

ISABELLA SANCHEZ IS DEAD

A hospital chaplain is accustomed to death. Yet every death is different, every individual soul sacred. As God's servant, I tend each with the Lord's good care. Ellen Rowley was one such soul. Struck down by a most ravaging illness, she bore her suffering with dignity. At the end she considered me her friend as much as her priest. But before she died she burdened me with a promise to be fulfilled after her death, a promise which lays heavy on my heart.

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Ellen was a nice lady. She was only seventy-six. That's no age, is it? A few of us from the shop went to her funeral. That's the least we could do. But we were the only ones there, us and the priest. The Council made the arrangements because she had no relatives. That's so sad, isn't it?

She enjoyed coming to the shop. Worked here until September last year. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. She'd arrive at half past eight, on the dot, never late. She was educated too, you could tell. Didn't mind serving but she preferred the back room. Sorting out the donations, bless her. She was good at that. Had an eye for detail, for quality. Valuable crockery, first edition books, that sort of thing.

Some of our volunteers moan a lot - how they miss their husbands, how their families don't visit, how the old days were so much better. Not Ellen. I once asked about her family but she clammed up. She lived somewhere on the Connorfield Estate, I think.

It was stomach cancer that got her in the end but none of us

knew. Didn't tell a soul, kept it to herself. Told us she couldn't come to the shop anymore because she had to look after an elderly neighbour. If only we'd known the truth, we could've helped. Yes, Ellen Rowley was a nice lady.

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Miss Rowley taught at Shenton Girls' Grammar School for twenty-six years. She'd been in post ten years when I was appointed Headmistress in 1984. When the position of Head of Modern Languages became vacant, I had no hesitation in putting her name forward to the Board of Governors. My judgement proved correct and the excellent reputation of the Department continued under Miss Rowley's guidance and leadership.

In the opinion of some it was unusual she stayed with us throughout her teaching career but she had an unswerving loyalty to the School and its core beliefs. As a teacher, Miss Rowley was diligent and conscientious, and had a natural empathy with her pupils, many of whom went on to university and enjoyed successful careers. She was a natural linguist whose love of Spanish, in particular, was conveyed with enthusiasm to her pupils.

Miss Rowley retired fifteen years ago. When we discussed her retirement, she said the end of the Millennium seemed an appropriate time 'to bow out gracefully' - her words, not mine. She made a clean break with the School and moved away, to the West Country I believe. I have not been in contact with her since but I am sincerely grateful for all she accomplished at the School.

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I was coming to the end of my career in the probation service when

Ellen's file landed on my desk. The service wasn't so hide-bound back in the 1970s. It wasn't an all-qualified service then. There were still people like me who'd served in the forces, hadn't gone to university - you can't get a degree in common-sense, can you? I think that's why they asked me to take on Ellen.

Her first words to me were, 'I've wasted six years of my life, now I need to make amends.' I told her not to be silly. After all, hadn't she mastered a new language and found her vocation? Like me, she had no formal qualifications. Perhaps that's why I thought she deserved special help, well, that and her determination. Six years previously, she could speak only the most basic English. Now she was a fluent speaker with just the slightest hint of a Spanish accent - and then only if you listened carefully.

Despite all that'd happened to her, she never had a chip on her shoulder. She re-discovered her religion, that helped too. Her positive attitude persuaded the College Admissions Board to accept her, even though they had doubts. Who could blame them? I put my neck on the line for Ellen but it was worth it.

Not that Teacher Training was easy for her. After all, she was ten years older than most of the other students. My Senior and I had long discussions with the College Principal about what, if anything, Ellen ought to tell her fellow-students about her background. In the end we - Ellen included - all agreed it was better to make no mention. If it got out an ex-offender was training to be a teacher, it might rebound on us all. But we were proved right. Ellen came through the course with flying colours.

We suggested she change her name, too. That was a right decision as well. Ellen Rowley was *her* choice. A few years later she made it official by deed poll. Isabella Sanchez was legally dead.

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Isabella Sanchez? Of course I remember her. Stuck-up cow. Never liked her. None of us did. A loner. Bloody foreigner too. Never fitted in with the rest of us girls. Got the treatment right and proper. Not by me, mind. Don't go blaming me. She was a stupid cow. Got bird for doing drugs. She always said she was innocent. Got framed by a feller. Typical. That's what they all say. Always had her nose in a book. Thought she was better than the rest of us. But inside everyone's the same. The Governor put her in solitary, for her own safety. Then she got sent to an Open Prison. Lucky cow. Bet they let her out early.

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I do remember the name Isabella Sanchez but I've had to consult my case notes to ensure factual accuracy. Most of the information is in the public domain so I am confident I am not disclosing confidentialities.

Our practice occasionally dealt with foreign nationals and although I am competent in the French language, I have only a passing knowledge of Spanish. Defending persons from abroad is never straightforward since almost every word needs to be translated and Miss Sanchez's barrister certainly found it problematic which did not help her cause.

She protested her innocence from the start. Although my long experience told me such protestations had to be treated with a certain degree of caution, I tended to believe her. She asserted that her fiancé, a Spanish entrepreneur named Luis Pedrosa, had travelled to this country on business and then telephoned her from England to say he'd forgotten to bring some important documents. He asked her to book the next flight from Madrid and bring a

package, which he'd left in his desk drawer, with her. Unbeknown to her, or so she claimed, the package contained a quantity of class-A drugs.

Despite extensive enquiries, the police - even with the help of Interpol - failed to locate Mr Pedrosa in either England or Spain. Without him, there was no evidence to support her version of events.

Miss Sanchez always struck me as a self-confident woman but, despite my constant entreaties, she consistently refused help from her family in Spain.

She was sentenced to ten years imprisonment. I did offer my services should she wish to appeal but I had to advise her, unless Mr Pedrosa could be found, an appeal was unlikely to succeed.

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You were once my little sister. You broke our parents' hearts. They are long dead. They never forgot you, though. Or your fornication with *that* man Pedrosa. They tried to dissuade you. You knew he was married. They told you. You didn't listen. You never listened. Live for the day. You did what *you* wanted. That is what you did. And the drugs. You were foolish. You knew about the drugs. You deserved prison. But you had some honour, I will give you that. You did not besmirch our family's good name.

I did my duty. I looked after your child as if she was my own. Natalia has grown to be a fine woman. She is now a mother of two fine sons. She was only four years old when you left her. How could you have done it? I brought her up as my own. I wonder where you are now. Is your shame always with you? Do you ever think of us?

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As she lay dying, Ellen told me her story and made me swear on the Holy Bible that I would seek Natalia's forgiveness. I said God would forgive her but Ellen insisted she would not be at peace until I promised to explain the circumstances of her life personally to Natalia. Even in her weakened state, she was unwavering. Somewhat unwillingly I agreed but, when I did, a smile of serenity crossed her face. Within twenty-four she was dead.

Now my mind is in turmoil. I promised to find Natalia to convey the truth and yet I know in my heart such action can only bring more heart-ache and grief. I pray that God in His wisdom will show me the way.

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