

## *The Betty Letters*

*My Dear Grandchild,*

*I fear little, actually, and death does not worry me, at all. But life does worry me at great deal. I have had, thus far, a reasonably good life and I am looking forward to quite a number of good years to come, too. My concern is, however, that I want to have as good a death as I have had a life. One does not fear death because one accepts that death is a part of life. After all, if it were not for death, then the world would be populated by tens of millions of pretty useless people, being taken care of by their offspring or somebody else's offspring. One sees this in Japan where the population of the aged and infirm has reached the highest level in history. In the animal kingdom, excluding homo sapiens, the problems of growing old and being unable to perform as well as when one was young do not exist because the natural predators of ageing animals soon capture and eat the weak and infirm for their meat. With the survival of the fittest at work in the wild, only the fittest of animals survive. The constant culling of the herds of wild animals means that chronic medical ailments are kept to a minimum. Homo sapiens, however, have graduated to the position in this world of ours so as to be protected from what was, once, their natural predators by living in houses and in cities and owning destructive and very lethal weapons in order to defend themselves when needs be such. Homo sapiens, today, live into their 70s and even longer and, with the advance of medical science, it will not be too long before living more than 100 years will be the norm not the exception. For myself, I do not want to live to be 100 years because, at that age, I would not be able to enjoy a nice bottle of wine, some chocolates on occasion, and, of course, a little nooky when the lights are turned off.*

*There is another problem that frightens me, though: Suppose I contracted a terminal disease for which there is no cure, the disease, causing me to suffer horrible pains, daily, as the disease eats away at my flesh. What am I to do? Suicide is not an option for me because I would not even know how to kill myself, nicely and cleanly, that is. If I jump out of a window, I might just break some bones and I could become a cripple. Then, I would suffer the pain of broken bones as well as the ravishes of the chronic and painful disease. That would just be aggravating my condition. If I buy a pistol and shoot myself in the head, it will leave a horrible hole there. I do not want to be a horrible-looking corpse, too. I want to die as the way that I lived: In dignity, without chronic pains and without the necessity of having a closed coffin because my body had been mutilated by a disease or self-inflicted wounds. It seems to me that if I have enjoyed life, I should be entitled to enjoy death – the long sleep, if you will.*

*I think, therefore, that assisted death ought to be made legal on the basis that, as it is written in the Oath of Hippocrates, a patient has the right to refuse medical treatment. After having been diagnosed by a physician as suffering from a chronic disease for which there is no known cure, one that is almost guaranteed to give me a great deal of discomfort, I see nothing wrong in making a determination to end my suffering. There is, I am informed, quite a number of people in Hongkong, who concur with my opinion and are making plans to fly to other countries where assisted suicide is legal. From a religious standpoint and from the medical standpoint of most jurisdictions, suicide or assisted suicide is not to be encouraged, under any circumstances. It is all well and good for the leaders of modern-day churches to make such determinations; and or for courts of law to legislate that doctors are licenced only, to save lives, not to end them, but, for a*

*person who is suffering, minute after minute, hour after hour, an agony that cannot be abated, what better medicine is there than eternal sleep? 'The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn no traveller returns.'*

*My Dear Grandchild, I am not suggesting anything, but death must be faced with the same strength and dignity as is life. If it is the time to leave these shores, then, I want to leave them with the same dignity and grace that I strove, during my days of usefulness on this earth. Nearly 1,000 years ago, the Persian poet, Omar Khayyám, wrote these words which were as true in his time as they are today:*

*'Come, fill the Cup, and in the fire of Spring  
Your Winter-garment of Repentance fling:  
The Bird of Time has but a little way To flutter —  
And the Bird is on the Wing.*

*'Whether at Naishapur or Babylon,  
Whether the Cup with sweet or bitter run,  
The Wine of Life keeps oozing, drop by drop,  
The Leaves of Life keep falling one by one.*

*'A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,  
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread —  
And Thou Beside me singing in the Wilderness —  
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!*

*'Some for the Glories of This World;  
And some Sigh for the Prophet's Paradise to come;  
Ah, take the Cash, and let the Credit go,  
Nor heed the rumble of a distant Drum!*

*'For some we loved, the loveliest and the best  
That from his Vintage rolling Time hath prest,  
Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before,  
And one by one crept silently to rest.*

*'And we, that now make merry in the Room  
They left, and Summer dresses in new bloom  
Ourselves must we beneath the Couch of Earth Descend —  
Ourselves to make a Couch — for whom?*

*'Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,  
Before we too into the Dust descend;  
Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie  
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and — sans End!*

*'There was the Door to which I found no Key;  
There was the Veil through which I might not see:  
Some little talk awhile of Me and Thee There was —  
And then no more of Thee and Me.'*

*Talk to you, next week.*

*Chief Lady*

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