

Act of Mercy / *Gerald L. Guy*

Act of Mercy

By
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PALM COAST, FL

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Act of Mercy

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The fact our oceans are besieged by illegal dumping, poaching of its resources by ruthless fishermen, contamination from fossil fuels and unthinkable deposits of plastic waste is mind boggling. Most Americans and peoples of the world are unaware of the assault. In fact, the author was surprised to learn of the harmful impact plastic debris has on these once-pristine waters until researching “Act of Mercy.”

Non-profit groups such as Oceana, Greenpeace, Ocean Conservancy and Save the Oceans, to name just a few, supplied endless data the author was able to use in crafting this tale. He was shocked by what he found, and hopes you are too.

While there seems to be a sudden awareness about the damaging impact plastic straws have on marine life, banning them is just the tip of the iceberg. There is so much more that needs to be done. We hope “Act of Mercy” will inspire you to reduce your own use of plastics, volunteer for coastal cleanup projects and urge lawmakers to take action to protect the world’s oceans.

Consider this: One billion people across the globe woke up hungry today. Our rivers and oceans provide a source of food that can stave off starvation and provide sustenance for centuries to come, if public awareness and science-based management can take hold.

At the conclusion of this work of fiction, you will find an Afterword that contains suggestions on how each of us can step forward and lessen our impact on the environment we too often take for granted. Do your part.

FOREWORD

To say I love the ocean is an understatement. The Atlantic is my solace, my muse and my mistress. It breathes life itself. It's where I go to find peace and serenity from the chaotic inland world.

It is where the idea for "Act of Kindness" was born and the birthplace of "Act of Mercy," a sequel that magically materialized from the waves of the Atlantic shoreline.

Hurricane Dorian, which became a tropical storm when it skirted the coast of Florida, hung around for an unusually long time. I worried about what kind of damage it might have inflicted on the shoreline I loved. So, on a hot and humid day in September, I scampered down to Flagler Beach for inspection.

I found few signs of serious damage but lots of debris. When I came across an orange root that had washed ashore, the foundation of "Act of Mercy" seized my brain and the spirit of Jerome Browning recaptured my imagination.

I had several other projects to finish before I could tackle this fictional tale but, when the time was right, it flowed from my fingertips to my keyboard like lava from a volcano. Nothing could stop it. It took only two weeks to weave this tale of fantasy and science fiction. Along the way, I fell in love with Jerome Browning all over again. I hope you do too.

PREFACE

Happy Shores Retreat is the home of Jerome Browning and an assortment of characters, all of whom are in their golden years. All have endured some sort of calamity that has left them in the throes of poverty or homelessness. In exchange for the bulk of their Social Security checks, they are provided room and board.

For years ninetysomething Jerome Browning has been the cheery face and friend of all who arrive at the facility's doors. He is Mr. Personality and the guy everyone turns to when trouble knocks. Unbeknownst to all, Browning inherited a massive amount of money, bought the facility – formerly Crater Lake Retirement Center -- and oversees its operation incognito.

As this sequel begins, Browning is still doing what he always does, spreading kindness and offering strangers and residents a helping hand. This time, though, it is his benefactor who needs his help. Accompanied by a one-armed teenager, who is blind, he embarks on the most fantastic journey of his lifetime.

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DEDICATION

To everyone worldwide who is fighting to preserve our planet. May your hard work continue, and your commitment be rewarded.

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*“Only we humans make waste
that nature can’t digest.”*

Charles Moore, Marine Researcher

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PART 1

Discovery



CHAPTER ONE

Now that Jerome Browning had more money than he ever imagined, and operations at the Happy Shores Retreat, once known as Crater Lake Retirement Center, were running smoothly, he had all the time in the world to wander the shorelines of the Atlantic Ocean.

He did it frequently, at least once a week, as compared to the annual forays he was allowed when he first arrived at the once county-owned center he called home.

Back in those days, his annual visit to South Beach in St. Augustine was the sole demand of a wealthy benefactor whose contributions to the retirement center's activity fund arrived in Jerome's name. It was a blessing few understood but all appreciated. Each year, Browning was chauffeured to the beach and given instructions for the distribution of the annual donation, much to the chagrin of one former director.

The donations helped make living conditions better at the center, which was home to about thirty-five displaced citizens, as well as a handful of patients in need of rehabilitation services and medical supervision. The Browning Fund had financed a library complete with periodical, audio, video and electronic materials. One year, an elaborate computer system was purchased for residents' use. Another time, a piano was purchased to support a program of song among residents. Each year, living conditions at the stark facility made an upward tick, thanks to the donation.

It was the first Wednesday in August of 2018. As usual, Browning was wandering the shoreline at St. Augustine's South Beach, where a kind deed years earlier had resulted in an inheritance too voluminous to comprehend. As always, he was searching for a conch shell, uncommon for the northern shores of the Atlantic but essential, he thought, to communicating with his benefactor. It was through a conch, he first talked with his financial supporter, Maria Lewis Reynolds. She was an incredibly wealthy and kind descendent of an

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ancient race of Meryan people who could live on land or beneath the waters of the world's oceans.

Yes, the Meryans were the mermaids and mermen of ancient folklore. Once they were many, and they ruled most of the Northern Hemisphere alongside the Mayans, an extinct civilization that disappeared in the jungles of South America. The Meryans were the guardians of the sea. The Mayans ruled the lands above water. They lived in harmony, and both civilizations were kind, intelligent and wealthy.

By human years, Reynolds was beyond ancient. She had lived for more than six centuries, returning regularly to the sea in order to regenerate and fuel her existence on land. It was on one such occasion, Browning assisted an aging woman who was being pummeled by the waves. It was that simple "act of kindness" Reynolds found worthy of great reward. Browning learned of the great riches of his inheritance years later when he escorted his benefactor to the ocean one last time. She told him to always watch for conch shells during his walks; it was through the conch she promised to communicate with him, especially in times of need.

So, when Jerome saw a dark object rolling in the surf not far from where he walked, the 95-year-old Browning raced to see what it was. Indeed, it was a conch shell wrapped in the tentacles of a tubular root that had washed ashore.

Blessed with ageless physical stamina and uncommon agility, Jerome was surprised by the weight of the root he pulled ashore and away from the relentless surf. He untangled the conch, washed it off in the warm saltwater and lifted it to his ear. As always, when a muffled voice spoke to him, he was startled.

"Jerome, we need your help. Plant this root at Happy Shores, and await our instructions," the voice said.

Immediately, he was alarmed. What could be wrong? More importantly, it wasn't Maria's voice that spoke from the conch; it was one he did not recognize.

"Who is this?" he asked. "Is Maria okay?"

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The only sound he heard was the vibration of waves against the sand, not so unlike any other shell that might roll ashore with the changing of tides.

He looked up and down the shoreline, searching for anyone who might have tried to fool him with a faux communication. He reached deep into the shell to make sure he hadn't been duped by a transmitter planted inside. He found nothing.

"Darn you, Maria!" he called out, hoping his benefactor might hear him. "What kind of message was that? How am I supposed to cope with the worry you create with such a curt message?"

He turned to the ocean and shouted, "What do you want of me, whoever you are?"

Almost instantaneously, dark clouds blocked out the rays of the warm, summer sun. The aqua blue water turned dark and the wind began to howl. Jerome grabbed his visor to keep it from blowing from his head.

Something had caused a sudden and abrupt change in the weather. He had seen many weather phenomena since moving to the shores of Flagler Beach, but not as sudden as this.

A low rumble began to roll from the distant sky and across the turbulent waters. It picked up size and force with each breath he took. As the thunder increased to an ear-shattering force overhead, he gasped.

Then, lightning appeared three hundred yards offshore.

Jerome began to tremble as a waterspout ascended from the location where the lightning struck. It was as if some sort of leviathan was angrily rising from the dark depths. The violent torrent raced directly toward him. He was afraid but too awestruck to run.

The watery cyclone stopped within twenty yards of the ninety-five-year-old, soaking him in a frigid gale and surrounding his ankles in its white, foamy spawn. His hat was blown from his grasp, and he had to shield his eyes from the force of the biting wind and sand that pelted him.

He was spellbound by the storm's sudden fury.

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Fear forced his eyes to remain alert; awe kept him from turning away.

He dared not move.

The noise was deafening. It was if he was standing next to the mighty falls of Niagara. The roar of Mother Nature drowned out everything.

The conch, still clenched in his left hand, began to vibrate. He didn't notice at first. His body was fighting too hard to maintain balance in the freezing whirlwind. He turned his back on the watery twister, closed his eyes and raised the conch to his ear.

"Do not be afraid!" the kind voice echoed from within.

Browning was shocked. The world around him suddenly grew calm. He could hear seagulls calling and waves rolling against the shore. The sun reappeared to chase away the chill. His deep blue eyes marveled in wonderment.

The torrent had enveloped him. All around him water rushed in a clockwise torrent. Bait fish, seaweed and sand were suspended in the swirling current. He could see nothing but the sun above. Water was on all sides of him.

Suddenly, he realized he must be in the eye of the mighty storm. The air around him was heavy with salt but also fresh and comforting.

As his mouth dropped open in awe, Maria spoke to him.

"Silly man, why must you question everything asked of you?" she said softly.

"Is that you, my beautiful friend?" he asked.

"You've been watching too many movies again, Jerome. Did you think Neptune had released the Kraken?" she asked, laughing loudly.

"Something like that!" he said. "Are you okay?"

"Yes and no!"

"How may I help you?" he asked.

"That is more like the kind friend I have loved for all these years," Maria replied. "Please me one last time, Jerome. Do as you were told. Plant the root at Happy Shores. Place the conch next to the spot where it will grow and await your instructions."

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“What instruction? What do you need of me?” he begged.

There was no answer, though. As quickly as the torrent encircled him, it lost its power and crashed to the sandy shore. The sheer volume and power of the water carried him out to sea. His head popped out of the waves twenty-five feet away from the shore. He gasped for air and held the conch in both hands above his head as he made his way back to the shore, muttering with each step.

“It’s been three years since I’ve heard from the woman,” he whispered. “You’d think she’d have the decency to say hello and goodbye.”

Again, the conch began to vibrate, and he pulled it back to his ear as he stepped out of the surf.

“Goodbye, Jerome,” Maria said.

As her voice faded into the sound of the surf, she added, “I like what you’ve done at Happy Shores, too.”

“I’m at your service, as always,” he muttered and continued his march to shore. He realized he should never underestimate or question the Meryan princess.

He found his soaked Ohio State visor on the shore and pulled it over his dripping hair. He secured the conch firmly against his rib cage, grabbed the similarly saturated root and headed back to where a limo waited to return him to Happy Shores Retreat.

The driver, an old friend by the name of James, saw a soaking wet Browning walking to the car with his hands full and rushed to his aid.

“What in the world you got there, Mr. Browning?” James asked.

“You tell me, James,” he said, handing him the heavy root.

“Looks like something that washed up from the bottom of the ocean to me, sir. Whatcha plan on doin’ with it?”

“I’m gonna plant it in the courtyard at Happy Shores, as I was instructed,” Jerome said, holding up the conch shell so James could see it.

“Are the shells talking again, sir?” the driver asked.

“Yep! It was your old boss,”

“Ms. Reynolds?”

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“None other!”

“Bless her!” James said. “I almost came looking for you when I saw those dark clouds and that sudden flash of lightning. But the squall came ashore too quickly. I prayed you would survive, and you did.”

“Tell me about it; I got soaked, though.”

“Well, there are a couple towels inside. I will turn on the heat so you don’t catch cold.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ll be fine. You’re treating me like a feeble old man again. You know I do not appreciate it when you do that. I might be old, but I am certainly not feeble. I’ll just roll the window down and let the warm air dry me some. Let’s head back.”

James opened the door for Jerome and saw him securely seated in the back of the limo before apologizing.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Jerome. I didn’t mean to insinuate anything about you being feeble. I wish I was as energetic as you are, sir. I fear it is me who soon will be feeble.”

“And stop calling me sir!” Jerome barked but could not keep himself from smiling at his old friend. “You’ve been driving me here for quite some time now, James. I shouldn’t have to remind you every time to call me Jerome.”

“I know, sir! James is just a creature of habit. Oops! Sorry again, Jerome. You just sit back and enjoy the ride. It’s a beautiful day. Are there any stops you want to make along the way?”

“No, James! Today it’s Palm Coast or bust,” Jerome said with a soft chuckle.

CHAPTER TWO

The whole gang was waiting for him when he waltzed back into the lobby of the Happy Shores Retreat. Just off the entryway was an activity center where all the residents came to absorb sunshine, read, watch television and chat with their neighbors.

Harry Cunningham, an 83-year-old former insurance salesman was leaning against a walker and smiling when he saw Jerome enter, looking wet and disheveled.

“What happened, Jerome? Did you get swallowed by a whale?” he called out and everyone laughed.

“If I told you, you’d never believe me. So, I’m going to save my breath,” Browning replied smartly.

“Aw, c’mon. Give us the lowdown, you ornery old coot,” said Phil Carter, a 78-year-old retired teacher who had been Jerome’s sidekick since the two arrived at the center.

It was Eliza Hamilton Dearing, 66, who rushed to his side with concern. She grabbed him by the arm and said, “Don’t pay them any mind, Brownie. Come with me. I’ll help you out of your wet clothing and get you a hot cup of tea.”

“If I’d known you were going to be so helpful, Eliza, I might have showed up at this door soaking wet more often,” he said with a twinkle in his eye and a smile from ear to ear.

“Oh, stop it, you horny old man! We don’t want people to talk,” she whispered as she ushered him to his suite, located in the Reynolds wing of the facility.

Dearing and Browning had become best friends, so to speak, when he came to her rescue shortly after she arrived at the senior living facility. Eliza was the distant granddaughter of Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton, the scorned widow of Alexander Hamilton, founding father of the American banking system. The former Treasury Secretary was slain by Aaron Burr in a duel provoked by Hamilton’s adulterous behavior with one Maria Lewis Reynolds, who disappeared shortly

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after his passing.

Hamilton's angry widow invoked a curse on her female descendants that lasted for more than two hundred years. Hamilton women were bound by the spell to locate the ageless Reynolds woman or the ghost of the scorned widow would haunt them day and night. According to family legend, Reynolds was a witch or sorcerer who deceived the former friend of President George Washington. The death-bed curse was the jealous widow's final effort to restore her husband's name. Of course, that never happened. And with Browning's help the curse ended at Crater Lake, but not without some harrowing days and nights.

Maria Lewis Reynolds was not a sorcerer at all, but the Meryan princess who Browning aided on the shores of the Atlantic. She had survived for centuries because of her special metabolism, married several times and accumulated more wealth than Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates combined. When she was called back to her ocean world for her final days, she awarded all her wealth to Browning because of his solitary act of kindness.

More important than the vast fortune, Reynolds passed on the gift of health and longevity with a single kiss at the time of their very first meeting. Since then, Browning had never suffered a day of sickness, and he maintained the mind and physique of a man half his age. For his age, Jerome Browning was a freak of nature and the envy of all his friends.

As he energetically escorted Eliza to his suite and the promise of some hanky panky, he whispered, "You won't believe what happened at South Beach today. It was simply amazing."

"Shhh!" she said. "If you haven't noticed, we are not alone in this hallway."

Jerome stopped dead and turned to face his followers. He felt like the Pied Piper of German folklore. A string of a half dozen men and women were following, some arm-in-arm and others using walkers and wheelchairs.

"And where do you all think you're going?" Browning asked the

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group abruptly.

“Where do you think, you old curmudgeon?” Phil called out.

“We want to hear what happened at the beach,” Harry chipped in. “And I wish you’d slow down some. Not all of us are as spry as you, you know?”

“You’re a nosey bunch, ain’t ya?” he replied.

“We all don’t get out as much as you, Jerome. We’ve got lots of questions. What did you see? Has another contribution come our way? How bad was Flagler Beach damaged by Hurricane Michael?” Phillip asked.

“Did you go by Amy Stockton’s new restaurant? What’s it like? She’s asked if we could send a quartet there to sing to her patrons one weekend,” called out Betty Criswell, 68 and the retreat’s fabulous choir director.

Jerome looked at Eliza and then at the gang that crowded the hallway outside his suite. He shook his head, winked at his comely friend and asked politely, “Do you mind if I change out of these wet clothes before I answer all your questions?”

About that time, Harry had caught up and pushed past Jerome. He turned the handle on the door to Browning’s suite and walked right in.

“C’mon and get out of them clothes,” he said. “While we wait for you, we’ll make some coffee. Betty, go get some of those delicious chocolate chip cookies Jerome likes.

“Just don’t take all day drying off. If you need some help, I’ll have Phil call down to one of the nurses in the rehab wing to assist.” Harry chortled.

Letting his eyes roll and smiling at Eliza, Browning said, “Why don’t you just invite everybody into my home, and if either of you call a nurse to help me, it won’t be just chocolate chips you’ll be pulling from your backsides.

“Get everyone comfortable,” he said to his female escort and Harry. “I will be just a minute. Eliza, you know where the coffee and tea bags are. We’ll finish our discussion later.”

Jerome stomped off to his bedroom while a half dozen guests found

seats in his tiny living space.

WHEN JEROME RETURNED, dressed in a tan running suit and tennis shoes, everyone was seated and enjoying refreshments. The room turned deathly quiet. The only sound came from a blower that filtered the air and cooled every room from a new AC/heating unit Browning had installed shortly after taking ownership of the facility.

Everyone stared at him as he walked to the coffee maker and filled his insulated cup with the Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo on the side. Jerome leaned against the counter, sipped his coffee and waited.

"Are you going to just stand there or are you going to tell us what happened," Harry begged.

Nobody, other than Eliza, knew Browning was behind the ownership change and all the improvements at Happy Shores. They still looked forward to the annual donation; it was like Christmas in August. Jerome was happy to go along.

Today, though, he stared at his friend and then at the insignia on his coffee mug and smiled.

"I'll tell you and your friends, Harry, if you can tell me who played first base for the Cleveland Indians in 1948, the last time they won the World Series."

"Aww, c'mon, Jerome. That's not fair," Phil shouted out as some of the women groaned.

Fortunately for the group, Harry was sitting next to Dan "The Man" McMahon, who was the second-best expert on Major League Baseball history behind Browning. Harry was far back in third place but a formidable trivia expert.

The two put their heads together immediately and began debating and tossing names back and forth. Jerome sipped more coffee and waited.

"You're so mean," Eliza whispered.

Glee broke across Browning's face.

All waited for the debate to end. When Harry looked up, everyone was holding their breath, hoping the pair conjured the correct answer.

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“The best first baseman in all of baseball in 1948 was the Yankees’ George McQuinn. Frankly, he belongs in the Baseball Hall of Fame,” McMahon said.

“That wasn’t the question,” Browning said smugly.

“All right! All right!” Harry said. “Eddie Robinson was six feet tall and weighed more than two hundred pounds. He played first base for your beloved Indians in 1948 but wasn’t terribly productive because he was coming off a broken ankle in 1947. Now spill the beans!”

“As always, I am impressed, gentleman,” their host said. “But I was going to tell you what happened anyway.”

Harry and Dan blew razberries in response. Some guffawed while others giggled.

“Get on with it then,” Phillip urged.

“And not another one of my cookies for you until you fess up, you mean and ornery cuss,” Betty said.

“Okay! The good news is there will be another donation to the Browning Fund this year.”

Everybody cheered and clapped.

“But the funds will be used outside of these walls,” Browning added.

“What?” Harry called out.

“But we requested...” came from another.

“I know! I know!” Jerome consoled. “The fund cannot finance everything in the course of one year. These things take time.”

“Are we getting a new mini-bus to transport us to the mall and sporting events?” McMahon asked.

“No!”

“How about a picnic pavilion?” someone else queried.

“No, but that’s a good idea and, if there is any money left, we might give that a go. The fund is getting \$65,000 to make a paved walkway around Crater Lake. It will be wheelchair accessible and benches will be strategically added so the beauty of the lake can be enjoyed by visitors and residents alike.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Eliza said. “It would give us all a great

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opportunity for exercise while enjoying the great outdoors. Crater Lake is beautiful and full of life, too.”

“Too hot to be outdoors,” McMahan mused. “I’d rather we’d get a mini-bus to cart us to events around the area.”

“You seem to be able to afford taxi service for all your special needs right now, Dan,” Browning replied. “I don’t see any reason why that should change. Maybe next year.”

“Yeah, sure!” he replied.

“Thanks, Jerome!” Phil said. “I know a lot of thought and consideration goes into the financial decisions that are made. I, for one, think the trail around the lake will be a wonderful addition. Most of us could use the exercise.”

“Hear! Hear!” was the response from several others in the group.

“Now, tell us how you got so wet. Were you chasing mermaids again?” Betty asked with a snicker.

If she only knew, Jerome thought before answering. “Honestly, I fell asleep on the beach and a rogue wave must have crashed the shoreline. Of course, there was nobody around to warn me. I got drenched.”

“That’s it?” McMahan said. “Jeez, I was hoping you got lucky or something.”

“Yeah, we all were hoping somebody had to douse you and your femme fatale with a cold bucket of water to get the two of you to part,” Harry said as everyone groused and got up to leave.

“What’s on the menu for supper tonight?” Phil asked as the group departed, leaving Eliza and Jerome behind.

When they were alone, Jerome confided in Eliza all that had taken place at South Beach. When he finished, he said, “All I have to do now is plant this thing and wait for instruction.”

“And you have no idea what those instructions might pertain to?” she asked.

“No! But I got the feeling something was amiss. I detected it in the tone of Maria’s voice. Other than that, I haven’t a clue.”

“Where are you going to plant it?” she asked.

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“I think right in the middle of the courtyard. If it grows into a nice tree or something, we’ll put some benches around it. It will make a nice place to read in the shade or just enjoy the outdoors.

“I’ll plant it late tonight when everyone is in bed. Would you care to join me for a midnight stroll of the grounds, ma’am?”

“Why I would be delighted, Mr. Browning. But first, let’s go grab some supper and enjoy a quiet evening. You must be tired after enduring an afternoon of shock and awe.”

“Frankly, I never felt better. I think that waterspout invigorated me. Maybe after supper, I’ll put those wet clothes back on and you can help me out of them.”

Eliza snickered and said, “Why, Mr. Browning, it is so easy for you to make a lady blush.”

Then, they walked side-by-side to the dining room.

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