



Glenda Gracious was born with a severe skin condition, and even though cosmetics offered numerous ways of masking it, it was always conspicuously visible.

On the left side of her face, the red, raspy skin seemed to pull down her left eye and make the corner of her mouth drop.

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At school, children called her *Sandpaper Girl* and later, in the years of puberty, she was ignored and shunned by most boys.

In her eagerness to be wanted and admired, she was perhaps too permissive to what she called the *leftover* boys.

Just before her 17th birthday the doctor told her and her mum that she was pregnant.

Abortion was out of the question, so her daughter Sandra was welcomed in the family like a sister.

Her parents offered to help and raise the girl but insisted that Glenda finish her education.

When two years later little Alec was born, he, too was embraced on the same condition.

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Majoring in Business Administration she graduated when she was 23. Her parents, and Sandra and Alec, now 6 and 4, attended the ceremony.

A few days later she was approached by a large pharmaceutical company, offering her a promising job in their sales department.

She became the rising star in the firm, showing a great talent in international relations.

Within a few years she could afford a luxurious apartment in the city.

Sandra and Alec were still living with her parents, but she was able to give them ample financial support.

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Her relationships with men remained problematic.

Men were only interested in controlling women, she thought.

Maybe she still resented them for making her feel unwanted.

Her bed partners were mostly married or otherwise attached, co-workers, or business associates.

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There was no love lost between men and Glenda.

One day, at the office, she overheard two co-workers commenting on her.

They were both married men who forgot to keep their office door properly closed.

“What about miss Gracious,” she heard the first one say.

“O my god, she’s hideous,” said the other.

“I’d rather be run over by a train,” the first added, “perhaps a paper bag over her head would help.”

They laughed, loudly.

Unnoticed, she slipped away.

She felt hurt but swore revenge.

I'll have you both! she thought.

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A few weeks later one of the two men lay on his back in her bed, sighing deeply.

“Oh, that was good!” he said.

She smiled and made him breakfast.

The next morning, she lay next to the other man.

“Wow,” he exclaimed, “you’re something else!”

She got up to make him coffee, and when she returned, she said: “Not as hideous as you expected, huh?”

He looked at her.

“Don’t know what you mean,” he said, but his face turned red.

“Never mind,” Glenda said, “I just wondered what your wife would say if she found out you traded her in for someone as ugly as me.”

His face went from red to purple.

“Oh, come on,” he stammered, “come on, it’s not like that. Come on, you wouldn’t, would you?”

Glenda laughed. “Now your face is as red as mine! Of course, I wouldn’t, of course not. I had a good time too!”

To reassure him, she offered him sex. But he said he had an important meeting and left.

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She liked to believe she was in control, but she felt lonely.

She found solace in her job, where she could present herself as a powerful, independent woman.

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When she was 43, both of her parents died within a few months from each other.

Her children were now grown-ups and lived on their own.

Sandra was married to an extremely nice schoolteacher and Alec was exploring life as a student.

They stopped by regularly, but, although they were fully aware of the situation, they regarded her as an older sister rather than a mother.

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The women in Glenda’s life seemed to live in different worlds.

Whether they were colleagues or women she met on business trips, she never felt a connection.

Their stories were of husbands, how the children were doing at school, happy families.

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But now, in her mid-forties, she noticed the stories were changing.

Many of the women had developed an angry impatience with their lives.

Some of them spoke of divorce, some did more than speak of it.

Now, Glenda found herself included in the conversations.

As a single woman, she gained a new appraisal: after all, she had been the smart one from the beginning.

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Glenda became close friends with three other women.

Together they went out frequently, visiting bars in the city, getting pleasantly drunk, occasionally being picked up (or allowing themselves to be picked up) by men.

She looked forward to these nights and felt accepted as an equal.

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The four women went wild on the night before Glenda's 50th birthday. "Cheers, here's to fifty!" they said, raising their glasses. "Yes, here's to the end of your life!"

The women burst out with laughter.

There was the glimmer of dawn when she stumbled into her apartment.

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When the doorbell rang, at around eleven, her brain had difficulty in knowing what was going on.

She felt terrible, her head was banging and there was a heaviness in every limb.

When she finally realized what sound woke her up, she managed to get up and move to the door.

When she saw who was in front of her, she broke down and cried.

She felt her knees give way and collapsed to the floor.

"Mum, mummy, what's going on?" She heard Sandra, as if in a dream. It was the first time she was called mum.

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She sat on her couch, shivering. Sandra was beside her, drying her face with a tissue.

Glenda inadvertently moved Sandra's hand away from her left cheek.

"My god, your make-up's all over the place!" Sandra said kindly. "I'll get you some black coffee."

With an unsteady voice, Glenda mumbled: "No, no coffee, nothing".

Sandra stayed with her the rest of the day.

Doing some cleaning, sitting beside her, doing some hoovering, sitting beside her.

Glenda felt physically feeble and exhausted, but intensely happy to have her daughter with her.

Not the end of my life, she thought, it's the beginning!

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It was a big change. Now she had a daughter to share.

Her bond with Sandra grew stronger all the time, and for the first time in her life she knew happiness.

Between her and Alec there was still the same distance as before, but it was something she could live with. He visited regularly and was kind to her.

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It was a shock when after a few months Sandra told her that she and her husband were moving abroad, where he had found a job at an international school in Lesotho, a small country in Africa.

Noting her mother's disappointment, Sandra had said: "It's not the end of the world, mum. We can still spend the holidays together. And there's always the worldwide web."

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Of the three friends, Glenda was closest to Erica.

The other two, Melanie and Iris, she knew from the office, Erica was a friend of Iris'.

Somehow, from the start, Glenda had sensed a special click with Erica.

Erica had two children and was going through a rocky divorce.

There were legal battles over money and custody of the children.

Erica said her ex-husband had been stalking her and threatened her with violence, but despite this, she maintained a happy attitude and was extremely funny.

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That evening, it was just two of them, standing at the bar.

Glenda felt a gentle nudge from Erica, who whispered in her ear: “I think Baldy over there is making eyes at you.”

A few yards away, she saw a slim, bald man lifting his glass as he met her glance.

Erica had discreetly moved away and was talking to another woman as he walked up to her and offered her a drink.

The man had a soft, warm voice and spoke with a foreign accent. “It is my first time in this place,” he said, “I stay at *The Ambassador*.”

He pronounced it with the emphasis on *-dor*, making it sound Spanish or Italian.

He was a salesman of medical equipment and they agreed that their lines of business had a lot in common.

Then, out of the blue, he asked: “What’s with your skin?”

Taken aback, she stammered: “Oh, well, nothing...” Nobody before had ever been so direct.

She looked away, then looked back at his face. She saw his friendly, brown eyes looking at her.

“May I?” and before she knew it his hands softly enveloped her face, warm and gentle.

When he saw tears gleaming in her eyes, he let go. “I’m sorry,” he said and kindly smiled at her.

She felt confused and vulnerable.

“I really should be going,” she said with a hoarse voice.

“Yes, I think we should,” he replied.

“I have my car parked nearby.”

Her throat was still very dry.

“I’ll walk you to your car,” he offered.

They passed *The Ambassador* on the way to the parking, but he walked with her all the way to where she was parked.

“Thank you for your company,” she said shyly and quickly got into her vehicle.

He smiled at her and waved his hand as she left.

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On the way home she kept seeing his face, his friendly dark eyes.

His soft, warm voice resonated in her.

The memory of his hands made tears well in her eyes.

After she parked her car in front of the apartment building, she just sat there for a minute before she opened the door to get out.

Walking past the mirror in the hallway, she suddenly halted. She looked into the mirror, and, in disbelief, her hand moved slowly to her face. She held her breath with eyes wide open.

The face in the mirror was flawless.

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For hours she sat on her couch, trying to make sense of what had happened. Then, having no sense of time, she picked up the phone and called Sandra.

“Mum, have you been drinking?” Sandra sounded annoyed. “It’s the middle of the night!” Sandra heard incoherent stutters and stammers on the other side of the line. “Mum, get some sleep, ok? We’ll talk again tomorrow.” She hung up.

Glenda got up and walked to the bathroom. She kept her eyes down, afraid of what she was to see.

The face in the mirror was still beautiful, perfect. In a daze, she removed her make-up and went to bed.

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With a start, she woke up. In a reflex, her hand went to her face. It felt smooth, soft. She got up and rushed to the bathroom.

She saw that her face was as perfect as it was last night.

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She called Erica.

“Hi, Glenny! How was Baldy?” Erica sounded cheerful.

“I saw you leave together.”

Glenda chose her words with care and told Erica what had happened.

“Jeez, Glen,” she said, “what a story! I’m sure there must be some explanation for it, I mean, without Baldy being involved.”

Glenda answered: “I just don’t know, I don’t know what to think. I had it all my life, you know. When I was a child, my parents took me to thousands of doctors, and they all said they didn’t know what it was, that I just had to learn and live with it. And then, now that I am almost 55, this happens.”

Erica insisted: “Really, Glen, there must be some logical explanation for it, there has to be.”

Glenda replied: “Please don’t tell the others. I’d rather tell them myself when I see you guys on Friday.”

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“Woo-hoo!” Melanie and Iris cheered when Glenda entered the café.

“Someone’s been keeping a secret!” Melanie exclaimed.

“You never told us about the surgery. I just recognized you by your dress, otherwise...”

Iris came up to her. “And what a splendid job they did, you look absolutely smashing!”

Erica raised her glass. “Calls for a toast,” she said.

When they had their drinks, Glenda told her story.

“Bullshit!” Melanie said, “no way! You expect us to believe about that guy? Forget it! I still believe it was plastic surgery, or else there must be some other logical explanation. But I don’t believe in fairy tales!”

After a few drinks, Erica put her arms around her, and said: “I’m just so happy for you! No matter what or how, you look stunning!”

Her position in the group changed. Men that would normally circle around the three other women, now fought for her attention. It was a completely new

situation that she soon began to like and became accustomed to.

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“Excuse me!”

A good-looking man stood next to her car after she parked at her home.

“Oh, hello,” she answered.

“Perhaps a strange question, but would it be ok if I use your phone? I left mine at home, it seems,” the man said.

“Oh, yes, sure, she replied.”

She opened her purse.

“Oops,” she said, “seems mine’s not here either. You know what, why don’t you just come up and use the landline.”

While he was on the phone, she made a quick cup of coffee.

When she came back from the kitchen, he had already ended his call.

“Thought you might like this,” she said.

“Nice place you have here,” he remarked, “great view over the city.”

Glenda noticed he looked at her intensely.

“Yes, I’m quite happy with it.”

He smiled. “Working woman,” he said.

“Big pharma,” she replied with a broad smile.

“A woman I know works in pharma too. What’s her name again, Iris something.”

Glenda poured him another cup of coffee.

“Sounds like one of my staff,” she said, “Iris McCarthy?”

The man put his hands together. “That’s her. Small world!”

After finishing his coffee, the man stood up. “What do I owe you?” he asked.

“Owe me?”

Glenda had got up too.

“Yes, for the phone,” he said.

“Ah, forget it, nothing!”

Their eyes met. She walked up to him and kissed him with passion.

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The sex was great.

“What’s your name again?” he asked when they lay next to one another.

“I never told you,” she smiled, “but it’s Glenda, Glenda Gracious.”

He reached out his hand. “Well, pleased to meet you, Glenda Gracious!”

They both laughed and kissed and made love once more.

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That Friday night, when she entered the bar, Erica stormed up to her, an angry fire in her eyes. “That was my ex, bitch! My ex!” she screamed.

Glenda was stunned. Erica lashed out at her face with her fingernails but fortunately Iris kept her off.

“Bitch, I’ll just give you your old, ugly face back, bitch, bitch, bitch!”

Iris pulled Erica away from Glenda.

Melanie came up to her and put her arm around her. “What’s going on?” Glenda asked bewildered.

“She says you’ve been sleeping with her ex this week,” Melanie explained, “and now he’s pestering her with it. That you were better than she ever was or will be, and all that.”

In a split second, Glenda realized it was the man of the phone.

“You dirty bitch!” Erica screamed.

“Things were better when you were just your ugly, hideous self! Now miss pretty thinks she can just screw anyone she likes!”

Glenda felt dizzy.

“Erica, I swear I never knew, I never knew.”

Erica looked at her with fiery eyes. “I hope you die and rot in hell!”

Melanie gently escorted her to the door. “Better just leave her be for the moment. Best if you go home now. She’ll come round in a day or two.”

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Days became weeks, weeks months. She didn’t hear from any of her friends.

She tried to work out of the office as much as possible, but whenever she was there, Melanie and Iris avoided her.

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During one of their videocalls, Sandra suggested that she visit a doctor, a dermatologist.

But since all medical treatment and research, even the birth of her children, had taken place when she

was under twenty, medical records could no longer be found.

“You have a wonderful, healthy skin,” the doctor said, “especially for a woman of your age.”

Glenda said: “But look, this is how I’ve been until just weeks ago!”

The photograph she showed was less than a year old.

The doctor looked at it closely and said: “Really, there’s very little I can say about that. Perhaps it’s best to just count your blessings.”

*

She missed her weekly gatherings with her friends.

Often, she was at the point of calling Erica, but she never did, not knowing what to say.

She felt the same loneliness as before but still hoped her friends would return in her life.

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Desperately, she kept looking for answers.

She thought of the mysterious foreigner.

She had no idea where he was, who he was.

One day, she found herself at the check-in counter of *The Ambassador*, but without a name or a company they could not help her.

She browsed the internet, hoping to find his picture on a medical site somewhere.

Frankly, she didn't really know what she was looking for; she didn't even know why she was looking for him.

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Overlooking the city, she stood before the apartment window. Her eyes filled with tears.

Loneliness felt like a familiar companion, but weighed on her more heavily now that she knew the taste of true happiness.

The razorblade cut in her hand as she slowly moved it to her face.

This story was originally submitted as part of a ReedsyPrompts contest.

The prompt read: *Write a story inspired by the concept of arigata-meiwaku — a favor that turns out to be a nuisance for its recipient.*

Deadline: April 14, 2023

<https://blog.reedsy.com/creative-writing-prompts>