A Cold Mourning

A. Denisse Tedesco

St. John Fisher College

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Wish You Were Here
by
Maryann Connolly

Dear Family:
I wish you were here.
I wish you were here to walk the dusty roads with me, and visit the shacks along the way.

From the road, we recognize the stench of garbage, and as we reach the foot of the hollow, see it scattered throughout the area. Several small children, disheveled and filthy, play in the leftovers. With a basin of rain water, a barefoot, weary mother, aged beyond her years, washes clothes.

I wish you were here to see the nine children who live in three rooms. They shy away as I sit on their porch. Only one tries to smile - an older girl wearing a checked dress at least three sizes too large, and held together with rusty safety pins. Sitting beside me, garbed only in a long T-shirt, a 4-year-old boy urinates on the steps. A blond 2-year-old plays with a hammer in the corner of the porch. Covering his leg is an open wound, obviously days old as the blood is dry and hardened, and the flies flock to the infected area.

I wish you were here to spend an afternoon trying to get an 11-year-old to a doctor. Bobby has cut his foot deeply. He is rapidly losing blood, and needs several stitches. The only doctor in town refuses to look at the injury because the patient has no medical card. I wish you could see the love and concern of the neighbors in their efforts to think of a family who has a phone, or a car to take the child to the hospital (30 miles away). But, most of all, I wish you were here to see the tortured look on the mother’s face as she says quietly, "My son cannot have stitches until next week." She looks at the blood-soaked towel and, holding back her tears, tells us she has no money.

I wish you were here to take over one period of recreation to teach these children how to play, realizing you must teach them again tomorrow.

Children who have never played an organized game before.
Children who don’t know how to follow rules, or let another have his way.
Children who quit the game before they dare lose.
Children who are rough, bitter and resentful.
Girls who are tougher than most boys we know, who must be to survive in this atmosphere.

I wish you were here so that you could return home with some concept of what life in Appalachia is like. To return with a new awareness, a new encounter, and so much more - a new sense of gratitude.

To return to thank God every day - or several times a day - for the blessings he has given our family. To thank Him because we have not had to grow up in an atmosphere such as this - one of poverty, filth and ignorance.

I hope before you put this letter away, you can take one moment from your busy lives, and thank God that we have had parents who cared so much for us that they taught us, mostly through example, how to love, how to give, how to care for one another. And pray - yes, pray hard - that we may never take these blessings for granted.

Yes, dear family, for a few weeks, or a few days - O Lord, just for a few short hours - I wish you were here!

Love,
Maryann

A Cold Mourning
by
Denisse Tedesco

A pale morning light penetrated the cracks in the window shade and came to rest upon my closed eyelids. I drifted slowly into consciousness and stretched beneath the warmth of my down comforter. With a smile, I remembered that it was the first day of Spring. Old Man Winter had gone to sleep and I could now look forward to warmer, longer days. Fully awake, I rolled out of bed and proceeded towards the kitchen to perform my daily ritual: worshiping the automatic coffee-maker. As the coffee brewed, I searched the refrigerator for milk. Having discovered the carton, I was annoyed at finding it empty. My frustration grew as I shuffled through the pantry for the powdered milk. A fruitless search. I grumbled and did what I had to do. I grabbed the first sweatshirt and and pants I could find and pulled on my sneakers. Since the grocery store was only a block away, I didn’t bother with my windbreaker; a nice jog would warm me up.

The morning was cold, much colder than I had anticipated. The wind seeped through my clothes and a splash wet my body. I began to run quickly, thinking the sooner I got the milk, the sooner I would be back in my warm apartment, enjoying a cup of hot coffee and the morning paper.

I came to a street crossing and jogged to the other side. Once there, I noticed a huddled figure. A heap of ragged blankets, brown with caked dirt, shivered as the wind blew across and through it. Approaching the quivering mass, I noticed a woman curled up beneath the wretched pile, desperately trying to keep herself warm. I forgot about the bitter wind and stopped at the corner. I saw a face soiled with years of suffering and pain and loneliness. It was ageless; or rather, to discern her age was impossible. A small hand, rough and calloused, covered with cuts, appeared from somewhere beneath her shaggy wrapper and tried to pull them closer around her. Useless to do so, since pulling them up covered her neck, but uncovered her feet. They were colorless. Whitewashed, almost, I recognized frostbite.

Suddenly, she looked up at me. She didn’t say anything; her face betrayed no emotion. It didn’t occur to me to smile. There was nothing to smile at.

The woman curled up into a tighter ball than before. She placed her head on her knees. A freezing, starving fetus in the womb of an uncaring city. One of many, but I never really noticed them; I always had better things to do.

She turned her head to the side and let it rest there. A long sigh escaped from her chest, one that suggested her fight was over.

I left her to her privacy and walked the rest of the way to the store. So engrossed was I in my thoughts that I didn’t hear the owner (who was a friend of mine) greet me as I entered. He tapped me on the shoulder, waking me from my reverie. I smiled
and nodded hello. Walking over to the dairy section, I selected the milk I wanted, then made my way to the cash register. There, I noticed some packaged Danish rings. I decided they would go well with the coffee so I took one box, then another.

The owner smiled as I walked up. With a knowing look, he asked, "Have company this morning?"

I nodded absently. I paid, left the store, and hurried home. Since the wind had increased in its intensity, I picked up my pace; I wanted to reach the woman quickly. Something inside told me to hurry, hurry before it was too late...

When I saw her, she had changed the position of her head again. Her forehead was pressed to her knees. I walked up and placed the packaged food next to her hands. My next step was to run home; I wanted to give her my comforter. But I also wanted her to know she had food there. I tapped her, but she gave me no response, so I shook her gently, and her lifeless body fell towards me. Frozen. She had frozen to death. I looked about me, but no one was around who might have helped. No policeman was in sight. I was alone, as she had been until the moment she died.

I moved away slowly. For some reason, I found myself thinking about the food. It would spoil out here, yet I didn't want to take it home. I wanted nothing to do with that food.

Like a man in a trance, I retraced my steps home. I entered my apartment as if for the first time, noting all my "necessities." The fragrance of coffee, which had once aroused my senses, now repulsed me. I stood by the window, bathed in sunlight, yet I was colder than I had been outside. I felt another spasm shake my body, and I fell to my knees and wept.
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Statue

Amy J. Goering

Janine McInnis