

The Photo

by Roland Foster

Ronnie Bradshaw — Doctor Veronica Gale Bradshaw, now — thanked her guide, who turned and left. She stood in the doorway and surveyed her bedroom. It was small, about eight by ten feet, with a single bed, a dresser, a cheap lamp, and a single straight chair against a wall. The floor was bare concrete that had once been sealed with some shiny, transparent coating. A window at head height over the bed let in strong daylight. A door in the right-hand wall stood open, revealing a tiny half bath. No shower. She guessed she would be taking sponge baths.

The bed looked inviting, and she was tired. The flights from Newark to San Francisco, then to Jayapura, had been excruciatingly long, though she had slept a little over the Pacific. The 90-minute flight in an MAF float plane from DJJ airport to the Papua highlands, through rain that seemed to be a monsoon, had been terrifying. The Jeep ride from the lake to the hospital had been bumpy but, thankfully, short, dry, and uneventful.

She laid her suitcase on the chair and opened it. Before unpacking anything else, she took out a photo and stood it on the top of the dresser. It was an unimpressive black-and-white snapshot, about four inches square, mounted in a cheap five-by-seven frame with a beige construction paper mat. It was a photo of Ronnie and Jack, standing in the back yard of their family's home. Jack, a head taller, had his right arm around her shoulders, and her left arm was around his waist. At twenty-five, Jack glowed with of the power of his Nordic heritage and young manhood, ready to conquer the world as soon as he finished medical school. Ronnie, then seventeen, was petite; her Asian features not quite beautiful as she smiled for the camera.

As Ronnie looked at the photo, sudden tears stung her eyes. Now, after ten years that seemed like an eternity, after finishing high school and then college and medical school, she and her big brother would be together again. They would live together, work together, and try to do some good in the world, together. She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them and focused on Jack in the photo. She smiled and declared, "I'm here, big brother. I'm ready. Put me to work!"

Jack, coming through the open door behind her, answered. "You're mighty eager, little sister. First, give me a hug."

She whirled and squealed, which was not like her at all. Then she was hugging him, both arms tight around his middle, her face with tear-filled eyes pressed against his chest. "Ow!" he said, with his arms around her shoulders. "You don't have to break my ribs!"

She loosened the hug, but remained silent for long seconds. Then she murmured, "Oh, Jack, is this real? It seems like a dream. Am I really here? Are we really together?"

He laughed. "Turn me loose, and see if I disappear. Or if you do." After a moment he continued, "Come on, Sis, let me go." He gently pried her arms away from his sides. "Dry your eyes, wash your face, and come with me. I want to show you around, introduce you to everyone. You can hug me again later."

"You promise?" They both laughed. How many times had she asked him that question while they were growing up? Maybe a hundred or more.

"Yeah, I promise."

"Okay. Give me a minute." She went in the bathroom and closed the door.

Jack offered to get a sandwich for her, but she wasn't hungry. He gave her a quick guided tour of the hospital, with a little sales pitch. She already knew that it was the best of the few medical facilities in the primitive areas of Papua province, the rugged western half of the island of New Guinea. She was amazed at the number of patients receiving treatment, and she witnessed some of the difficulties caused by multiple language differences and primitive superstitions.

They were busy all the early afternoon with introductions, including a short staff meeting. They had agreed that she would be called Dr. Gale, to avoid the confusion of having two doctors named Dr. Bradshaw. After the meeting, they went together on Jack's afternoon rounds to check on his patients. She was deeply moved when an old woman in a wheelchair grasped Jack's hand, and he squatted down and said a few words to her before moving on. Ronnie didn't yet understand the Indonesian words, but she saw that there was love in that exchange, and in many others. Most of the children smiled when they saw her, in spite of their bandages or pain, and she thought, "These kids are why I'm here."

Back at her room after a quick supper, she sat down wearily on the edge of the bed. Jack said, "Tired?"

"Bushed," she replied. "I may sleep for a week."

He picked up the photo from the top of the dresser and sat down beside her. "Do you remember the day Tim took this photo?"

"Yes, I do. Then two days later he gave a copy to each of us, and one to Mom and Dad."

Jack smiled. "Timmy was so proud. He developed the film and made the prints in his little darkroom, and bought the frames with money from his piggy bank. He thought he was going to be a professional photographer. And now he's a truck driver."

Ronnie nodded. "But he's happy with his job, I think, and with his wife and his little boy — with his life." She paused, then said, "Do you remember what I said when we first saw the picture?"

"Oh, yeah. You said, 'What a handsome couple. They should get married.' Of course, I assumed you were joking. It was a crazy idea. Brother and sister can't get married. So I said, also as a joke, 'Ask me again when I finish med school.'"

"It was a crazy idea," she replied, "but I had been thinking about it for years, since I learned that marriage between close relatives was taboo mainly because of genetics. And I'm adopted, so genetically we're not related. I think when I saw that picture, you and I with our arms around each other, it gave me the courage to say what I was thinking."

He shook his head. "You told me several times that you weren't joking; you were serious. I finally got the message. Then I didn't know what to do, so I asked Mom about it. She thought about it — you know how Mom thinks things over — and she said, 'Marriage is a life-long commitment. If that's what you both want, go ahead. You'll do it well. Your father won't approve, but I do.'"

Ronnie nodded. "And Dad emphatically didn't. And we tabled it — we were apart so much, with school and then you working overseas, there wasn't anything we could do about it anyway." She stood and retrieved an envelope from her suitcase. "Until now," she said. "This is for you."

The front of the envelope had only one word, "Jack," in their father's blocky printing. Jack opened it slowly and removed a single sheet of paper. He read it quickly, then looked at Ronnie. "Do you know what Dad wrote?"

"I have an idea."

He read aloud: "Dear Jack. If you and Ronnie want to marry, I can't say I approve, but I will no longer object. You are two intelligent adults. Do what you think you should. Either way, you both have my blessing and my love. You always have, and you always will. Love, Dad."

They stood and looked at each other for seconds that seemed like minutes. Then Ronnie held up the photo and said, "Well, I still think this handsome couple should get married. What do you say? And don't take years to come up with an answer."

Jack took her in his arms. He said, speaking to the top of her head, "I think that's a wonderful idea. You can hug me again now if you want to."