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Kevin O'Hara: Graced by Christmas shawl

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By Kevin O'Hara

PITTSFIELD >> Spencer Trova, my good friend and fellow nurse on Berkshire Medical Center's psychiatric wing, dropped four pills into a med cup and turned to me. "Kev, we're never going to Heaven, you know that."

"Wow, Spence, that's cheerful chat."

"No, I mean it. Think of how many promising saints we've extinguished over the years with medication, just because they're labeled with religious grandiosity. Who knows, some of them could've gone on to inspire our ailing planet." He looked down at the pills. "Take Clyde here, for instance."

"C'mon Spence," I laughed. "Clyde is nuttier than a Payday. His heart's in the right place, granted, but do you really think he played golf with the Four Evangelists?"

Spencer chuckled, "Oh, I forgot that little tidbit. But imagine if Francis of Assisi were alive today. Here's a young man who talked to birds, gave away his possessions, and protested poverty by stripping down naked. He'd be committed here for a 21-day evaluation, and court-ordered to take monthly injections until all his spiritual ambitions were squelched."

Life of devotion

He paused: "But we've had saints on our floor, haven't we? Remember Grace from Krakow?"

"Remember her," I replied. "There's not a Christmas that goes by I don't think of her."

Grace was admitted to our floor one bitter December night after she was found wandering outside the old bus station on South Church Street. A lovely yet delicate woman, she had no coat, no money, no I.D. and remained mute when questioned. The police, fearing harm might come her way, wisely brought her to the hospital.

In the Emergency Room, this shivering transient finally blurted her name to the police and crisis worker. "I'm Grace from Krakow, and I've devoted my life to Pope John Paul." She was diagnosed with "Schizophrenia with religious delusions," and surprisingly came willingly to our floor.

Her few belongings, carried in a flip-top wicker picnic basket, consisted of four small religious statues, a prayer book stuffed with holy pictures, and a pair of knitting needles stuck through skeins of colored yarn. Escorted to her room, she immediately pasted prayer cards to her headboard — Teresa of Avila, Elizabeth of Hungary, Catherine of Siena — and placed a statue in each corner. Only then did she eat — ravenously.

For the better part of her three-week stay, Grace remained isolated in her room, coming out only for meals and mandatory groups. Her only request was to knit in the privacy of her room. Sharp objects such as knitting needles weren't allowed on the unit without supervision, so staff were assigned to sit with her, whenever available. I, for one, was quick to volunteer for such easy duty.

There she'd sit by the light of window, murmuring prayers as she knitted a scarf, a "prayer shawl" as she called it, hoping such a garment, once blessed, would comfort its recipient. I'd chat with her in hopes of making inroads, but she'd often shush me, saying, "Can't you see I'm doing God's work?"

Who was this enchanting but enigmatic drifter, I wondered, and why had she fallen into our company?

When Grace completed a prayer shawl, usually in three days, she'd ask to see our hospital chaplain. Father Neil Decker would arrive promptly and bless the shawl. Grace would then enter the common area, and despite scant interactions with other patients, seem to know intuitively who was most in pain. Then she'd drape the prayer shawl warmly about the sufferer's shoulders, saying a prayer as she did so. These shawls — robin-egg blue with ivory trim — never failed to comfort, however chronic or confused our patient.

Gift comforted many

Upon her request, we discharged Grace on Christmas Eve. She refused assistance of any kind, but we insisted she take a coat and a little money from petty cash. Before leaving, she presented the floor with an elaborate red and green cape — a Christmas shawl — that would comfort many a patient over the years.

One evening, as I was sitting with her, I had asked if she wanted anything for Christmas. She looked up from her knitting and replied, "Yes, enough yarn to cloak the world."

Kevin O'Hara, a retired nurse from BMC, writes an annual Christmas story for The Eagle.

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