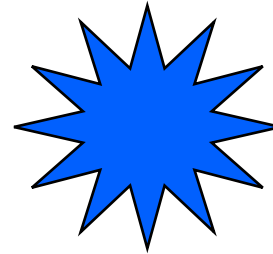


A LIVING GIFT FROM A DYING MAN
"Death and the blue light"
by Judith Fraser



"I sent that last rocket to the moon," Uncle Bobby, my mom's youngest brother, said with a deep chuckle as we sat at his kitchen table in Torrance. "Sure was a beaut." He picked up a packet of Camel's sitting next to his can of beer and banged it against his fist. A slender white cigarette popped out. Even a diagnosis of cancer couldn't help him stop his smoking habit.

He put the cigarette between his teeth, flicked open his Colibri lighter, and lit the end all in one graceful movement. It was one he'd been practicing since he was a child of ten, before we had warning signs about tobacco addiction, and before it was against the law to sell to minors. The tip of his Camel turned red, a softer tone than the stop light on the corner across the street. The inhale sounded like an angry rattle snake, while the exhale took on more of the sound of the air coming out of a punctured tire. Grey smoke circled his head, drifted out the open window behind him and mingled with the midday rays cascading over the potted lavender Geraniums on his balcony. He loved taking care of his flowers.

Aunt Gisela, his third wife, stopped whatever she was doing in the adjacent living room, scurried to the side of the table, put her hands on her hips, and shook her head from side to side. Dark brown ringlets bounced gently against her square face. Deep lines sprang up on her forehead. "Stehem, stehaw, stawe," she mumbled, or something like that. I couldn't always decipher her charming way of speaking Cuban-English, but her message was always loud and clear.

At forty-five, twenty years younger than my Uncle, she was his opposite. Quick as a wink, she pulled out a can of Lysol from one of the big pockets in her red dotted apron, held it in front of her like a metal shield and pressed her finger against the top button. "SSSST," the scent of pine cut through the tobacco smell like a knife. My uncle coughed and waved his hand in front of his face. "You tryin' to kill us with that stuff." He smashed his Camel against the bottom of the crystal ashtray and reached for his beer.

"Ju put away dat beer'n drink papaya juice," she ordered. "Fresh, I make today." She zipped by us like an athlete running a marathon, took a large pitcher of papaya juice out of the refrigerator, poured it into a small glass, and set it in front of him. The "tip-tip-tip" of her shoe against the white linoleum floor kept time with the "tick-tick-tick" of the clock on the adjacent living room wall as she waited for him to comply.

Uncle Bobby loosened his long thin fingers from around the beer and clasped them around the juice. "I don't know why I put up with you." He downed the glass in one swig, then reached again for the beer.

"ImpoSSebul," Aunt Gisela sighed like a hurt child. "I try save ju, ju try da patience of Job." Tears flashed in her eyes. The red dots on her apron jumped onto her cheeks. "Ju Momma'n Poppa jus waitin' across da bridge to take ju away from me."

I glanced up at the photo of my maternal grandparents hanging on the kitchen wall to my left and smiled. It was originally black and white, as all photos of the 1900's were, but Uncle Bobby had it tinted. A beautiful woman and a handsome man holding a small child stared back at me. The man, my grandfather, was wearing a black suit with a tie to match and a white shirt. The woman, my grandmother, was wearing a pink high neck blouse trimmed with white lace. The child, my mother's older sister Ann, was dressed in a yellow dress with a peter pan collar. Swirls of white halos circled around their heads and shoulders, then faded into a soft blue background. After the photo was taken, my grandparents went on to have eleven more children. Uncle Bobby was the eleventh in line. Nine, including my mom, are all dead now.

"Yup, ju Momma'n Poppa, brothers'n seesters, gettin' closer all da time. Ju makin' it hard for me. I no want you to cross dat damn bridge." Aunt Gisela bit down hard on her words.

I leaned back in the chair and ran the palms of my hands over the top of my jeans. “You think there is a bridge?” I asked Aunt Gisela. “Ju betcha,” she said enthusiastically. “But, only good peoples get to cross.” She stared again at my Uncle Bobby. If it was possible to transform a rebel into an angel with a look, she’d have my bet, hands down.

“Hog wash and horse patootie, Gisela” Uncle Bobby said. “You’ve got more hare brained beliefs than anybody I’ve ever run across in my whole life.” He reached for his pack of Camels. “And I’ve known quite a few hare brained people.”

I bit down on my lower lip. Maybe I was one of those hare brains. A woman who lived down the street from me in Hollywood used to talk to dead people. She did it for a living. We called her Doctor Mary, but she wasn’t a doctor, not in the usual medical sense anyway. I never knew whether to believe her or not, but her stories were fascinating.

“This young man rang the doorbell one day,” Doctor Mary said as we sat together having a cup of tea in her living room one day. “And, being the trusting soul I am, course I let him in. He was dressed up real nice, a pin stripe suit, white shirt, red tie.” She fingered the loose, grey strands of hair from around her cherub face and brushed them back towards her ponytail. “But, he wasn’t happy. A perfume of pain followed him in my door and sat with him on my sofa.” Doctor Mary’s chest expanded and contracted as she took in more air to help her get through the memory. “He told me that he had hidden an old insurance policy in his filing cabinet under the ‘I’s and asked if I’d call his wife and tell her. When I questioned why he didn’t call and tell her—he just shook his head and said, ‘I tried, but she won’t listen to me.’ After he gave me the number and I agreed to call—he left. It seemed like such a little thing to do, so I called. Right then and there I picked up the phone.”

Doctor Mary pursed her thin lips and made a smacking sound like she was tasting the call all over again. “A woman answered,” she said. “It was his wife. When I told her what her husband said, she went into convulsions. Her gasps made it sound like she was having a heart attack at the other end of my phone line. Scared the beJesus out of me.” Doctor Mary’s words rushed out like water released from a dam.

“Turned out, her husband was dead. Died a month before. Isn’t that something? And he walked right into my living room. Usually when I talk to someone on the other side it’s through my thoughts. This was person to person.” She fanned herself with her right hand. The one with the diamond ring on it. “The wife called me back after she found the insurance policy and thanked me, but she didn’t have to. It felt good to be able to help—and amazing to sit face to face with a ghost.”

The stop light beyond the kitchen window turned green. Uncle Bobby lit another cigarette and chuckled. He seemed so sure there wasn’t anything that happened after this life. But, I wasn’t. Saying anything out loud would just provoke a fight—so I kept my thoughts to myself. There wasn’t any way to prove a possibility. A soft breeze blew some of the fine strands of my blonde hair against my eyes. I brushed them away.

“Your kids want some of the stickers I had made up?” he asked. ‘I’ meant the company he worked for. He was an inspector in the aerospace division of Rockwell International. A company that employed thousands.

“Sure.” My kids were a little old for stickers, but I liked that he asked.

“I sent some heavy duty folks into space.” Uncle Bobby rifled through a vanilla folder and carefully pulled out round stickers of the: Columbia, Challenger, Spacelab 3, and Discovery.

“When I was a kid, my brothers read comic books that showed something like this on the covers,” I said. I pointed to the picture of the Challenger racing across a deep blue sky, its rockets leaving a trail of vapor pointing toward Earth. “We thought it was all just fantasy back then.”

“Yep. It’s a whole new world,” Uncle Bobby said. “Soon we’ll be living on other planets.”

The next time I saw my uncle it was at the Little Company of Mary Hospital in Orange County. He was unconscious. “Ju come, please,” my aunt had said earlier on the phone. Of course I complied.

I sat at the foot of his bed listening to the painful sounds of the rattle snake and flat tire as I watched his chest rise and fall, rise and fall. Aunt Gisela stood in the doorway, her shoulder against the frame.

Then—suddenly—it was quiet. Painfully quiet. Aunt Gisela gasped and ran for the nurse. I stared at my uncle wondering how it was possible to be alive one second and gone the next. It didn't make sense. My mind went blank.

A few minutes later his nurse rushed in. She checked for any vital signs. But, it was only a formality. We all knew he was gone. "God be with you," she sighed as she gently held her right hand over his forehead.

I'd never been in a room when someone died before. I'd only seen them later—at the funeral home. It was hard to know what to expect. My thoughts scrambled as I searched for what to think, what to do. Time stopped. Seconds seemed like hours. I felt helpless. I wanted to do something, but I couldn't move. I sat perfectly still and watched my Uncle's lifeless body.

Then I saw it. A thin electric blue light moved easily through his mouth and headed for the sunlight just beyond the window. I blinked my eyes and shook my head questioning this incredible vision. Here I was, sitting in a room, watching something that seemed impossible. Something I'd never seen before. Something coming out of a man who didn't believe anything happened after death.

"Damn," I whispered to Uncle Bobby. "I wish you were here to see this."

"Maybe I am," he whispered back. I looked around, but I couldn't see anything.

Uncle Bobby had mentioned space ships taking us to other planets. Now, he was headed into space without a ship.

I found Aunt Gisela in the hallway. "What to do? What to do?" she cried.

"Nothing," I said softly as I wrapped her in my arms.

"I try keep him here. No good. No good." Her words came out in spurts. "Maybe I wrong. Maybe dare's no bridge. No way to loved ones."

I patted her back and held her tighter. "I think there is a bridge," I said softly. "It's blue and narrow and reaches into forever."

"For sure?" She pulled away and looked up at me.

"For sure." I lifted her chin. "And everybody crosses over it. Not just those who believe or those who led a good life. Angels—everybody—even rebels."

Aunt Gisela's face softened, her eyes glowed with hope.