

*Dear Friend*

Written by Mitchell T. Palmer

Dear Friend,

Today I awoke determined to end something. I shall share more about that later in my letter to you. First I wish to tell you about an old gentleman I saw today when I visited the hospital.

I arrived at 10:00 a.m. today and walked to the room where a variety of tubes, wires and devices used to monitor the health of a patient who wasn't expected to live through the day took up more of the space in the place than that of the old man's frail body. It was apparent that he was once a large man. Even today that man's body filled the hospital bed from top to bottom with what I guessed must still measure in excess of six feet eight inches of height. His body had withered from the days of his earlier life, that much was clear. He couldn't have weighed much more than 160 pounds now. His bone structure indicated a man who, when all the muscle was intact (perhaps just a year or so prior) he would've easily tipped the scales beyond 300 pounds if he had weighed an ounce.

As I spoke to the man initially I must honestly admit that I didn't know then and couldn't tell you now what we discussed. I was too busy contemplating the way in which life had withered the old man. The liver spots and veins, tendons and ligaments in and on his arms stood prominently stretching the brittle flesh that barely covered his frame. Much of the surface of his skin was littered with abrasions, scars and bruises. I don't know if he was able to look at himself in the mirror nowadays but I suspected that if he were able he wouldn't have preferred what he might've observed. A body that must once have seemed indestructible now betrayed the fact that even the slightest bump would leave a black, blue and purple mark that wouldn't disappear for weeks, if it ever truly went away. The lightest contact with anything moderately sharp would've breached the epidermis and lead to profuse bleeding and more scarring.

These were the thoughts that went through my head. As I pondered the plans I had made the evening before my mind seemed to lurch back to the words the old man was sharing and now I listened intently as the old man regaled me with stories of his youth, when he was strong. The many places he had worked at hard labor, the ease with which he could always find work even when his neighbors, friends and fellow church-members couldn't seem to pay someone to employ their meager services.

He told me how, even at a young age he was always large and how he had been able to make a little money just by walking around the neighborhoods with boys in the area much older than he so that bullying would end. He appeared to be very strong, and he was, and though he was never exceedingly intelligent he wasn't the dullest-witted person he knew. The old man raised his right arm slightly and closed his hand as tightly as he could, making a feeble fist. No words accompanied this action. Several moments of silence followed and I dared not break it with my own meaningless thoughts. Silently, slowly the old man opened his hand and began to speak again. I could not hear the words he was saying and leaned forward, finally sliding to the edge of my chair, straining to comprehend the words, still unable to do so. It was then the man turned his head slightly toward me and his still elevated, opened hand motioned to me to come closer. I stood immediately and approached the side of the bed the old man was destined to live in the rest of what I was certain now would be a short remaining few hours. As I got nearer he moved his hand slightly again, this time

motioning me to place my face near his. As I shuffled my feet I glanced around carefully to avoid dislodging any wires, cables or tubes, finally I leaned down, placing my head nearer his and he reached down, grabbing my wrist and tugging at it gently. Understanding his intent instantly, I placed my hand in his. The large man's hand nearly completely enveloped mine. I was shocked first by the realization that his hands were still so large, the fact of its frailty notwithstanding, then by the coldness of the surface of his skin. The old man struggled at the oxygen mask on his face with his left hand, failing to remove it. I timidly grasped it with my free hand; his grip on my other hand became firmer as I lifted the mask off his nose and mouth and gently placed it upon his forehead. Until this moment I had not seen the tears forming but not yet dribbling out of his eyes. His voice came now in choked, stilted phrases that nearly broke me; nearly crushed my soul. Placing my free hand over the top of his, the one that held mine so tightly, I tried to reassure him that it was all right, he could take his time. Just tell me what he wanted to say. I regret that to this moment for the words that came were more than I could bear and yet the old man did me the greatest service with his next words that any man, woman or child has ever afforded me.

"I've always had friends, family, people around me." He began. "Oh, it may have been due to my size and what I could do for some, yes I understand that."

Now the tears welled up in my eyes and I remember worrying that they may pour out upon the old man's face, what kind of hospital regulations would that violate? As this thought dissipated the old man's eyes filled beyond their capacity to damn up the flood that was flowing now. With tears pouring down his cheeks he continued.

"I've always been with someone. Surrounded by people, see? But one by one they've all died on me. Slowly throughout my life I've suffered while watching the people I knew rushed off to hospitals or carried away in the coroner's car. I've always had trouble; see, being around people who were ill. God-forbid when I knew they were dying." I nodded my head and told the old man that I understood what he was trying to say. "No, you don't." He replied meekly. I was part surprised and part offended thinking to myself how bitter this old man had become from outliving his loved ones, watching as they slowly went away from him, one by one.

Trembling now and having trouble breathing the old man attempted to continue. After a few brief moments he began talking again, this time with a smile vaguely forming on his face. It appeared to be an expression of irony but I wasn't sure until he spoke the words that changed my plans as I had laid then out the night before. "I can't die alone." He said. "Don't let me die all alone. Please."

That old man died over the course of several more hours. I never left his side and he never relinquished his gentle grip on my right hand. Afterwards I returned to my home. I am writing this letter to you, dear friend so that you will know I couldn't carry-through with my plan to end something today. I thought to embolden myself in my hopeful endeavor by visiting the hospital, seeing the people there whose lives had been reduced to withering, near corpses. I thought that if I viewed what so many of us amount to in the end my plans would make more sense, be easier to complete. Like that old man I only discovered that I am afraid to die all alone. Unlike the old man I have made the choice not to live alone throughout the time I have left. Whatever that may be.