly and to their own beat. She mumbled a simple hello, as if this thing of beauty, this flower, were a good friend with whom she held frequent conversations. She began to spray the petals of the flower, paying particular attention to the orange nexus and ignoring every other living thing within a two-block radius. She loved feeding her friend—it was as if this morning ritual that she performed like clockwork was the very thing the flower needed to start each day—stretching and yawning like a child does every morning before getting out of bed to begin a fresh, new day. And indeed, this flower, this thing of beauty, seemed to lean in toward the old woman as a cat does when its master pets its side. The petals glowed from the spray, radiant moisture that gave it a healthy sheen. It was indeed alive.

At that moment a disturbance off to the side caught her by surprise. She glanced up, in time to see a thick, camel colored boot come crashing down out of nowhere, catching the flower, this thing of beauty, in its mid-section and cutting it down like a machete at work in a lush jungle.

The woman screamed; dogs, homeless men and drug addicts halting their pathetic lives for a quick second or two to glance her way. She was up in an instant, breathing fire, finding some inner strength that surprised even her and fueled her on—staring into the eyes of the stranger that had cut her friend down. He was a large man, dark, long dreads, headphone-covered, gold-chained, fancy, creased, designer jeans, a thick, ribbed, down jacket—all-in-all, more money wrapped up in his slick, urban threads than most, if not all of the residents here made in a month. He stepped back quickly, swatting away the woman’s arm that had come up, almost in a defensive measure, as if she were one of those annoying horse flies that hung around on hot, sticky summer days . . .

But she held her ground, staring him down with clear, lucid eyes as if she were on the aggressive here, reaching up with a bony hand and grabbing the lapel of that expensive jacket, pulling him close as the spray bottle tumbled to the ground. The younger man’s look quickly changed from one of annoyance to fear as her eyes locked onto his. He looked away and down, saw the thing of beauty that lay at his feet. Heard the guttural sound that emanated from her lips as she held him close. He knew that something was very, very wrong.

“Look what you have done,” she said in a low voice. She gestured down to the ground and the man had no choice but to follow her stare. “LOOK, what you have DONE . . .” she repeated slowly. He swallowed quickly; sweat breaking out on his face. He was easily a hundred pounds heavier than her and could move her out of his way without shifting much of his weight, but he dared not move, or for that matter, breathe.

“You will fix this,” she whispered as a crowd of gawkers gathered around in the morning air to witness this unique scene between man and woman, more than a half century separating them in age.

“You will make this whole,” she hissed, “as God is my witness, you will.” And with that said, she reached to the ground where the flower lay still, and picked it up gingerly between two hands, placing it carefully and slowly, into his . . .

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They arrived at dawn. Like a caravan, they moved slowly, silently, as camels do in single file along the sandy ridges of the mighty Sahara. Hooded helpers carrying soil, shovels and tools, pails of fresh water, and most importantly, the object of an old woman's affection: the fallen flower, wrapped in layers of damp paper towels and kept from drying out with the assistance of her spray bottle. She was up front and on point, the large, dark, dreaded man behind her, silent—his eyes neither shifting left nor right, as if there might be something in his path that might jump out at any second without warning and cut him down the way he had done to that living thing yesterday, without conscious thought. They arrived at the spot where this thing of beauty had been severed by his carelessness—and he sighed; the woman heard him and began to turn to him as if to share her pain with him, but then thought otherwise and moved on, leaving him alone to deal with his guilt.

She directed him and his workers; the first order of business was to widen the concrete crack that had housed this beautiful flower. That took a bit of time. As they chipped away at the concrete slabs, people, mostly residents of the neighborhood, halted their journey to gaze upon the folks who were creating all of this ruckus. Next, they used their beat up shovels to mix the earth with the topsoil they had carried from the woman's tiny apartment three blocks away. She was silent for most of this time; as was the large, dark man, his camel-colored boots permanently discolored from the soil that stained them a darker brown and would forever remind him of his unfortunate, stupid mistake.

Several hours later the flower had been planted. She had done the honors herself, not trusting these men who were nameless and faceless behind the wool of their hoods to fulfill this sacred deed. She had slowly and carefully unwrapped the flower from its damp housing as if it were a most precious gift. After she was finished and had patted the soil down by hand and water, her friend stood tall and defiant once again, swaying unhurriedly in the breeze, the petals dripping diamond-like particles of moisture that refracted the deepening sunlight like a prism.

It was then that she grasped the hand of the dreaded man, urging him silently to take the hands of the others. She bowed her head as they circled their handiwork, whispering a short prayer for all things living, and for those special, near and far, who had departed this life without rhyme nor reason—like this flower, a thing of beauty cut down in the midst of its prime . . . not allowed to blossom, spread its wings, and to soar. But she hoped this thing, this flower with its purple and yellow specs, vibrant orange epicenter that stood quivering proudly in the breeze would live and breath once again, would reach deep, deep down into this fresh, wet soil beneath broken slabs of dirty, drab concrete, plant its roots, and sprout again—more lovely than before.

She spoke to each man in turn, looking into their eyes like a hawk, unblinking and unwavering as she commanded them, as an army's general would, to remain here and hold vigil until they were very, very sure, that this thing was here to stay. Lastly, she spoke to the large, dreaded man and gave him his orders.

“Stay here and keep her from harm's way. Make sure she is fed and protected. Understand?” He merely nodded. Exhausted from the work and the mental strain, he knelt down to rest, uncaring about his expensive jeans that were streaked with sweat and dusty earth.

“This flower may not mean much to you,” she said in an unhurried whisper, “but it represents a great deal to me. Look around you, look down our own streets and witness the filth, destruction, and despair that cling to us like a blanket. Can you see?” She raised her hand, forcing him to glance down the trash-strewn street to the broken down, boarded up establishments. “This flower represents hope; with all of its form and splendor, it reminds us every day just how precious life really is. Whether we are talking about a bawling newborn baby, an old woman like me who longs to meet her maker, a rabid dog, or a street hustler trying to make a dollar from fifteen cents; frankly it matters not! Life, my friend, is precious—can you see that? Look at this flower, tell me you see that message in its beauty.” He nodded, tears suddenly filling his large eyes as thoughts of his long-parted maternal grandmother, his Nanny came rushing past like a storm-filled stream, and made him cry. It shook his large frame for several moments as he stared at the flower and thought of her. The woman above him placed a hand gently on his shoulder, felt the vibrations ripple through him before he settled and grew still. She left him there with the others, able soldiers, hoping and praying her friend would be okay.

Two days later she knew it was done. Like those who keep a bedside vigil until the misty eyes of dawn come and take their loved ones away, she knew with razor-like certainty that her friend was gone. She went to visit it one last time, but couldn't bear the sight—the once rigid stem now yellowing and limp, the bulb that lay at a sickening, listing angle, and the color washed out of what remained of the petals (most had fallen and lay curled up in the dampness of the soil like a sleeping child). She turned away and fled, tears in her eyes. The large man with the dreads looked on with his hooded compatriots in silence. There was nothing any of them could say . . .

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Three weeks later there was a knock at the door. The old woman was surprised. Rarely did she receive visitors. She had kept to herself lately, holding the grief and the pain inside like a prized secret, not venturing out except to obtain groceries and under no circumstances going near that damned street—No, there was not a single thing left for her there—the one sign of beauty and hope that had meant something had been cut down like a gangly, knotted vine, swatted out of the way like a annoying spider’s web. Startled, she opened the door cautiously, and was ushered outside by her church friends. The woman grudgingly strolled up her street to the corner with the two ladies as they excitedly told her of the surprise that was in store for her. Had she seen was what going on several blocks over? No, she replied hastily, cutting off further conversation like a quick turn of a faucet, as if she was no longer interested in that part of the world . . . and yet, she moved toward the source of their excitement like a child rushing down cold stairs on Christmas morning.

They turned the next corner in unison, and the woman’s breath was taken away by what she saw. The once filthy, glass-strewn street was spotless. The carcass of the lifeless car was gone. Drunks and drug addicts no longer huddled in darkened, trash-filled doorways. The empty storefronts were free of glass-shards; graffiti covered fronts scrubbed clean or painted over with fresh, vibrant colors. The rusted covered iron bars of the abandoned liquor store had been painted over in shiny black. The half Christ hanging over the church was gone, replaced by a new piece of stained wood—an eight foot cross hung from the apex of the roof. The whiff of fresh flowers from neatly positioned flowerpots invaded the woman’s senses as they walked slowly past the boarded up storefronts, glancing from left to right, unable to contain the rising excitement and enthusiasm.

Up ahead, at the crossroads of concrete where they had attempted to breathe life back into something already too far gone, a wrought iron fence had been erected, enclosing a garden of fruits and vegetables. Several women on their knees, their faces covered with sweat and grimy earth looked up and smiled as they worked the soil and tended to the new creatures. But what caused the woman to stop dead in her tracks was not this monument to that lovely flower, but what lay beyond. Across the way from the garden, fifty yards or so, where the edges of two sidewalks from different streets came together—centered on the enormous brick wall of a middle school that covered half the block—stood a huge mural depicting in lifelike color and detail her friend. The wonderful, almost perfect form and splendor of a flower—her flower. Long, lush-green stem, a fleshy, pulpy thing of such fine beauty, with its warm flecks of purple and yellow petals. Interlaced at odd intervals, with a nectar-producing bulb of bright orange, like firelight, reproduced in

excruciatingly, exacting detail, uncanny to the way the living thing had been made, down to the last feature, by the hand of God. A banner underneath that read, “*All life is precious, like the splendor of a beautiful flower.*”

She moved with the others, zombie-like, toward this testament of life. A movement off to her side caught her attention, a mere annoyance less than a disturbance, until she recognized the young, dark, dreaded man, covered from his white painter’s cap and overalls to his darkened, camel colored boots with thousands of paint swaths and splotches. He smiled silently and took her hand. There were tears in her eyes. Together and in unison, they walked towards the mural, hope permeating the air like the fragrance from an exquisite rose . . .

*The End*

*Dedicated to those precious lives lost on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001*

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