

The Betty Letters

My Dear Grandchild,

I never told you this story before because it was quite horrifying for me, at the time, and I did not want to scare you with the gory facts. But I shall tell you the story, now. On my last trip to Canada with my husband, Bo-Bo (he was on official business, about which I cannot tell you), I met a Jewish solicitor whose parents had been survivors of the German Nazi Concentration Camps, which flourished during World War II. Soon after our arrival in Canada and meeting this very religious Jewish man, who would not work after the sun set on Fridays because it was the Sabbath, he telephoned me in my hotel room on a Saturday afternoon – before the sun had set, which is in violation of the laws of Kashrut. When I, jokingly, told this solicitor that he should not be telephoning me at this early hour on a Saturday afternoon, he told me that he had to break with the laws of Kashrut because his elderly mother had been taken to hospital in a coma and, as such, he would not be able to keep his appointment with my on the coming Monday. I asked him how ill was his mother and, on hearing the answer, I determined to join this filial gentleman at the hospital. What I saw on that Saturday afternoon shocked me, I can tell you, My Dear Grandchild. The solicitor's mother was about 85 years old and still one could see the numerical tattoo of the Nazi Concentration Camp on the inside of her left arm. She was as white as the sheets on which she lay, her sparse, grey hair dishevelled – and she was not breathing on her own: She was being kept alive, artificially. The Jewish solicitor tried to will his mother to live. To no avail. He, really, had no choice when, after about 10 hours, he was persuaded by the doctor to turn off the life-support machinery, allowing his very ill mother to pass away, quietly and peacefully. For those 10 hours, he persistently refused to allow his mother to die. For those final 10 hours, this solicitor ate nothing, drank nothing, but stayed by his dying mother's side, stroking her hand, sometimes brushing her hair with his fingers ... and praying in Yiddish, all of the time. I was moved, I can tell you. Oh! How I was moved! 'She is trying to live,' he remarked to me, during that fateful afternoon, nodding his head, assertively. 'Life is so very precious!' And, then, he cried a little more. Then, another prayer. I left the hospital after his mother was pronounced legally dead and when, clearly, my presence was inconvenient for this man, his wife, his 2 young sons, the rabbi, who had come to give assistance, and the restaurateur who had offered a special meal to him.

I reflected on the events of that Saturday for many months to come. I, still, reflect on them. The lady, who had died, had had a very difficult life, having been an invalid for many years due to the horrors that she endured in the Nazi Concentration Camps where she had been interred, during part of the Second World War. I wondered – and still do – at the fact that she had tried to live with courage and dignity and, in the end, she died, seemingly, without any dignity, after suffering an agonising death over a long period of time. You see, My Dear Grandchild, she had been suffering from a terminal illness for at least 5 years before falling into that deadly coma from which she never recovered. For what reason should not a person die with dignity, as much dignity as that person enjoyed in life? For this poor woman, I am certain that she must have considered, many, many times, how the end of her life would come. She had suffered since coming to Canada, from one medical problem after another, all due to the way that she was treated in German Concentration Camps where, among other things, she had been used for medical research. About 5 years before the end, she could not walk, she could not sit for more than a few minutes, she could not eat by herself, and she could only talk for a short period of time before becoming exhausted. She had to be cared for by a Filipina helper who carried her frail frame to and from the toilet when called upon so to do. Life for this poor lady had become an intolerable burden for her and the son who adored her. Of that there could have been no question. Being a religious Jewess, she could do nothing but wait, impatiently, for death to

deliver her from her human prison. Death, as I have said in the past, may be beautiful, but dying is not.

It is illegal in Canada and in most parts of the world for doctors to assist in helping a person to die. In our culture, euthanasia – the intentional taking of a life or the act of omission in respect of a person, dependent upon assistance for his or her benefit – is considered almost on a par with murder. Hippocrates (460 BC – 377 BC), the greatest physician of antiquity, who is regarded as the father of medicine, is credited with the drafting of his Oath which states, inter alia: ‘I will give no deadly medicine to any one if asked, nor suggest any such counsel.’ The medical world, generally, accepts this as being wise counsel because, otherwise, it is considered possible for evil men to take advantage of a situation and to commit murder, cloaked under a different name. In The Netherlands, Belgium and in Oregon, the United States of America, euthanasia is considered legal. In Alaska, on September 21, 2001, it was determined in Sampson et al v. State of Alaska: ‘... the terminally ill are a class of persons who need protection from family, social and economic pressures, and who are often particularly vulnerable to such pressures because of chronic pain, depression and the effects of medication ...’. But I put it to you: Should not a person, who is hopelessly in a chronic state of terrible discomfort, knowing full well that there is no cure for the illness, be permitted to leave this world in a manner, befitting what we would call, humane. For a sick dog or cat, it is considered a kindness to administer a lethal injection in order to put the poor animal out of its pain. Yet, for human beings in a similar situation, we refuse the same kindness. I understand that if one legalizes euthanasia, there will, always, be somebody who will commit murder under the guise of mercy killing. But what about those other people who are unable to die without assistance when their physical condition is such as to make living a Hell rather than a Heaven?

I pray to God that I shall never be in a position that I want to die, but, if such a horrible situation were to visit me, I hope that I shall be able to obtain some assistance because the alternative, I have personally witnessed – and I am appalled by its terrible potential.

And, now, I must stop writing this letter. Actually, I am almost in tears when thinking of that Saturday afternoon in Toronto, Canada.

Talk to you, next week.

Chief Lady

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