

Aunt Betsy

Jerrie W. Hurd



he was my great-aunt on my father's side and I hated her. She was fat. She used two long crochet hooks to tie her shoes. Everybody knew it. Unless, of course, I was around. Then Aunt Betsy complained of arthritis in her joints and a sore back until I offered to tie her laces for her. I scrubbed nearly raw after touching her shoes or anything else she touched. I was afraid her fatness might be catching.

Her crochet hooks and her high-pitched whiny voice frequently made her the butt of family jokes. Yet right after they laughed, my relatives sobered up, turned to me and said what a good woman Betsy was. "You can't grow up to be any finer," my father said a hundred times if not more. "That's why we named you after her."

Aunt Betsy lived in a little white frame house by the orchard. She loved flowers and grew tall crimson hollyhocks along the fence and marigolds in pots on her porch. I lived with my father, mother, and two older brothers further up the hill in what we called the Big House. It was a two-story, hundred-year-old, farmhouse with a wide front porch. It had been built by my great-grandfather — the same great-grandfather who homesteaded the farm. For four generations, my people raised sheep, wheat, and potatoes on a section and a half of dry ground above the Snake River Valley in southeastern Idaho. Aunt Betsy was seventy years old. She could remember everyone who'd ever lived on that farm.

"You know," she said, "you have the same jaunty walk as your elder cousin Martha Louise. The very same." Or, "You have uncle Edward's eyes" . . . or "old Matthew's jaw" . . . or "Grandma Foster's temper." When I was a little girl, I used to lie awake nights worried those dead people might return and reclaim their parts.

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One day my parents decided to go out of town and leave me with Aunt Betsy. I didn't want to stay with her. I was fourteen years old and quite capable of taking care of myself, except that my parents wouldn't hear of it. "Aunt Betsy's honest, good-hearted, and unassuming," my mother said while I rolled my eyes together in disbelief and tried to focus on my nose. "You can't disappoint her. You know how she loves company."

It was late fall. I got off the school bus by the Big House and walked slowly down the hill dragging my feet in the dust. Halfway there, a black and white magpie hopped on a fence post and mocked me with its squawk, squawk, squawk. "Shut up," I shouted and threw a rock. Aunt Betsy stood outside by her hollyhocks, waiting for me. She waved. I pretended not to notice until she called loudly, "Yoo-hoo, Mary Betsy, hello."

From the moment I arrived, she fussed over me, her hands fluttering through the air, working up an excited sweat. Did I want to take my coat off? Did I want something to eat? Did I need to go to the bathroom?

She pulled out the old photo albums. I sat on the edge of her faded green couch and counted the minutes. The evening wore on. We got past the photo albums, dinner, and dishes. Still there was time left before bed. Aunt Betsy said, "Don't you have a piece of needlework or something?"

I shook my head.

"When I was your age, I always had something tucked away to take up the idle minutes."

"I did a piece of embroidery last summer," I said.

"How'd it turn out?"

"Fine, I guess. Mother made a Bible cover out of it."

"Say now, that reminds me," she said. "Have I ever showed you the family Bible?"

I glanced at the clock. Twenty more minutes.

Aunt Betsy pulled herself out of her chair and motioned for me to follow her into the spare bedroom. It was dimly lit, full of old furniture, and cluttered like the rest of her house with odds and ends. Colored bottles stood along the windowsill. Doilies decorated the nightstands. A crocheted bedspread covered the bed. Aunt moved a pile of quilts off a trunk in one corner and lifted the lid.

"You'll have to help me," she said. "You lift one side and I'll lift the other."

Together we lifted the biggest book I'd ever seen and laid it on the bed. It was bound with a heavy leather backing. The covers were wooden, an inch thick, inlaid with gold, silver, and rubies. Two metal rings protruded from the edges.

Aunt Betsy stepped back, panting from the exertion. She pointed to the rings. "Know what those were for?"

"No."

"Well, I'm not surprised. I'd have never guessed in a million years if your great-grandfather hadn't explained it to me. You see, in the old country where your great-grandfather lived before he came to America, they had only one

Bible for the whole village. They chained it to the pulpit. The chain ran through those rings. Now isn't that interesting?"

I nodded politely.

"Feel how smooth it is. Go ahead. Feel it. That's real fine workmanship."

I reached out and touched the book's surface.

"The clasp is pure gold," Aunt Betsy went on. "The village was poor. Sure, they knew the best part was the words written inside. The gold, I imagine, was their way of adding what value they could — out of respect."

She opened the book. I heard the leather give. The pages smelled musty.

"Look here," she said, pointing to the front page.

I saw a handsome angel with an intricate scroll arched over the print.

"That's hand cut," she said. "Most of the book was done on a press, but some of the pages, like this one, were done by hand."

She went on and on, turning the pages, pointing out other intricate designs and some full block prints. At the same time, she talked about all the wonderful things my ancestors had done to save and preserve that book. How it had been brought across the ocean and hidden from the Indians and dragged from a burning house. There were no clocks in the room. I don't know how long she talked. I only know I kept feeling more and more overcome, smothered. Like my aunt that Bible seemed too large, too good. I stepped back, my hands pressed stiffly to my sides, and said, "I don't feel well. Can I go to bed?"

"Oh, my, what have I done? I've kept you up past your bedtime and on a school night too. Are you really ill?"

I thought quickly. If it was stomach or fever or headache, Aunt Betsy would make me take some of her homemade elixir. "I'm just tired," I said.

"Sure, now. That's it. You help me put this Bible back and I'll get you some warm milk."

I stepped back another step. "Can't we leave it right there? I'll sleep on the other side of the bed. I won't even touch it."

"That wouldn't be very comfortable," Aunt said. "What with my arthritis and sore back, I might never get it moved myself. You'll have to help me. It won't take but a minute."

After that Aunt worried I'd caught a chill. She piled quilts on the bed until I was awake half the night fighting them. When I lay on my back, my toes got smashed. When I rolled over on my stomach, I couldn't breathe. In the morning, she served unsalted oatmeal sweetened with brown Karo syrup. I gagged on every spoonful. She kept saying, "It'll be easy on the stomach. It'll make you feel better."

I couldn't help it. The next night when my parents asked after "poor Aunt Betsy," I fairly exploded, "She's not poor! She's got a Bible worth more than this whole ranch!"

A dead silence followed.

My father was usually easy going. If the crops were good and he could pay his tithing and trade his Buick every other year for the latest model, he was willing to leave things be. That year the crops weren't good. The reason he and my mother went out of town overnight was to seek new financing.

My mother was a worrier. She almost never sat down. She was so thorough in her cleaning, she even dusted the doorknobs. And when she wasn't cleaning, she cooked. When she wasn't cooking, she worried.

Pa said, "My granddad did have an old Bible."

Mother said, "It can't be that valuable, can it?"

By Sunday the whole family gathered at our house. George, Pa's brother, said he'd always thought Grandpa was worth more than his estate had shown. He was an accountant who served in the state legislature and owned half the car dealership where my pa traded. Pa's sister, Eunice, worked at the local bank. She'd never married and never gotten promoted and hardly ever came out to the ranch unless it was to borrow something. She said she thought Aunt Betsy must have deliberately hidden the Bible.

"She's half crazy," Eunice said, tapping her temple with one finger. "I'll bet she thinks that Bible's more junk like the rest of the stuff she's crammed into that house of hers."

"She's obviously not the most responsible party to be guardian of such a valuable artifact," George agreed.

Then Pa and George brought out their copies of great-grandpa's will and decided that although the Bible wasn't mentioned, neither was anything else in particular. All things had been divided equally.

"Well, I believe in a direct approach," Pa said. "Let's tell her the Bible belongs to all of us."

"Don't look at me," said Eunice. "I can't keep her on the same subject with me. You start talking to her and the next thing you know, she's off on great-uncle so-and-so."

"You're the oldest," Pa addressed George.

"Yeah," he answered, "but you're the closest to her. She lives right here."

I was sent to fetch Aunt Betsy. I didn't tell her why she was wanted at the Big House only that we had company and she better come quick or she might miss them. She took her teapot off the stove, put her cat out, and latched the back door. I waited for her to put on a sweater, a jacket, and a coat. She pulled wool socks under her shoes and galoshes over her shoes. She wrapped two scarves and a hat around her head. Forty-five minutes later, she waddled in our back door saying: "I didn't know you had so much company."

"Bessie, we want to talk to you about Granddad's old Bible," Pa began.

Aunt Betsy glanced over at me.

I looked at the floor. I was enjoying this showdown, but I didn't think it was polite to let her see.

"I been meaning to show it to more of the children, but it slipped my mind," she said.

"No," Pa said, "that isn't what I mean."

"Give it to her straight," Eunice said. "Or she won't understand."

"Give me a chance, will you?"

"What?" Aunt Betsy asked. "What is this?"

"We've decided to sell the Bible and split the money. It should have been done at the reading of Granddad's will."

"But what about the children?"

"They have Bibles of their own."

"But it's their past. You can't sell their past."

"We're thinking about their future. Besides paying a lot of bills and keeping this ranch together, the money from that Bible would send most of them to college. With your share you could do some of the things you've always wanted to do. Wouldn't you like that?"

"You sell houses and land and cars and wheat, but you don't sell the family Bible," Aunt Betsy said.

"Bessie, this is the twentieth century. No one can afford to drag the past into the twentieth century. Wouldn't you like to see the kids go to school?"

"Don't you think your grandfather had the future in mind when he came to this country?" Aunt Betsy asked. "Do you know how much baggage he brought with him?"

"No."

"Eighty pounds. Just eighty pounds for a wife and three kids and himself to come to a strange land and start a new life. That old Bible weighs thirty-two pounds, but he brought it with him."

"Listen to her," Eunice said. "She's completely out of touch with the real world."

"Let me tell you this, Eunice," Aunt Betsy said. "The real world ain't inside a bank."

"You want to know something, Aunt?" Eunice retorted. "That house you live in could bring a hundred dollars a month, but you live in it for free."

"I never knew I was charity."

"You're not," Pa said. "You're family."

I was embarrassed for her. I'd never seen her oppose the family, much less grow red in the face and raise her voice. At one point she stomped her foot and rattled the knickknacks on the bookcase.

In the end, Pa told her to get the Bible ready. He would be over the next day to get it. That gave her time to copy the record. Everyone agreed that the births, marriages and deaths ought to be preserved. Aunt Betsy was the person to do it, they all assured her. Then everyone went home.

The next day, Pa took me with him. As we came in the front door, Aunt Betsy turned away to busy herself. She folded back the bright afghans that covered the couch and all her front room chairs.

"Sit down," she said. "Would you like some cake? I made some with cream filling."

"We're not hungry," Pa said.

"Yes, you are. You're money hungry. Oh, I shouldn't say it, but it's true."

Pa said, "I'm worried about the ranch. We could lose it. Maybe you ought to worry too. Where would you go if we didn't have this ranch?"

"Oh, don't give me that." She waved him off with the back of her hand. "Truth is, this place has always been on the brink of disaster. That's the nature of ranching."

"Where's the Bible?" Pa asked.

Aunt Betsy fingered the fringe on an afghan. "Sure you won't have some cream cake? It's awfully good — my best."

"Where's the Bible?" Pa asked.

She looked Pa straight in the eye. "I hid it."

"You what?"

"You're welcome to search my house. You can turn out every drawer and every cupboard. You can tear up the floorboards, if you like, but you won't find it."

"Bessie," Pa said. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"I do."

"A book like that could be easily ruined."

"I wouldn't let anything happen to that Bible," she said. "Four hundred years ago, the Nielsen family was given the responsibility to protect and preserve the village Bible. Sure, a lot has happened since then; but you got to remember, our family had that book before most people could read. That kind of pride will pay more mortgages and carry more kids through college than any number of dollars."

It's been fifteen years since that night my parents went out of town and left me with Aunt Betsy. In that time the family's fortunes have waxed and waned. My brothers run the ranch now, since Pa had open-heart surgery, and they've added two hundred acres. George lost his last bid for the state legislature. Eunice got married. Yesterday the family finally searched Aunt Betsy's house. They didn't find the Bible; just as they didn't find a cheap coffin that would hold her bulk.

For fifteen years Aunt Betsy kept her secret. Then last month as her health failed and I was preparing for my law exams, I received a trunk full of old photographs and a letter charging me with the family responsibility.

The Bible, she wrote, was in a museum. On weekends, whenever I could, I was to take my own children and the other family youngsters there. I was to tell them all about the book and our history. I was to show them the old pictures even if they wrinkled up their noses. I could, however, sweeten the learning with an ice cream, she said.

I don't know how she managed to get the Bible into the safekeeping of a museum. She didn't say. I can only imagine it was with the same determination as those others she admired, who carried it over land and sea. What's more, I don't know how to tell the family where it is. They'll think I helped her, and I wouldn't care, but I'm not worthy to be called her accomplice.