Elizabeth, and Dying Wishes

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ALL WINTER AND INTO SPRING Charlie Sutton tended his wife as best he could. It was awkward from the start, knowing that the outcome was never really in doubt. The cancer that Bettie defeated six years ago was back, and would not be denied this time. The disease progressed quickly; diagnosed in early summer, Bettie was bedridden by November. In severe pain almost continually, soon unable to take food through her stomach, and with a long decline as her only prospect, Bettie made a decision that seemed to some as utterly ghastly, even blasphemous, but to her was perfectly rational. On the morning of Valentine's Day, Charlie noticed that the intravenous tube had come out of Bettie's arm. He said something about it, and went over to put it back in.

"No," Bettie said with a smile. "I won't be needing that anymore." There was a quiet pause.

"Oh, Bettie," Charlie started, "you can eat again?"

"No, I can't eat any more," Bettie replied, almost matter of factly.

Charlie didn't understand. "Then you need the tube again, don't you?"

It was a hard situation for him to face—it seemed so ominous and morbid. But leaving is always harder for those who stay, and Bettie had been thinking about leaving for a long time. After they talked awhile, Charlie agreed she was right. He had always *wanted* to make her happy, it was just that he had never been much good at it. Bettie's mother endowed her with an abundance of self-fortitude, and she had learned early on that the greatest obstacle to fulfillment in life is one's own self. When Charlie showed himself satisfied with the limited prospects of a factory job, Bettie borrowed money and enrolled in home economics at a local college—not easy for a woman with a baby in blankets and another on the way. Bettie not only finished first in her class, but she was also active in student government, and got herself elected student body president, the first woman—and the only mother—to ever hold that office.

Bettie landed a job teaching in the same high school she had attended, and the additional income was enough for them to purchase a small but solid house in the near suburbs. Bettie soon became an institution in the new neighborhood, where her expertise in sewing and handicrafts was eagerly sought. When she and Charlie were tracted out by Mormon missionaries, she prevailed on Charlie to have them all join the church. The Suttons were faithful members from that point on, and by the time of her first bout with cancer, they had been in the ward longer than anyone else. Bettie's circle grew ever wider helping generations of girls sew their wedding and temple dresses. She and Charlie raised three boys and a girl in their little house, and all but the youngest son stayed active in the church. The two older boys both served honorable missions.

Now, in the sunset of their life together, Bettie was getting ready for the sun to go down. And Charlie at last came to accept it. "My bags are packed," she told the stream of visitors to her bedside. Ward members and friends subtly vied with each other to see who could get the latest from Bettie, who had visited and talked with her most recently. Charlie had to do some aggressive doorkeeping to ration Bettie's waning strength; but each day they both sensed how she was getting inexorably closer to the end. Rumors of what was afoot with Bettie were whispered among the ward, and many were indignant. It was unnatural, some members said; whatever our burden, we must endure to the end. Even the bishop told Bettie that she must "wait on the Lord" in all things.

But Bettie saw it from a different angle, that of a woman who had lost her second fight with cancer and who, the doctors assured, was going to die within a few months. Despite the best intentions of her husband and church brethren, the several priesthood blessings given to her failed to indicate otherwise. So, with children grown and on their own, and a quiet voice within her soul telling her all was well, Bettie was of a different mind than she might have had she not been the one who was sick. Would it be "waiting on the Lord" and acting "natural" to dope up her body and dull her mind with pain-killing drugs? Or did the Lord really want her to endure slow months of agonizing pain? Christ suffered for all, she reflected, and sometimes, in the moments when her pain was most intense and the seconds seemed an eternity, she thought she saw him suffering—first as he prayed in silent anguish in the garden: "Couldn't you wait with me one hour?" he seemed to ask her, as he had his disciples. Then she would envision him at Calgary, writhing in open torment on the cross and crying aloud for the ages to hear, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" These scenes came to her many times, and after each, when the pain subsided, there was a final vision of warm, open arms, and a loving countenance which beckoned the invitation, "Come unto me, Elizabeth, ye heavy laden, and I will give thee rest." She had always

believed that heaven was a place of peace and rest, and for Bettie, to come literally unto Christ now seemed the most natural thing to do.

While a slow painful demise was not something she desired, Bettie did harbor two last wishes before she died. She made these known one day late in March, when she was surprisingly energetic and in full command of her mental faculties. At Bettie's request, Charlie called the Relief Society president, Jess Neeley, on the phone and asked her to come over. In the presence of both of them, Bettie announced her wishes. First, she wanted it to snow again—a big, heavy white blanket. Charlie and Jess threw a glance at each other. It had been a very dry winter, with unseasonably mild weather. What little snow there had been all melted back in January, and with April only a week away, there was little hope of any more again this year. But Bettie waited patiently for one more snowfall, to see the yard and the fence adorned a final time in a shimmering white blanket.

Second, Bettie handed them the written program for her funeral. What was unsettling was the clear instruction that Jess, as Relief Society president, conduct the funeral service. Not just sit on the stand, but conduct it from beginning to end.

The Neeleys had been in the ward for only five years, but the two women had grown close through their time as visiting teaching companions. When Jess was called as Relief Society president last year, she asked Bettie to serve as her counselor. For the first time in her life, Bettie turned down a calling. She knew deep down it was not for her. Now she had a calling to ask of Jess.

"You'll do it, won't you?" said Bettie.

Jess gently took Bettie's hand, but did not answer.

"Of course, she'll do it," said Charlie cheerfully. "She'll do it, no matter what."

Jess was not sure what to say, and preferring not to disappoint her friend, she said nothing, only smiled. Over the next few days, Bettie shared her wishes with each visitor that Charlie allowed upstairs. Once again a troubling rumor made its uneasy rounds through the ward.

Due to the lateness of the year, the sudden snow storm on April 1 was all the more remarkable. Overnight, a foot of wet snow was dumped on the city, and, as Monday morning dawned, airports, schools, and mass transit were socked in. It clung to the trees and pulled down utility wires. And in the early afternoon, as the sky cleared and a radiant spring sun began to melt the snow, the yard outside Bettie's window had never looked more resplendent. She beamed as Jess came by to visit. Bettie was very weak now, and could only speak in the softest of voices.

"I'm responsible for this," she whispered proudly. "I wished for it,

and look—the Lord blessed me with my wish." Bettie turned her head towards the window and gestured slightly with her hand. A triumphant smile lit up her face, and a sparkle gleamed in her eyes. Hers was not a countenance of gloating, but of satisfaction and farewell, because both women knew in their hearts that Bettie's life would last only as long as the soft, swiftly melting snow. "My bags are packed," she smiled weakly, and drifted off to sleep amid the warm companionship of her beloved sister.

On Tuesday Charlie was vacuuming the living room when Bettie's sweet voice suddenly called his name. He quickly ran upstairs, forgetting that it had been weeks since Bettie had the strength to say anything louder than a whisper. The months of creeping around the house quietly, going up to her room with uncertain expectation—even the recent weeks of serving his partner and companion of forty years, knowing as they both did of their conspiracy to steal a march on death—these had not quite prepared Charlie for the grief of her passing.

Bettie died in that long, late afternoon moment when the sun still casts shadows, but can only be seen if the horizon is clear and you know where to look. He was with her when she left. "See there?" Charlie said quietly, as he stroked her cold hand. "There's your aunt Alice, and there's your sister Claire . . . your mother, and that must be Dad." By now tears were streaming down his face, and Charlie knew Bettie was gone. But he did not feel alone, despite his grief, and for this he was very grateful.

"I know how you must feel, Bishop. She was a member of the ward for over twenty-five years. Don't think I don't realize that." President Mansfield was genuinely sympathetic. "I've been around here longer than you have," he continued. "I've known Bettie Sutton for years. Not all that well, but I knew her."

Royal Mansfield sat across the table from Bishop Birch Cullen in the stake president's office. Not only was Cullen the youngest bishop in the stake, his was the largest ward as well, a mixture of city and working-class suburbs where poverty, social distress, and church inactivity were high. Both men knew that many members owed their activity, in part, to Sister Sutton.

The issue was the program for tomorrow's funeral. It was important because dozens of mourners, members and non-members, were expected to pay their last respects. Bishop Cullen had just learned that Elizabeth Sutton expressly wanted the Relief Society president to conduct her funeral. This, as Royal Mansfield reminded Bishop Cullen forcefully, was squarely against protocol.

"But it's her dying wish," Bishop Cullen insisted. "She asked that Sister Neeley conduct the funeral. In fact, we have it in her own handwrit-

ing. What's so wrong that we can't we honor that?"

"You don't understand," President Mansfield replied with a heavy sigh. "I'm not saying that anything is 'wrong' about it, but it is contrary to church policy. As it states right here—"

Bishop Cullen cut him off. "Yes, yes, you've read it to me twice already. I read it before, anyway. Look, I don't really like having a sister conducting a church meeting either, but this is not a regular church meeting, and what harm will it do?"

The stake president paused to let tempers cool.

"Funerals are to be conducted by the bishop, you know that's how it is," he said softly.

Bishop Cullen stared out the window.

"You know Bettie had another wish before dying," he said finally.

"Another wish?"

"Yes, she had two wishes before dying. She got her first wish—she wanted to see snow one last time. And after a such a mild winter, the Lord granted her wish and we had snow, and on the first of April at that. Not a bad reward for forty years of unstinting Christian service." Bishop Cullen paused and turned in his chair. "She was an active member of this ward before I was even baptized."

For a long time neither man spoke. Royal Mansfield lowered his eyes; to his surprise, they were filled with tears. He was feeling something in his heart, and it told him he had been exactly right in choosing Birch Cullen as bishop. His face opened into a sad, faraway smile.

"Well," Royal Mansfield began slowly. "It would appear that he who made us all granted Sister Sutton her wish with a snowstorm in spring. Of the two wishes, that's the hardest for sure, and we couldn't have helped on that one."

He continued in a humble voice. "Now I suppose we have the power to do something about the other wish. And I can't help but think that our Father in his mercy would want us to. Just make sure you sit on the stand, Bishop. And let's hope this doesn't start a precedent."