

The Wages of Bickering

"I'm afraid the prognosis is not good, Oom Storm."

"Well Jack, with my family history I didn't expect it to be. How long?"

"Anything up to about two years. For most of that time you should be OK but after that, well, things may happen quickly."

"You can tell when the end is near?"

"Of course."

"Good. Then this is what we do. Nothing. All I want is to be kept comfortable. If I have pain or nausea treat them - that's all."

"Are you sure?"

"Ja Jack. Having somehow expected this, I have had time to think this through. You know with all the ups and downs I've had a good seventy years, done many things and achieved most of my goals. There's no winning this genetic battle so let's handle this with dignity. Deal?"

"Deal, Oom Storm. I'll help where I can."

"Thanks, Jack, I know."

"Pa Storm. What a pleasant surprise. Come in."

"Thank you Lucy my girl," he said walking into the humble cottage that Lucy had recently moved in to.

"What brings you here, Pa?"

"Two things."

Lucy looked puzzled.

"First, I see that that no-good son of mine is pushing for a divorce. How do you feel about this? Are you happy?"

"Yes. I am, Pa. I can't put up with his nonsense any longer – ag Pa, things aren't what they used to be. He's different these days. I sometimes wonder what happened and why. Since Ma died it's as if he's taken on her role of stirring – he gets everyone going at family gatherings - but then you know this. "

"Ja, my girl. And the latest girlfriend?"

"She's just another rich socialite Pa. You know Bernhard – he has to be in the limelight and worships wealth."

"Ja, he takes after his mother. Money is all that turned her on. And a certain rich businessman," he added as an afterthought.

Lucy's heart ached for him.

"Lucy. You have heard of Hans Loubscher, the divorce lawyer?"

She nodded.

"He's agreed to represent you."

"But Pa, it will be expensive, I can't afford him."

"You don't have to. Lucy, of all my six children and their partners you alone are close to my heart. I'll pay for this man's services. I'm saddened by the heartache Bernhard has caused you, deeply saddened. Even so, divorce is never easy. It was something that crossed my mind with Ma but the consequences would have been too disrupting. I decided rather to throw all my energy into the farms," he mused, "But you have a chance to escape."

Oom Storm paused and looked at her thoughtfully. He took a deep breath and thought, *now that I'm facing the end of my life it is important that she knows know how much I have grown to love her.*

He looked at her tenderly and said simply, "I love you Lucy."

"I love you too, Pa."

"I've been thinking of all the fun times we shared. Remember when I laughed until the tears rolled when you read out some of the comments from those English essays you were marking."

They both chuckled at the memory.

“Those long walks and horse rides on the farm - checking fences, keeping the workers happy. You know Lucy; the volkies on the farm all love you. They miss you.”

“I miss them too Pa.”

“Now, there’s something you can do for your old Pa. I am going to instruct Hans that you want nothing in the divorce settlement on one proviso - I think it will be a good idea if Bernhard never contacts you again. What do you say?”

“Ja, Pa that will make my life a lot easier - his bully-boy tactics don’t scare me anymore but they are exhausting to deal with. I’m looking for another teaching post so that will take care of the finances.”

“Well, before you start looking - do you remember that little house in Cape Town that you love?”

“Yes Pa.”

“My offer on it has been accepted. You and I must go to Cape Town next week so you can sign all the documents.”

Oom Storm smiled. For the first time ever he has seen Lucy speechless.

“Shhh,” he said as she started to speak, “At the same time you’ll sign for a 4x4 I’ve ordered that you can use to go to those out of the way places that you like to paint. Lastly, I’ve already taken out a life annuity for you. It will more than cover your living expenses and allow you to save. It will grow at 10 per cent per annum and keep your income ahead of inflation. Of course if you want to teach again, that is your choice.”

Ah yes, he thought, this is all worth it, just look at her radiant face. He watched the changing emotions reflected in her eyes and was happy – she at least would get what she deserved.

“But Pa . . .”

“Shhh,” he said again, putting his finger on her lips, “You’ve deserved far more than I can ever give, this is just my way of saying thank you. You’re a good person.”

While she gazed at him in stunned gratitude he said, "Now the other thing. My genes have caught up with me Lucy girl, and Doctor Jones tells me that I have two years maximum."

Lucy flung her arms around his neck and sobbed. Looking up at this great big farmer who was closer to her than her own father had ever been, she struggled to control her flowing tears and found herself blurting, "I'll miss your big warm hugs, Pa. Oh how I'll miss you."

"Listen to me Lucy, always remember the good things and let's enjoy what time we have left. You know my girl; you only live once and I've had a good innings. I've enjoyed my life on the farms. My only regret, if you can call it that, is that I married Ma. It was wonderful in the beginning but as the years passed she became negative. She realized too late that farm life was not what she wanted, but it is in my blood – farming is the only thing I really know how to do, and I've been a good farmer."

He paused staring into the distance over Lucy's head thinking about the past.

Almost to himself he mused, "She knew that when she married me. And then there are the six kids. I had such hopes for them and have any of them amounted to anything worthwhile morally? Lucy remained silent listening to thoughts she knew he had never voiced before.

"You've guessed over the years that I've no feelings for my brood; they all take after their mother – city slickers and money grabbers the lot. But that aside, their moral values are not mine. What's more, five of them married people similar to themselves."

"Remember when you were teaching *King Lear* and we discussed parent/children relationships?"

Lucy nodded.

"Well I sometimes think that the other daughters-in-law and my own three daughters make Goneril and Regan look like saints. What sickens me most is now that I'm getting older, they all toady to me – simply trying to gain favour in the inheritance stakes."

"You and those wonderful people in the surrounding farms and the town have kept my faith in human nature. You, especially, are my Cordelia – for which I thank you."

Tears now streamed down Lucy's face as she hugged Pa Storm.

"Those ingrates have been bickering about my possessions as though they had a right to them. They don't speak to each other civilly. They argue about what still belongs to me. The one is afraid that the other will inherit more."

About twenty months from the fateful visit to doctor Jones Oom Storm was there for another examination.

"Oom Storm, I think you have less than three weeks of fairly normal health left. We've been controlling the pain and nausea but that will become ineffective towards the end. I told you the end would be quick."

"Yes, Jack," Oom Storm smiled.

Once again Oom Storm sat with Lucy.

"My dearest girl," he said, "The time has come. I've come to say goodbye."

"But Pa I'll look after you. I want to be with you."

"No my girl. But thank you. Now remember, don't attend my funeral – stay right away from the rest of them - promise?"

"I promise, Pa."

"Good girl."

"Pa Storm – no one thing can replace or repay you; I am going to miss you so much"

"Shh," Oom Storm said, putting his finger on her lips. "You've brought joy to an old man's life."

"Pa, where will you go?"

"Don't you worry about that. Death has never worried me and I feel that it should be a private thing my girl. I've arranged and paid for my funeral. I will not let myself be beholden to anyone. Tomorrow I'll mix myself a little drink which will send me painlessly on my way."

Lucy wept. She knew that all she could do was to accept his decision – nothing would change it.

Next morning at the farm he picked up the telephone. "Jack?"

"Yes. Oom Storm? Good morning," said the tremulous voice.

"Leave in about three hours' time. A note on the dining room table will tell you where to find my body. Thank you and goodbye."

Before he could respond the phone went dead.

Whistling happily to himself, Oom Storm climbed the koppie to his favourite viewing spot.

He stretched out languidly and looked across the beautiful land that he loved so much.

The sun was warm and comforting on his body.

A wry smile played around his lips as he reviewed the good times and things of his life. Lucy was catered for and the rest of the brood can go to the devil. He was content.

Unscrewing the bottle top he poured its contents into his favourite whiskey tumbler. He raised the glass, "Ready or not Saint Peter, I'm about to find out if you're real."

The eyes of the eleven sitting waiting for the lawyer alternately gleamed in anticipation and darkened as they glared at each other, each hoping for the lion's share.

When the lawyer's secretary ushered them into the boardroom they were somewhat perplexed to find the local doctor, dominie, magistrate and chief of police in the room with Mr Cronwright.

None of the assembled guests made any move to greet them.

Mr Cronwright began reading, *"The eleven of you gathered here today were all as miserable and as grasping as your mother was. Your constant bickering over my possessions led me to call the assembled gentlemen together a year ago.*

With them as witnesses, and in their presence, I destroyed my Will and all its codicils."

There was a gasp which reverberated around the room as eleven pairs of eyes stared at Mr Cronwright in disbelief.

The lawyer continued, "As there is no will, the Master of the Supreme Court will deal with what is left of my estate according to the laws of intestate succession."

Another gasp ricocheted around the room.

"Finally, it gives me great satisfaction to tell you that my five farms no longer form part of my estate. I have donated them to the National Parks Board. Mr Cronwright has the contact details of their representative who will advise you of the date when the remaining movables will be auctioned for their funds. Signed, Johannes Jacobus Stormvogel."

Disbelief registered momentarily on all eleven faces before pandemonium, blame and accusations erupted among them.

Once the eleven had been dealt with and the five gentlemen were alone, Waterford whiskey tumblers were filled from a bottle of 25 year old Middleton - gifts from Oom Storm especially for the occasion.

Mr Cronwright raised his glass.

The others followed suit.

"To Oom Storm."

"Oom Storm," they chorused.

I swear I heard Oom Storm chuckle.

Ray Hattingh