



Between
LIFE
and
DEATH

from despair to hope



DR KASHYAP PATEL

Chapter 4

Dreams Shattered

*To-morrow, to-morrow and to-morrow
Creeps in the petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time:
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, our brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more, it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

— *William Shakespeare*

Tired from a late-night volunteering at the theatre, Annie awoke to the ringing alarm. She silenced it with a smack and snuggled against Todd's warm back. She sighed, knowing that three unfinished costumes with Friday delivery dates awaited her at work and Jess wasn't scheduled to return for another two weeks.

As Annie moved to a sitting position, every muscle in her body screamed in protest. She rolled her shoulders and felt a pain in her right breast. Maybe she'd pulled a muscle. The lighting and camera equipment she had moved last night was heavy, but she had moved it before without injury or muscle aches the following day.

With a deep yawn, Annie climbed out of bed and made her way to the bathroom. She flicked on the light and removed her nightshirt. In addition to the tenderness, her right breast had a new red and swollen area on the outside of her nipple. Worry picked at her mind as she outlined the swelling with her fingertips. Her back and shoulder muscles were stiff and sore from exertion, but the feeling in her breast was different.

The warm shower improved the muscle stiffness in her body but had no effect on her breast. Annie pushed the discomfort to the back of her mind. Breast tissue was more sensitive than back muscles. Perhaps it required additional healing time.

After slipping into jeans and a T-shirt, she ran a brush through the long, dark hair that tickled her hip, then braided the locks into a thick rope gathered at the nape of her neck. With each movement, the discomfort in her right breast caused her to wince. She flipped off the light. The rent was due in two weeks. If nothing unexpected came up, maybe she could afford a clinic visit after she sent the landlord the monthly check. Annie slipped through the front door to avoid disturbing Todd. For now, she had to finish those costumes.

For the rest of the week, Annie immersed herself in meeting her deadline. As she selected sequins, scarves, fabrics, the art consumed her—until she had to raise her right arm. Her breast was not improving.

Analgesics became part of her diet. During the day, she focused on her work. Sleeping represented a challenge. With nothing to occupy her mind, the tenderness seemed to intensify. The day Annie mailed the rent, she left work for a quick appointment at the local urgent care center.

A middle-aged physician dressed in a white lab coat entered the examining room, holding a clipboard. “Ms. Carlson, I’m Dr. Smith. Tell me about the problem with your breast.”

“I got up a few days ago and it was swollen and red. It hurts every time I move my shoulder. I take aspirin, but it doesn’t help much.”

Although the physician didn’t apply a lot of pressure as he palpated the swelling, Annie had to grit her teeth to keep from crying out. His deep frown of concentration made her nervous. Maybe it wasn’t just a pulled muscle.

“You have a lot of inflammation in the tissue. How long has this been going on?”

Annie concentrated on the past few weeks. “Sorry. It wasn’t just a few days. It’s been almost two weeks. I’ve been so busy. I guess time got away from me. I noticed it the day after I set up the theatre audiovisual equipment. Occasionally I lift heavy equipment, so I thought I’d pulled something.”

“Do you remember a specific incident when you may have injured yourself?”

Since Annie had spent a lot of time in the theatre, she was adept at reading nonverbal cues. Dr. Smith’s facial expression and tone didn’t match the nonchalant way he tried to phrase his question. As she recalled the night before she noticed the problem, her heart rate accelerated and she could feel perspiration on her upper lip.

“I don’t remember anything,” she answered.

“You could have suffered a minor trauma or injury. Sometimes an infection, a condition called mastitis or inflammation of the breast, results after an injury. There may be a small abscess forming. I’ll write you a prescription for antibiotics. You need to return in two weeks. If we don’t get an adequate response, we may need to schedule additional testing.”

Annie exhaled in relief. Just an infection. In a few days she’d be good as new.

As with many artists, Annie Carlson had struggled with the transition from education to employment. After completing her studies in New York and multiple relocations, she and her

husband, Todd, finally settled in Phoenix, Arizona. Although a native of South Carolina, Annie felt comfortable in her new home. She hadn't attained all of her personal goals yet, but she was close.

Money was in short supply, but she had love and a fantastic job designing costumes for Broadway shows and theatre artists. At this stage in her life, she refused to worry about multiple shifts and the lack of healthcare coverage. She and Todd were young and healthy, and they would improve their earning potential and benefits as time passed.

At home, Annie placed her antibiotic bottle near the kitchen sink and faithfully adhered to the prescribed schedule. Each morning in the shower, she checked her breast. The swelling slowly subsided and the tenderness improved. After two weeks her breast was no longer sore, but it still didn't look like her left breast. The doctor had told her to return if it didn't improve. Annie checked her side-view reflection. He said *improve*, and she had improved. She just needed more time to heal because she worked so much. Her mom had always harped on her work schedule, and perhaps Mom was right. However, Annie couldn't afford to cut back yet. Things would chill in a few more weeks. As soon as she had a lull in her schedule, she would get another appointment if her breast wasn't totally healed.

Again, life and work occupied Annie's thoughts and time. The Arizona desert moved into summer and the temperatures soared. As Annie slid behind the steering wheel for the short commute home, perspiration beaded along her collarbone and oozed down her cleavage. Even that caused pain to slice through her right breast. As she rolled down the window to let in some air, Annie repositioned her right arm to alleviate the discomfort. For the past week she had ignored the returning pain. Today it was different. At first it had been localized in a spot near her

nipple. Now her entire right breast felt encompassed with fire.

The following day, Annie left work early for an appointment with Dr. Smith. Tension tightened her shoulders as she thumbed through a magazine in the waiting room. The office visit and more antibiotics would take a big bite from her next paycheck. What would she do if he ordered additional testing?

Think positive, she scolded herself.

The nurse called her name, and Dr. Smith entered the exam room eight minutes later. “Ms. Carlson, looks like your abscess is back.”

Annie nodded and gritted her teeth as he gently palpated her inflamed right breast.

“Last time we caught it when it was forming. This time it looks like it’s a full-blown abscess.”

While Annie dressed, he wrote another prescription. “I’m ordering an ultrasound so we can determine the size and location of the problem. After a week of antibiotic therapy, I want you to have a biopsy.”

Two thoughts hit Annie: How much would it cost, and how much would it hurt? Her breast was well beyond tender and she’d already endured two exams. Worse, another office visit would consume the small amount of extra income she would take home from this week’s paycheck.

Financial concerns clouded Annie’s thoughts until a young woman near Annie’s age entered the ultrasound room. “Hi. My name’s Marcie. I’m the ultrasound technician.”

The tension in Annie’s stomach eased. Marcie had small, capable hands and a gentle voice. Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad.

“This may feel a little cold,” Marcie said as she squeezed a thick jelly over Annie’s breast.

Prepared for pain, Annie balled her hands into fists. Marcie moved a round smooth probe over Annie’s swollen breast. Annie relaxed her fingers. Although the light pressure was uncomfortable, the jelly allowed the probe to glide over the skin and reduced the pain. Once certain she could manage the physical discomfort, she turned her attention to the wavy patterns on the black and white screen.

Marcie paused and pressed the intercom. “Dr. Sharp, can you come to the ultrasound room?”

Annie’s gaze flicked from the screen to Marcie. Was her technician new at this procedure and needed some help, or was something abnormal showing up on the screen?

The radiologist, Dr. Sharp, arrived and, after a cursory introduction, peered at the screen. Marcie outlined a dark spot in the middle of a bunch of wavy lines. Annie swallowed past the lump in her throat. Although she had never met the radiologist, something was going on and she could tell it would be bad news and would cost more money than she had.

“Is there someone with you today?” he asked.

“No. I came alone. Why?”

“I want to perform a needle biopsy to obtain a tissue sample. I don’t like the looks of this spot.” Again, he indicated the dark shadow on the screen. “If I do this today, we can get a diagnosis right away.”

Although dollar signs flashed through her mind, Annie wanted to get the procedure behind her and move on with her life. “How long will it take?”

“Twenty minutes—not for the procedure. A biopsy only takes a few minutes. We like

patients to stay after the procedure to ensure they're feeling okay.”

Annie tried to concentrate on the conversation, but the word *biopsy* had started to spin in her mind. Where else had she heard it? Hadn't Aunt Martha had a biopsy? Fear made her heart race in her chest. Aunt Martha's biopsy had preceded her cancer diagnosis, and the horrors of chemotherapy and radiation. However, Aunt Martha was much older than Annie, who was only twenty-nine.

“Ms. Carlson?”

Annie came back to the present. “The biopsy, right? Let's get it over with.”

Except for the prick from the local anesthetic, the biopsy created little physical pain. However, it was the mental stress that moved Annie to the edge. During the procedure, she played the what-if game. What were the chances someone her age could get breast cancer? Would they have to remove her breast? How would Todd react if she was scarred from the procedure?

As she dressed following the biopsy, Annie adjusted her bra to alleviate the pressure on her tender breast and the small surgical site. She lifted her blouse and hesitated. Todd? Should she tell him about the biopsy or wait a few days until she had the results? She fastened the buttons of her shirt and picked up her handbag. This news would make him crazy with worry, and it was going to be needless anyway, right?

But by the time she parked the car in front of the apartment, she felt like she had slowly unraveled and was hanging on by a mere thread. Todd wasn't due to arrive home from work for another three hours. In the meantime? Annie unlocked the door and walked to the wall phone.

After three rings, the line connected to her mother, Jill, in South Carolina.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Annie, I was just thinking about you. How is your breast infection?”

“I’m much better. I saw the doctor today and the infection cleared up. A radiologist took a biopsy to make sure everything was okay.”

Silence filled the line.

“Biopsy?” Jill’s voice trembled.

“Wait, Mom. I don’t want to scare you. They just did it because I kept getting breast infections. The doctor’s going to call in a couple of days with the results. I’m sure it’s going to be fine.”

“You let me know as soon as you hear,” Jill said.

Annie could tell by her mom’s voice that she was having a hard time processing the information, and if she was honest with herself, Annie felt the same way. It was just too much for both of them right now.

“I’ve got to start dinner. Todd will be home soon,” Annie said, infusing her voice with a cheerfulness she didn’t feel.

“Call me the minute you find out, okay?”

“I will, promise.”

The call from Dr. Smith came while Annie and Todd were working. Since Annie arrived home first, she played the message. Dr. Smith didn’t indicate the biopsy results in the message. He requested that she come to the office as soon as possible. Annie pressed the play button for the third time and slumped into the worn dinette chair. It had to be bad news. Why else would he ask her to come in as soon as possible?

When Todd arrived thirty minutes later, she plastered a smile on her face, but Todd

wasn't fooled. He took one look at her and his cheerful expression faded. "Annie?"

Annie threw her arms around his neck. "I'm so scared."

Tenderly, he unfolded her arms and held her hands between his. He searched her face as if he could read her thoughts. "Is it the biopsy results?"

Annie nodded. "Dr. Smith left a message to come in to his office as soon as possible."

Todd folded her back into an embrace. "We'll go first thing in the morning."

Annie and Todd entered the stucco office building hand-in-hand. After signing in, Annie picked up a magazine from the small oak end table but didn't have a chance to open the pages. The nurse called her name and she and Todd followed the young woman to Dr. Smith's private office. He joined them within moments.

Annie studied the physician's lined forehead as he shook hands with Todd and then pulled up a chair in front of them. His gaze traveled from Todd to Annie and he said, "I'm sorry. I have bad news. Your biopsy shows you have a very aggressive form of breast cancer."

Although the physician continued to talk, Annie's thoughts hit a wall the moment the word *cancer* had entered her ears. Memories rolled through her mind with one consistent thought: *Am I going to die?* What about Todd? What about the family they would never have? What about the house they would never purchase?

Todd said, "Are you sure? She's so young. Maybe the pathologist made a mistake—got her test confused with someone else."

Annie struggled to concentrate on Dr. Smith's response.

"I know this is hard to hear, but we double-check the results. Also, the biopsy results confirm my physical findings. Annie has a large tumor. The weight and volume have disfigured her breast. It's warm and extremely tender to touch. When you feel it, it's like a rock embedded

in soft tissue.”

Annie pressed her fingers to her right temple, careful not to touch her arm against her chest. Everything Dr. Smith said was true. What were they going to do? They didn’t have insurance. Their savings were almost nonexistent.

Twenty minutes after they had arrived, Annie and Todd stepped outside into a new world. The sun didn’t appear as bright, but the heat seemed stifling. Annie felt as if she couldn’t breathe. She had breast cancer. If she still had a life ahead of her, she knew it would never be the same.

Todd drove back to the apartment without saying a word. Annie glanced at him as they walked to the apartment door. She’d never seen his features appear so void of emotion. He had to be in shock because Todd’s sensitivity to people and his environment was what had drawn Annie to him in the first place. That trait was also the reason Annie held her tears at bay.

The moment Todd closed the door behind them, he embraced her. She squeezed her eyes closed, trying to suppress the tears. It felt as if the walls of her world were closing and she was trapped between them. She struggled for a breath and then forced her mouth to form the words, “It’s all over.”

“No. It can’t be. I won’t let it,” Todd whispered in a ragged voice Annie had never heard before.

“I wish you had that kind of power. I wish I could erase this—all of this horror.”

Todd broke the embrace, holding her upper arms in his strong hands. “It could still be a mistake. I read an article about—”

“It’s not a mistake. It’s big and it’s growing every day. That’s why Dr. Smith wants me to start treatment as soon as possible.”

“So you’ll get the treatment and then you’ll be cured, right?”

Annie shook her head. “We don’t have health insurance and we’re almost broke.”

“Don’t worry about money. That’s the least of our worries. We’ll get what we need. I don’t care what it takes. We’ll get what we need to get you well. You’re young and strong. You can beat this.”

Annie pressed her fist to her lips but couldn’t stop the tears. “I don’t know.”

Todd’s features always displayed his feelings. Right now, the panic and fear Annie read in the tremble of his chin almost broke her heart. He swallowed once, but the desperate attempt did nothing to quell the storm brewing inside. He pulled her against him and wept into the hollow of her neck. Sobs racked his wide shoulders.

Ignoring the discomfort in her breast, Annie hugged him close. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Say you’ll get better,” Todd pleaded.

“I can’t. It’s bad, honey. It’s really bad.”

“No, Annie. I can’t lose you. You’re my life.”

Annie’s iron will dissolved into tears. Together, they cried for their lost life. They cried in fear of the unknown. They cried in desperation.

With swollen eyes and a sniffle, Todd finally released her. “What are we going to do?”

Annie shook her head. “I don’t know. I can’t even think. I just feel numb.”

Todd pulled a tissue from the dispenser on the counter and blew his nose. “We won’t give up, Annie. Not you and me. We won’t give up.”

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too,” Todd said. “But I can’t think about this anymore. Do you want to take a

walk?”

Annie glanced at the fading light through the front window. The apartment complex had a nice walking path. When they'd first moved in, they couldn't get enough of desert walks.

Annie glanced at the horizon, but the desert didn't call to her as it usually did.

“I don't feel like it right now. Besides, I need to call Mom.”

Todd pulled on his ball cap. “I've got to get some air.”

“Go ahead. I'll talk to Mom while you're gone.”

Todd paused with his hand on the door. “Are you sure you're ready to talk about it?”

Annie shook her head but picked up the phone. “No, but I need to tell Mom what's going on.”

The soft creaking of the front door announced Todd's departure, then silence filled the apartment. For the first time in her life, Annie felt truly alone. She loved Todd and was certain of his love for her, but this was cancer. *Cancer*. He didn't know—couldn't know—how it felt to be ... dying. Like a long-starved desert plant praying for rain, Annie grasped for the one person who had always been there for her. A tear oozed along her cheek as she entered her mother's phone number into the hand unit.

“Hello?” Mom's voice filtered through the receiver moments later.

At the sound of the familiar voice, Annie's tears started again. “Mom, it's me.”

“Honey, what's wrong? You don't sound like yourself.”

“I—I have cancer and I don't know what to do.”

“Oh, dear God, no!”

Only moments ago, Annie was certain she'd cried every last tear she had in her, but the

distress in her mom's voice opened the floodgate all over again.

As suddenly as they had started, Mom's soft sobs stopped. "Annie, listen to me. We'll get through this. I want you and Todd to take the next available flight to Charlotte. Do you have enough money for tickets?"

"We can't just leave. We have jobs, responsibilities."

"You have a responsibility to yourself first," her mother said firmly. "Do you have enough money for a flight home?"

"I think so."

"Do I need to come out there and help you get ready to leave? I can do that if you need me."

Annie wiped her face with a tissue. "No, I can manage."

"Be strong, sweetheart. We'll deal with this together. I love you and I'll always be here for you, okay?"

"Okay."

"Call me back as soon as you book your flight." Mom continued to talk, but Annie felt as if she were in a surreal dream world. There were sounds coming through the phone, but nothing made sense.

"Annie?"

"Mom?"

"Honey, let me make the airline reservations for you."

"No. I can do it. I have to talk to Todd," Annie said, struggling to clear the fog of confusion.

"Do you know his schedule this week?"

Annie sniffed. “Mom, I can’t think. Everything’s so messed up.”

“I know. Just come home. I’ll help you. We’ll get through this together, as a family, just like we have in the past for everything. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Take one step at a time. All you need to do is get Todd’s schedule and call me. I’ll find a flight for you. Can you do that?”

They said goodbye and Annie pressed the END key and placed the receiver on the counter. She pressed her fingers against her temples. Think. She wasn’t the only woman to contract breast cancer. She’d read of others who had survived, hadn’t she? Then the memory of Aunt Martha sent a shiver along her spine. Cancer had claimed Aunt Martha’s life after a long, miserable battle.

Annie stroked a strand of hair tickling her temple. Aunt Martha had not only lost all of her hair, she’d suffered through weeks of nausea and vomiting before her death. Annie dropped into the kitchen chair and held her head in her hands. Airline reservations. She needed to check times. Her fingers stumbled over the keys, but after a few attempts she opened the airline website. Several flights left for Charlotte every day, but the redeye was the cheapest.

The absurdity of the situation nearly made her laugh. Tickets to Charlotte were a drop in the bucket compared to cancer treatment. How would they pay for it? Would she need surgery? She printed the available flights and exited the site.

Annie pulled her worn travel bag from the closet shelf and opened it on the bed. She’d hoped to one day save the money for a weekend getaway with Todd, but this wasn’t the getaway she had in mind. She folded her favorite tie cardigan. Why had she and Todd let money and work stop

them from enjoying quality time together? Until today, she'd never resented the personal delays. Annie added underwear to her bag. Now she wondered about her decision to postpone the important things—details she had taken for granted.

As she selected shoes and tucked them into the sides of her bag, she ticked off the postponed dreams. She and Todd would take more time together, later. She and Todd would have money for a down payment on a house, later. She and Todd would start a family, later. Now she wondered if she would ever have a later. All those sacrifices, time wasted, time she didn't have. Had her life clock already started ticking and she'd been too busy with unimportant tasks to notice?

In the tiny bathroom, Annie placed her toiletries and extra hair bands on the counter. She glanced at the mirror and didn't recognize her reflection. The haunted image in the mirror escalated her fear. Annie touched the dark strand of hair at her temple. She'd always believed her hair was one of her best assets and she had never cut it. Would she need chemotherapy? Would her hair fall out by the handfuls as Aunt Martha's had? Todd liked the way the dark waves snaked along her nude body when they made love. Would she ever do that again?

Annie stomped her foot against the vinyl floor. No! The cancer was a big mistake and as soon as she returned to Charlotte the doctors would confirm it. Only older women like her aunt died of cancer. Discomfort pulled her gaze to her chest. Even beneath the silky fabric of her bra, her breast ached with heat and swelling. But still . . . she couldn't be dying.

With a hard jerk that rattled the glass near the sink, Annie opened the cabinet drawer and snatched her toothbrush and the tube of paste. Had her vanity caused this? She'd gladly trade her life for her hair.

I'll cut it and use it for a wig for me and sell the rest, she promised herself. *Just let me get*

my life back.

Annie pitched her comb and brush into the toiletry bag. She was the star in a nightmare and there wasn't a chance she'd wake up. Wake up? She might not even live long enough to witness the ending.

Just last week her friends and colleagues had laughed at the black balloons and tombstone décor she had picked out for her thirtieth birthday. It was the death of her adolescence, after all. This week, though, it looked like thirty might be her last birthday ever.

The next morning, as the sun climbed the horizon and brought a pink tint to the bedroom, Annie stretched and snuggled against the warmth of Todd's back. Her eyes were burning and swollen from hours of crying. Yesterday's events crowded her thoughts. It wasn't a bad dream. She had cancer. She might be dying. However, she wasn't going to fold like one of those inexpensive chairs she always hated stacking backstage. Within thirty minutes of Todd coming home from his walk, Annie had completed the reservations for their trip to Charlotte on tonight's redeye.

In South Carolina, Annie's mother checked the guest bedroom again. When Annie had married and moved to Phoenix, it had taken several months for Jill to adjust to the loss of her daughter. However, that touch of empty-nest syndrome couldn't compete with the loss overwhelming her now. She wasn't going to just be separated by a few miles. If Annie couldn't be cured, Jill might lose her.

Jill searched through her pants pocket for a tissue. As she wiped the trickle of tears from her cheeks, she vowed she'd control her emotions. Annie didn't need a weeping willow, she needed an oak. Jill had to be strong and she had to help Annie be strong against the cancer.

With renewed determination, Jill closed the door to block the photos of Annie on her first bike, Annie at graduation, and Annie and Todd's wedding. Jill drew strength by moving forward, not by looking back. Last night she had gathered her husband and Annie's younger brother around her. They had wept together. However, after the tears they had garnered family strength and made a simple plan to help Annie. As the matriarch, Jill shouldered the primary responsibility.

"Stay strong," she repeated to herself as she checked her purse for her keys.

At the Charlotte airport, Jill parked and hurried to the passenger arrival area. According to the monitor, Todd and Annie's flight had landed and passengers would be disembarking within minutes. Jill located an empty seat and waited. She had contacted Jodie, one of her friends, about a good oncologist. Jodie hadn't hesitated. She had recently lost her father to cancer. She had been to our clinic multiple times and had witnessed first-hand our philosophy of care. She directed Jill to my office. It was also conveniently close to Jill's home.

Jill squeezed her lids together to suppress the tears. She couldn't think of beautiful Annie as a cancer patient—not yet. "Be strong." she whispered to herself again.

As she scanned the faces of passengers moving down the escalator, a wave drew her focus. She blinked. Annie waved again, but she wasn't smiling. Todd wore a stoic half-smile. At the bottom of the escalator, Annie hurried forward.

Jill hugged her close and Annie sobbed on her shoulder. Jill's "be strong" mantra evaporated in tears. Annie was too young and vibrant. Cancer should have struck Jill instead. She had lived her life and raised a family. Her beautiful Annie was just getting started.

Jill rubbed Annie's back just as she had when Annie was little. "Don't cry. We're going to get through this."

“I’m scared, Mom.”

“I know, honey. I am too. But we’re here, together. I found a doctor who specializes in cancer. I called. He’ll see you if it’s okay with you.”

Annie massaged her forehead. “Does he know we don’t have insurance?”

“Yes.”

Todd directed them to the baggage claim. “I don’t care who she sees as long as she goes right away.”

As soon as Jill had settled Todd and Annie into the guest room, she called my office and made an appointment for Annie. Heartsick, she then busied herself preparing the family meal. Although she understood she couldn’t protect Annie from the disease eating at her body, she could still prepare a healthy meal, provide shelter, and give her daughter a mother’s love and support.

The dinner conversation covered anything but health. Everyone worked hard to act as if Annie were healthy and the family gathering was merely an unexpected visit. But this was no visit. This was a family in crisis.

The following morning, Jill drove them to my office. Tucked against a wooded area, the stucco building with brick interface that housed Carolina Blood and Cancer was located only a few blocks from the local hospital. Todd held Annie’s hand as they entered the double glass doors. Inside, another patient waited in the reception area, watching the flat screen mounted to the wall with unseeing eyes. Todd and Annie selected a seat near the large fish tank while Jill gave Annie’s name to the receptionist. Within minutes, a young woman with a smile as bright as her royal purple scrubs appeared in the doorway and called Annie’s name.

“We’d like to accompany her,” Jill said.

“No problem. My name is Debbie. Annie, I need to weigh you before I take you to the examining room.”

After checking her height and weight, Debbie took her into the waiting room and was taking Annie’s blood pressure when I walked in.

“Hello, I’m Dr. Patel. How can I help you?”

Jill noted the immediate panic in her daughter’s gaze and responded instead.

“My daughter, Annie, flew in last night. Her doctor in Phoenix just diagnosed her with breast cancer and said she needed treatment right away.”

“I’ll be happy to help in any way I can. Do you want me to continue with treatment until you return to Phoenix?”

Jill waited a beat to see if Todd or Annie wanted to take over the conversation. When they didn’t respond, she said, “Annie and Todd have moved back to Rock Hill so they can be with family. They don’t have health insurance.”

“Let’s work on treatment first. We can work out financial matters later. Did you bring your records from Phoenix?”

Annie shook her head.

I gave her a reassuring smile. “If you give me your doctor’s name, my staff will call and get everything we need. I’d like to examine you first and then we can discuss the best treatment for you.”

Jill’s shoulders slumped as she left the room with Todd. This was still the easy part. Right now, I was examining her baby—her only daughter. Would my findings be better? Worse?

Within ten minutes Annie and I rejoined Todd and Jill in my office. “I feel we are dealing with a serious situation,” I told them. “Annie’s tumor is very large. I also felt the lymph nodes

under her arm. This means the cancer may already have metastasized or traveled to her lymph system. When I pressed on this area, I felt swelling. This fluid buildup is caused when the cancer tissue liquefies.”

Obviously frightened by the explanation, Jill glanced at Annie and Todd. They stared at me with blank expressions. Jill picked up her pen and scribbled my description with a trembling hand. She couldn't let herself slide into terror. She needed to be strong so she could help Annie understand her disease after the shock subsided.

Once I finished explaining, Jill swallowed past a bone-dry throat and asked, “How do we treat this?”

“We need to consult with a surgeon to biopsy one of the lymph nodes as well as drain some of the fluid from the axilla.”

“Do you know a surgeon who will take Annie's case . . . even without insurance?”

“Absolutely! Please, you have enough worries. Let me help you with the arrangements.”

Jill exhaled as at least the financial burden lifted. “Thank you. Will Annie have to stay in the hospital?”

“No, I think we can do this on an outpatient basis. Once we get the biopsy results, we will talk again about the best course of treatment.”

Jill squeezed Annie's fingers. “Honey, do you have questions?”

Annie shook her head.

I said, “This type of cancer is unusual for your age. Did anyone in your family have breast cancer?”

The question seemed to pull Annie out of her shock-induced confusion. She pushed back

a long, dark tendril of hair that had drifted near her right eye. “My aunt had ovarian cancer. She died at forty-seven.”

I responded, “I don’t want to lose any more time. My nurse will draw blood for some tests, and I will arrange for what we call CAT scans at the hospital. Don’t worry, a scan doesn’t hurt. It’s like a fancy x-ray that tells us if the cancer has metastasized to any other area of the body. The answers from these tests will help me determine the best course of treatment.

“After that, we’ll talk to several nonprofit foundations to help coordinate payment. Our business officer will work with you so finances don’t create more stress.”

Within five minutes we had made an appointment with a surgeon and scheduled the scans at the adjacent hospital. I handed Annie a card with the appointment times written on the back. “I want to see you next week. If you have any questions before then, feel free to call me.”

With cancer, Annie had entered a hurry-up-and-wait mode. While I had arranged an immediate appointment with the surgeon, she would still have to wait for the results. The CT scans were completed immediately, but she had to wait for the radiologist to review them. The waiting portion was by far more dreadful than any of the procedures.

On the date of her follow-up appointment with me, Annie didn’t know if she wanted to throw up or hide. But at least after the appointment, she would know the score. She could fight the invader in her body better if she understood the battle looming before her. She’d spent a week waiting, worrying, and crying. But it was time to stand tall and move to action.

I met Annie, Jill and Todd in my private office. Outside the office window the birds chirped and the sun bathed the grass. Inside, perspiration oozed along Annie’s sides in spite of the cool air pumping through the air-conditioned building. Now that the time had arrived, she

wasn't sure she wanted to know the information within the folder in my hands.

“Annie, the tumor in your breast measures 4.5 inches by 5 inches. According to the biopsy report, the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes in the axilla and we also found malignant cells in the fluid Dr. Revel drained from your arm. This makes your cancer a stage three-B. However, it hasn't spread to your bones or other tissue—and this is encouraging. There is a small but definite chance that we can shrink your tumor with treatment.”

Annie sucked in a breath to maintain her calm. Okay, she could deal with this. Based on what I had told her during her first exam, she had suspected the node in her underarm would be positive. The good news was that it hadn't spread to other parts of her body.

“Okay,” she said.

“Dr. Revel recommends that we start treatment to shrink your tumor before he removes it. I agree.”

Annie had prepared for her visit in advance, so questions were fresh in her mind. “Can you be more specific? I need to understand the kind of treatment, how long it will last, what to expect if you think I need more than one, and the side effects.”

During her first visit, Annie had played the shrinking violet due to fear and shock. Fear still plagued her, but it no longer paralyzed her. She'd told Mom and Todd that she wasn't going to shrivel up and die without a fight. A fight meant she had to take responsibility for her decisions and her life. She was glad Mom and Todd were there for support, but they didn't have cancer. She did. She focused on the conversation with me.

“I'm glad you're asking so many questions,” I said. “I expect them from my patients, and I'll do my best to share as much information as I can about where we go from here. Keep in mind that each patient is unique, so the treatment course, side effects, and outcomes will vary.”

I'll always be honest with you. If I feel we aren't getting the expected response, I'll tell you so we can discuss your options."

"I appreciate that," Annie said.

"I'm here to help you through this journey in every possible way, but I'm not God and I don't have a crystal ball."

Annie closed her eyes, acknowledging the unspoken message. She understood that some people survived cancer and others did not. She planned to do everything she could to be a survivor.

"We will start with two chemicals, Adriamycin and cytoxan. Both chemicals are cell poisons and they attack your cancer cells at different stages of multiplication. We give four doses of both every three weeks. The drugs can cause nausea, vomiting, alopecia and low blood counts, but we will take precautions to minimize these negative effects."

I paused and looked at the beautiful hair framing her face like tiny silk threads. Annie touched her hair. It would fall out and I was reluctant to tell her. "I'm sorry," I said. "Alopecia means hair loss. I can't give you anything to prevent that."

Annie clenched her jaw as I confirmed her suspicions. Her hair was the least of her concerns. Right now she was more concerned with living.

The Friday before the Labor Day holiday, Annie marched into our chemotherapy treatment room. In her life before cancer, Annie would have loved the room with its large navy easy chairs facing a long bank of windows opening to the garden. In her new life after her cancer diagnosis, she recognized that the garden helped patients relax and meditate or pray for strength to fight the battle inside their bodies. However, increased cancer treatment knowledge wasn't the only thing

that had changed for Annie. Last year, she had looked forward to the Labor Day holiday away from work. Now, long weekends and holidays meant nothing. Cancer wouldn't take a break because it was Labor Day.

As Debbie motioned toward a chair, Annie squared her shoulders. Her career struggles had taught her the valuable lesson of tenacity. In the big scheme of things, her work in theatre was peanuts compared to a cancer diagnosis, but she knew how to dig in and stay the course. Now she had a new job—fighting for her life. She was ready for the challenge.

Debbie rolled a small cart beside the chair with tubing, tape, and multiple small- and medium-sized bags of fluid. Annie winced as Debbie inserted the needle into her arm.

“The larger bag is just fluids to help keep the line open so we can infuse the important drugs,” Debbie explained as she picked up a plastic bag about the size of a sandwich. “This bag contains the medicine to help prevent nausea and vomiting.”

Although Annie had read about her treatment plan and I had explained the actions of the drugs and their side effects, anxiety still squeezed her belly. They were going to infuse her with poison. It was supposed to kill mainly cancer cells, but it was still poison. To hold her fear at bay, Annie focused on the little bag as it dripped into her vein. Lots of folks used the anti-emetics she was being given. With any luck they would keep her from getting sick.

Debbie waited for the anti-emetic drugs to complete, then picked up a syringe. “This one burns, but it won't last long,” she told Annie.

With a quick turn of her wrist, Debbie attached the syringe to the tubing connected to Annie's arm and slowly pushed the plunger. The red substance moved toward the cannula taped to Annie's arm. Within seconds a liquid fire engulfed her flesh.

It won't last long. It won't last long. It won't last long, Annie chanted silently through

gritted teeth.

When the burning stopped, she exhaled.

An hour later, Debby disconnected the empty bags and removed the cannula from Annie's arm. Annie breathed in deeply, then exhaled slowly. The treatment was over.

"That's it. Unless you have a problem, we'll see you in three weeks. Don't forget to drink lots of fluids," Debby said.

Annie placed the novel she had started into her bag. "I will. Thanks."

Annie refused to sit idly and worry. She dug in and researched her disease. By the time she received her second treatment, she had replaced fear with hope. She believed the chemo was shrinking her tumor. Each time she visited the surgeon, he drained a smaller quantity of fluid from around the tumor.

After a month of chemo, Annie's hair started to fall out. But instead of grieving her loss, she countered with a positive attitude. Some days the loss of her beautiful hair got the best of her, but for the most part she kept a smile on her face and hope in her heart. Each time she removed a clump of hair from her brush, she imagined the chemotherapy shrinking her tumor.

Annie made an appointment with Jodie, a hair stylist who was one of her mother's best friends, to shave off the rest of her hair. She was going to lose it anyway.

Shortly after she received her buzz cut, Annie's surgeon reported that her fluid build-up had stopped so she wouldn't have to return until she'd completed her four doses of chemotherapy. Annie pumped her fist. She'd won another skirmish. Now she'd carry on until her last dose. As soon as the chemotherapy ended, Dr. Revel would reassess her tumor. If the mass had shriveled and released its tentacles from her chest wall, Dr. Revel could surgically remove it.

With this information, Annie walked a tightrope. She didn't look forward to surgery, but she longed for the reassurance that her tumor had been excised from her body.

Don't expect too much too soon, she coached herself.

Cancer had taught her an important lesson: When you don't know how many days remain, don't wish your life away. Easy to say, hard to live out. How do you maintain hope without aiming so high that you fall?

On Halloween day, Annie reported to the clinic for her final dose of chemotherapy. She settled into the recliner and focused on the calming qualities of the garden. Although the last of the summer plants had gone dormant for our short South Carolina winter, Annie looked for signs of life. Beside her, nurse Debby prepared to inject the Adriamycin that Annie referred to as red poison. Outside the window a tiny hummingbird with a bright red throat and a small, hairless patch on its head sucked nectar from a feeder.

"You also drink the bright red nectar. Do you suffer from breast cancer?" she whispered to the tiny bird.

A larger hummingbird darted at the small bird, but he held his position, his tiny wings beating so quickly that only a blur was visible.

Annie smiled in spite of the fire streaking up her arm. "Check out that hummingbird. This must be her third dose of chemo too."

"Chemo?" Debby said as she turned toward the window.

"Yeah, see how the feathers on her head are gone and she's drinking red poison just like you injected in my arm?"

Debby's laugh filled the quiet area. "Works for me!"

Annie kept the smile frozen to her face. An hour later she had reached the end of her chemo journey. Was it enough to kill the tumor?

A few days later, at Dr. Revel's office, Annie waited with apprehension. Her life had filtered down to the information the surgeon would provide. Was it good news, bad news, or just okay news?

When the office staff called her name, she stood and whispered, "Good news, please."

The perky nurse escorted her to the surgeon's office, where Dr. Revel joined her five minutes later. She read his tentative smile and swallowed. He wasn't going to deliver the news she'd hoped for.

Dr. Revel levered a hip onto the edge of his desk and flipped a page in her file. "Well, Annie, the tumor has responded to your chemotherapy, but not as much as we'd hoped."

Although she maintained her smile, her heart accelerated right after the word *but*. "What's that mean?"

"Your tumor has decreased almost one third. That's really encouraging and means your cancer cells are sensitive to the drugs you've been given. However, there's still a sizable tumor in your breast and it hasn't pulled free of your chest wall. I think if we give you another round of chemo, it will shrink to a size I can remove. When I go in, I want to have the best chance at removing all of it."

Disappointed, Annie and her mother returned home. How would her body react to another round of chemo? Although it hadn't been the nightmare she'd anticipated, she didn't relish the thought of another round.

Outside her bedroom window, gray clouds darkened the afternoon sun. The bright reds

and yellows of fall had faded to browns. Life outside had gone dormant. If the next round of chemo didn't work, was she also moving into the winter of her life?

Her mother found Annie staring out the bedroom window and wrapped her arm around her daughter's shoulders. "I know you're disappointed, but at least your tumor responded," Jill said.

Annie hid her worry behind a bright smile. Mom had been through a lot and she didn't want to worry her more. "You're right. By spring I'll be good to go."

One week before Thanksgiving, Annie reported to our clinic for her second round of chemotherapy. She had given herself a pep talk, so as she pushed through the glass door entrance there was a smile on her face and a spring to her step.

The first time around she'd adjusted to the cherry-red Adriamycin firing through her vein. Today, the Adriamycin had been replaced with another powerful drug called Docetaxel. She sank into her favorite treatment chair and inhaled and exhaled deeply.

I had told her that patients typically suffer fewer side effects from Docetaxel. As Debby approached with the bags of solution, Annie took another deep breath. What if it made her sick? What if it didn't work?

By the time Audrey, another one of my patients, entered the treatment area, Annie had calmed her anxious thoughts enough to try to encourage the older patient.

"Welcome," Annie said. "Don't let that needle scare you. Debby's a pro at slipping it into your arm with almost no pain."

For a moment Audrey's tense expression morphed into a slight smile. Joy lifted Annie's spirits. At least she'd made someone else feel a little better. She sipped a soda and then ran her

tongue across her lips. Hey, she didn't have the usual bad taste in her mouth. Annie took a larger drink. She wasn't nauseous—not even a tinge.

Adjacent to Annie's chair, Debby adjusted the IV connected to Audrey. Annie caught her eye and gave her a thumbs up. "It's scary the first time around, but the fear is worse than the actual treatment."

"Thank you," Audrey said.

Annie smiled. By reassuring Audrey, she'd received far more than she'd given.

One week before Christmas, Annie returned for her second treatment. Although the clinic staff had decorated the office with festive accents, memories of last year's parties and late-night dancing clouded her spirit. She wondered if she'd ever return to that life. She was no longer the same person who walked through life unaware of the many blessings surrounding her. She'd never take her life for granted again.

Debby started the IV and the chemo.

"One step at a time, one day at a time," Annie chanted as the new drug raced through her system.

After her third treatment in January, Annie returned to her surgeon. Tense with anticipation, she closed her eyes as he palpated the area surrounding her tumor.

"Annie?"

She opened her eyes to meet his intense gaze. Her heart slammed inside her chest.

"If I didn't know where it was, I might have missed it," he said with a grin.

"Does that mean—"

He held up his hands. "It means I want to send you for a CT scan to ensure the tumor has

separated from your chest wall. If the CT confirms it, we'll schedule you for surgery and your tumor will be gone.”

Annie blinked at the moisture forming in her eyes. Cancer Act II had ended.

On the day of her surgery, Annie took a deep breath and stepped from the car onto the hospital parking lot. Instead of looking at the brick building, she gazed at the brilliant blue sky above. It was a glorious spring day. Overhead, the sun was slowly tempting the tiny green buds out from the trees lining the wide walkway. Birds chirped a merry tune and in the air the scent of earth and new life wafted with the light breeze.

Beside her, Todd squeezed her fingers as they continued in silence. In a few hours Dr. Revel would remove the last of her tumor. Once she had recovered from surgery, she would move to radiation, and after radiation she could once again look forward to life.

Dr. Revel completed Annie's surgery without complications, and after a short recovery, Annie came to see me. She wore a perpetual smile. For the first time since diagnosis, her facial expression reflected the gratitude filling her heart. She was going to live.

I opened the manila folder on my desk. “So, Annie, how are you feeling?”

“Fantastic!”

I endorsed her reaction wholeheartedly. “Dr. Revel called me after your surgery. He was very pleased with the results.”

Annie nodded. “He thinks he got it all.”

I placed my hand on her shoulder. “There's no evidence of the tumor. However, since the pathologist reported residual cells, I'd like to give you one more round of chemo after the radiation to make sure we've destroyed all the cancer cells.”

Annie didn't want to think about anything else at that point. The tumor was gone. She felt

great. I paused to let her digest the information. “Dr. Revel explained this, didn’t he?”

“Yes. So the additional chemo is just to make sure we kill the last of the cancer cells, right?”

“I promised I’d always be honest. Your cancer has responded to the chemotherapy. I recommend you receive another round of chemo after the radiation therapy just to make sure we’ve killed any remaining cancer cells.”

“Okay,” Annie said, letting go of her elation just enough to revisit her motto: *One step at a time*. The next step was radiation.

On the first day of radiation therapy, Annie completed her usual morning hygiene with a persistent knot in her stomach. The curtain call for Act III in Annie’s Cancer Saga was scheduled at the radiation center in less than forty minutes. Annie stiffened her spine. She’d endured the chemotherapy and the surgery. She’d make it through radiation. Besides, she had almost reclaimed control of her life and wasn’t giving up on that goal.

But the moment she entered the treatment room, her bravado sputtered. Okay, this was scary. With the chemotherapy she’d faced a silent battle inside her body. With radiation she had to deal with an external force. Annie’s eyes rounded as she took in the huge machinery and the gurney beneath it. It seemed that her cancer saga had just entered the realm of sci-fi.

She turned to her imagination to help her through the first treatment. As the white robot-like machine emitted rays, she imagined she was back at work. In her mind she was designing a new costume for a sci-fi flick. As the treatment progressed, she imagined various costume renditions. On most days the treatment ended before she had finalized her design.

When Annie completed her last radiation treatment, the heat of August in South Carolina

had parched the earth. As she emerged from the radiation center, she didn't mind the sweltering heat. It was over—chemo, surgery, radiation. Better, she was still walking in the sunshine—hot sunshine, but no way was she about to complain about the heat. She was alive. She had found a new job as a costume designer supervisor for the Columbia Theater. After a year of struggle with her health, she had not only reentered the work force, but had secured a job in her chosen profession only sixty miles from her hometown.

One thing still hovered in the back of her mind—the last round of chemotherapy that I had recommended. By the time she returned for her next visit to my office, she'd made a decision. I entered the office with my usual smile. “You've come a long way with a very difficult disease. I think with the radiation and one more course of chemotherapy, you have a good chance to keep the cancer from returning.”

“I need a little more time,” Annie said.

I sat beside her. “We'll continue to monitor you to help you live as long as possible.”

“No, I mean I'd like a little more time before I start another treatment.”

I was disappointed. “I understand it's been a long process. But I think it's best to get one more course of chemotherapy just to make sure.”

“I plan to get the next course. I just want a little vacation. My uncle has an apartment in New York. When I was first starting in the theatre, I stayed there. I love the city. It has this exciting beat and it makes me feel so alive. I've put my life on hold during this treatment. I just want some time before I start up again.”

I closed her file. “I understand your request. When you return, call the office and we'll schedule you.”

As Annie moved with the crowd from the subway to street level, her heart strummed in her chest. She loved the city with its skyscrapers, busy streets, and hustling workers. The minute she turned toward the theatre district on Seventh Avenue, her breath quickened. New York City wasn't always pretty, but it was always alive—especially near Times Square. The jitter of excitement danced through her veins and matched the beat of her flats on the pavement.

She'd just passed the mega toy store when a sharp pain speared through her lower back. Annie inhaled and moved closer to the building to let the throngs of people shuffle past her. Maybe she had sprained her back lifting her luggage. With slow, measured steps, she made her way to the first restaurant, limped inside, and eased into a seat near the entrance. After a few minutes the pain subsided.

When the hostess asked to seat her, Annie shook her head and stood. After a brief excuse about forgetting something, she turned toward the door. Okay, what was that all about? She continued to walk, but slowly.

The pain nagged her through the rest of the evening and into the night. When it continued the next morning, Annie thumbed through the Yellow Pages. According to some of her friends, chiropractors could fix simple backaches. After three calls, Annie made an appointment to visit a chiropractor only a few blocks from the apartment. Still walking like the Tin Man from the Wizard of Oz, she entered the office located on the second floor over a butcher shop.

The staff greeted her with a smile and the chiropractor examined her within fifteen minutes. Annie received a spinal x-ray, a treatment to relax her back muscles, and instructions to ice the painful area until the strained muscles had time to heal. Relieved, Annie exited the office into the crisp autumn air. In eight to ten days she'd be good as new.

Although Annie followed the chiropractor's advice, she experienced only temporary

relief. But compared to cancer, a little pain in her back was a minor inconvenience. She finally had a life again. She planned to squeeze every moment of happiness and fulfillment from it.

In the third week of September, she returned home. The New York trip had revitalized her. There were so many things she was anxious to see and do, and returning to her cancer-patient status wasn't one of them. Yes, her back hurt a little, but she wasn't the only one on the planet plagued with backaches. Was it wrong to want a life free from blood tests, IVs, and routine visits to the oncologist? After a night of soul searching, Annie called our office to speak with me.

“Annie, it's good to hear from you. How was your trip to the city?”

“Fabulous!” she said.

“Wonderful,” I replied. “It's good to maintain a balance in your life. Are you ready for the final round of treatment?”

“That's what I called about. I feel great and I ... I just want a little more time to be Annie the artist, not Annie the cancer patient.”

“How much longer?” I asked.

“Just a few more weeks. I've got some things to do. I'll call for an appointment.”

By the last week in September, fall had moved in to South Carolina. Although the sun still warmed the air to almost eighty degrees, the temperature in the evenings and mornings dipped. Annie loved the pastel hues of the evening sky as the sun slipped behind the horizon. However, along with the drop in temperature came a more serious problem.

Tired from her hectic day, Annie had gone to bed early. Halfway through the night she was jolted awake by a sharp pain in her abdomen. She rolled onto her side and tucked her knees to

her chest, but the pain didn't ease. Within an hour she rushed to the bathroom to empty her stomach.

With most flu bugs, once the stomach emptied, the pain subsided. Annie received no relief. Worse, the vomiting continued.

"Honey?" Todd opened the door to the bathroom.

"Sorry I woke you," Annie gasped between retches.

"Can I get you something? Water, Sprite, juice?"

Another round of vomiting made her stomach feel as if something was ripping it to shreds. She rested her forehead against the commode and gasped for breath.

"What time is it?"

Todd checked his wristwatch. "Two-thirty."

"You better get dressed. I think I need to go to the ER."

The efficient ER staff drew blood and gave Annie an injection of Demerol, a potent pain reliever. From her gurney, Annie squinted at the wall clock. Todd and her mother's voices droned in the background, but she couldn't focus on the words. Too bad the pain cutting through her abdomen didn't clear the haze of her mind.

"Have you ever had liver problems?"

From her near fetal position, Annie blinked and tried to focus.

"Ms. Carlson, your liver enzymes are high. Have you ever had liver problems?"

"No," Annie said.

"When was your last chemotherapy?"

Why did he have to ask so many questions? Annie waited for the next wave of pain to pass. "It's been a few months."

“Alcohol consumption?”

Stop the pain or go away! Annie screamed in silence. “I have an occasional glass of wine or mixed drink, but nothing lately.”

From the chair beside her, Todd said, “Why? Is something wrong?”

“I’ll have to perform more tests. It may be gallstones. I’ll order an ultrasound and a CT scan. If we don’t find something we need to treat on an emergency basis, we’ll make an appointment for you to see your doctor for follow-up.”

One week later Annie, accompanied by her mother, came to my office. The pain and nausea had subsided, but her skin now had a yellowish tint and she felt perpetually tired. Drained of energy, fear had returned to her mind.

I could not hide my concern. “What has happened to you all of a sudden? You look quite low and depressed. You worry me.”

“Last week I had to go to the ER with bad stomach pains. The ER doc said I had something wrong with my liver. He thought it might be from the chemotherapy until I told him it had been weeks since my last treatment.”

“What tests did they perform?”

Annie glanced at her mother, then back at me. “CT scans. He told me to see you regarding the results.”

“Excuse me for a moment. I’ll see if we received them.”

Annie stared through the window at the garden. It was the first week of October and most of the plants had begun turning their leaves to red and brown. Was her cancer like those plants that would shed their leaves only to come back a few months later in full bloom?

The clock on the credenza softly ticked off the minutes. Fourteen minutes had passed since I had left to inquire about her CT results. Annie swallowed in spite of a cottony dry mouth. She knew I would never have kept her waiting needlessly. With each minute her fear mounted.

After fifteen minutes I returned to the office with several sheets of paper. Despite efforts to remain reassuring, I'm sure I wore a crease of concern on my brow.

I placed the new sheets from the CT scan into her folder. "Annie, I'm afraid your cancer has attacked your liver and bones. However, it's not the end of the world. We will continue to fight. We're not going to give up or cave in."

Annie blinked. Had she heard me right? Was her cancer back—in two places? She counted her breaths—breathe in, breathe out. Okay, her cancer was back. She knew the drill. Acquire information. Move on. She forced her eyes to meet mine.

"Please be honest with me. No sugar-coated language. You've been upfront with me so far, so please don't stop now. Is this it?"

I met her intense gaze and she read the sadness in my heart.

"Do I have any treatment options?" she pressed.

"I promise I'll always be honest with you even if the news is hard for both of us. Annie, your cancer has come back with a vengeance. At this stage, we need to change our goals. Your cancer has spread to most of your bones and a large part of your liver. We have some treatment options. If we can't shrink the tumors, we may be able to keep them from growing."

Beside her, Mom sobbed softly, but Annie kept her own tears at bay and breathed deeply to calm the waves of paralyzing thoughts. Think. She had to think.

"Please, Annie. Don't give up," I repeated. "We can't just fold our hands and cave in."

Annie pressed her fingers to her temples. This was so hard. She gazed at the ceiling and

forced her thoughts into line. “Okay, explain what type of treatments. How are they administered?”

Her questions eased the conversation a bit. “There is a new compound called Trastuzumab. It selectively targets breast cancer cells with the Her 2 Neu protein. We may add another drug to make it more effective and a bisphosphonate to help strengthen your bones and prevent fractures and pain.”

“Is that why I had the back pain while I was in New York?” Annie asked.

“That’s a possibility,” I replied.

Her mother broke her silence. “With this new treatment, are you talking about treating the tumor or just prolonging her life for a few months?”

“Every case is different, but there’s a chance that the treatment will give Annie more time.”

Annie swallowed. The unstated portion of my answer was clear. The cancer was back and this time there was no talk of curing. It would claim her life. She could go through more chemotherapy and gain more time. Around her, silence cloaked the room except for the clock ticking above my desk.

“I need time to think this through,” Annie said.

“Of course. You have my personal cell number. Call me if you have any questions.”

With her arm wrapped through her mother’s, Annie left the clinic. She’d come full circle with her treatment. She wasn’t cured. Her cancer had spread and it would soon end her life. How would she spend her remaining days—mourning her death or embracing each precious moment that remained?

After careful consideration, Annie agreed to the additional treatments. Every day was precious, and she wanted as many as possible. She decided to keep her morbid thoughts private. Her fate had devastated her family. Todd and her mom had been her cheerleaders, so hopeful. Why did her family have to suffer too?

That night, Annie fought the inevitable despair and sadness. However, with the sunrise, she resolved to live. She couldn't live forever, but forever had never been part of her life contract. She had now, this moment, and she planned to live it to its fullest. Small issues that had annoyed her in the past faded in importance. When she felt love and gratitude, she acknowledged it. She touched, hugged, and talked with her loved ones. Since her moments were numbered, she planned to leave this world with a heart full of love, not regrets or unspoken feelings.

Of course, there were low moments, but she did her best to keep them inside and only played the pity party if she was alone and could do nothing to lift her spirits. During the day, Annie pasted a smile to her face and made it a point to make everyone around her feel life's joy. Although she was the youngest person in the infusion center, she used her quick wit to entertain the patients and staff. She focused on laughter, not on nausea, and on the moment, not on tomorrow.

As fall faded into winter, Annie's jaundice deepened. In spite of her positive attitude, her bone pain increased until she had to limit her movements. I replaced her mild pain medications with instant-acting morphine. She would have to take a dose every six to eight hours to control her discomfort.

Although Annie was mostly able to live above self-pity, she had a hard time adjusting to the anguish her mother and Todd suffered. They too displayed brave faces, but as her health deteriorated she noted they were having more difficulty suppressing their emotions. One sunny

morning she awakened to find Todd weeping beside her. Similar incidents occurred during the day with her mother. Each time, the sight of their emotional torment hurt worse than the increasing bone pain that ravaged her body.

One evening, Annie swallowed her medication and pushed herself upright. “I’m tired of lying around the house. It’s almost Christmas. Let’s go to the mall.”

Her mother’s eyes widened. “Honey, are you up to it? The mall will be a madhouse with shoppers.”

Annie removed her coat from the front closet. “Sounds like just the thing I need—decorations, bustling people.” *Life*, she added silently.

Jill looked through the front window. “It’s very cold today. Maybe we should wait until tomorrow.”

“Mom, Todd won’t be back for a few hours. Let’s go shopping. If I get tired I’ll sit in the common area, listen to Christmas music, and people watch.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m going. I’d like you to come with me.”

As Mom frowned, Annie suppressed a smile. It wasn’t like she was trying to press Mom’s buttons, but she needed to get out of the house. What better way than Christmas at the mall?

Just the act of getting in and out of the car and walking into the mall exhausted Annie. *How discouraging*, she thought. Then she stiffened her spine. Cancer had nearly claimed her body tissues, but that didn’t mean she had to allow it to take over her mind and spirit.

“I love the Christmas decorations,” she said, using the excuse to stop and rest as she focused on a beautiful holiday wreath.

“Where do you want to go?” her mother asked.

“I want to sit on one of those sofas right in the middle of the action,” Annie said.

From her mother’s frown, Annie guessed Mom was on to her ploy. No matter. As soon as Jill entered a store to shop, she might temporarily forget about her dying daughter and her dying daughter could focus on the holiday season instead of her depressing disease.

“Do you have your cell phone?”

Annie sank into the plush cushions of the sofa. “I’ll call if I need you. Now go.”

“Do you—”

“You have my list. Now go. I’m fine.”

As soon as Jill disappeared, Annie sighed in relief. Fatigue settled into every muscle as she focused on the busy shoppers. To her right, a child babbled excitedly about Santa Claus. Behind her, a young teen begged his parents for a loan to purchase a special gift. On her left, a lady struggled with so many bags that Annie wondered how she would get them to her car.

“Annie!”

She’d know that voice anywhere. Annie turned to her right as her mother’s best friend and hairdresser approached with a large shopping bag.

“Jodie, it’s good to see you!”

Annie caught the look of distress Jodie quickly hid before she gave her a gentle hug. Did she look worse or was something else bothering Jodie?

“It’s so wonderful to see you out. You’re not alone, are you?”

“No. Mom had a few last-minute presents to buy so I came along. I love this time of year.”

Jodie placed her shopping bag on the floor and sat on the sofa beside Annie. “I love that

pink sweater. The color is perfect for you.”

Annie appreciated the compliment. The cancer had been brutal on her looks. However, something more important came to mind. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Jodie gave Annie another squeeze. “Me too, especially since you’re here with me.”

“I have something important to talk to you about. It’s big. Well, not really that big, but it could be . . . difficult.”

Jodie frowned. “What’s bothering you?”

“I need a favor.”

“You don’t have to ask for a favor. Tell me what you need and I’ll be happy to do it.”

Annie glanced at the crowd, then back to Jodie. “Everyone thinks I’m going to beat this. But I think they’re wrong. I think I’m running out of time.”

Jodie offered a weak smile of reassurance. “You’re just having a bad day and that’s okay. But don’t give up”

“I want you to do my hair.”

Jodie checked her watch. “I have an appointment in an hour, but I’ll work you in.”

Annie resisted the urge to scream. This was so hard. “After I’m dead.”

Jodie’s eyes widened and her mouth seemed frozen in the shape of a little *o*.

“Don’t look at me like that. Funeral homes hire people to style hair. I want you to do mine.”

With trembling fingers, Jodie lifted a thin strand from the side of Annie’s face. “Your hair was always beautiful. I remember the first time I cut it.”

“That’s why I want you to do this. The chemotherapy has pretty much wrecked it, but you can fix it. I know you can.”

Jodie blinked back a tear. “When the time comes, I’ll do whatever you like. But right now you’re alive. Every day scientists are discovering new drugs and treatments.”

“I’m not giving up. I just want to be prepared. You’re a fabulous hairdresser and I want to look beautiful one last time.”

“You’ll always be beautiful, Annie.”

“Like you have an unbiased opinion. Promise you’ll work your magic on my hair. I want everyone to remember how I was before I got sick. I know my hair’s not the same, but I’ve seen you work miracles. I need you to work one for me.”

Jodie swallowed, and then nodded.

“Thank you,” Annie whispered.

That request marked the beginning of Annie’s preparations. If this was to be her last Christmas, she wanted it to be memorable for her family. Her treatments were the first to go. She called me and made two requests: Cancel all chemo appointments prior to Christmas, and write a prescription for a stronger, longer-acting pain medicine so she could enjoy her time with her family.

Annie resolved that her final Christmas gift to her family would be her spirit. She wanted to share the joy of laughter with her loved ones. When her back wrenched with pain, she laughed and made every effort to help others laugh with her. She focused on every witty remark in her repertoire and used them like she’d once used sequins on a costume—everywhere. She also made each day, each moment, sparkle with love and light. She had to cram those intense feelings of a lifetime into her remaining days. On the close of Christmas Day, as she kissed Todd and each member of her family, she whispered two quiet, simple words to each of them:

“Thank you.”

At Annie’s request, I visited her home on January 4th. She greeted me with a smile and a “Happy New Year!”

“Happy New Year to you too! How is your pain medicine working? Do you need another prescription?”

“How much time do I have?” she asked.

I hesitated. “Excuse me. I wasn’t prepared for your question.”

“Sorry, but I need to know.”

“I’m afraid maybe a few weeks or a month.”

Although she’d sensed her time was almost gone, this took a few moments for her to process. Then she asked, “How will I die? Will it be painful, or will I slip into a coma?”

“I need to admit my ignorance here, because death may be different with each individual. But know that I won’t let you suffer in pain. Whatever you need, you call me. If you can’t, your mother or Todd can call. Day or night, I’ll respond.”

Annie opened her palm and I gently grasped it.

“Thank you. I needed to hear that first. I’ve had something new happen. I am not afraid of dying. I just don’t want to suffer, and more importantly, I don’t want my family to see me suffer. I have ...”

She paused. I waited for her to continue.

“I have a throbbing pain and a kind of electric sensation in my left arm and leg. What’s that all about?”

“Those symptoms indicate the cancer may be invading your brain, if it has not already

happened. If that is the case, you may slip into a coma prior to your death.”

Annie nodded. “That’s probably why my head hurts off and on.”

“Yes.”

“My family members are having trouble letting go.”

I cupped her hand. “Where would you prefer to be when you die—at home or in a hospice?”

“I want to slip from this world without difficulty. I think it will be very hard for Mom, Trace and Todd to witness me dying here.”

Annie blinked away sudden tears, then the corners of her mouth lifted upward into a smile. “Thanks, Dr. Patel. Your visit has been a tremendous help. I believe our relationship in this life ends here, and I have a lot to do to prepare. I look forward to seeing you. Maybe next time I’ll be one of those hummingbirds outside your office!”

I couldn’t speak. She gave me a weak hug, and I saw another tear making its way from the corner of her left eye. Goodbyes are never easy.

In the kitchen, Jill was preparing a light lunch. Lost in thought, she almost didn’t notice my presence until I spoke.

“She’s at peace with her disease,” I told her. “I’m amazed at Annie’s insight. She’s in complete control and has accepted how she will move from this life to the next.”

Jill couldn’t suppress her tears. “I wish I could share her grace. It’s so hard.”

I embraced her. “If you need me, just call—any time.”

The next day, Annie complained of severe headaches and nausea. She could barely move her left arm. Jill called 911 and rushed her daughter to the hospital. When they arrived, the ER physician

contacted me. I requested a brain scan and left the clinic for the hospital. The medications they infused into Annie's system helped alleviate her pain and nausea, but she was confused and disoriented when I examined her.

As soon as the results from the scan arrived, I joined Jill, Trace, and Annie's grandmother in Annie's hospital room. Todd had determined that he couldn't emotionally handle Annie's final moments, so he hadn't accompanied them.

"Annie's scan indicates multiple cancer spots throughout her brain," I reported.

"How long?" Jill whispered in a strained voice.

"I don't think she'll be with us more than a few days."

I folded Jill's hands into mine. "If Annie slips into a coma and can't breathe on her own, do you want me to place her on a ventilator?"

"No! Doc, no! That's not going to happen to her. Please tell me that won't happen."

"I don't believe she will go in that manner. However, the cancer has invaded her brain and it could cause her brain tissues to swell at any moment. That swelling could affect her breathing. This is not the kind of decision you want to make quickly in the middle of the night. It's best if you make that decision now. If you like, I'll come back after you and Trace have time to discuss your wishes."

Jill and Trace exchanged glances. Trace lifted his shoulders in a resigned *I don't know*.

Jill turned back to me. "What do you suggest? What would you do if this were your child?"

"This is a terrible decision for a parent," I acknowledged. "Her cancer has behaved like wildfire until now. If you decided to place her on a breathing machine, the chances are poor for her to ever come off of it."

“So we’d only be prolonging . . . this.”

After a moment I said, “If my son had a similar prognosis, I wouldn’t want him to be placed on a breathing machine.”

Jill looked at her husband and he nodded.

“No breathing machines and no CPR,” she said. “We don’t want to make her any more miserable than what she has been through already. While I want to cling to my little child longer, I don’t want her to suffer any more. Annie has accepted this. It’s time for us to do the same.”

With tears streaming down her cheeks, she picked up her daughter’s slender hand and gently rubbed it. On the other side of the bed, Annie’s grandmother prayed for a peaceful departure. Trace lowered his head into his hands. I quietly left the room to make a note of the family’s wishes. It would be the last action I would take in Annie’s therapy.

Jill stayed at Annie’s side. As she continued to caress the soft flesh of Annie’s hand, memories flowed through her mind. Annie had such beautiful hands. Jill loved the feel of them, loved washing her chubby fingers covered in the cake and icing of her first birthday. She remembered praising her little girl as she washed traces of paint from her own nails after her art class in second grade. She remembered crying when Annie held up her ring finger with Todd’s engagement ring a few short years ago.

Outside, the sun descended as Annie’s breathing became irregular. Although she didn’t open her eyes, her eyes moved beneath her eyelids as if she were dreaming. Jill watched, waited, and remembered. Darkness filled the room. Annie’s chest expanded and fell. A few moments passed before it repeated the movement.

Within a few hours, Annie was breathing barely two or three times each minute. Jill

continued to gently rub her wrists, singing the nursery rhyme that Annie had sung as a little toddler. Jill knew Annie was listening as she waited for her eternal sleep. Indeed, Annie was listening. A few moments before midnight, her eyelids opened. Reflected from the moonlight, a tear glistened in her eye. Jill's hopes rose for a moment, then she realized that Annie wasn't seeing. Annie took a deep breath and her lids closed again.

Jill squeezed Annie's hand and waited. One minute, two minutes. Five minutes later, she slowly released her daughter's hand and placed it across her chest.

"Good bye, Annie," she whispered.

Harry had sat mesmerized as I recounted Annie's brave departure.

"Annie was the youngest patient who ever passed away under my care," I reflected.

"Oh my," Harry said softly. "What a life. She lived her dreams every minute. She did what she loved and spent time with whom she loved. Such a beautiful and calm farewell."

Harry gazed out over the garden for a moment, then continued. "I'm glad you were able to help Annie move on to her eternal flight with some peace and grace. Unfortunately, my mom's no longer alive to sing me my favorite lullaby when I'm ready to leave."

He paused a moment, thinking. "Susan is very tender at heart and I cannot see her accepting my departure without resistance. It will be hard on her and on me too. But I will need to plan my departure well in advance."

"I am not sure if that will be within your control, Harry." I knew that he may not be aware of his surroundings during his final moments.

"Well, doc, didn't you say that Annie opened her eyes just before she flew out of this world? What makes you so sure that departing souls are not aware of what is happening around

them?”

“You are right. I have not walked that path,” I said. “Honestly, neither have I thought of it. I don’t know how I’ll take it when my own time comes.”

“Well, I don’t want to hear any more of young people dying. Can you tell me about more-mature people and how they handled their journey beyond this body?”

“Sure, next week when we meet, we can talk about someone totally different. Maybe a teacher. I’m sure we both can learn from her. Her name is Julie. Sorry—her name was Julie.”

“Okay, doc. Thanks again for all your time. I don’t know how you keep working with cancer patients on a daily basis, though. I’ll see you next Wednesday.” We rose from our chairs, and I could see tears in his eyes as he stood.

“Doc, I apologize for taking you back to what must have been very hard—not just for Annie, but also for you. I still have some questions that keep haunting me. What does it mean to die well? What do you think an ideal death looks like? How can I prepare Susan and my daughters to deal with my death?”

“Harry, one suggestion I’ll make is that you start writing notes that enable you to share important thoughts with those you will leave behind. You can express your ideals, communicate lessons you have learned from life, share memories and hopes, offer advice, ask for forgiveness, and express love.”

He nodded, resonating with the idea. “I’ll start on that this week. And I want to start planning for my own funeral. If young Annie could do it, why not me?” I walked him to the waiting room. I could see that moving about was getting more painful for him.

Chapter 7
The Beginning of the End
or The End of Beginning?

*There is no death! The stars go down to rise upon some other shore,
And bright in heaven's jeweled crown, they shine forevermore.*

— J. L. McReery

“Hi, Dr. Patel, this is Connie. Mom is having severe pain in her legs, like Charlie horses. She was tossing and turning in bed the whole night.”

“Oh, Connie,” I replied. “I just saw her last month and everything seemed fine. She looked the best since I have seen her as patient.” I was not overly concerned, but I have learned to always listen to my patients. They know their bodies better than anyone else. “Let me have a quick look at her, though. When can you bring her in? Tomorrow morning?” I did not want to take any chances.

“You know, Dr. Patel, Mom will never verbalize her suffering. She wants to remain a positive witness for Jesus in this life. She will downplay all her suffering and pains. You will need to dig deep with her. I am getting worried for her.”

A few months back, after intensive treatment followed by a bone marrow transplant, Ann had been declared free of her leukemia and had just started moving on with her life.

The next morning, Ann came to the clinic along with her pastor husband, Shelton, and Connie, their adult daughter who had called the previous day. Ann’s neck muscles were visibly tight and her lips pursed. She looked somewhat frail. Her lips were bright red and her cheeks

had a red tinge. In addition, she wore enough makeup to hide her fatigue from sleepless nights. Her fists were tightly clenched, and her knees hugged together as if she were in deep discomfort.

Her genuine smile was trying to conceal her suffering.

“Hello, Ann!” I greeted. “Ms. Eternal Optimist!”

“Eternally faithful, Dr. Patel. It is you who is the eternal optimist and I am the eternally faithful witness.” Ann wanted me to learn the difference between faith and optimism.

I always enjoyed eclectic conversations with her about my confused terminology, having lived in three different continents and twelve different cities in a short span of fifteen years.

“Tell me what’s going on. Connie is worried about your leg cramps and your not sleeping well. I can see your knees are tightly locked. How long has this been going on?”

“Well, off and on for the last couple of weeks. You know, since I returned from the hospital, I have been doing so much at home, running around after my grandchildren! I know I should have taken it easy. I’ve learned my lesson, I promise. I will listen to my body from now on.”

“Well, since your last visit just few weeks back did not reveal any problems, I don’t believe we should be terribly concerned. But prevention is always better than cure. Let me examine you briefly and do another blood count. Then we will figure out our next step.”

I examined her thoroughly. There weren’t any obvious signs to be worried about. I saw no sign of leukemia such as oral ulcers or bleeding spots. I attributed her symptoms to a combination of her speedy recovery from leukemia and her bone marrow cells crowding the large bones of her lower limb. If it had happened faster than usual it may have led to the leg pains. Her blood count was even better than on her last visit. All blood cell lines were normal.

“Everything looks good again,” I was happy to report. “You may be right, Ann. You may have overdone it. Be careful and listen to your body.” I reassured her that nothing seemed to be amiss and that the leg pains were probably due to over-production of bone marrow stem cells or overexertion.

Connie jumped in. “Dr. Patel, I know you know your subject well. I know my mom well enough, though. She is not herself. She always will downplay her symptoms. Lately she has been blissfully silent. I can see she’s in pain and yet she is smiling more than ever. Would you mind checking her weekly? I’m just worried.”

“Okay,” Ann jumped in. “I’ll be honest. Connie is right. I am having this very unusual sense of physical unease, yet I feel calm inside. My body seems to be going down and my spirit seems to be moving upward. But I haven’t been able to sleep at night due to cramps.”

“Do you want some pain meds?”

“Oh, no, I don’t want pain meds. I can live with this. I just thought I would share this weird feeling that I can’t figure out.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s see you weekly and monitor this.”

“Thank God.” Connie appeared relieved.

Although I didn’t detect anything unusual in Ann’s pain, she could. Maybe she was instinctively aware of something that all my tests had missed. She had picked up on the skill of listening to her body, and it was telling her that all was not well.

What I did detect was that Ann herself seemed different, but I couldn’t quite figure out how. It wasn’t her attitude—she was not depressed or overly anxious. All she wanted to do was

affirm what she thought was happening in her body. No matter how much I reassured her, I could tell that she took the leg pains seriously.

Ann continued her weekly appointments for the next month. She had undergone bone marrow transplant four months before and, so far, everything was proceeding as expected for her recovery.

Outside my clinic, fall was in full swing and today had brought the season's first cold air. The soil was covered with freshly fallen yellow leaves from the trees. The sun hid behind an overcast sky. Premature chill and cold, wintery air brought an unusual gloom. Ann was the last patient scheduled for the day. Today would be her last weekly appointment—I wanted to switch her to a monthly follow-up schedule again.

As usual, Shelton and their daughter Connie had accompanied her. Ann looked good. Her skin retained an excellent color and her face was bright. She carried the same smile. But behind that smile, I detected a bit of detachment. It was as if Ann had lost interest in everything outside of her faith.

By now her leg pains and flu-like symptoms had disappeared entirely. I asked whether she was feeling anything unusual and she denied any abnormal symptoms after the leg pains disappeared. Again, I examined her thoroughly and didn't find any abnormalities.

I remarked, "Another month gone by and still you seem fine! Let me just take a look at the blood work and then you can go home."

It was the last week of October. This was likely Ann's last office visit of the year. With each passing month, the chances of her leukemia returning were lessening.

Yet Ann was dispassionately quiet. “No problem, Doctor,” she replied faintly. “We can wait for the blood count results.” She was much more reticent than during any of her other visits. Was there something she was concerned about? I would ask her after we reviewed her blood work.

There was a knock on the door. My lab specialist, April, was waiting outside.

“Come in, April!” I said jovially.

“Dr. Patel, could I talk to you outside for a minute?”

“Sure.” When I had left the room and closed the door behind me, April handed me Ann’s blood report. It took less than a second to realize that something was very wrong. I had to ask the usual screening questions. “Are you sure you had a good sample? Are you sure the specimen wasn’t overly diluted? Maybe blood clotted either inside the butterfly or inside the EDTA tube.”

I could think of a million reasons for what I saw in the report, except for the most obvious and most painful. April shook her head at all of my queries. That meant that the blood results could only have come from one thing.

Walking back into the examining room was very difficult. No amount of experience ever prepares doctors for some of the conversations they must have with patients. It felt even harder because just a few minutes ago I had reassured Ann and Shelton and their daughter, Connie, that nothing was wrong.

I began cautiously. “Ann, your blood count is not totally normal. Your white blood cell count has dropped somewhat, and so have your platelets. Although there isn’t an overly pronounced drop, it is still significant, and this worries me.”

Connie immediately understood the words I had left unstated.

“Is her leukemia back?”

Connie was visibly upset. Her initial reaction was just like mine—utter disbelief. I glanced at Ann’s husband. Shelton’s face had fallen, and he seemed to have suddenly entered a state of severe melancholy.

Tears started forming in everyone’s eyes, including my own. I did not have to verbalize my answer to Connie’s question.

“Now what?” Connie broke the silence. “Are there any options left?”

“Let’s plan for the next step before we lose time,” I said as calmly as I could. “Her leukemia may be returning. I want to send her back to Gary, my dear friend and colleague, who may have better answers. He can explore allogeneic transplant.”

“Bone marrow transplant?” Connie gasped. “Isn’t that very hard on the body?”

“Yes, but it may be our only way forward,” I said.

“How soon can we get going?”

“Let me make the call.”

“Hey, Gary, this is Kashyap. I hate to disrupt you at the end of the day. I need your help.”

“Anytime for you, my friend. How is your sweet wife doing?” I am not sure Gary could sense the tremor in my voice.

“Do you remember my patient Ann?”

“Of course! Is her leukemia back? I suspected that beast might come back.”

“Yes.” I did not have any more energy left.

“Send her to Greenville right away,” Gary said. “I’ll arrange for her admission for the same floor and room she had before.”

“They will be on their way shortly.”

Ann’s life had turned upside down again. For the last ten months her life had been lived between the hospital, chemotherapy center and infusion centers. Her body had been pricked countless times in the hope of finding answers. Then she was declared in remission. She had just started regaining control of her life.

She was admitted to the same hospital room with the garden view. But this time she had a strange feeling of detachment. Everything had changed: her approach to life, her attitude toward life, and her relationship with the world. She sensed that she was on the last legs of her journey on this planet. All she wanted was some time to allow her family to accept whatever outcome was barreling her way.

Ann received intensive chemotherapy to control her leukemia so she could enter a second remission. It didn’t matter how long or short the remission was; it just had to be long enough for the doctors to complete the bone marrow transplant.

No matter what her doctors said, she was confident that nothing was going to save her at this point. The only reason she tolerated the harsh and desperate therapy was for the sake of her family. While she had accepted that she would soon be in Jesus’ presence, Shelton and Connie had not. Ann didn’t want them living with the guilt that they didn’t do everything possible to try to save her.

With each passing day, Ann became weaker and weaker. Leukemic cells were invading every one of her organs despite the chemo bombardment. She finished her chemotherapy on Valentine’s Day—exactly one year after her original diagnosis.

But her condition started worsening rapidly. Now she needed a blood and platelet transfusion every week. Her lungs were covered with angry leukemic cells and she had difficulty

breathing. Between the infections caused by her demolished immune system and lung blood vessels clogged with leukemia cells, doctors could no longer tell what was hindering her breathing.

Many specialists examined her, and each had a different opinion. But they all still had one thing in common. They established that her leukemia had become fastidious and was growing more rapidly each day. Even a transplant by the world's best doctors in the world's best hospital wouldn't stop the relentless march of the leukemic blasts now. Everyone from doctors to nurses to Ann's family to Ann herself wanted an answer: What had happened? What had gone wrong? Why had the leukemia returned with such a vengeance?

"Hello, Dr. Patel. This is Connie. I apologize for calling you on your cell phone, but we need your help."

Her voice was broken. Something weighed very heavily on her mind.

"No problem, Connie. You can call me anytime on my cell phone. What can I do for you?"

"Mom is not doing well. She has been in the hospital for the last several weeks. After her last chemotherapy, she has gone downhill quickly. She is struggling for every breath. I am not sure if we are on the right path. I know what lies ahead for us."

She started sobbing.

"I will be on my way soon," I assured her.

"She is in room 307. She will be going for a bone marrow test soon. Otherwise we all should be in her room."

I reached Ann's room in the late afternoon. Her body appeared very frail. Visible portions of her skin were covered in raised red spots. It was difficult to say if these were leukemia cells clustered under her skin or if she was bleeding under the skin. Her neck muscles were prominent. While her face still bore that blissful smile, her eyeballs were sinking.

She had to stop between sentences to catch her breath. She looked anxious, as if impatient to pack her bags and move along. The look on her face, her feeble voice, and her body slowly wasting away all pointed to her readiness to exit this life for the next.

My friend who was treating Ann at the hospital, Dr. Gary Spitzer, arrived to join us. Before he could begin, Shelton asked permission to say a prayer. We held hands together, surrounding her bed. It was indeed a divine scene to see an Australian Jewish oncologist, a southern Episcopalian pulmonologist, and an Indian Hindu oncologist hold hands while a Westminster Protestant pastor prayed for an eternally faithful patient who always saw herself as a witness for Jesus regardless of her pain. For a few moments we all forgot why we were there.

Finally, Dr. Spitzer broke the silence. "The news isn't good. Almost 90 percent of the marrow space has been replaced with cancer cells. There is no space left for normal marrow maturation. I wish I could give you some hope, but at this point I think being completely honest is best. I don't believe Ann will make it for more than a few weeks. I think the best thing now is consider what she wants, rather than think about what we want for her."

As Gary spoke, he had none of his usual enthusiasm. Ann had touched the heart of everyone she came in contact with, including this grizzled old oncologist. He was extremely sorry that he had to deliver this news.

"You mean it's over?" Connie burst out. "No, that can't be! There must be some procedure or hospital that can save her!"

Gary looked Connie in the eye sympathetically, his voice firm but gentle. “I wish I had something different to tell you, Connie. I’m afraid that at some point we all are going to die of one thing or another. If there were any place we could send her, neither Dr. Patel nor I would hesitate for a second. But at this point, even a miracle is impossible. The best thing now is to not waste a moment that we still have with Ann and do whatever she wishes for her last days.”

Gary was usually not one to talk like a philosopher; the family realized how serious and resolved he was.

“Can you at least tell us one thing? What happened? What went wrong with the leukemia?”

This question is common among everyone whose cancer suddenly returns after remission.

My friend was very patient and kind. “Leukemic cells are very intelligent,” Gary explained. “Ann, your latest bone marrow report shows multiple new mutations, indicating that your leukemia cells have evolved into a much more aggressive form that is also very resistant and fastidious. They have developed MDR, or multiple drug resistance genes. We still don’t know how it works or how to prevent it, but it causes them to become immune to the chemo poisons that destroyed them in the past. Scientists are still working every day to try to prevent these genes from forming, but we are still miles from a solution.”

Gary’s answer finally told us what had happened with Ann. Somewhere, some leukemia cells had survived the chemotherapy bombardment. These survivors developed a mutation that made them more aggressive and also resistant to chemotherapy. That was why none of our regimens worked anymore, and also why we couldn’t get Ann into a second remission for the bone marrow transplant.

Ann quietly asked, “Can I go home today? And if so, can I go now?” This was the first time Ann had intervened in the discussion. She continued, “I want to spend my last few days at my own home, where I have spent the last three decades. I have no regrets of having come so far, and I have known for the past few months that my time is coming to an end. I have no regrets.”

“Yes, of course,” Gary replied. “Let me coordinate all the arrangements for hospice care for you at home. And I’ll send a nurse to your home to help ensure that you are comfortable.”

Gary started making arrangements immediately. He didn’t want Ann to lose a single second of the time she had left. Ann returned home the next day, uncertain whether her journey was ending or beginning. It was probably a blend of both. In spite of difficulty breathing and lack of oxygen in her body, her mind was still sharp and clear. She had never resisted the idea of dying and leaving this world; she knew quite well that she would be going to join her heavenly Father.

Winter, spring, summer, fall and another winter had passed since her first diagnosis. Last winter, the family was hoping for a cure. Now the family was simply hoping for minimal suffering as Ann’s condition deteriorated. She had lost a lot of weight. Her body’s normal tissues were losing the battle against the ever-replicating leukemia cells.

But no matter how much havoc leukemia wreaked on Ann’s physical body, it was not able to break her will and faith in God and His love. No matter what end Ann came to, she would be the victor. Neither the suffering nor the apprehension of physical death was able to remove the wonderful smile that even her weak and wrinkled face couldn’t hide. Even in her own suffering, she saw the Lord’s hand at work and believed that He would bring about His perfect will for His glory.

Ann's suffering in the last few days had been increasingly obvious. Even walking a few steps was strenuous. Shelton had positioned Ann's bed against the wall so she could enjoy the beauty of the backyard. Her frailty no longer allowed her to stand on the deck.

Even in the harshness of winter, a back yard that was dry and barren and filled with leafless trees couldn't shake her belief in the Lord's care for all things. She still saw the occasional squirrel scamper over the dry branches, and a bird that must have been lost enroute to Florida made its home there. These sights reminded her of the Creator's presence. He had granted life to a bird where logically there should have been none. Its voice reminded her of the voice of the Creator that she now heard everywhere. As night fell, she could see faint lights from distant stars, reminding her that God's presence spanned many galaxies, reaching millions of light years away.

On March 3, I paid a visit to Ann to see how she was doing and if I could help ease her pain in any way.

"Hello, Ann. How are you feeling today?" I greeted her.

She smiled up at me and said, "Bodily, you can see I'm quite weak and fragile, Dr. Patel. But mentally, I'm still the same woman I've always been! If anything, now I'm finally at ease and comfortable with the direction God has decided to take me. I think He wants me by His side sooner rather than later. At least I'm no longer confused about how much longer I have."

Although noticeably enfeebled, she was still able to compose words and express herself clearly.

"Are you in any discomfort? Do you hurt at all?" I was trying to pinpoint any symptoms I could help her with. "Please don't hesitate to ask for any pain medicines. It is okay to ask for

help. I know we now have limited time with you. As much as I wish you could stay with us, I agree that the Lord has different plans for you. He wants you to go home to Him, and sooner rather than later.”

We talked further about our views of the afterlife. Ann maintained her solid belief that Jesus Christ had secured eternal salvation for her. She knew that throughout her earthly journey, He loved her and was with her. She accepted that leukemia was part of God’s sovereign plan for her life. She had no regrets and was ready for the Lord’s angels to come and take her to her heavenly home. Her steady faith was an incredible example to me.

As we wrapped up our visit, the effects of Ann’s most recent morphine dose were making themselves known as her speech slowed and her voice grew weaker.

“Ann, can I be of any help to you in this transition between life and what comes after?”

“Oh, Dr. Patel, you have truly been a godsend,” Ann smiled as she took my hand in hers. “You have made this journey so much easier for me and my family. You’ve done all you can for me now. May God bless you! I look forward to seeing you some day in heaven with our Holy Father.”

These were Ann’s final words for me. I said my last goodbye to the lady who had so touched the most inner part of my soul.

The hours went quickly thereafter. Ann was getting weaker and weaker, and her often-vacant eyes stared at the sky outside the window almost constantly, as if she were seeing something the others couldn’t. She spoke of heavenly music the others couldn’t hear.

Finally, it was Shelton who realized what was happening. Ann was seeking permission to begin her journey to heaven. He asked all the family members, including all her daughters, sons-in-law, son, grandchildren, and even the family dog to come into her room.

They all held hands as he began a prayer.

He then slowly took her hand into his own, kissed her on her cheek, and said gently, “Ann, I love you. I know you can’t wait to be in heaven with Jesus. You have been my light and my joy for so many years. You were by my side in rough and good times. There are countless reasons for me to want to say, ‘Please don’t leave me here by myself.’

“But there is just one reason to say that you have my permission to move on so you can be in God’s presence. The reason is that I know you are going to Jesus, our Savior, and any such reason trumps all that I can offer. I love you, sweetheart. All of us love you with all our hearts. Your passing will leave a permanent hole in our hearts. We are going to miss you so much. But whenever you’re ready, it is okay for you to move on.

“I will miss you always, and we will be reunited in God’s heavenly kingdom. I can’t wait to join you and behold the glory and beauty of our Lord Jesus.”

One after the other, all the family members came to give Ann their goodbyes. As hard as it was to do, they at least were thankful that the Lord had allowed them the time and opportunity to do so. Even the family dog came and sat silently nearby, maintaining a quiet vigil by her side.

Shelton’s words made a monumental difference. After everyone said their goodbyes, Ann appeared relaxed. Her vacant eyes no longer searched the sky. Her breathing slowed. The next day, Ann slept most of the time. She did not appear to be in discomfort.

Two days later, on the bright sunny morning of March 7, Shelton and Connie were sitting beside Ann's bed. The dog was sleeping on the floor and the grandchildren were in another room. Ann's breathing was heavier and deeper than usual. She was slowly slipping into a coma.

Suddenly, they both saw Ann's face brighten, as if she saw something heading her way. She opened her eyes, lifted her head toward the ceiling, and raised her hands in the air. Her face was serene. It was almost as if Jesus were reaching down to her and she was trying to take His hand. Shelton helped lift her up, fully aware that the time had arrived for Ann to depart from this world. Though he couldn't see anything, he felt the presence of Jesus in the room.

Ann opened her mouth, offered one final smile, and whispered, "Oh Lord! I am coming to your kingdom!"

Shelton felt a sudden jerk, followed by heaviness in his hands. The life had finally crept out of Ann's body. Her soul and spirit were now with the angels, who were taking her to be with her Lord Jesus, leaving the lifeless body behind in the hands of her loved one.

Within a few days, Ann's body was buried. The soul and spirit that had graced and brightened the lives of so many, including my own, had left the earth and moved on to heaven. She left behind not just a body, but also an imprint on the hearts of everyone with whom she came in contact. Churchgoers, volunteers, nurses, doctors and family alike grieved. During the visitation, everyone in the room remembered Ann's deep love for people and her absolute assurance in the promises of God.

I ended Ann's story there. As if he had been holding his breath, Harry released a long, slow exhale. He looked and sounded sad. "I hope my departure is as good as Ann's," he said. "Do most Christians believe what she believed? About angels coming to escort her to heaven?"

“Well, according to the Bible, Jesus told of a faithful believer who died and was carried to heaven by the angels,” I replied. “And those who believe in Him and His teachings believe as Ann did.”

Harry asked, “Doc, how do you keep doing this?”

“Well, my friend, people and friends like you inspire me to keep doing what I do. I believe in learning. I am a lifelong learner. And, of course, I want to apply what I learn to help patients along this journey.”

“Tomorrow, doc?” Harry asked. “I may have just a month or two, or just a few weeks. Who knows for sure? But you’re helping me prepare ... myself as well as my family. I need to make lots of decisions, and soon.”

“Sure, my friend,” I said. “How about two o’clock tomorrow? I can have Dr. Gore see a couple of my other patients while we talk. I’m thinking of two individuals whose stories interconnected in many ways. And they brought me some of the most intense, but most rewarding, experiences of my life.”

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