

Do Not Go Gentle

by

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The trembling won't stop. I hold her hand and try to sooth her, but there is nothing I can do about the trembling. It's part of the renal failure, Ron said, along with the nausea. Charlotte has been putting a brave face on it, but I know she is in pain.

We live in a beautiful rambling house on the North Norfolk coast. It used to be a B&B, Charlotte told me she stayed here with her husband many times. There are thirteen of us, some in couples but mostly single. I'm the only single person who isn't a widow or widower. I never married, for reasons I won't go into.

We all found our way here through word of mouth, as fugitives, escaping before our planned Cessation. Many people agree with the Cessation. They think 75 years is long enough. It is supposed to free us from the problems that had beset our parents, of quietly wasting away in nursing homes, being spoon-fed and losing our dignity. It offers certainty and peace of mind. But I, and the others here at Dylan Thomas House, would not give up my freedom so willingly.

Charlotte has been here for two years, arriving with a suitcase and a bag full of books six months after I did. Her grandson Geraint drove her to the agreed drop-off point, she didn't trust anyone else not to report her to the Cessation Authority. She turned up in the dead of night, with a face full of make-up and sporting her favourite hat.

I sit by Charlotte's bedside and read to her. She is quite weak, lying on her left hand side as the dull ache of her right kidney forces her to. Ron has had an idea, but it's risky. He could hook Charlotte up to a home-made dialysis, circulating dialysate into her abdomen, which will flush the toxins out. It may give her another six months.

I finish the chapter and put the book down on the table. We talk about Ron's plan to clear out Charlotte's kidneys, and give her a better quality of life.

Going to hospital is out of the question for us, so this is Charlotte's best hope. But the underground groups and support networks we have, whilst finding it relatively easy to bring us food and home comforts, may struggle to get the quantity of drugs needed.

'We may have to spread the net wider,' I say, 'approach someone different. We don't want to risk our normal supply chains. This is a one-off.'

'I've been thinking about that. I know who I want to call.'

The next day, we sit outside in the weakening sun and drink tea, watching the bees pick up their last vestiges of nectar before the cold weather sets in. The house mobile is on the table and, nervously, I take hold of it and press the numbers Charlotte reads out to me. It rings a few times before a deep voice answers.

'Hello?'

'Is that Geraint?'

'Yes, who is this?'

'It's about your grandmother, Charlotte.'

'What's happened? Is she...'

'She's poorly. Without treatment she won't have long left. One of our community was a GP, he says there's something we could administer which would help her, give her longer. But we need the medicine and we don't have anything like that. We, Charlotte and I, wondered if there was any way...'

'You need to get the medicine.'

'Yes, exactly. We know this puts you in a difficult position, but...'

Charlotte motioned to me to hand over the phone. I was worried that she wouldn't have enough energy to speak but she took a deep breath and whispered.

'Geraint.'

'Grandma, is that you?'

'It's me darling. You have been so good to me, getting me here and keeping it secret. I hate to ask anything which would put you in danger.'

'No Grandma, you need me. What do you want me to get?'

‘It’s my kidneys. I need something called dialysate. Quite a lot of it. Have you got a pen and paper to write it down? D-i-a-l-y-s-a-t-e.’

Geraint was quiet for a moment, thinking.

‘I don’t know how at the moment, but I’ll do it. I’ll get it for you.’

I grab the phone back and speak to him.

‘We’ll phone you. I don’t want to pressure you but do you think, would five days be enough time? Only she is struggling rather a lot.’

‘I’ll reach out to a group I know. They may be able to help.’

I put the phone down and squeeze Charlotte’s hand. She nods at me.

‘He’s a good boy. He’ll try his best.’

I spend the next few days looking after Charlotte, who is putting a brave face on her discomfort. She sleeps a lot, sips some water and tea, and I try to keep her spirits up. Ron gives her some pills but they don’t really touch the sides of the pain. We have given Geraint the location of one of our drop-off points, and he says that it is in hand. Two days later, Ron and I walk under cover of darkness to the pill box. There, in two cardboard boxes, are 30 bags of dialysate, with the tubing Ron will need to run the solution through. I grin when I see them. More time with Charlotte is all I want. We haul the boxes into a wheelbarrow which we use to walk slowly, and wobbly, back to the house. It is messy and fiddly but after a few days Charlotte has some colour in her cheeks and her breathing is less shallow, like she can fill her lungs again. I even style her hair so it no longer lies lank at the side of her head.

This week, I listen to the news. We rarely listen as it’s a reminder of a world we are no longer part of, but I have a reason to now. After any particularly risky delivery, we check if it’s been reported. On the whole, the police leave the Oldie communities alone, as long as they keep out of sight. If we’re not a drain on the system, they can ignore us. The Cessation had been promoted as a policy of compassion, but we have no doubt that its purpose was primarily economic. The over 75’s accounted for sixty percent of hospital admissions and forty percent of GP appointments before the Cessation was put in place. Money that could be spent elsewhere.

On this particular day, I tune in to a local radio station, and the third item makes my heart jump into my mouth.

‘Three men from the Norwich area have been arrested in connection with the theft of drugs from the James Paget Hospital. A quantity of different drugs are believed to have been stolen to be sold on the black market.’

I just knew that Geraint would be one of them. My fingers shake as I bring up the local newspaper on the house mobile. In the newspaper the three men are named. They have been charged and bailed.

Geraint tells them that the medicine was not for profit, he had no intention of selling it on, but to help someone. The police ask who it is for but he won’t tell them. The CPS offer a deal; they will let him off with a fine if he tells them who it is for. He remains silent.

Geraint tells me all this when I phone him. ‘But I’m prepared to get a big fine, or even time in jail, if it helps Grandma live a little while longer, and in less pain.’

As we breakfast together the next morning, I tell her what has happened to Geraint, and the offer the police have made. Charlotte puts her cup of tea down and looks stricken. She walks slowly up the stairs to her room. I follow her and we sit on the bed together. She picks up a picture of all her family that she has by the bedside, and traces their faces with her finger.

‘I know they were all hurt by what I did, but it was the right decision for me. I had so much life left in me, I didn’t want to be snuffed out. But I can’t let him ruin his life, his future. Can I really put myself before my Grandson who has so much of his life left? I clung to the notion that I would not go gentle into that good night, I would rage against the dying of the light. But if that comes at the cost of my Grandson’s freedom, I have not loved him as he has shown he loves me.’

I know then what she is planning to do. Here, in our closing years, is the intimacy I had sought all my life, and I weep for its premature end.

Sometime this week, when she has sorted through her things, and written letters, and hugged everyone here in our community, she will find her way to a police station and explain that she is handing herself over to the Cessation Authority. She will give them a signed statement, explaining that her Grandson stole drugs for her, an ‘Oldie’. She will give no indication of where she has been living, but will ask for clemency for Geraint, for the CPS to honour their offer of just a fine, and no criminal record. A series of letters will also go to the national newspapers, imploring voters to re-evaluate the system that sends people to

their state-sanctioned end, the day after their seventy-fifth birthday.

I will sit alone in my room, and re-read the card she has written for me, left alongside a bunch of roses from the garden and with tears streaming down my face, speak out loud the words of Seneca she has inscribed.

‘Life, if well lived, is long enough.’
