

# Worth the Tears

Emily Bowers, CNA

I walk into work thinking about her. The last time I walked through these doors, I wondered if I would ever see her again. Today, I wondered if she would be there when I walked through the halls. As I start my day, I begin to inquire about her. Is she still here? Is she still alive? How is she? They tell me she is still here, in body, but she's really gone. Any minute could be her last. I go about my busy day, tending to my patients and their needs. She begins to slip from my mind in the craziness of the day. Later in the day, someone comes to find me and says, "She's yours to take care of until the end of your shift." I slowly walk down the hallway, dreading what I will see.

You see, I have gotten to know her well in the past year or so, have seen her smile through it all, and have seen her try her best to be as independent as she could be. I remember her smiling at me through her pain in my early stages of being a certified nursing assistant, as I blubbered through introducing myself. I saw her smile through the chemotherapy, the cold sweating, and the endless days and nights of lying on that cold, hard bed. I saw her walk the halls the past few months just trying to be strong and pull through. She did not know a limitation. She was going to make it, no matter what. She never gave up.

The smell of deadly cancer, the smell I have come to recognize all too well, lingered in the hallway. I walk into her room to find two others around her bed, watching, making sure there was a breath to follow the last one, and then one after that.

One looks up at me and says, "Do you smell that?" I sadly nod and walk closer. Seconds that seemed like minutes go by slowly as we wait for the next labored, shallow breath. A nurse at her bedside is holding her hand, whispering sweet assurance.

At some point, she is going to let go. At some point, one of us will have to prepare her to be seen by what family may or may not come to see her. I do not understand how someone could let a family member die alone. I never will. It never gets easier.

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"That is why I do what I do. To stand there in the gap for those who have no one to hold their hand while they take their last breath."

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"You have fought so hard. It's OK to let go. We're here with you. Just let go." There is no family. There are no friends. Just the three of us. My fellow assistant suggests we sing a chorus of "Amazing Grace" as she bids me to close the door so we do not disturb the others. We gather around her bedside, holding her hands, trying to be a comfort. Emotion overwhelms us, and we cannot seem to get out the words.

A tear starts to slide down my cheek, and then another, and another after that. No, I am stronger than this. I should be used to this by now. I just cannot stop the tears. As she continues to fight for her breath, we slowly walk out, one at a time, and try to finish our shifts. Every once in a while, I poke my head in the door, just to make sure she is still breathing. She is. She is still fighting.

When my shift is over and I walk out the door, she is still lying there. Fighting.

But that is why I do what I do. To stand there in the gap for those who have no one. Those who have no one to hold their hand while they take their last breath. It never gets easier, but it is always worth it.

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