

**The Resurrection of Nelson Campbell**

by  
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“Nelson’s back in the hospital again,” Elizabeth Campbell said. “You have to come right away.”

The call from the sixty-two year old widow interrupted Charles Spears, Rector of the Downtown Church of Our Savior, as he was preparing his sermon on the raising of Lazarus.

“Which unit?” he asked automatically. After preaching for forty years on the same text, Spears was unable to think of a new approach to the miracle.

“Intensive care. Can you meet me there?”

From the crackling on the phone, Elizabeth was calling from her cell.

“Yes. Of course,” the priest replied.

“Thank God. I can’t go through this again by myself.”

When inspiration failed, Spears, like many of his aging colleagues, considered repeating sermons from decades past that no one in his parish had heard. But where had he stored his sermon notes from the 1970s? As the priest was getting into his car, he remembered that Nelson Campbell had died in intensive care five years earlier.

Like an architectural rendering from the old Soviet Union, the hospital sprawled over several city blocks. Hundreds of one-way glass windows, hermetically sealed to keep patients and air and souls from escaping, checkered the concrete slab facade.

Maybe Nelson Campbell had been wandering through forgotten corridors for five years

in his split back hospital gown, trying to find the exit. But Nelson Campbell had been cremated, and Spears himself had interred his ashes in the columbarium behind the altar.

Spears parked three levels down from physicians' parking. Following the signs to intensive care, he passed a large room half lit by television sets where dull-eyed people sat on vinyl couches drinking carbonated beverages. This is how I will find Elizabeth, he thought, holding her older daughter's hand, staring at the floor while the reflection from a television plays across her empty face. A whispered explanation from the doctor, a hug and frightened good-byes, then a big boned woman would arrive to escort poor Mrs. Campbell to her new quarters in the psychiatry wing. Thus would begin the normal progression of his older parishioners from condo or assisted living to the linoleum floored Alzheimer's unit at the Episcopal Retirement Home.

Elizabeth was standing beside the cardiologist at the nurse's station looking at Nelson's old records on a monitor. Wearing a dark suit that contrasted expensively with her layered blond hair, she seemed strangely out of place, like Condoleezza Rice in a Baghdad bunker.

"It can't be Nelson," she insisted. "It just can't be."

"Everything checks out from the last time," the cardiologist said. "The scar from the old appendectomy, the mole over the left eyebrow, the incisions from the knee operation, even bruising from the IV lines."

"My God," Elizabeth shuddered.

"He's exactly the same as he was before he went into ventricular fibrillation," the physician continued.

“Thank God you’re here,” Elizabeth said to the priest. “I can’t go in there by myself.”

Across the corridor they could see the lower part of a draped body lit by blinking bedside monitors.

“What happened?” Spears wondered.

“A nurse found him,” the cardiologist said. “She called a ‘Code Blue,’ and this time they were able to revive him.”

“Has anyone talked to him?” Spears asked.

“He’s still a little groggy,” the doctor replied, glancing at Spears’ clerical collar. “We don’t see many cases like this.”

“Neither do we,” said the priest.

The Rector took her hand, and they followed the doctor into the room.

Elizabeth squeezed his fingers so hard that he grimaced. Nelson Campbell was staring at them from the bed. As he aged, his cheekbones and nose became prominent, so that his hard, angry eyes stared at them from a face like the marble head of a Roman senator.

“Hello, Betty,” he said thickly. “What took you so long?”

“We just heard you were here,” the priest replied for her.

“Where else would I be?” he said irritably. “I’ve had the strangest dreams.”

“It’s the anesthesia,” explained the cardiologist.

Nelson looked at the doctor as if he didn’t believe him.

“You look worried,” he said to his wife. “Something happen to one of the kids?”

Their older daughter's husband had left her as soon as their two children reached puberty, and their son had been fired from his third job in four years. The younger daughter was staying at her mother's Naples condo seeking literary inspiration after two DUIs in one quarter and dropping out of the creative writing program at City University.

"Everybody's just fine, Nelson," she replied with a frozen smile.

"I'm tired, Betty," he said, closing his eyes. "Come back later. And Charles, we have to talk."

"Yes," said the priest. "I'd like that."

While the doctor fussed with the monitors to provide cover, Nelson Campbell's widow and clergyman left the room.

"It was such a lovely funeral," she said, dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

Like most wealthy widows, her husband's death had been a profound relief, terminating the random emotional violence of a thirty-five year marriage and leaving her with the spoils of his ruthless business career.

Returning to the garage, Spears understood why people awaited the results of their loved one's surgery so far from the operating room. They were not afraid of hearing that the operation had failed; they were afraid of hearing that it had succeeded and that the patient would return to inflict on them again the burden of their life.

The year before Nelson died, the church had installed a columbarium behind the altar with veneered receptacles like safe deposit boxes to hold the ashes of the dead. For Nelson Campbell, internment in a safe deposit box would have been a fitting end to an existence spent in unrestrained acquisition.

The Rector entered the chancel and crossed himself. A dark square had opened in the columbarium. The priest turned on the overhead light that illuminated the altar during the Eucharist. Sure enough, the panel that had marked the final resting place for Nelson's ashes was open. Lying on the floor, lid ajar, was his pewter urn. Spears picked it up and turned it so that the light shined inside. It was as clean as if it had never been used. Spears placed it very carefully on the altar like a chalice awaiting the sacrament.

That evening the Rector called on Mrs. Campbell at her condo overlooking the river. Daughter Meredith greeted him at the door without enthusiasm. After a casserole procured at her grocery and wine from a waxed paper box that Nelson, Jr. had picked up at a drive through, the family was ready to address their patriarch's resurrection with their spiritual, legal and financial advisors. As he followed Meredith to the living room, he heard her seventh and ninth grade children experimenting with the television to see just how loud they could get it before their mother shrieked at them.

"We closed the estate two years ago, Elizabeth," Harris Scintilton, the family attorney was trying to explain. "The company's gone. We had to sell it to diversify your portfolio."

Envisioning her husband's reaction, Elizabeth Campbell shuddered.

It was one of the few times that the well dressed, late fifties lawyer welcomed the priest's presence. Spears had made him the church's Chancellor to better discern the lawyer's raids on his parishioners' estates. Mrs. Campbell motioned for Spears to take the chair across from the lawyer and next to Nelson, Jr. Neither lawyer nor son stood up to greet him.

“We’d be a lot better off if you hadn’t let Horlach Spencer invest the proceeds,” Scintilton said to deflect his client’s anger from himself to the her financial advisor.

“Will Monica be coming up from Naples?” Spears asked to break the tension, hoping the answer would be no.

“I left a message on her cell,” her mother said, looking nervously at her son.

“She’s probably out on the pier fishing, wouldn’t you think, Meredith?” Nelson, Jr. said provocatively to his sister. “I hope she cleans her catch before she takes it home.”

He was wearing jeans, a T-shirt that said “Viva Las Vegas” and dirty tennis shoes, a uniform that identified him as a habitué of bright, frothy coffee shops where customers sipped lattes and networked away the endless days.

“Just shut up!” Meredith replied, turning to shriek at her children.

If she were not sixty pounds overweight and gaining, the clothes her mother bought her on their weekly shopping sprees might have made her appear attractive. But after two children and a contested divorce, even the most lavish facial could not smooth the fault lines of rage and frustration.

“I asked Charles to discuss our situation with us,” Mrs. Campbell began in the tone of a mid twentieth century matriarch that she had learned from her mother. “Nelson, won’t you offer Mr. Spears a glass of wine?”

“Isn’t Horlach coming?” Nelson, Jr. interjected. “The problem is money, not miracles.”

“Exactly,” said Harris Scintilton.

“We’ve had enough miracles,” his sister agreed.

The siblings looked at each other in surprise. It was the first time they had agreed on anything in years.

The doorbell rang, and the two manic grandchildren ran to open it.

“Ciao, Betty,” a voice smoothed by sycophancy and alcohol called from the alcove.

“We thought you were the pizza,” one of the teenagers piped.

Spears sipped the wine and quickly set down the glass. Horlach Spencer entered the living room with the same expression of eager expectation as he cruised the undercroft Sunday mornings searching for the newest widow on whom to lavish his obsequies. Thanks to a superb dye job and weekly massages at the athletic club, the financial adviser exuded the sullen grace of a country club trophy winner in some indeterminate class. Betty Campbell stood to receive his embrace, and Spears shook his soft hand. The lawyer remained seated.

“What a surprise to have Nelson back,” Spencer exclaimed, accepting a brimful glass from Nelson, Jr. “I can’t imagine what this must mean for you. And you too, Harris.”

“It means we’re back to having Daddy dole out the money, unless you have some other suggestion,” Nelson, Jr. said angrily.

“That could be a problem,” Horlach said, sitting down carefully on the couch next to Nelson’s former widow. “Everything is tied up in those damned trusts that Harris wrote.”

“Those trusts saved millions in estate taxes,” Scintilton seethed.

“And generated nearly as much in fees,” retorted the financial advisor.

The Rector noticed that Horlach wasn't wearing socks. Betty Campbell smoothed her skirt expectantly and gazed at him. Their hands were close enough to touch. Spears recalled persistent rumors that Spencer sometimes provided his clients with other personal services under the rubric of wealth management.

"Well, he can't have any of my money," Meredith snapped. "I've got the kids to look after by myself."

"I'm very illiquid at the moment myself," Nelson, Jr. said.

"I'm sure Mr. Spencer has thought this all through," his mother said hopefully.

"Of course he'll be living with you, Betty," Spencer suggested to test her reaction. "As long as you share a car, I don't think any radical changes have to be made."

"Daddy never shared anything with anybody," Meredith laughed. "He's going to want everything back."

"You did the funeral," Nelson, Jr. rounded on the priest. "What went wrong?"

Spears was amazed at how quickly they moved from self-pity to clerical malpractice. Harris Scintilton eyed him like a cobra sizing up a mongoose.

"The resurrection of the dead is an article of faith," the Rector replied.

"But not one at a time," Nelson, Jr. argued. "Not just to us. It's not fair."

Tired of the TV game, the grandchildren entered the room, pouting for pizza.

"We'll get it on the way home," their mother said, standing up.

"I'd better be going, too," Spears said, preferring an elevator ride with Meredith and her children to further complaints about the miracle. He left the attorney and the financial advisor eyeing each other like gauchos in a knife fight.

Elizabeth took him aside at the door, while Meredith stalked after her children to the elevator.

“What am I supposed to do if he wants to, well, you know?” she whispered.

“However you handled it before, I suppose,” the bachelor priest replied.

Elizabeth Campbell started to cry.

“It isn’t that bad, is it?” Spears said.

“Sometimes you just don’t know what to believe, do you?” she sobbed.

Nelson was sitting up in bed against an avalanche of pillows when Spears arrived at his room.

“Oh, hello, Charles,” the patient greeted him, raising an arm trailing plastic tubes.

“Betty dropped by again yesterday evening,” Campbell said. “Nobody seems very happy to have me back,”

“Most people have difficulty dealing with a new situation,” Spears explained.

“By the way, do you remember what happened?”

“Honest to God, Charlie, it was the damndest thing I ever saw. One minute a doctor was pounding on my chest and the next I was on stage facing the lights, like when you’re in high school choir. Everybody was wearing white robes, and we were packed in so tight on the risers that you could hardly move.”

Nelson Campbell paused as if he saw again that heavenly choir surrounding him like ice sheets on a glacier facing the morning sun.

“And it just went on and on. I never could stand church music, that’s why I played golf most Sundays, and now you have to stand there and sing twenty-four seven. My back was just killing me. We sang “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Amazing Grace,”

“The Hallelujah Chorus” and the rest of them so damn many times I had them all memorized.

Campbell reached for a plastic cup with a bent straw and sipped.

“How did you get back here?” the priest prompted him.

“I started moving up the risers, step by step, just like I did in choir. I knew they had to end somewhere, and I could climb down and get away, maybe have a cigarette in the rest room. It seemed like it was going to take me forever. I was squeezing between the two fattest women I’d ever seen, when I popped out the back.”

“Popped out the back?” Spears repeated, amazed.

“I fell so far I thought I’d bust something when I landed. But here I was again with some guy pounding on my chest as if I’d never been away.”

His description of heaven was unlike any Spears had ever heard. Perhaps, he thought, that was why so few return to say anything about it.

“I’m beginning to think I made a mistake,” Campbell continued.

“What would you do if you returned to heaven?” Spears wondered.

“Do you think they’d give me another chance?”

“There’s always another chance,” the priest assured him.

“I’d go down to the stage into the lights instead of backing out. There has to be somebody watching who can tell me what it’s all about.”

It was the first time Nelson Campbell had ever shown any spiritual insight. He had learned nothing in his first life of sixty-five years and everything in his second of one day. The priest’s faith in heaven was restored.

“Hello, dear,” Elizabeth called with forced cheerfulness from the door. “The children are here.”

Meredith’s children squeezed past her carrying extra large soft drinks followed by their mother and Nelson, Jr.

“Let Grandma have the chair,” Meredith snapped at her son, who had plopped down in the visitor’s chair as soon as Spears arose.

Nelson Campbell eyed his family with the watchfulness of a cornered animal.

“Where’s Monica?” he demanded.

“We’ll talk about that, Dad,” Nelson, Jr. smirked. “But first we should go over the figures. Why don’t you kids take a hike?”

His niece and nephew turned to their Mother.

“Where can they go?” she asked.

“There’s a TV room by the lobby,” Spears suggested, anxious to avoid the coming confrontation. “I’ll show them.”

“Come back tomorrow,” Nelson said. “Sometimes I think you’re the only one not trying to get something out of me.”

Brushing aside the tubes, Spears shook his parishioner’s hand. Meredith’s children were in the elevator before he could say goodbye to Mrs. Campbell.

“You’ve what?” were the last words Spears heard Nelson Campbell utter just before the elevator doors closed.

Spears had left the teenagers to fight over the largest chair in front of the waiting room TV, when he heard soft chimes signaling a “Code Blue” on the hospital intercom. Somewhere, like a bee from a smoking hive, another patient was trying to escape. Did

they need an alto, a tenor or a bass in that celestial choir where Nelson Campbell was supposed to spend eternity?

There was a voice mail for him from Elizabeth Campbell when he returned to the church. Nelson had gone into ventricular fibrillation again and died. She wanted a private funeral and no obituary to draw attention to the family's misadventure with immortality. Her voice sounded much relieved.

"Hope you got it right this time," Nelson, Jr. said to the priest after his father's second funeral.

Only Mrs. Campbell, Nelson, Jr., Meredith and her children, Harris Scintilton and Horlach Spencer, the people who had a real interest in keeping Nelson Campbell dead, had attended. Spears read the first draft of his sermon on the raising of Lazarus, confident that none of them would be in church to hear it again on Sunday. Once a week was enough for Episcopalians.

"Charles, there's something I wanted to ask about your sermon," Mrs. Campbell said, edging him away from the others. "Do you really think that heaven is porous, and that if we weren't so blind we would see many dead people among us?"

"Yes," he said, glancing at Nelson's family and professional advisers.

"I'm leaving tomorrow to spend some time with Monica in Naples," she said.

"Could Nelson find me if it happens again?"

"I wouldn't worry about that," Spears replied. "This time he learned to let go."