



The Widow's Mite

DARCY D. JENSEN

University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, California

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.” (Mark 12:42)

She still sleeps to her side of the bed. Partly by habit. Partly from fear. Fear of reaching out for him in the night and finding no warmth, only the chill of empty sheets. Plus, in a way she couldn't explain, only feel, it would seem disrespectful and a denial of her love for him. Both were an unfaithfulness she'd never consider. Especially in death. It was their bed, it would always be their bed, never hers alone.

Nor could she bring herself to rearrange the bedroom furniture, even though it had been months since her beloved's ashes had returned to the earth. His corner of the bureau remained undisturbed; the key ring he jangled when nervous. It was a maddening practice, especially in their younger years. And sometimes she told him so. She forgave him this quirk, in some ways loved him all the more because of it. At some point during their years together, the vexation over that and other petty irritations, which she knew were petty even then, had softened. They had been together long enough for time to polish smooth much of the coarseness between their personalities.

She remembered how some of his mannerisms and habits had been charming in their courtship. Some were even responsible for her initial interest in him. Later they became irksome distractions, and more. There were times when all she could see was the blemish, enlarged to full-blown flaw. Those were the times she won-

dered what she saw in the man ever to have married him. But those challenges of heart diminished with the years. Quirks that once were charming, then irritating, finally were accepted as mere quirks. She had come to love the man, not his mannerisms.

Next to the key ring lay some pocket change, a nail clipper, and the old wallet bursting with baptisms, proms, grandchildren, and other memories she dare not open all at once. The grief would surely be too much to bear. And, she still respected his privacy. He never went into her purse, nor she his wallet.

All these things were laid out with the carelessness of one fully expecting to fill his pockets with them come the next morning. Only the next morning didn't come.

Their wedding picture has been brought out and placed prominently in the center of the bureau. It hadn't been out of the storage box in years. But it seemed right to take it out; she needed to take it out. His face had begun to fade when she thought about him, and she feared

what it would mean if, one day, she couldn't remember with any clarity at all. What would happen if all she could recover was a vague, distant outline, gray and shadowed? She needed a reminder to help reconstruct the contour of his face, the set of his eyes.

Though he and she were far from the youthful figures in the wedding picture, she preferred it to more recent photographs. She needed the hope, the future it promised. It seemed easier to hold an image from the start of life rather than its end. The wrinkles would come as they had in life—slowly, unnoticed.

Sometimes, most often around dusk, when the life of day surrenders to the purgatory of night, his death seems so remote, so unreal. His life, too. It was as if he had never lived at all. As if they had never been married. And given birth to Charles and Elaine. As if they had never held each other tight, tight as steel the day the young lieutenant brought news of Charles. As if all the memories—Charles's chocolate Easter egg melting in the pocket of his new dress pants because he just had to take it to church with him, Elaine's graduation from the university, the grandchildren, her beloved Henry—were only the troubled imaginings of an old woman lost in a world of her own creation.

There are times when his death seems so remote and unreal that she begins to think that maybe he never really died at all. That he is still alive, away on business. Or simply late for dinner.

She catches herself sometimes expecting him to come in from his garden pattering to lead her on with his silly nonsense and romance. "Bees make honey; honey is sweet. The queen their love, honey their treat; One is their heart, the other their glee. Dear queen of my life, will you my honey be?" She blushed then; she blushes still.

"Mom! Mom! Where are you?"

"Oh, in the bedroom, dear." Startled by Elaine's voice, the wedding picture slips from her hand. She catches it in her lap, holds it firmly for a moment, and rises

from the corner of the bed. Placing it back on the bureau, she takes one more look. "I'm in the bedroom, Elaine."

Stepping into the doorway, "What are you doing?" Elaine asks.

"Just tidying up," she said with some embarrassment, as if caught in some indiscretion.

"Thinking about Dad again?"

"Well, I suppose so."

"Mom, it's been months since Daddy died," she said, trying not to scold. But, some frustration still leaked through. Elaine disliked it happening. She wanted to be patient and understanding with her mother. But her worry that, her mother might be dwelling too much on her father and his death sometimes got the best of her.

"I know, Elaine." Unable to look Elaine's way, her eyes sagged, looking at nothing in particular. The tears were near and she knew it. Besides, she didn't want to have another crying spell in front of Elaine. They made Elaine uncomfortable, and that, in turn, made the grief more out of place.

She took a breath and swept her fingers across the corner of the bureau as if she were wiping off some dust. "Let's go into the kitchen for some coffee. We do have time for a cup,

don't we?"

"Yes. I'm a little early. I don't have to pick Lynn up until six. We have time." Seeing that she had surprised her mother, Elaine wondered what it was exactly that she had interrupted. It raised a now-frequent concern about her mother. Maybe this was the time to say something.

While her mother poured the coffee, Elaine sat down at the kitchen table in the same place she had while growing up. It was a familiar, comfortable feeling. The same salt and pepper shakers. The napkin holder.

"Mom, you've got to get out more. Do some things. Meet some new people." Elaine didn't want to sound pushy. But she couldn't help thinking that her mother's grief was lasting too long and keeping her from getting on with her own life. Just because her dad was dead didn't mean her mother had to mourn forever.

"I do. I get out some. I still volunteer at the hospital. Plus there's church and circle meetings. But, you know, 'Couples' Club' is out now. Oh, they still invite me, and that's nice of them. It's just that I feel like such a third wheel. They all have each other and I have no one. They do their best to include me. But being with them makes me feel more lonely. I just can't. It hurts too much."

"I suppose that would be hard. But there are other groups. How about 'Merry Widows'? They all know what it's like. They might be good company for you." If being with married couples was too difficult, her thinking was, then maybe other widows would be good.

"I can't. I just can't bring myself to go. It sounds so depressing. A bunch of old ladies sitting around missing their husbands. That's not company. That's an endless funeral luncheon!"

Elaine waited a moment, taken by her mother's innocent honesty.

"Well, if not that group, then some other group. There are plenty of other

groups that might work. It's just that it's time for you to get out more." Those were the thoughts that had been on her mind lately, but the words blurted out before she had a chance to soften them.

"It's your time, hon, not mine." She didn't mean to be so abrupt. She always hated it when she thought she sounded snippy. Elaine simply didn't understand. For so many years it was Henry and Vi, Vi and Henry. Now it was Vi, with no "and" anymore. No Henry. Just Vi. Everything in her world had changed, everything.

Elaine was silent. She played with her coffee mug, deflecting the silence, keeping her sudden embarrassment in check. Her mother was right. It was her timetable for healing, not her mother's.

She knew things were difficult for her mother. She even understood some of the pain. After all, she had her own grief. And, especially since her father's death, she had wondered what it would be like if Jim were to die. It was a horrible thought, one she couldn't keep for very long. It scared her too much.

"It's just that I'm worried about you. You don't seem to be getting over your sadness."

"It's getting better, Elaine. Really it is. It's like going through the old family photo album. I see a picture or something of Henry's and I have to relive the memories that come with it. Sure it hurts sometimes, and makes me sad, very sad.

"But a lot of the sadness is happy, too. Oh, not like it was when the happy times were

happening. Or like they would have been when all of us would be together, like at Thanksgiving, telling stories. It's happy in a thankful sort of way. Sad, of course, but glad, too, for having had them in the first place. I'm so grateful. And I cry sometimes because of that, too.

"Just the other day, while folding the last of Henry's flannel shirts—I'm giving them to the Russell boy, he'll get plenty of use from them—I remembered the time we were driving past the store downtown that sells clothing for large-sized men and women. They had a sign in the window that caught Henry's eye. It said, 'Big Blow-Out Sale!' When he saw that, he just burst out with laughter. Nearly hit the car in front of us, he was laughing so hard. I couldn't help myself, I got the giggles, too. Before long we were both roaring—me at him and him at the thought of 'Big Blow-Out' clothing!"

Elaine hadn't heard that one. It brought a smile to her, remembering her father's sense of humor, and his laugh. And, for a moment, she understood what her mother meant by memories coming alive on their own.

"How's the packing going?" Hearing about the flannel shirts, Elaine recalled that her mother had been gathering Henry's things together in order to give them away.

"It's okay, I guess. But, it goes slowly sometimes. I'm glad we gave away most of his clothing right after the funeral. It was quick and all at once. I was still so numbed. That made it easier, I think. I wouldn't want to go through each little piece now.

"But I keep coming across odds and ends. Yesterday I found that pocket knife

of Henry's that he thought he had lost. It was in the back of the utility drawer. I bet he put it there after fixing something. You know how forgetful he could be sometimes. He really liked that old thing. Opened mail with it. Cut newspaper ads with it. On the coffee table, mind you! I'll never be able to get those knife scratches out of that table. Well, when I found it, I had to remember. The memories were automatic. That doesn't make it bad, does it?"

"Well, no. I don't think so." Elaine wasn't sure about this. She had no experience with this sort of thing, but she certainly didn't want to make her mother feel even sadder about it.

"I think maybe it's good in some ways," Vi continued. "Like medicine. I remember the good times, and the bad—we had our share of those, too. And something happens with them. Slowly but surely, the sadness in remembering doesn't hurt as much as the time before. But the good stays that way. Even grows. Because it reminds me how good the good was. And I think that will stay, without so much of the sadness." Vi wasn't sure she had said that very clearly. It was something from inside, deep inside that had been happening in her. Not something she tried to make happen; it was just there. Like a leaven. She didn't have the words to describe it any better.

Elaine thought for a moment. There was something true about that. She had sensed it in her own grieving. Maybe she was being too hard on her mother.

"I'm sorry if I've been pushy lately. I only want what's best for you." At saying this, Elaine felt her own tears coming.

"I know, dear. I know." Vi looked away, feeling Elaine's love, giving them both time to treasure the moment and let the awkwardness pass.

"Well, it's time to pick Lynn up. Thanks for the coffee. By the way, you're still riding with Jim and me to church tomorrow, aren't you?"

“Yes, if that’s still okay.”

“Of course it is.” Elaine placed her coffee mug in the sink and walked toward the door. “We’ll be here about twenty to eleven.”

“That will be fine,” Vi said as she opened the door and watched Elaine go to her car. “See you in the morning.”

Vi waved as Elaine drove away, throwing a bashful kiss in the direction of the car. Elaine didn’t see it.

Vi placed her morning’s first cup of coffee on the stand beside her chair, picked up a pencil and the piece of paper on which she’d been working, and sat down.

“It’s so quiet in the morning,” she thought. “Especially Sunday mornings. I wonder why that is.” She paused to think about it. While the quiet of most mornings was pleasant, Sunday mornings were especially nice, almost serene. It had been that way ever since her youth. She didn’t know why it was so, didn’t have to know, she concluded, just appreciate it.

“Let’s see now,” her finger scans the top of the list. “The tools, saws, all the garage equipment will be Jim’s. What he doesn’t want, well, he might know

someone who could use the rest. The fishing poles and such to Robby. How he loved that boy! All the more I suppose because of Charles.” She stopped, carried by thoughts of another time. So much life had been lived. So many memories. The time had gone by so quickly.

After a few moments, maybe minutes, she returned to the list. “The shotgun will go to Jim. Henry’s writing desk—I can still see Henry sitting there designing his next project—that will be Elaine’s. As a child she was so fascinated by its cubby holes and the drawers full of treasures she’d never seen before, treasures we adults took for granted. She had such fun sitting in Henry’s chair at the desk, crayon in hand, pretending her scribbles were every bit as important as his.

“The key ring will be Lynn’s. I’ll never forget watching Henry hold her in his arms, dangling that shiny ring, just out of her reach. They’d have so much fun—her little hands trying to catch it, and him dancing it in and out of her grasp. She’d cackle and giggle with such delight. Yes. The key ring will be a special memento of her ‘Gwamps’.

“The rest of the stuff can be divided after I’m gone. Elaine can decide who gets what then.” She puts the list down, feels a sense of relief, or more accurately, release, in having completed it. Like a burden had lifted, though that wasn’t completely true either. It wasn’t really a burden. How could a lifetime of memories be a burden?

It was more like a lightness of spirit, a small, clear freedom had been given her. She could feel it. Like the changing inside she had mentioned yesterday to Elaine.

For weeks it had been coming. Not so much by Elaine’s urging, in fact not much by that at all. Elaine intended to be helpful. Only, she didn’t understand; Vi herself hadn’t, except as it grew in her day by day, week by week. She had learned it couldn’t be forced or controlled. “You can want it to happen at a faster rate,” she thought. “But, the heart heals in its own time. Like a bone or anything else broken or wounded.”

“Mom, Jim’s waiting in the car. Are you ready to go?” Elaine shouted, partially closing the front door as she stepped inside. “We’re running a little late.”

“Oh, my goodness! Yes, dear. You know how slow I am in the morning. Just as soon as I get my coat on,” the sentence going unfinished as she raced into the bedroom. In the rush, she grabs her coat and kerchief and spins around, glancing at the bureau, the shrine she’d been stripping for weeks. She sees the left-over pocket change, the last of Henry’s relics, scoops it into her kerchief and drops it into her purse.

“I’m on my way. I’ll meet you at the car.”

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and...,” she begins to hear the words of worship. Sometimes it takes a while. The spirit is slow to catch up with the body and settle into the pew.

Oddly, that’s one of the reasons why she is fond of the liturgy. She can be late

page 288

or lost, but it continues on as reliably as ever. That was reassuring for her. It meant the liturgy would always be there as a steady, familiar friend. She might drift away, but it would remain, ever ready for her to rejoin it.

She knew that some might consider that an improper notion; it was probably why she never told anyone. But to her it was a blessing. The liturgy worked, even when she wasn’t at her best.

Like this morning. She’s unusually anxious. More so than she can remember. Not since she read the lessons for All Saints Sunday just a few weeks after Henry’s death has she been quite this unsettled. But she thought she knew the reason for this morning’s nervousness. It had been building all service long.

“For just this moment,” she thought. As the offering plate nears, she reaches into her purse and, trying not to attract Jim or Elaine’s attention, carefully takes the kerchief out, laying it in her lap. She spreads out the corners of the kerchief and cups the coins in her hand, holding them tightly.

When it’s her turn, she holds the plate, unsteadily at first, lifts her hand over it and releases the change.

“Yes. For just this moment,” she says to herself, her thoughts scanning a lifetime.

Now in the midst of worship, her family and friends surrounding her, she has given the last from Henry’s hand into the offering plate. A surrender. And a benediction. The final offering of a life so beloved.

“In the sure and certain hope,” she reminds herself as she passes the plate to Elaine.