

The Gift of Life

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She sighed as she awoke, then lay looking at the ceiling. Stark, white, offering no answers. It was very quiet and still in her small house. Had been for years now. No Ned, no Peppy. She rolled over and sat on the bed, hands on either side touching, holding, perhaps gripping the edge. She looked out the window. It was not a pretty day. But then, she had come to feel comfortable with these dry grey mornings. So it was alright.

Her feet reached into her slippers and she went over to the mirror. She was not dismayed at what she saw. Most women had stopped wearing make-up years ago because it prevented the oxygen from getting through. So the face was very familiar – it was the same in the morning as it was in the middle of the day. Though it tightened a bit in the evenings. She looked intently at the face. As she had for the past month of mornings. Still, it offered no answers. And tomorrow that face would be fifty years old.

Minutes passed before she picked up her brush. It was four years now since her husband had 'given'. Funny how words change. She remembered when people had 'passed on' or 'passed away', but now the polite word was 'giving'. 'Dying', of course, was reserved for those earlier freak deaths which still happened occasionally. And perhaps for animals. The others talk of Peppy being dead, but she liked to think that he too, gave. Whatever the words, though, it had been years since either Ned or Peppy were around. And yes, she was very lonely.

She fixed the pins in her hair, took the faded orange robe from the chair and put it on. It was the one Ned had given her. And the one Peppy would always curl up on if she happened to leave it on the bed. Which she often did. Still.

As she walked from her bedroom to the bathroom she took note of the rough rug beneath her feet. She let her fingers stroke against the wall as she passed by. It was important to feel everything today. She turned on the tap to wash up, and listened to the water. She reached out and felt it cold and clear along her hands. Water had oxygen in it, didn't it.

Six years ago, the world had reached a limit – the oxygen supply could sustain only so much life. Though most couples were already limiting themselves to two children, it became illegal then to have more. It also became illegal to own a pet – such oxygen-users were extravagances we could no longer afford.

She jerked her trembling hands away from under the icy stream, turned on the warm water, and reached for the soap. She must not drift this morning, she must pay attention, today. She washed her face, her hands, then picked up the towel hanging beside the sink. It was something soft and gentle. Something comforting. After a bit, she hung it back up.

It also became law, then, to give up your life at fifty – for the oxygen supply to be distributed so as 'to maximize efficient survival of the species'. Mandatory suicide, Ned called it.

She remembered that year, the year of '72. Of course there were millions of people over fifty and they all had to give. It was a holocaust. So few were able to give voluntarily – social

morality and religion never does keep up with social reality and necessity. Many were still Roman Catholics, insisting that it was indeed suicide and as such, a violation of the seventh commandment – if they committed such a mortal sin, they would surely go to hell. But what about 'doing for others', some asked. The response was the claim that love of God transcends love of humankind. The pope of course advised resistance, and then the old sacred versus secular power struggle broke out. It didn't seem to occur to anyone that by not giving, the Roman Catholics still violated God's seventh commandment: instead of killing themselves, they'd be responsible for killing others, by using oxygen that would have supported someone else. But could that really be called killing? People were over-eating somewhere and starving somewhere else long before '72 – wasn't that the same?

She finished up in the bathroom, pausing to look again in the mirror. Her robe hung loosely as she walked back along the hall. The plants are to be watered, next, now.

And others, inclined to be religious, declared that the world was meant to end and the new laws were interfering. The press had a lot of fun with that faction, exclaiming that their God couldn't be too omnipotent if they were worried about human action having any effect on the divine plan.

She carried the jar of water from the kitchen to the study and poured into each pot, turning some, forgetting there was no sunlight. Ned was the picky one with plants. He'd spend an hour some mornings watering and turning, then clipping the deadness away, crumbling their earth between his fingers, then feeding some from his stock of tiny bottles filled with various plant foods. But that was four years ago and now only a few were left, the others having died of her not-too-fussy care. Her negligence was not merely due to a carelessness – she much preferred her greenery to be in fields, feeling that potted plants were like caged animals. But a field is just a very large pot, isn't it?

And then you had the ones crying for freedom and liberty. We had prided ourselves on being a democratic country and this law, of course, was seen as a totalitarian dictate taking away our liberty, our freedom of belief as well as our basic freedom to choose.

And the right to life. By '69 people had become quite vocal – and violent – with respect to the old abortion problems, and for a while in '72 of course many abortions had to be performed: there were couples carrying their third or even fourth child. It didn't take too long for compulsory sterilization to be legislated, but instead of solving the conflict, it intensified it – now the right to life of the unconceived child was being denied. Opposing factions countered by stating that the right to life was simply no longer an unconditional and inalienable right.

She walked back to the kitchen and plugged in the kettle. The clock on the wall showed that only fifteen minutes had passed since she had awakened. What if all the minutes of today pass as slowly?

While waiting for the water to boil, she opened the cupboard and took down the package of bran muffins. The cellophane had torn and they were getting a little hard. She also reached for a small plate and transferred one muffin from the package to the plate. She put the package back on the shelf. In the drawer there was a knife, and in the fridge, some margarine.

My life *is* my own. The thought seemed sudden, but of course, it was not. And the choice to end it *should* be mine. I think I would give whether it was law or not, it's a fact of life now that we just can't go on and on until we age to death, that's a luxury of bygone days. I've had my years of life, very enjoyable and satisfying, I should not begrudge another the same chance, I should give, I want to give. I too resent the law for taking away my freedom – my freedom to

give without compulsion. but of course there must be the law. Only a few would give voluntarily. Not enough. We need to be compelled by law. Always have.

The steam was furiously chugging. She unplugged the kettle and took the teapot from the shelf. After rinsing it with the boiling water, she put a teabag inside, filled it, and set the kettle back down. She put the lid on the teapot, and set it beside the muffin and margarine, on the table.

I suppose in many ways it's like the draft – when wars between countries were legal and the men and women between fifteen and forty were required to enlist, required to go, fight, kill, and be killed. I suppose it's the same thing. What comes first, duty to self or duty to others? The conflict increased for those who had children – extensions of self and at the same time part of the others. Though Ned and I would have been draft dodgers. Then. We didn't believe in that kind of dying. There are different kinds – of dying.

Realising she had forgotten a teacup and spoon, and a little upset with herself for such a lapse of presence, she pushed back her chair and got up from the table. She opened the cupboard again and lifted the one with pink roses from its hook. She opened the drawer again and picked out a spoon. Then she sat at her breakfast. One more time.

But if only I could wait a few weeks. For Lann's first child; she is eight and a half months gone. How I would love to hold my first grandchild, just once! Just once before, to touch her tiny toes, look into her eyes, to hear her cry and babble, to feel her little lungs breathe. Just once to see her. To touch the one I am giving for, giving to –

She had begun to cry again, and abandoned the task of buttering her muffin. Her hands pressed flat on to the table and her head moved stiffly back and forth, eyes wide in a desperate denial. She reached into the pocket of her robe and got out the kleenex. After a bit, she drank more of her tea.

What will two weeks matter? Oh yes, I have thought of applying for an extension. Edna did that and was refused. And then they made a special check on her fiftieth birthday just to make sure. Poor Edna had decided to risk it, hoping for a premature but safe birth of her grandchild, but it didn't work out that way. She was arrested, and her children were fined. They are still paying out. It's such a very heavy fine, to encourage the children to feel responsible too, to assist in their parents' gift if need be. Dear Edna. Little Pammy is alive and healthy, and so cute. She has your smile.

She poured the second cup of tea. And buttered the other half of her muffin.

Suppose I risk it anyway. Edna always was unlucky. There have been slips in the check, sometimes someone will forget or be late – that man in the paper the other day – he was discovered to be seventy-five years old. That was quite a story, all the children rushing to see the picture, they'd never seen anyone that old except in family photo albums. And relations never seem to matter to the young.

But the fine, it would be too much for Lann to bear, with the little one coming along, even with all that I can leave to her. We have never been rich. And suppose I was discovered in three or four days – there'd be the fine for nothing, I still wouldn't be able to hold the child.

The tea was getting cooler now. Her fingers started picking up the crumbs from the plate and she absently nibbled each one before swallowing.

Yet money is such a petty price to pay to display and defend personal principles, personal freedoms. Perhaps, but do I have the right to those freedoms – by insisting on my freedom, I may be depriving someone else of theirs. Perhaps Lann's child, my own grandchild.

But what if that someone else consented? Suppose I could find someone willing to give a month early. Perhaps then I could be allowed to give a month late. That sounds reasonable. It adheres to the spirit of the law, the purpose, the reason. No more oxygen is used in the bargain. I'll need to call a lawyer, and apply. She looked at the clock on the wall, fourteen hours to find someone, she raised her teacup to her lips in excitement, surely someone – her hand started to tremble, badly, spilling the tea.

How foolish. How could I have forgotten? Of course Ned and I tried that. I agreed to give two years early so he could give two years late and we'd die together. The authorities refused permission. Something about the timing being crucial, there would be an excessive demand on the oxygen supply for those two years that would make a difference, whether or not the demand two years after was less than allowed for.

She pushed the teapot, cup, and plate angrily away from her.

Why did I think for a moment that –

She leaned back in the chair, one hand in her lap, the other still twitching, slightly, on the table. Then she sighed and began to draw circles around the puddle of tea with her finger.

She thought of Edna again. No, it's not a question of risk. It really is a question of right: do I have a right to live? Do I have the right to destroy something I did not create, my own self? Is freedom of choice an individual's right under all times and circumstances? What's the matter with taking a privilege that's not your right? And it's a question of responsibility: why is it good to be altruistic? What obligation do I have to other human beings?

She fixed her gaze on some distant spot through the doorway, her eyes grey and dry. She continued to sit, motionless now, but for her face slowly beginning to tighten, and her finger tracing the circle around and around.