



3-15-1988

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Recommended Citation

Bujnovsky, Mary (1988) "Final Witness," *Westview*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol7/iss3/2>

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Final Witness

By Mary Bujnovsky

provocative analysis of a contemporary issue

It was the time of night that almost everyone was asleep. Beth Christian made her nightly rounds, checking on patients. She expelled a long sigh as she approached Room 101. It was only 1:30 a.m., and Beth felt exhausted. Tonight would be the night. "Why did it have to happen on my shift?" she wondered. This wasn't the first patient she had watched die, but this death was different. Beth felt more helpless than usual.

Always before, Beth had thought her job made a difference. When death began its approach, everyone worked at trying to stop the final moment. The King family was different. They were here only to have pain medication while they waited. Such a waste was the general thought among the hospital staff; especially Dr. Thomas thought so. Death and illness were the enemy, to be fought with every weapon available, according to Dr. Thomas. Death wasn't accepted without a fight. But in this case, David and Sarah King had tied Dr. Thomas' hands.

Beth remembered the first time Mr. King had been admitted. It had been for a simple illness no one had expected to be difficult. During the course of this treatment, it was discovered that Mr. King had a rare blood disease that would cost him his life. Dr. Thomas had told him that chemotherapy might cause the disease to go into remission. He had been honest. There was no cure. Mr. King's life expectancy had suddenly dropped to less than one year. Dr. Thomas had strongly urged chemotherapy treatment in the hope of slowing the illness. Maybe Mr. King would be one of the lucky ones.

The Kings had made another choice,

though. Now, less than six months later, Beth Christian was working on the very night David King would pass from this life.

It wouldn't be very long. Everyone had known that yesterday. Beth began to resent having to go into his room. Dr. Thomas was in the staff lounge. He was waiting—not that there was anything he could do, but at least he felt more in control being present. It was just too late to help now.

Beth entered the room. Only a small light showed the people in there. She was surprised that only Sarah King and Reverend Jones were there. But, Beth had been surprised throughout by these people. Mrs. King looked up as Beth entered the room.

"He seems to be very comfortable," she said. "I want you to know that we, David especially, really appreciate your care. Everyone has been very kind to us."

Beth looked at her, careful not to show her anger and frustration. "What care?" she thought. "This man simply let his life go. Forty-five is too young to die without a fight!"

Mrs. King looked softly at her husband. There was a glimmer of tears in her eyes. She leaned forward and touched his shoulder. Again she looked toward Beth.

"David has made sure everything is ready. The kids and I will be taken care of well. It hasn't been easy, but we believe we've made the right choice."

Dr. Thomas walked into the room as Mrs. King finished speaking. Beth could tell by the expression on his face exactly what he thought about her words.

"How's he doing?"

"He's still holding his own, although his respirations have become more labored."

Dr. Thomas was very careful to hide his feelings from Mrs. King, but Reverend Jones looked carefully at him as he turned to leave.

"I'll be in the staff lounge, nurse. Call me when his condition changes."

Dr. Thomas rapidly left the room. Beth wanted to follow him, but she knew what her job was.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you. We'll just continue to pray," Rev. Jones said. He opened his Bible and began to read quietly.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Beth looked toward Sarah King seeking some clue. Finally, she turned to her patient.

David King gradually opened his eyes. As Beth looked into his eyes, she saw peace and acceptance. Slowly he moved his eyes until he found his wife's head lying on the bed next to his hand. Beth wasn't sure, but just for a moment she thought he smiled. Gentleness and love seemed to flow from him with a strength that caused Mrs. King to lift her head.

"Darling, I'm here." Tears began to form in her eyes. "We'll miss you so, but I believe in the rightness of this." She tried to smile, but her lips trembled with the effort.

Reverend Jones touched David's hand. Mr. King looked toward him.

"All is ready. I've talked with everyone, and they're doing as you wished. They'll wait for word from Sarah like you asked."

Beth quickly left the room then. Tears had begun to gather in her eyes. As she walked rapidly down the darkened hallway, there was a look of frustration on her face. In her mind, questions circled one after another. The most frequent was "Why?"

Practically stamping her feet, Beth worked out her frustration in movement. There was very little else she could do. It was too late now. Mr. King was going to die, and nothing was going to change that fact. A frown marred her face as she realized her confusion was not the fact he would die, but the attitude the family had about his death.

Death! Beth had seen her share of death. There had been little children

who died, their bodies bruised and beaten. She had also seen the old die, alone and unloved. In each case, Beth had done her best to help cheat death of its victory. Now these people simply sat down and let it overtake them. It was wrong. It had to be wrong, didn't it?

Two hours later, the call light in 101 went off. Jumping quickly to her feet, Beth traveled the hall toward the room. One look at Mr. King convinced Beth it was time. Stepping to the phone, she placed a call to Dr. Thomas. Time seemed to stop in that small room as Mr. King's breathing labored until finally with one last shallow breath he stopped completely. The Reverend Jones and Mrs. King had stepped to one side of the bed. Beth, feeling for a pulse, looked up wishing Dr. Thomas would hurry, only to realize he was standing by her side. Feeling no pulse, Beth stepped back to allow Dr. Thomas to examine the patient.

Carefully checking Mr. King, Dr. Thomas finally looked up into Mrs. King's eyes. "It's over. Even now, I'm still looking for that miracle." There was a question in his look.

Mrs. King, tears streaming down her face, looked with wonder at Dr. Thomas. "Even now, you say. How can I explain that you just saw that miracle? Paul, you tell them."

She leaned over her husband, kissing him one last time, saying her final goodbye. Whispering, she said, "I'll join you someday."

"I'm going now. The family is waiting. I'll call and then wait for you in the chapel, Paul."

Carefully, as if in great physical pain, Mrs. King walked from the room. She was leaving her husband in the hands of others now. She held her head high, though the tears ran freely down her face.

Reverend Jones watched her a moment before turning back to face Dr. Thomas and Beth. There was sorrow in his face as he viewed their confusion.

"I don't know if I can make you understand, but just for a moment try to believe in something greater than life. David and Sarah have spent their lives turning to that Greatness. In their eyes, God is more real than this world. When David found out about his

illness, he first prayed and sought God's will. Then, together, David and Sarah accepted that God's way is sometimes mysterious and often all that is left is believing, even when it hurts."

Dr. Thomas snorted in disgust. Beth looked even more confused. Reverend Jones continued. "There is a time to die. David accepted that it was his time and in accepting that, he chose to die without fear. In David's eyes, Sarah's also, this was his final witness. To face his death with that same belief that enabled him to face life was his last desire." With these final words, Reverend Jones walked toward the door.

Dr. Thomas looked after him before turning to Beth. "I'm still looking for that miracle." Sadly, he turned and also left.

Wearily, Beth picked up the phone and placed that call that alerted the

appropriate people. Then she began preparing the body for its last trip.

Shaking her head, Beth pondered all that had happened this night. She was sure there was an answer if she could only find it. Finished with her work, she glanced toward the table. Lying open was that same Bible Reverend Jones had been reading. Drawn like a magnet, she walked over to it. Bending, she read one verse that had been marked and underlined heavily. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." ▀

MARY BUJNOVSKY has spent several years working in a hospital setting. Currently, she is enrolled as a junior in the Division of Nursing at SOSU. After she completes her degree, she will work in Southwestern Oklahoma as a registered nurse.

the power of fancy

Note In A Washerwoman's Diary

By Sandra Soli

While hanging out laundry
I make sail in a good wind,
Visiting women from all ages,
all histories. They tease me,
beckoning through holes in my
used-to-be-striped dishrag,
unfit lately for such public display.
Kitchen secrets, bedroom pleasures
brazenly flap KER-FLAK! KER-FLAK!
I smell a fine whiteness in sheets,
worn but nicely straight because
I pinch their corners, thinking
all the while of clean pages
in a book I will carry it,
a present to the women of
many centuries. They remember me.
We have the same wrinkled fingers.



SANDRA SOLI is an honored writer who came to America from England and now lives in Oklahoma City. This poem originally won First Place in a Poetry Society of Oklahoma Spring Contest.