

Forgiveness

I began my short career of “visiting the sick” during the summer before my junior year of high school. Each afternoon, I carried a heavy bag through the small city hospital on Sunset Avenue, and then across the street at the Old Age Home. Many of the folks were happy to see me and I charged them very little. I wasn’t working on the merit badge for sainthood. I was just selling newspapers.

I didn’t think giving up each afternoon for the summer for this job was worth it, but I had promised my cousin I’d take his paper route while he was away with his family. At two cents per, I had to peddle a lot of papers to make any money. Looking for prospective customers, I marched through every door that wasn’t locked ... sick rooms, private rooms, executive offices, even the drier parts of the surgical floor ... anywhere I might find a news-starved reader. I rushed into 8-bed wards and shouted, “News, Newspaper” and I lurched through waiting rooms, tripping over the outstretched legs of swollen eyed sleepers, who waited for news from a surgeon or obstetrician. I stepped around vomit and stumbled in on physical examinations and once saw a boob flop out of a nightgown, an experience I would have imagined erotic before it actually happened. Such is the fine line between titillation and bewilderment for a 15 year old boy.

But each day I took a short break and made a few swift moves in a continuing game of chess with Tom, a patient whose infirmity was a mystery to me. He sat all day in his private room, smoking, oddly dressed in pajamas and a striped tie. The thirty-ish young man said he’d been in a car accident with his wife and that she was upstairs on the Women’s Floor, but I was never able to find her.

Tom taught me chess and he had a unique way of doing it. Without any introduction or explanation, he set the pieces on the board as if a game was in progress and invited me to move any piece. So I moved the horse.

“No,” he said, “that’s the Knight and you can’t move it that way. Move it like this.” Frustrating at first, his method of attempt and correction greatly accelerated my learning the game. Early on, he corrected the mechanics of my moves, later on their usefulness. Years later I read this method was used to teach

monkeys to do useful work. And the North Koreans found it useful for brainwashing.

Eventually I asked Tom why he wore a tie with his pajamas, but I never got an answer. Questions about his wife upstairs on the Womens’ Floor got nowhere. But he did answer my question about the dead flower in an orange pot on his night stand.

“It’s a grape hyacinth, a purple miniature. It’s dying,” he said. Tom’s affable demeanor mysteriously evaporated, and I left to get on with my business of selling the news. But each day I visited him, I poured some water on the plant. I didn’t know he had stopped others from doing the same. Soon the hyacinth began to recover.

When I’d sold all the papers I could at the hospital, I crossed the street and ran up the twenty-three steps of the aptly named Sunset Home for the Aged. Panting when I arrived at the top of the stairs, I always wondered if the architect’s demented plan had been to march incoming residents up the front stairs and carry them out the back door to waiting hearses. Today, one would suspect the insurance companies of such a plan. But in reality, I was probably the only human to ever use the front stairs. Patients as well as workers arrived and left by the lower back door.

My favorite inmate at the Home was Albert Swenson. He was a nice old man and told lots of stories, some of them interesting.

His favorite topic was his late wife, Mary. “I met her in high school,” he would begin. “She was so lovely and full of life. Always laughing.” So, I would sit fidgeting for a few minutes and listen to the old man reminisce about his dead wife, hopefully not showing my impatience.

“Do you have children, Mr. Swenson?” I asked one afternoon, just to change the subject away from boring old Mary at the county fair, on the ferris wheel, learning to drive or fishing at the lake. He said nothing and for a moment and I thought he hadn’t heard me. Then he spoke.

“A daughter, Elise. She was killed. In the spring.” His voice faltered.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Thank God her mother is gone. It would have destroyed her.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

“A car accident,” he continued. “Her idiot husband was driving. He’d been drinking.”

“That ... That’s terrible.”

“Well, he didn’t get off unscathed. He’ll never be right and that’s fine with me.”

An uncomfortable thought arrived.

“What’s the man’s name?” I asked.

"Who? Henry? His name is Henry and they've got him over in the Masonic Hospital now. He can drown in his own drool, for all I care."
Relieved, I listened for another few minutes and then said I had to get home for supper.

On Thursday, Tom looked woebegone.
"I'm almost out of money," he said. "You'll have to get the paper money from my wife, upstairs."
I was a nice kid, but I didn't give away free newspapers.

"Tom," I said, "I can't find your wife upstairs. I've looked for her."
A look of complete despondency came over his features.
"No," he said, "she's up there. Just ask the nurses for Elise Henry."
A sick feeling came over me.
"Henry?" I said.
"That's me, Tom Henry"
"He said you were a lot sicker," I wondered, aloud.
"I was. Wonderful thing, modern medicine. I couldn't even feed myself for a few months when I was in the Masonic Home."

"Tom, I bring a paper every day to Mr. Swenson. He's across the street in the Home," I said.
"I know," said Tom. "He's been there for over a year."

I didn't know what to do. I could continue to play chess with Tom and listen to Mr. Swenson's stories about his wife, but I felt pretty uncomfortable now. I didn't want to tell the old man Tom was just across the street.

The hyacinth came back into bloom and the gorgeous purple flowers bulged out of the pot.
"See what a little water can do, Tom?" I said as I walked into his room.
"She's dead, you know."
"I don't know for sure"
"Nurse Pepper told me....for sure."
Tom must have been told this before. I wondered why it was just now sinking in..
"I wanted the hyacinth to die, so I didn't water it. " he said.
"I didn't mean to..."
"And when I was sure it was dead, I was going to hang myself in the shower with this tie."
"What's the flower" I started to ask.
"Her father brought it to her. Limped across the street and bought it in the Gift Shop and brought it up to the Women's Floor. Nurse Pepper said Elise died the next day. Wanted to make sure I got it if I survived. Albert probably didn't know it, but it turns out the grape hyacinth is the flower of forgiveness. I don't deserve it."

Tom stood up. I'd never seen him out of his chair. He wobbled a bit, but remained standing and took a cane from the back of the chair.

"I'm taking the flower back to Albert," he said.
"Tom, I don't think that's a good"

"You're going to help me. Bring it," he said, and he stumbled out the door, limping on his cane. I grabbed the hyacinth and we were on the elevator in less than 30 seconds. It's amazing how quickly you can move when you're breaking the rules.

Drivers heading down Sunset Avenue that afternoon saw a man, dressed in pajamas and slippers and wearing a tie, step from the curb and cross the road. A teenager carrying a canvas newspaper bag and a flowering plant followed him. On the other side of the street, Tom stopped, breathing heavily, and looked up the twenty-three stairs.

"We can go around to the back door," I said.

"No, this is the way."

Tom climbed 6 or 7 steps and sat down, gasping for air. I stood next to him, holding the grape hyacinth. He took a deep breath, got up and climbed three more stairs, almost toppling over with exhaustion. We were now nearly half way to the top and I was afraid he would take a nosedive back down to the bottom.

"Tom," said a voice above us. I looked up and Mr. Swenson stood at the top of the stairs. Tom began to cry. Mr. Swenson started to descend to us, with what looked like one painful step at a time. When Albert Swenson and his son-in-law met near the top, I put down the hyacinth, stepped in between the two men and heaved them upward, one step at a time. I knew if one of us went, we all went. But we made it up to the front door.

I retrieved the purple hyacinth and came back up the stairs. Setting the plant down next to the front door, I left the two men sobbing in each others' arms.

The tragedy of Tom and Elise and Mr. Swenson had quite an impact on me at that age. I got a friend to cover the paper route for me over the remaining two weeks and I never went back to the hospital or nursing home. I think I was afraid that something worse might happen.

To this day, I still wonder how a person can forgive another for taking their loved one. Or forgive themselves for ending the life of the one they love.

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