

FIVE WEEKS IN A CRITICAL CANCER WARD

One Sunday the telephone rang and my sister-in-law in California wanted to know where to send the body--meaning my husband. He had been operated on for a small lump on his cheek, and it turned out to be cancerous. He was paralyzed and deformed on that side of his face. They said he only had a few days to live.

I called California and he was in the Veteran's Hospital. He tried to talk over the portable phone, but his throat was closed and you could not hear him. I asked the nurse what he said, and she said he would not leave that place. He was going to die and for me to come quick.

I lived a long way from California, two days and two nights on the train. I was afraid I would get there too late, but God was on my side and he was still alive. When I got to the hospital and then to the ward where he was, it was a large room with eight beds four on each side. Each bed was divided by a green, heavy curtain, and you could pull the cord and it made a nice size private room.

I asked for his bed and they showed me. But he did not look like my husband. He looked horrible! His one eye was out and he could hardly see with the other one. His mouth was wide open and drawn and crooked from the side of his face being paralyzed. He looked like an Arminian that you see in the magazines of the starving people in the foreign lands. His throat was closed and he could not talk over a whisper. You could not understand him. He had something like green moss all over his body. They told me it was from starving, as he could not swallow and eat and hardly slept.

When I looked at him I could not believe my eyes. He wrote on a pad, "Don't be afraid. It's me. Don't cry and don't get hysterical. If you do, it will worry me. Don't leave me. I hope they keep me out of pain." He also said, "I can't eat nor sleep. I wish I could."

I called my brother-in-law in Memphis, Tennessee, a surgeon, and told him. Then he called California and talked to the doctors. The next morning when I went there, they had put a tube in his nose and he was fed that way. He ate three times a day for five weeks. I thought he was better, but the doctors and nurses knew he was not, and was getting weaker and weaker each day.

There was eight beds in the room. It was called the Critical Ward. Later he was moved to another room. They said it was called "St. Peter's Room", and then the next move was out for good. They had seven or eight funerals per day there. All of these men knew they only had a short time to live. Some mornings you would go there and a bed would be vacated in the night.

Each man had a cancer in different places; one on the shoulder, one on the stomach, one on the brain, the throat, the rectum, the chest and so forth. They were all in real pain.

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Every three hours a nurse came with a push cart and would give each man a hypodermic on his leg, arm or hip. My husband had two shots every three hours and a pill. If the nurse happened to be a few minutes late, the men all would start groaning, crying and asking for her. One man hurt so bad before he got his shots he would always say, "How much more can a man stand?" After they got their shots things would get quite again for another three hours.

I had permission to come and go when I wanted to, so I stayed each day fourteen hours and was busy with my husband every minute. He could not hold a Kleenex he was so weak. He could not hold a cigarette in his mouth. The only way he could cool his mouth was with a little cotton pad dipped in cool water and squeezed, and I also had to put cotton ball pads, dipped in water, on his one eye.

One patient caught his hair on fire, also the bed spread, so the nurse said he could not smoke unless someone lit his cigarette and put them out. As I was only two feet from his bed, it turned out to be my job. He smoked one behind the other all day long continually.

The hospital served the patients delicious food and served well, but the men all complained about everything. It was either too hot or too cold or the coffee was awful. Some could not eat, their throats were closed also. Some had to be fed. The nurses, orderlies and colored help all were good and kind to the men. A person would have to spend a lot of money for what he got in the government hospital.

Twice a day was called "Nourishment Time". A cart would be rolled in with every kind of juice imaginable. Each man was served what he wanted. The Gray Ladies came at regular intervals, wrote letters and shopped for the men. Twice a week the Canteen Cart was rolled in and you could buy anything a man wanted from pins to electric razors.

The men were like little children. All the orderlies were busy one time, so a patient asked me to get him a urinal. I went way down the hall and brought him one, and, do you know, he saw it was bent and I had to go all the way down the hall and get another one. Under ordinary conditions he would not have thought of asking me to do that. He was a flier in all three wars. He had a plane at the air port. His brother came from the north and took it home to sell because he had flown his last trip.

Ordinarily I would not have wanted to be in the room with eight men all sick, but they were all gentlemen, not one thing was embarrassing for me. One man was rolled in and he started cursing. The nurse said, "We don't have any talk like that in here. (Those are fighting words.)" He said, "That's why I'm talking like that because I couldn't fight a match box." From that time on, for the next few days, he was all right until he passed on.

Each night I would ask each one what I could bring them in the morning. They would all say: "Just come early. We will be waiting. We can't use a thing." One man did ask for a can of tomatoes. I knew he could not eat it. He just kept it on his bedside table to look at.

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I asked if I could call a foot doctor to come and trim my husband's toes and finger nails. The next morning a colored woman named Gertrude and a colored orderly came in. They manicured his nails and cut his toe nails. When all the men saw what was going on, just like children, they all wanted to be fixed, also. After it was all over, they said, "Didn't we have fun?" They had forgotten about being sick. In a few moments though they were all groaning and waiting for the twelve o'clock shot.

All the men have head phones if they care to listen to the radio, but the eight in the ward only slept and woke up when it was time for another shot.

The hospital center was on a thousand acres of ground. It was beautiful. I heard that a well known movie actor's grandfather donated the land to the government. They have their own funeral parlors. It is like a big city. I was at a hotel a long way from the hospital, so they told me to get closer so they could get me quick. The Legion had built and donated a beautiful guest house of brick and concrete for the critical patient's relatives that are just waiting for the end of their loved ones. They charge one dollar per night. The rooms are furnished beautifully and have private baths.

By the grace of God my husband lived five weeks over his time. It happened so quick. He got through the end without pain, like he wanted to do. He had a mass and was in the Slumber Room in the beautiful Spanish Chapel. They blew Taps after the services. Then we brought him back home to be buried. He could have been buried in the government cemetery without cost, if we wanted. I am very grateful that he was fortunate enough to be in that government hospital.

Cancer is terrible. It strikes so quick. I never knew it could strike in my family. I am alone now, and the road seems long, but I am thankful that I spent the last five weeks with him. I believe I helped a little. We had a good life, about forty years; also a fine son we lost. It's all like a dream. I am glad I was part of the dream.

HELP FIGHT CANCER! SEND ANY AMOUNT TO THE E. JOYCE MORIARTY MEMORIAL IN CARE OF CANCER CONTROL HEADQUARTERS, 787 JEFFERSON AVENUE, MEMPHIS, 10, TENNESSEE.