Aunt Bertha

Tom Olsen*
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Abstract

My great-aunt Bertha was childish and always a burden...
“Ha! Have a cigarette?”
“No thanks, that isn’t my brand.” She took a shiny, flat cigarette case from her purse along with a grey leather-covered lighter. Her fingers were shaking and she couldn’t get a spark from the lighter. He lit a match and held it toward her. She broke the cigarette into the ash tray. “Let me out, Al, I think I’ll go.”

He looked at her soberly for a moment. Then he forced a grin. “O.K. Jane.”

He watched her as she walked out, stopping by the bar to speak to a well-dressed young man with long, wavy black hair. Sure—she was smooth, but not soft and smooth. She’d find her college man too. She could.

He walked slowly up to the bar. For some reason he felt good. “Give me another Schlitz, Ed.”

“Sure Al. Hey,” said Ed smiling, “what the Hell did you do?”


AUNT BERTHA

My great-aunt Bertha was childish and always a burden. But her worst trait was that she would not die. She was seventy-five when my parents agreed to care for her for the rest of her life, for what she would leave them when she died. She fooled them. When she finally died at ninety-seven, she had used all her own money and was such a burden to my parents that they had to send her to the county hospital.

Sending her away killed her. I think she could have cleared a hundred easily if we had been able to keep her well fed and provide her with lives to torment. It was a kind of mutually agreed murder, that business of sending her away.

My mother’s health was failing, mostly because she had spent more than twenty years catering to the whims of this old woman. My father had employment dropped on him by the government and we were eating more then than we ever had before in my memory. My sister was in high school and wanted to go to college, and I myself thought that I must have a new baseball glove. It was a
culmination of these things that sent my great-aunt to her
death.

She wasn’t sick. She had never had a sick day in all those
ninety-seven years. She had put her husband away (pneu-
monia) and all of her brothers and sisters had been dead of
old age for a long time. That’s not a bad record considering
that she was the oldest in the family. She liked to think
about dying, or at least gave the impression that she did.
Whenever people brought up the subject of getting old
she would tell them about the plot where she would lie,
alongside Andrew, her husband. She would sigh and say
her husband’s name once or twice and then talk about
something else.

For years after she had first come from Norway she had
worked as a servant girl, as so many young Scandinavian
women have done. She migrated to the Midwest to be with
her brothers and sisters, and, I think mainly, to catch some
young strong, unsuspecting Norwegian immigrant. Andrew
must have been all of that. We children knew him only as
a faded photograph, their wedding picture. He looked
strong, and must have been, and if there was any brain inside
that sloping head, I don’t know where God could have
found room to put it. He worked on a section crew in a
small Iowa town. He probably would have been foreman
too, except for his untimely death, Aunt Bertha always
said.

After Andrew was dead and buried, Aunt Bertha lived
with her sister in the house Andrew had built. They had
some money, they certainly never spent any, and they
watched for thieves night and day. When their vigil was
finally rewarded by a thief, after five years or so of watch-
ing, they gave him a stinging dressing down. They still
weren’t too good at speaking English so the worst thing
they told him was “go to grass,” a fierce expression they
had picked up from Andrew, the robust section hand. It
must have shocked the thief a good deal to be told to go to
grass by two old foreign ladies. They were both somewhere
around fifty years old then.

Finally, at the ripe age of sixty, her sister tired of liv-
ing with her and joined Andrew. Aunt Bertha spent some
of her sister's money for more plots in the cemetery and came to live with my grandfather. In another ten years she had salted him away with the sister and Andrew. This left her, the oldest, with nobody to outlive, so she made her deal with my father.

My mother, a gullible soul who knew nothing of the record Aunt Bertha had piled up in her years here, thought it was a way to solve the depression. Father had been forced out of the garage because he could no longer sell new cars, even Fords. Things were getting pretty well stretched—to the point where we didn't get up from the dinner table with full stomachs any more. At that we were better off than most of the families in our town; we still ate three meals a day. A chance to take care of the old lady, then well into her seventies, and get what she left us when she died, looked like the best thing that could happen to us.

In five years her money was gone, father had been forced to almost everything but stealing to feed us all, and she was still going strong. I had been born during this interim to further complicate things. She hobbled around the house whenever she thought we weren't home, snooping into all our secrets. Once my sister buried a pirate treasure, a dime in a tobacco can, and Aunt Bertha dug it up and kept it. We got back on her by stealing from her though. At eighty-two she broke her hip showing us how to ski. It healed as well as if she had been only twenty and we still had to put up with her hobbling around after us. I think she got a few more years to live during the weeks that her hip was broken, by sucking them from my mother. I will always believe that my mother gave, or was forced to part with, part of her very life during that time to care for that old vampire.

Then the REA began to build lines and Dad got his job. He soon had a car, an old one because he couldn't afford better and still keep Aunt Bertha, and we used to get mother out from under the old lady's thumb once in a while. That's what really gave us our chance to get rid of her.

About this time my sister realized she wanted to go to college. When spring came that year, I needed a baseball
glove, and that was practically her death warrant. We had enough reasons to get rid of her, and she herself gave us the chance we had wanted for years.

When we began to take mother for rides once in awhile, the old lady was afraid that mother's life might be taken away so that she couldn't suck on it. She said she was sick, to keep mother home, safely with in reach. And she could make it pretty convincing. She had never been pretty and she had worked up a skin cancer on her temple by this time. She looked like a witch, and she soon developed a moan good enough to scare my sister and me anytime, and we were used to her.

When she pulled her sickness on us we decided it was time for her to go. We knew, and she knew too, that if she ever got out of reach of tender young people to draw life from and into the hands of professionals at killing, she would die. We called the county home and made an appointment for them to send their ambulance the next day. My mother bathed her the next morning, without telling her why. Aunt Bertha was getting such tender consideration that she smelled a rat. She was too mean to be fooled for long. Mother told her why she was being bathed and she began to moan and yell for father. Father went in, chased out my sister and me and closed the door. We heard father talking quietly whenever she would pause her moaning and screaming to catch her breath. She shut up pretty soon and father came out.

The ambulance came, and they rolled her out to it on a litter. My sister and I stood by, watching with savage satisfaction. She did one last venomous thing before I saw the last of her. She called me over to the litter and asked if I were sorry to see her go. I said no and she spit on me. Later, father told me that the last day there in the room she had tried to spit on both him and mother. But she hadn't hit them. It's pretty hard to spit very high lying down.

Four days later mother answered the phone, listened a minute, and then told all of us standing around, "She's dead." Nobody said anything.

—Tom Olsen, Sci. Sr.