

Love Him To Death

by Liz Dolan

Gerard was in a room by himself across from the nurses' station, an oblong counter with computers and TV monitors which during the day was a hubbub of voices and phones ringing. Ellen asked if her grandson could be moved to another room?

"He just left the NICU," the nurse said, "He has to be monitored closely." His tiny body was hooked up to wires connected to machines with buttons and digital numbers. A feeding tube slipped down his throat into his stomach. An IV fed him fluids and medications. A stuffed kookaburra lolled in the corner of his crib. It almost turned Ellen's stomach to look at him. When his mother was born, she was ruddy-cheeked and had a full head of black hair.

Leaning against the rail of the crib, Ellen felt as though Gerard's crusted eyes were begging her for help. "Give me time; I'll do whatever I can," she whispered, patting his tiny feet.

The nurse checked all his wires, "He smiled today," she said.

Ellen hung her jacket on a hook next to the window. "At least there's lots of light in the room. "My daughter painted the nursery yellow, sewed checked valances for the window." Careful to follow protocol, Ellen placed her books on the window sill, then washed her hands. She watched the nurse jot down the readings from the machines and remove his diaper.

"I'll give him to you," she said. "Watch the wires."

"His head looks bigger," Ellen said.

"Really?"

"Almost swollen."

"We're afraid he may have excess fluid in his brain. Didn't your daughter tell you?"

“Seizures, brain damage, right?” Ellen was sure her daughter was not telling her everything.

“Sit down,” said the nurse.

Ellen sat in the rocker next to the crib while the nurse placed her left hand under his head and the other under his bottom, lifted him and backed away from the crib. She stepped to the side of the chair and positioned him in Ellen’s arms with all the wires intact. He felt like flotsam.

“If anything disconnects, the machine will beep. I’m only a few feet away.”

Ellen held him stiffly; she feared he’d shatter like crystal. Exhausted after the ninety mile drive, she sank back into the curve of the chair and allowed him to rest in the crook of her arm.

“Would you hand me that book? His sister sent it, her favorite.”

She began to read *Good Night Gorilla* to him. *Goodnight hyena, goodnight lion, goodnight giraffe....* Although she had read it a hundred times before to his sister, she wondered if Gerard would ever clap his hands when the gorilla and the mouse climbed into the zoo keeper’s bed. The doctors were not sure he could hear. She sang *Scarlet Ribbons* to him. He stared at her with his filmy eyes; when he began to nod, she buzzed the nurse to place him in his crib.

Glad she could relieve her daughter for a few days, she decided to stay with him as long as she could. When the buzzer beeped, she was in the middle of the scene in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* where Michael Henchard, in a drunken stupor, offers his wife for sale at an auction:

“Five guineas,” said the auctioneer, “or she’ll be withdrawn. Do anybody give it? The last time. Yes or no?”

Startled by a buzzer, Ellen jumped up, dropped her book, and stared at the red figures on the machines; the numbers were plummeting. Nurses descended, swooped

like angels from left, right and center. One shoved her out of the way.

“He’s turning blue,” the nurse said. Standing behind the cluster of nurses, Ellen could not see Gerard. All she could see were elbows and arms moving swiftly. In a few minutes calm returned and the baby and his machines were back in sync. All but one nurse left the room.

“Is he okay?” Ellen gasped.

“Fine,” the nurse said, as she wiped his face with a soft cloth. “Probably a gastric attack.”

Because it was getting dark and she had to walk a few isolated blocks to the Ronald McDonald House, Ellen, her heart still pounding, was glad to leave. She stuck the bookmark, dusty from the nurse’s footprint, into her book. She patted Gerard’s curled fist and smiled at the nurses huddled in conversation by the exit.

In the bitter January air, she walked down the lane between grassy slopes covered with pine trees. Pulling up the collar of her coat, she shivered as she sipped fresh air. Would Gerard ever have that pleasure, breathe on his own?

When she wandered into the brick house, she realized she hadn’t eaten supper. In the kitchen with four refrigerators adjacent to four dish washers, she read chalked on slate, “Astra Zeneca cooked supper for you today. Enjoy.” A large woman sat at a table, spooning food into the mouth of a young man as long and lean as Lincoln, strapped into a wheel chair. “Zach,” she said, “It’s almost bed time.” His head hung down to one side; he twitched.

“How old is he?” Ellen asked.

“Sixteen,” she said, smoothing his hair. Ellen imagined Gerard in sixteen years, the size of a man but dependent, maybe worse than this young man.

“Have you any help?”

“Until Zach was ten, my husband but he couldn’t deal with him anymore; he moved cross country with his job.” No wonder the woman looked so haggard. Was this to be

her daughter's lot? And what of Gerard's sister whose life had already been turned upside down?

The last time Ellen babysat, four-year-old Maisie screamed when she saw her mother carrying her overnight bag again, "I don't need a babysit, Grandma. You go to the hospital so Mommie can stay home." Ellen had to peel Maisie off her mother as she continued screaming, "I hate the baby, I hate 'im."

"How could your husband leave?" Ellen asked. The woman wiped her son's mouth with a napkin.

"I understood, his only son," she said.

Ellen wondered how this woman was going to prepare her son for bed. How would she lift him, undress him? She wanted to offer help, but she couldn't deal with the messiness of it. The situation infuriated her. A few years earlier Ellen had volunteered at a dinner for the handicapped in her church hall. Not five minutes into the event, a young woman in a wheel chair asked for assistance to go to the bathroom. When Ellen attempted to lift her from her chair to the toilet, she got her half way up until she had to drop her back onto the seat. She almost dropped her on the floor. What had she been thinking to attempt lifting someone as heavy as herself alone?

"So sorry," Ellen said gasping, feeling incompetent as she tried to push her back into a comfortable position. "I'll get help." She never volunteered for the event again.

And now that her husband was gone, Ellen felt even less capable of dealing with Gerard. Two years earlier Ellen's husband, Ted, had come home and told her their divorced friend, Geneen, an artist, had asked to paint his portrait.

"A nude," Ellen joked, "The Thinker? Where are you modeling?"

"She'll sketch from a few boardwalk shots. Later I may have to pose." He tossed his cap onto the hook.

Ellen understood how his shock of salt and pepper

hair and dark brown eyes still caught women's attention. During the summer her daughter's friends joked with her on the beach about his perfect body. A month later he brought the painting home.

"Wow," she said, "That's a great likeness."

"She wants me to continue sitting for her."

"Is that wise?"

"I'm just helping her. Don't make a big deal out of nothing. She gets good money for her paintings which she needs badly."

Although Ellen knew how generous her husband was, she didn't want him dealing with Geneen. She called her and told her gently, "He can't sit for you anymore."

"He never even hinted at that," Geneen replied. "Is it too boring?"

"He's too busy. Business, that's all."

"Well, I'll wait until he tells me himself." It was not the first time Ellen had tried to right a situation in Ted's life. Once she called his boss with whom she had gone to college to remind him Ted was the *uber* candidate for the new executive position the firm was creating. When Ted found out, he slammed his fist into the wall, "Are you crazy? Are you out of your mind?"

"You see," she said, "I helped you get the job."

"For your information, that call almost caused me to lose the job. Don't you ever, ever butt into my affairs again. You made me look like a fool."

When he walked into the kitchen, she could tell by the tight set of his jaw that he was furious about her call to Geneen. She continued chopping the carrots and onions on the carving board.

"That call was cruel and unnecessary; Geneen needs the money. You have to control everything and everybody, I am so sick of it, so damn sick of it. You just don't get it. One of these days you're going to hit a wall."

Soon after, he left; her neatly ordered life frayed at

the edges. She never realized how much he had done for her. Now she was paying bills, repairing broken shingles, taking the car in for tune-ups. She tried to patch things up but her husband told her life without her was much too serene. Besides he was planning on moving to Montana, "To the great outdoors. Alone," he said. "By the way," he added, "I'm happy to tell you just in case you intended to make any more phone calls, that Geneen has met a very nice gentleman. There was never anything going on between us."

"I'll go with you," Ellen said. "A fresh start in a new place, just the two of us."

He didn't answer. Then Gerard was born.

What did his future hold if he could not breathe on his own; if he were brain damaged? Would he ever come home? Would her daughter's home be turned into a hospital? The neo-natologists had already spoken to her daughter about various syndromes: Rett's, Angelman's, Leprechaun's. The experts really didn't know what was wrong with him. All they knew was that his wind pipe was too narrow to allow oxygen to reach his lungs; they also knew he was having seizures but they did not know why.

When Ellen returned home, she began to research for herself, surprised to find so much information about things she had never heard of before. She wondered about her husband; now when she needed him most he was gone. As she sat in front of the computer, she said out loud, "I am so frightened." She had hit the wall.

Last year her daughter's friend, Sarah, had had a baby with Down Syndrome, which she had given up for adoption to a family who had a child with Down and who wanted their child to have a sibling who looked like him. Ellen found it hard to believe that there was a waiting list of parents eager to adopt disabled infants. When Jane heard of Sarah's decision, she called, "I can't believe she gave up her own child." Ellen knew she wouldn't even broach the

subject of adoption with Jane.

What did Jane know about life? In fact, what did Ellen know? She had always considered the raising of children the most important thing she had ever done. As a first grade teacher, she had spent hours each night crossing *t*'s and capitalizing first names guaranteeing that every student who entered her class left reading or on the brink of reading. It was always the slowest child to whom she gave the most attention. She'd bend over him, pat him on the back and say, "We can do this together." Why couldn't she have the same hope for Gerard?

Jane had been a gifted gymnast. Every time she double back-flipped on the beam, Ellen held her breath. Once she asked her how she got so much height in her round off back handspring on floor.

"It's from the speed of those first three steps and the hurdle. It sets you up for the layout, which after moving so fast feels like it happens in slow motion since you have so much time in the air. You are flying. If you are twisting, your body spins as it rotates, an amazing feeling, the legs come together and snap down driving the backwards motion into the handspring, you're upside down, your feet are snapping down again, it all happens so easily," Jane said as though she were in a trance.

After a broken ankle and a hyper-extended elbow, Jane returned to practice eagerly even though Ellen was convinced she should quit. Once Ellen told her, "If you can do gymnastics, you can do anything."

Interestingly enough, Jane seemed to be dealing with Gerard with the same endurance and skill she had shown as a gymnast. But somehow Ellen had never envisioned a Gerard in her daughter's future. She was determined to take action to relieve Jane's burden.

The next time she returned to the hospital, she was surprised to find she could sleep over in Gerard's room if she liked.

“Yes, you can, if I can find a cot,” the red-haired nurse said. “Your daughter is lucky to have you. Gerard, too. Such a tough little guy; five years ago he wouldn’t have survived.”

“But he’s suffering,” Ellen said, “He’s suffering.” It was technology, not nature that kept Gerard alive. The doctors had no choice but to help him survive, but it was not the doctors who would sacrifice the rest of their lives lifting him in and out of wheel chairs, in and out of beds, feeding him baby food and changing his diaper when he was forty. The image of the woman singing “Blue Bird, Blue Bird” to her sixteen-year-old son was imprinted in her brain. She tried to concentrate on the love she saw in the woman’s eyes but the truth was this love made her grind her teeth.

Although it was hard to keep up with the ever changing faces, Ellen began to befriend the nurses. She was careful never to get in their way. “Hi Ginnie,” she’d call as she entered the room. “Can I help you change Gerard?” It was important to gain their trust. In a notebook she jotted down the times the nurses made their rounds. She walked up and down the corridors noting which children may have warranted extra care or tended to wake during the night.

During the day she leaned against the counter of the nurses’ station, “How are the almond cookies? Maybe I’ll bake short bread next time. Do you need anything from the cafeteria?”

Maureen, the broad-shouldered one who had worked in construction before she became a nurse, had a brother who had attended Cornell at the same time as Jane. “My brother came out when he was there,” Maureen told Ellen.

“Maybe it was those fierce winters,” Ellen joked.

Another nurse told her, “Gerard will probably have to undergo a tracheotomy soon.” She starred the chatty

nurse's name in case she needed more information later.

"Trachs are done routinely here," she said.

"Barbaric," Ellen said.

"The trach will help him breathe until his lungs mature, help him grow."

Because of throat cancer Ellen's brother, Eric, had had a tracheotomy. Every time she saw him, she was disgusted by his efforts to talk and the foul, gurgling noises he made. Of course, his cancer was due to smoking. No matter how many times she had begged him to stop, hearing how his voice was growing raspier, he never did.

"This is no fault of yours," she said to Gerard.

After ten p.m., she noticed the nurses' station was darkened except for security monitors which she never saw anyone watch. She checked to see which nurses took turns sleeping. She wrote everything down because she didn't trust her memory.

She even became familiar with the machines surrounding Gerard; she learned what the digital numbers indicated, "Sometimes the buzzers go off for no good reason. Just turn them off," the red head told her. The pulse oximetry machine whose lead was taped to Gerard's toes displayed his blood oxygen levels and emitted a soft red light. The probe, which adhered to his skin with a patch, tracked his temperature and displayed it along with blood pressure readings emitted from a wrist cuff. Ellen decided the time of greatest vulnerability on the unit was three a.m., the middle of the graveyard shift; it was the shift when most people died. Maybe, she thought, because it was dark and quiet and so very, very peaceful; maybe people needed to be alone to die.

Gazing at Gerard asleep in his crib, she thought of the note Thomas Hardy had penned to a close friend upon the loss of his son, "To be candid, I think the death of a child is never really to be regretted, when one reflects on what he has escaped."

Thinking about the operations, confinements, and suffering Gerard would escape, she framed them in her mind so she would have the courage to do what she knew she had to do for his good, for the good of her daughter and for her incredibly vibrant grandchild so she could grow strong and tall. She could not clear her mind of the horrors of the miserable life this sickly child would escape.

She stopped calling him Gerard; she stopped touching him. She no longer read to him. She tried to forget what her daughter had said, “He’s just different, Mom. We can do this; we’ll take care of him and love him to death.” When she pondered Jane’s words, she tried to let go of the situation but she could not. Maybe she needed more time to accept Gerard. She couldn’t sleep. She practiced turning the buzzers on and off. She prayed constantly that God would take him. If not, when the right moment arrived, Ellen hoped she would have the courage to do what nature uninterrupted would have done, the thing she knew she had to do.