

Kindred Souls

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

The first time I noticed death's true power to make the ordinary into something extraordinary was my junior year in high school. There was a girl in my English lit class who had a self-done hair cut, wore the same t-shirt and frayed jeans every day, and who spent more time giggling with her friends than listening to Beowulf.

I can't remember her name now, but I can remember her position in the row of chairs (two down from the door), her crooked smile, and the flat way her eyes assessed me every time I spoke up in class.

She died at an unmarked railroad crossing on a Friday night, sitting in the backseat of a rusted Ford Fairlane, with three other friends, kids I had never met.

They were all drunk.

And her chair remained empty the rest of the year.

I know I wouldn't have remembered her if she hadn't died. By now, twenty years later, she wouldn't even be a blip on the memory radar.

But she's there. Every time death shows up in my life.

And he shows up often.

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I'm an orderly in a nursing home, a far cry from those days twenty years ago when my biggest worry was whether I got into Princeton, Yale, or the state university.

It's not a lack of skills that brought me here. Nor a lack of brain power. It's actually the availability of the work. In every town, in every county, in every state, nursing homes need orderlies.

And they hire.

No questions asked.

Well, not true. Maybe a few questions asked. You see, I'm 5'2" and petite in a delicate sort of way some women never grow out of. Most administrators take my word that I can bench press my own weight plus (I show them my biceps and that helps) but here, in Seavy Village, Oregon, I actually had to lift the administrator.

Caught him by surprise, I'll tell you. I don't think that 200 pounds of walking depression had ever had a woman heft him like a sack of flour before.

He hired me and put me on the night shift so he'd never have to see me again.

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Let me tell you about the night shift. You can actually feel death stalking the halls.

This place, Seavy Village Senior Care Center, was built in the early 1970s, and sprawls, as so many buildings from that era do, across a full city block. The apartments in the front overlook the ocean. The old folks there I never see: they're self-sufficient, most of them, and healthy enough to live on their own.

It's the nursing home part, the part tucked in the back, where I spend my time.

People don't die at night. They die at dawn. One moment they're breathing, the next they're gone. I'm the one who gets to move them, usually wheeling their little hospital beds to the sterile room in the basement that Senior Care uses as a temporary morgue.

But sometimes I have to carry them -- like that 1920s football star who died slumped over on the toilet or the 95-year-old great-grandmother who never spoke but managed to get out of her wheelchair and walk fifty feet before collapsing forever in the middle of the corridor.

I remember those, like I remember dozens of other deaths. After a cadaverous old guy died in a pool of vomit, one of the nurses said to me that death is like eating: you eat hundreds of thousands of meals over your lifetime, but you only remember the ones that make you sick.

Wonderful place, this.

And the bitch of it is that she's right.

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Eloise Mortimer arrived on January 15, 1997. I remember the date because we'd lost a record fifteen that night. Five of the deaths were normal -- the expected end to long and unhealthy lives. Part of the problem was a flu epidemic. We'd tried to keep the sick ones isolated, but the virus spread through the first floor like something out of a Stephen King novel. And those deaths were not pretty. They took out five popular residents, and the entire staff was in mourning.

Even me.

There's a room at the end of Hall One-A that we called the Presidential Suite. Not because anyone important ever stayed there, but because it was big and private, and the long-term care resident had to be worth big bucks to even be considered for it. I'd never seen a room like it in any other nursing home, and believe me, I'd worked at dozens. It was, one of the nurses told me, the old administrative office, but something had happened there shortly after the home was built, and the office was moved to the back of the building, as far from the residents as possible.

Eloise Mortimer got that room, and she decorated it with pieces from her house: two reclining leather chairs, dark green velvet curtains that blocked the sun, a large stereo television with state-of-the-art VCR and every cable channel Seavy Village could receive. We were even supposed to use her bedding, until one of the nurses explained how the home simply didn't have time to care for something so expensive.

By now, everyone's heard of Eloise Mortimer. But even then she was famous, mostly for her publicity stunts. It began shortly after her husband, Jay Mortimer the Third died. She held a benefit for the Portland Actor's Guild and insisted on performing at it herself. She wasn't half bad, but her get-up was. She dressed like Marilyn Monroe at the President's birthday bash -- and Eloise didn't have the figure for it.

That made the Portland papers, they tell me, but it was her later stunts that made the national news: dropping fifty thousand dollars in cash on the floor of the Senate in protest of budget cuts to the arts; shredding a book in the Library of Congress to reveal the trashing of hundreds of paperbacks all over the country; blocking traffic on every bridge in Portland to force highway money to be used for bridge improvement -- and so on. For ten years, you couldn't watch television without seeing Eloise Mortimer doing something wildly inappropriate, gaining attention, and then making some sort of difference.

Obviously, she had turned her attention on nursing homes. And since she had a vacation home in Seavy Village, she picked on us.

To be fair, she was ill. I never knew the details, but I guessed it was some form of cancer that was taking away her strength. It could have been something else, though, too. She did have to use a wheelchair from the moment she arrived.

You'd have thought she could have afforded her own live-in care, her own nursing home, for god's sake. Any sensible person would have done just that, taken care of themselves in the privacy of their own home.

But not Eloise Mortimer. Her entire mission in life had been to improve the lot of the common people. She wasn't going to abandon it as she approached death.

She held a press conference the morning she arrived. I saw it on my black-and-white in my furnished apartment still rented, at that point, by the week.

She looked tiny in her wheelchair, wrapped in a cashmere coat, and a blanket that would have cost me half a year's salary. She had the look of the very old or the very ill: bones so prominent that the skin seemed translucent, eyes wide, hands clawed with age or arthritis. There were several handlers behind her, a few nurses I recognized, and a gaggle of reporters.

"One should never give up in the face of terminal illness," she said, her amplified voice thin but strong. "I am going to take this opportunity to investigate conditions in nursing homes -- from the inside. I am choosing a mid-range extended care facility simply because so many people will end up here. We all know about the cheap ones, and the expensive ones, well, they may have their problems, but they won't affect most people."

She made it sound as if her very presence would uplift the facility. It would change the facility, certainly. All of the resources would be directed toward her.

I shut off the tube, thinking that she was making one of the strangest gestures I'd ever seen a rich so-called humanitarian make. But that was how I always felt about Eloise Mortimer. How, it seemed, much of the country felt about her. Political cartoons made fun of her charity efforts, successful as they were, because Eloise was always front and center. It seemed she benefited more from the publicity than the charities did from the money.

It would have been better for all nursing homes, I thought, for her to donate her fortune to them. Or part of her fortune. Or even designate a part of her fortune for nursing home regulation, improvement or inspection.

But no. She had to do this.

Eloise Mortimer's attempt to be one of the common people.

Or so I thought.

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She was awake that first night when I clocked in, propped up in bed, the expensive blanket still wrapped around her. She had a book open on a lapdesk, a desk lamp -- green and expensive -- on the end table, and stylish half-rim glasses on the edge of her nose. If I hadn't known she had a terminal illness, I would have thought she was fine.

"Lights out was several hours ago, Mrs. Mortimer," I said, even though it wasn't my place. Orderlies didn't instruct patients. Nurses did.

She smiled at me and pulled the glasses off her nose. They were attached by a small gold chain that shimmered in the light. "I had some paperwork to finish."

"Other residents don't have paperwork, Mrs. Mortimer," I said and then flushed. Calling attention to myself was something I wanted to avoid, and yet here I was, all for the chance of speaking to Eloise Mortimer one on one.

"You saw the press conference," she said.

I nodded.

She sighed. "I suppose I came off as a little too arrogant. I usually do."

"I don't think this is the way to experience nursing home life," I said.

"Do you have a better suggestion?"

"Register under an alias. Live with the furniture the home provides. Forgo the press conference. No one else comes here with that kind of fanfare."

"You do speak your mind, don't you?" she said.

"Not usually," I said. "Just when a bit of foolishness crosses my path. Foolishness I can't ignore."

"I just want to do some good in my last few weeks of life," she said.

"Then let someone else have the room. Pay every patient's bills from now until they die. But don't come here with your fancy furniture and your expensive clothes and say you're living the life the others have. You're not, Mrs. Mortimer, and no matter how many publicity stunts you pull, you never will."

She stared at me a moment, her eyes even bigger than they had seemed on my small television set. Then she slowly pulled her glasses over them, and bowed her head, making me feel as unimportant as the discarded dinner tray beside her bed.

I picked up the tray because it was my job, and carried it to a cart in the hall. Then I stopped at the nurse's station and made a note that someone had failed to remove the food from Mrs. Mortimer's room before lights out. Then I went into the employee break room, bought myself a Coke, and leaned against the wall, trembling as I drank it.

It wasn't that she could get me fired. That didn't really matter. I could move on. Get another name. Get another job. But it was that arrogance, that so dismissive arrogance, that had me shaking.

Let's take care of the little people, and do it in the way that best benefits me.

Me.

Me.

Her lights went out at 3 a.m., and I didn't even open the door to her room, as I usually would. I made my rounds just before clocking out, partly to see how death would fare that night. I could almost imagine him, purusing the occupants of the room like a man would look at a desert tray, then carefully selecting the right combination to finish off the evening meal. Sometimes he wanted a lot, and sometimes nothing at

all. And frankly, given some of the people I saw, the diseases I saw, I wasn't sure which was worse.

Death took out two more that night: one a tiny old woman -- Hannah Dailey -- who'd been holding on despite diabetes, blindness, and severe loneliness, and the other Biff Lonnen, a former contractor who'd been swindled out of his life savings and was extremely bitter about it. I'd liked Hannah -- I'd always made a point of speaking to her about something every day -- but I wasn't sad to see Biff go. No one deserved to be swindled, but the rest of us didn't have to pay for his victimization.

I clocked out, went home, slept a few hours, and then went to the beach.

* * * *

I always worked near water. A product of my childhood, I guess, growing up near the Great Lakes. One of the reasons I loved Seavy Village was the beach itself -- seven miles of untouched beauty, in Oregon, where the beaches couldn't be owned. I went there, winter, summer, sunshine or storm, to mourn my people and to reflect, just a little.

I didn't say a prayer for them -- I couldn't. It wasn't my place -- but I did a small silent wish across the waves, a wish for their spirits, a wish for peace. Then I picked up a handful of sand, and let it slip through my fingers.

The wind blew the grains across the beach, where they mingled with the other grains, unrecognizable as the ones I held only a second before. A reminder to myself, how each life is insignificant, like a grain of sand, and yet without each life, there would be no beauty, just as without the individual grains, there would be no beach.

You never know who you touch, said Father Flannery shortly after he had found me twenty-five years ago. _Only that you move forward, you never give up, you never stop touching.

_He touched me. I touch others. Or try to. Which was why Eloise Mortimer angered me. She pretended to touch others, when all she really did was touch herself.

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Her light was on the following night, and the night after that. I ignored her, against the administrator's orders. Let someone else pay attention to the royal Mrs. Mortimer. I would give attention to the people who really needed it. Who didn't have cashmere coats or leather chairs for their guests.

Who didn't have guests.

Or family.

Or press followings.

On the fourth night, I found a note clipped to my timecard:

Mrs. Mortimer would like to see you.

It was in the administrator's handwriting, and I knew I would receive on small reprimand in my file. As if it mattered. Too many of them and I would move on.

Again.

Since the note said nothing about when Mrs. Mortimer wanted to see me, I went about my duties. I moved trays, changed bed linens, helped residents to the restroom. I prepared three different rooms for

new residents who would arrive during the day, and moved exercise equipment for the physical therapist's sessions the following morning.

By three a.m. I went by her room, hoping her light would be out.

It wasn't.

I pushed the door open. She was sitting in bed as she had the last time, blanket wrapped around her. The book on her lapdesk was non-fiction, thick and heavy. Her papers were piled on a briefcase beside the bed.

She brought her glasses down and let the gold chain hold them in the center of her chest.

"Linda," she said. "You don't look like a Linda."

I slipped into the room. I wasn't a Linda, even though that was the name I used here. But she didn't have to know that. "How's a Linda supposed to look?"

"Tall, willowy, blonde. Debutantish."

"Not mean and muscular."

She smiled. "You're petite and strong," she said. "More a Jo or a Pat."

"More boyish."

She shrugged.

"More butch?" I couldn't keep the edge out of my voice. "You have many prejudices, Mrs. Mortimer."

"Do I?" she asked.

"I can think of only one willowy Linda. Linda Evans. The others are small and tough. Think Linda Hamilton in Terminator 2 or Linda Hunt in just about anything."

"I don't watch television," she said.

"Much," I said, looking at the expensive screen across the room. It was dark, but I had heard it earlier, blaring the Headline News theme.

"Much," she said.

"I have other things to do," I said. "You wanted to see me. Make it quick."

Her smile grew. She closed her book. "I like you," she said. "You're direct."

"I really don't care what you like and don't like, Mrs. Mortimer," I said. "I just want you to get to the point so I can get out of this room."

She took a deep breath, sighed, as if I were imposing on her. "I want you to show me what nursing home life is really like."

"You want me to take you on a tour?"

She nodded.

"Make you see how the others are?"

She nodded again.

"You can't wheel yourself, peer into others' misfortunes on your own?"

"Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"Lady," I said, "I don't know what you're doing."

"I'm making a difference," she said.

I snorted and pushed open the door. I wouldn't even dignify her comment with a response.

"I don't suppose you've been watching the news," she said.

I froze. I shouldn't have, but I did. "I'm a little busy," I said. "I don't have all day to lay on silk sheets and watch CNN."

"MSNBC is doing a joint on-line on-air investigation of the top nursing homes in the country. CNN is investigating unreported violations at nursing homes all over America. CBS, NBC, and ABC are using their news magazines to investigate the plight of the poor, sick, and elderly who use all the beds in these places. And CNBC is doing a long series on the efficacy of extended care insurance. Not to mention the Oregon stations. They're investigating each home one by one."

"All because of you," I said.

"That's right." I had my back to her, but I could hear the smugness in her tone. "I brought the issue out; now they'll cover it. I got a call from our senior US Senator today promising to set up hearings to look at the nursing home issues in this country."

I pulled the door closed, stepped back in the room, and turned around, fists clenched. "What are the nursing home issues?" I asked her.

"Poor care, lack of funds, familial neglect -- "

"Over fifty percent of the people in this home have family visiting them on a regular basis," I snapped. "They don't bring leather furniture, but they stay as long as their stomachs can stand. The other fifty percent may not have families any more, or may have alienated them, or don't want them to come. And sure there's a lot of lonely dying people, people who can't afford better treatment, people who can't afford a private room or their own wing or deserve a phone call from a senator. But they're not getting poor care. Every nurse in this place tries. And most of the orderlies do to. You come here and lock yourself in this private suite and claim you're doing something for America, when all you're doing is diverting time, diverting resources, and forcing people to concentrate on the wrong things."

"Then take me out there," she said. "Show me what you see."

"You don't need me, Mrs. Mortimer," I said. "You got eyes. Look for yourself."

And then I walked out of the room.

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Death took four more that night. The flu epidemic was waning, but still present. Two men died from flu-related causes, and one woman, Sue Lee Frank, apparently died of natural causes. The other, Alice

Andreeson, a tiny birdlike woman whose anxiety was so palpable that it seemed to infect her entire wing, saved up her medications, took them in combination with her nightly pain pill, and died a horrible choking vomituous death.

There was nothing the nurses could do. By the time the ambulance arrived, she was so far gone that they drove her, without lights, to the hospital.

I was embarrassed to be relieved that their morgue would guard her.

Still, I cleaned up the sheets and disinfected the room, and stood, alone, with the presence of death.

I hadn't liked her. She had been too frightened, too insistent. I looked in her square lonely face, and I had seen myself forty years hence. Alone. Terrified. Dying, but not fast enough.

"I did everything I could," I whispered, and knew it to be a lie.

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I did watch the news that day, and discovered that Eloise Mortimer hadn't been lying to me. Not only was the broadcast media covering the story because of her presence, but so was the print media. Investigations of unexplained deaths. Examinations of nursing home medicine. Philosophical discussions of the cultural necessity of warehousing the old.

Discussions we as a culture had been having since I was a girl. I remembered going to nursing homes as a pre-teen, performing with the Christmas pageant or on a mission with the church. Those homes smelled bad -- of urine and unwashed bodies -- and most of the elderly there had clearly given up hope. Things changed in the late 70s and early 80s. Part of it, I think, was that the Boomers were growing older and watching their parents and grandparents end up in those places, deciding to make changes before the Boomers themselves had to go in. The reality was -- is -- that most of us will not have the money that Eloise Mortimer had. Most of our families will not have the resources or the time to care for us.

Most of us will end up in a home.

Not by choice, like Eloise Mortimer, but because there is nowhere else to go.

And no matter how much I explained that to her, she did not understand.

She did try though. The nurses told me when I arrived that she went to the dining room three times that day and tried to engage others in conversation. Most would not talk to her. Then she went from room to room, using her motorized wheelchair, trying to learn how the other patients felt. She caused so much distress that a nurse, hearing shouting on the floor, brought Mrs. Mortimer back to her own room, and gave her instructions to stay there.

Her light was on till four a.m. this time, and I did not stop. There was something more going on here besides simple curiosity and press entourages, and I didn't want to know what it was.

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I lead a solitary life. Even more so now, now that I'm away from Seavy Village. But there, I was solitary too. I had my beach, and my job, and my gym.

The gym was state of the art, with new Nautilus equipment, and every single rowing/walking/climbing machine known to man. But those didn't interest me. What interested me was the real gym, tucked in the back, with its free weights and mirrors, mats and punching bags. It smelled of sweat, and there men, and

a few women, worked with a concentration not often found outside sports training camps.

I don't know why it existed in Seavy Village. I was just glad it did. I went there, lifted weights, punched a few rounds, did my 200 sit-ups and 100 pushups. By the time I was done, I was layered in sweat, and pleased to be alive.

It felt as if it washed the stink of my work off me. It also allowed me to think of something else for a while, something that didn't involve death and dying.

And loneliness.

But that day -- the day after Alice killed herself -- I couldn't forget. I sweated and pushed so hard that my spotter on the bench press threatened to report me to the management as an insurance risk if I didn't slow down. I sparred with one of the guys in the makeshift rink, and I even played a game of handball -- badly -- when one of the courts came open.

Nothing worked. I kept seeing Alice's face, her birdlike eyes as they had followed me through the room. She was always awake at night and we always talked, and by the time I left, she was usually calmer.

She had no one. She had told me that, and in the six months she had been at Senior Care, no one had come to see her. Her husband had died five years before, and she had lived alone, rarely leaving her house, seeing only neighbors and the people from her church. The anxiety, always a factor in her life, had grown worse in those years, until she had become a virtual prisoner in her own home. But she hadn't minded, she said. She had loved the place.

She minded Senior Care. The presence of other people. The lack of privacy. Sometimes she screamed in terror when we couldn't answer her call button quickly enough.

She never told me what she was so afraid of, and I never asked. As I said, she made me nervous, and often I would leave her room after those talks anxious myself.

Ironically, though, she wasn't afraid of death. She welcomed it as a silence, a calming, a long sleep after a particularly rough and horrible day. She welcomed it, and told me, expecting, somehow, that I would take care of it.

I never did.

So she had to take care of it herself.

* * * *

That night Eloise Mortimer was waiting for me. She sat in her motorized wheelchair, wrapped in her expensive blanket, arms crossed and glasses dangling from their chain around her neck.

"I have something to show you," she said.

"I have a lot of work to do," I said as I walked by.

"This will only take a minute."

I stopped. I could have kept walking, but I didn't. I was slightly flattered by her interest, her attention, and I was curious, too. "Why the obsession with me, Mrs. Mortimer?" I asked. "Is it because I don't bow to your every whim like the others around here?"

"I've lived with naysayers all my life." She wheeled her chair through the open door.

"Then what is it?" I asked.

She waited inside. I got the message. I had to follow her in order to get the answer.

And I cared enough to do so.

I went in, and allowed her to push the door closed behind me.

She wheeled her way to the leather chairs across the room. I think she expected me to sit in one of them, but I wouldn't. I would stand. Near the door. To show her that, I crossed my arms.

"I am interested in you," she said, "because I believe you have more than a passing acquaintance with death."

"I see it every night, Mrs. Mortimer," I said.

"No," she said, and her voice was strong. "I believe you know Death. I want you to introduce me."

I was so shocked by her statement that my mouth operated before my brain. "Why? So you can sic the press on him too? You know, they're pretty aware of the effects of death on the culture."

"You make fun of me," she said. "But I'm very serious."

My heart was pounding. "I really don't know what you want," I said as I turned to the door, "and I'm not sure I want to find out."

A notebook sailed across the room and landed at my feet with a smack. Pages riffled open from the force of the throw.

Articles were pasted onto the plain white sheets, almost like killer's notebooks out of the movies, or a child's homemade picture book. Only the articles weren't what I expected from a charitable society maven.

Angel of Death Kills Six in Cancer Ward

Kervorkian Supervises Fifth Suicide

Police Arrest Nurse in Patient's Death

I turned pages with my shoe. The headlines went on and on. Most I didn't recognize. Stories from local papers about mercy killings, in and out of hospitals, nursing homes, extended care centers.

"You think I'm doing that?" I asked.

"Someone is here," she said. "There are too many deaths."

"So you decided to check in here, a latter-day Miss Marple, to solve the crimes yourself."

"No." Her voice was stronger than it had been before. "I would like whoever it is to take me."

"To introduce you to death."

"Yes."

"And you want me to get out the word."

"If that's what it takes," she said.

I picked up the notebook, closed it, and tossed it on her bed. "Do you know what that would do to this nursing home? You check in with all the publicity a celebrity gets, with a terminal disease, yes, but one that gives you months, maybe years yet, and then you die. You don't think that would be investigated? You don't think people would talk? You don't think someone would find your damn notebook and start investigating every soul in this place?"

"That frightens you, doesn't it, Linda. Because your references don't check out. And neither does your name." Her eyes were a bit too bright. "That's right. I checked. Or had one of my people check. And that may seem Miss Marplish too you, but I wanted to know I was talking to the right person. And I am, aren't I?"

"Do you always make up conspiracies, Mrs. Mortimer?"

"Usually," she said as if I hadn't spoken a word, "there's a triggering event. What was yours, Linda? A parent? A grandparent? Someone who died a lingering death with no succor? Someone you couldn't help, perhaps you were too young, perhaps unknowing, so you got a job like this one, where you can prevent such needless suffering?"

"How come you never wrote books?" I asked. "You're so good at making up scenarios."

"Are you saying I'm lying?" she asked.

I took a deep breath. "I'm saying that even if I could, as you so quaintly put it, introduce you to death, I will not. Because that would be murder, Mrs. Mortimer, and I do not commit murder."

"Then what do you call it when you put a pillow over the face of a little old man who doesn't have the strength to fight you? Orderly Assisted Suicide?"

"You're not funny," I said.

"I'm not trying to be funny," she said. "I'm looking at a long tunnel ahead. I really don't want to go through the pain and the agony. I'd like to die."

My eyes narrowed. I felt a tightness around my heart. "Then do what I told you before, Mrs. Mortimer. Take care of yourself."

"I can't," she said.

I didn't believe her. If frail, frightened Alice could orchestrate her own death, Eloise Mortimer, with all her resources could too.

"Hire Kervorkian," I said. "He specializes in these things."

"But don't you find him rather ghoulish?" she asked.

I didn't answer her. I grabbed the door handle and yanked it down, and let myself into the hallway.

It was light, but shadowed, so that residents could find their way if they needed to, but so that the light wouldn't interrupt their sleep.

I made myself walk to the breakroom and sit down. I planned to stay there until I felt calmer. It wouldn't be good to walk into patients' rooms upset. They had enough to contend with, without a simple orderly interrupting them or their sleep.

I sat there and waited.

But the calm never came.

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The triggering event was not, as Mrs. Mortimer guessed, a parent or grandparent. It was someone much more important.

It was Father Flannery.

I ran away at the age of 12. Not that there was much to run from. My mother had lost herself in a bottle long before, and my stepfather, a charming man who'd been in prison three times, had never bothered to learn my name. I doubt they noticed I was missing for days, maybe weeks, and I doubt even more strongly that they reported my loss.

Father Flannery found me sitting under the viaduct with a bunch of street people in early September. This was in Northern Wisconsin, and the tinge of fall was already in the air. I didn't know then what faced me. The winters there were so harsh that even healthy street people died of exposure.

He took me by the hand and, with the promise of a real meal, drove me to the local orphanage. This was the early '70s in a conservative town. The orphanage hadn't yet been taken over by Adult and Family Services, and the money that supported it all came from the Church.

I had a bed for the first time in weeks, and food, and I would have bolted if Father Flannery hadn't found my weakness right away.

Books.

He gave me books.

That first night, he gave me a copy of Love Story, and when I snorted at him, and told him I didn't read that sappy stuff, he hauled a paperback copy of The Godfather out of his pocket.

"Don't let the nuns catch you with this one," he whispered in his broad Norwegian accents. He was a Minnesota native, and sounded like it, despite his Irish roots.

I hid the book successfully, and each time he visited, he would trade me the book I had finished for one I had not yet read. He nourished my mind, and in doing so, he nourished my heart and my soul.

He never asked me to convert. He never even asked me to go to church, although I did, for him. I also went to school, for him, and became a model student, for him, and learned that God had given me a brain so that I didn't have to live like my mother had. He also gave me the use of the gym, long before it was fashionable for girls to sweat. He made me realize there was more to life than struggle and survival. He made me realize that each one of us had a purpose -- we had only to find it.

He was my own personal savior, the kindest, gentlest person I had ever known.

He died of Alzheimer's.

By the time I graduated from college, he didn't even know his own name.

* * * *

I should have left Seavy Village then and there, and I knew it. But I had rounds that night, and promises

to keep. Some were spoken, others were unspoken, but they all amounted to the same thing:

A duty.

A sacred duty.

Father Flannery would have understood. He always said God had a plan, even for the worst occurrences. I used to think Father Flannery's Alzheimer's was a plan to bring me to these places, to prevent such needless suffering.

But I really don't know.

None of us do.

All I know is that when it comes to death, the entire culture's in denial. We take our beloved pets to the vet when they become incontinent or paralyzed, or demented with age, and ask that they get "put down." Then we stand there, and hold a paw, while the vet injects a drug, and the animal's spirit leaves its body, and we are all relieved that the suffering is over.

Alice Andreeson had begged me to help her. Over and over again, and I had refused. I did not think her sick enough, and I couldn't get enough distance from her anxiety to see her clearly. I never saw the resolve that made her spit out the pills day after day, hour after hour, saving them as best she could until she made the choice the only way she could.

At least I would have arranged a merciful death. She had died choking on her own vomit, in more terror than anyone had a right to feel.

She was 81.

Even in our compassion, sometimes, we fail.

* * * *

That night, death took, without assistance, the last three flu victims. He also took three more. He took Lana Eagle, a former pillar of Seavy Village's community, who had emphysema so bad that each breath made her cry. Then he took Ira Rundin, who had rheumatoid arthritis, and fluid in his lungs. It was, the nurses said, only a matter of time. And in these cases, sooner is always better than later. And he took Sam Conner, a once robust old man who'd been the best card player on the floor. Sam weighed fifty-six pounds, and no longer knew the difference between an ace and a dog dish.

He was the last to go, just before dawn.

Then I clocked out, and went home. It didn't take long to gather my things -- I'd done this a thousand times before -- and to pack them into my truck. I went to the bank, and took a full withdrawal in cash. I had plenty of time. Usually no one ever searched for me. And if they did, they wouldn't even start until I'd missed one shift. And that was over twenty-four hours away.

I was thinking Austin this time, or maybe Vancouver B.C. I suspected weather would dictate my final choice: Vancouver in the summer, Austin in the winter.

And since we were in the middle of spring, I headed north. Taking my time, using my cash sparingly, trying to decide which identity to wear next.

I didn't feel free -- there were a few other folks, not yet ready, whom I'd been watching and whom I had

to abandon -- but I knew I'd find a place in Canada that would need me just as much.

But I never even had the chance to look.

I had promised myself an afternoon nap before making the drive inland to Interstate Five, and then north to Vancouver.

North to see who needed me there.

North to do what most people wanted to do, and couldn't.

* * * *

They found me at a roadside motel with \$20 per night rooms, and no ocean view. I was just south of Seaside.

I had underestimated Eloise Mortimer. She'd been keeping track, she would say later, of "legitimate" and "illegitimate" deaths. And she knew after three "illegitimate" deaths on the same night, that something was going wrong. And when I didn't clock in the following evening, she had her Miss Marple Moment: the highlight of her media career.

She fingered a killer.

"As crimes go," she said at her first press conference related to my case, "this is as close to perfect as they get. Take an elderly person with no family, and so ill that she cannot fight back, and kill her. It satisfies that sick urge to murder and does so in a way that most people won't mind."

It didn't matter to me that she misunderstood. It didn't even bother me that she was using me this time as her media springboard.

It bothered me that most of the culture agreed with her, and I was branded as a murderer right from the start.

Death's Handmaiden, they called me, and they portrayed me as this Nazi-esque matron, this tough woman who killed for pleasure in town after town after town.

No one talked about the real issues.

Not even Eloise Mortimer.

* * * *

She died, I'm told, peacefully. In her sleep in her own bed. After the publicity surrounding my arrest and trial, no one noticed that she had abandoned her post in Senior Care. Her duty was done. Her empathy played out to millions. And she would be remembered forever for starting the Congressional Hearings that led to the closure of fifty nursing homes nationwide (with none opening to take their place) and, of course, for identifying me.

I had hoped that she would die in excruciating agony, begging someone -- God, her "people", a nurse -- anyone to help her end it all. But she was lucky, even to the last.

Most of her money went to distant cousins and in-laws. The rest to civic organizations where she had spent most of her life: the Portland Metropolitan Opera; the OMSI Museum; Ashland's Shakespeare Festival. She even gave money to the local media in the form of grants to help "improve" local reporting.

Not a dime went to hospice foundations.

Or nursing homes.

Or relief organizations.

Not one thin dime.

* * * *

Even though it's summer, I'm in Texas. I am in a maximum security facility with twenty years before I'm eligible for parole. A lot of people die here, and they die, like that girl in my high school class, in senseless ways after leading senseless lives.

I have introduced no one to death, and I don't expect to. I work in the prison laundry because I am forbidden to go near the sick, and I work out as much as I can, and I spend some time in the yard.

In the evenings I read.

It's not a bad life, considering. But if it continues much longer, it'll be a wasted life. My only hope is to be a model prisoner so that they'll let me out sooner, and I can start doing something worthwhile again.

I have spent a lot of time talking to the local priest. He already knew of my work -- most of the country did; it was one of the biggest news stories of the decade -- but he didn't know about Father Flannery.

This priest, Father Harralson, is appalled that I have used Father Flannery as justification for what he calls "mass murder." There is a point to suffering, Father Harralson has told me. Even Jesus, God's son, suffered on the cross. Suffering is part of life. It is, he says, an integral part of death.

I do not believe him, but I do not argue. Even if I could, he would not listen to my opinions. According to Father Harralson, I am the worst kind of sinner: the kind that takes God's work into her own hands.

He says he prays for me every night, prays that God will forgive me.

Because he cannot.

Yet every day, after he leaves the prison, he makes his other rounds. He visits the sick, and comforts the dying. He holds hands with people whose life is measured in hours and tries to give them some degree of succor, to ease the pain of their last moments on Earth, to let them go gently into that good night.

His method is less effective than mine, but it has the same purpose.

Ease suffering.

Stop the pain.

Allow the dying to meet death easily and without struggle.

I said this to him two days ago.

He has not been back.

He does not like seeing us as kindred souls.

But we are.

We are.

And that is something the Eloise Mortimers of the world have never understood.