

Purest
Mercy

Daniel Roberts

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Writing this story has been the most extraordinary experience of my life. But no writer crafts a story entirely on their own. So, I'd like to thank the following wonderful people, each of whom, in their own special way, has made *Purest Mercy* possible.

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Purest Mercy

is dedicated with love to Rev. Dr. Eddie Kidd,

Rich Mullins,

Carole and Robert Plemmons,

Rachel Joy Scott,

and all my spiritual champions who have gone before.

Thank you for shining light upon a dark path,
and leading the way.

Daniel Roberts
November 19, 2021

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*“Blessed are the merciful,
For they shall receive mercy...”*

-Matthew 5:7

1

MERCY

HOLY THURSDAY, 2013
3:20 P.M

The mysterious young woman, known only as Mercy, paused for a moment and closed her light brown eyes. She then added two final sentences to the third page of the letter, and set the notebook aside.

She sat in one of the front pews of Resurrection Christian Mission Church and stared up at the cross, suspended in the back of the altar. On a bright day, the sun streaming through the stained glass behind the cross would have burst through in vivid rainbow prisms, wrapping the entire front of the sanctuary in ethereal beauty. It was a scene of which she never tired, a scene in which she could wrap herself in hard-won happiness, hard-won tranquility.

But not today.

Today the sun was hidden behind a growing veil of dark clouds, casting the sanctuary in eerie gloom. The stained-glass artwork behind the cross depicted Jesus returned to life, but Mercy could not see it this afternoon, draped as it was in shadow. All the beauty was silent. Perhaps that was only appropriate under the circumstances, given the role the storm would soon play. Still, she missed the beauty.

Mercy felt cold and anxious. Her stomach was tight, and her heart beat in a ponderous way that made her chest ache. She was sweating,

and her hands trembled and felt clammy. Exhaustion clawed at her, as she had barely slept the previous night, and the nightmares had been terrible. It had been a long day already, and the night...

The night promised to be intense.

Knowing the day of one's own death is about as rare a thing as there is in this world, but Mercy *knew* and the knowledge clung to her with stark urgency. She had slogged through the day, going through the motions of her job while wrapped in an ironclad shroud of apprehension. Not about what she would have to do, nor why, nor even what the end result would be. All of that had been revealed in her final short dream during the early morning hours, a dream concerning events she had long believed might be waiting for her, now becoming very, very real and immediate. True, the identity of the recipient of the blessing was still unknown. But she had narrowed it down to one of two very close friends, and in the end, though their suffering would be horrific for a short time, she would soon thereafter free them from every vestige of that suffering, every wound, every scar. Mercy had a feeling that, afterward, the recipient would probably never even remember what had happened.

So she was coming to terms regarding all those issues. She was reconciled to all that was to come for her. What was upsetting her far more was how David would endure. That he would not be the victim of the attack, she was certain of, and she had given fervent thanks for that assurance. Still, how would he respond as the years passed by? How would he cope? How would he carry on? Mercy knew he would understand her decision, because he of all people had some understanding of the gift she had been granted, and the extremes to which her devotion was capable of pushing her. Of course, he would forgive her; she reckoned he would feel there was nothing to forgive, since he would make the same sacrifice if he could. Doubtless his love would remain as constant and deep as it always had been; perhaps it would even grow greater still, through her final act, though they were going to be ripped apart by it all.

Mercy had no concerns about his feelings ever changing, ever lessening, as a result of her decision, which was not really hers to make anyway. His heart was true, his commitment to her assured.

Yet, there was more to consider than just the two of them and the relationship they shared. There was David, in mourning and alone. What would become of him once she was gone?

That was another question altogether.

He had a full life, serving in the community. Young as he was, he had the wisdom, strength, and resilience of a man many years older, and most everyone looked up to him and respected him. Rev. Bethany and Dr. Ross, the new man in her life, considered him like a son, even if his stubborn pride and independent spirit had prevented him from accepting Bethany's offer to look into adoption, several months before Mercy had appeared and taken his heart by storm. Little Amy adored him as the big brother she had always longed for but never had. He was intelligent, capable, thoughtful, kind, gentle, always inspiring and deeply spiritual. In short, he had everything to offer, and the future was spread before him with endless possibilities, with unmitigated promise.

Yet, he was also passionately in love with her, as she was with him. And very soon, she would be torn away from him. How would he handle it? How would he go on? Would he recognize the bright future still before him for what it truly was, or would the devastating loss hang over him like a pall, draping all his days in sadness? He was not yet twenty years old, and he might well consider his life completely over after tonight.

Mercy sighed, and shook her head in disconsolate helplessness. David was the strongest and most courageous person she had ever known. Surely, *surely* he would find a way, provided he could find the *will* to keep going, the desire to carry on. But it would not be easy, not with all the deepest-held dreams of his life swept away, and swept away so abruptly. Trembling, she brushed a stray tear from her cheek and leaned forward, her hands clasped under her chin, elbows on her knees. She stared intently at the cross, the stained glass. But the sky had grown darker still, and the beauty was even more silent than before. She missed that beauty, so very much. Even the edges of the cross were growing dimmer by the minute.

Almost time...

Dearest David. They had never talked in-depth about the future. Mercy knew that David had avoided the subject out of

a desire for greater financial stability. He had been out on the streets since early fall 2010, when he was sixteen and a runaway escaping terrible cruelties. He almost never spoke of those earlier years, a preference Mercy fully shared and understood; she could scarcely bear to revisit her tormented past either.

Over time, he had gravitated to Resurrection Christian Mission Church like a starving man to a banquet table, and his maturity and courage soon won him a fan in Reverend Bethany Lewis. A curious proposition followed some weeks later from the minister: would he consider a position as Pastoral Assistant? Mercy had heard the story from both sides, and knew that there had been some initial hesitancy from David. The proud young man had been concerned at first that the offering of the position was no more than a veiled act of pity on Bethany's part, that there had been no real needs the position was meant to address, and the minister had been forced to reach deep into her reservoir of patience, being both firm and persuasive, to finally convince him that pity had nothing to do with it. The needs were real, the duties thought-out and quite specific. Thus it was that he had eventually agreed, and in the closing days of November 2010, had begun his work for the Mission Church. He had been saving his earnings ever since.

Life on the streets was for him, as for her, a necessary escape route from a deadly situation, but he didn't intend to live on the streets any longer than he absolutely had to. The situation was a temporary solution, no more. Though he did not talk much about it, Mercy knew that he was eager for the day when he would have his own place...and be able to provide for her as well.

Even so, they had never really discussed it. The future had been carefully skirted as a topic. She understood all of David's reasons for that. Yes, he had a certain prideful streak, this man she loved, and he wanted everything to be perfect for her. So he was too embarrassed to speak of the future until it all *did* come together, perfect for her in accordance with his standards. Until then, broaching the subject would be too difficult for him. To speak of it was to speak of a beautiful life still out of reach, of dreams vital but unreachable.

From her own standpoint, however, there was far more to the

avoidance. Part of it was, Mercy never wanted, even inadvertently, to give him any cause to feel pressure. She never wanted to embarrass or upset him in any way. So she kept her distance from any mention of the future.

Not that keeping that distance was difficult for her. It was not, in any respect, and that was another part of the avoidance situation from Mercy's perspective. The topic was simply not a crucial one for them to explore from a relational standpoint...each knew that they belonged to one another, and that knowledge only made them that much more devoted, each to the other. He declared his love for her in countless beautiful ways, across numberless beautiful moments, and seldom did it happen through references to months and years to come. Those were conversations she felt sure he was storing up for later days, but she never needed him to promise her his future love or commitment. Mercy already understood that that love and commitment were hers; in ways that went far beyond mere words, she understood.

Yet, the final part of it was, the future was tenuous. It was more tenuous than David knew, a reality which made for the most significant aspect of the avoidance equation as she experienced it. Yes, Mercy understood the depths of his love for her, and the fact that he wanted to be with her always. She knew his devotion to her was genuine and intense, and that everything he desired out of life, he desired for her. All of his dreams revolved around Mercy, and she knew it like she knew there were stars in the heavens. Vividly these truths came through all the time: in the ways he smiled at her, the ways he held her, the ways he looked at her and spoke her name. Their intimacy had thus far remained ever chaste; there was no real privacy on the streets or in the Mission. But the passion pulsing between them was all the more strident for that chastity.

They never *had* to talk about the future. That was the point. It was more than enough to know they were united by their love for each other.

Even so, the future was vulnerable. More than he realized, it was tenuous and vulnerable, and thus Mercy, like David, had her own reasons for never bringing it up. While his reasons centered on financial considerations, hers were far more complex. And the

biggest reason was because, deep down, she had always suspected—*always* suspected—an event such as she now faced tonight: an event that would bring her life to an early and violent end, while someone else's life would be saved by her selfless act.

Mercy would die, that one of her loved ones would miraculously live.

And afterward...

She had kept the suspicion hidden from him, hidden sometimes even from herself, in deference to the happiness they shared and the dreams and hopes she knew they both cherished: marriage and family, a life of peace and blessings. Given all the damage that had been done to her over the years, she felt certain she could never bear children. But adoption was always a possibility, and she had treasured her visions of adopting no less than another young woman did her visions of conceiving and giving birth.

Still, she never mentioned any of this to David, though she sensed he wanted to marry her and raise a family as well. Partly her reticence came from that desire to protect him from undue pressures. Partly it came because she trusted and believed in his devotion and thus, sweet as they were to have, she didn't feel that she had to have reassurances. But it came mainly because of that lingering shadow of premonition in the far corner of her mind. The premonition that she did not have long to live.

The secret was too significant, and she could not bear to share it with him. How could you even begin to try to share such a secret with the man who wanted to take your hand in his, and carry you over his threshold as his bride someday, and spend the rest of his life loving you? Especially when you wanted that, too, and hoped against hope that it might happen one day? Best to steer clear of the subject altogether...

It had been there for as long as she could remember, though, that suspicion, a cancer that refused to be defeated. During the years before her deliverance, it had been front and center, weighing her down like a ball and chain. With the conditions she endured there, it had been an easy idea to succumb to, the most natural idea in the world, for the men who had controlled her life steadily pushed her closer and closer to the end.

Ever since her deliverance in early 2011, however, the suspicion had retreated to the shadows, to the periphery. The cancer had been in remission. Her new life with David and Rev. Bethany, with Amy and the Resurrection community, was one of joy and wonder, miracles and possibilities, hope and peace, safety and love. Wonderful day had followed wonderful day, and even on the days when rain showers blotted out the sun, happiness still coursed through her like a river. For the first time ever, she was truly *alive*... and felt it in the very marrow of her bones. David, marriage, family and friends... Even as David's did now, for a time her own future had spread out before her, a beautiful tapestry just beginning.

That sensing of early death was unrelenting, however, stoking around the edges of conscious thought during moments that were too quiet, creeping closer during dreams that were too unsettling. And now, today, she felt grateful for never dismissing it out of hand, but instead giving heed to it across all these years. For her dreams last night had transformed possibility into certainty, the suspicion into a confirmation. Death was indeed coming. And Mercy was ready.

The storm building outside was only the first part of this ordeal.

Twice she had nearly given in, coming close to telling him about what lay ahead. Once in the morning, just as they were preparing to start the workday, and once again when they reunited over lunch at the Mission. In both instances, she had chosen instead to not speak of it. She had not known *how* to tell David, that was one reason. Another was the gleam in his eyes that attested to a special excitement, a heightened joy she could not think of disturbing. He had something up his sleeve—today of all days! Mercy had no idea what David's sweet excitement this day was all about, but she figured it had something to do with her, and it only brought her that much closer to tears. How could she clip the wings of his joy with revelation of the heartbreak that would come upon him only too soon? It was impossible, beyond comprehension.

So Mercy kept it carefully hidden, this troubling secret. But David, attentive as ever, had been only too aware she was hurting and on edge this day. Even nestled in his strong, protective arms, she had endured a very restless night, with vivid nightmares, and was feeling

none too well as the day wore on. None of which had been lost on him. Concerned, at lunch he had suggested they take the rest of the day off and spend time together. They could enjoy one another's company...go to one of their favorite places, the Jessica Schay Memorial Park, perhaps, where she could put her head on his shoulder and take a nap on their favorite bench. They had earned some vacation time, Bethany loved them both, and she would readily consent.

Mercy had sorely longed to say yes, especially knowing this would be their last day together. She had longed, so very much, for that peaceful final time with him. But the crisis was hurtling toward them now like a freight train, and there was so much she had to do in preparation. Time was short, and slipping away fast. Thus, she had politely declined, citing numerous duties at the church office. It was true, there *had* in fact been numerous duties at the church office; mainly, though, she had needed space to pray, to prepare, and to write this important letter to him. Upon her declining the invitation, David had been surprised, and visibly uncertain. Gazing into her eyes of lightest possible brown, he had seen the exhaustion etched there, and noted her wan and pale appearance. He had shaken his head, incredulous, and asked if she was sure.

Mercy told him she was. Then, at 3:00, she had retreated to the sanctuary with the pen and notebook borrowed from Bethany. She took several long moments and deep breaths to collect herself, and then began to write...



She was a beautiful young lady, was Mercy. She deflected such praise on a regular basis, but it was the truth. Indeed, "beautiful" was faint praise. Shoulder-length dark brown hair, bordering on black, framed her gentle face. A small, straight nose; dainty lips given to smiling; an assortment of amazing smiles ranging from soft to radiant. Adorable little dimples appeared whenever she smiled, adding to her endearing visage. Her smiles touched everyone around her with delight, and while those smiles shined forth beautifully from within her, they seemed to belong to everybody else.

Then there were the eyes. David called them, and their owner, Sacred Eyes. Almond-shaped and utterly clear, they were indeed of the lightest possible brown. Patient, thoughtful, warm, kind, compassionate...they were perhaps her best feature of all, which was saying something, given the smiles and dimples. Yet there was something unsearchable, undefinable, about those eyes, too, like a puzzle piece that fit perfectly, but was still in the wrong puzzle. Those bright eyes held a wealth of maturity and spiritual depth that belied the number of her years, as well as the extent of her suffering. Mercy's friend Claire once put the matter well when she said, "If the eyes are the window of the soul, Mercy's window looks into a holier dimension." Those eyes made you wonder sometimes if she really was just in her late teens, if she really had merely followed the crowd in off the streets to Resurrection Mission one cold evening. There were times when you looked into those eyes and you could believe they had seen Heaven...and now longed to convey some portion of Heaven to you.

Then, of course, there was the continuous stream of miracles, testifying so eloquently to Mercy's beauty within...

Her growth had been stunted by the deplorable conditions of her upbringing, so it was not until after her deliverance that her physical development took off. Arriving at the Mission that fateful evening of January 24, 2011—the date the community now celebrated annually as New Thanksgiving—she looked nearer twelve years old than her actual age of fifteen. She had been unwell, uncared for, undernourished, and behind on the developmental curve.

Since those days, however, Mercy had embarked on a new life, and grown into a truly lovely young woman. Late bloomer though she was, she bloomed wondrously, especially her first six months out of captivity. She gained four more inches, finally standing at 5'7", and her figure evolved in dramatic fashion as a result of her improved health. All the physical changes had confused and frightened her at first, for she had not been in any way prepared for them. Nothing had ever been explained to her about this process of growing from girlhood into a woman, so she had no frame of reference for the transformation taking place within her. In the midst of her fears, however, Rev. Bethany had recognized her personal

turmoil, and gently guided her through the transformative process. The minister had explained that it was all simply part of the rhythm of life: she was becoming a young woman, and these were normal changes that every girl went through on the way to womanhood.

These days, Mercy was slender but no longer emaciated, still shy but no longer timid, still a bit tentative in large groups, but more and more comfortable with her place in the community she loved.

Frequently, she found that she drew admiring stares from unknown men, and this turned the blood in her veins ice cold. Fortunately, none ever approached. David was most always nearby, and even when he wasn't, she usually had plenty of protective friends around her. Mercy was a Godsend to the Resurrection community, and there was nothing that the members of that community wouldn't do for her, including safeguarding her from harm. They adored her, and many even viewed her as a saint, or an angel.

Crowds still made her somewhat uncomfortable. Even the Resurrection crowd could be overwhelming at times, much as she treasured them all and knew they all treasured her. Peace and stillness were her comfort zone, but with as many people as Resurrection Christian Mission Church attracted, big crowds and a great deal of noise were often unavoidable. She bore up as best she could. Mercy was a quiet soul, who asked for nothing and appreciated everything. She found wonder all around her, all the time. She loved to take in every sunrise, immerse herself in every sunset, wrap the colors of fall around her and rejoice in the newness of spring. The simplest gesture of kindness could move her to tears; the simplest words of care could overwhelm her. In all these ways and more, she was like a child. Purity and innocence infused her life with joy, and all who came into contact with her were affected.

Yet, she had known prolonged and extreme abuses. She had experienced violence and suffering, neglect and loneliness, throughout most of her life, on an order few could imagine. Until that amazing night of New Thanksgiving, she had not even had a name, and during her painful, isolated formative years, she had felt far, far less than human. Remarkably, none of it had destroyed her; but all of it left scars both visible and hidden. Those first fifteen years made her older, wiser, and more introspective than was usual for

those her age. She had grown up far too soon, and all that she endured took its steep toll on her.

Every bit of it, however, also drew her nearer and nearer to God.

Several wonderful years had passed now since the deliverance, and she had been brought to life in a way she could never fully describe. If her wonder and joy at times astonished or even exasperated others, it was only because she was so grateful, so happy, to be fully alive at last. Fully *alive*.

Tonight, though...

Tonight, for the last time, she would have to endure more than she could bear. Memories of the bad dreams still scratched at her mind, and she could see some of what she could expect, though the specifics were beyond her discernment. No matter; she had known what being a victim was like, and it would be no different this night than before. It would be fatal, that was the only difference. It was a profound difference, to be sure, but she had been ready for death her entire life long. The important thing was, this time, whatever happened to her would be *worth* something, would *mean* something, would have a greater and higher *purpose*. This time, it would be about someone else. Someone's life would be saved, someone she loved very, very much.

And as a result of that gift she was prepared to give, she now understood, Mercy would receive in return an incomparable Gift of her own, one that transcended all reckoning, one that surpassed all other gifts, combined.

She continued to lift up David, but she had no choice. Her course was set. She would commend him to God in her thoughts and prayers, and she trusted that he would make it through this ordeal and find a way, somehow, someday, to carry on.

For her part, Mercy was ready. She glanced back over to the letter she'd just finished, and smiled. It would serve. Removing the perforated pages carefully from the notebook, she folded them over twice, then reached into a pocket of the notebook and retrieved an envelope already addressed. Taking a deep breath, she placed the letter into the envelope, and sealed it shut.

Then she closed her eyes, and began to remember.