

There aren't two categories of people.

There aren't some that were born to have
everything,
leaving the rest with nothing,
and a majority that has nothing
and cannot taste the happiness
that God has created for all.

The Christian society that God wants
is one in which we share the goodness
that God has given for everyone.

Archbishop Oscar Romero

Mountains of the Moon

STORIES
ABOUT
SOCIAL
JUSTICE

EDITED BY
STEPHANIE WELLER HANSON

Saint Mary's Press
Christian Brothers Publications
Winona, Minnesota

Short Fiction Books from Saint Mary's Press

Waking Up Bees

STORIES OF LIVING LIFE'S QUESTIONS

Mountains of the Moon

STORIES ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE



Genuine recycled paper with 10% post-consumer waste. Printed with soy-based ink.

The quotation on page 2 is from *The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero*, compiled and translated by James R. Brockman (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), page 212. Copyright © 1988 by the Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus.

The publishing team included Barbara Allaire, series editor; Stephanie Weller Hanson, development editor; Rebecca Fairbank, copy editor; Barbara Bartelson, production editor; Hol-lace Storkel, typesetter; Stephan Nagel, art director; Proof Positive/Farrowlyne Associates, Inc., front cover designer; Barbara Bartelson, back cover designer; Kate Mueller, cover illustrator; pre-press, printing, and binding by the graphics division of Saint Mary's Press.

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Printed in the United States of America

Printing: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Year: 2007 06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99

ISBN: 0-88489-542-4

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A Shard of Glass

by Carole Duncan Buckman

Rob, you just keep pressing that shard of glass into your heart, don't you?" As I tramped through the woods, the priest's words repeated in my head. "You're never going to be happy until you forgive him."

Forgive him. It'd be a cold day in hell when I forgave my father. Ten years ago he'd betrayed Mom, tearing apart our family. And now he had the nerve to be featured with his new family in the newspaper. In color. There he was, on the front page of last Sunday's "Life" section, the big oil man, in his designer home, hosting a charity party. Beside him was my stepmother with Morgan, my spoiled stepsister, conceived four months before my brother Jennings was born. Conceived while Dad was married to Mom. Why had I told Father Pete about it anyway? A shard of glass in my heart. That described the pain I felt when I thought about Dad.

I could live with it, couldn't I, that shard of glass? I wasn't all that unhappy. Girls hung around hoping I'd call. I was handsome, strong. I had a football scholarship as a kicker

for UCLA in the fall. My school counselor had said that with my test scores, I could pursue any profession I wanted.

I kicked a rock, spinning it through the leaves. I lifted the backpack from my shoulders and reached for my water bottle. I'd taken a new path today, heading north from my house into the mountains. The woods were wilder here than along my usual route. It was nice hiking in the woods. Peaceful. It gave me time to think.

Father Pete is wrong. I don't have to forgive Dad. I can take his money and be civil, but I won't forget Dad's betrayal. And Dad knows it. Sure, he tried to explain. He didn't mean to break his marriage vows. He respected Mom, but he loved Sharon. Hypocrite!

Brush crunched behind me. I thought vaguely of wild animals, of mountain lions' teeth and claws. I started to turn. Then someone tackled me. I crashed to the ground, stunned. My face hit the forest floor. I inhaled mold, tasted acid in the damp leaves. Fists pummeled me. Boots kicked my ribs and legs. Men pulled off my backpack, my shirt. They took my boots and my pants with all the pockets. I couldn't fight back. They were all over me. I counted five of them, dark shadows, pulling and punching at me.

"You won't get away with this!" I shouted. I rolled over, intent on memorizing faces so I

could identify them later. They were young, my age.

"Shut up!" the guy pawing through my billfold shouted. He swung his foot back and kicked toward my head.

I turned away, then felt stabbing pain on my neck. Colors flashed. My world went black.

A swirling wind blew that night, and leaves spiraled down, covering me. From time to time, I woke, confused, wondering if I was alive or if this helpless feeling was death. Through the black waving tree branches, I saw cold white stars. I wasn't cold. Like the rocks on the forest floor, I was unaffected by temperature. I tried to move my fingers. I couldn't feel them. My tears blurred the stars, and I closed my eyes. I hadn't cried since I was a child. What kind of man cried? I lapsed back into sleep.

When I opened my eyes again, shafts of sunlight bathed the forest. I listened to birds sing. A beige puppy stared into my face, then barked fiercely. I smelled wet dog. A boy bent over me. The boy's thick black hair needed cutting. He poked a stick at my cheek. I blinked fearfully as the stick moved toward my eyes. Please, God, save my eyes, I prayed.

"Hey, mister, are you alive?" the boy asked in Spanish.

“Ah,” I said. I knew Spanish. I’d had perfect grades in Spanish. The words were there. Help me, I thought, but my tongue was frozen.

“Where are your clothes, mister? Aren’t you cold in your underwear?” the boy asked.

“Ah,” I said.

“You’re all bloody. Wait here. I’ll get my sister, María. She’ll know what to do.”

The boy and dog left. I listened to myself breathe. Birds called back and forth. A squirrel chattered. How long had it been since I’d left home Friday afternoon? “Gone hiking,” my note had said. Mom would have found it on the kitchen table when she came in from work. She was used to my going off by myself. She encouraged my independence. I had a date with Jessica on Saturday night. Tonight. When I didn’t show up, she’d be steamed. Would she call? Probably not. Too mad. She’d go out with the girls and cruise the drag.

Mom had a meeting in L.A. Monday morning. She’d think I’d gone to Dad’s, wouldn’t she? She might drop Jennings off at Dad’s without asking if they knew where I was. I felt panic building in my chest.

The school attendance clerk would miss me. She’d call the house Monday. But Mom wouldn’t return home to get the message until Wednesday. I could die by then, couldn’t

I? Was my neck broken? Why couldn’t I feel anything? What if the boy didn’t come back?

I’m defenseless, I thought. The forest animals will find me. Rats, raccoons, ants, bugs. Mountain lions. Bobcats. If I lie here helpless, they may all come. Something rustled in the bushes. Senses. I can hear and see and smell. Is that good? If I’m about to be attacked again, I don’t want to sense anything.

Oh, my God, I’m sorry for having sinned. Automatically I prepared for death. What were my sins? I’d been selfish, self-centered. I’d hurt Cindy when I dropped her after we’d dated for months. Dad, I’d never forgiven Dad. The shard of glass Father Pete had talked about. God, I forgive him. Do I mean it? If I don’t mean it, it won’t count. I want to mean it.

Forgive me as I forgive others. Dad was mostly good, wasn’t he? He was wrong to betray Mom, but he was right in so many ways. Mom forgave him, didn’t she? I remembered them laughing together over a joke at our shared Christmas dinner. In July Sharon and Dad had both flown to Washington for Grandpa’s funeral, and they’d sat holding hands with the family, supporting us.

I thought of ski trips, of flying down mountains, leaping through moguls, daring Dad to follow, laughing when he crashed. Dad, gamely climbing back on his skis, always ready to try again.

Try again. How many times had Dad bought me whatever I wanted? And I'd never thanked him sincerely, had I? There'd always been that barrier—Thanks, but I still hate you.

I imagined my father standing in front of me. "Dad, I forgive you. I love you."

Then I thought of my stepsister, Morgan. I'd never taken her fishing when she wanted to go. I'd never done anything nice for her. I wished I had another chance to be a big brother to her.

I thought of Cindy, my old girlfriend. Why had I dropped her? I'd felt her love, hadn't I? And she'd been so much fun. But she'd wanted love back. It was easier for me to date lots of girls and never get too close. I wished I could tell her I was sorry.

I remembered a tall blond boy with thick glasses who sat in front of me in trig. He was new in school, and we'd all ignored him. It was probably hard to be new and not have any friends. I should have welcomed him. I should have tried to introduce him around, hung out with him.

The wind swirled more strongly, and leaves touched my face.

I imagined the UCLA football coach tramping up to me, carrying a football. "We expect you to keep up the kicking until fall, you

know," he said. "You can't waste time lying here."

"I can't help it," I said.

"Well, then, someone else should have your scholarship."

"Yes, sir, that's fair," I said. The scholarship didn't seem important anymore. Football didn't seem important. The coach tramped away.

I felt light, as if I could float through the trees. The shard of glass was gone. I hadn't felt its going, but the pain was gone.

The rustling came nearer. Whatever it was, I was defenseless. God, I'll be a better person if You get me out of this, I promised. Then the woods were quiet again except for the cicadas and doves calling. I was alone, paralyzed and abandoned.

This was my cold day in hell. That's when I'd said I'd forgive. And I'd forgiven my father. Who else? The men who'd attacked me? I didn't want to die hating them. I forgave them, too. I smiled. Forgiving was easy.

I thought I saw Father Pete walking through the trees. He wore cowboy boots and his alb and stole.

"Can I have Communion, Father?" I asked. "The shard of glass is gone."

"And so you're happy?"

"Well, I guess, except I'm in trouble here."

Father leaned down and I tasted the bread. I felt Father's thumb anointing my forehead with oil. Deep peace filled me. Father Pete walked further into the forest.

I heard feet tramping through the brush.

"There you are, mister," the boy said. "Over here, María!"

The puppy licked my face. I felt the wet, rough tongue and smiled. Had I felt anything on my face before? Leaves, the stick? I couldn't remember. A teenage girl pushed the puppy away. Was she real? She was slight with black curling hair. She wore jeans and a faded navy blue sweatshirt.

"What happened to you?" she asked in Spanish.

"Ah," I answered.

"You shouldn't have come here," she said. "People are desperate."

The woods weren't far from home. Why shouldn't I be here?

Why were people desperate? This was California. Nobody was desperate in California. At least I'd never known it if they were. They were like the boy in trig, I thought, people I hadn't noticed. The guys who attacked me might have been illegals. People who needed money badly. The girl and her brother must be illegals, too, I thought. I couldn't expect them to help me.

"Can you move?" she asked.

I tried moving my fingers.

"I guess not," she said, tucking a blanket around me. Her cool fingers touched my face.

"I think your neck might be broken," she said. "Juan, run back and get that piece of plywood that's over the doorway. Wait until Ramon comes home from work and bring him, too." She turned back to me. "You're safe now. Sleep, if you want. I'll be here."

I closed my eyes and dozed. I dreamed that I was playing football. The cheerleaders were chanting my name. I imagined María standing under the bleachers, separated from me in the shadows.

It was dusk when I awoke. Cold raindrops fell on my face.

"Thank God, you've come, Ramon," María said.

A young Hispanic man stood over me. "Can he walk?" he asked.

"He can't move," she answered. "We need to put him on the plywood and get him to the shack before it really starts to rain."

"He'll be bringing *la migra* to us," Ramon said.

"Ramon, God sent him to us to help. We can't worry about getting caught," María said.

I watched Ramon put his arm around his sister. "You're always seeing God," he said.

They put the piece of wood down and lifted me. I heard the plywood scrape the forest floor. "Ah," I said, meaning please be careful. If you move my neck wrong, I'll die. The puppy barked and leaped in the leaves. The trees above me moved closer as I was lifted. I listened to the rain's gentle whisper and felt its cold tickle on my face.

"As soon as the rain stops, you need to run to the pay phone to call an ambulance. We can carry him to the highway to meet it," María said.

"I don't suppose he has any money on him," Ramon said.

"They took everything but his underwear."

"Ah," I said again. I have money at home. I'll pay you back for the phone call. I'll pay you for helping me.

"We can spare a quarter, Ramon," María said.

As if I were a babe in a cradle, I lay helpless on the board, rocked back and forth to the rhythm of their feet on the forest floor. I slept again. I awoke in a shack lit by a kerosene lamp. I smelled kerosene and food and people. The puppy's wet tongue licked my face. I stared up at the roof. Part of it was stone. The shack had been built onto a shallow cave. Tin and plywood pieced unevenly together served as the rest of the roof. María's family cast long shadows as they came one

by one to stare down at me. A mother and father, a grandfather.

"Come, your dinner's ready," María's mother said.

"Let me give him more water and clean him up first, Mama," María answered.

I swallowed the liquid and watched her gently wipe my arm with the washcloth. She rinsed the cloth in a bucket, and I felt the warm water on my face, then pain when she touched my face above my eye. Pain is good, I thought. Feeling is good. She rinsed the washcloth.

"I have brothers," she said. "You don't need to be embarrassed."

How had she become so kind, so compassionate, I wondered? I fell asleep watching her.

I awoke to low voices speaking Spanish. The shack was mostly dark. I was being lifted on the plywood. I saw Ramon's back by the light of the kerosene lamp.

"It's all right," María said. "We'll get help."

Then I was outside, looking up at twisted tree branches and the stars, listening to their feet thud along the trail. The full moon lifted itself from behind a cloud. The trees still dripped and crackled from the rain, and the forest smelled fresh.

Suddenly the board lurched. The trees tilted.

“Ramon!” María shouted.

I closed my fingers over the edge of the plywood, held on. Or did I imagine my fingers moving? A pulse of hope throbbed in my heart.

“It’s okay,” Ramon said. “He didn’t fall.”

“Please be careful,” María said.

When we reached the road, María sat cross-legged beside me on the ground. Cars and trucks came and went, their lights growing, growing, then with a roar disappearing. I smelled diesel, gasoline, exhaust.

“It won’t take Ramon long to reach the pay phone. Then the ambulance will come,” María said.

“Ah,” I said. I dozed, then woke.

The ambulance lights pulsed red, and gravel crunched as the vehicle stopped beside me. María stood, a shadow in the headlights. Ramon had slipped away. The ambulance doors slammed.

“We found him hurt in the woods,” María said.

“Hey, Jamison, you speak Spanish?” The uniformed man leaned over me.

“He can’t move,” María said. She pantomimed my neck breaking.

Another voice spoke. “She thinks his neck is broken. Heartbeat’s good though, breathing good. I don’t think he’s hypothermic or dehydrated.”

He spoke to me. “Okay, buddy, we’re going to lift you into the ambulance. *Comprende?*”

“Grah,” I said.

“Know his name?” Jamison asked in Spanish.

“No,” María said.

“He must have been beaten up a few days ago. His cuts are already healing. What did you put on them?”

I remembered the leaves that had covered me. Healing leaves. Even then, God had been with me.

“You want to ride with us?” Jamison asked María.

“No, but I need the plywood and blanket,” she answered.

I felt a collar being fitted around my neck. I was lifted from the plywood onto a stretcher, then into the ambulance.

María stood beside me with the blanket over her arm. Her hand touched my cheek.

“*Vaya con Dios,*” she said. Go with God.

I will, I thought. The shard of glass was gone. I didn’t know my future, but whatever happened, God would be with me. “*Gracias,*” I said.