**Presbyterian Writers Guild**

 Progressive Feast in Parabolic Storytelling

**Pastoral Integrity in a Guilt Laden Society**

**BEING STILL**

**by**

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The solemn, pallid stare of the charge nurse received Chaplain Benson into the 6th Floor Maternity Unit, foretelling his somber task. He wished, yet again, the metal doors would take him into a new place, and offer him a happier routine, beyond the necessary task of pastoral comfort for a grieving family. He longed to hear lullaby chimes signifying a healthy newborn, but this hope was stolen, again, by the nurse’s face, evidence of the task ahead.

 In a Unit where families joyously gawked at newborns through the nursery window, Charlie noted the night shift had a certain calm. Sleeping mothers occupied rooms where a blue or pink heart-shaped nametag announced each new arrival. In one dimly-lit room, Charlie surmised a mother and child cuddled while nursing.

 Chasing the sleep away from his eyes, Charlie looked with furrowed brows at this Nurse he didn’t recognize. She spoke right away with a nervous tremble, recognizing him by his clerical collar and Hospital ID.

 “Hi. Chaplain Benson? Thank you for coming at this late hour. Please join me in the staff room. I’m Delores Farris, the charge nurse tonight.” She walked quickly, turning her back as he followed her into a room filled with the smell of coffee, a large circular table, and schedules and other memos on a prominent bulletin board. She turned and looked at him. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

 Charlie welcomed her invitation and poured himself a cup. “Thanks! It’s just what I need.”

 The two stood around the table facing each other as Delores spoke. “I was called to work here tonight. Short staff, you know. I work in Dr. Thompson’s office across the street. The other nurses are in Delivery.”

 Chaplain Benson nodded, waiting for his instructions. Nurse Farris fumbled with words, introductions, trying to explain herself. He listened knowing he wasn’t about to hear good news.

 “The patient in room 607, the girl, … I mean the young woman in room 607 needs you. I mean she didn’t call for you … we did. I guess WE need you to go there. She’s alone. She has no family. Well, err … listen Chaplain; she had a very difficult delivery.” Her eyes suddenly dropped. “It didn’t go well. I wish it hadn’t happened on my watch. I don’t know how to put this.” She paused, gasped, stammered a bit, then looked directly into his eyes, “I don’t know how to help her and the other nurses … well, they’re attending to another mother.” Nurse Farris kept talking, hardly taking a breath and trying to be matter of fact. Nurse Farris, her eyes glazing over, looked downcast and away.

 “She had a still birth, you know, a stillborn,” she gasped, clearly upset and struggling to speak. “Her baby had no heartbeat. She wanted to hold it; now she won’t let go. She’s back in her room and she still won’t let it go. One of the Nurses told me to call a Chaplain.” Almost in desperation, she pleaded, “Please, Chaplain, can you retrieve the tissue?” Nurse Farris stopped talking and sat down, looking at the floor. Her arms fell to her side with her hands tightly clenched. Quiet filled the room.

 Charlie paused and took a deep breath realizing the task before him. Delores, deeply troubled, accepted a shift in Maternity where a newborn is dead. After an awkward moment of silence he responded with hopeful reassurance.

 “I understand. I’ll go to her room and let you know if I need you.” Gathering his thoughts and wondering *who this girl, this young woman was*, he asked, “By the way, Delores, what is the patient’s name?”

 Delores looked up, relieved to turn this matter over, and informed him, “Mira. Mira, she’s a student at the State University. She’s from Slovakia.” Delores paused and then offered, “you can look at her chart if you want”.

 “Thank you, Delores. I pray everything will be okay now; I’ll be on my way. Room 607, right?” He knew it was 607, as he gathered himself and reflected on her choice of words while trying to comfort her as well. *I can visit with her later,* he pondered as he set about his mission to bring comfort and care to a woman alone, in her room with a newborn who had no breath, no life, no future.

 *There is a first time for everything,* Charlie pondered as he became aware of the squeaking sound of his shoes against the polished floor of the hallway leading to Mira’s room*.* *How do I ask a mother to hand me her baby, her stillborn? How do I do this?* Charlie’s mind was racing as reflections passed through his thoughts in milliseconds. He remembered families and patients laden with guilt, fear, anger, the absence of hope, often relying on prayers for miracles. He practiced flexibility and openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. “The Holy Spirit is my Companion,” he told others when asked *how he faced such difficult situations?*

 Charlie moved closer to Mira’s room seeking to bring the integrity of spiritual care to this young woman. He looked back at Nurse Delores, intuiting her need for pastoral care as well. She remained seated in a silent posture of sorrow. He could see her head bowed, held between her hands. He stopped briefly, pausing to offer silent prayer for Delores. *Put Your arms around her. She wasn’t expecting this tonight. Bring her comfort*. Turning around, Mira’s room was next. *I can set a time to meet with her when she’s free from nursing.*

 Gulping in the reality of the next moment, Charlie noticed a closed door with no pink or blue heart posted there. He arrived. As heart wrenching as this might be, Charlie faced his assignment with confidence even as he knew the uncertainty of the outcome. *OK, Holy Spirit, We’re a team!* he thought as he knocked and entered her room with his Companion.

 He walked into her room, slowly scanning the setting. A dim fluorescent light over her bed cast a soft hue over the young girl, draped in a hospital gown and light pink robe. Alone in her thoughts Mira held her baby close while sitting on the edge of her bed, rocking in a gentle rhythm, rocking her stillborn baby. Void of tears or expression, Mira clutched her little bundle against her breast. As if she could bring her baby back to life, Mira continued to rock as Charlie entered the room. He looked at her stillborn child all wrapped up in a soft cotton blanket, with a little white cap peeking out the top. Mira’s long brunette hair flowed down her back. Clearly in a space of her own, Mira did not speak.

 Charlie felt the loneliness of the room and wondered, *What do I say?* Pausing before closing the door he looked at Mira, “I’m Chaplain Charlie,” he said quietly. He moved a chair close to the end of the bed and sat down, thinking *not too close, just close enough not to be invasive*.

 Mira looked up at him briefly, but offered no words. Mimicking the rhythm of a beating heart she rocked her baby, conveying the closeness of mother bonding to her child.

 He began to reflect. *This isn’t like other situations I’ve been in*. *There is no family, no roommate from school, and no father, no one. What do I say?*

 Charlie’s thoughts rambled, wondering, and trying to figure out what to do. He thought of the verse, *Be still and know that I am God*. (Ps 46:10). *How fitting!* He thanked his Companion for the inspiration of needed scripture and guidance. *I need to be still*, he thought.

 Intuitively he began rocking too, in a subtle almost invisible way so as not to draw attention, enough to convey acceptance and presence. He kept thinking and wondering, *What should I say?* *I pray my Companion is helping me through this. I want to minister to Mira, but what do I say to her?* And, nagging him were the words of the Nurse and her instructions for his mission. He tried to dismiss those words as they lingered. *Mira has every right to hold her baby for as long as she needs to. After all, she carried this baby with her everyday these past months.*

 Thirty minutes earlier Charlie’s pager buzzed. Quickly he’d dialed the hospital number on the pager and learned a Chaplain was needed in Maternity. From a deep sleep, he went into full alert mode, dressing quickly, donning his light blue clerical shirt and Chaplain ID. Methodically, he noted the time as he chased the sleep away from his face. For six years Charlie alternated the On-Call Night shift with a Fr. Renaldo Suerez and Rabbi Joseph Siskin who partnered with him on the Hospital’s Spiritual Care Team. Kissing his sleeping wife goodbye, Charlie headed toward the garage on a cold winter’s eve.

 He used his two-mile drive to Memorial Hospital for reflection and preparation. Wisps of snow blew across the road. An occasional delivery truck, on a nightly mission hurried by. Streetlights blinked yellow, clearing an uninterrupted path to the hospital’s parking garage.

 The dark silhouette of Memorial Hospital appeared. Only a few lights cast shadows on the exterior of this mammoth structure. He entered the employee’s parking garage and parked in his usual spot marked clergy, close to the hospital entrance. Some kind of tragedy awaited him. Most often, the ER or Maternity needed a Chaplain late at night. Tonight Maternity summoned.

 Charlie looked at Mira, all the while rocking with her. He wanted to affirm her and let her continue for as long as she wanted or needed. The digital clock above the white board listing her caregivers flashed 2:16 a.m. Time passed in silence. He looked around the room. *How ironic, a family suite with no family*. A couple of pictures hung on the wall. A child playing with balloons running across a field caught his attention. Ironically, no helium balloons welcoming a new arrival floated in Mira’s room. The other picture, a scenic landscape print by Monet, offered a tranquil peace. Charlie’s eyes remained transfixed on this young mother cuddling her breathless baby. He realized a certain comfort from Mira’s rocking. Mira caressed her baby with remarkable tenderness. He found himself mesmerized, watching her. Charlie began to witness a special innocence between mother and child. Mira had a way of consoling herself for whatever hurt and pain she felt from her birth experience.

 He sensed there must be deep sadness, guilt, shame, anger, resentment, and inner turmoil in this young mother. He knew, or at best he had an idea, her story might be filled with loneliness and conflict. He owned these thoughts; he longed to know more about Mira to confirm his projections. He wanted to ask her, yet resisted trite conversation in this solemn moment. Silently Charlie conveyed affirmation and acceptance as Mira continued quietly rocking her baby; the bonding of mother and child, mattered.

 In the weight of this moment, Charlie realized he didn’t know if Mira gave birth to a boy or a girl. In due time he would, in fact he would learn much more about Mira and her story.

 Charlie glanced at his watch. He spent almost an hour beside Mira without a word except his introduction and silent gesture of rocking along with this young mother. His Companion kept saying, *Be Still!* Charlie chose not to converse, offer prayer, or ask questions. As time passed, Charlie formed a question for Mira, working it over and over in his mind to get the words right, praying for guidance from his spiritual Companion.

*Clean Language is needed here,* he thought. Charlie taught the art of Clean Language, a non-invasive way of asking what needs to be asked, avoiding the unnecessary. After repeating the phrase in his mind over and over, he settled on what to say.

 “And when you no longer hold your baby in your arms like that, where would you like your baby to be?” There, he said it. He broke the silence. He offered a simple question and wondered if it was the right thing to ask. She offered no response, no glance toward him. No questioning of what he asked. She remained silent.

 Minutes passed. Mira paused, and turned toward Charlie and spoke, “In my heart. I want my baby to be in my heart.” She looked away and continued rocking.

 “And, take all the time you need for your baby to go to your heart,” saying each word slowly and deliberately, again using Clean Language, as if to suggest she had all the time in the world, no hurry, no demand.

 A tranquility seemed to transform Mira’s face. She stopped rocking and turned toward Charlie and handed him her tiny blanketed baby.

 “She’s in my heart. My baby’s in my heart.”*It’s a girl* he realized. Mira handed her to Charlie. He received Mira’s child and began to rock her as soft, gentle, loving tears fell from the eyes of these two strangers in room 607. “And, what is her name?” he asked.

 Mira paused, a tear rolling down her cheek, forming precious words, “her name will be Krásna Kvetina, which means beautiful flower in my Slovakian language”.

 Charlie continued to rock Krásna and cradle her in his arm. He noticed a pitcher of water on Mira’s night stand. “I would be glad to baptize your daughter if you like,” he offered, not knowing her faith. Charlie’s spontaneity flowed freely, feeling the leading of his Companion. Mira responded without hesitation, “Please. I am Slovokian Orthodox. My family would want her baptized, too.“

 With Krásna in his arms and removing her little cap, he took water from the pitcher in his hand and let the drops fall gently across her head, spilling their way through the wrinkles in her tender skin. “In the name of God our Creator, Jesus the Son, and our Companion the Holy Spirit, I baptize you Krásna Kvetina. You are a beloved child of God and with God you shall always be.” He offered a prayer. Following this impromptu sacrament, the two began to share conversation, bringing them close.

 “May I share my confession with you? You are a priest, right?” Mira wondered, her eyes looking directly at Charlie speaking good English with a noticeable accent.

 “Not a Catholic priest, but a protestant Chaplain”, he responded.

 “That’s OK, you are here and, well, I’ve been thinking of what to say to you since you came in my room. Your presence has been comforting. There are so many things going on in my head, I have to confess. I’m so sorry”, Mira began sobbing, while clutching her hands to her heart.

 Charlie moved closer and offered her a box of tissue from her tray table. He desired to extend his hand and some physical touch of reassurance. His gesture alone gave her the confidence to continue.

 “I feel so dirty”, she paused and choked on her words trying to gain some composure. “Can I be forgiven”? Without interrupting, Charlie listened. “No one knows. My parents don’t know; I can’t tell them what happened. Chaplain, can I tell you, can I confess to you?”

 Charlie reached his right hand to Mira, holding Krásna with his left. She willingly moved one hand away from her heart and reached back to hold his. “I didn’t mean to get pregnant. It was an accident if you can call it that. I’m so embarrassed to tell you this”, Mira sighed and took a breath. Charlie could feel a tremor in her hand as he tried to offer a sense of calm, understanding and acceptance.

 “I wanted to meet people and make friends and I thought I could at this party. It started out to be a lot of fun and I was having a good time. I started drinking. I know I drank too much. Everyone was drunk, some were taking off their clothes, like an orgy, people having sex. One of my friends said I passed out. I passed out and didn’t know what happened.” She looked up, filled with shame and admitted, “That’s when I became pregnant. How can God ever forgive me? I wish I had never gone to the party.”

 “God already has”, Charlie spoke softly. “As you so lovingly rocked Krásna and loved her, so God does to you. He holds you close even through those times you wish never happened. You are forgiven! And, can you forgive yourself?”

 Mira was deeply emotional. “I’ll try. I’ll try. I thought God would punish me. But I do love my little girl; I want to feel God’s love in my heart too.

 Echoing the words he said earlier, Charlie guided her, “take all the time you need to feel the love of God in your heart and God’s loving words of forgiveness”.

 The conversation paused for a moment and Mira looked at Chaplain Benson and said, “Thank you! I’m ready to get some sleep and I want to take a shower and feel clean again. Could you ask the nurse to come and help me out? I feel pretty weak. I think she’s been waiting quite awhile.“ Mira’s smile of understanding on her face conveyed an awareness of the moment. “Also, could you see about cremation, so I could have her ashes?”

 “Ok,“ Charlie said as he began to draw closure to his visit with Mira.

 Mira took Charlie’s hand and touched her baby with the other, “Thank you for being with me tonight”. Charlie stood up, cuddling Mira’s baby in his arms. “Good night, Mira. God bless you!“

 The walk back to the nurse’s station allowed Charlie the time to step into a deeper level of understanding his role in the midst of tragedy. “ *Mira helped me to see a place where a lifeless child can live forever.* He wanted his walk to last. *Now it’s my turn to hold little Krásna and I’m not sure I can let her go*.

 Charlie stepped away from Room 607 and walked ever so slowly to the Nurse’s station. Delores saw him coming, holding Mira’s baby, as she started to rise from her seat at the desk. She stood motionless as Charlie approached. “Delores, this is Krásna Kvetina, Mira’s little girl,” he said with a certainty of meaning. “I baptized her. Her name means beautiful flower. Mira wants to have her birth certificate and arrange for cremation. I’ll have a social worker call on her later this morning”, Charlie spoke so matter of fact not able to verbalize his memorable time with Mira.

 Delores suddenly turned to tears as she motioned for Chaplain Benson to follow her again into the staff room. “I lost a baby,” she confessed. “I miscarried in my fourth month. I was 18.” Delores stammered. “I can’t get over it. The memory of it still haunts me. I wish this hadn’t happened the night I get called to this Unit. I can’t do this,” she said. “I’ll get one of the other nurses to take …. uh .. er … Krásna for you.”

 “Delores, Mira is tired and ready to get some sleep, but I think she would appreciate a visit from you first. She wants to take a shower. Her baby is in a special place; a place where stillborn children can live forever. Go see her. You have something painful in common. Take time with her and offer her your love and understanding and see what happens next. Would you like to visit later when you’re free to talk?”

 “I would. I’ll call you soon.” Delores hesitated at first, but realized the importance of Charlie sending her on a mission to room 607 now. She slowly turned to Charlie catching a look into his caring eyes. She left the comfort of the staff room and headed to see Mira. Charlie with baby Krásna in his arms watched as Nurse Farris walked toward Mira’s room and went in.

 At the same time another nurse from the Unit walked into the nurses’ station and recognized the little blanket Charlie was holding. “Hi Chaplain Benson, is this Mira’s baby?” she asked. Charlie recognized Jenea Thomas, a long-time maternity nurse. “Hi Jenea, I understand you’ve been in delivery.”

 “Yes, it was a long night but all is well. Moments ago Mom delivered a 7 1/2 pound baby girl. She’s beautiful and mom’s doing fine. Dad was a little faint but managed to hold out coaching her all the way, trying to keep pace with her breathing and contractions.” Wanting to tell more, she stopped and looked at Charlie, “Here, I’ll take her and make the arrangements for her cremation. Mira told us what she wanted to do. Delores has been a mess all night and hasn’t handled this very well. That’s when I decided we needed to Page you. By the way, have you seen her?”

 “Delores is in the room with Mira”, he motioned to Mira’s room as he passed Krásna to the waiting nurse.

 “Take a peek in our nursery, the family is still here if you would like to say hello and share a prayer or blessing.” Chaplain Benson smiled and started walking down the hall toward the nursery as Lullaby chimes sounded on the Hospital PA.

THE END

Author’s Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author’s imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Rev. Jim Splitt resides in Wahoo, NE. He is married to Kathleen, who serves as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Wahoo. He serves as Chaplain for Hospice and Home Health Care of Saunders County, NE. He retired in February 2013. He presently serves Homestead presbytery as pulpit supply and member of the Committee on Ministry. He also serves on the Board of Directors for the Presbytery Pastoral Care Network, a national Presbyterian organization supporting the care of pastors throughout the denomination. During his career, Jim spent time in Chaplaincy, Parish Ministry and Pastoral Counseling. He is a graduate of Concordia College in Moorhead MN, Hamma School of Theology, The Westchester Institute for Counseling and Psychotherapy and Siena Heights University. Jim enjoys biking, photography, geocaching, playing guitar and hammered dulcimer. Jim & Kathleen have a blended family and are parents of 6 boys, all grown and living in Minneapolis, MN; Louisville KY; Cincinnati OH; and Omaha, NE. Jim and Kathleen have a dog & cat, Frodo and Amariah.

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