

The Blessing

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You never can tell what April is going to be like in Boise. Sometimes you get sunshine, sometimes you get rain, and sometimes you get blizzards that roar out of the canyons. I died in Boise in April. It was nice. Boise was nice. April was nice. Dying was nice. I was clear-headed, the pain was tolerable, and my boy flew in from Kansas to give me a send-off priesthood blessing.

My wife would have kicked his butt if she had known that. She didn't want me to die. But I didn't mind. I was lying in a narrow, standard-issue hospital bed in a narrow, standard-issue room on the third floor of the Veterans' Hospital. My kidneys were shutting down. They had taped a sheath to my weenie and attached a long plastic tube. The urine ran into a clear plastic bag hanging on the side of my bed. Nurses checked the bag every couple of hours. You know you're in trouble when they start keeping track of your pee.

They took my clothes when I checked into the hospital and issued me one of those gowns that tie in the back and leave your hind end exposed. They took my temple garments, too. I could have insisted on wearing them, but that would have made a lot more work for the nurses, so I didn't. My wife fretted, but I patted her hand and said, "Don't worry about it, sweetheart. The Lord knows I wear 'em."

I had had surgery for bladder cancer in Boise earlier and had been back for periodic checkups. The nurses on the ward remembered me. That was nice. I had been in my seventies when I had that surgery, beyond the three score years and ten that Psalms 90:10 talks about.

I was born in 1890. People who were born back then had a life expectancy of forty years, so the Lord didn't owe me anything. I was past warranty when I died a month before my eightieth birthday. When I got cancer, I decided to go to the Veterans' Hospital because commercial hospitals cost too much. My wife and I were living on our social security and a telephone lineman's pension. I was eligible for the VA because Uncle Sam

had drafted me in 1917 and shipped me over to France. They marched us a lot, and the Huns shot at us some. Then they all signed the Armistice and we came home.

My wife and my oldest boy—he lives in Boise—picked my other boy up at the airport and drove him straight to the hospital. It was late afternoon.

“Dad,” he said, “you look a sight.”

“Oh, Lord,” I said, “things must be bad. They’ve sent for the cavalry.”

“Hush,” said my wife. “You’re doing just fine.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. Then we settled down for some hospital room chitchat. Somewhere in the conversation, my boy asked me if I could still recite “The Fearless Ride of Rosie O’Toole.” It’s a Civil War poem about a young woman who warns the Confederates that Union troops are about to ambush them. My grandfather was a Confederate soldier. My boy loved that poem, and I used to be able to recite the whole thing to him, so I gave it a try and did all right. Each time I came to the refrain, “the fearless ride of Rosie O’Toole,” he joined in. It was nice, but the effort wore me out; so after Rosie saved the Confederates, I closed my eyes and drifted off.

After my operation—my first trip to the Boise VA—I got to feeling pretty good. My wife and I decided to fly to Kansas to see our boy and his wife and our two grandkids. They wanted to take us to Nauvoo, to see the Mormon history sites.

My boy was a bishop at the time, the head of a small ward in eastern Kansas. He was only thirty-four when he was called and ordained. Being a bishop is like having a second full-time job.

The morning we were supposed to leave for Nauvoo, I didn’t think I’d be able to make it. I felt weak and nauseated. But I got dressed and climbed in the car. I’m glad I did, because it was a nice trip. My mother and dad had joined the Church in 1887 in North Carolina, and we eventually moved to Utah. My wife’s people were Nauvoo Mormons. Her grandfather was one of Joseph Smith’s bodyguards. After the Prophet was martyred and the mobs came, Grandpa Seth joined the exodus to the Salt Lake Valley.

Nauvoo languished after the Mormons were driven out. A century later, the Church came back and bought a lot of property there. It refurbished old homes, shops, and farms. By the time we made our trip, there were Mormon missionaries dressed up in pioneer costumes, taking peo-

ple on tours. We had a nice trip to Nauvoo and enjoyed the rest of that summer a lot.

Autumn was beautiful in Idaho Falls. Then we had a late winter that wasn't too bad. My wife and I read a lot and watched TV. And we went to the temple twice a week. We felt blessed to live in a town that had a temple. The next nearest temple was in Logan, a hundred miles south.

In March I started feeling weak and puny again, and I began to throw up a lot. Sometimes I spent half the night in the bathroom. Early in April after one of those nightly sessions, I crawled back in bed and told my wife, "We have to go back to the VA." She had good cry, and I held her. We lay in bed all morning. That afternoon I called Boise.

Going back to the VA for checkups after the bladder operation wasn't that bad because, a few days after my surgery, they put me in a ward with a bunch of guys, and I got acquainted. We had a good time. We traded war stories, played board games, and kidded the daylights out of the nurses. I loved to go out on the hospital grounds and sit in the sunshine. I liked to feed the squirrels. They'd come down from the trees and sit beside me on the bench. They took peanuts right from my fingers. My wife came to visit every day. Sometimes we'd spread a blanket on the grass and have a picnic.

But this time, things were different. The plane ride lasted forever, and I puked almost the whole way. My boy and his wife drove us straight to the VA. They put me in a private room, the doctor ordered a bunch of tests, and by the next day they were measuring my pee.

My boy that lives in Boise doesn't go to church. He did when he was young, but then he went to college and took some courses that steered him away from the faith. The war came along, and he went overseas. He was wounded in the Battle of the Bulge. He and my younger boy, the bishop, used to talk about religion and the Church sometimes, but they didn't fight about it.

After we got to Boise, my wife got in touch with a bishop and asked him to send the elders to give me a blessing. She wanted them to use the power of the priesthood to heal me.

She and the older boy were in my room when they came in, an old geezer like me and a young ramrod with a military haircut. They were wearing the standard Mormon vestments—dark suits, white shirts, and conservative ties. After some obligatory pleasantries about wild flowers in the mountains and the high cost of gasoline, the old guy handed the

young guy a little brown bottle filled with sacred olive oil. He poured a few drops on my head and said the prayer of anointing. Then they both laid their hands on my head, and the old guy pronounced a blessing. I've done the same thing dozens of times. And I've seen people healed by priesthood blessings. The Lord has that power. But I knew it wasn't going to happen this time. The old guy pulled his punches. In the blessing, he commended me for my faithfulness and blessed me that I would rest well and be free from pain. He prayed that the doctors and nurses would do all they could to make me comfortable.

This definitely was not a "take up your bed and walk" blessing.

My wife knew it, too. I could tell she was really disappointed, but she didn't say anything. She thanked the elders for coming and walked to the elevator with them. But then she went straight to a pay phone and called my boy, the bishop, in Kansas.

"Your dad needs you here," she told him.

He packed a bag and caught a plane the next morning.

So after I gave my sterling rendition of "The Fearless Ride of Rosie O'Toole," I dropped off to sleep. When I woke up, my boy was sitting beside my bed. My wife and our other boy had gone home. It was quite late. I blinked my eyes and shifted around to relieve a crick in my back.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I feel like I've been dragged through a knot hole."

"Mom wants me to give you a blessing."

"I've had a blessing," I said.

"I know," he said. "She wants me to give you another one. I'm going to fast and pray about it."

"Okay," I said.

He left after the nurse came to give me my sleeping pill. I dreamed I was a kid back in North Carolina. My dad was showing me how to make traps to catch rabbits. He used to rig a figure-four trigger made from sticks and put it under a heavy wooden box. When the rabbits came to take the bait, they'd jiggle the sticks, and the box would fall down and trap them inside. Sometimes they'd scream. I hated that, but I liked rabbit stew. I taught my own boys how to make figure-four traps when they were small, but they never caught anything.

Something woke me up. A nurse was checking the bag before going off duty.

"Is my output up to VA standards?" I asked.

"You're loafing," she said. "You're going to have to boost production."

"Well, I say it's good enough for government work."

She laughed.

She took my vital signs and fiddled around with some of the equipment, then patted me on my bald head and said, "See you soon."

"If you're lucky," I said and went back to sleep.

Morning came. They tried to feed me some, but I couldn't eat, so they stuck a needle in my arm and hung a bag to give me nourishment. By early afternoon when my wife and the Kansas boy came, it was bad, but I bucked myself up and put on a good face.

We talked, catching up on all the family news and remembering the Nauvoo trip. My wife sat in a chair at the head of the bed and held my hand. I kept drifting off, losing the thread of the conversation. They stayed about an hour, and then said they'd be back about seven.

That evening I had a room full. There was my Boise boy and his wife and my three grown grandkids, my Kansas boy, and my wife. My wife told me our daughters had called from Alaska and New Jersey, sending love and prayers.

I think my dad was there, too, and some others from beyond the veil. I didn't see them, but I felt their presence, especially my dad. I could tell that my wife wanted to get on with the blessing and that my bishop boy didn't. He took her out in the hall for a few minutes; and when they came back, she had settled down. After my boy from Boise dropped out of the Church, his wife didn't stay active either. His kids weren't baptized. I figured my bishop boy had told my wife out in the hall that he didn't want to give me a blessing with everyone around. I guess she thought it was because he'd have a hard time feeling the Spirit to heal me under those conditions, but I knew what he was doing.

We chatted for a while longer, then everyone said good-bye and headed for the elevator.

"Mom, you stay here and say goodnight to Dad," my bishop boy said and left with the others.

He came back a few minutes later. "I'm going to fast a while longer," he said. "They're waiting in the lobby. You go with them, and I'll stay with Dad."

My wife looked at me.

"So long, sweetheart," I said. "He knows what he's doing."

She hugged me. I kissed her, and she left.

“She wanted to stay,” he said.

“I know.”

“I feel bad.”

“I know.”

My boy sat beside the bed and held my hand for a long time. We were both crying when he laid his hands on my head and sent me home.