

Grace in a Flower  
by G. Scott Sparrow

It was almost dark as we made our way out of the piney woods and into the fresh-cut corn fields on the way back to my uncle's house. I rode old Smokey bareback, and my two cousins rode the full-size horses on ahead of me. We were tired, and so were the horses. As usual, we had all gotten up early and ridden until midday. Then, we'd gone back out again in the cool of the evening. And now, we dropped the reins and let the horses' hunger carry us back across the fields toward the farm house.

It was like heaven to be in Alabama with my cousins, and I visited there as often as my parents would let me. My grandparents and aunts and uncles treated me so kindly, that I looked upon each of them as near-perfect. In my child-like bliss, I could not see the real-life struggles that would eventually bring them to their knees.

A popping sound interrupted my half-sleep, and I looked down to see what the horses were stepping on. But it was too dark to see the small green fruit that grew on the vines that lined the edges of the fields.

"What's that sound?" I shouted.

"Maypops," Dub yelled back. "They're all over."

That told me nothing, but a few days later, I walked over the same ground and noticed the bright green vines that ran along the edges of the fields. Small green fruit were everywhere, and to my child's mind, they had to be good for something. But for what, I did not know. Then, I discovered something far more intriguing than the fruit. Lifting the leaves, I exposed a delicate, violet flower with a tiny white cross in the middle. I was transfixed by its beauty, and I took one back with me to my uncle's house. But the hair-like petals were fragile, and they quickly drooped.

Later, after returning to Texas, my mother helped me look it up in a plant book. I discovered that it was a passion flower, and that its Latin name was *passiflora incarnata*. Obviously, the delicately framed cross had suggested to someone years before the passion of Christ. I learned that it was was a medicinal herb, too, but that part I forgot until later.

It wasn't long before things went downhill for my uncle's family. At the height of his social rise, he was a prominent businessman and an officer in the largest town bank. But when his corn fields along the Tombigbee River fell prey to an overpopulation of deer, he took the law into his own hands, and began to kill the starving deer to protect his crops. The game wardens came to arrest him one evening as he sat upon his tractor, armed with the old .35 Remington with a barrel that always looked like a cannon to me. For a while, it was not clear that he would surrender to them. He was defending his livelihood, after all; but his resistance to the law on that day precipitated his fall from grace in that community.

Adding to the family's losses, my uncle's younger son was killed a few years later while driving his tractor trailer home one night. He left the highway to protect another motorist, and was fatally injured when his rig flipped over. And then, later on, his older brother turned to alcohol and wrecked his marriage.

Along with other rude awakenings, my short-lived childhood fantasy of perfection and bliss collapsed under the reality of human frailty.

Even though I embarked on an intense spiritual search at the age of 19, and have continued ever since, a sense of sadness and despair has dogged me since my childhood years. So it is perhaps not surprising that my anxieties about life came to a head one night in

my young adulthood when I was visiting my childhood home in south Texas, just before I was supposed to be married.

I am not sure why it happened, but I awoke in the middle of the night in sheer, indescribable terror. It was my first panic attack. Although I had a Master's degree in psychology at the time, I had no real first-hand experience with such things. Like most people when they have their first panic attack, my sense of confidence was shattered in an instant. I was convinced in that moment that I was on the verge of madness or death, or both. Anyone who has ever had a full-blown panic attack will know that I am not exaggerating.

Up to that time, my spiritual life had been unfolding at a pace that was difficult for me or my friends to comprehend. I felt blessed by God, but for what I did not know.

And so, the night time terror seemed to come from out of nowhere, and left me deeply shaken. For over two years, the panic attacks recurred, further diminishing my belief that somehow I could avoid the tragedies that befell others. Around that time, I would awaken in the middle of the night, paralyzed with terror. I would grab my Bible, and read the promises of Jesus in the book of John, clinging desperately to the shred of hope that Jesus' words instilled in me.

While reading the Edgar Cayce readings one day around that time, I discovered that the passion flower vine -- that intriguing southern flower from my childhood -- had curative properties. Specifically, he recommended it for epileptic seizures and, sometimes, for anxiety. Looking for relief in natural ways, I promptly ordered some passion flower from an herbal supplier. Since I had to order it in bulk, I received a three-pound shipment in the mail one day -- an amount that lasted me for years. The bag of pulverized herb went with me wherever I went, and it was my own poor-man's remedy for despair. For the months that followed, I would drink a cup of passion flower tea before going to bed each night. I imagined that it calmed me and protected me from the raw panic that could rise up in an instant. A cup of passion flower tea and my Bible were my unflinching companions on those sleepless nights when the panic overcame me.

The panic went away for a while shortly after a dream that I had one night after reading from my Bible at 2:00 a.m.

I dreamed that I was in Palestine at the time of Christ. I was living in a one-room house with my parents. I knew that I'd never seen Jesus, only heard about him. I went to sleep on the dirt floor of the house, and had a dream. In it, Jesus called me to come and follow him. When I awoke, I was filled with yearning to find the one who had summoned me to his side. I bade my parents farewell, and went in search of him.

That dream was a turning point, and for a season, the nighttime panic subsided.

Two years ago, it returned at a time that it became clear to me that my years in Virginia Beach were coming to a close, and that it was time to return to south Texas. It was not easy to close up a counseling practice of 16 years, say goodbye to most of my friends, and -- most grievously -- leave my 10-year-old son, who lived with my ex-wife. Indeed, it was difficult to absorb all of that loss and change, however necessary.

Not surprisingly, the nighttime terror returned as I was preparing to leave. Actually it had started up some time before, but it intensified during that time of stress. It was more than a bad feeling this time: It was compounded by an absence of breath. I would awaken on the edge of blacking out, having not breathed for some time, and completely out of breath. I would run gasping down the hall -- and often out the door into the night before waking up all the way. When I shared my symptoms with a psychologist friend, who had researched various forms of apnea -- the sleep disorder that causes breathing to be interrupted. Most snorers suffer from "obstructive apnea," in which a closed air passage temporarily suspends breathing. But I didn't

snore, nor am I overweight, so my researcher friend said that my form of apnea sounded like "central" apnea, a rare and more ominous form of the sleep disorder in which the brain -- for some reason -- tells the body to stop breathing. But then she quickly ruled that out, saying -- not very reassuringly -- "If you had central apnea, Scott, you'd probably be dead."

I knew that I was on the edge of life, and that IJ needed something to pull me back.

One evening before we left for Texas, I was leaning against the deck rail behind the house. Looking down into the yard, I spotted a tiny green plant rising above the thick St. Augustine grass. Nearby I could see another, and another. Five young plants were spread over a 10-by-10 area, revealing the deep green, trilobed leaves of *passiflora incarnata*. Needless to say, I was stunned. Even though I knew that the plant grew in the south, I had never seen a single plant inside the city limits of Virginia Beach, much less five plants.

It was, I am convinced, one of those little miracles. In the weeks that followed, I harvested the leaves and fruit from those plants, and drank the tea each night before going to bed. When we left for our new home in Texas, I carefully wrapped up three of the maypops and took them with us.

Stories that end with closure appeal to our hopes, but rarely capture the truth of the never-ending journey. However, about the time we left for Texas, I had a dream in which the blossom of the passion flower took on new meaning.

The first part of the dream concerns my discovery of a great tragedy -- the murder of a native American man by a group of white hunters who considered the Indian as little more than an animal. (In analyzing this later, I realized that my impulse to return to south Texas was driven by the realization that an essential, natural part of me had to be restored.) I am so deeply saddened and outraged as I discover this crime that I know I have to report it to the authorities. As I call to report this tragedy, I look up and see a red plane overhead. A young pilot is saluting my efforts. He swoops down again and again, and does magnificent barrel rolls and loops as he pulls out of his dives. His maneuvers are so amazing that I finally realize that the experience has to be a dream.

I walk slowly across a grassy area, carefully observing the beauty of everything around me in the dream. A large hibiscus towers over me, and its dew-covered red blossoms droop down over my head.

From past lucid dreams, I know that the holy light has to be near. So I raise my eyes to look for it, and see instantly that a white light fills the sky. I know that the light is Christ's light. There is a pattern that radiates outward from it, like white lace, or delicate latticework.

Then I notice an elderly woman approaching me. I feel great love from her, so I put my arm around her and kiss her on the forehead. I know somehow that she is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

We turn to look again at the Light, and see that there is a second light to the left and slightly below the white light of Christ. The second light resembles a passion flower blossom, with bluish and lavender hair-like petals radiating outward from a central light.

I turn to her and ask, "Is that your light?"

She nods.

I look back and see that there is now a third light -- to the right and again, slightly below the light of Christ. It radiates from a window on the top of a tower that has spiral steps leading upward.

I ask Mary, "Whose light is that?"

She says, "Mary Magdalene's."

"Do you want to go there?" I ask her.

She nods again.

So we begin climbing the steps of the tower. Then I awaken.

The passion flower resurfaces from time to time in my life, as a symbol and as an herbal remedy alike. When I contemplate its delicate beauty, I am reminded that the word "passion" -- that is often used to describe Christ's suffering -- has nothing to do with what we usually think of that word. It has to do with his submission to the forces that were at work to bring his life to fruition, however tragically. The word as it is used has more to do with "passive" than with "zeal," and has a disturbingly out-of-control ring to it. But there are no guarantees that we will survive in responding to spirit's call. Indeed, we may be crushed, as he was, in our attempts to serve the good. But then again, what better choice do we have? Whether we see ourselves as one who consents to our calling, as Mary did, knowing frightfully little about what the future holds -- or as one who suffered to love deeply as Mary Magdalene probably did -- we, too, will flower if we can bring ourselves to follow our soul's calling without regard to the consequences.