

Gracie

From his study upstairs Dr. Marter heard the front door open. He hurried downstairs.

“Gracie, you’re early. It’s so good to see you!” He gave his daughter a big hug. “Oh, I’m glad that you’re going to spend the summer at home! I’ve missed you terribly.”

“Well, actually, I have something to tell you, Dad.”

“What? You’re getting married? Oh, that’s wonderful news! Who is he?”

“No, no, Dad. It’s not that.”

“You’ve gotten your first job as a physical therapist then? That’s great news too!”

“Well, sort of. Let’s sit down.”

They took their seats across from each other in the living room, he on the sofa, she in the rocker, where his wife always sat before she died.

“I hope you’re going to be working close to home.”

“Uh, no, Dad. I’m going to Morocco.”

“Morocco? But, Gracie, you’ve been away at grad school for three whole years, and now you’re going to turn right around and leave again? And so far away?” He felt like an orphaned child someone had just adopted only to abandon at once.

“I know you’re all alone in this big house, Dad, but I have the chance of a lifetime here. The American Friendship Foundation opened a physical therapy clinic in Rabat last year, and they’ve hired me as a therapist. They specialize in treating children with cerebral palsy, which, as you know, is my main interest.”

“But, Gracie, you can’t leave me again. You just can’t.” In a matter of seconds, his entire future had become a cold and empty darkness.

“Dad, I have to. This is my chance to see another part of the world, to live in a foreign country, and to do some real good. If I don’t do something like this now, when I’m twenty-five, when will I? After I’m married or well established in my career, it will be too late.”

To avoid feeling and expressing his pain, Dr. Marter had recourse to rational argument. “Gracie, I don’t think you’ve thought this through. Do you know how dangerous the Muslim countries are for Americans after 9/11?”

“Dad, I feel an inner calling to do this.”

“What, an angel of the Lord has spoken to you from on high?” His feelings of hurt were leaking out in sarcasm. “Come on, Gracie. That’s just a passing fancy.”

“No, Dad, this desire has been with me for a long time now. It’s a kind of inner certainty I feel. I have to do this.”

“Oh, Gracie, you’re just like your mother! She was always rushing off on some foolhardy adventure, always taking needless risks. And it got her killed.” For all his grief, his voice had an angry edge to it.

“At least she lived life. You’ve never taken a risk in your life, Dad. You’re always playing it safe.”

That remark cut too deep. “Maybe that’s why I’m still alive. Where would you be if we had both gotten ourselves killed?”

Gracie’s tone grew softer. “I know how much you miss Mom. I miss her too. And I know you’ll miss me. But please try to understand. I really want to do this. And besides, Morocco is a safe country. It’s not like Afghanistan under the Taliban.”

“Oh, Gracie, you are still so young, so idealistic, and so naïve. I would *never* go to a Muslim country. Not on your life. But I guess there’s nothing I can do to stop you.”

“It’s just for a year, Dad, and you’ll be busy with your medical practice. The time will go by quickly. You’ll see. Then I’ll be back.”

He slumped back on the sofa.

Gracie stood up and stepped over to kiss her father on the forehead. Then she took her bag and went upstairs to her room.

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Gracie sat on the bed and looked at the picture of her mother on the dresser. O Mom, she thought, how did you and Dad ever make it together when you were so different? You were always so much fun and ever ready for a new adventure, while Dad was always so serious and stuck in his routine. Maybe he thought he had to be overly responsible because he saw you as irresponsible. But I think he never understood you. How could he understand a free spirit like yours? I know he feels lonely and afraid. He needs at least one of us to take care of him. And maybe he’s right. If you hadn’t gone to Brazil to photograph that indigenous tribe they’d just discovered, you’d still be with us. But photography was not only your profession, it was your

life. How could you not go? Oh, I wish you were here to tell me what to do . . . But I already know just what you would say. I carry your voice inside of me. You would say, “Gracie, follow your heart, live your dream, do what you think is right, and fear nothing!” And that’s exactly what I’m going to do.

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Two weeks later Dr. Marter drove his daughter to JFK. They rode the whole way in silence. When the boarding began, they both stood, and Dr. Marter said, “Gracie, it’s not too late to reconsider. You don’t have to get on that plane.”

“Yes, Dad, I do. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. You just take care of yourself.”

“But I do worry about you. I really don’t have a good feeling about this. At least promise you’ll call me every week, on Friday, okay?”

“I will, Dad. Goodbye.” Gracie kissed her father on the cheek and hugged him tightly.

Some eleven hours later, Gracie Marter had just gone through customs at the Mohammed V International Airport in Casablanca. When she entered the main hall, she saw people dressed in strange clothes and could not understand a word anyone was saying. She stood for a moment, perplexed. Then she spotted a couple holding a sign with her name on it and walked straight towards them. They were about a decade older than she and had a relaxed, casual air about them.

“Well, you must be Gracie. I’m Eric, and this is my wife, Amy. Welcome to Morocco and welcome to the team.”

“Thanks. I’m so excited to be here. I can’t wait to get started. I think it’s going to be great. At least, I hope it will be.”

As they began the hour-and-twenty-minute trek from Casablanca to Rabat, Eric asked, “So, Gracie, what are your first impressions of Morocco?”

“Really different from America. I can recognize Arabic though I don’t speak it. But there was another language at the airport, and I had no idea what it was.”

“Probably one of the three Berber dialects. A little under thirty percent of the people speak it, though most people speak Darija, a dialect of Arabic. But many Moroccans know French as a second language, and that’s the language we use to communicate with them. By the way, how’s your French?”

“Well, I took it all through high school and college, and I spent a semester in Paris my junior year as an undergrad. So, it’s not too bad, I think. But tell me, why do they wear those long robes with pointy hoods? They look really funny.”

“The robes are called *djellabas*. They’re really very practical. The hood shields the eyes from the sun during the summer and from the sand during a sandstorm. In the winter it functions as a hat and protects from rain and snow. But get this. When the weather is good, they use it like a backpack to carry loaves of bread or groceries home from the market!”

Gracie laughed.

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Finally, they arrived at the team’s house on the Avenue Ibn Toumart in Rabat. The outside appeared plain enough, but when Gracie crossed the threshold and passed through the entrance hall, she said, “What? A huge garden right in the middle of the house? Just look at all of these exotic plants!” Then she raised her eyes. “Oh my! You can see the stars from inside the house! But what happens when it rains?”

“It rains right inside the house. But there is a covered walkway all around the atrium, and all the rooms on both floors open onto it. So, you won’t get too wet. That’s the dining room.”

Eric pointed to an open room on the right with no wall separating it from the atrium. “Why don’t you take a seat on a *mazwad*? The team will be assembling in a few minutes for dinner.”

“A what?”

“A *mazwad*, one of those big floor pillows.”

Gracie sat down on a large cushion at a Tayfour brass table measuring about forty inches in diameter and only eighteen inches high. One by one the other five members of the team straggled in, and Gracie introduced herself to each in turn.

Once everyone had arrived, Nuwairah, the cook, brought out a large platter and set it on the table.

“Mmm. That smells interesting. What is it?” Gracie asked.

“It’s called *zalouk*,” one of the team members answered. “It’s basically a hot eggplant and tomato salad. Here,” he said, tearing a piece of bread from a round, flat loaf, “this is *khobz*. Use it to scoop up the *zalouk*. But be careful. Nuwairah likes to use a lot of chili oil.”

Gracie scooped up a healthy portion of the mixture and took a big bite. Suddenly, her eyes opened wide. She fanned her mouth with one hand, while reaching for water with the other, as tears streamed from her eyes. From the kitchen they could hear Nuwairah laughing, and the team members winked at one another. It was all part of Gracie’s initiation.

After the first course, Nuwairah brought out a shallow bowl almost two feet in diameter topped by a strange cone. An enticing aroma wafted from it.

“My heavens, what in the world is that?” Gracie asked.

“It’s called a *tagine*,” another team member answered. You cook in it over hot coals and then serve from it. The lid traps the steam and returns it to the pot, and so you only need a little bit of water, which is scarce here.”

Inside simmered a stew of squid rings, tomatoes, and onion, seasoned with paprika, cumin, coriander, and, of course, cayenne pepper. Once they had served the dish onto individual plates, Gracie, made wise by experience, took a small bite. “Mmm, still spicy, but not quite so hot this time.”

“No. We’ve had our fun with you for one night,” Amy said.

After a dessert of fresh fruit and a date-filled pastry called *ma’amoul*, served with mint tea, Gracie retired for the night, looking forward to her first day at work in the morning. She fell asleep quickly but awoke about midnight, startled by a loud sound that she at first thought was a siren. For a moment she didn’t know what to do. Was a hurricane coming? Had there been an accident? Was the house on fire? A little more awake, she recognized that the sound was a human voice singing through a loudspeaker. What on earth? Was somebody throwing a wild party? But it didn’t sound like party music. It was more like a chant. Now she strained to catch the words and made out the phrase *Allahu Akbar*, “Allah is the greatest,” one of the very few she knew in Arabic. Oh, a *muezzin*, a kind of cantor, was sounding the *adhan*, the call to prayer, from a minaret. She lay back down, with the strange sights, sounds, smells, and flavors swirling in her head.

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Around nine o’clock the next morning, a Moroccan couple in traditional garb came to the clinic, the husband pushing a wheelchair, which held their four-year-old son strapped in, the wife walking several paces behind him.

When the Moroccan nurse showed them into the consultation room, the man stopped short at the sight of a blond-haired, Western woman wearing blue jeans, a short-sleeved blouse, and a headscarf. The husband and wife looked apprehensively at one other.

“At least she wears the *hijab*,” he said to her in Arabic.

“Well, who is this handsome young man?” the foreigner asked in French with evident enthusiasm.

The husband and wife looked at each other again, disconcertedly this time—no one had ever spoken of their son in those terms. Encouraged by the foreigner’s affectionate smile towards their little boy, the father said, “This is Tahir. My wife is Qismah, and I am Nasir.”

“And my name is Gracie,” the foreigner said with the same smile. “I’m so pleased to meet you.”

The husband and wife looked at each other again, not quite sure what to make of this outgoing newcomer.

The foreigner asked about their child’s symptoms, and the husband answered her questions, while his wife looked down at the floor. But even when the foreigner proceeded to take a history and inquired about the pregnancy and delivery, the father continued to speak for the mother, who had not yet raised her eyes.

“Does your wife not speak French?” the foreigner asked.

“She does, but she is very ashamed. She thinks that Allah has afflicted our child to punish us for our sins.”

“Oh.”

“But I tell her we have not sinned,” Nasir said and sighed with the weariness of a man who has repeated the same argument a thousand times. “We recite the *shahadah* (the Islamic creed) every day, we perform the *ṣalāt* (ritual prayers) five times a day, we give the *zakāt* (alms) to the poor, and we observe the *ṣāwm* (fast) during Ramadhan. We have even made the *ḥajj*

(pilgrimage) to Mecca. But I cannot convince her.” He looked sadly at his wife, who did not look up.

“Well, Nasir,” the foreigner said, “I am not Muslim, and it is not my place to teach you about your religion. But I believe that Allah loves all his children, especially those who most need his help. This child is a blessing to us, not a curse. Tahir will teach us how to show love and care, and he will bring us much joy. His cerebral palsy is caused by a brain injury, not by something you or your wife did.”

For the first time Qismah looked up. She smiled at Gracie.

A week later, another Moroccan couple attired in modern dress brought their six-year-old daughter, who walked with crutches.

“What a precious young lady! What is your name?” the physical therapist said when they entered the consultation room.

The father translated for her into Arabic since his daughter had not yet learned French in school, and the little girl answered, “Kifah.”

“Well, hello, Kifah,” the physical therapist said, squatting so as to be on the child’s level. “My name is Gracie.” She gave the little girl a big smile and held out her hand, which the child shook.

“I know that our daughter will never be normal,” the father said, as if apologizing, before telling the physical therapist the particulars of her condition.

“Instead of dividing the world into the normal and the abnormal,” the physical therapist said, “I prefer to think that each of us has our strengths and weaknesses. We want to discover Kifah’s strengths and build on them as well as teach her new skills to help her overcome her weaknesses. That way she will become as independent and as integrated into her home and

school life as possible. She is a beautiful little girl. Let's never tell her that her way of doing something is wrong. We want to help her do the best she can in a way that's right for her."

The mother squeezed the father's hand, and the parents looked at each other with new hope. Then they looked at the physical therapist and nodded together in approbation. It was clear that her words had pleased them.

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Those kinds of responses confirmed in Gracie the sense that she had chosen the right path. Another day, however, as she was finishing an exam, she heard shouting from the lobby. As soon as her patient had left, Eric appeared at the door.

"What was all that shouting about?" Gracie asked.

"You," Eric said.

"Me? What did I do?"

"It's not what you did, it's who you are. The patient's father refused to have a woman treat his son. He claims that women may not work outside the home, or even leave the house without a *mahram*, a male relative, and that women should not be educated. He was scandalized that you don't cover yourself from head to toe. According to him, you should have your hands cut off for wearing nail polish and be stoned to death for being sexually seductive."

"Sexually seductive?"

"Yes. Your ankles are showing. He called you a Western whore."

Gracie did not know what to make of the incident. Perhaps not everyone corresponded to her positive images after all. She wondered how many Moroccans shared that man's sentiments.

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Gracie got along well with Eric, Amy, and the other five housemates and colleagues. But she worked with them all day Monday through Friday and spent every evening with them after work. On the weekends she wanted to get out and explore on her own. One Saturday she went strolling through the Andalusian Gardens on the grounds of the Kasbah of the Oudaïas, a 12th-century complex of walled fortress, palace, and mosque. She listened to the music of the fountains, breathed in the scent of the orange and lemon trees, and marveled at the imposing structure of the surrounding fortress walls. What a beautiful, quiet retreat for solitude and meditation! As she soaked in the atmosphere, two Moroccan men approached from the opposite direction. One of them said something to her in Arabic, which sounded angry.

“Je ne parle pas l’arabe,” Gracie said.

The man translated into French: “The prophet Mohammed, may peace be upon him, sanctified this ground when he walked upon it with his holy feet, but you defile it with your filthy infidel steps. May Allah wipe all the enemies of Islam from the face of the earth!”

Stunned, Gracie did not know what to reply, and the two men walked off. Maybe her father was not altogether wrong about the dangers here. Although it didn’t happen every day, she had encountered an unexplained hostility from time to time in the six months or so she had now lived in Morocco. Yet, the families she worked with seemed to appreciate her, and she felt that she was making a difference.

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One Friday morning a team member was watching the news before work.

“Hey, everyone, come here fast. You need to see this.”

The seven other team members scurried to the television just as the announcer began his report.

“Yesterday morning an American soldier was accused of raping and murdering a Muslim woman in Afghanistan. Although unconfirmed, the report has unleashed a wave of indignation across the Middle East. Massive protests were staged yesterday afternoon and are planned again today in Islamabad, Kabul, Teheran, Bagdad, Damascus, Riyadh, Cairo, Tripoli, and Algiers.” Then scenes of thousands of angry men swarming the streets and chanting anti-American slogans filled the screen. “Authorities fear some of the demonstrations may become violent. The United States is recalling its ambassadors from several Muslim capitals.”

“This looks bad,” Eric said. “Maybe we should close the clinic today and give things a chance to settle down over the weekend.”

“How are things here in Rabat?” someone asked.

“Calm so far,” the one who had been watching the news replied.

“We can’t close the clinic,” Gracie said. “Our patients are depending on us. We have to see them, no matter what the cost to us.”

After some discussion Gracie prevailed, and the team went to work as usual. The morning passed without incident, and everyone started to feel relieved. When the clinic closed from 12:00 to 3:00 for the *jumu’ah*, the Friday congregational prayers, Gracie went to the Medina, the old town, as she always did during that long midday pause, to have lunch at her favorite café and to browse in the open-air shops that lined the narrow streets. She had just finished eating and now, at about 1:30, she was standing in front of a pottery store, looking at its display, across from the Moulay Sliman Mosque.

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Inside the mosque sat Husam al Din el-Hashem, a young, uneducated, and unemployed Moroccan. He listened to a middle-aged imam describe how the US presence in Saudi Arabia

desecrated the entire Muslim world, how America's support of Israel enabled the murder of Muslim brothers, how the Americans had killed over 20,000 Muslims believers in Iraq and Afghanistan, ten times the number of infidels who died in the Twin Towers on that glorious day, and how the immorality and godlessness of America and the entire West was an affront to Islam. Then the imam called for a worldwide caliphate, the introduction of shari'a law, and the execution of every infidel who refuses to convert to Islam or to submit to Islamic rule. With each proclamation el-Hashem grew more heated. Now he had reached the boiling point. At the close of his sermon, the imam shouted:

“My brothers, does not the Quran tell us, ‘Fight in the way of Allah with those who fight with you . . . And kill them wherever you find them’? Does it not say that ‘those who believe fight in the way of Allah, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of Satan. Fight therefore against the friends of Satan’? Does it not command us to ‘slay the idolaters wherever you find them’? Remember, my brothers, ‘Allah loves those who fight in his way.’ You are the sword of Allah, for it is written: ‘You did not slay them, but it was Allah who slew them, and you did not smite when you smote the enemy, but it was Allah who smote them.’ Death to the infidels! Death to the enemies of Islam! Death to the Christian West! Death to America, the Great Satan! You are *mujahideen*. It is your sacred duty to kill the unbeliever. *Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!*”

Stirred to a frenzy by the sermon, el-Hashem left the mosque at the end of the prayers. His eyes lit on a woman in front of a shop immediately across the street. Although she wore a headscarf, when many Moroccan women did not, her blond hair and blue jeans gave her away as a Westerner.

He rushed towards her from behind, drew the knife he always carried, and pulled her head back with his left hand on her forehead. With one swift stroke of his blade, he slit her throat. The woman fell to the ground and soon lay in a pool of blood.

Screams of the bystanders alerted the local police, who patrolled the Medina. Within minutes they took el-Hashem into custody.

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It's getting late. Why hasn't Gracie called yet? I hope everything's okay, Dr. Marter thought. Every few minutes he looked at the clock, thinking her call would come any second now. The phone did not ring until Saturday morning.

"Hello, Gracie? Is that you?"

"This is Nunzio Angelo, Deputy Chief of Mission of the United States Embassy in Rabat, Morocco. Sir, I regret to inform you that . . ."

Dr. Marter sat for an hour in disbelief. Then he pulled himself together and booked a flight with Royal Air Maroc leaving JFK at 5:45 Saturday afternoon and arriving in Casablanca at 6:25 Sunday morning. He had to bring Gracie's body home for a proper burial.

Once he had boarded, Dr. Marter found his seat in the very back of the plane. He had a long flight ahead of him and time to be alone with his thoughts. When the stewardess came by, he ordered a scotch on the rocks.

O Gracie, my dear Gracie, first you left me for school, then for Morocco, and now for good. I shall never hear your voice or see your smile again. I shall never walk you down the aisle and give you away at your wedding. I shall never hold your children in my arms. You won't be there to comfort me in my old age. I shall be all alone for the rest of my life.

Why didn't you listen to me? I tried to tell you how dangerous it was. But your mother didn't listen to me either. I begged her not to go to Brazil. She was the first love of my life, and you were the second. Now you have both left me to lead a loveless life. We could have all been so happy together, if only you two had listened. Why were you both so naïve? Why couldn't you see the dangers? I should never have let you go. This is all my fault.

And Dr. Marter burst into sobs, which the engine noise drowned out.

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Dr. Marter had arranged for Eric and Amy to pick him up in Casablanca, just as they had Gracie. When they arrived home, the other five members of the team were waiting for them.

"I'm so sorry that we had to meet under these circumstances. We all loved Gracie," one of them said to Dr. Marter.

"And all the people she worked with, the children and their parents, loved her too," another said.

"Yes, and she loved working with them. She was so dedicated to them," a third added.

"I think you would have been proud of her, Dr. Marter," still another said. "She had become increasingly aware of the dangers here, and she knew the risk she was taking Friday, but she put the children before herself. She was a courageous woman."

These last words shocked Dr. Marter. Until then he had thought of his daughter only as young and foolish, not as knowing and brave. He choked back the tears welling up as much from gratitude as from grief.

After resting Sunday afternoon and evening, Dr. Marter spent the day Monday on the necessary formalities: he obtained a medical certificate of death and a certificate of noncontagious disease from the morgue, recovered Gracie's passport from the police, had a

mortuary certificate notarized by the Consulate General stating that Gracie's remains could be buried in the United States, and himself signed a next-of-kin letter authorizing shipment of her body. Then he made arrangements with the only funeral home in Morocco to ship internationally, the Compagnie Marocaine des Pompes Funèbres. Eric drove Dr. Marter from place to place and translated for him as needed.

By the time they had finished, it was already growing dark.

"Before we go home," Eric said, "let me show you our clinic, where Gracie worked. It's not far from the house."

As they pulled up, they saw a crowd of several hundred people standing in front of the clinic and holding candles, among them numerous children in wheelchairs and on crutches. At the front door and all along the sidewalk lay a carpet of freshly cut flowers. A large picture of Gracie hung in the window. Above it a sign written in big letters said in both Arabic and French, "The Friend of Islam." Scores of notes had been taped to the window around Gracie's picture: "We will miss you," "We love you," "Thank you for everything," "We will never forget you," "May Allah be pleased with you."

Eric thanked the crowd for their show of support. When he introduced Gracie's father, they came one by one to kiss his hands. Dr. Marter had held it together all day long, but he could maintain his composure no longer and wept openly with the crowd of strangers, with whom he felt an inexplicable bond.

On the way back Dr. Marter asked Eric: "How would you like to have a doctor on your team?"

"What do you mean?"

“My wife died a few years ago, and now Gracie is gone. I am all alone. I have been thinking about retiring anyway. I could sell my house and my practice, move here, and help you at the clinic. I would need a few weeks, of course, to set all my affairs in order.”

Two months later Dr. Marter had taken Gracie’s place at the clinic. She was gone, but her spirit of friendship was not.

Glossary of Names

Gracie: grace, favor, kindness (Latin)

Marter: torture (German), but a homonym with “martyr.” Gracie shows kindness but is martyred. Dr. Marter: “doctor” originally meant “teacher” (Latin). Dr. Marter attempts to teach Gracie about the dangers that lead to her martyrdom. His name suggests that he may suffer the same fate as she.

Eric: ruler (Norse). He is the team leader.

Amy: beloved (ultimately from Latin). She is Eric’s wife.

Nuwairah: small fire (Arabic). She is the team’s cook.

Tahir: virtuous (Arabic). She is an innocent child.

Qismah: destiny, fate (Arabic). She believes her daughter’s condition is their punishment for their sins.

Nasir: helper, protector (Arabic). He protects the family by his faithfulness to his religion.

Kifah: struggle (Arabic). The child struggles with a disability.

Husam al Din: sword of the faith (Arabic)

el-Hashem: the crusher (Arabic). He murders Gracie.

Nunzio: messenger (Italian from Latin)

Angelo: messenger (Italian, ultimately from Greek). Nunzio Angelo breaks the news of Gracie’s death to Dr. Martin.

Note: the imam’s sermon is based on the following verses from the Quran: 2:190–191, 4:76, 9:005, 61:004, and 8:17.