

The Last Man

She could still feel the sting of the needle as she reached to pull the stop signal on the bus. The redness was starting to fade around her new tattoo, a rose with red blooms climbing her forearm. She was excited to show her classmates this new piece of body art when she got to her anatomy class. Body art was the one extravagance she allowed herself and it had taken her six months to save the three hundred dollars for this tattoo.

Maria Diaz was a second-year nursing student at the downtown branch of the local University. Even though the bus was a couple of minutes late, she still had plenty of time to get to class before the lecture started. As she exited the bus, Maria noticed an elderly man sitting in the bus stop shelter. He seemed out of place in the throng of students rushing to and from class. First, he was old, very old, maybe in his eighties or even nineties. His wispy white hair was wind-blown and disheveled by the draft the buses created. He had bushy eyebrows above eyes that stared, without appearing to look at anything. Obviously, he was deep in thought.

The man wore a three-piece gray flannel suit, a starched white shirt with a red and yellow striped tie. Maria thought it strange for anyone to be wearing such an outfit on a warm summer day in the city. On the bench next to him was a highly varnished black walnut box tied by a faded red, white, and blue ribbon. A metal cane that had a small platform with four rubber feet leaned next to the box. It was the kind of cane used by the elderly with weak legs and balance problems. *I hope he finishes his business before the afternoon heat hits*, Maria thought as she walked to class.

After Class Maria and two friends went out to get a coffee at the nearby Starbucks. As they passed the bus stop, she saw the man still sitting there with his box and cane. *He hasn't moved in over an hour, strange. I wonder if he's lost?* Her nurse-like compassion kicked in. "Excuse me.", she said to her friends, "I think there's something not quite right with that old man over there." She turned and walked over to the bus stop and sat next to him. The man seemed unaware that a young woman in bib overall shorts, a black tee shirt, and a rose tattoo had taken the seat next to him.

"Excuse me sir but are you OK?" She asked.

He turned and looked at her with dull blue eyes and said nothing.

"I saw you sitting here an hour ago. Are you waiting for a bus?"

"Yes, number 37." he replied, almost in a whisper.

Maria thought *"I wonder if the 37 stops here"* She rose and looked towards the Kiosk with the bus schedules. Yes, the 37 stops here every half-hour. My God he's missed two, possibly three buses, she thought as returned to her seat next to the man. Maria took three or four deep breaths and said. "I'm Maria Diaz, a nursing student. May I ask where you are going?"

"Looking straight ahead, he said, "To the cemetery, the veterans circle".

"Do you know that you've missed at least two buses? How are you doing?"

He turned and stared directly into her big brown eyes "I don't know."

Maria was a little taken aback by his admission. He looked too dignified and proud to say he wasn't just fine. *Maybe he has a touch of dementia?* "Do you know the 37 has come by here already?"

"Yes, I just wanted some time to think. I'm a bit uneasy."

"Are you from out-of-town?"

"Yes, I'm here on some very difficult business."

"Can I help in some way?"

"No, but thank you"

She decided to stay with him until the next bus arrived. They sat quietly together for a few minutes. She looked at the cane and realized the man would have trouble walking once he got to the cemetery. "I have an Idea, why don't I call you an Uber."

"An Uber?"

"It's kind of a taxi. It will take you to where you want to go and even wait there for you. Much better than the bus."

"Uber, Uber why yes that sounds better. How do I get one."

"I call one for you." With that, Maria pulled out her cell phone, looked up the number, and called. "I'd like to have an Uber come to the bus stop in front of the University on Sixth Street. She paused then added "Make sure it's a full-sized car or a van. The passenger has trouble walking."

A few minutes later a silver Toyota minivan pulled up next to the bus stop. A tall thin Dark-skinned man jumped out of the driver's seat and came over to help his passenger. He wore baggy pants, a loose-fitting shirt, and a small white crocheted cap that contrasted with his swarthy skin. The old man struggled to get onto his feet and leaned heavily on his cane. Maria pick up the wooden box and carried it to the car. The driver opened the side door, then came over to the old man and offered his arm. Slowly the pair made their way to the open door. Maria followed, thinking "He is going to need help walking at the cemetery". Maria set the box in the old man's lap, then climbed into the passenger's seat. She looked at the ID photo of the Driver "Ibrahim Moussa".

"Mr Moussa please take us to the veteran's circle in the cemetery."

On the ride out the man was silent while Maria started to converse with the driver. "Mr. Moussa, where are you from?"

"Sudan" he smiled as he answered her question.

"How long have you been in America?"

"Three years"

"Your English is very good."

"Thank you miss I practice very hard, every day."

"What did you do in Sudan?"

I was a teacher in the village school. I love teaching."

Why did you come to America?"

"I had to flee. One day bandits came. They killed many, especially educated people. By the grace of Allah was able to get away. "

"Darfur?" a voice from the back seat asked.

"You know it?" The driver said.

"Yes, The war was in the news. It must have been horrible."

"It was but that is past. Now I am in America. I am happy and someday I will be a teacher again. It is such a good country. I am a humble driver but I am richer than I ever dreamed possible. Praise be to Allah."

After a half-hour drive, they arrived at a low grassy mound with many concentric rings of headstones surrounding a flag pole and a stone bench. Maria took the box while Ibrahim helped the old man out of the van. The three of them slowly walked up to the bench. The Old man sat down. "I'd like to rest a while."

Ibrahim looked at his watch. "It is time to pray, excuse me." He went back to his van took a small carpet from the back and then looked up to the sun. Ibrahim walked over to a maple tree, laid the carpet on the ground facing east, and knelt in prayer.

Maria watch as she sat on the bench next to the old man. After a few minutes, he asked "I bet you want to know what's in the box, Maria?"

"Yes now that you mentioned it, I am curious."

"Whiskey, very old whiskey." He paused then spoke with a halting voice. "Gawd it was awful an island made in hell. No water, and hardly any vegetation left after the shelling, Just gray gritty dust. It is amazing why anyone would want it, much less spend their lives defending it. What was worse, we attacked it. I was in the second wave. We ran over a beach littered with dead men, towards others that would soon be dead. Madness, pure madness."

He paused as tears ran down his cheek. "And after two weeks of fighting, there were less than 40 of us left. 40 out of 150 who landed. Our captain and most of the officers were dead. We were no longer a fighting unit. We were done, used up. Back on board the ship, the lieutenant commanding the company, called us together. He was a young college kid who had joined the company just before we sailed to that island. He started the meeting by quoting Shakespeare. "*We few, we happy few, we band of brothers*". Most of us just stared blankly at him while some others smirked. We just wanted to forget. But he had an idea, a proposition. He said many English units have a tradition, a last man or men ceremony. He was going to get a fifth of the best whiskey he could find and put it in a box with two shot glasses. Then the last two living members of our company will come together to drink a toast to the bravery and comradeship we forged on the God forsaken island. At the time we didn't think much of the idea, I know I sure didn't."

He sat silently for a long minute. "Funny but over the years his band of brothers idea took hold. Yes, we were a band of brothers. You probably don't understand, but something happened. I remembered those days with both terror and fondness. Weird, but I never wanted to live so much as on that island, never so afraid yet never so alive. I'm not a hero, but I know I'm not a coward. Just one of thousands of kids who did the best they could in a horrible situation."

He took the box and with shaking hands undid the ribbon. He opened it and took out the bottle and the two glasses. He gave Maria the glasses and the bottle then set the empty box on the ground. "In this circle is the grave of our captain who died on the third day of the battle. We respected him so much that this is where the last two would come for our final toast. It's a beautiful place, don't you agree?"

"Yes, very beautiful" Maria said "Where is the other veteran?"

"Oh, he passed away last month, so now it's just me." Will you hand me the bottle, please."

He took it in his age-spotted hand and attempted to twist off the cap. He couldn't move it. "Damn old age." He cursed.

Maria tried but couldn't. She called to Ibrahim. "Mr Moussa will you help us please." The driver jogged up the mound to Maria. "Can you open this for us?" She asked

Ibrahim took the bottle of dark amber liquid in his large hands, gave the cap a twist, loosened it, and handed it back to Maria.

Maria passed the open bottle to the old man whose hands were shaking. Seeing this she took the bottle back. "I think it would be best if I poured the whiskey."

"Yes, Yes, thank you. Then he looked over to the young student nurse. "I don't like to drink alone. Won't you please join me?"

Maria thought for a second afraid she would be intruding on a sacred moment. But the old man said "Please. I think the boys would enjoy a toast from a pretty young woman." He slowly rose. Maria stood up next to him, holding the bottle and the two shot glasses. She handed one to him and then poured a shot first for the veteran and then for herself. He stood erect and looked down over the graves, then slowly raised his glass. Maria followed his lead. With a strong voice, he pronounced "To them men of Baker Company, Fifth Marine Division, a true band of brothers." Both he and Maria downed the shot of whiskey. It burned her throat and tasted awful. She grimaced and coughed. Then the old veteran said, "Pour another for each of us."

When Maria put a shot in each glass. The old man raised his arm "To all the men who fought there, Japanese and American. To all of them, God bless their souls." They drank the second shot and sat down on the stone bench. Ibrahim who had been standing behind them head down in reverence for the occasion, came around the bench and seated himself next to them. The three of them stared solemnly across the rows of graves while above them the American flag waved in the warm summer breeze.