

Blessings for Jean

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I get the call on Monday. Grandma Jean is being transported from her nursing home to the ER. There is blood in her urine. Her body has still not healed from the pelvic fracture a month prior, and I wonder—all of us do—if this is it. At ninety-five, my husband's fierce grandma is failing in body and fading in mind.

My sister-in-law meets me in the ER lobby and takes me back to Jean's room. Sarah is calm, but her concern for Grandma is palpable. Jean has favorites among her ten grandkids and their spouses. She likes the feisty ones, and nobody has sass quite like Sarah, "the baby" now in her thirties. My husband, Dave, the oldest, is not even in Jean's top ten. But she trusts him and appreciates that he looks out for her and has done her taxes for the past twenty or so years, ever since her husband Larry passed. She likes me because I make her laugh and weather her stormy moods.

Jean's tiny frame is swallowed up by the bed. I can hardly tell what is limb and what is tangled sheet. Her lips are dry; her mutterings are unintelligible. We can't get her to drink, so instead we use the straw as a dropper, slowly letting beads of water fall into her mouth. She swallows like a tiny bird and smiles when Sarah urges her to drink a little more.

Like my Oma, Jean was an Olympic-level food pusher, offering you a sandwich fifteen minutes after finishing a meal. But unlike my Oma, who could make toast gourmet, Jean is a terrible cook. On a visit to Denver when my son Jonah was three, he got strep. Fever, rash, and a super sore throat. Jean was so upset that he wouldn't eat, only drinking juice from a sippy cup. One morning I awoke at seven to the sound of Jonah crying and the smell of burnt meat. I found him in a highchair with

a blackened rump roast on the tray. Jean looked at me in frustration, “Mama, you said he likes beef—but he won’t eat anything! I cannot let this baby starve!”

Another time when we visited, she served the kids some chili. One daughter found a pickle in her bowl. When we asked how it got there, Jean explained with pride that she had gone to lunch with friends a week or so ago, collected the leftover burgers and repurposed the meat. “Walah!” she exclaimed, “Just throw in a can of beans and you’ve got chili!” Dave distracted Grandma while I drove to McDonald’s.

The doctor arrives with Jean’s test results. She says things like “DNR” and “palliative care,” and we nod. We just want her to be comfortable. But I fear Jean won’t go gently into her good night. She may be only slightly larger than an American Girl Doll, but she is a fighter. Like her husband was, she is a nondenominational Christian. But unlike Larry, who passed from cancer in the ’90s, she’s scared to die. Jean has asked me enough times about what I think will happen to the “bad people” on the other side that I know she’s anxious about where she’ll end up. When I first told my husband this, he confided that some family members think she might have drowned someone once. I laughed out loud. He didn’t. Grandma Jean is more tightlipped about her past than someone in witness protection. It is clear her body is filled with trauma and secrets just as surely as it is with failing organs. But for more than thirty years she has loved me and my children, has played patty-cake and changed diapers and made terrible food with what she called her “crooky hands”—twisted and spotted and beautiful.

The sips of water seem to loosen her tongue, and soon she is talking to people only she can see. Her dearest Larry is here, and she calls after a young version of her only child, my husband’s father. Then a cloud passes over her face, and she’s back in time to whatever it is that scares her, that keeps her spirit tethered to a body trying to transition. She mumbles about water, a girl, and cries out, “I didn’t mean to hurt nobody!” Sarah and I each take a hand, willing her back to the present. It is gut-wrenching to see this pain that no narcotic can touch. She needs divine relief. She needs to hear in an authoritative way that hellfire and brimstone are not what awaits. She needs to feel the grace only Jesus can offer.

“Grandma,” I say, “it’s time to pray.” My hands gently cradle Jean’s head, and I open my heart to feel as much of God’s love for this woman as I can, mingling it with mine and Sarah’s. I imagine pouring that love as a golden warmth into her body. I open my mouth, and I say that her time

is coming soon, and I encourage her to go in peace. I feel prompted to be explicit: “The Lord and Larry are waiting on the other side with open arms. And by ‘other side’ I mean heaven, paradise, the good place, up there.” My supplication is awkward but sincere.

It used to embarrass me when Jean and Larry would pray in restaurants. These were not “bless the food” quickies, but long, drawn-out affairs with every grandchild mentioned by name and need. I vacillated between keeping my eyes shut so I wouldn’t have to see other patrons stare at us as Grandpa asked God to “lift up these chicken nuggets” and wanting to keep my eyes open to give the server an “I’m sorry, this is weird for all of us” look in case they came to refill our glasses mid-benediction. Now that I am in my fifties and feel simultaneously so tender and helpless regarding my own children, I wish I could go back and bottle every holy and cringey word of those prayers. I would keep them in the pantry with the food storage, knowing the faith and love of these grandparents would be waiting for a rainy day to feed our souls.

Over the next few days, several grandkids trickle in from out of town to be with Grandma, now back in her nursing home on hospice. Grandsons hold her hands, rub her feet, tease her. Granddaughters bring nail clippers, files, polish, lotions and set to work on her “crooky” hands and feet, making her sparkle and shine. One makes sure none of Jean’s skin gets dry, plying her with Chapstick, aloe-infused socks, and CeraVe. They turn the tables on their grandmother and ply her with food. Fig bars, applesauce, cheeseburgers, chicken enchiladas with extra onions. Much like my Jonah with strep, she tries to obey, but her pain keeps her from being compliant. Her body is beginning to let go.

One night when we are leaving, I tell her we are going to pray. She comes to the surface as if swimming up from the bottom of a pool and says, “Let *me* pray.” We encircle her bed, and she launches into a supplication on our behalf. When she gets to the grandkids, she starts at the top. “Lord, I trust David,” she says, then adds with emphasis, “But I don’t like him.” We all hold our breath—and our laughter. She’s never been one to hide her feelings. She starts again after a few beats: “I love him, Lord. I love him.” My heart lurches at this unexpected affection. She does not like him. He has had to make hard choices that often angered her. But to have that trust translate into love? I am giggling and crying at the same time, blessing her as she blesses us. My husband is speechless as tears collect in his ginger-white beard.

These days are long. Waiting for a spirit to leave the body is tender and boring and sacred. Tedium and holiness can go hand in hand. One

evening, Sarah and I are at her bedside when the nurses come in to change her. Jean requires cleaning up. Knowing how frail her body is, we fear the mere pressure of turning her and rearranging limbs will bruise flesh as easily as a careless hand can leave marks on a too-ripe peach. We offer to help. Sarah cradles her ribs and I her legs, as if we are handling a Ming vase or a live grenade. I hope she can feel the love we have for her, can know how grateful we are. I remember her changing the diaper of a squirming two-year-old Sarah and hearing Jean say, “Ain’t this girl something?!” Jean bathed and changed and sang to all my babies in turn, eager to show her love through mundane tasks. I know in this moment that Sarah and I are attempting to give an offering in return. There is something sacred about tending to the bodies of those who cannot do it themselves: the babies, the sick, the elderly, the dead. Our hands say more than what our mouths can. Or perhaps her body receives what her ears won’t hear. This is our blessing: Dearest Jean, grandmother, and friend, you are forgiven. You are free. Healing awaits. With every last beat of your heart, know this: we love you, we love you, we love you.

This essay by Heather Sundahl received third place in the 2023 BYU Studies Personal Essay Contest.