Passing

by

Cullene Bryant

[cullene@telus.net](mailto:cullene@telus.net)

Address:

#2702 120 West 2nd St.

North Vancouver BC

Canada VM 1C3

604 980 9207

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Let nothing disturb thee,

nothing afright thee;

all things are passing;

God never changeth.

St. Theresa of Avila

Forward

In the middle ages a young man called Martin de Tours joined the military and hoped to fulfill his family’s expectations by moving up through the ranks. One day, just before parade, he came upon a beggar at the city gates. Moved by the man’s desperate plight, Martin removed his soldier’s red cape and cut it in two with one sweep of his sword. He wrapped the remnant of the cloak around the shivering beggar’s bony shoulders. When he returned to the yard, his comrades laughed at his impetuous action. “How will you ever become a general if you treat your uniform with such disrespect?”

That night, Martin had a dream. Jesus came to him in a vision and said, “This day you clothed me.” Martin abandoned his career in the army, became a follower of Christ and performed many miracles. After his death, the townspeople found half of his cloak. They treasured the sacred relic in a chappelle. This became the root word for chaplain, one who covers and comforts the vulnerable with God’s love.

Surgical Unit

I Just Called

He had the luxury of solitude. It was an austere private room, not even a picture on the wall. No flowers. Not a single card. I figured he’d been crying. His eyes red, a bubble of moisture just below his nose. The sheet covered his body, all but his bare shoulder, a mound of muscle firm and hard, speckled with fine blonde hairs like a round rock covered in soft moss; the bandaged shoulder, a stump bound in white gauze like a beached log coated in barnacles, drying in the sun.

“Just called by to see how you’re getting along. I’m the chaplain. Cullene’s my name,” I said.

“What do you think? I’m dying?”

“You look pretty healthy to me.” I wanted to lighten things up. Smiled. He reminded me of you. An athlete, strong and fit.

“I was healthy once. Before this.”

“What happened?”

“Motorcycle accident. Swerved to miss a car. Hit the median. My arm was crushed.

“How terrible.” A silence fell between us as I pictured the bloody scene. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m in sales. Furniture. Teach ballroom dancing on the side. How am I going to jive, swing my partner, lead with my hand on the small of her back?”

The resemblance between the two of you is uncanny. I can still see the gym where we took ballroom dancing lessons: the waltz, the two-step, the tango. Do you remember that song? *I just called to say, I love you. I just called to say how much I care*. At the end of the night they always played that tune. You sang it in my ear, your voice gravelly and dark. Then, you’d give me a hug. My heart dipped and swung like a jack ‘o lantern in the breeze. I’d been alone for so long after the divorce. When we were feeling particularly romantic, we danced in the living room to your collection of big band records. One night the needle scratched. *I just called to say* repeated over and over-without the *I love you* part and we wound down. I thought I’d never dance again, or sing, or breathe.

“Look, I’m not here because you’re dying. I usually see patients after surgery. Do you have any relationship to a church? A faith connection?”

“So, you’re a lady chaplain. That’s unusual. I’m Catholic.”

“I can call a priest if you like?”

“Not practicing.”

“How’s your wife taking it?”

“We’re separated.”

“Does she know?”

“I called her. She’s in Florida with some guy.”

Our last fight. Words spat at each other, bitter as lemons. After you left, I threw up in the toilet. That night a girlfriend, bought me dinner. We went to the Olive Garden and ate Caesar salad, watching our waist lines. She ordered a whole bottle of Chardonnay.

“Don’t cry. You’re a beautiful woman. There’ll be others.” She filled my glass to the brim. She was right. But for some crazy reason, I still remember your strong arms around me, the squeeze whenever that song began.

I knew he needed to grieve the loss of his arm, tell the story. Where was he headed that day when he jumped on his motorbike? When did he first notice the car that caused the accident? Was he conscious when the ambulance screamed to his side? Did the doctor warn him his arm might be amputated?

“No woman’s ever going to want me again.” His words froze in the air like ice crystals in sub zero-weather.

“You’ve still got two left feet.” That made him smile. “The important thing is to keep on dancing.”

He raised a muscled arm from under the sheet. “Keep me in your prayers,” he said.

I grasped his hand and held it for a moment, his skin rough like a warm wool blanket. “You bet.”

Mysteries

For me art is a spiritual exercise whether or not one paints or sings, writes or acts. The practice of religion needs art. Ritual, story-telling, icons and statues, all are ways of leading us toward the sacred. I left my home in Toronto to study at Boston University School of Theology because Dr. Ehrensperger held the chair in religious drama.

However, I didn’t become an actor. I danced. We were a small committed troupe who believed that all things were possible. We danced in black and white tights for the civil rights movement. We danced to drum beats in a vigil against the war in Vietnam. In the school’s Marsh Chapel, I danced the Virgin Mary to Benjamin Britten’s *Ceremony of the Carols.*

We didn’t have a Green Room in the church. Instead, the dancers and actors gathered in the basement gym, where children sang hymns, listened to Bible stories and pasted silver angels onto colorful paper on Sunday mornings. During rehearsals, I sat on a fold down hard aluminum chair and listened to Mrs. Love, our director and choreographer, a Southern red head, once an accomplished dancer.

Mrs. Love liked to lecture us about Martha Graham. “She was a pioneer in modern dance; lived during the destruction of World War II. Graham’s art made a statement about the harshness of life. She rejected the graceful lines of classical ballet; forced her body to work against gravity; create angular lines.”

I played the Virgin Mary. Not the virtuous one in blue who sat in religious ecstasy in the centre of the stage, the one Raphael loved to paint, the pale faced girl with only a trace of a smile on her placid face. No, no. I was her alter ego; dressed in a red velvet gown with a low bodice and puffed sleeves. I danced her desire, her passion. “Pass your hands over your breast, dear. It’s alright,” said Mrs. Love. I danced the pregnancy; cupped my hands over an imaginary big belly; danced the birthing pangs, tossed my hair back. “Wonderful Dear. You’ve got a high kick*.”*

I think back on that magical time, smell the make-up, the softness of the velvet against my skin, the freedom of the leap into empty space; the enjoyment of my body. I didn’t realize then that some day I would be surrounded by young men in wheel chairs who would never lift their legs again, women wandering down hospital corridors trailing an I.V. pole behind them.

In 1964 I finished my degree in Boston; was ordained; returned home and became a minister in the United Church of Canada. Five years later, I became a hospital chaplain. It was like being in a war, at the front, a time of courage and bravado, fear that God was dead and hope for life, not just eternal life but life after the tragedy, after the devastation*.*

Orchids

In the early 1980’s I left muddy Toronto in March and flew into shimmering Edmonton. There had been a fresh fall of snow, the air brisk and clean.

All the next morning, a committee fired questions at me from behind the boardroom’s oak desk. I was being interviewed for the position of Director of Pastoral Care at University of Alberta Hospitals. I was newly divorced and yearned for a new life.

“How would you deal with an angry relative who was threatening to sue the hospital?” The psychologist rustled his papers.

“Would you try to convert someone on their death bed?” The social worker smiled, in an attempt to help me relax.

“Can you work nights? You would be on call twenty four hours.” The nurse stirred her coffee with a quick efficient motion.

That afternoon, one of the doctors on the committee took me to his home for lunch. The tires of his car crunched on the snow and skidded to a stop at his front door. The smell of garlic wafted from the kitchen.

“Come in,” said the doctor’s wife. She ushered me to a table laden with crusty rolls and steaming beef stew. Logs burned in the fireplace. But it was not their flames that caught my eye. A solarium bursting with orchids surprised me. How out of place they were against the glistening snow!

I have learned since that Asian scholars sit on rocks beside streams or at the foot of mountains and meditate on orchids. They grow in sacred places. Noted for their healing qualities, Malaysians feed them to ailing elephants.

That winter I moved to Edmonton with my two children, Alex, ten years old, and Rhiannon six. In the trunk of my car, I kept blankets and candles in case we stalled on the highway. “The heat of one candle can keep you alive,” said the social worker over coffee one morning. Her name was Ellen. She was trying to make me feel comfortable. Her eyes sparkled like fire flies on a dark Ontario night.

In the early mornings I chipped ice off the windshield, the air so bitter I could hardly breathe. All that lonely dark winter of sub zero-weather, I treasured the scene of those nodding orchids that had enticed me to my new home.

The Pediatric Intensive Care Unit

Callings

My great-grandmother was an Ojibwe woman. I never saw a picture of her, but her husband’s sombre portrait framed in an ornate gilt casting, hung on a pale green wall in my father’s den. Often, I wandered into that room; settled in the big leather armchair; stared at my great-grandfather’s face. His receding hair line reminded me of my father’s; a hint of a smile, a trim Van Dyke beard. My father was called to be a doctor among the Italian and Greek immigrants on the Danforth in Toronto. During the depression he would deliver a baby in exchange for a chicken. My great-grandfather was called into the wilderness to teach the Ojibwe about the one true God. A starched white clerical collar stood up around the missionary’s neck. Who was he, this man called Ellsworth? Was he the youngest son of an aristocratic English family? Did they send him to the New World because the land had been parceled out to the older boys? Did they expect him to enjoy a little parish in Toronto, Fort York as it was called then? Or did he experience the call to be a missionary to the natives as he sat listening to the choir at Winchester Cathedral? Were they proud of him for his devotion or did they want to get rid of him?

Who was she, his wife? No one knows. My father told the story in bits and pieces. I sewed together the patches of our family history with my own imagination. I pictured my great-grandmother making her husband deer hide moccasins in the summer and bear paw snowshoes in the winter. She cooked wild rice and sturgeon. All the while he translated the Bible stories into her language, she told him about Gitche Manitou, the compassionate spirit that resides in all that lives. While he prepared sermons about God’s love, she fed the hungry lame boy who begged outside the lodge.

“Your great-grandfather would have laid his life down for his black-haired wife,” said my dad, “She died of tuberculosis.”

When my great-grandfather married, his family disowned him. What romance! What glamour! To embrace the forbidden, to be shut out from the affections of one’s family forever. To be accepted by strangers. Protected by them. Loved.

I was too young to know about government schools, the forced separation of children from their parents, the uprooting of religion, culture and language. I only thought he adored her and gave up all his material comforts to lie beside her in the fire light. She gave birth to five children, one after the other.

Did he weep for her, rail against God? Surely after giving up so much to preach The Word, he must have felt betrayed by his heavenly Father. He took his five children to a Christian boarding school in Rochester, New York. The matron forbade them to weep for their mother, washed their mouths out with salt water when they spoke her language. When he left them at the doorstep he could only say *I’ll see you.*  There is no word for good-bye in the language of the Ojibwe.

My father said he went mad mourning the loss of her; turned native; worshipped Gitche Manitou. But I wonder, after so many years, did he realize his God and hers were one and the same?

Sweet Grass

The elder had approached me in the pediatric Intensive Care Unit. “Are you the chaplain?” He smiled showing laugh wrinkles around his almond eyes. “We need to burn sweet grass. Quite a few children from the reserve are here.”

I nodded. A few weeks ago, a local minister had strode into my office in scruffy jeans, a plaid shirt and shoes with holes in the soles. He prided himself in being a social activist, even had the beard. “Do you realize children from Hobbema are drinking polluted water? They’re right here in your hospital.”

“I didn’t know that.” I had just arrived in Edmonton and was feeling my way around the community and the hospital. I had been so delighted to have a visitor, a colleague. “Do you want to go for coffee?”

“You should be out there organizing protests.” He wagged a finger at me.

“I can’t just leave the hospital. I’d be fired.”

“Think about it. You’ve got kids.” He turned on his heels and strutted down the hospital corridor.

The wrinkled old man with the velvety voice repeated his request. “We want to smudge and leave herbs under the children’s pillow.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

I went to my boss, Gerald. “Speak to the fire chief,” he said tapping his stubby fingers on the desk. “It will definitely be a hazard.”

“I can’t turn off the fire alarms.” The fire chief scowled and folded his arms across his chest.

“It would only be for a few minutes.”

I made telephone calls, sent memos, filled out forms and signed documents. Eventually, he relented. A few weeks later I saw through an open door, the elder and a young woman at the bedside of a child. I didn’t disturb them. The vanilla smell wafted into the hall.

Baptism

I was called to the pediatric intensive care unit. A doctor, probably a resident, pointed to a bedroom with a closed door. “The mother’s baby died but she won’t leave. We’ve got to take it to the morgue but she won’t let go.” She’s been here for a couple of hours.”

“What’s the mother’s name?”

“Claire.”

The room was as dark as an empty womb. Shades drawn. No sunlight. Claire was sitting on the edge of the bed, the baby wrapped in a blue blanket, clutched to her breast. Beside her sat a young nurse, doing her best to offer comfort. “I’m sorry. We did the best we could.” The nurse was young enough to be fresh out of school. Her eyes were full of tears. It was as if the words from a text book were written on her face. *It’s all right to cry, a little. The family will know you care. But try to be professional.*

“As soon as I said, “I’m Chaplain Cullene,” the nurse fled the room.

“I’ll leave the two of you alone.” Her crepe soled shoes squeaked away.

“How sad that your baby died!” I could almost hear the palpitations of the mother’s heart, the terror and grief. But the heart is a muscular organ, strong as a clenched fist. It can’t break in two. I sat beside her on the bed and tried to draw her into conversation.

“You’re all alone.”

“Me and my boyfriend broke up.”

“Do you have family?”

“I’m taking the bus to Beaumont tonight. Would you baptize my baby?” Claire’s hair fell over her shoulders, covering the infant’s face. I stalled to figure out what to do.

“Have you chosen a name?”

I could have simply blessed the infant. I knew it wasn’t theologically sound to baptize a dead baby, but Claire was so distressed. She wanted it baptized and that was that.

“Her name is Clarissa. Clarissa Clark.” She fidgeted with the blanket.

“I’ll get some water.”

I found the young nurse back in the intensive care unit. She gave me a glass bowl used to hold cotton balls. I went to the sink.

“I have some sterile water.” She held up a bottle.

We went back to the room. Claire handed me her baby. I uncovered the child’s wizened face. The little corpse felt heavy as a stone. I said the ancient formula. “I baptize you, Clarissa Clark, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer.” I said a prayer for Claire, something about the assurance of God’s love and her baby being held forever in God’s embrace. The nurse crossed herself; bowed her head as if she was in prayer, or holding back tears.

I gave the child back to Claire. She held the little girl for a few moments; kissed her brow wet with water.

“Can you give Clarissa to the nurse now? It’s time to go.” The room was so quiet that my whisper sounded like a shout.

Obediently, Claire put the bundle in the nurse’s arms, and without a backward glance left the room.

“I’ll take the baby to the morgue. You don’t have to.” I reached out for the corpse.

“I’m okay.” The nurse straightened her back.

I wanted to put my arm around her, take her for coffee, relieve her of the burden of death. But she wanted to be strong and proficient.

“I’ll walk with you, then.”

Halloween

Hoar frost clung to the grass, a carpet of sparkles like sequins on a ballet dress. Patches of fallen gold leaves broke the seamless pattern. But the magic dissolved, as soon as the early nights descended. Bitter winds blew the stars away and nearly extinguished the city lights.

On Halloween night, my children had to dress warmly. Back home in Toronto, fairies, pirates and princesses held out their brown paper bags for treats. But in Edmonton, Alex and Rhiannon wore snow suits. No chance of showing a bare ankle or naked hand. Alex pouted.

“I want to go back home!” Rhiannon wept copious tears.

A year ago, in Toronto, the children’s father and I took them door to door for candy. He held Rhiannon on his arm and Alex clutched my hand. A family for the last time. The night before, we had decided to separate. The memories of losing him hurt physically, like the poke of a witch’s broom stick or the jab of a skeleton’s finger.

In this new city, I smiled ‘til my cheeks hurt; kissed both children on their foreheads; wrapped white sheets around their padded bodies; cut holes for eyes and mittened and booted their hands and feet. “There! You’re ghosts. Let’s go and haunt someone.”

Emergency Unit’s Waiting Room

The Machine

I found her in the Emergency’s Family room, a windowless cubby hole, painted beige, the colour of sallow skin. “Hi Sonya, I’m Chaplain Cullene. I’m a minister here in the hospital. May I sit down?” She sat stiffly in a straight backed chair. The stale air smelt of the last group of relatives that had huddled there, waiting for news. A solitary black phone sat on a table, mute testimony to the people beyond the hospital walls, people who didn’t know yet, who would have to be called, informed in a rational and controlled fashion of the outcome. “The nurses told me about your husband’s accident.”

She nodded; gestured to the chair. Then without a pause, she began her story.

*I was washing dishes; the sink is by the window. I looked out and saw his dad’s truck swerve into the driveway. He got out and ran towards the house screaming. “His arm’s off. His arm’s off.”*

*“Is he dead?”* *I ran out the front door.* “*Is he dead?”*

*We lifted him out and laid him on the grass. His clothes were torn right off. He’d worn those baggy pants. They must have got caught. He must have turned round and round. The machine didn’t let go of him until his arm was cut right off.*

“How terrible!” What more could I say? “How did he get help?”

*He dragged himself to the hog shed. There’s a phone there. Ours isn’t connected yet. I prayed the ambulance would come quickly. Then I realized his arm was left behind. “Go back for it,” I said. But his dad leaned against the truck and started crying.*

*“I can’t go on. You’ll have to go yourself.”*

*I was trying to stop the bleeding and screaming at him to help me. You know what people think of a woman at a time like that. They say she’s hysterical but I was trying to save Dan’s life. The old man’s shoulders were heaving and he was crying like a baby. So I knew I had to go back.*

The words came out of her mouth like pebbles whipped into the air under a spinning tire.

*All the time I was driving back to the hog shed, I thought of how careful Dan had been, and how angry he would get if I didn’t do things safely around the farm. When I got there, I ran to where the machine was standing. I found his arm with the sleeve still wrapped around it lying under the blade. I laid it on the floor of the truck. I was afraid it would fall off the seat if I went over a bump.*

As she talked, her hands flew through the air like a bird in a windstorm. I wanted to calm her, comfort her. I patted her knee. Her corduroys were rough and stiff. I looked down and realized I was touching a dark red patch of blood.

*I got back just as the ambulance was ready to leave. I knew he had lost so much blood I had to talk to keep him alive. “There’s money in the filing cabinet but don’t use it for anything. It’s for emergencies,” he said. As if I didn’t know.*

She started crying again. I put my arm around her. She leaned on me. I felt her tears on my neck.

*Oh my man, my man! We should have left the farm last summer when things were hard and we were so much in debt. We should have left and come to the city.*

A shaft of light came into the room. The doctor in the doorway. He was a bit older than her, a grave young man with hair thinning at the top of his head. “We’ve established a pulse. We’re trying to get his blood pressure stabilized.”

*His arm. I carried it all the way in the ambulance. I wrapped it up and laid it on my lap. Can you attach it? It’s terribly important. He plays the fiddle you see. He’s won prizes all over Alberta.*

“I’m sorry. There’s too much infection. There’s a lot of internal bleeding. He must have been battered by the machine. We need to operate on his right leg. We’re trying to save his life.”

“What’s the operation?” I asked.

“Amputation. We have to amputate the right leg.” The young doctor looked at the floor. He took the stethoscope from around his neck and stuffed it into his pocket. I got up and threw the Kleenexes in the garbage. She sat there, staring into space like someone in a trance. Then without even looking at the doctor she spat out the order. *Do it*. Then she stopped crying.

The Mother

“The mother’s in the waiting room. Her daughter has juvenile diabetes. We don’t think she’ll make it.” The nurse was an older woman. Her hair was blonde but dark at the roots, as if she didn’t have time to go to the hair dresser. Lines of concern furrowed her brow.

“How old is the girl?” I took a deep breath.

“Ten.”

Scattered magazines covered the coffee table in the waiting room. A forlorn teddy bear sat on the back of the chesterfield; leaned against the wall as if it was too tired to sit upright. The young mother sat on a wing backed chair, her hands clasping and unclasping as she stared at the worn brown rug. I wear a big rhinestone cross on a gold chain around my neck, along with my identity badge. If people are confused about who I am - they meet so many people at the beginning, doctors, residents, nurses - they’ll gather my purpose if I show them the cross.

“Hi. I’m Chaplain Cullene. Your daughter’s here. Would you like to tell me what happened?”

“I didn’t know she was so sick ‘til I gave her the orange juice. Said she was thirsty. Her hand shook so much. Couldn’t hold it. Spilled it all over the bed.”

“That’s when you called the ambulance.”

She nodded. “I don’t know where her father is. We’re going through a divorce.”

“That’s hard.” Nausea roiled in my stomach, with the sudden memory of my own shattered marriage.

“I don’t know where my son is. He’s at our neighbour’s, down the road. I don’t know their last name. I should have written down their phone number. We just moved here. If something happens to her I don’t know how to contact anybody.” She reached for the box of Kleenex. Blew her nose.

“You know your son is with neighbours. He’s safe.” I touched her shoulder in an attempt to reassure her. How hard she seemed on herself.

In our first days in Edmonton we moved into a shell of a house. No appliances. No fridge for cold fresh milk. I sent Alex to buy some. He had to go down the street and cross an empty field adjacent to his school yard. When the door slammed, I had thought to myself. Am I crazy? My son in a strange city? Running through an empty lot? I had visions of him getting lost, pedophiles, child snatchers.

A gush of fresh air cooled our faces. The doctor stepped into the room. “Do you want to see her? We’ve got the I.V. running. We’re not sure if…”

“Oh no.” She covered her face with her hands.

The doctor turned abruptly without finishing his sentence. We followed him into the emergency. We walked passed rows of cots. She didn’t look to her left or right. She didn’t notice if beds were empty, or if bodies lay there groaning and staring at the cream stucco ceiling, or if someone’s eyes followed her. We stepped behind a green curtain and there she was, the girl’s brown hair curling into the white pillow, her slim body covered by a sheet. Eyes closed. The mother reached out to her child but there were numerous needles in both arms, oxygen tubes up her nose. She looked like a grotesque puppet on strings.

“I don’t know where to touch her.” The mother’s hand fluttered like a dazed butterfly. We both looked for a patch of skin, then she grabbed her daughter’s toes.

The little girl surprised everyone. She lived. A few days later, when the mother took her home, she must have embraced them. The three of them must have clung together.

A Policy

Gerald, my second boss in three months, was director of support services. He had a trim moustache, thick black hair and large hands that should have been wielding an axe or tugging at a fishing line not rifling through papers. During one of my interviews with Gerald, I mentioned something about going home for Christmas.

He raised his bushy eyebrows. “You can’t go home for Christmas.”

“But I have three weeks holidays coming to me.”

“Yes, but our policy is employees work for a year before they take any time off.”

“My children are going home to Toronto to visit their father at Christmas. They’re expecting me to go too.”

“I’m sorry. We have a policy…”

“No one told me. I wouldn’t have come here if I’d known I couldn’t go home for Christmas.” My voice rose in panic. I was sick and tired of policies and procedures. I wanted to fill my children’s stocking, watch them tear open their presents, hug my mother and my sister. I started to cry. I wanted to quit right then and there.

He blushed and tapped the desk with his big hands as if he was patting my shoulder. “Let me speak to the vice president. I’ll see what I can do.” I wiped away my tears with the back of my hand and tried to leave the room with a scrap of dignity.

Pay Back Time

I was doing rounds in the emergency unit when I came upon Sarah in the waiting room. “I’m the chaplain here. Cullene is my name. Can I help you?” The young mother’s face was pale and thin, her eyes red with fatigue and crying.

“My baby. Something’s happened to my baby.” I tried to draw her into conversation, but she stared into space, muttering.

I excused myself and went to the nursing station.

“The mother in the waiting room is quite upset. What’s happening?”

“Sarah’s her name. The child’s three. She fell down the stairs. Had some kind of a seizure. Epilepsy, maybe.”

“Keep me updated. I’ll go back and sit with her.”

When I returned Sarah was still muttering.

"I'll never ask another question."

"What are you saying? What question?"

"My husband's Roman Catholic. I'm taking instruction."

"That should be interesting." I sat down beside her on the worn chesterfield.

"I asked the priest a question. Now God's paying me back."

"What did you ask?"

"If God is all-powerful, why is there so much suffering in the world?"

"That's a good question."

"I challenged God. Now he's paying me back."

"I don't believe in that kind of God. I'm sure your priest doesn't either."

She didn't seem to hear me. I tried to engage her again. “Intelligent people ask questions.”

She continued to stare at the wall and mutter her litany. "I'll never ask another question."

Not wanting to intrude, I left her for a while. Where did she conjure up the vision of such a vengeful deity?

I returned in twenty minutes with a glass of orange juice. The room was empty. I hurried to the nursing station. “What happened to Sarah?”

“Gone home. Just a one time seizure. The family doctor will follow it up.” The phone rang and she turned away.

I went back to the waiting room; sat on the chesterfield; wrapped my arms around myself. The room felt as chilling as the young woman’s religious beliefs. Her God did show mercy. Perhaps groveling repentance does help.

I walked down the hall into the chapel and smelt the wax from the burnt out candles. The cross hung from the wall front above the altar. How did the meaning behind the symbol become so twisted?

I wanted to go back to the emergency unit and search through Sarah’s files; find her phone number; straighten her out. Instead, I could only hope she would talk to her priest. I imagined him with a white shaggy beard, bright blue eyes with laugh wrinkles at the corner. He would say, “Jesus died because he confronted evil. He wasn’t a sacrifice to appease an angry God. His blood didn’t pay the price for our sins. That’s language from the Middle Ages.”

“But I challenged God.” She would frown and twist the silk fabric of her dress.

“Your child’s illness isn’t a punishment for healthy curiosity. Now dry your eyes.” The priest would pat her shoulder.

“What does the cross mean then?” She would crush the Kleenex in her hands and look up from the floor.

“God wept over his crucified son, just as you cried over your child’s illness. God suffers with us.”

Hark the Herald Angels Sing

A week before Christmas, when the hospital was festooned with designer trees and wreaths redolent with pine cones and holly, the nurses formed a choir and invited my daughter and me to sing. A merry little troupe, we tried to fill the patients’ empty hours; travelled from room to room trilling *Silent Night* and *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. We avoided the Intensive Care Units; the patients there were too ill too hear the good news. Those in the four bed wards and private rooms smiled gamely. Some of their hearts were surely full of relief because the surgery was over, the infection healed, the fever gone. Others knew they would lie in their beds alone on Christmas morning and would wait for the cold turkey and soppy dressing that evening, if they were allowed to eat.

After the singing and the hot chocolate and the nurses’ compliments on my daughter’s red Christmas dress, we skidded home on the icy roads and packed our bags to fly back to Toronto.

Odious my Oates

The president of our hospital retired amid flowers, handshakes and tears. He was like a corner stone that held up the old building. A kind old Jew with a strong ethical sense, Mr. Bernstein headed the institution for twenty years. As the chaplain, I was asked to attend the farewell banquet; bless the food and the people present; speed him on his way.

Our new president, Mr. Oates, hailed from Arkansas. He was one of those Americans who cherished family values and the King James Version of the Bible. He smelled of shaving lotion, solid leather shoes and crisp dollar bills. At first glance you could see that he exercised in the gym every day. A man of medium build, he dressed exquisitely. He wore freshly pressed business suits, polished shoes, starched shirts and matching silk ties.

In his first week on the job, he privately interviewed all of us in his office. On the morning of my meeting, I re-wrote my resume, dressed in a black suit and donned a clerical collar. I ordered it from a company in Boston. Their designers realized more and more women were entering the ministry. They created a blouse that sported a stiff white collar at the neck. This apparel came in appropriate colours: black, brown and navy blue. Pleats ran vertically down the front of the shirt, only a touch of femininity.

Mr. Oates stood when I entered and shook my hand. I knew by the puzzled look on his face he didn’t expect Rev. Bryant to be a woman. Right off, I told him I was working on a doctoral degree at Princeton University.

“My thesis explores issues of grief and loss.” I sat down on the chair he offered.

“How did you get interested in that subject?” He smiled.

“I worked at Sick Children’s Hospital in Toronto and met young women with terminally ill children. Often under the strain the marriages broke up. I couldn’t imagine how they bore the pain of a double loss.” Thus having garnered his sympathy, I admitted that I was a divorced single parent, that my family was not whole or virtuous like he might think a minister’s family should be.

“Tell me about your children” He continued to smile.

“I have a ten year old son, Alex and a six year old daughter, Rhiannon. I understand you have a son, too? I showed my white shining teeth but I couldn’t hold the grin as long as he could.

“Terry is twelve.” It was difficult to read his smile.

I swerved the conversation in the direction of his offspring and for a while we built a fragile bridge and I passed the interview.

Next, he summoned the directors of the various departments to a retreat to a Jasper resort. Our task: to write our hospital’s mission statement. “What’s the dress code?” asked the Head Pharmacist, a man who had been around a long time and knew the ropes.

“Casual,” said Mr. Oates.

The men happily doffed their ties and collared shirts; wore turtle neck sweaters and jeans. Mr. Oates appeared in his black suit.

“Couldn’t he have at least worn a sports jacket?” The men groaned over their coffees.

“Did he have to wear a tie? Couldn’t he have unbuttoned the first button of his shirt?” said the Chief Dietician.

“He’s got no chest hair,” said the Chief of Radiology.

Myths about his perfectionism began circulating. It was whispered around the hospital that he appeared at the loading docks at three o’clock in the morning. No one heard a car drive up or noticed headlights in the darkness. He descended upon the workers like a second coming, to separate the sheep from the goats, to decide who would be fired or laid off. People broke into a sweat in his presence. We called him the odious Mr. Oates.

A week later, he requested to see me, another interview but I didn’t know what it was about. I wore a red suit, power dressing.

“We need Prayer Breakfasts in this hospital. Eight o’clock first Monday of the month.” He no longer smiled.

I pictured Mr. Oates at the head of the table praying for each one of us, rooting out our sins and infirmities and smiling. I imagined him forgiving us for our humanity. I imagined him ordering me to pray over patients expecting them to be miraculously cured.

“This is not a church-related hospital. It’s funded by the government. Our Pastoral Care Department is ecumenical and inter-faith.” I said.

“Prayer breakfasts will raise the morale of the staff.” He stood up and shook my hand. Smiled. Our interview was over.

The next Friday morning the boardroom was full of all the directors of the various departments. I was at one end of the table and Mr. Oates at the other. Just as I wouldn’t convert a patient on the deathbed, I didn’t want my colleagues to feel pressured. I had a plan.

One of the occupational therapists belonged to the Jewish faith, her husband a cantor in the synagogue. We had become close friends. When I had first arrived in the hospital, I discovered that one of my tasks was to write an article in the hospital newspaper. In December, I wished the staff a Happy Hanukah and a Merry Christmas. That year, one holiday followed the other. Zelda came into my office elated.

“No one ever acknowledges our celebrations. They sneak by in the calendar year without anyone caring.” She flapped the newsletter in the air like an athlete waves her country’s flag.

Zelda and I planned the first Prayer Breakfast together. I opened with the twenty-third Psalm. She explained the meaning and history of Hanukah. I said a benediction familiar to churchgoers but belonging to the Hebrew Scriptures.

*The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26)*

At the end we gobbled up Zelda’s delectable cheese blintzes.

In the ensuing months we ate: bannock, salty stuffed dates and sugar dipped jalebis. Still the complaints circled about religion being forced on the staff. In the end Mr. Oates gave in. He cancelled our prayer breakfasts.

Unfortunately, we couldn’t cancel Mr. Oates.

The Medical Unit

Meditation

The Whitemud Equestrian Centre fanned out between my house and the hospital. Every morning I turned off the main highway. Horses, dream figures, emerged in the dawn mist. I paused and studied their muscled flanks, swift strong legs, heads held high. Then, I drove down Keillor Road, past the white fences, the green grass and elm trees. A time for quiet meditation before the rattle of wheel chairs, the grim voices of medical residents, the odour of dying, bedside flowers.

Rakhi

I ran in to Rakhi frequently. She cleaned the medical unit.

“Morning,” We nodded to each other.

I wasn’t a morning person. When the alarm rang at six thirty, I rolled into a hot tub and gradually came alive while I toweled off. Then I roused my two children. Quick breakfast. Packed lunches. We were off.

Rakhi leaned on her mop, greeted me cheerfully. Slowly our brief words grew into conversations.

“What a storm last night. How did you make it in on those icy roads?” I stamped my boots on the rug to shake off the snow.

“My husband dropped me off in his truck.”

“I’ll never get you used to this weather. Where are you from?”

“Delhi.”

“What a change for you! I’m from Toronto. But we didn’t have cold like this.”

“I always say no matter what happens in life, always be cheerful.”

“I’m shivering too hard to smile.”

“When I was a child my mother died and my father abandoned me.”

“In Delhi.”

“Here, in Edmonton. He left me on the street.”

“How terrible. Didn’t social services step in?”

“I made it to my auntie’s house. She raised me.”

“How old were you?”

“About ten.”

“Did your aunt treat you well?”

“She made me part of the family. She chose my husband, a second cousin, so I would stay in the family.”

“Is it a happy marriage?”

“He’s good to me. But I wish I could have chosen my own man.”

“That doesn’t always work out.” I imagined her stepping out of her husband’s truck in the snow. Blowing him a kiss goodbye. A stable kindly marriage, a close warm family. Safety. Companionship.

“I would have liked the freedom to choose.”

“We all want something else.” I brushed away the melting snowflakes that trickled down my cheeks like tears.

Wild Life

“Those boys have had such a destructive life style. Drink too much. Take some stupid dare and dive into a shallow pool or have some accident with a motorcycle. What a waste!” The nurse, earnest and young enough to be a graduate on her first job, shook her head.

“What about this man? He’s just been admitted.” I was looking for referrals. We were standing together in the nurses’ unit, a jumble of charts on the counter.

“You should visit him. He’s really depressed. Urinary infection. His accident was years ago.”

I walked slowly down the hall, my feet weighted down with dread. Dread of the rage I would see lying like ashes in his gray eyes; the sardonic tone of his voice; or worse still, the silence, the refusal to acknowledge another person in his room. Who could blame these boys for the grimace on their pale faces, the profanities that spouted from their mouths like rusty water from a broken pipe?

“Hi, I’m the chaplain. Cullene is my name. How are things going?” He turned his wheelchair sharply. I looked into his eyes, avoiding the shapeless legs, the lifeless arm like a dry twig that had fallen into his lap.

“Look at these.” He made half a gesture, a slight raise of that thin arm into the stale hospital air; turned his chair to face the bed. A pile of black and white photographs were scattered across the wrinkled sheet. One was a seagull taking flight off the water, his wings spread, buoyed by the breeze; another a close–up of a beaver’s inquisitive face, ringed by a froth of the waves. “My show.”

I looked away from the pictures and realized his eyes had turned from gray to green, speckled with gold.

“You’re a photographer?”

“Since the accident. Still life on the river.”

“They’re beautiful pictures.”

“When I found out I’d never walk again, my father and brother built a raft that would hold my wheel chair. They rigged up the camera so I can push the shutter.” His face relaxed into a smile.

“Such a play of light and shadow.”

“I was hoping to get another prize, but it looks like I’ll miss the show.”

I stood beside him and studied the pictures: a mother duck with her babies swimming in single file, the down of their feathers white against the dark water; a frog, his throat bulbous and full of croaking; a fish leaping into a spray of silver droplets.

“Your subjects are so lively,” I said. Then I wanted to bite my tongue. He was frozen into that wheelchair like a wild thing trapped in a cage.

“I creep up on them.”

I could see him on the raft. Clouds glide over the blue sky; the shoreline slides past as richly detailed as fake scenery in a movie; bulrushes sway; water lilies bob to and fro; spruce trees rise out of rock. Stranded in the wheelchair, he floats noiselessly over the current. His lens catches everything in motion.

Swing Yer Partner

I didn’t hope to meet somebody; I just wanted to have some fun. So, I joined a single’s square dancing club. It took place in a high school gym that smelled of a mixture of rubber soled running shoes, bubble gum and winter frost. Even though it was thirty degrees below zero, we kept the windows open; the dancers became so warm from constant movement.

Some of the advanced members performed in shows at rodeos and carnivals. The women wore white shoes, bright gingham dresses with red crinolines to match or frilly blouses with skirts trimmed with lace, their costumes an expression of their femininity and allure. Though, none of them were particularly good looking. They had glasses, or big noses or wide hips to spoil the appeal. I just wore blue jeans and a sweater; I was at the beginner’s level. Their partners wore matching shirts and big silver buckles. None of them were married; they lived together, or were long time dancing partners and lovers, but still single.

The Vice President, a jolly plump woman in her fifties, confessed to me she was in love with the caller, a large man who always wore a Stetson. On the first night, during the coffee break, Martha suggested we drive together, since we both came from the same part of town. I welcomed her kindness and over the course of the winter we became square dancing buddies. We never ate a meal together or went window shopping at West Edmonton Mall. We simply drove back and forth to the colorful skirts and the western music about love and wild horses, heart beak and harvest moons. She told me that her husband had died of Hodgkin’s disease years ago.

“When I met Bud, it was love at first sight. There was electricity between us and everybody felt it. He can’t get a divorce; he’d lose everything. We spend Saturday afternoon’s together; snuggle up in bed and watch a John Wayne movie. He’s a great cook, too.”

“Does his wife miss him on the weekends?”

“She doesn’t care. We’ve been together ten years now. Everybody in the club knows.”

“Too bad you can’t get married.”

“We have a good life together. We’re a team. I do the business end, arrange for the rehearsal space and the coffee and all, and he does the rest. See, the caller’s important. If any one slips up the whole square can get confused and the dance breaks down. So he calls out a simple step that will get everybody in order again and the dance carries on.” She said this while switching on the directional signal as we turned left against the traffic.

I thought when I joined the club that square dancing would be easy. In high school it was part of our physical education curriculum. I remembered allemande left to your partner, grand chain. Square dancing can’t be that hard. But it was. I tripped during the two steps and skipped in the wrong direction to the basket ball turn. At twirl two I wanted to walk, and at walk two I tried to twirl. But, at least, over that first cold winter I got out of the house. I enjoyed the company of healthy happy people. I didn’t tell them where I worked or what I did. When a man swung me, I could feel the muscles in his arms, the force of his strength as he led me, the laughter in his eyes when he looked at me. I hadn’t been touched by a man for so long.

The year of dancing lurched and stumbled by. Martha invited me to the group’s New Year’s Eve party.

At first I demurred. “I have no one to bring.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “I don’t have anyone either. Bud will be with his wife.”

To my surprise, I did have fun that night. Jim, one of the advanced dancers, danced every tune with me. I knew he was one of the partnered men. His girlfriend, Sandi lived in the apartment downstairs in his house. She was a bony creature, with spindly legs that showed pale and skeletal during the twirls. Over the Christmas vacation, she was visiting her sick mother in Toronto. So, Jim arrived at the festivities alone. He danced smooth as a clean knife spreads peanut butter over warm toast; his hand melted the skin at the small of my back. He gave me a chaste squeeze at midnight, and I drove home alone.

At the end of January I walked into the classroom and threw my coat on an empty chair, eager to begin the lesson. Jim was cool and his partner overly solicitous.

“How was your Christmas? It must hard to be alone.”

“I flew back to Toronto to be with my family.”

“I’m so glad you had such a good time at the New Year’s Eve Party.” With that she flipped about in her purple skirt and flounced away.

That night I was thrown out of the square dancing club. Bud, the caller beckoned to me at the end of the class. “You’re just not keeping up,” he said, lifting his hat off his brow and wiping the sweat away. “You’re breaking up the square.”

I cried all the way home in Martha’s car.

“Do you want me to speak to Bud?” she asked.

“No. It’s okay.” The wind shield wipers clicked back and forth in the rain like exclamation marks.

Evaluation Session

Gerald, my boss, looked up from his desk with a friendly smile and motioned for me to sit down. I was relieved by his hospitable gesture. My voice cracked as we made small talk about the weather, the sleet that fell this morning, decked the trees in silver icicles and snarled the traffic. This was my sixth month evaluation and I wanted him to appreciate me and my work.

“Some people didn’t make it in this morning.”

I want to say, “Look at me. I did. And got the children off to school too, all by myself.” But I held my tongue. I wanted him to realize I’d come into the hospital after midnight when relatives grieved the loss of a loved one. I wanted him to know that more than one nurse had come to my office to talk because they’d heard that I’m divorced and they’d just broken up with their boyfriend or husband. I wanted to tell him about the memorial service I held for the child who died after nine months in the pediatric intensive care unit and the nurses who wept like mothers at the loss. But I waited for him to speak.

“Your memos are too short.”

“Pardon?”

“You’ve got to improve on the memos you send out. They’re too short.”

“I was taught to write business letters that came to the point. Memos are sort of mini-business letters.”

“You need to put more in them.”

“More what?”

“Words. They’re too short.”

I nodded assent and that was the end of our interview.

Neurosurgery Intensive Care Unit

The White Dress

“We need you up here right away.” The urgency in the nurse’s voice mixed with the static on the telephone line, a weird staccato in my ear. I could hear him screaming before I stepped out of the elevator. Buck looked like a football player, muscular, unshaven, balding early. He wore a navy blue sweat shirt and pants.

“I’m the chaplain here. What’s happened? May I help you?”

“She’s dead. The doc said that she died.”

“Let me get you out of this public area. Come into the Quiet Room.” He let me lead him by the elbow.

I motioned for him to sit down in a comfortable armchair but he remained standing, waving his arms and sobbing like a broken down windmill. “Tell me who died?”

“My girlfriend. She’s only twenty two. How could she die?” He rubbed his dripping nose on his sleeve.

“What a terrible shock!”

“We’ve been going together six months. I was even thinking about marrying her. We had a picnic at Cooking Lake yesterday. She was fine. She was beautiful in a white dress. It’s all my fault.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I did it.”

“What happened?”

“We got home late and went to bed. Not going to tell you what we were doing.”

“What did the doctor say?”

“An aneurism.”

“That’s a weakness in the arteries. You couldn’t have known about that.”

“I killed her.” His voice rose.

“I’m going to get a nurse to explain to you what an aneurism is.”

I hurried to the nursing station and found an older nurse. She was giving orders to student. A pencil behind her ears, bangs in her eyes. An air of authority about her. I interrupted. “Buck is really upset. He thinks he killed his girlfriend.”

“What gave him that crazy idea?”

“They were making love.”

“Oh for God’s sake. It happens all the time.” She bounded out of the unit towards a patient’s room.

“He needs to hear that from you.”

“Tell him it’s like a blow out in a tire.” She disappeared behind closed doors.

When I got back to the quiet room, it was empty. I spied Buck by the elevator. As soon as he saw me he started yelling. “Bury her in the white dress. The one she wore at the picnic.”

An old man with a cane frowned at Buck, got up from his chair and limped down the hall. A woman gathered her child in her arms. I was beginning to think I should call security. I crossed the distance between the patients’ rooms and the elevator. A small football field of green carpet and plants. “Hold it. A nurse is coming to speak to you. She’ll explain everything.”

“Bury her in the white dress.” His arms flailed wildly; spittle flew from his mouth; ferns trembled in their pots.

Then the elevator door opened and his raucous grief was swallowed up.

Honeymooners

“Cathy must have been tired when she got into the car to drive home. That’s why she didn’t see him. He was speeding through a red light. She didn’t have a chance.”

One of the nurses shoved a cup under the coffee machine. Her companion reached out for the hot drink and blew the steam away. I had joined them in the staff room; relaxed in a comfy chair. My feet hurt from standing beside beds all day. They told me Cathy had taken a longer coffee break than usual. Showed them her honeymoon pictures: the hotel in Jamaica; the poinsettias that grew wild on the road; the boat they took deep sea fishing.

Later that day, I visited Cathy in the neurosurgery intensive care unit. She had multiple fractures, spinal cord injury. She was attached to a ventilator, so she couldn’t speak but she could write. I read her note. “Let me die.”

I don’t usually give religious tracts to people. But I came across a beautiful photograph of a sunrise over a beach, the kind of scene she must have enjoyed from her balcony in that Jamaican honeymoon suite. Underneath were written words from the Bible.

*The Lord is my light and my salvation.*

*Whom shall I fear?*

*The Lord is the strength of my life*

*Of whom shall I be afraid? Psalm 27:1*

I handed her the photograph tenuously, and read the quotation. She smiled. I slipped it under her pillow. When I returned the next day, I was surprised to see the picture with its inscription hanging in front of her. One of the nurses had attached it to the intravenous pole. What do you say in the midst of such a tragedy? Her eyes locked on to it, even when I prayed with her.

“May God walk with you on this hard journey, comfort and encourage you. May God console your husband and give him courage. May God be with your parents and keep them strong. May the Lord be your light and salvation and keep you from fear.”

Her husband was alone in the waiting room, his head in his hands.

“Dirk? I’m the chaplain. I’ve been talking to Cathy.”

“She’ll never walk again.” He swept a lock of sandy hair out of his eyes. I couldn’t help but notice his tanned skin. “I told her I don’t care. I’ll build a ramp in the house. I’ve done construction. I’m good at it.”

“You’ve just come back from your honeymoon. What a terrible way to end such a happy time.”

“I’ll never love anybody else.”

He told me how she delighted in children, how dedicated she was to her profession, how well she cooked. Then he repeated the vow. “I’ll never love anybody else.” He looked me square in the eye. “She doesn’t want them to operate again.”

“I know.”

“We had so many plans for our future.”

“It’s important to give her hope.”

The next day I met her parents in the family room. We sat in the too soft leather chairs and breathed in the disinfectant. Her father was a military man, stalwart, shoulders straight, head held high. Her mother, dressed in an avocado green wool business suit displayed bravery equal to her husband.

“I’ve got a good pension. We’ve got money. We can do anything for her.” Cathy’s father spoke in a voice gruff with suppressed tears.

The surgeon interrupted us. He wore green scrubs, fresh from the operating room, letting us know he had only a minute, but was doing his best. “We don’t think we’ll be able to wean her off the ventilator.”

“Then she’ll never go home.” Her mother tightened her lips. She wouldn’t cry.

“She wants to be left alone, no more tests, no more surgery.” He swayed from one foot to the other as if he was standing on the scales of justice, unable to make up his mind which decision would be the most ethical one. “We’re ordering more morphine. We think she’s depressed. You can’t rest in an I.C. U. Too much noise. After a few days of undisturbed sleep, she may change her mind.” He left us; shut the door.

When Cathy awoke from her deep sleep, she hadn’t changed her mind. She wanted to die. She wrote a note to the staff. “I’m a nurse. I know what’s in store for me. No more heroic treatments.” She looked like a little spider caught in a web of tubes that tangled around her body. I took Dirk to the cafeteria for coffee. Bitter. So hot it burns your lips.

“Do you remember that Jane Fonda movie? *They Shoot Horses Don’t They*? It takes place during the depression.”

“Yeah, the one about marathon dancers. They dance to the point of exhaustion.” He tore open a packet of sugar.

“You wouldn’t put an animal through that. Your wife feels the same way.”

“I know what you’re talking about. I had to shoot my dog. I remember taking him down the lane with my rifle under my arm. My dad said that it was the kindest thing to do.”

We drank our coffee in silence.

In the ensuing days the surgeons argued. The parents, begged her to be strong. Dirk held her hand; professed his undying love. Finally, the doctors called for a meeting of the bio-ethics committee, but before they could gather to discuss her case, she died. God was kind. Cathy had her way.

Guns, Whiskey and Wild, Wild Women

I was so lonely that first winter, I joined Edmonton’s Operetta society. I lined up for an hour to audition for *Annie Get Your Gun*. When they finally gave me a script, I recognized one of the nurses in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit. She brushed her bangs away from her eyes and smiled

“Hi Mary,” I said. “You must be tired after a long day of work. Now this!”

“You can’t stop caring about people.” She laughed and introduced me to the group. “This is our new chaplain from Toronto. Be nice to her folks.” She handed me my lines.

I would have been happy to be in the chorus, but I won the role of Mrs. Potter Porter, a society matron who makes a play for Frank Butler, Annie’s true love. A few weeks before the show, I hung a large poster on my office door; a picture of Annie in a short buckskin skirt leaning coquettishly on her gun. I thought nothing of the advertisement, expected the staff would buy tickets, anticipated taking my own children. On the night of the performance, I wore a taffeta wine dress with a black underskirt. Made the most of the short bit, wrapped my arms around Frank’s neck and one leg around his hips. The audience laughed.

Years later, when I left the hospital, my boss, a woman, the Vice-President of Operations, came to say goodbye. We were almost friends.

“I’m so sorry to see you go. You contributed so much. Did you know you were almost fired when you first arrived?

“Why?” My legs started shaking. What disaster if I had been fired, after bringing my two young children all the way across the country!

“It was that *Annie Get Your Gun* poster hanging on your door.”

“A few of the staff were involved one way or another in that show.”

“It *was* the poster. Some people didn’t think it was appropriate to hang on a chaplain’s door.”

“How is it nothing happened?”

“There was a movement led by some, shall we say conservative Christians? Mr. Bernstein, the President, liked you. Remember him? So did the Vice President of Medical Services. You used to ask him where the best ski hills were. You wanted your kids to learn.”

As she talked, a scene came to my mind: me whizzing down the hall with these two powerful men. My office was adjacent to theirs and we were heading to the board room. I bravely kept stride. Who was I, a mere woman, and a chaplain to match them step by step? They were talking about investments, something I knew nothing about. I didn’t know what to say, but I felt I had to add something to the conversation. It was a long hallway. “I’ve got stocks, too. Hiram Walkers.”

“How did you get those?” asked Mr. Bernstein.

“A present from my dad when I graduated from university. I guess they must be worth something by now.”

The two men glanced at each other and laughed. At the time it didn’t occur to me that they were liquor stocks.

“That poster caused you more trouble than you realized. But those two men liked you. When push came to shove Mr. Bernstein said, ‘any chaplain who can talk about stocks and likes to ski belongs here.’ ”

Chaplain’s Office

Flowers

She must have seen the sign to the Chaplain’s Office that hangs beside the lobby’s elevators. She slipped in and hovered in front of my desk like a little gray shadow. I heard a rustle; looked up from my papers. Alice stood before me, a wisp of a young woman, about twenty. Her brown hair streaming down her back so straight it could have been ironed. She wore dull brown polyester pants and a frumpy white top.

“Can I help you? I’m Chaplain Cullene.” I motioned for her to sit down.

“I’m Alice. My dad’s in the intensive care unit. Heart problems. I’m afraid he’s going to die.” She held a parcel awkwardly on her lap. “Will you take these flowers up to him?”

“Don’t you want to deliver the bouquet yourself?”

“I can’t. My family’s not speaking to me.”

Slowly, her story emerged. A year ago Alice had entered therapy because of night terrors and flashbacks. She confronted her parents. Her father denied the accusations of incest. Her mother remained adamantly loyal to her husband. Since that day they refused to speak to Alice.

“How did you find out he was here?” I asked.

“My cousin phoned me. She just found out yesterday he’d had a heart attack.” She began undoing the parcel. “Please take these flowers to him. If he accepts them, I know he’ll accept me. If he refuses them, I know he’ll also reject me.”

I was taken aback by the stark beauty of her gift. A solitary red chrysanthemum towered above a purple ceramic vase. Beside it stood a single pussy willow; behind that a large green leaf. Greenery and yellow berries filled in the base of the Ikebana bouquet. The bleak austerity of the array told her story.

“Did you create this yourself? It’s beautiful.”

“I got it from the Japanese florist down the street.”

“I’ll go and see your father, but I have to tell you that flowers are not allowed in the intensive care unit. There’s just no space.”

“Let him know I’m here. I want to see him before he dies.”

“I’ll find out how critical he is.”

I discovered from the nurse that Mr. Bennett, Alice’s father, had recovered and had been moved to a general ward.

“He’s in the first bed on the right. Look for the patient with the pink rose on his night stand. We gave it to him. A goodbye present from the nurses. He’ll be discharged soon. A real sweetheart.” She waved crossed fingers at me.

I found him easily, a handsome man with blue eyes and sandy hair, the sort of male model pictured swinging a golf club in a retirees’ magazine.

Alice’s mother was quite another picture, a small wizened woman with rounded shoulders and a hollow chest. At the mention of her daughter, she cringed toward her husband as if to protect him with her own frail body.

“She’s not part of our family anymore,” said Mr. Bennett.

“Not at all,” echoed his wife.

“Alice is downstairs. She wants to bring you a bouquet.”

“We have flowers. Look at that. The nurses gave him that rose bowl because they liked him so much.” Mrs. Bennett pointed to a fragile pink flower bobbing in water, translucent petals barely keeping the rose afloat.

I excused myself hastily; asked the resident-on-call to come down to my office. “Alice would like to know her father’s prognosis. A bit of information might comfort her, even though her dad won’t see her.”

“She must have done something awful.” He shifted his glasses on his nose.

I bit my lip.

We found Alice waiting in my office, the flowers still perched on her lap.

“Your father had an acute myocardial infarction. But he’s stable now.” After a few exchanges, the young doctor gave her his card. “Call me if you need me. I’ll let you know if anything happens.” He checked his watch and was gone.

“I’m so sorry your father wouldn’t see you and your lovely flowers.” I helped her wrap up the bouquet, again.

“At least he’s okay.”

“In Japan, Buddhist monks used to arrange these flowers in silence. Their work was a kind of prayer or meditation. Maybe this bouquet is a prayer for you.

“For me?”

“To the Japanese the chrysanthemum is not a cut flower. It’s a living plant.”

“I didn’t know that.” She smiled and slipped out the door.

Klondike days

Our hospital celebrated Klondike Days with gusto. Pancakes for lunch and a concert in the afternoon. One of the nurses in the operetta society asked me to be our hospitals’ Klondike Kate and sing some old love songs. In the 1800’s Edmonton was the last outpost. Miners stocked up with supplies, liquor and their last taste of female flesh before the isolation of the wilderness. The spirit of the gold rush never died. Even in the 1980’s the sense of adventure and bawdiness swept over the city; seeped through the cracks in the walls of our emergency unit and even into the administrative suites.

“Would you do a concert for the staff at noon hour?” What fun. I couldn’t resist. But I faced a dilemma. How could the supposedly reverend chaplain play the infamous Klondike Kate? She dressed in red and performed the flame dance; owned a brothel. My instinct was to offer a Mae West version of this wanton woman. I would like to have sung something like, *My Old Flame, I just can’t think of his name.* Instead, I bought a second hand pink costume with a huge feathered hat and made the theme of the concert, love. After all, isn’t that what Christianity is all about? A microphone and sound system were set up on an outdoor stage. I broke out into a sweat before I made my grand entrance. Mr. Oates, the president, sat in the front row. His legs neatly crossed, hands folded as though he were in church. I took a deep breath; sang innocuous songs like *Cruising Down the River, Moonlight Bay* and ended with Streisand’s, *People Who Need People.* Kate became a saint. I corseted, scoured and stifled her. To my great but secret regret, I did not sing come-hither love songs. Eros did not appear on stage that summer. Only when I took a shower.

Palliative Care Unit

Cleaner

Charlie lined up the pottery animals on the window sill.

“The blue cat’s for my daughter. The red dog’s for my ex-wife.” He held them up for me to examine. I didn’t ask who the unpainted ones were for. Perhaps they were for the nurses on the unit, a decoration to stand beside their files. I was glad for the colorful gifts he proudly displayed. It gave us something to talk about. Up until that day he treated me with reserve. Was it because he was a black man and I a white woman? Was he in too much pain to care about the strangers who came in and out of his room to change his sheets, bring a tray of food, fix his catheter? His cancer had metastasized and now there was a tumour in his brain.

“You’re pretty close to your ex-wife.” I nodded towards the red dog he planned to give her.

“She lives in New York. We keep in touch by phone. She’s a nurse so I can ask her questions about my meds.”

“Are you from New York?”

“Yeah. I still think of myself as an American, even though I came here five years ago. I was in a pretty bad way.”

“What happened?”

“I’m a Vietnam war veteran. I saw some of my buddies die. When I got back to the Bronx, I was drinking pretty heavily. Then I met my wife and cleaned up. We got along pretty well for a while. Then, I got drinking again. I don’t know why. Had trouble holding down a job.”

“What did you do for a living?”

“Cleaned out the New York subways. Worked nights. They lock the bathroom doors before midnight. People relieved themselves in the corner. I had to clean it up before morning. I wore protective material but I think that’s why I got sick.”

“What a horrible job!”

“It’s my own fault. I never took care of myself.”

“Sounds like you’ve been through some rough waters.”

“The war was the worst, watching my buddies die.” He frowned. “Do you know a guy named Vivaldi?”

“He was a great composer; wrote The Four Seasons.”

“I’ve got the tape. Listen to it all the time.” He opened the drawer of his bedside table and handed me the cover. On the front was the silhouette of a violinist.

I pictured Charlie listening to the glorious strings of the concerto; the passion of the sonorous upward sweep; playfulness of the pizzicato; the unrelenting scraping of the bow. The virtuosity of Vivaldi tested the mettle of the best violinists. The music framed the vicissitudes of Charlie’s life.

One day, when I walked into Charlie’s room, he was sitting on the edge of the bed running his fingers through his hair.

“What’s the matter? Are you in pain? Shall I call a nurse?”

"Can you get me another one? Someone must have taken mine during the night." He pointed to the cross on the wall.

"What do you mean?" I asked. There on the wall, hung a bare wooden cross. "There's no body," he said.

"Ah, yes. Roman Catholics usually have the corpus on the cross. Protestants display an empty cross to signify the resurrection."

"Well, get me another one.”

“House keeping must have exchanged them for some reason.”

I want my old one back. I want the body on it. I talk to Him all the time.”

I hurried back to my office and found a polished ceramic crucifix with fine detail. The crown of thorns bristled; nails punctured the delicate fingers and fine ankles of the Christ. I returned to Charlie’s room. Removed the empty cross. Hung up the new one.

“My life was a walk in the park in comparison to His.” Charlie gazed at the suffering Christ; settled back in his pillows. He stifled a groan. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. Then, the muscles of his face relaxed. He almost smiled at the crucifix. For a moment - it must have been the sun blinding my eyes, or the heat making waves like it does on a hot pavement in the summer. For a moment, I thought I saw Jesus’ head turn towards Charlie like a soldier in battle acknowledges the wounds of his comrade.

The day Charlie died, his bedroom had changed. The bed had rails. No pottery animals decorated the windowsill. I hoped the gifts had been delivered to his ex-wife and daughter. The bed had rails. A male nurse sat on a chair doing cross word puzzles. Charlie was on his back; arms crooked, up in the air. He looked like a dog waiting for his belly to be scratched. It was a shock. “Hi, what’s happening?”

“He’s having brain seizures. Needs a twenty four hour watch,” The nurse sucked his pencil for a moment and then focused on his puzzle.

Then a sound that sickened me. An animal sound. A bleat, like a calf wanting its mother.

The nurse looked. “Well, that’s the most I’ve heard from him. He doesn’t usually respond. You must mean something to him.”

I felt like I was in a film that got stuck, in one scene. I didn’t know what to do. The nurse flicked his pencil between two fingers and bent over his paper again. I wanted the nurse to leave, but I was afraid Charlie would have a seizure right there in front of me. The railing around his bed was too high for me to bend down and reach for his hand.

Then I remembered. I went to Charlie’s bedside table and pulled out the Vivaldi tape. Slid it into the recorder. I hope Charlie soared out of this world on the strings of Vivaldi’s violins.

The Cross

One morning a nurse stopped me in the hospital corridor. "Would you go and see Heather?" she said. "She's not going to make it out of here. Cancer."

"Does she have a family?"

"Married, but apparently they separated a few months ago. Two little girls. She's only twenty- eight."

The disease had not yet ravaged Heather's face. She was pretty, with high cheek bones, large blue eyes, short brown hair spread out like a cloud around the pillow. After the introductions and some initial conversation, I asked about her children. Surely, I thought, their welfare would be her unfinished business. Sorting out their future would help her die with some peace of mind.

“Doreen and Dianne. They’re four and six.”

“You’ve had your hands full. I mean being sick with little kids.”

“Bill has been helping me out. We split about six months ago. Then, I got sick. He came back to help out. But we didn’t reconcile. ”

“So, he’s looking after the children, now.”

“Yeah. Look. I don’t want to talk about my kids. It’s me that’s dying.” She raised her head from the pillow.

“What do you want to talk about, then?”

“Give me a faith to die by.” She clenched her white fists; pounded the mattress.

I didn’t know where to begin. I pictured her hugging the two children goodbye. I imagined them absently playing on a rug with blocks, wondering where their mother was. Was Bill squatting on his knees, helping them to build a castle? How could he take care of them and work too? I wanted to ask so many questions.

"What’s your religious background?" I searched for a starting point, taken aback by the urgency of her demand.

"I never went to church. No. Wait. I went to a Catholic folk mass, once. It was really nice. Lots of guitars."

"Then you know a little bit about Jesus."

"No. Not much.” She fell back on the pillow, drained of energy. “Didn't he walk on water, once?"

In the days to come I reflected with Heather about the Bible story she knew. Jesus had just fed five thousand people. No wonder he was sick and tired of the noisy crowds. He sent them home. They had had their fifty minute hour. He climbed a hill alone and prayed. The disciples waited for him in a boat on the lake. “What’s taking him so long?”

“Should we go back and get him?”

“It’s getting dark. He shouldn’t be up there, alone.”

“Who’s got a knife?”

Before they could make up their minds about what to do, a storm came up. White caps lashed the sides of their fishing craft. “We should have gone back to shore,”

“He’s taking so long. It’s his fault if we sink.”

Then out of the mist came an apparition. “Hoist the sails. It’s a ghost.”

“Wait, it looks like Jesus.” Peter waved his arm at the approaching figure.

“How much wine have you had?” That would be his brother Andrew speaking.

Then they heard the familiar voice. “Courage, don’t be afraid. It’s me.”

“If it’s really you, let me walk on the water with you,” Peter could hardly hear his own voice above the roar of the wind.

“Come,” Jesus beckoned to him.

Peter hauled himself out of the boat and before he knew it, he was walking on the slippery essence. What was it like? It wasn’t easy. He lurched in the broil of waves. Salt stung his eyes. His foot slipped. He began to fall into the murky depths.

“Save me.” He spat water. You’d think a fisherman could swim.

“What little faith you have. Why did you doubt?” Jesus grabbed Peter’s arm.

How did they get to the boat? Did Jesus wrap one arm around the disciple’s thick neck and drag him along in the water to the vessel? Did he scramble into the boat, pushing Peter’s behind, so that they both fell into the slimy fishing nets that rested in the hull? Or did Jesus walk over the foaming waves and step into the craft like a prince lifts his foot from the red carpet into a carriage?

What was I to say to Heather? How could I convince Heather in the agony of her disease that God would walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and she would not be alone?

The next time I saw Heather, Bill was there. A handsome and athletic man, he hovered nervously at the foot of her bed. She was lying in a fetal position, her back turned to him and facing me as I came into the room. Her cheeks were flushed; she had been crying.

Bill asked if he could see me alone. I took him to my office. He explained he had moved back into the apartment in order to help Heather through her illness.

"To tell you the truth if she wasn't so sick I don't think I'd have gone back. But I couldn't see her go through the chemotherapy alone."

"She needs you right now."

"But she keeps asking me if I love her. I don't really. We'd broken up. I can't say if some miracle happened and she got better I'd stay."

"But there's not going to be any miracle. She knows that. There's not a lot of time left."

"So what am I supposed to do when she asks me if I love her?"

"You care to some degree or you wouldn't be here," I said.

"You think I should lie to her?"

"I wouldn't call it a lie."

Later that afternoon, I went back to see Heather. She greeted me with a glowing smile. "I don't know what happened between the two of you when you were alone, but he said things to me he never said all those years we lived together. He's never talked to me that way." Heather's face looked like a child's at a birthday party just before she blows out the candles.

I was still haunted by the image of her white fists pounding the mattress. What words to say to give her a faith to die by?

That evening I took the bus downtown and found a jewelry store. At the next interview, I gave her a plain silver cross with a delicate chain to wear around her neck. Sometimes we sat in silence when she was too weak to talk. When she opened her eyes I would say, “I’m still here.” I wanted to lift her out of the pain, loneliness and fear. I would have pulled her away from death as Jesus lifted Peter out of the roiling sea. But we both knew that she was drowning soon. I grasped her hand in mine, her white fingers fine as china. “God holds your hand too,” I said.

The next Monday I went back to Heather’s room. The bed was empty. They must have moved her, I thought.

“Where’s Heather?” I stood at the nursing unit and waited for one of them to look up from the charts.

“She died.”

I felt a blow to my stomach. “Why didn’t you call me? Was she alone when she died?”

“You gave her that cross, didn’t you? When we were bathing her, the chain broke and she was beside herself. We were able to fix it. She would hold on to it when she was in pain. When we prepared the body, we left it around her neck "

Prayers

The newly cleaned steps smelled of disinfectant. I held on to the railing, afraid of tripping. I was tired. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. I had yet to see three dying patients.

The door was ajar. I tapped lightly and proceeded to enter. A young man sat by the patient’s bed. He got up quickly and rushed to my side.

“I’m Chaplain Cullene.” I extended my arm to shake his hand.

“No, I cannot shake a woman’s hand. I’m sorry”

“I understand.” We both nodded and smiled. No offense meant. I once knew an Orthodox rabbi who could never shake my hand when we met, because I was a woman. The boy was dressed in a black business suit. I noticed the white tagiyah he wore on his head.

“Is that your mother?”

“Yes. She’s dying.” Her demise was a matter of fact. He spoke as if he was saying, “I have the shopping list.” He looked like my own son would in a few years. He couldn’t have been more than eighteen. His lips did not tremble; his mouth did not make a grim line across his face; his smile was relaxed, even charming.

“May I be of any help to you as a chaplain in this hospital?”

“It’s okay. I’m reading the Koran to her.” There were no tears in his eyes.

“You’re all alone.” How would he feel when the signs of death drew near: the raspy breath, the twitching body, a drool of blood from her mouth? Nothing is as fearsome as the sound of the last shivering breath, the lightness of the body become like lead. I wanted to embrace him, shield him from that final scene.

“The prophet taught us that a natural death is God’s mercy – a returning of the soul to the embrace of God’s love. Thank you for your kindness.” He dismissed me.

“I’ll leave you then.”

He returned to his mother’s bed and lifted up the Koran.

“Bism Allah al Rahman al Raheem.” His voice was calm, the tone lilting as a melody, while he intoned his mother to death.

In the next room a woman lay in a fetal position in the bed. She was dark skinned with black thick wiry hair. I assumed she was already in her death throes, perhaps in a coma. Just as I went to pull up a chair, I heard a clanking sound behind me. A young man entered in chains. He wore a faded brown t-shirt, jeans and worn running shoes. He had a day’s growth of beard on his chin. Both his hands and feet were shackled. His boots dragged noisily over the tiled floor. He held back tears, his face twisted in agony. He was followed by a prison guard in a green uniform, a gun in his holster. The guard stood by the door.

I introduced myself and handed the young man a chair. He refused to sit down and scarcely acknowledged me. I feared if the woman would opened her eyes, she would notice the cuffs around his wrists; hands crossed, useless as rocks. The guard must have thought the same. He left his post at the door and undid the chains. The convict sat down.

“Mom, I’m here. Mom. Mom. I’m here.”

She didn’t respond. He repeated the dolorous chant over and over. Except for his broken voice the silence was deadening. He gave up trying to reach her; frustrated, he got up to go.

“You can stay as long as you want. Don’t rush,” The guard’s kindness kindled light in the gloomy room.

“I expect she can hear you, even if she can’t answer,” I too wanted to encourage the boy. What had he done to bring this humiliation upon himself? How had his mother worried about him; wept over him? “Would you like me to pray with you and your mother now, or shall I remember you in my prayers in the chapel?”

“Pray in the chapel,” he said. A heavy silence followed. “I don’t know what to say.” Tears were rolling down his cheeks now. Every time he moved his feet the clank of steel tightened the tension in the air.

“Tell her you love her.”

“Mom, I love you. Oh Mom. I love you.” He found her hand like a shivering little squirrel hiding under the sheets.

To our amazement she opened her eyes. The guard stepped back in surpise. I stifled a gasp. She tried to speak; her gaze fixed on him.

“Mom I’m here. Mom, I love you.”

He stuttered his mantra until her dark eyes closed. Then he rose; stretched out his arms to receive the shackles. The hand cuffs snapped. He shuffled away.

I didn’t want the clanking of irons to be the last sound his mother heard. So I stayed by her side and said the Lord’s Prayer.

The last room I visited that afternoon belonged to a Jewish patient. She had just died, her yellow skin, flaccid. A well-dressed woman in a brown tweed suit sat at the bedside, weeping noisily. A bald man stood beside her, his hand on her shoulder.

“I’m the chaplain in the hospital. Is there any way I can help you at this time? I’m not Jewish. This is an ecumenical service in the hospital.”

“It’s the same God,” The man smiled. “I’m Sam. This is my sister June.”

“This is your mother?” They both nodded. “How long has she been sick?

“It started with breast cancer. She had a mastectomy. Then it spread.” Sam rehearsed the story of her illness: the surgeries; patient waiting for results; slivers of hope; the doctor’s prognosis; crumbling cinders of despair. For a moment silence covered the room like a sheath.

“Why did he do it to her?” June spit out the words like a fire eater at a circus.

“You mean the doctor? Sam frowned.

“I’m talking about God. She was a good person. Why did He do it to her?”

“I don’t think God chooses cancer for someone. Sickness and death happen.” I didn’t want to start some kind of argument in their time of grief, but I hated to see her leave with the image of a cruel God. What comfort would she find in her religion?

“She didn’t deserve this.” June blew her nose loudly into a lace hanky.

“It’s hard to see someone you love suffer.”

A nurse disturbed us. Drew me aside. “They’ve been here most of the afternoon. They need to leave.” She slipped away on soft white shoes.

“Would you like me to pray with you before you go? I could say the twenty-third Psalm.”

“Is that yours or ours?” June hissed like a pressure cooker on a hot stove.

“Yours, I wouldn’t do that to you.”

Sam smothered a chuckle. “Go ahead.”

“Let’s gather around the bed and hold hands.” I began the prayer. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...”

Blessings

I was just coming out of the Palliative Care unit, when I bumped into president, Mr. Oates. He was dressed in his usual black suit with a crisp white collar. The only colours in his outfit were the purple and yellow dots sprinkled like paprika over his black tie. I was dressed in flat shoes, my feet sore from walking down the hard tile corridors. Not my usual high heeled meet-him-in-his- office mode. He nodded and flashed his front-of-the-cover Maclean’s Magazine smile.

When ever I saw him, my palms would sweat. Even so, I reached out to shake his hand. His grasp was as limp as the leaves of the wilting Easter lily blooming bravely on an antique table by the door. “I don’t know if I’ll see you before the holiday, so let me wish you a Happy Easter.” Instead of shaking my hand and releasing it, he held mine in both of his. He looked me straight in the eye. I squinted in the light of their sapphire brilliance.

“A blessed holy Easter to you.” His voice just above a whisper. He held my hands for a moment as if he were really blessing me. Then, walked away. By this time all of me was hot, my face flushed, my armpits wet with perspiration. What kind of a chaplain does he think I am?

Should I have greeted him with, “A hallowed sacred season, Mr. Oates?”

The New Chapel

A Sacred Space

That year they tore down the old part of the building. People took away bricks as a memento of the place where their baby was born or their father died. A mall filled the centre of the new edifice: a gift shop, an ice cream bar, a place to sit and watch the waterfall. Yes, there was a waterfall in the middle of the new hospital.

“It’s not only beautiful but it humidifies the area. Isn’t it a lovely sound?” said the architect.

Balconies up to the top floor overlooked the open area; vines tumbled over the edge. They were real, not plastic. A team of gardeners watered them. Rocking chairs were provided on every floor so that patients could relax and listen to the tinkle of the tumbling water.

Workmen had already built half of the chapel, when the architect called me in to officially give my approval. The chairs were moveable; there was ample space for wheel chairs and stretchers. A divider could be drawn to cut off the chancel creating a multi-purpose room. I opened a closet door. Our Arab medical residents had already piled their prayer rugs on one shelf.

“The glass bricks around the chancel make everything so bright and airy.” I wanted to say something affirming, because I noticed that the cross was hanging front and centre over the altar. “This is an interfaith chapel.” I tried not to frown.

“No one asked for a meditation room,” said the architect. “We could have put a line of geese flying across the wall, something spiritual but not religious.”

I gulped at the cliché. Every day when I introduced myself to strangers they chirped this phrase like a medal of honour. “I’m not religious but I am spiritual.”

“I’d like to honour the enduring religions,” I replied.

In a few weeks Zelda, my Jewish friend, and I hunted down a wrought iron menorah. The local imam donated a prayer rug –like the ones stored in our cupboard. It hung on the right wall, a symbol of discipline and devotion. A Hindu woman heard about the new chapel and offered a statue of Ganesh.

“He’s half elephant and half man.” Her eyes lit up as she talked about ordering a bronze replica straight from India.

“That may upset some people,” I said. “They might think we’re promoting the worship of idols.” Eventually we hung the Om symbol on the left wall, a sign of peace and harmony.

All the officials of the hospital were there, including Mr. Oates. The Koran and the Bible were read by our guests. A friend of mine, a Roman Catholic priest, strummed his guitar, and we sang with gusto. A real celebration!

The next day the prayer rug was stolen off the wall. It left a vacant space: gray lines where dust had gathered around the edges; black holes where the nails had been. Some one thought they had confiscated an expensive hand woven Persian rug like ones sold in far off market places for thousands of dollars.

We replaced it with a simple woven mat under glass, framed it and drilled nails into fresh holes. The menorah was anchored to the ground and the Om reinforced. We thought that nobody would try to steal the cross. And so it was, we fastened down, locked in, and held together our various faith traditions in one sacred place.

Christus Victor

I remember when my breasts were full and aching with milk. How eagerly I wanted my baby to suck. That’s how it was for her, the young mother I met in the Emergency Unit.

“I’m hurting. She touched her bosom. We were on our way to Calgary to visit Jack’s parents. We were just getting out of the city when he hit us head on.” Janet’s eyes darted back and forth as if she could still see the car hurtling toward them, the windshield shattered, the cries of the children. “My baby’s dead. Just three months old.”

“What a tragedy.”

“Susan, my four year old is here, in the pediatric intensive care unit. My husband is at the Miseracordia Hospital. I’m dashing from one person to the next.” She took a deep breath like a marathon runner who stops only for a drink.

“Is your husband going to be okay?” I asked.

“Yes. He’s going to recover.”

Just at that moment Janet’s mother came into the room. Her gray hair clung in damp curls at her forehead. She was dry-eyed; her lips tight.

“Have you seen Susan?” asked Janet.

“Yes. She’s asleep.”

“This is the chaplain and this is my mother, Ellen. I’m going back to the Miseracordia to see Jack.” She left in a flutter of a blue scarf around her neck and her purse swinging over her shoulder.

“Susan’s in a bad way.”

“What a shock for everyone!”

“She was such a bright little four year old. She had her birthday party last week. I can’t believe this has happened to her. And the baby…” She burst into tears.

What words of comfort could I give? A dead baby, a child handicapped, a young mother dashing from one hospital to another tending her loved ones. Tragedy hit the family, like a bull dozer in a cornfield. Uproots, tramples and kills the tender young shoots.

I took Ellen to the hospital’s chapel. She gazed at the cross hanging above the alter; smelled the candle wax.

“In our church we have a stained glass window. Jesus stands wrapped in white funeral garb, the empty tomb behind him. You can see the blood on his bare chest, but his hand is raised in a blessing. The picture is called Christus Victor. There is no victory here.” She wiped her eyes.

We sat silently. We prayed. She asked me why. I had no answer. I wanted to go home and hug my own children. I wanted to go home and sleep in a man’s arms. I wanted to eat a plate full of pasta and drink a glass of red wine. I wanted to be alone and cry, rail against God for all the people I tried to console in this Hades of a hospital.

Six months later, on a Saturday morning, I was enjoying a leisurely breakfast of hazelnut coffee and crescent rolls smeared with honey. I picked up the newspaper. There on the front page was Janet’s picture. Beside her in a wheelchair sat Susan, her four year old, curly haired daughter. *Susan, a quadriplegic, suffered a brain injury that causes spasms*.

Janet had become the new president of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers.

My mouth dropped. The grandmother was wrong. There was a victory. Janet, taking up arms.

Refuge

The heated, underground garage became my refuge. The incandescent lights cast a white ethereal glow. My space, private, close to the fire exit, not the glass elevator. Before work, I could hunker down in the front seat, close my eyes and pray.

I was like a whirling dervish, turning and swirling down hospital corridors. I slid down the belly of the whale; I was overcome by the whirlwind; I was enveloped in the cloud by day and burnt by the pillar of fire by night. I wept like Mary at the cross and haunted the tombs of wasted dreams. I stood up straight in the storm. Cried out like Job.

“Where were you, O God,

when the old man aspirated on his vomit,

when the aphasic woman tried to speak,

when the paraplegic couldn’t scratch her own nose?”

I faltered and fell and got back up and arched my back and threw my arms up into the air. I slipped down, down, down into a purple vertigo, and was taken back to my student days. Back to the stories about Martha Graham and the war, back to the dance, the red velvet dress, back to that high kick. I tasted the trickle of sweat that formed on my upper lip whenever I flung myself into the air; landed in someone’s muscled arms.

God lifted me out of the vertigo; became my dancing partner, thigh to thigh. I did not limp away. I did not stumble and faint. I learned the steps and came to understand why, on that first day of creation, the very stars sang and the heavenly beings danced for joy

The Cardiovascular Intensive Care Unit

Celebration

Every time I eat Black Forest cake, I remember Gertie. I met her on the cardiovascular Unit. She nearly died after the triple bypass. “Congestive heart failure” said the nurse.

Gertie’s black curls clung to her forehead like clumps of coffee grounds thrown into the sink. Her face shone, a pale moon on the hospital’s over-washed, graying pillows. I held her hand. She smiled, opened her black eyes that wordlessly begged me to stay by her side. There are no chairs in the Intensive Care Unit. Even families are not encouraged to stay. I stood like one of those angels you see on tomb stones, rigid and stiff, beside her cot until she fell asleep. I hoped her death would be as peaceful.

The next day, on my rounds, I was surprised to see her still in the bed, surrounded by a web of tubes.

“I survived.” Her bony hand crept over the sheet, her slender fingers like a fly’s legs.

“You have a strong will to live.”

“I’ve seen death up close, walking skeletons. I come from Haslach.”

“In Germany.”

She nodded. “Our town had a concentration camp full of French prisoners. One of them was a priest, Father Alexis. He refused the prisoner’s uniform; wore his Cossack in the camp. The soldiers made fun of him; tortured him. My mother and the members of our parish smuggled in bread. He distributed the food; comforted the prisoners; kept them alive.

“Those little meals must have been a sacrament.”

“I carried freshly baked loaves in a straw basket on my arm. Through the market place, past the tanks, down the narrow cobble stone streets. I wasn’t scared.”

“How did you sneak the food into the camp?”

“One of the guards whose grandmother was French helped us.”

“How brave you were.”

“No, just young and foolish. I was in love with the guard.”

“What happened to your accomplice?”

“He disappeared after the liberation. I don’t know if he was shot or…” Her voice trailed off and tears drowned the sparkle in her eyes.

“And the priest?”

“He lived through it all. Went home to his parish in France.”

“You have some bittersweet memories.”

“I’m going to make it out of here.”

“What’s the first thing you’ll do to celebrate?” I could see that she was exhausted. I wanted to leave her with hope.

“Eat some black forest cake.”

She smiled.

A few days later I got a call to see a patient on the general medical unit. Another tragedy – a car accident, a cancer patient? I steeled myself to face someone’s tears. She was in a private room, a few people gathered around her bed. I recognized the nurse and the resident from the Cardiovascular Intensive Care Unit. Even the cleaning lady, Rhaki was there.

“Gertie?”

“You remember me. I fooled them all. I’m alive.” On her lap was a cardboard box filled with a half-eaten Black Forest Cake.

She cut me a piece. I can still feel the smooth whipped cream rolling over my tongue, taste the tart cherries, inhale the sweet chocolate shavings. It was a holy communion.

# Postscript

More than twenty years have passed since I moved from Ontario to Alberta. I severed connections with old friends, said good bye to my family, my children’s husband. Behind me lay the waters of Lake Ontario, green hills, white trilliums, red maple leaves and soft falling snow that covered everything like icing sugar. Before me the North Saskatchewan River snaked by. Its name comes from the Cree word which means, swiftly moving water. Fed by glaciers and muddied by silt, it wends its way through Alberta to Saskatchewan. I came to a province of formidable mountains that blocked the sun, where cars skidded and wrecked on black ice. Winter’s frosty breath walloped my chest; surprised my lungs. It was not the harsh landscape that made me lose my bearings. The traumas I daily witnessed shook my soul. But I did not lose faith. My relationship with God deepened.

I used to go and sit by the North Saskatchewan River. I thought about the Red Sea and how the Israelites gathered there when they fled from slavery in Egypt. I thought about their panic when they faced the waters, the Pharaoh’s army chasing after them. They were trapped.

I sat by the North Saskatchewan River and thought about the people I encountered in the hospital. I still hear their voices, look into their eyes, feel the softness or roughness of their hands. I thought about how they were chased down by death or pain, and confronted a sea of loneliness and grief.

I remembered a midrash, a Hebrew story about the Exodus. A man called Nachshon stood among the Israelites as they faced the Red Sea. Behind them rose the dust of the Egyptian army. Their chariots came closer and closer. The people cried out in despair. Moses stretched out his arm but nothing happened. Had Moses lost his faith? All the Israelites panicked but one man. In that terrible silence as the people waited for God to act, Nachshon stepped into the sea and the waters circled around his ankles and up to his knees. Still he kept walking and the water covered his hips and his chest. And still he kept on walking. The water covered his mouth and his nose. Only then did the sea part. Who knows if God chose to save Nachshon from drowning or if it simply took the sea that long to split. But the people were saved. They splattered into the muck and trudged to freedom.

Some of the people I knew in the hospital were swallowed up by death. God wept for their sufferings in the same way he cried for the Egyptian soldiers. For, he loved them and they were part of his creation. I believe God took the dying patients in his arms and they passed through the dark waters into a space where angels sing. Other people I knew were cast up on rocky shores. They survived the many traumas and travelled onward. Many of them were as brave as Nachshon

More than twenty years have passed and I sit alone in my living room and remember them and write down their stories, a testimony to their courage. One detail that lightens my heart is the faith of Miriam. As I look back in memory I hope that in some small way I was like her.

When the Hebrew people landed on the other side of the sea, she burst into singing. And all the people joined her. They unpacked their timbrels and danced. They carried their musical instruments along with unleavened bread and sheep skins because they knew some day, they would sing again to the Lord.

*The Lord is my strength and my song.*

**Author Biography: Cullene Bryant**

**Books: Collection of Short Fiction**

1993 *Llamas In The Snow* Books Collective, Edmonton, AB.

2005 *In The Dry Woods* Books Collective*, Edmonton, AB.*

**Short Fiction:**

1998 Room of One’s Own 21:2 *Wild Life In The Canadian Wilderness*

2006 Descant *Voluptuary Sweetness*

2008 The Dalhousie Review *Exhibition*

2009 Descant *Prometheus*

*2010* emerge *The Machine*

*2010* The Toronto Quarterly *Compulsion*

*2010* The Dalhousie Review *Party Time*

**Prizes:**

1994 WGA Book Awards *Llamas In The Snow* Short list

2002 Lawrence House Centre For The Arts, Sarnia, ON, *Diva* Honourable Mention

2006 *In The Dry Woods* (short story) First place in Canadian Christian Writing Award, national competition sponsored by The Word Guild

**Publications: Articles:**

2010 Senior Care Canada: *Comforting Married Widows and other Family**Members*

2010 Canadian Nursing: *When The Clouds Roll In*

2006 Health Progress: May-June Vol 87 No.3 *Nurturing The Institution’s Soul*

2005 Healing Ministry: Summer Vol. 12 No. 3 *The Question of Evil and Suffering*

Health Progress: Jan Feb. *God is our Hope*.

2004 Journal of Pastoral Care: *A Spirituality For Health Care Workers*

2004 Healing Ministry*: Pray With Me* Vol 11, Number 3, Summer 2004

2004 Healing Ministry: *The Cross: A symbol of comfort for the dying*

2004 Healing Ministry: *Why God Why*?

2004 Presence: *Creative Writing As A Form Of Prayer*

**Related Activities:**

Readings: The Writer’s Studio at Rhizome Café and other venues; Vancouver International Writer’s Festival (launch of *emerge*); It’s About Bloody Time, English Graduate Conference SFU

**Present Employment:**

Chaplain at Three Links Care Centre, part time, six years

**Education and Recent Workshops**

B.A. M.Div. D. Min.

The Writer’s Studio SFU 2010 -11 Mentor Ivan Coyote; 2012 -13 Adjunct Writer, Mentor Brian Payton

Intensive Manuscript Consultation: Betsy Warland, Claudia Casper