



Gia

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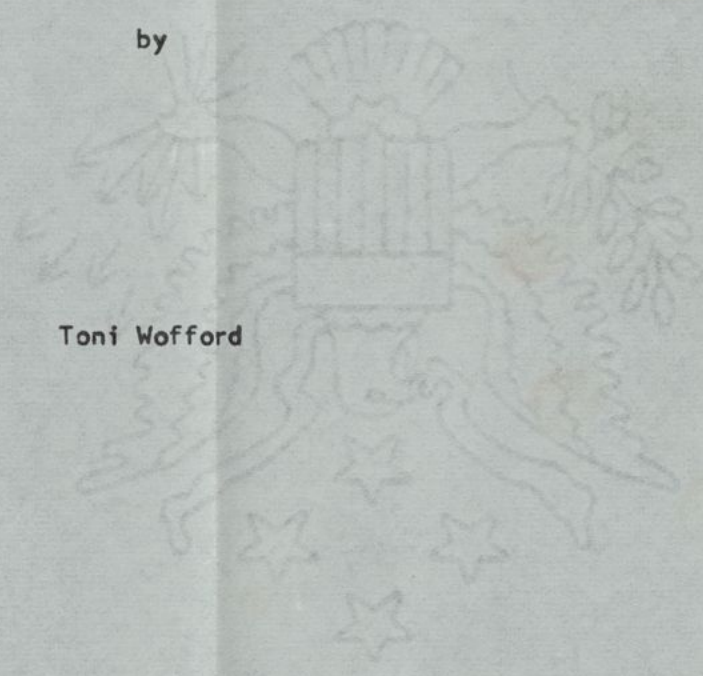
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GIA

by

Toni Wofford



GIA

Despite the fact that she was fourth in a litter of nine children, and lived on the nondescript skirts of Guava, Texas, Gia escaped anonymity. Her distinction came from the complete indifference with which a rusty nail was met when it punched clear through her foot when she was five years old. Consequently, her left leg was much smaller than her right and her foot, large and twisted, flopped when she walked like the broken wing of a bird. Her infirmity kept her virtuous for many years, but when she was eighteen she gave birth out of wedlock to twin boys. In Guava, bastards are the rule rather than the exception and no particular attention would have been paid to Gia at all except for her steadfast refusal to name the father. So adamant was she in not exposing her lover that the community quickly came to the conclusion that the progenitor of those lusty boys was Father Cornejo—the local priest. Having agreed in its collective mind that this was the case, they dismissed the subject and seldom if ever dotted their gossip with mention of Gia or her sons.

Once when the boys were eleven months old, their mother took them to the river and let them wallow about on the shore while she washed clothes. The elder soundlessly and effortlessly tumbled into the water and before Gia noticed him, he had floated out to the middle of the stream where the current pulled him down and away. Gia, while raising up a cotton skirt to let the water run through it, got only a glimpse of a chubby wet body being carried out of sight. She would have screamed but there was only cold air where her voice should have been.

After the death of this child, Gia became foolish in the handling of the other. She covered him with kisses in the morning and made crowns of flowers for his hair. In the evening, if he spilled his bowl of coffee on the floor, she, with the back of her hand, would strike him a blow which spun him from the bench to the floor. When he shrieked in pain and confusion, she beat him to fructify guilt. So this child grew strong and beautiful in body but poorly in spirit. He moved

from bewilderment and fear to surliness and belligerence. By the time he was twelve, he was well on his way to becoming a talented killer, had not he gone to a rodeo where a horse's hoof caught him behind the ear. His last awareness was of bluebonnets growing by fence posts and the sound of bone.

So deeply did Gia grieve over the death of this son that had she any mind to speak of she would have lost it.

Now she was thirty. Her sisters and brothers had married, or run away, or been imprisoned. One sister had become a rather successful prostitute. Her mother worked, as she always had, as a cook on a ranch eighteen miles away and her father's appearances were sporadic enough to be negligible. There was no one to cry to, or with.

Thus, with her grief tucked securely in her bosom, Gia walked, one day, the seven miles to Corbett, Texas, which, unlike Guava, was a community large enough to have a mayor.

She entered a tavern, there, which was situated on a street which ran parallel to, and twelve feet from, a railroad track. The tavern smelled, strangely enough, not of liquor but of grease. Sitting by the window without a penny or a prospect of one, Gia ordered a bottle of beer. The waiter, rolling a toothpick about on his tongue, nosed the bottle deep into the glass so there should be no wasteful foam. Gia drank, slowly but without pause. It did not occur to her to think whether the taste was pleasant or unpleasant. She drank another and then asked for gringo whiskey. The smell of it, which made her eyes burn, she could have endured, but it was like fire in her mouth and she spit it out. The waiter smiled and brought her wine. The first taste startled, the second soothed. She ordered a bottle and drank deeply of both the wine and her grief. Soon, however, her sorrow became resignation which turned by imperceptible degrees into acceptance. From there it was a short journey through indifference, complacency, self-esteem, bravado, and anger

back to despair. This last, despair, pressed into her breast like the heel of a heavy boot and an emotion, to her inexplicable—perhaps self-pity—welled up inside of her and spilled out of her eyes. Without sound, she cried. Deliciously and luxuriously, the tears slid down her cheeks and around her nostrils. They dripped off of her chin and spotted her dress. Minutes became hours and still Gia cried. She was not thinking of the death of her sons. She was remembering instead something that had happened long ago when she was six years old. She had awakened to find, under her cot, a shoe lying on its side with a bright new penny in it. Instead of taking the coin out of the shoe, she called her sister to see. But when her sister looked, the penny was gone and only the ugly brown shoe remained. And now she cried out the abysmal disappointment she had not expressed then. Remembering the shoe made her think about her foot, and it seemed to her that the great wash of tears had carried with it the weight of that ugly, twisted appendage. Once despair was exhausted, delusion took root. Her foot became light, straight, tiny, shapely. A beautiful foot that would have thrown Cinderella into black envy. An agile foot. Pavlova's toe would have quailed before it. Gia crossed her legs and swung her dainty, lovely foot in a manner akin to coyness. Having disposed of her hateful deformity her thoughts at this time were ineffable. She knew only the language of drunken, tired men and ignorant, irascible women. She could not think or articulate what she felt or desired. She read no books, had seen no movies. All she knew of luxury was the lace of the altar. All she knew of peace was the oblivion of sleep. All she knew of rapture was the sound of guitars. And all these things, for the first time in her life, she felt she deserved. So new and overwhelming was this realization, Gia stood straight up holding her head proudly and defiantly. The sudden motion was unfortunate. She heaved. Standing before the window of the tavern, she was fully and abominably sick. She did not see the disgust of the waiter, hear his curses or feel his wet hand on the nape of her neck. Nor was she really aware of being thrown out and face down on the street. After retching painfully, she picked herself up and began walking.

The heat was remarkable even for Texas. The sun gave the faces of old men and the tops of frame structures a static glare. Doorways merged into blank walls and store fronts leaned at her. She thought she was walking up a steep hill and when she became certain she could never reach the top, the hill suddenly became an alley. There, her knees hardly bending, her back pressed against a wooden fence, Gia sank into a sitting position. She was sick again and then fell dumbly and deeply asleep.

Later, when it was dark, a man came. Noiselessly, Gia saw the moon over his shoulder—a fuzzy yellow moon with a ring around it.

"Good weather," she thought. "It will be clear and fine tomorrow..."

The morning chill and a conviction that she was being stared at woke her. She looked into the placid grey eyes of a cat. Knowing that neither the eyes nor the chill would leave while she lay there, she forced herself to stand. Her stomach felt as though someone had scraped it with a sharp thin stone. Her eyes ached and her head throbbed. Uncertainly, she moved out of the alley and into the street. Without even wondering in which direction home was, she turned her steps instinctively away from the rising sun. She had an odd sense of having missed or forgotten something.

Turning a corner, she came quite unexpectedly upon a scene which, in other circumstances, probably would have moved her. Two abreast, before the open doors of a church, stood fourteen little girls. Dark hair oiled and bound under white veils; firm brown legs encased in white stockings; little and lithesome hips hidden under billowy white skirts. Except for the occasional toe of a patented slipper surreptitiously scratching a calf, there was no movement among them. In awe and trembling they chanted, the time being measured by a fat nun with glasses. They

looked to Gia like a belt of wild white roses plucked from the dusty front yards of shot gun houses, or from the embankments that skirted railroad tracks...hardy and lovely and quick to lose their petals. Waiting, holding back the knife-clean shiver of expectation; singing, pouring out of their delicate lips the heavy, tired but terribly sweet Latin of dead men; wide-eyed, they waited until the signal should be given and they would sway into the church and, for the very first time, eat God.

Gia, shuffling past them, noticed that the sash of one of the girls at the end of the line had come undone. Then her eye struck something bright and shiny on the walk just behind this child. She moved closer. The thing twinkled and glittered at her. She crept nearer, as unobtrusively as her wretched foot would allow. She saw that the shiny thing was a rosary of silver. A throb of desire shook her. She approached the child and bent to tie her undone sash. Casually, as if only shifting her weight, Gia placed her broken foot over the rosary. A moment later the singing stopped. She glanced up quickly and saw the fat nun staring in gape-mouthed terror toward her foot. Indeed, each little girl had turned her head and stared, too, in the direction of Gia's foot. Hot with fear, Gia looked down. But the rosary could not be seen edging out from under her foot as she had feared. Then why were their eyebrows pulled back and their mouths twisted?

"Ah," thought Gia, "They are frightened of my foot."

"No," she whined aloud. "Is it so ugly?"

As if to answer in the affirmative, the last girl, whose sash Gia was tying, turned to look and screamed. She screamed the way any little girl would scream when faced at last with the monster that lurked heretofore only in dreams. The way any child would scream when coming upon the horrid thing seen only briefly before Mama snatched one away.

So piercing was her scream that Gia did not feel the sharp prick of pain that darted

into her ankle. She heard only the scream. Her fingers still caught in the sash, Gia sank to the ground. She kept hearing the scream and then she heard no more.

September 6, 1938

Notes for a funeral sermon to be delivered by the Reverend Antonio Cornejo, O.F. at Saint Mary's Church, Guava, Texas.

"The ways of God are mysterious but His love is everlasting. He chooses, and privileged is he who has been chosen. Here before us lies the body of a woman. An ordinary, yet extraordinary woman. She went to Corbett expressly to see a sight that was dear to her heart. A sight that gave her continual spiritual refreshment. She walked the seven dreary miles on the night before a Blessed Sunday; slept, obviously, in the cold street in order that she might see the taking of First Communion by the girls of that parish. What joy there must have been in her heart. What splendor must have coursed through her veins as she listened to the lovely voices of those children. And then she saw, like the deadly Serpent entering Paradise, the scourge of this country, the guila monster, creeping toward these innocent children. Without a moment's hesitation, indeed with the enthusiasm and joy in suffering for God that Saint Paul charges us to have, Gia Linda Domingo threw her foot, her own body into the path of this monster. And died full of the knowledge that she had given her life to save those of innocent children.

It is my firm belief that we should pray not so much for Gia Linda, as to her. It would seem only fitting if Gia Linda Domingo were known not only in this community but throughout the nation and throughout the world as Santa Gia, for surely this is a saint."

Toni Wofford

