

Johnteen

By Michael Groetsch

November 2001

It is the fall of 2001. There is a faint chill in the evening air. My wife Barbara sits quietly as I drive into the large parking complex of East Jefferson Hospital. People scurrying back and forth in blue scrub suits and white lab coats suggest that the shift is changing. The staff leaving for the day seems anxious to get home to their families. The staff arriving seems anxious not to be late for patients who await their care.

Entering the main door of the hospital's massive lobby, its extravagant design appears inappropriate for the pain found inside its walls. Such luxury provides no relief to the suffering. Perhaps it is meant for those who visit. Perhaps the décor is for those who grieve. As I walk through the hospital's long corridor, mechanized voices emerge from the intercom with tones of urgency. The solemn eyes of those who sit in a large waiting room reach out to mine, but quickly withdraw into silent thought.

Barbara and I approach a patient information desk to the pleasant welcome of an aging man. The gray-haired clerk wears a volunteer name tag below the left pocket of his starched white shirt. I ask for my mother's room number and his prompt reply that she is in T-2 suggests that other family members have already arrived.

As we exit the elevator on the second floor and approach room T-2, we immediately hear the sound of my father's voice. We enter Mom's room to the cautious smiles of my sisters, brothers, nephews, and aunts. She is scheduled for surgery in less than three hours. Mom has cancer. I find it so very difficult to say the word.

Dad sits nervously on the edge of Mom's hospital bed. Almost like a child clinging to his mother, he caresses her left arm with gentle hands. Although she appears upbeat, her eyes express concern. Surgery is to take two to three hours. We are hopeful that things will go well, but the thought of losing her is daunting. I glance at the clock that hangs on the bare wall. It is 3:30 p.m. I look again and it is only 3:34. Seconds seem like minutes, minutes like hours. Mom is to be taken into surgery at 5:45 p.m. Time seems to move so slowly when anticipating such events.

At 5:40 p.m., a young man with dark hair and kind eyes enters the small room. He has come to transport Mom to surgery. He seems instinctively aware of our distress and concern. Like his eyes, his demeanor is soft and warm. His voice serves as an antidote to the anxiety we feel. After receiving Mom's assurance that she is ready, he carefully guides her hospital gurney out of T-2 to the loud whispers of our silent prayers. I notice my brother's eyes and cheeks are red. He has been crying in an adjoining room. Most of my family cries in private. I often cry alone, so that I don't intrude on others.

We gather in the spacious area of the hospital where those in waiting measure time in microseconds. On my left is a large screen television that no one watches. Its muffled sound serves as a placebo, like the white noise of a ceiling fan. On my right is Dad. He drifts deep into thoughts that only husbands or wives have at times like this. In an attempt to separate myself from the uncertainty of the moment, I allow my mind to drift into pleasant memories of my childhood.

As I retreat into the past, my mind's eye projects bright images that encompass the spectrum of the rainbow. Although I dream in black and white, I recall my childhood in vivid color. I see Mom spraying my tiny worn out penny loafers a bright shiny red.

They are as bright as the candy apples that she gets me when we go to the circus. They are as red as the fire truck with the bell and ladders that she got me for Christmas. She makes such a fuss over my shoes that I feel good inside. Although it is difficult to explain the significance of those tiny red shoes, they were the earliest memory that I possess of life around me and I am blessed to have shared it with my mother.

I shut my eyes and continue the search for more of my past. I see Mom placing the shiny silver and gold stars on grammar school papers of which I am so proud. She places a star above all of my A's and B's and tells me what a wonderful job I did. She gives me a kiss and another special star, one that is ocean blue. I never told her that for years, I kept the papers with the glittering stars hidden away in a secret place. I would always look at them whenever I wanted to feel reassured. I only wish that I could find my shiny stars this night.

I always associate bright colors and pleasant experiences of my childhood with my mother. I see her attaching deep blue and sapphire green reflectors made of cut glass onto my homemade skateboard. I sit and watch her plant dark- red poinsettias, with green-red centers, in her little garden in front of our home. On yesterday's Halloween, she carves a smiling face on a large orange pumpkin and lets me pull the seeds from its belly with my small hands. I help her wash our new canary- yellow Buick convertible. Its heavy metal grillwork resembles an exposed steam heater in an old office building. Although I don't fully understand why I associate bright colors with my early life with my mother, such reflections seem to rescue me from moments of darkness. But this is not a time to be analytical. It is a time to visit my past so that I may endure the present.

As I continue my search for other treasured memories, I hear the echo of Mom's voice from another distant time. I see her as a 28- year- old woman. A young woman with

soft blonde hair and fair skin who brings ice cream to eat and comic books to read as I recover from tonsil surgery. She reminds me of a beautiful actress I saw in a late night movie. Her name, *Johnteen*, is the prettiest name I've ever heard; prettier than all of the colors of the rainbow; prettier than a dark- red poinsettia with its green-red center.

My private reflections of life with my mother are interrupted by the nervous stirrings of my father. It is now 8:45 in the evening. It has been nearly three hours since she has been taken to surgery. Dad is beginning to worry that they are taking so long. He begins to question why no one comes with a progress report on her condition. With hands in both pockets, he paces up and down the waiting area's wide corridor. Although he doesn't sob on the outside, I know that he cries within his soul. After my aunt and sister reassure him that it is still too early to anticipate word on Mom's progress, he settles back into his chair and escapes into the empty sound of the big screen television.

Treasured memories of my mother always merge with those of my father. My mind blinks to the sight of Dad coming into the bedroom in which I sleep. I am five- years- old and always lie in Mom's bed on Thursday nights when he goes bowling. I don't know why, but their bed always seems warmer than my own. As Dad lifts and carries me to my own bedroom, he hugs my body as I pretend to sleep. I want to feel his touch as he tucks me into my bed. I want to feel him kiss my cheek as he arranges the pillow beneath my head. Such kisses are so much better when he thinks that I am sleeping.

As I struggle to evade the stress of Mom's vigil, my mind continues to meander into my past with Dad. I am 10- years- old and sit on the porch of our home. I watch him load trucks in a pouring rain. He is the shipping clerk for our family business. His company faces the front of our house. School is out for the summer and I sit on the porch in eager anticipation of bringing him lunch. Mom lets me bring Dad his sandwich and chocolate bar that she stuffed in a brown paper bag. He shares his lunch with a white pigeon that always

seems to know the hour of the day. Dad goes to work at 6:00 in the morning and doesn't return until sunset. His 12-hour workdays are his way of telling us how much we mean to him.

In yet another image of Dad, I am 15- years- old. He sits quietly at his desk in our spacious new home and pays the family bills so that we don't have to worry. I am old enough now to realize how much he has done for us; a blue- collar worker who made our lives comfortable through sweat and workdays that often extended into the night. Dad has provided us with a life frequently taken for granted. I am proud that he is my father. Perhaps I need to tell him so.

It is 9:33 in the evening. My welcomed flashbacks are broken by the sudden approach of my mother's surgeon. Dad jumps from his chair and rushes towards the doctor. As he questions the surgeon concerning her condition, my heart seems to momentarily stop as we await a reply. Like the young man who escorted Mom to surgery, the doctor has dark hair, kind eyes, and a bedside manner that is soft and warm. As the surgeon speaks and makes eye contact with Dad, she appears cautiously optimistic. She explains that most of the cancer has been removed and that Mom has been placed in the recovery room. Dad presses the doctor for absolute assurance that Mom will be okay. She responds by saying that while the cancer is advanced, her post-operative condition is favorable. She further explains that chemotherapy should eliminate what could not be removed in surgery. For the first time since early evening, I notice that my father is smiling.

It is 10:30 p.m. We enter the area where my mother is recovering. Tubes and an oxygen mask are attached to her body like the tentacles of an octopus. Her breathing is labored and she appears in distress. My heart quivers until a nurse enters and reassures us that her condition is stable. I only wish that I could bring Mom ice cream and comic

books to relieve her pain. I only wish that I could find my bright shiny stars and stick them on the medical chart that hangs above her bed.

October 2002

Although Mom has done relatively well since surgery eleven months ago, she recently suffered a series of setbacks. For the third time in less than three months, she has been readmitted into East Jefferson Hospital with a high fever. Chemotherapy has ravaged her body and spirit. Although she tries to remain upbeat for us, her face cannot conceal her pain.

My wife and I enter the elevator to the whispers of another couple discussing the plight of their own mother. She is also hospitalized with cancer. Although I feel like holding both of them, I remain empathetically silent as they exit in tears. Once again, we enter the fifth floor to visit my mother. We are not certain that she will see tomorrow.

At 8:30 p.m., as our family sits near Mom's bedside, her face becomes swollen and bright red. She begins shaking violently and whimpers with pain. My sister Jeanne and I rush to the nursing desk to alert the staff of the crisis. A clerk filling out medical charts tells us they are short staffed but will immediately call for a nurse.

Fifteen minutes pass and she still shivers and moans. We nervously wait for someone to assist us. The sheets on her bed are drenched with sweat. I feel my heart pounding in my chest. I am terrified that she may die before anyone arrives. In a desperate attempt to address her pain, Dad climbs in bed and embraces Mom's body.

At 8:50 p.m., a tall nurse with silver-white hair enters the room. She apologizes for the delay. She explains that employee reductions have left her almost helpless in responding quickly to such situations. After addressing her immediate needs, the nurse

tells us that Mom is scheduled to take her medications at 9:00 p.m. She assures us that she will return momentarily. Mom's fever is dangerously high.

It is 9:20 p.m. but no one has arrived. Mom begins to shake so violently that her bed vibrates in rhythm. Dad continues to cradle her. Once again, Jeanne and I rush to the nursing station seeking assistance. As before, we are informed that personnel shortages have caused them to be behind schedule. We are told they are doing their best.

We return to Mom's room, but I station myself in front of her door hoping to find someone who can help. I see a nurse at the far end of the long empty corridor and approach her with a tone of urgency. She tells me that she must first take care of a patient whose medications were due an hour ago.

At 9:50 p.m. the nurse that I met in the hallway hurriedly enters the room. She rummages through my mother's medical chart to determine which medications are due. Like the other nurses on the floor this night, she is polite, but stressed. After giving Mom an I.V., she takes her temperature. Dad watches and reads the numbers as they rise on the thermometer. Her temperature has risen to 104.3. I silently pray that it will stop. The nurse explains they cannot monitor patients as often as they should. She offers to leave the thermometer with us. We agree. I wonder about patients whose families are not close by. I dismiss the thought. The possibilities are frightening.

It is almost midnight. Mom's current crisis is over. Her fever has passed. She no longer shivers. She appears exhausted but speaks in a manner that provides us with temporary relief. With the reassurance that Dad and Jeanne will stay with her for the remainder of the night, I kiss Mom's forehead to let her know that I love her. My wife and I leave for the evening so we can face the next day.

Within three days of Mom's hospitalization, we are present as the doctor releases her to go home. She is to resume chemotherapy within a week. As a nurse's assistant helps her into a wheelchair, I notice Dad making 'the sign of the cross' with his fingertips. The same hand movements that he makes each time he passes in front of a Catholic Church; a symbol that reveres a higher power.

After arriving at Dad's car, the attendant lifts Mom into its back seat. As a light rain falls, Dad drives from the parking garage towards a home they have missed, the home where we were raised as children.

November 2002

It is 6:30 on Saturday morning. The piercing sound of the bedroom phone awakens me. It is my father. His voice is stressed. He tells me that Mom relapsed in the middle of the night. She is in the ICU at the hospital with a high fever. Dad tells me that she is only semi-conscious. His words are those of worry.

I quickly shower, dress, kiss my wife, and rush to my car. Barbara tells me that she will meet me in an hour. As I speed towards the hospital, my mind wanders to places I don't want to go. I feel emotionally numb by the thought of losing my mother. Once again, I cry in private as I drive into the hospital's garage.

I easily navigate the corridors that once confused me. The meandering hallways of the hospital have become too familiar. As I enter a crowded elevator, I now find myself avoiding eye contact with the people inside. I don't want to see their pain. Grief is not unique. It only appears to be when it is your own.

I enter the waiting area to the sight of Dad sitting alone in the corner of the room. He stares blankly at the early morning news. My brothers and sisters have not yet arrived.

I want to hug Dad but inhibitions restrict my movements. Although he informs me that visiting hours are over until 10:30 a.m., I cannot bear the thought of losing Mom without saying goodbye.

I enter the ICU and plead with the nurse to let me see my mother. She hesitates but reads my eyes and asks that I be brief. Thanking the nurse for her kindness, I hurriedly walk into Mom's room. Although she breathes through an oxygen mask and cannot speak, she seems to welcome me with a warm expression. I speak the words "I love you." I tell her that I hope I've been a good son. As my eyes moisten, tears run down the sides of her flush face. I realize, until now, I have never seen my mother cry.

It is now 10:00 p.m. We have been here for nearly fourteen hours. Mom received a transfusion and has miraculously recovered from a near death experience. Her fever is gone and she is, for the moment, out of danger. Her legs, however, remain red and swollen. Dad massages her feet with cream and tells her that she is his baby.

Our entire family holds vigil around Mom's bed and tries to remain positive. Barbara tells my mother how young her hands look as she proudly holds them up for all to see. My brother, Barry, reflects on a funny story about our childhood. My sister, Brenda, comments on Mom's beautiful ocean blue eyes; eyes highlighted by a hairless scalp; eyes as beautiful as her name; eyes prettier than the bright red poinsettias she once planted in her garden; eyes that watched over us as children.

By Tuesday evening, we take a deep breath knowing that once again, Mom is coming home. We are aware, however, that this is a process that could end tomorrow; that additional time with her could be brief. Denial has become our friend. It whispers untruths so that we can face another day.

December 2002

It is a chilly Christmas Eve. A cloudless sky reveals the beauty of bright twinkling stars. My wife and I travel towards our family's Christmas party in anticipation of seeing my mother. The thought that she will celebrate Christmas with us overwhelms me. I pray that it will not be her last.

We enter the party to a flurry of children who eagerly await the arrival of Santa Claus. Mom sits in the center of the den surrounded by my brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, and friends. Dad sits by her side and openly displays his love. Mom is wearing a pretty red dress that brightens the room, a dress that reflects the colorful memories of my childhood.

It has been thirteen months since she had surgery. Her courage over the last year has been remarkable. Her will to survive so that she may continue to share her life with us is heroic. As a tribute to her spirit, I present her with a red poinsettia in a vase covered with shiny gold paper. The paper shimmers like the gold stars that she once gave me as a child. I whisper that I love her and I am proud she is my mother.

Within an hour, my cousin Kevin arrives at the party. He is dressed as Santa and is ambushed by anxious children. It occurs to me how quickly the years have passed. My memory recalls a scene in which Kevin's father played Santa at our Christmas party when I was a child. I still recall the anticipation of receiving my gift. It was a gift that came from Mom's heart. It was a gift that came from Dad's 12-hour workdays. On this night, however, the greatest gift I receive is Mom with her glowing smile. I don't want this night to end. I don't want this to be her last Christmas.

For the remainder of the night, we eat, drink, and tell stories of Christmas' past; stories that lay buried within our hearts; stories of precious moments that we have shared together; stories of love. Even within the absence of words, we let one another know how much we care. We hug and kiss, laugh and cry, and share glances that reaffirm our oneness. And then the night is over.

January 2003

We gather in the waiting area of the ICU. Mom is critically ill. Her kidneys are now poisoning her body. She has requested that she not be attached to a dialysis machine. It is apparent she is prepared to enter the tunnel that will terminate her pain. She has suffered so much. It would be cruel to go against her wishes and attach her to wires and tubes that will prolong her agony.

As in the past, in small groups, we enter the ICU to say our good-byes. While I stand by her bedside, once again, I reflect on images of my past. I suddenly see Mom standing over my hospital bed feeding me ice cream to soothe my pain. I see her placing Dad's sandwich and chocolate bar into a brown paper bag before he leaves for work. I see her changing the bandage on my older brother's arm following an accident in which he fell. I see her hugging my younger brother as he wins the race at the annual picnic. I see her giving my little sister medicine that will reduce her fever. I see her cuddling my youngest sister shortly after she was born. Mom was always our caretaker. Now we are hers. It seems so strange how roles become reversed.

Dad holds a straw to Mom's lips in an effort to quench her dry throat. He gently strokes her forehead and face with his right hand. He reminds her how much she is loved. He tells her that she is his baby. He tells her how he would like to take her home so that

she could sit in her favorite chair. I momentarily retreat from the room in an effort to regain my composure.

It is 8:30 p.m. The visiting hours in the ICU are over. During the course of the day, an endless stream of family members have come and gone. My sisters are weary. The hours they spend at the hospital are excessive. Recognizing their fatigue, I suggest that they go home to rest. I offer to spend the night.

Dad refuses to leave Mom's side. He knows that the end is very near. He knows that the woman who has given him five children, his wife of 59 years, is about to leave this life until they are rejoined in the next. Jeanne, Brenda, and the rest of my family go home for the evening. Brenda kisses Mom's forehead and tells her that she will return in the morning.

Following everyone's departure, the waiting area and surrounding corridor become quiet and still. Dad stays in the room with Mom while I try to sleep in the lobby. The blend of distant voices coming from a television, the hospital intercom, and staff members walking the hallways provides me with the comfort that I am not alone. I slowly fall into a twilight sleep.

At 1:00 a.m., the sound of a hallway door closing stirs me from my restless sleep. Knowing that the nurses have given us permission to come and go as we please, I get up and walk into the ICU to check on Mom. As I approach the door of the small room where she lies, I see Dad standing near her bedside. He is sobbing. Without intruding on his private moment, I retreat into the lobby and cry until sleep comforts me.

At 3:30 a.m., I am wakened by muffled voices coming from the corridor. I quickly rise and re-enter the ICU to see if Mom is okay. Two nurses reviewing a patient

chart smile empathetically. I enter the small cubicle in which Mom and Dad sleep to reassure myself that she is still breathing. Although I know that we need to let her go to the other side, the thought of her leaving us terrifies me. It seems so odd how life repeats itself. It was only yesterday that my parents opened our doors to see if we were okay. Now we open theirs. Dad sleeps in a fetal position on the floor in the corner of the room. He has not left her side for a week. I cannot comprehend his pain.

January 15, 2003

Although Mom is slipping further away, she has survived the night. She has been transferred to the floor where patients go to die. All machines and substances that would prolong her life and suffering have been withdrawn. She is being allowed to enter the tunnel; the tunnel that will transport her into the arms of loved ones that wait on the other side.

Dad stands over her bed and sobs. He tells Mom that he would give all his wealth to spend just one more day with her. Dad strokes her hair. He caresses her face. He kisses her lips. Dad tells Mom how much he loves her and says goodbye. It is then that she begins to enter the tunnel. It is then that she begins to travel to the other side.

Suddenly, *Johnteen* begins to hear a familiar voice in the near distance. "Michael is right. You do have one of the most beautiful names that I have ever heard. I should know. I am the one who gave it to you."

As *Johnteen* looks up, her mother Eva, who passed before her, extends her hands and lifts her from the other side of the tunnel. And then there is light.

"Welcome home, *Johnteen*. I've missed you so. What a beautiful name."

I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is the object of beauty and strength. I stand and watch her until at length she hangs out like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.

Then someone at my side says: "There, she is gone!"

"Gone where?"

"Gone from my sight. That is all."

She is just as large in mast and hull and spur as she was when she left my side and she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined port. Her diminished size is in me, not in her. And just at that moment when someone at my side says: "She is gone!" There are others watching her coming, and other voices ready to take up the glad shout: "Here she comes!"

And that is dying. - Henry Van Dyke