

Forgiveness

I began my short career visiting the sick during the summer before my junior year of high school. Each afternoon, I carried a heavy bag through Faxton Hospital on Sunset Avenue, and then across the street to the old wooden Home For The Aged. Many of the folks were happy to see me, and my price was just a bit of pocket change. I wasn't working on my merit badge for sainthood. I was just selling newspapers.

I didn't think giving up each afternoon that summer was worth the money I made, but I had promised my cousin I'd take his paper route while he was away with his family. At two cents per paper, I had to peddle a lot of newsprint to make it worthwhile. 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 saw what I probably should not have. Such was the nerve of a 15 year old boy.

Each day I took a short break for 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, and 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 when I went up to sell papers there, I was never able to find her.

Tom taught me chess in a unique way. Without any introduction or explanation, he set the pieces on the board as if a game was in progress and invited me to move a piece, 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 "do and revise" greatly accelerated my understanding of the game. Early on, he corrected the mechanics of my moves. Later, he pronounced on their usefulness. Years later I read the method was successful in teaching monkeys to do useful work. Teenagers, too, I guess.

Eventually I asked Tom why he wore the tie with his pajamas, but I never got an answer. Queries about his wife upstairs also got nowhere. He did answer my question about the dead flower that sat 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 evaporated, and I left to get on with my business of selling the news. But each day when I visited him, I poured 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, wait for them to fall over dead, 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 one of the few to use the front stairs. Patients and staff 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." 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 across town 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 money for the paper from my wife, upstairs."
I was a nice kid, but I couldn't afford to give away free newspapers.

"Tom," I said, "I can't find your wife upstairs. I've looked for her."
A look of pain 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 that 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."
That scared me. I tried to change the subject.
"What's the flower" I started to ask.
"Her father brought it to her. Limped across the street, bought it in the Gift Shop, and brought it up to the Women's Floor. Albert probably didn't know it, but it turns out the grape hyacinth is the flower of forgiveness. Nurse Pepper said Elise died the next day. She asked Pepper to make sure I got it if I survived. But I don't deserve it."

Tom stood up. I'd never seen him out of his chair. He wobbled a bit, but remained upright and grabbed a cane off 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 the plant," he said, and he limped out the door, leaning on the 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 tall man, dressed in pajamas and slippers and wearing a tie. As he stepped from the curb and crossed the road, a teenager followed him, carrying a canvas newspaper bag and a flowering plant. On the other side of the street, Tom stopped, breathing heavily, and looked up the twenty-three stairs.

"We should 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. I began to protest, but 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 summit and I was afraid he would take a nosedive back down to the street. This is crazy, I thought.

"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 began to descend to us, overcoming much pain by the look on his face. Tom continued upward. When Albert Swenson and his son-in-law met near the top, both of them obviously exhausted, 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 ran down to retrieve 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. I got a friend to cover the paper route for me over the remaining two weeks of the summer, and I never went back to the hospital or nursing home. I think I was afraid that something worse might happen.

I've always wondered how a person can forgive another for taking away his loved one. And I don't know how I could ever forgive myself for ending the life of anyone that I love. I know its bizarre, but I think of that every time I put on a tie.

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