

Saffron Street Woman

By Cristina Goulart

I didn't understand what I was seeing. *We* didn't understand what we were seeing. It was outside the realm of our experience, of our understanding of the world.

We had wandered into a section of the city where the tours did not take us, a section which our concierge had crossed out on our map with a big "X." The neighborhood smelled like a potpourri of garbage, sewage, incense and cooking spices. Every few moments a cloud of diesel would temporarily block out all other smells then dissipate quickly. Overhead was a frightening tangle of electrical wires. All around us people jostled on foot, rode past us on bicycles or swerved in cars.

Dwellings, shops, and eateries were stacked on top of each other in aging buildings, most of which could use some spray washing and a few coats of paint. We passed an elderly beggar sitting with bowl extended, staring out from behind cataracts with the sunken cheeks of a tooth-spare jaw. At home Stella and I have a policy: *do not give money to panhandlers*. Here, we give each one a small coin.

We were only a few blocks past the tourist zone when we came upon the incomprehensible scene. We had turned into a narrow street where only one car at a time could fit and we had come upon a young woman wearing richly dyed cloth in hues of saffron and ochre with gold bangles on her wrists. She lay alone on a blanket at the side of the street. The skin on her hands and feet, her forearms and shins was red and raw in places and charred in others. Her face had been spared, and somehow the folds of her skirt had not caught the flame. She lay on her blanket gasping and moaning in agony. Some people walked by. Some watched her. No one helped her.

This is what we did not understand; why was no one helping her? Why was no one screaming for a doctor? Where were the first responders, the paramedics? A man of skin and bones, draped in gray folds of cloth and holding prayer beads, was looking on and praying aloud. That was it. A woman was seriously burned by her makeshift cook stove and the best she had was a frail old man chanting on her behalf and two American women staring in horrified ineffectiveness.

The two of us managed to unglue our feet and began to grab people passing by. "Help her!" we demanded. "How do we get help?!" we called out.

"There is nothing for you to do," we were told by a kindly middle aged man. "She is a street woman." He shrugged and shook his head as he walked away.

Street woman. Homeless? A prostitute? She didn't look like either to us. "No one deserves this!" Stella yelled to the people who were tending to their own business near us or watching from a

short distance. Some people paused momentarily at our insistence but then kept walking. Some were annoyed or agitated, others projected a resigned sadness. We were ridiculous in our impotence to help.

In our world we would have called 9-1-1. In this world, *we* were 9-1-1. I had my stash of over-the-counter and prescription pills on me, as I always did when “adventure traveling.” We had bottled water with us too, but what could help besides morphine and skin grafts? We approached this saffron and ochre clad woman in stiff steps as though our bodies and minds were disagreeing with each other; one trying to approach; the other trying to run away.

My own stash of valium, which I used to cope with my fear of flying, had seemed so precious and powerful just moments before. Now the little pills were nothing. Now I wanted opiates. Opiates were probably available on this very street for less than I paid for my plastic bottle of pills. Buying drugs on the street was not something neither of knew how to do back home. We certainly didn’t know how to go about it here. If we tried and were caught, would we go to jail? If we did go to jail, for how long would we be kept?

These thoughts and ideas flowed between us quickly, silently. In moments we were contemplating breaking one of our own travel rules in this exotic land: *Never separate.*

Throughout our moments of confused attempts to procure help for her, the woman’s moans and her gasps for air had continued. And still we stood doing nothing.

Then Stella saw blond hair down the street. Tourists. Westerners. We called out to them and waved them over frantically. They approached us smiling, until they saw the display of suffering on the blanket at our feet. We watched confusion and disorientation take hold of them. Their eyes darted as if to find the answer to this gruesome puzzle in the air surrounding us. Seeing their confusion pulled me out of my own heart-sick trance.

“Are you American?” I asked.

They shook their heads. “Dutch,” one said.

“But you speak English?”

They both nodded, mutely staring at the woman, whose moans had not stopped, whose gasps had not quieted. The shorter one wove his fingers into his hair as if he were about to yank out chunks of it.

“You must have a phone that works here. Can you call for help?”

“No, Madam.” Madam, he said. “No Madam, our phones do not function here.”

The poor woman continued to moan and lie there unaided, at our feet. For moments we all four stood stupidly staring. After what seemed like hours Stella spoke.

“Go to your hotel,” Stella directed them. “Tell the concierge to send help. Explain the woman has 2nd and 3rd degree burns. Do you understand?”

They nodded, but stood rooted to the ground. She leaned towards them, “RUN.” And they did; two blond cheetahs loped through a slow-moving human herd.

It was just the two of us alone again with a stranger’s agony in a world of tired humanity. Time and air stood still around us. We three were avoided by passersby, as though surrounded by an invisible barbed wire fence.

Stella began to chant softly, a Buddhist chant I remembered hearing before. I pushed my anxiety and revulsion aside. I pushed the screams in my throat into a corner of my mind to be let out later. Gingerly, I approached this beautifully dressed, horribly burned woman. I coaxed some water into her mouth and thought it was a miracle that she could swallow it. I coaxed one valium into her mouth and then another. Those were all I had. I’d be using gin to get onto the plane next week.

I sat on the blanket with her, and placed my hand on her head. Stella sat too, keeping up a steady soft chant with her eyes closed to the cooked flesh on this still-alive woman. The woman had begun to shiver, though the weather was warm. I gathered my will, the entirety of my being and set my ego aside. *Let me be a conduit for Divine peace*, I prayed. The woman’s moans quieted slightly as the minutes wore on, but her breath rasped. I brushed her hair back from her face with extreme tenderness, as if each hair were breakable to a fingertip’s touch.

We couldn’t speak her language and she couldn’t speak ours, but still we managed to let her know: *You are not alone. We have not discarded you.* Her eyes had opened and her gaze fell on our knees, our feet, our hands. I leaned down awkwardly to look in her face and for one moment her pain and fear flooded into me. I let it flow in and willed myself not to scream. I willed myself to show this child of God a calm face. And I did.

Time passed slowly. Still no one helped. A quarter of an hour gone by. Half an hour gone by.

The woman’s gaze became unfocused and returned to rest upon one of Stella’s upturned hands, resting on her own knee. Stella’s chanting continued, an expression of calm and peace conveyed through round vowels.

And while she gazed at that upturned palm, the “street woman” in brightly colored flowing skirt and embroidered shirt, with her black hair held back from her face by the lightest hold of my hand, gasped suddenly and sharply and then her breath escaped in one long exhale. She was still. Her eyes were open but unseeing.

Stella stopped her chanting and reached out for my free hand. We waited to feel her spirit lifting, to feel it moving through us. I looked up thinking I would see an unearthly shimmer above me, but I didn’t. What I felt and saw was, simply, the cessation of suffering. Two of us sat on the

filthy street that was the third's death bed. Two of us were clad in drab wrinkle-free pants and T-shirts, the third was in vibrant cloth with embroidered hems, her feet and hands the wrong colors.

Some locals had taken an interest in this unlikely scene. A few women stood with scarves pulled in front of their mouths and noses. Some men stood with their arms crossed. I noticed the two young Dutch men we'd sent to get help standing nearby. Such unmasked fear and sadness were displayed on their faces that I knew what they had looked like as children. One of them had been crying.

"No one would come," I said for them.

They shook their heads.

Stella reached across me and closed the unseeing brown eyes. I reached into my daypack for the richly colored silk I had bought just hours before. Magenta. I had meant for it to be made into a dress when I got back home as a reminder of this vibrant country, of this particularly adventurous vacation. Instead, it would serve as a shroud. As Stella and I spread this cloth over the body we heard murmurs of surprise from the locals around us, but we did not know if they were expressions of approval or offense. We tucked the fabric under the still-warm body so that its form was clearly outlined.

In an expression of a religion I had long ago abandoned, I crossed myself as I uttered aloud "in the name of the father, the son, the holy spirit." The two young men followed my lead, crossing themselves and speaking the names of the Christian holy trinity in what must have been Dutch. None of us wanted to see how this woman's body would be treated, so we walked slowly away to the tireless chanting of the street mystic, the curious crowd parting before us.

None of us spoke as we walked toward our hotels. When the two young men reached their hotel they stopped, and motioned to the building, indicating that is where they were staying. We four stood looking at each other, then hugged wordlessly, but intensely, as though we were family.

As Stella and I continued onto our hotel, I asked myself, *how does it come to this?* How do we humans lose so much of ourselves that we create societies like this? The "street woman" in saffron and ochre cloth was one of a legion of discarded people in an overpopulated city, in an overpopulated country, on an overpopulating planet. Was she left alone to suffer and die by her own people because of her status? Because she had no male relatives to protect her? Because of the means she used to feed and clothe herself? Or was it because there is a begging swarm of tens of thousands of starving, dying street people here and therefore her death on the street was accepted as the inescapable norm?

Stella broke the silence. "This is just wrong. This place is awful. Why did we come here?"

I wanted to agree and yet, I remembered just weeks before, a homeless man, drunk on a street corner in San Francisco, his face peeling from sunburn and disease, sitting on the sidewalk in soiled pants.

“I would eat if I had some money,” he’d said then rattled a tin cup at my friends and me as we walked by.

I had stopped walking because I wanted to help him in some way. My heart hurt for him. My friends kept walking without a break in their strides, though, and so, afraid of losing them, I turned away from him and jogged to catch up.

“That’s just wrong,” I’d said.

“He’s a drunk,” they’d said. “Disgusting.”

In the evening after Stella and I had left a dead woman on a street, I am sitting in an Internet café. I am freshly showered and my stomach is full. I am staring at a blank screen before me. I want to scream with my written words that we must all wake up to the plight of the abused and abandoned, to the growing homelessness in our own country, to an ever-expanding human population. *I have seen where this trajectory leads!* I want to scream with capital letters.

But I don’t. I write a simpler message.

Dear family and friends,

Today we sat on a dirty blanket

With a street woman

Young and beautiful

Dressed in sunset colors

Burned severely by her stove

No one responded to our screams

Except two sweet Dutch boys

Who could do nothing but cry

So we chanted and prayed

We gave her water and valium

We looked in her eyes

And we watched her die.

Love,

Me.