

Mothers' Days

By Michael Fine

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After a twelve-hour shift lifting table-tops, Gloria Seal was in no condition to linger in front of the Coke machine with the rest of the shift or to sit on the wall in front of the courthouse with the bunch on day-release from the jailhouse down the street.

It was the first warm day of early spring. There was still light in the mauve and orange sky over Newman's Ridge. The early night air was warm and encouraging as it is later in the spring but Gloria could not persuade herself to look for more signs of what was coming than that.

She had worked the overtime. They fired you if you don't work it, but she knew her mother would be mad and tired and more difficult than ever and would think she had stopped on her way. She had enough trouble from the people at work who thought she was the stupidest person alive.

Gloria was twenty-nine and nothing about her was quick. She had broad low cheekbones, dull eyes, a square frame and an expressionless face. Her hands were square and her fingers blunted. Even her skin seemed thick. Her back was broad and her arms strong from lifting table tops all day long. She did not look attractive, even to herself, but then, it had never seemed important to try to look like anything, as any notice she had ever attracted had brought her pain or ridicule.

She was also slow. She knew it herself. She couldn't ever guess what was going to happen next. She couldn't figure right and she was always making stupid mistakes. She'd spent nine hundred dollars on a truck because someone told her the payments were only sixty-five dollars a month and she could afford it on her salary. Come to find out she'd forgot to figure in her trailer payment and anyway the truck was no good.

That day she'd stacked ten tabletops like they told her and then stacked another ten because she forgot about the first lot and they all stood around smoking while she made the second pile. No one even offered to help.

She had tried to be quicker, to be sure, but it just wasn't there.

But when Gloria was reminded of her mistakes, her accidents and her slowness, she did not include her three children among her faults although her mother did. It was true that her children had been conceived almost by accident, by fathers who found their way to her by chance and then never again acknowledged knowing her at all. It was also true she'd carried all three without realizing that she was pregnant at all. And it was true as well that the whole town snickered at how she'd given birth -- easily and without warning -- to one in a parking lot of the funeral home; to one in the locker room at work and the last one, the girl, in the bathroom of her trailer with her mother standing and pounding on the flimsy wooden door wanting to know what was taking her so long in there.

Still, Gloria, after the initial surprise of those births, was glad that the two boys and now the infant girl were with her and had come from her, from *her*. It was more than a surprise. It was a sort of miracle, the only unexpectedly good thing that had ever happened in Gloria's life.

It didn't matter. Her mother never let her forget that she and her children were more trouble than they were worth.

When she came home at night, her mother always had a list. Travis, the six-

year-old had broken the lamp and brought worms into the kitchen, had the earache and had been fidgety all day. Taylor, the three-year-old, was smothering and fevering and played in mud and wouldn't eat. Impenema, the baby, had diarrhea and cried and cried so her grandmother had the headache and needed money for the doctor and her headache powders and was going home to bed.

Every night there were dishes in the sink and soiled clothing for Gloria to wash. Every night, there were toys, used pampers, and overturned pots all over the house for Gloria to put away. That was her life.

She understood from her mother that she'd gotten exactly what she deserved.

There were no lights on at her trailer when Gloria pulled up in the front of it. Gloria sat for a moment in the idling truck.

Of the three children, Impenema had become the most important to her. A girl. Gloria herself was the only girl. She had two brothers, older now, big men who weren't quick either, but did not suffer on account of that because of their size and strength. They joined their mother in blaming Gloria for being slow, for not being more like them, for stumbling and making mistakes. One drove a bulldozer. The other worked with Gloria making table-tops. He resented her for being there as his slow sister and he ignored her at work.

Perhaps it was because they were so much alike that having Impenema thrilled her. Perhaps it was like a second chance, a chance to make things better for the baby, a chance to protect her as no one had protected Gloria herself.

Gloria's mother didn't laugh at her, but she didn't like or understand Gloria either. Gloria knew. Every time her mother said something about one of her kids, Gloria knew she was thinking that this sickness and mess wouldn't have happened if Gloria had not gotten pregnant in the first place, and she would have not gotten pregnant if Gloria hadn't been slow. It was no different in childhood, when she was blamed for every fight after she got picked on, blamed for everything that was stolen from her or that she lost, blamed for everything she forgot. The truth was that her mother blamed her and was angry at her for being who she was, even though she could have been no other.

In time, Gloria came to understand that her mother was slow herself, that her mother was a slow unpleasant woman with a nasty mouth. But since she had no one else (Gloria's brothers having become unable to stomach their mother in any but small doses) Gloria endured her mother's tongue because, like Gloria, her mother could not be other than herself either.

The children were asleep in front of the television set. Inpenema lay on her back on the couch, a four-month-old with a bottle propped so the nipple was in her mouth. The house was a wreck. Gloria's mother was nowhere to be seen. Gloria was late. Overtime. Her own fault.

When the toys were picked up and the dishes put away, Gloria, herself barely able to move, lifted the boys, first one and then the next, and carried them to their beds. It was nine o'clock, just before the baby would wake for her evening bottle.

Gloria made herself a sandwich for the next day, and then made sandwiches for both of the boys. She made them dinner as well because she was certain to have to work overtime again the next day. Then she mixed the baby's formula.

Suddenly she became aware that something wasn't right.

Impenema was too still.

Gloria rushed to her.

It was a week before Gloria went back to work, and even after she did, she spent her evenings, the cool long evenings of the mountain spring, in the little family cemetery where they had buried her daughter. Gloria sat, each night, in her truck at the foot of the tiny grave.

The cemetery, which had perhaps twenty graves, sat on a hilltop overlooking the Clinch River. Gloria sat while the redbud came and went, while the dogwoods came on, while the nights turned cool into what her people called redbud and dogwood winters, through to the time the black locusts blossomed, when clusters of heavy white blooms pulled the branches of all the trees lining the roads down, as if they were bowing or praying, as if the roads and the brush around them had a new coat of paint and were glad for it.

Gloria went up there not to think. That was all she wanted to do.

They called it crib death and they said it came without warning, that there's no way to prevent it; that it wasn't her fault, but Gloria knew they blamed her anyway. Everyone in town

looked at her and didn't and then looked away. They didn't say anything much to her, but she could hear them talking to each other when she turned away. At the funeral parlor, it was her mother and brothers they came to talk to, to console, leaving her alone in her numbing grief.

And sure enough they sent the child protection people, the welfare, out to investigate. The welfare people went away after making her tell the story one more time, not looking at her either. But she knew everyone in the county blamed her nonetheless.

Gloria's mother blamed her too. She said Gloria should have found the child right away, should have cried louder for help, should have taken her to the doctor, should not have tried to work, should never have gotten pregnant in the first place.

It didn't matter. Gloria knew her mother's hatefulness was there to keep Gloria from blaming *her*, but Gloria didn't think like that. Gloria said nothing.

Still nothing hurt worse than the blame Gloria put on herself. The way them people didn't look at her, the way her momma talked at her, all that hurt but that hurt was nothing compared to what Gloria would have felt if no one had said a thing. She could have saved Impenema. She could have prevented it. She shouldn't have trusted her mother. She shouldn't have worked no overtime. She should have waked Impenema when she come home.

But what was worser was how Gloria knew it was true. Everything they had been saying and thinking for years. This proved it. Everything was Gloria's fault. For being Gloria.

One Sunday night in early May she left her car for the first time to stand at the foot of the grave.

It was evening. There was no sound, and Gloria could still see for miles down to the river. The special red light of early dusk made the hills wise and warm, as if illuminated from the inside. Everything: hills, trees, the brush, the ground itself glowed as if its inner meaning was visible to those who only had to look to understand.

The grave itself was a mound of hard red clay, rising from the rounded crest of the hillside. Around it, Gloria noticed now, were ground-flowers in the grass -- yellow buttercups, white field pansies, and low blue violets that had come on since she had first stood there six weeks before.

She picked a buttercup and pulled the flower apart, petal by petal, thinking. Then she stooped and picked more.

The lights were off again in her trailer when she got home and the boys barely woke when she lifted them, wrapped them in blankets, and carried them to the truck.

On the way out of town Gloria stopped at her mother's trailer and left the bouquet of ground-flowers in a small blue vase on her stoop.

It was Mothers' Day, 1988.

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