

# DEATH WAITS

By Donna R. Jensen

The ambulance attendants gently lifted the frail, pain-racked body onto the gurney. As the belts snapped around her, Jenny's eye lids fluttered open. She glanced anxiously around the room at her surroundings. The deep yellow of her skin had crept into the whites of her eyes, making a sharp contrast with the cornflower blue that had dazzled many a young man.

Her lips worked in an attempt to speak. "Once I loved Rachael...she was so pretty... so sweet to me..."

She's *really* confused, I thought as they wheeled her down the hall to the front of the nursing home where the ambulance waited.

It was time for Bingo in the dining room.

"You don't have to get mad," Joe said to Harriet as I walked by. They were talking as they sat side by side in their wheelchairs. Harriet was fanning the air with her fist, trying her best to reach over and punch Joe.

Seeing my questioning glance, Joe said, "Honest, all I said was, 'Honey, can I see you to your room?' I wasn't going to ask to come in!"

Smiling, I continued to prepare for the afternoon activity. I loved this job as director of activities. *Imagine*, I thought, *getting paid for having fun!*"

More residents came out for Bingo than any other activity. The prizes were candy or fruit depending on diet or preference. Everyone in their seats, it was time for me to call the numbers. June was assisting me today.

Fifty-six, she shared a room with her eighty-year-old mother, Katie. June had been crippled all of her life from a birth defect. She'd never taken a step.

She told me how her tall, strong, father had lifted her easily from bed, to chair, and to the car for trips to church.

Each morning Katie and June were bathed and dressed, and after breakfast, placed side by side in their wheelchairs in the hall. Katie mumbled unintelligible words as she fidgeted in her chair and seemed not to see the people and things around her.

From time to time, like now, June left her mother's side to join in the social and recreational activities of the center. Social workers had tried to persuade her to go to another facility that had more to offer her personally. June's reply was always a firm, "No." Now her mother needed her.

That evening as I enjoyed the quiet of our little West Virginia hamlet from my porch. I thought about the talk in the break room at work that day. Death, a frequent visitor to nursing homes, emerged as a logical topic of discussion. Several of the nursing staff confessed a desire to better understand how God determined when it was time to take someone home.

“Look at Jenny,” one nurse said. “She’s ninety-seven, been a Sunday school teacher. Wouldn’t you think God would end her suffering and let her die?”

“And what about Katie right across the hall?” commented another. “Whatever, will June do when her mother goes?”

“Maybe it won’t be Katie who goes first,” someone else interjected.

We returned to work agreeing that it was all beyond us.

During the two years that Jenny had been a resident, she seldom left her room. Once in a while we were able to coax her to come out to attend church services. Sometimes her son came to visit.

Weeks past, Jenny lingered on through two more trips to the hospital where she rallied and came back, clinging painfully to life. As director of activities, I visited the residents daily. One morning as I concluded my visit with Jenny, I asked, “Is there anything at all that I can do for you?”

Thoughtfully, she said, “N-o-o.” I patted her hand and turned to leave.

“Unless, I could tell you something.”

Turning back to her I said, “Sure, Jenny, what is it?”

“When I was seventeen,” she began, “I loved Rachael.”

“Yes,” I replied.

Haltingly, she went on. “I never told Phillip. He wouldn’t have understood. Rachel and I spent a lot of time together. We wanted to live together always, but what would people have said? Love can be very confusing... It was wrong that I loved Rachel the way I did.

Realizing what she was saying... what she had tried to say before... I asked, “Are your feelings for Rachael still bothering you?”

“Yes,” she sighed.

I moved to her side and picked up her hand. “Then, Jenny,” I said, “why don’t you just tell Jesus how you feel and we’ll get it all taken care of?”

Freely she spoke to Him, not as some far-removed deity but a friend there in her room. When she finished, tears stained her cheeks. Peace filled her heart. Jenny died that afternoon.

A couple of months later it was discovered that June had cancer. Her doctor told her that she didn’t have long. She was a lovely woman. Her every word and deed radiated her love of God. “Will you agree with me in prayer that God will use me to the end and not leave my mother alone?” she asked.

On a Sunday morning, June went home to be with her Lord. Within 24 hours, so did her Momma.