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## Vigil

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*Vigil*

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MJ Bressler

Ribbons of sunlight fanned across the old wooden floor, as the student nurse hurried through the hallway to the end room. The ancient, dried out floor boards creaked and moaned beneath her feet like an old person, complaining at the disturbance. She wondered how many footsteps had passed this way in the ninety years the hospital had been in service.

It was built just after the Civil War in the late eighteen hundreds. Soon it would be replaced by a sleek, modern edifice holding the latest equipment. Groundbreaking ceremonies were planned to take place in a few minutes in the parking lot below this section of the ancient structure. From the window in the hallway, she could see the group of participants wandering about with their shovels, waiting for the signal to plant them in the dirt.

Though inconvenient and difficult, she'd miss this old place. There was a comfortable familiarity here that could not be moved to the new building. With the stainless steel sinks and tiled floors, the new hospital would be sparkling with all the latest equipment, but sterile in personality. It would never have the character this old place had acquired over all the years it stood harboring the ill.

She walked briskly down the hall. The rustle of her starched, white apron sounding like the leaves in autumn as October breezes tried to disengage them from the trees. The sound always made her feel efficient. As she pushed the door open with one hand, while holding the blood pressure apparatus with the other, her mind reviewed the list of duties she had to accomplish before her shift was over. The structure and fast-paced schedule fit her

like the nursing student uniform she so proudly wore.

Quietly, she approached the bed on which an old woman was lying. This patient had had a stroke a few weeks prior, and had not regained consciousness. The staff placed her on death watch, for she was terminal.

After the student applied the blood pressure cuff, she pumped the bulb and held the stethoscope to the pulse point on the crook of the woman’s left arm. She could not hear the beat. Again she pumped the bulb and listened carefully. She thought she heard a sound at forty over zero. She tried again to substantiate. Yes, she’d heard it correctly. The patient’s respirations were shallow and her pulse, slow and faint. She was clearly dying.

The student quickly reported her findings to the head nurse. Since she had never witnessed death, it was time she faced her fear, so she asked to be allowed to sit with the woman until the end.

The patient had no family, no visitors; she appeared to be alone in the world. The head nurse gave her approval to allow the student to observe the end of life.

The young nurse stood looking down at the old woman and thought that she had always feared death, but now she had the opportunity to keep vigil until death appeared. What had she expected to see, the Grim Reaper lurking in the shadows waiting to spring? He wasn’t in the quiet room with the old smells of Lysol, urine and decaying dreams. What she observed was a gentle peace.

She sat in the chair next to the bed and took the woman’s hand in hers and whispered, “You are not alone. I’m here with you.” Stroking the woman’s brow, as if comforting a child, she began to hum softly “The Old Rugged Cross.” It was the hymn her grandmother loved to sing.

Moments passed and the activities outside began to acceler-

ate. The groundbreaking ceremony had begun. The old woman's respiration decreased, as if she was hoarding each precious moment of the life she was about to leave. As the shovel entered the dirt for the new building, the crowd applauded and the band began to play. The beat of the drum reverberated, shaking decades of dust out of the old window frames.

The old woman's heart beat a last farewell, as death stole her last breath and carried it away.

The student's fingertips searched for a pulse, but felt none. She pumped up the cuff of the blood pressure machine. There was no sound. Calmly, she checked her watch for the time of death and wrote the numbers in the chart. After notifying the head nurse of the patient's demise, the student cleared away the equipment that was no longer needed. She efficiently performed the tasks she had to accomplish before her shift ended, while her thoughts were on the death she had just witnessed.

It was not so terrible at all. Why had she spent so much time fearing it? Death was peaceful and kind to this old woman. Perhaps, it's the dying that's the most threatening to the imagination. The fear that one will be aware, fully competent of mind, yet, not able to catch one's breathe or alleviate the awful pain. These were the distressing images dying provoked, creating fear.

This had been an easy dying, a peaceful death.

Walking down the hall she noticed the sunlight had disappeared from the wooden floor. Dark shadows moved along as if in mourning. The boards emitted a soft groan as she hurried over them, intent on completing her duties. Outside the ceremonies grew silent, while dusk threw a shroud upon the day.

} MJ Bressler