

Three Who Have Died

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Summary: Three obituaries—Thelma, a drug addict she met in jail, and of two Catholic Workers, Betty and Jim. Recounts how she held out a hopeful vision of God’s love to Thelma before she died of an overdose. Remembers rubbing Betty’s back as she lay dying in the hospital. (DDLW #739).

I must write about Betty Cuda Van Ells, and Thelma Gadson and Jim Votta, three who have died recently, and all of them are our friends.

Thelma was in the Women’s House of Detention with Deane Mowrer, Joan Moses, Judith Beck and me, and she died in November of an overdose of drugs. I put her between Betty and Jim because they were two saints if there ever were any around us, and we want to hedge in Thelma with saints because she was a wild one, an indomitable soul who was on work strike while she was serving her sentence, which was of some length for a mere House of Detention. She had a very bad infection, for which she was not getting any treatment, because the doctor had ordered a medicine too expensive for the City to buy. So she refused to take any work assignment. She was the girl I mentioned in my story who slept on the stone floor, hitching her bed up to the wall to give herself more room. Every night when the corridors were settling down to silence, she would call out, “Now I’ll sing my little song, I’ll say my little prayer. I got until Oh See Tee to go, and God have mercy on us all.” For a long time that Oh See Tee was a mystery to me until someone explained it meant October—when she would be released. Until then she never went near a window, never peered out to the streets below, never looked over the ledge of the roof to see the outside world stirring about its business. Week ends she spent her days squatting on the floor on a blanket in the corridor playing an interminable game of cards with several other women. Her cell was spotless and she always insisted on helping us clean ours. She had served many terms and was very grateful for the meetings she had with a psychiatrist or psychologist provided by the jail. She was listened to, she got attention, she was respected as a human being.

We were in jail in July and the first part of August, and it was very hot. We never saw Thelma in anything but a night gown or a seersucker dress. When at the end of October she showed up at the Catholic Worker all dressed up as pretty as a picture, we did not recognize her at first. Deane was over for lunch that day, so we all ate together and afterwards showed Thelma around St. Joseph’s House.

We wanted her to come to the country for a spell of vacation but she wanted to look up her friends, and look for a job. The Salvation Army was going to help her, and the social service had been very good to her, giving her enough to keep her for a week. Deane went out with her that afternoon, and came back feeling depressed, not being able to do anything for her but give her some money. It is hard to realize that we have to fight our battles so alone, that there is so little help we can give, or take.

And now word has come of her death, a late word, since according to the officer at the Salvation Army she had died November 8, just a few weeks after she had come out. Had it been an accident or had she deliberately taken her own life in despair at not being able to live without the “kick” which drugs bring?

We had talked one day about the beatific vision, about the embrace of God which carried with it all the joys our longing hearts desired.

“What is it I love O God when I love Thee?” St. Augustine had written.

“It is with no doubtful knowledge, Lord, but with utter certainty that I love You. You have stricken my heart with Your word and I have loved You. And indeed heaven and earth and all that is in them tell me where ever I look that I should love You and they cease not to tell it to all men. . . But what is it that I love when I love You? Not the beauty of any bodily thing, nor the order of the seasons, not the brightness of light that rejoices the eye, nor the sweet melodies of all songs, nor the sweet fragrance of flowers and ointments and spices; not manna nor honey, not the limbs that carnal love embraces. None of these things do I love in loving God. Yet in a sense I do love light and melody and fragrance and food and embrace when I love my God—the light and the voice and the fragrance and the food and embrace in the soul, when that shines upon my soul which no place can contain, that voice sounds which no tongue can take from me, I breathe that fragrance which no wind scatters, I eat the food which is not lessened by eating, and I lie in the embrace which satiety never comes to sunder. This it is that I love, when I love my God.”

I remembered enough of this quotation to tell it to Thelma and to the other girls around.

“Gee, I wish I could think of heaven like that,” one of the women said. “Do you really believe?” They spoke in the same way of a new social order, “wherein justice dwelleth.” “There will never be a time when there is no more war, no more fighting, no more drinking and swearing, no more prisons,” they said sadly. But against hope we believed in hope, and they tried to hope.

Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief! I believe that God is good. I believe that there is no time with God, and that all the prayers we are going to say, Deane and Joan and Judith and I, will be enough, will have been enough, to overflow the soul of Thelma with graces, so that she turned to God at the moment of her death and held out her arms to him.

And we are not alone in our help for Thelma. There is Betty Cuda, as we knew

her, the young Italian girl who came to help us on Mott Street, who went to work with Ade Bethune for a year, who made retreats with us at Oakmount with Fr. Farina, who worked with the Milwaukee House of Hospitality and married the director there, John Van Ells, and bore him several children. And now she is dead, in her early thirties, of leukemia. She was a loving person and I saw her only last March, a month before her death, in the County Hospital in Milwaukee.

She had embraced voluntary poverty, and she died poor, with the knowledge that her children were in a county home, and her husband sick with diabetes and at a heavy job. I visited her in that great modern hospital on the outskirts of Milwaukee and felt that the ward where she lay was a dismal place, filled with aged and dying, and with no sight of cheerful and healthy nurse or interne, no student lamp over a desk at the end of the ward. It was a dim place, that long "el" and to call a nurse you had to press a button and speak into the empty air, and from behind you a metallic voice came from a tube, "What do you wish?" and you asked for what you needed, and if your voice was quavering or dying, there would be repeated, "What do you want, speak up, make yourself heard!"

But Betty had many friends around her who loved her, the Gallaghers, Florence Weinfurter, Margaret Blaiser and many others. I sat with her that winter afternoon while she was having a blood transfusion. She said that it made her feel warmer, she was cold, so cold. Her back was aching her and she was just skin and bones anyway, but she had strength enough to sit up in bed and let me rub her back.

I'm going to tell Peter Maurin," she knew him well, "when I see him in heaven—that you rubbed my back for me, the last time I saw you." She knew she was dying, she knew it was not long before she would see Peter, Larry Heaney, Catherine Odlivak and Fr. Roy and others whom she knew.

Jim Votta was another friend of Fr. Roy who helped us with the Philadelphia and Baltimore Houses of Hospitality. He was always working at some job or another and always passing out literature, and taking people out to meals and talking to them about God. For him there was no other interest in life. "The Name of Jesus is a breath of sweetness in the air, a shout of joy in the heart, and honey in the mouth," St. Bernard said. He worked as sacristan mostly because he wanted to be near the Blessed Sacrament and he saved enough to go on pilgrimages (one could not walk across the water to Fatima) but in general he too lived poor and helped others all he could. The last time he saw me he gave me his Marian missal which also has a quotation from the Imitation of Christ in it after every Mass.

They are two good companions for Thelma, and though they might not have found too much to talk about during life, they know her needs now that she is dead. We have prayed to them to pray for her, and they will work too to gain her a place of "refreshment, light and peace."