

The Waiting

by Jim Schicatano

It was a beautiful, sunny, spring morning and, as I traveled alone to Mrs. Yoman's cottage in the country, I playfully tossed stones onto the dirt road ahead of me. The woods were slowly regaining the green color that had been lost during the past winter, and squirrels, birds, and other delightful creatures of the forest were stirring on both sides of the road. The pleasant, morning air was wonderfully refreshing and I was filled with an energy that one can only feel on a spring morning. Spring was in the air, as they say, and I couldn't wait for summer to arrive.

I was anxious to see Mrs. Yoman, too. I had not seen her during the previous winter and I missed her companionship and her talk of old times. She was a woman who I greatly respected and admired. She had telephoned me the previous day and asked if I would consider stopping by and cleaning her front and backyard. Most of the work merely consisted of raking the leaves and picking up branches that had fallen during the winter. It never took too much time and I would have done the job for nothing, that's how much I liked her. She was quite old, probably in her mid-eighties, and had been a widow for nearly seven years. She still grieved over her husband's death and her eyes would occasionally fill up with tears during our talks.

Her children wanted her to live with them but she was emotionally unable to leave the cottage that her husband and she had shared for nearly forty years. She remained there alone, welcoming the neighbors and relatives that occasionally visited her, and occupied her time by reading and baking homemade breads and desserts for her neighbors. She loved her life in the country and especially liked the woods that surrounded her cottage. She enjoyed feeding the birds and squirrels and even named some of her favorites. I was unable to differentiate between the animals, but she insisted that she could identify them and I accepted her claim.

As I approached the cottage, I noticed Mrs. Yoman sitting alone on her front porch. She sat there nearly every day, knitting or reading to help pass the time. The quiet road relaxed her, she said, and the fresh air helped to keep her young.

"Good morning, Mrs. Yoman," I called to her in the distance. "How are you today?" She smiled and promptly waved to me. As I walked up the steps and onto her porch I was immediately struck by her old and tired appearance. I had not seen her for several months and it concerned me

that she was finally beginning to show her age. Still, she displayed her customary congeniality and was obviously delighted to have me as company.

"Good morning, Johnny. How are you doing?" Her voice was hoarse and I realized that she was fighting a cold.

"I'm doing fine. It sounds like you caught yourself a cold."

"I don't know what it is. I just woke up like this. Feel downright awful. I had some tea but it didn't seem to do much."

"It must be the weather changing or something. Maybe you should go inside."

"No, I'm fine, really. Besides I don't want to miss it." I glanced down the road and around the woods. Miss what? I asked myself. "How's your mother doing?" she asked me. "I heard she had pneumonia."

"Yes, but she's doing a lot better now though."

"Oh, that's good to hear. I baked some homemade bread for her and for the family, too. Make sure you take it with you when you leave."

"Thanks, I will."

She suddenly went into a deep coughing spell, gasping for her breath as she covered her mouth with a tissue. Several moments later, she slowly sipped her tea and her cough began to subside.

"Is there anything I can get you, Mrs. Yoman?" I stared at her in pity. She was very thin and did not appear well. Her cheeks were pale and her eyes looked heavy. She had lived a long, hard life and it was, perhaps, beginning to take its toll. Her small, emaciated body could no longer perform like it once had. I saw before me a woman who was physically deteriorating. I could only hope that her mental capacity still remained sharp.

"I'll be alright Johnny. Would you please get me my pink blanket, though? It should be on my couch."

"Sure. Is there anything else I can get you?"

"No, that's all, thank you."

I entered her cottage and instantly noticed the pleasant aroma of fresh, baked bread. I took a deep whiff and my thoughts quickly shifted to later that day when my family and I would be eating her delicious bread along with our dinner. I walked over to the couch,

picked up her blanket, and glanced around her living room. It was spotless. Mrs. Yoman always kept her cottage perfectly clean. She was a good worker for any age.

"Here you are," I said as I returned and covered her with the blanket.

"Oh thank you, Johnny, you're a sweet boy." She smiled again in appreciation. I knew she wasn't feeling well but she still remained pleasant, and I felt that was a good sign. She was one of a kind and I was determined to see more of her during the spring and summer. Once again she started to cough. It was a loose, deep cough and I could only hope that there was nothing seriously wrong with her.

"Mrs. Yoman, why don't you go inside?"

"No, I can't."

"Sure you can. Here I'll help you."

"No, I can't. I must wait here."

"For what?"

"I'm going home." Her eyes stared straight ahead down the dirt road.

"Oh. When are they coming?"

"Who?"

"Your family."

She looked up at me. "Are they coming?"

"You just said they were. You said they were coming to take you home."

"No, not them. Not that home. I'm going home. Today. That's why I must wait here...now."

I wondered if her mental abilities were failing her, too. She didn't appear to be making any sense. Her chair continued to rock back and forth. Still under her blanket, she stared with resolution down the dirt road.

"Mrs. Yoman, I don't understand. What is it exactly that you're waiting for?"

Never turning her head, her tired eyes turned up to meet mine. Then she returned her attention back to the road. A faint smile suddenly emerged, then quite naturally and unemotionally she said, "I'm

waiting, Johnny. I'm waiting for death."###

The gentle, warm rays of the golden sun once again reminded me that summer was on its way. The birds were singing, the squirrels were gathering, and insects were crawling and flying all around us. Hope and cheerfulness permeated the country air. The woods had come out of hibernation and life was returning for a new season. Yet, here was a woman anticipating death.

Somewhat startled, I sat down on a chair next to her.

"Mrs. Yoman, you shouldn't talk like that."

"Why not, it's the truth."

"Maybe, but..."

"Oh I know what you're thinking, Johnny." Her face was stern, but not upset. "Poor old lady has finally gone overboard."

"I wasn't thinking that at all. It's just that... Well, you just shouldn't give up on life like that."

She smiled. "I haven't given up on life. It's just my time, that's all. Everyone has to go sometime. Sooner or later we must all meet our Creator. Today is my day. I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Before the day is over I will be walking with the Lord."

"But how can you be so sure?"

"He told me, that's how. I wouldn't make that up now would I?"

"He TOLD you?"

"Now you're thinking I'm hearing voices, don't you?"

"No..."

"Listen Johnny, I can't explain it. It wasn't actually a voice, it was sort of... Well, I can't explain it. It's just one of those things. Don't you understand? My time is up. The Lord told me so. It is this day that every person must prepare for and be accountable for. I've had a good life and I'm thankful for that. But it can't go on forever. Soon we are all called home. Today is my day. Today I'll be joining my husband, Frank, who left me seven years ago. You know, I bet he's waiting for me.

"In all fairness, I should be giving you some advice before I go. You know, some words of wisdom that I have accumulated after seventy

years. Alright, I admit it, its eighty-five years. Anyway, well let's see... Hmm... I guess the most important things are all common sense. Love your family, Johnny. That's important because no matter how close you become to someone outside the family, no matter how good of a friend they may seem, when it comes right down to it they usually won't be there for you like family will.

"And don't hold grudges against someone. Lord no. Why, Frank and his brother, Donald, from Syracuse, were on the outs for over fifteen years. When Frank passed away, just between you and me, there wasn't anyone who took it harder than Donald. 'All those wasted years', he would cry. Nope, nobody took it harder than Donald. Funny thing was, both were good men. Honestly! They were just so stubborn and obstinate that they refused to make amends." She began to cough again and reached for a sip of tea.

"After all those years of holding a grudge, I believe they even forgot what they were feuding about. Funny, isn't it?"

"Mrs. Yoman..."

"Another important thing," she continued without hearing me, "is sharing with your neighbors. Just too many people today who don't even know who their neighbors are. You're a nice boy and I hope you stay like that. Coming down here to clean my yard is awfully neighborly of you. Oops! I'm holding you up, aren't I? Well you go right ahead and get to work. Don't mind me. The rake's in the shed in the back."

I was hesitant to leave her. "But, Mrs. Yoman..."

"Now, don't mind me. You go right ahead."

"Are you sure I can't get you anything else?"

"Oh no, I'm fine. Now don't work too hard. There's some iced tea in the refrigerator if you want some. Help yourself."

"But..."

"Go," she said more firmly.

"Alright," I said reluctantly. "Look, if you need anything..."

"I'll let you know."

I reluctantly entered the house and went out into her backyard. It was a large, flat, square yard, which was about one hundred feet long and wide. A picnic table was situated just outside the back door and flowers were planted along the side of the cottage. I wondered where

she had found the time and energy to plant them. A metal fence extended along the circumference of her yard and small evergreen trees were planted inside the fence. Small fruit trees of all varieties, standing no more than fifteen feet tall, filled the rest of her yard. Beyond the metal fence was, of course, nothing but the woods.

I opened the shed to retrieve the rake and began to rake together all the branches and leaves. As I worked, I was unable to clear my mind of thoughts of Mrs. Yoman. Why was she so convinced of her death? Was she losing her mind? Had she heard a voice? Her cough was dreadful but she didn't appear ready to die. She appeared as pleasant as ever. Still, she was in her eighties and talk of such nature had to be taken seriously. After several minutes, I dropped the rake and returned to check on her.

As I stealthily moved through the living room, I could hear the creaking of the rocking chair. Its sound told me that she was still alive. I quietly approached the front door, endeavoring not to disturb her. However, she suddenly turned around. I had startled her.

"Oh, Johnny. Come out and sit a spell."

"I was just..."

"You were just checking to see if I was still here, weren't you?" she laughed. Considering the fate that she believed awaited her, I found her temperance to be remarkable. "Yep, I'm still here. Although not for long." She remained under the warmth of the pink blanket and continued rocking. The hoarseness in her voice persisted but her coughing had subsided. "You know Johnny, I was just wondering."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I was just wondering how it will happen."

"Mrs. Yoman, please..."

"We have to learn to face death, Johnny. They say death is part of life, you know. You see, when you die, you really aren't dying. It's just a new beginning – a new life. You really can't die. Oh, your body may die but inside you still live. It's like being born all over again – just a different phase of life, that's all. It's all so different." She glanced up at me. "You look worried. Am I worrying you?"

"Well, yes," I candidly replied.

"Don't be worried. There's nothing to worry about. Actually today is the biggest day of my life. And I believe it's going to be my

happiest. Today is the day when all the hard work ends; all the pain of my arthritis ends; all the fatigue ends; all the suffering ends. Today is the day when I am finally rewarded for committing my life to the Lord. Life is so hard. It's full of travesties, injustices, and heartaches. But I truly believe that in a few hours I will look back at my life, then look around me at the peace and beauty of heaven, and say, 'It was worth it.' I truly believe that.

"How will it happen? I wonder. Will I have an accident? Will some stranger be walking down that dirt road and call to me – like the Grim Reaper? Maybe I'll see a light from above and float off into heaven."

"Mrs. Yoman..."

"No, I don't think so. You know how I think it'll be, Johnny?" Sincerity filled her eyes. "I think there'll be a gentle, spring breeze coming down that road – so beautiful, so gentle. And as it passes by it will carry my soul with it upwards, towards heaven. That's how I think it will be. That's how I wish it would be."

"Love the Lord with all your heart Johnny, that's the most important thing. That's all that really matters..." She yawned and slowly closed her eyes. "I'm going to take a nap. Wake me before you go."

She continued to breathe, so at least I was able to determine that she was still alive. I returned to my work in the backyard but my thoughts were unable to leave that front porch. I realized that Mrs. Yoman would die some day but the thought of her absence left me feeling despondent. When that day of her death would arrive, I knew for certain that I would miss her and I would be losing a wonderful friend.

The yard was cleared, the branches and leaves were bagged, and I was finishing my job when I heard something shatter in the front. I tossed the rake onto the grass and hurried towards the door. Darting through the cottage, I came to the front door and saw broken glass on the wooden floor of the porch. Her teacup had fallen. I went out and began to gather together the broken pieces.

"Are you alright Mrs. Yoman?" I asked her as I knelt on the porch. There was no reply. "Mrs. Yoman?"

I glanced up at her. Her eyes remained closed. A faint smile was evident on her face but she was no longer breathing. She never appeared more peaceful than she did at that moment and I did not even attempt to awaken her, for I knew that she had left me. My heart sank in despair at the loss of my friend.

But before tears had formed in my eyes, I became aware of something else. Something was happening around me and I was blessed to be a part of it. As I looked down the dirt road that led to her cottage I realized that what I was witnessing was something wondrous – something inspiring.

A gentle, peaceful, spring breeze blew softly in my face. And as I glanced at the budding woods around me and then at my departed friend, I understood clearly that spring was, indeed, a time of rebirth.