

## Gifford's Nose

Gifford was obsessed with his nose. Not so much with the shape or size or what other people might think when they saw it (Cyrano de Bergerac he wasn't), but rather what was in it and, more importantly, how well those precious molecules of air passed through it—or, far too often, didn't pass through it, bristling the cilia, winding torturously past the turbinates. Standing alone in the cold damp air of early April waiting for an anemic sun that was long overdue, he couldn't help thinking about how his nose might very well be generating an overabundance of pasty, pale yellow mucus along with those ubiquitous and uncontrollable inflammatory mediators (histamine was the worst), triggering a vascular congestion that the nasal spray he always carried with him may or may not relieve.

Even now, huddled and cringing and crying softly under the canopy of silver-gray clouds that hovered, shroud-like, over the cemetery, his thoughts of the love he had just buried would somehow disconnect, sometimes straying to the stormy edges of his tormented being, then reconnect, coalescing into a tightly wound ball of sorrow and fear and indifference, waiting to explode like the Big Bang at the beginning of time.

But always these thoughts, connected or disconnected, would circle back to his nose—which had been bloodied but never quite broken in the playground fights he could never seem to avoid when he was a kid. His nose was his one true weak spot in an otherwise well-functioning body, the lone chink in his armor against the Black Knight of aging, his proverbial Achilles heel. Throughout his life, nothing and no-one had truly beaten him down, not his over-zealous mother, not his comically liberal professors at college, not his hard-core cartoon of a drill sergeant (Staff Sergeant Jackson, mean as a grizzly and just as big), not even the Viet Cong, still assaulting him in occasional nightmares and flashbacks.

In their own unique way, they had all, every one, tried to break him, just as time tried to break him, but they failed. They failed because they didn't truly understand him. As an obligate nose breather,

he was very vulnerable; all one would ever need to do would be to pinch the nostrils shut and he would have quickly confessed to murdering his wife—although he certainly hadn't—the way the narrator confessed to killing the Old Man in *The Tell-Tale Heart* ('...tear up the planks, I admit the deed...!'). What he knew, what he was absolutely certain of, was that as long as his nose remained patent, he was breathing. And breathing meant he was alive, which was about all he was these days—*spiro, ergo sum*.

At this ambivalent and transitional stage of his life, if he had to obsess over a single part of his body, it probably should have been his waistline, which had been slowly but steadily expanding over the last few years. Even though his BMI hovered around 29 (never quite reaching the dreaded 30), if he had thought more about his belly fat instead of his nose, he would have realized that he was more than likely only five or six Whoppers short of becoming another grim casualty in the never-ending war on obesity.

But he didn't think about his BMI; he didn't think about his unhealthy diet or his proliferating fat cells or that he looked as though he was six months pregnant. What were these compared to the overactive army of immune cells that seemed at times to target his nose as though it was a gunnery range or the last battlefield in some terrible and bloody war? What were these compared to restless nights filled with strange and disturbing dreams, endless days filled with deathly silence and involuntary memories? What were these compared to grief and despair and desperate loneliness, long and desolate years that stretched out before him like the Sahara desert? Gifford knew grief like he knew the inside of his nose and somehow bound the two together into one badly congealed mass of misery.

The dark, velveteen clouds parted like the curtains at the beginning of a play, and the sun took center stage at last. Acting on instinct honed by experience, Gifford took the small pump bottle of oxymetazoline hydrochloride from the side pocket of his only clean dress pants, removed the cap, and sprayed the inside of each nostril twice. He sniffed and snorted in an attempt to help the vasoconstricting molecules do their work. He was no doctor, but he did understand from unfortunate experience that the relief was only temporary, that the congestion would very likely rebound in a few hours, if not sooner.

He understood that someday he would have to deal with the potential counterproductive effects of the medicine. But not today, not while the pain of loss was still a fresh bloom in his mind, a single black rose that would never lose its petals.

The sun lit up the gothic letters newly chiseled into the rounded marble headstone: “Marilyn Gifford, aged 69 years and three months, beloved wife of Robert Gifford.” Then the letters faded as the cloud curtains closed, leaving him cold and alone once more, but at least still breathing through his nose, at least still alive and vertical.

As he stood in the open air gazing at the now darkened headstone, he thought about the blur of activities in the days following Marilyn’s sudden death. Like running a marathon where after the first mile, all you see is your own shadow on the pavement, not the other runners, not the scenery, not the finish line, never the finish line

He flashed back to the funeral. He remembered Reverend Cantor standing in the pulpit, arms piously raised to the heaven in which he so fervently believed. “Let us not grieve for the departed,” he had said in his best resonant preacher’s voice. “For they are now singing with the angels.”

Gifford thought about those words the reverend had spoken, especially the word departed. To Gifford, using departed as a synonym for dead made it sound like they were going on a trip, a voyage, a journey—all the way to paradise perhaps. Would they be riding a golden chariot or the celestial railroad or a big yellow school bus? Or would they have to walk, skipping from cloud to cloud, wingless angels in training?

Then he had an image of his wife singing with the angels. Maybe that’s why she was taken, he thought; people often said she had the voice of an angel. Maybe the angelic chorus needed another soprano to continue those never-ending hymns of praise.

And if that’s the case, that to die is to sing with the angels, he said to himself, I’ll very likely live forever, in spite of my nose. He actually smiled, although humorlessly, at this thought. He knew he had

never in his life been able to sing on key, if he could sing at all without sounding like a frog blasting out its last croak, without his nose stopping up in the middle of the first verse of *Amazing Grace*—which was the only hymn of praise he knew by heart.

He thought about the three Viet Cong soldiers he had killed (or was it four?) in a firefight somewhere deep in the jungle. What angels do they sing with? A cold gust of damp wind hit him in the side of the head, and he took that as his answer. They weren't singing with angels or anyone else. Rather, they were watching him, haunting him still. Every time he tried to make his peace with what he had done in that brief moment of confusion and fear, they were there, nameless faces with dark eyes fixed, gazing upward at the endless sky, perhaps searching for a heaven they didn't really believe in.

He shook his head to clear it of those long departed peasant soldiers. He hadn't wanted to kill them. He hadn't wanted to kill anyone. He just wanted to survive, to do what he was ordered to do without thinking too deeply about it, then go home to the world he understood as intact as possible.

Of course, he did return home, scarred but alive, addicted to marijuana and nasal spray. And no one cared, not even his father, who had fought in France with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne ("That was a war," the old man had declared). Slowly, Gifford's post-army life approached some kind of normalcy, a job selling cars, the obligatory cheap one-bedroom apartment with blank white walls and furniture from Salvation Army, a few like-minded friends with whom to drink and smoke and get high.

He met Marilyn at the home of one of these friends. They shared a joint or two, got stoned, giggled uncontrollably at nothing, and had sex as though it had been pre-ordained, the most natural thing in the world to do at two o'clock on a Sunday morning. The following weekend they did it again, then every weekend after that until they moved in together and eventually got married. Simply the natural order of things, life's logical progression, at least as it was in the early 1970s: jobs, parties, mutual attraction, sex, marriage, careers, house, children. Generally in that order.

Except the children never came, although not for lack of trying. He had always assumed that part of the natural order just wasn't meant to be, at least not for them. And they adjusted to that reality. Over time, their love and their dependence on each other grew until they melded into one, fulfilling the mandate expressed in Genesis (2:24—he actually looked it up once).

As their life together became more insular, they quit the parties and the drinking and the drugs. Gifford even quit smoking, in spite of his high pressure job. Occasionally, he would join the other salesmen in the back room of the dealership and wish he had a cigarette. But mostly, he didn't, because the smoke usually triggered a nasal congestion that was becoming more difficult to relieve. A few years later, when he became general manager of the dealership, he banned all smoking on the property, well ahead of the statewide mandate. His nose thanked him by behaving itself, at least while he was at work.

Because she loved her husband and knew his nose almost as well as he did, Marilyn promised to quit smoking, and actually did for nearly a decade when she became his secretary and had to work in a smoke-free environment. But when the first serious symptoms of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease manifested themselves, forcing her into retirement at the age of sixty-two, ironically, the long suppressed desire to smoke roared back, and she started up again. She told herself and her doctor, once the diagnosis was confirmed and sounded—at least to her—like a death sentence, “what difference does it make now?”

She lived another seven years, at first smoking only in the garage, then, when navigating the garage became too difficult for her, confining herself to their small den. It was there that Gifford found her late one evening, slumped over in her recliner, wasted body wrapped up in her favorite quilt like a caterpillar in a cocoon. A half-smoked Marlboro still smoldered in the ashtray. Next to the ashtray were three unused inhalers. Her nasal cannula was coiled on the floor, oxygen flowing uselessly into the dirty carpet.

Of course, he called 9-1-1. What else was there to do? But he knew she was gone. And he knew that in some dark and lonely place in her mind, this quiet and solitary death was what she had wanted, what she had sought, that she was just tired of being sick, of struggling to breathe, of being tethered to an oxygen tube in a small room that began to feel like a prison cell from which there would be no escape except in death.

He thought he understood, although that didn't make him feel any better. At times, he had even shared her sense of the hopelessness born out of fatigue. Many days and nights he had fought his own battle with breathlessness, wishing sometimes that he could simply ram a tube into his nose, a tube that never clogged or swelled shut because of vascular congestion or mucus accumulation.

Standing in the cold, shivering and alone, he put the hood of his jacket up over his head. Unconsciously, he took a handkerchief from the back pocket of his pants and blew his nose, ejecting tiny globules of clear mucus. The congestion was already beginning to return, capillaries swelling in response to the damp weather and the inevitable rebounding effects of the nasal spray.

Fixing his gaze on the new headstone, he tried to think about what he had just lost and the mind-numbing emptiness that lay ahead. But, like always, his thoughts came back to his nose and the elemental process of sucking air into his lungs. At this moment, in this granite and marble forest of death, he was alive, and he was a bit surprised to find that he wanted to be alive, even though his main reason for living for the past forty-five years was now underground, never to re-surface.

In the midst of a steady drizzle that stung his face, he slowly turned away from the headstone and started toward the parking lot, resolved that he wasn't quite as ready to give up this life as he imagined he would be when he had watched the casket being lowered in the ground, the final confirmation that his former life had ended. He had been nearly alone then too, just he and Reverend Cantor, with a couple of grizzled and bored-looking workmen standing by.

When he reached his car, the blue SUV he was given upon his retirement from the dealership three years ago, he looked back toward the cemetery. He could no longer see Marilyn's headstone, but he knew she was out there somewhere, healthy lungs full of fresh heavenly air, gracefully hitting the high notes as the angelic chorus sang *How Great Thou Art* or *Nearer My God to Thee*.

Gifford blinked to clear his eyes of the scene, sniffed twice to make sure his nose was still patent, and opened his car door. He slid behind the wheel and eased back in the cold leather seat. He closed his eyes and thought about the rest of his life. He was sixty-nine years old. And, except for his nose, he was healthy. He knew he could conceivably live another twenty or even thirty years, if he took care of himself. In his mind, he remembered a line from *The Shawshank Redemption*: 'Get busy living or get busy dying.'

He could always stop running and let death overtake him, surrender himself to the dark angel without a struggle, just as Marilyn had. This was as inevitable as sunrise and sunset, simply an unavoidable consequence of being alive. He understood that. But, he thought, you don't have to like it or hurry along the process; make death have to work a little.

Gifford opened his eyes, pulled out his cell phone, punched one of the names in his contact list, and made an appointment with the doctor he hadn't seen in five years. Then, on impulse, he took the bottle of nasal spray and threw it out the window, watching it land in a deep puddle of fresh rainwater. His nose was part of his former life. He would obsess over it no longer.