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The Understudy

Linda Denise Harris, B.A., M.A.

An abstract presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing

Abstract

This story is a first person true account of love and loss between two sisters. The sisters are separated by seven years and other siblings, yet the bond formed in childhood is strengthened through the trials and tribulations of life. When the older sibling learns that she has terminal cancer she wants her sister by her side.

From the perspective of the younger sister, the story weaves from past to present, back and forth, as each substantial scene unfolds. Through her eyes, the younger sibling sheds light on the early years and the reader learns what it was like growing up in the modest home where the relationship between the sisters was forged.

As they move through the course of the illness, the experience of the most intimate of moments is shared with the readers. At the heart of the story the reader is offered snippets of journal entries inspired by the ill sister as communication with her friends and loved ones. The journal entries and her responses provide insight into her character from others points of view.

When she is ultimately claimed by death, the writer begins the task of ensuring her sister's wishes are honored while contemplating how this unwelcomed change has forced her to move from understudy to main character.

The Understudy

Linda Denise Harris, B.A., M.A.

A Culminating Project to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing
2010

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY

Eve Jones, M.F.A.

Chairperson

Associate Professor Beth Mead, M.F.A.

Advisor

Dedication/Acknowledgments

I have long considered myself a story teller, yet not necessarily a writer. To those who have referred to me as such, I am eternally grateful. To those who have supported and encouraged me, I thank you.

In addition to my thanks, I send much love to my family readers, including my Big Baby Brother and his lovely wife Barbara, and my incredibly awesome daughters Alexis, Sarrita and Ashley. The beliefs you expressed in my ability have propelled me.

To Shannon Pendleton, a great writer and classmate who once said about my work, "I get you," and then graciously agreed to read this work; thank you for your suggestions that helped to make my heartfelt tribute to my beautiful sister, a good piece of prose.

And finally, to God, who I not only acknowledge as supremely in charge of all of the above, but I especially thank the Lord for directing me to the love of my life, Herman Leo Harris, who is everything I could ask for in a mate, and then more....

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes a Thing Chooses You

My husband and I marked twelve years of marriage this past July. That's substantial because it's my third and longest marriage. As an anniversary gift, my sister-in-law gave us tickets to see an apprenticing comedian.

The comedian was appearing during amateur night at a fledging club, little more than a hole in the wall in a strip mall. The joint was sparsely furnished with a series of small round tables and metal chairs and was dimly lit.

On this night, the comic wasn't very funny; I don't even remember his name. In fact, I only remember his closing joke which recently came to my memory and resonated.

A small, slender, black man in his thirties, he told a story of occasionally running into friends he'd gone to school with; it went something like this:

"People come up to me all the time and act like I'm not successful 'cause I'm still performing in St. Louis. I tell them, 'Shit, I'm doing a' right. I got a roof o' my head. I'm drivin', payin' my bills. Hell, I'm in St. Louis 'cause I wanna be.

The young man paced across the stage, wiped his brow with a

bright red towel and then took a sip from his water bottle. He turned and provided the audience with a visual by holding up his hand and counting using his extended fingers to make his point. Holding up his pointing finger, he proceeded.

“Look here, Michael Jackson? Successful. Dead.”

He added his middle finger while still holding his hand up, showing two fingers.

“My man Bernie Mac? Successful. Dead.”

Then, holding up his three middle fingers with his thumb and little finger folded back into his palm, he continued to list celebrities.

“Beautiful, just gorgeous, Goldilocks and shit, damn Charlie’s Angel Farrah Fawcett. Y’all know you had that picture of her in the swimsuit on your wall, in your locker, folded up in ya’ pocket , or, in your case man, ya’ jail cell.”

With three outstretched fingers, he motioned to a man in an orange linen suit who was seated close to the stage. The crowd applauded and laughed appreciatively.

The man in the orange suit gestured demonstratively as if to shoo the comic and the spotlight that was now shining on him.

The comedian continued while still holding up his three fingers.

“Farrah Fawcett. On the show, her name was Jill. She was my favorite angel. She was my ultimate; a dream girl. She was also successful and now she’s

He paused for a moment as he moved his hand to his ear, encouraging spectator response as he continued, saying,

“What?”

On cue, the audience responded loudly, “Dead.”

“That’s right. Dead.”

The comic lowered his hand, switched the microphone from one hand to the other and placed the free hand on his hip as he persisted. .

“Speaking of dream girls, how ‘bout that fine ass Jennifer Hudson? That’s my dream girl for real. She’s a sister; baby got back, front and some on the sides. And, she’s successful.

At this point, his hand came off his hip, and darted back up into the air, holding all four fingers up, with his thumb tucked back towards him and continued.

“Yeah, she’s successful. Damn American Idol didn’t work out for her, but fuck that.”

He contorted his fingers to make the obscene gesture generally associated with the phrase and then paused momentarily. He took a gulp of water and continued, putting his hand on his hip again.

“Jennifer Hudson didn’t need ‘em. She got ‘Dream Girls’ and ‘Sex In the City’ and now she got a baby and a man but what did she have to give up? Her mama dead, her brother dead and her little nephew dead, all at once. That’s a lot.”

He shrugged and paused momentarily, for effect. He scanned the room slowly and deliberately. It was eerily quiet with retrospective melancholy.

***“So yeah, I’m doing a’ right. I’m just fine.
To get more than I got, I’m gonna have to lose
sumtin’and I’m not sure I wanna give nothin’ up.”***

The audience responded with steady applause and appreciation. He ended his show on a high note.

“That’s my time. I’m out y’all.”

As I began my final semester/cluster in the Master of Fine Arts Program at Lindenwood University, the essence of this comedy skit became my reality. For my capstone final project, I contemplated whether to produce a book length project of poetry, not likely; a collection of short stories or essays; a novel; or a screenplay. After considerable thought, I decided I would write a series of short stories or essays which revolved around growing up in a family of my personal heroes.

I’d titled it, “The Vision of the Yellow Dress and Other Tales about the Fabric of Life.” I completed the title piece with the intent to paint a picture of my mother telling a teenage me, a story about dating a man, she presumed to be the father of the famed Dallas Cowboys’, Tony Dorsett. It’s a sad story in which I daydream about an easier life she might’ve had if things had been different.

In her youth, she'd had a beautiful yellow dress set aside for a visit from a man named Tony Dorsett. As fate would have it, the event never materialized in the small East Texas town where she lived but the proximity fed the imagination. The short story ends with the realization that her life choices, culminating with marrying my father, and their loving each other, my siblings and me unconditionally, were far greater than any alternate life choice she could have made. (By the way, the demographics and geography were all wrong. Tony Dorsett of the Dallas Cowboys grew up in Pennsylvania and his father's name was Wes.)

I'd also penned a table of contents and outlined a theme for several essays although the aforementioned was the only one committed to paper. I'd started the second piece. It was a story my father told me shortly after I divorced the first time and returned to live at home. I was deeply depressed.

My father offered me advice in the form of a personal story. He'd been married before my mother but his first wife left him. He was broken hearted when she walked out. She'd left him a memento; a favorite dress. It was an ankle length, slinky dress hung singularly on her side of the closet. He said he'd stared at that dress every night hoping and praying that God would send her back.

"I thought I would die without her, and I prayed one night that if she didn't come back, I wanted the Lord to take me." It was then, he explained,

he'd seen a heavenly vision, "God came to me in a fog. I wasn't asleep, but I was somehow paralyzed and couldn't move. God showed me your Mama and your grandmother. God told me to stop looking at the skimpy silk dress, open my eyes and receive the gift."

My father said when he was able to move his limbs, he immediately got up and threw the dress out. Six months later, he met my mother. He said she looked like an angel, just as she had in the vision. He ended by reciting his mantra, "Trust God."

I hadn't quite finished that story but I was making progress, confident that I would have the overall project fifty percent complete by mid semester. However, a few days later, I made a telephone call that would immediately and forever change my life.

My sister Brenda had been on kidney dialysis for nearly three years before we started talking about the possibility of a transplant. Her only son, one of our brothers, and I all agreed to be tested. But lately, she'd had some additional health problems and was persistently feeling under the weather. She'd been nervous about a colonoscopy but had come through it fine. Early this particular morning, she was having an endoscopy and the results wouldn't be encouraging. In fact, they were dire.

Her husband of forty years answered the phone and was broken up to the point where he simply handed her the phone after saying, "It's hard to talk about."

Her voice flowed through the receiver, calm and composed. "I have cancer in my esophagus, stomach, liver and a little in my back."

Dumbstruck, I couldn't find my voice. I tried to process her words.

When I was silent, she continued.

"It's very bleak; six months, if I'm lucky."

She had calculated the duration of six months and expressed sadness that she might not be able to see her only grandchild graduate from high school. "I wanted to go to Aaron's graduation but six months is March."

I finally found my voice but the words reflected denial, accusation.

"Who said six months?" I asked.

"The doctor."

"He doesn't know everything," I said, "He's not God."

"I know," she answered, "I have a lot of faith and if it's God's will..."

her voice quivered before she added, "Don't be sad. I'm going to need you." Then, referring to the fact that she had been our family caregiver, she spoke plainly. "You're going to have to do what I would do. You're going to have to become me."

I smiled though I was crying softly as I told her, "That's not possible; I've tried for fifty years to be like you and if I haven't succeeded this far, how can I do it now?"

"You're going to have to," she said, "and you're going to get a good

book out of this. You'll have to write about it afterwards; it will be therapeutic for you."

As writers, we're always looking for that next good read. We want to write that compelling story that others long to read. We want to see our name in print and have someone ask us about our motivation. I am no different. But as the young comic references in his routine, this is a high price to pay for a good story.

Nonetheless, the hand has been dealt; there are no do-overs. It is the thing that has chosen me; and it is the thing that will therefore be, the subject of my final project, my capstone.

My sister Brenda is the focal point of this piece and I, the understudy.

ACT ONE

Meet My Sister Brenda: Leading Lady

Most of my early childhood memories include my red-haired, freckled- faced sister, Brenda. She was Mother's sixth child, the second daughter and seven years older than me. I was the ninth of ten and the third and baby girl.

Though Mother was present, Brenda's presence was stronger. Recently, when I learned she'd been diagnosed with cancer, I looked back and realized I had relied on my sister the way others counted on their mothers.

We grew up with the Franklin Mountains as our backdrop. The range sits at the base of the Rockies, but nearly seven hundred miles from Pikes Peak. In the middle of the vast desert, the mountains protrude into the horizon of El Paso Texas and extend north into New Mexico. The city borders old Mexico, separated by a small muddy stream that was once the mighty Rio Grande.

When I started first grade in my freshly laundered rummage sale clothing and ribbons in my hair, it was Brenda who walked me up to the classroom doorway. I'd see her once again before lunch when my recess ended and hers began.

Though we were poor, somehow we never qualified for free or

reduced meals so Mother scraped together coins and left them on the dining room table in order for us to purchase hot school lunches. Mine was always a single shiny quarter as I couldn't be trusted with small change. Brenda and my brothers received any combination of coins to ensure they each had thirty five cents. When we marched outside single file for our free time, we weren't allowed back into the classroom until after lunch.

Despite the fact that we started out in an orderly fashion, as soon as we got a glimpse of the bright West Texas sunshine and smelled the dust of the fresh outdoors, we became raucous, our narrow behinds dashing feverishly onto the playground, a sandy paradise spotted with tethered balls, monkey-bars, swing sets, and a small asphalt basketball court that doubled for volley and dodge ball. Lunch sacks or boxes were tossed aside with sweaters and jackets strewn nearby.

Time seemed longer then and a lot happened in those fifteen minutes. My game of choice was sand play; I'd plop down in the dirt and routinely lose my shiny quarter. That should have meant I wouldn't get lunch. But, it didn't; my sister always fixed it. When I lost my money, she gave me hers. I don't remember her ever complaining or even telling anyone.

When my truncated school day ended, Mother would pick me up in our beat up station wagon. If it was Daddy's pay day, we'd run

errands, pay utility bills in jeopardy of disconnection or shop in the corner grocery store where she could *buy now and pay later*.

Brenda walked home with my brothers when their school day ended. Around the same time, Daddy arrived home from his day job as a maintenance mechanic. He'd change into worn and tattered clothing and wait while my brothers changed into jeans and T-shirts. Then they were off to his second job, gardening and lawn work. Mother started dinner but then left for another of her jobs cleaning office buildings, so Brenda finished it.

Because my parents were hard working, dinner was always hearty, consisting of meat and potatoes, rice or beans and fresh green, red or yellow vegetables from Daddy's garden. Fried meat sizzled in a cast iron skillet and the grease was used for gravy. It wasn't until I was an adult with children of my own that I learned macaroni and cheese was an entrée.

Brenda and I ate before Daddy and the boys got back. If dinner was ready in time, we'd eat it sitting in the living room, watching *The Patty Duke Show* before the news came on.

As the night grew quiet and I went to sleep, Brenda was found washing the dishes, pots and pans in the single sink, or sweeping and mopping the worn, torn and faded linoleum. Her efforts resulted in the small kitchen being spotless; the only residue, dinner for Mother set aside and covered in foil. As housekeeping was *woman's work*, Brenda

single handedly kept our modest home meticulous but resented that none of us shared her compulsion for cleanliness.

Throughout her life, Brenda remained organized to a fault. She couldn't tolerate a clothing label rubbing against her skin and promptly cut them out. To this day, I don't know the size or the launder instructions of clothing she's handed down to me.

When she first started dating her husband Palmer, she spent hours cleaning and then timed it so she'd have an opportunity to enjoy a leisurely bath before he arrived. She'd be sure to leave our singular family bathroom orderly in case he needed to stop there.

Frequently, however, our brother Tinko, a year younger than her, interfered. He'd come in from cutting grass and challenge her for bathroom rights. If he made it there before her, he'd throw his filthy clothes, complete with grass shavings, mud and gravel in the middle of the floor and leave a dark ring in the tub afterwards. Our parents would admonish him and insist he clean it but it was never to Brenda's satisfaction. Regardless of whether she had her bath or not, she'd be compelled to clean it.

Once when she had prepared her bath, Tinko ran in announcing he had to hurry. She charged towards the bathroom where they collided and tussled. He overpowered her, pushed her aside and

jumped into her water fully clothed. The clear water in the claw foot tub immediately turned murky brown and she ran to our parents, screaming and sobbing.

The rivalry over bathroom use was a recent development. When they were younger, Brenda had virtually exclusive use of the tub whenever she wanted it. Our brothers only bathed occasionally. They followed Daddy's mantra of "bathing once a week whether they needed it or not." For Brenda, however, personal hygiene was always important. She insisted upon morning baths as opposed to night, saying she didn't feel clean if she bathed the night before.

So she was up early and responsible for ensuring we got to school on time. I was always well groomed. Brenda diligently combed my long kinky hair though I was less than cooperative.

When we vacationed, she sacrificed her high standards, unbeknownst to me at the time. Mother did not accompany us because she had to work, having no paid vacation. As an adult I've realized that with us gone, it was a vacation for her just the same.

Daddy's boyhood home was in the backwoods of a little town carved from Mississippi hilly red dirt the consistency of clay. Our grandmother lived there with Daddy's older sister and her family. They farmed the land and we travelled there annually. At the time, they had no indoor plumbing; pumped water to wash in a tub and relieved themselves in an outhouse. Our Aunt complained that we used too

much water because Brenda was bathing us daily. Our younger brother and I frolicked under the hot sun in the humidity of the long day, playing in the red dirt, and undoubtedly required daily cleansings but that wasn't our Aunt's concern. First Brenda asked us not to get dirty and then reverted to the three of us using the same water. Though, he was probably the filthiest, she bathed our baby brother first, then me and, when the mud settled she used the same murky water to clean herself. Realistically she probably made herself dirtier, but psychologically she felt better having gone through the motions.

Back at home, with the bathroom wars becoming commonplace, our parents updated the bathroom, adding a shower and an additional half bath. During that time, we used wash cloths to freshen up. Brenda, however, improvised. She'd get up before sunrise, go into the backyard and take cold showers using the garden hose.

Her passion for cleanliness and order continued into adulthood. Anyone spying on her linen closets, her pantries, even her sewing basket, would see a work of art. Whenever she and Palmer had parties, not only did everything have to be spotless, but she'd refold and organize everything in their bedroom drawers to include their socks and underwear.

I once asked her why; no one would know.

She'd answered, "I'd know."

Brenda was as painstaking professionally as well, always learning, always teaching. Shortly after she learned she had cancer, she pulled out a leather journal, dated it 13 October, 2009 and instructed visitors to write.

"I want you to write me a letter; recall a memory or anything you want. Skip a few pages between letters so I can answer."

There was some initial leerness and then questions.

"My handwriting is bad; can I type it?"

"I can't come to visit; my son has swine flu. Can I send it electronically?"

Brenda answered affirmatively.

"Who's going to see it?"

She explained she wanted it public but gave her only child, Palmer Junior, permission to write a letter exclusive of the book.

However, after much thought, he elected to be open.

"Dearest Mother, My Angel and My Best Friend, My earliest and most frequent memories pertaining to you almost all revolve around you "Carrying the Burden."

As I read, I held my breath. I assumed he would recount numerous times his mother bore my burdens although many were

either before he was born or while he was still very young. Nearly all of my memories either included or revolved around Brenda.

She and I had our share of fights but the truth, I almost always provoked her. Such was the case when our grandmother died. I was sixteen and it was one time Mother accompanied Daddy to Mississippi and we did not. Although Brenda and Palmer were married, he'd been assigned duty overseas and she'd temporarily moved back in. One morning, she was running late and asked me to take trash out: I refused. One thing led to another and before long, we were brawling. She punched and kicked; I scratched and bit. Our Brother Kenny eventually broke us apart and I went off to school, nursing my hurt feelings. He'd been pretty hard on Brenda, admonishing her that "she was the adult and our parents had left her in charge." She'd felt terrible and bent over backwards to make it up to me. I milked her self-imposed culpability for all it was worth and didn't do anything to assuage her guilt.

As an adult, I eventually gave her a pass, admitting I had contributed to the craziness of the moment, but I don't think she ever really forgave herself.

Pondering what her son had written in the journal, I considered that whether an adult or a child herself, Brenda was not only like a parent to me but also, my mentor, my advocate, my friend.

My sister Brenda was selfless and loved deeply. After being

informed of her illness, I traveled to El Paso to spend precious time. As I entered her hospital room, I said, "I love you."

She responded "I love you more."

Given the recollections recorded here, I can do no less than agree. I believe Brenda loved in a way few others are capable.

An example of Brenda bearing my burdens occurred in one of my most youthful holiday memories. I was a pre-teen, and in a practical sense, our parents were too old and too tired to deal with the madness of the age. In a sense, they'd done their time. Our mother was eighteen when she had her first child, our oldest sister Poo. With no concept of birth control, she continued to have children every couple of years until I was born twenty years later and our baby brother, the last, surprised her six years after that.

Both our parents worked full and part time jobs simultaneously. Then, depending upon the season, they worked more, picking up odd jobs here and there.

This particular New Year's Eve was the year before Brenda and Palmer married. I'd sat alone sporting my traditional Christmas gift, new red pajamas. Mesmerized, my gaze affixed to the floor model black and white television, I was transfixed by the crowds in Time Square. I stared intently as Dick Clark began the countdown.

"Ten, Nine, Eight."

I was on my feet, exuberant.

Our brother and parents were asleep; everyone else was out.

"Three, Two, One."

When the brilliant ball dropped, it was as if a fire burned my feet and energetically, I burst into their small bedroom enthusiastically screaming, "Happy New Year!" I was sincerely joyous and naively expected them to wake and share in the glorious moment. Instead, Mother woke startled and admonished me in a tone so harsh, I left their room sobbing.

With hurt feelings, I trudged back to the modest living room where the formerly brilliant light from the television flickered and now appeared dim. My eyes were still watering and my vision blurred when Brenda and Palmer came in.

"What's wrong?"

Through tears I recanted the story of how I had been wronged.

While I'm sure Brenda understood my mother's reaction she didn't take me down that path. Instead, she said, "Go put on some clothes; we're going out to bring in the New Year. We can't have you starting out the year sad."

I headed towards the bedroom we shared when she called out, "Be sure and wash your face."

Riding in the back seat of Palmer's newly acquired convertible

Mustang; I took short sniveling breaths to regain composure as he pulled into the nearby Dairy Queen. We ordered hot chocolate with soft serve ice cream substituting for whipped cream. That taste was glorious and remains in my memory as a most delicious and satisfying sensory experience. I've never been able to duplicate the sensation I felt on that early morning New Year's Day.

Recalling numerous instances of how Brenda cared for me, I continued to read her son's entry. Though I had two sisters, Brenda was the only one with whom I had a relationship of credence. Poo moved away before I was born; I only knew of her in passing or tales.

When I took note of boys, it was Brenda who intercepted Mother and taught me about the birds and the bees. Mother said, "Keep your skirt down and your pants pulled up." Brenda had to explain that to me. I was clueless and unconcerned about sex. I just wanted to have my books carried and receive a huge gold and brown mum corsage for homecoming. I'd become aware of boys but was still afraid to kiss; but I was ready to hold hands or wear a letter jacket or class ring.

By the time I wanted to pull my pants down, it was Brenda to whom I confided. After all, Mother still said "pocketbook" for vagina and "dingle" instead of penis in spite of the fact she'd had ten children

And, it was Brenda who convinced me to tell our parents when I

wanted to marry, though she was living across the country on the East Coast. As with all romances, it started out magically. But he eventually became abusive to the point where our parents didn't want him around. On the other hand, I remained enamored and determined to continue seeing him. I even agreed to sneak across the Mexican border to elope. Brenda remained my confidant so when I called to tell her of my dilemma, she convinced me not to alienate our parents.

"You really can't do that. It will devastate them," she said.

"But they don't like him." I countered, "They don't accept him and I love him."

"Listen to me," she said, "You need to tell them. Both of you need to sit down with them like adults. They will accept him if you're demonstrating you've made a mature decision; running away doesn't do that. If you tell them and they don't accept it, then feel free to go to Juarez and get married, but you owe them that."

She was right. Our parents didn't resist. In fact, they sponsored a big church wedding, with all the trappings. When the short-lived marriage ended with more than 2,000 miles between me and our parents, I was grateful I had listened.

At the time, when I finally realized it was necessary to remove my infant daughter from the nastiness, I called to ask if I could return home. Though they welcomed me back, they had neither the means nor the knowledge required to help me accomplish the move.

Again, bearing my burdens, Brenda, and Palmer advised me and then secured a trailer and came to move my belongings.

Years later, when I decided to "jump the broom" again, I planned to keep it low key, just immediate family. I was still ashamed of the first fiasco which I had been so determined to consummate, so sought familial approval. Brenda never judged me but wanted me to have what she had; Palmer, her first and only boyfriend, had been with her since she was sixteen. Clearly that wasn't my reality. I was twenty-eight with a six year old, and ready to commit to a second marriage.

Brenda talked us out of going to city hall and subsidized what she said would be a small and intimate ceremony. But Brenda couldn't do anything small, so it became a production. I'm not sure how she orchestrated the grand event without my noticing, but she pulled it off, down to having *The Wedding March* piped in.

A decade later when I feared I was suffering a nervous breakdown as that marriage unraveled, who else but Brenda left her warm comfy home to travel to the snowy Colorado Mountains. It was in the middle of one of the harshest winters in recent history and she came to rescue me.

When the dust settled, I moved my two daughters back to El Paso to be nearer to family, Brenda and Mother.

When a friend introduced me to the man I would later recognize as my soul mate and I was afraid to trust, it was Brenda who convinced me to put my fear aside and believe in love.

On the day I was to board a plane for a destination wedding with Mr. Right, I overslept. When Brenda and Palmer came to take me to the airport, they woke me from a sound sleep.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Groggy and dazed, I made my way to the door. I was dejected and considered that it was fate; it was too good to be true.

"There's no way I can get ready now. I just can't go."

"Are you crazy?" she asked. "Get yourself together and come on here. You can still make it."

"I haven't had a shower," I said.

"Shower when you get there."

I was a puppet; she the puppeteer. Palmer, always at her side, grabbed my bags and shoved them in the car; she did the same with my catatonic body. I made it to the airport in the nick of time, and though it took me 25 years longer than it had taken her, I finally entered a quality marriage.

Through the years, the number of times that Brenda bore my burdens is immeasurable. When I struggled with my children, it was her advice I sought. Ironically, my children also entrusted her with their private thoughts. As such, she had insight that helped her counsel us all respectively. Even so, she never betrayed a trust.

When the news was happy, I rejoiced with Brenda. When it was sad, I immediately phoned her for consolation. I called her when my first grandchild was born; then cried on her shoulder when seven months later, he died.

"Did they have insurance?" she asked.

"No."

"Well, they'll need money for a funeral. Financially, we're in a pickle," she said. "I can send money or I can come but I can't do both."

"I need you to come," I answered without thinking. "We'll figure out a way to pay."

Both she and Palmer traveled from El Paso to the East Coast for the baby's burial. Their presence helped make an unbearable circumstance, bearable. She sent flowers and slid two crisp hundred dollar bills into my coat pocket as she left.

These memorable scenarios are a small sampling of what immediately crept into my recollection as I continued to read Palmer Junior's journal entry, so imagine my surprise when as I continued reading, I didn't see my name. It had seemed to me that she'd been so busy taking care of me, she couldn't possibly have borne anyone else's burdens, but as I read, all of what he'd written was familiar.

His entry continued: *"On your tiny shoulder, Mother, you've carried the burdens of our family much as Christ carried the burden of the world. First, I remember you carrying the burden of caring for Aunt Poo when in her time of need; she was flown to El Paso."*

Brenda was probably as close to Poo as she was me, though they were total opposites. Mother's assessment was brief and succinct; Brenda was her most "angelic" child; Poo rested at the other end of the spectrum.

Always slender, by the time Poo boarded the plane from her home in the U.S. Virgin Islands where she'd lived for several years, she was less than 100 pounds; skeletal at 5'6". She made analytical decisions about how much medical care she wanted and when she knew the end was imminent, she demanded her husband fly her home to die.

Poo relished being the oldest and demanded the associated

respect. She lived hard and fast. She smoked cigarettes and drank and likely was an alcoholic. When diagnosed with cancer in her late 40s, though it was heartbreaking, there was a sense it had been expected.

Once back in El Paso, Poo lived less than two weeks. During that time, Brenda provided constant care, and made funeral arrangements per Poo's instructions.

Poo was undeniably absolutely gorgeous in a Lena Horne, Dorothy Dandridge, Halle Berry sort of way. Because she rested on that laurel, she took vanity to the extreme. In death, she requested the casket closed because she couldn't be sure how she'd look. As agreed upon, Brenda applied her makeup; including her signature eyelashes while she lay waxen and cold. Not one to betray a trust, she honored Poo's wishes but said, "I wish I could have gotten her permission to leave it open. She looked as beautiful as if she'd applied the makeup herself."

Six months later, our beloved father died after a brief illness. As a result, Brenda took a maternal role with our aging mother.

Her son's writing also mentions this: *Perhaps your greatest and most beautiful burden of relief came from the 24 hour/7day duty of carrying the burdens of Nana's illness and end of life care. All while maintaining a full time job and a family of your own."*

Mother lived ten years longer than Daddy but suffered a debilitating stroke which rendered her permanently paralyzed. Brenda transformed her antique decorated guest room into a world class medical facility and provided "priceless" personal care.

In his writing, Palmer Junior also included other caring acts Brenda performed on behalf of our brothers, his uncles.

Our brother Charles holds the record for being the first, and so far, the only African American ever to serve as Drum Major for the United States Marine Band, *The President's Own*. He attained the highest of the enlisted ranks and led the band when Richard Nixon was in office. While assigned duty at the White House, he'd mingled with Presidents and foreign dignitaries, but when he retired from the military and moved his family back to El Paso, he had difficulty adapting to civilian life. By the time he was forty-five he was a full blown alcoholic.

When his incessant drinking led to failing health, diabetes and liver disease, he couldn't keep a job and frequently was found passed out. On those occasions, Brenda was the one who'd secure his well being, though others grew weary of his *wolf cries*; Brenda remained faithful to him until he died at age fifty-one.

Finally, Palmer Junior mentioned his mother's due diligence, in the saga of our baby brother, an uncle only slightly older than him, but a recovering crack cocaine addict.

Our youngest sibling leads an unconventional life complete with associations with criminals, derelicts, and the general dregs of society. He's non judgmental, doesn't like answering questions, always needs money and advice, but generally only accepts the former.

Brenda's always available to him, encouraging him to seek treatment and improve his circumstances. She supports him both emotionally and financially. He calls her when he needs money for rent or car repairs; she always provides.

She says, "It's for the children."

There are eight of them, and a grandchild.

Brenda makes sure they have quality holidays and ensures they have beds in which to sleep. She allowed them to live in our family home rent free; but vagabonds, they chose to move on. He's fallen off the wagon more than a few times and his wife occasionally tumbles too. But they have so far, always found their way back. Brenda always gives them the benefit of the doubt.

Once, when the children were small, he binged, spending his entire check on drugs and staying away a weekend. His wife, understandably livid, began acting out in front of the children. Brenda interceded by retrieving the children and giving the adults private time.

She successfully distracted the children, allowing them to swim, roast marshmallows, eat pizza and watch videos. She styled the girls hair and painted their finger and toenails. When she returned the children, she didn't lecture the parents, but instead shared stories of the children's adventures.

And though Brenda persistently encouraged the parents to be more involved in the education of their children, she still spent long evening hours tutoring the youngsters to ensure they did well in school.

Brenda's son ended his writing by thanking his *wonderful mother, wife to his father and grandmother to his only son*. While he'd touched on many of Brenda's deeds, he'd only scratched the surface.

ACT TWO

Rehearsing

Brenda *knew* she had cancer before the formal diagnosis.

"Something's wrong with me," she said explaining a frightening scenario.

She'd gotten out of bed and fallen; couldn't get up, had no strength in her legs. Palmer had been ready to call an ambulance but thinking it was her diabetes, she asked him to first bring her a regular, not diet, Coke.

"It was like a miracle," she said. "I took a few sips and could stand."

"You needed sugar," I said, "I guess it's true there are eight teaspoons of sugar in a soda. "You've got to be careful. You could go into a diabetic coma."

I queried her; had she been taking her medicine, eating right, exercising?

"I stopped going for walks because I fell at the park and now especially, I'm afraid I won't be able to get up. I eat but everything comes back. I think I have cancer," she said flatly.

"Why would you say that?" I countered. "Where's your faith? Of all the things that could be wrong, why would you claim something as horrible as that?"

She answered that Poo died of cancer when she was just fifty.

“Don’t jump to that conclusion. Just because Poo had it, doesn’t mean you do. You have a totally different lifestyle. You need to go to the doctor, find out what’s wrong. It’s probably something simple.”

Ironically, during that same time frame, in a separate conversation, Palmer revealed the same concern as her maladies continued to surface and unfold. I’d called not realizing she was out and he told me he suspected the worse.

“What’s wrong with you people? Is that all you know?” I barked.

“I don’t think you realize how sick she is,” he said.

He said he hadn’t discussed it with her so I told him she’d expressed the same. When I asked him about his thought process, he provided an informed answer, he’d done research.

“I’ve been looking on the internet and she has all the symptoms.”

As a dialysis patient, with high blood pressure and diabetes, Brenda had seemed remarkable well, her vibrant self at the Fourth of July party they’d hosted just two months prior. She actually seemed healthier and more energetic than she’d been for some time. With this recent vision of her, it was hard to think about the severity of her condition.

In the six weeks preceding the dire news, whenever I called, her voice was hoarse.

"I'm okay," she said, "I just haven't been talking."

Almost exclusively, our conversations included her health.

"I was sick as a dog last night," or "I've had a terrible cold; missed dialysis and had to go twice in a row; it wiped me out."

Though we consistently talked two to three times a week, she had begun calling more frequently and mystery and intrigue associated with her wellness, surfaced each time.

Helpless, I'd turn the conversation to the one thing I thought I could control; the possibility of a kidney transplant. I deduced I was the best candidate; if I could just give her my kidney, everything would be idyllic. Of late, though, in spite of the fact she'd been cleared as a transplant candidate, she wasn't giving it serious consideration. Without fail, in every exchange, I reminded her and asked her to send me the paperwork so I could be tested.

She'd stalled because she believed she had cancer and she didn't want to "waste" my kidney. However, she promised to make an appointment with Ray.

Ray wouldn't have been my choice. A retired military physician, he's a genius or *certifiably* insane. He's been her neighbor and friend for nearly thirty years and took care of Mother when she was bedridden. Brenda was loyal to him. A divorcee, he's a recluse and a hoarder who keeps everything from outdated medicine to rusted-out cars. In spite of his obvious idiosyncrasies, both Brenda and Palmer trust him and have confidence in his medical skills.

Though she took care of everybody else, when her own health was concerned, she was unreliable. She'd complain, make appointments, and then cancel when she felt better. However, since she was getting progressively worse, she kept her appointment.

Initially, Ray referred her for a colonoscopy and though she was anxious, results were unremarkable and encouraging. The next step, the endoscopy, was telling.

When the test was administered, there was an immediate diagnosis; no biopsy required; an indication of the proliferation, cancer in her esophagus, stomach, liver and back.

Though the words were clinical and factual, it was clear the end of Brenda's life was imminent. The signs had been there, now there was no denying.

Once confirmed, in hindsight, there'd been numerous occasions where I should've connected the dots.

A few years earlier, when Palmer Junior married Susan in Las Vegas, her feet had been perpetually swollen. Later when we'd met in North Carolina to check on an ailing brother, her condition was amplified; her feet were not only swollen, but she was also unable to keep food down. We'd eaten at P.F. Chang's in Charlotte and she'd excused her nausea by saying she could no longer tolerate beef or spicy foods.

When she began dialysis treatments a few months later, I attributed all of her troubles to the malfunctioning kidneys and dismissed cause for further concern. Yet, just a year before at a Valentine's Day wedding for a nephew, her vomiting had been profuse.

During our first phone conversation after diagnosis, she'd been optimistic though Ray predicted six months at most.

"Don't be sad. I'm going to need you," she said.

Brenda had been our family caregiver even when our parents were alive so her next words were alarming.

"You're going to have to do what I would do. You're going to have to become me," she said plainly.

Crying softly I smiled at the thought of this incredulous impossibility.

We talked more about her bleak condition though there were awkward silences fueled by shock and disbelief. I asked how I could help. She wanted me with her in the hospital and suggested I notify the family. She was aware others did not share her affection and admiration for the good doctor and spoke to it.

"Please ask them not to be disparaging about Ray. I realize they will think and say what they want, but I don't need to hear it. I know he's not perfect, but he loves me like a sister and it's not his fault."

I would remind them that Brenda could have elected another doctor anywhere along the way and admonish them that this was not the time to question her judgment. Just as Palmer sought treatment elsewhere after Ray diagnosed his prostate cancer, Brenda could have done so with any of her previous maladies. There was quiet animosity towards Ray among some. Part of it stemmed from Ray's eccentricities displayed at social events. He routinely walked away with plates of food and drink; as if he was feeding a brood. Still, that could have been overlooked, chalked up to his propensity to hoard, but the deeper resentment was attributed to Brenda's dependency on dialysis. Though Brenda presented late, scheduling and then cancelling appointments until it was severe, many thought Ray should have immediately referred her to nephrology instead of attempting corrective modalities

himself. When he ultimately hospitalized her and called in other medical professionals, it was surmised, he'd left the experts with little option.

Fully understanding the objective, I assured her I'd make the calls but before I hung up, I was compelled to surface our last substantial disagreement and apologize. It had centered on taking our paralyzed Mother into her home. Instead of being supportive, I tried to convince her otherwise. I feared it would be overwhelming and, as I was a struggling, single mother of two at the time, I wasn't prepared to help. The task was undoubtedly gargantuan but she'd essentially told me she would do it if it killed her.

I asked if she remembered. She did.

"I'm sorry I was so mean to you," I said. "Please forgive me."

"It was a difficult time. You've been a great sister and you've always been there for me," she said, shifting the conversation back to the present. "I'll need you more than ever now. Palmer's going to be a basket case and my son will not be much better."

She'd been right about Palmer; he'd already begun to unravel. He wasn't able to talk, he tried but his voice cracked as he choked on his words and became silent.

Brenda said she'd always wanted to die before him, unable to imagine life without him. With her death looming, she was now concerned about his coping and survival.

"It's hard watching him, he's so pitiful and I don't want him to be sad. I want him, all of you, to celebrate my life because I've had a good life, I've been very blessed. I told him to make it festive but he doesn't want it to be; doesn't think he can handle it. He has no choice though; it's what I want and it's my, "she hesitates briefly, "funeral. So, you'll have to help, go to Eastside meats and have it catered."

"What do you get from Eastside meats?" I said.

"We'll talk about it when you get here," she said.

I'd already planned a trip for a long weekend in October but asked if I should come sooner.

No. They aren't doing anything immediately. There's time.

"I'm not going to die tomorrow," she said. "Palmer asked me what I want to do. I'd really like to go to Ruidoso to see snow and to go to Disneyland."

"Disneyland would be great," I answered. "Say when and I'm there."

The image of the most magical place on earth allowed us to move from devastation to fantasy. We ended our call on that note.

I spent the rest of the afternoon and most of the evening talking with family members, echoing Brenda's words "not to be sad" and "not to blame Ray."

After the first series of phone calls, family began arriving for, or scheduling visits, though most had attended her Fourth of July festivities.

It was that activity, where she'd seemed so right, that Brenda continuously recalled. If they'd been there, she talked about specifics, if they hadn't attended, she told them what they'd missed; how much fun it had been, how good the food was, how the hot, hot sweltering heat of El Paso's desert summer was kept at abeyance by early morning showers that demonstrated courtesy by staying away during the celebration.

At that party, her flair for the dramatic and theatric were fully employed, she'd left nothing to chance. Though she'd gone missing a couple of times during the week for mandatory four-hour dialysis appointments, she otherwise seemed healthy. The prospect that her small body was further riddled with tumors was completely bizarre.

Afterwards, when she became so ill, so quickly, it was speculated she'd simply done too much. It was impossible to fathom that she'd pulled off that party while the weight of massive cancer tumors grew inside her.

After diagnosis, our brother Kenny visited first. They'd driven to the mountain community of Ruidoso in New Mexico, but it was too early for snow. He also was the first to write in her journal. *When I first got the news that you were very sick I couldn't believe it. My first reaction was to cry and then to start praying and asking God to please help you and help our family because you are the glue that keeps us together.*

Although Brenda answered every entry, his was one of only two that she personally penned; the others were dictated as her condition worsened. When she answered Kenny, her once beautiful handwriting was deficient, shaky and inconsistent but the words were eloquent.

My dearest baby brother, I remember you as a strong little brother and I have always loved you. Keep praying because God is in charge. His will be done and we must accept it.

Initially, and while Kenny was in town, Brenda experienced a welcomed side effect from the test that identified the malicious condition. The endoscopic procedure had temporarily opened the esophagus, moving the tumors away, allowing her to eat and keep food down, albeit not much, and not for long.

During this brief reprieve, medical options were explored. Ray told her he'd consulted a local colleague and also contacted M.D. Anderson Hospital in Houston for treatment alternatives. Palmer immediately began to consider the feasibility of temporarily moving

their domicile nearly seven hundred miles east to the other side of the state, if it meant a better outcome. Soon, however, Ray withdrew the options because neither arrangement materialized. Palmer was apprehensive but Brenda was quick to agree to treatment at the hands of her friend.

"No one else will take me," she expressed in a phone call. "They say my case is too complicated. I have too many things wrong with me."

Her voice and the words were heartbreaking.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I'm okay. I'm not afraid. Ray came over last night and he asked me to trust him. He has a plan. I'll be fine," she said.

Within days, the tumors were fully expanded again and vengeful; internal bleeding required Brenda's immediate hospitalization.

Now, Palmer also was accepting of Ray as the physician of record.

When I arrived in El Paso, Brenda had been receiving blood, dialysis and bed rest. Though not yet administered, the decision to receive chemotherapy had been made. The time for me to ask her probing questions had passed.

She was lucid and matter of fact. After showering, she put on black and white striped animal print sateen pajamas with a flannel lining, gelled and crinkled her hair and asked for her makeup.

"I won't ask you to put my makeup on, that would be too hard. I just want you to understand how I do it so you can explain it to them."

I understood the reference to them as mortuary workers. I handed her moisturizer and liquid makeup, eye shadow, liners and brow pencil.

"You don't quite have the brow right," I observed, "it's a little off."

"It doesn't have to be exact, it's better that way, natural looking."

She sprayed *Nina Ricci*, replaced the bird-shaped cap and explained that Palmer's recent romantic reaction to the fragrance made it her favorite though she had a perfumery in her bathroom cabinet ranging from *Boucheron* to *Burberry* to *Vera Wang*.

Once refreshed, I asked her to review an informational email to limit phone inquiries.

The draft provided an update on her condition including that she'd developed a nasty cough, attributed to a tumor on her diaphragm. Brenda edited the message as follows:

- ~~Visitors must be limited; Brenda wants you to visit.~~
- ~~Visits should be short as not to tire her out; Brenda is very weak and sleeps most of the day.~~
- ~~Children and those with coughs or colds should not visit; Brenda's immune system is compromised. We must be careful not to expose her to germs or bacteria.~~
- ~~Don't all come at once—space your visits; for your convenience, we'll set up a calendar.~~
- ~~You will have to stay in a hotel; for your convenience we are putting together a listing of nearby lodging.~~
- ~~Brenda is seriously ill; this is not the time for laughing, joking and socializing; ideally, and soon, we plan to meet at a resort area where we can have a great time.~~

When the email was sent, the plan was for her to remain in the hospital four days, but we quickly learned predictability was elusive. Ray said she'd only be in the hospital for the first treatment and that subsequent treatments could be administered on an outpatient basis. Dialysis was temporarily suspended to allow the intravenous administration of the chemotherapy and give the poison time to work.

However, initiation was delayed about 24 hours because Ray was uninformed and unreliable. He consistently gave us bad information about who, what, where, when and how as it related to the chemo and he was persistently hours later than expected.

Brenda's sense of humor never diminished and she never failed to come to the defense of her doctor.

"When are they going to do it? Have you ever heard of having to beg for chemo?"

"It's your doctor; he's key and he's nowhere to be found," I said.

"He's probably had an emergency. I'm not his only patient," she said, her tone more serious.

He eventually appeared, looking worn. He claimed to have been up all night contemplating how to proceed; he wanted to ensure everything was perfect and in place.

She smiled appreciatively.

I exchanged curious glances with Palmer Junior as Ray continued. He's the diametric opposite of Brenda yet she trusts him with her life. He had to have been a good doctor at one point but his quirky ways had caused him to be banned from every hospital in the city except the marginal one we were in. He made rounds late in the evening, decades old appointment cards stuffed into his pockets; to make notes because he doesn't believe in computers. His filthy lab coat, stained with orange and brown liquid splotches on the sleeves and visible dirt resides in the cuffs and collar.

He'd delayed the initial dose until he had the opportunity to validate some of his supposition and meet with the pharmacy. The 5FU (fluorouracil) was finally administered the next morning without incident and there was no obvious reaction so our confidence was boosted and we fully anticipated she'd be discharged on the fourth day.

Ray was good about ensuring Brenda had anti-nausea medicine so while we often heard the sounds of others miserably throwing up in

the night, she was spared. On the fourth day, however, blood work revealed infection.

Ray decided to keep her hospitalized ten more days. That was a devastating blow and no one was more disappointed than Palmer. Since he'd been unable to sleep without her at home, he decided to stay with her that first night. When I left them, they sat watching the sunset after taking a short walk to the lounge area. I loved them both and until now had always envied their love story. Now, however, my heart simply ached for them.

The extended hospital stay made some family members antsy. Though we'd asked them to space their visits and be conservative, many were now insistent and persistent, growing anxious as the scenario changed. My daughter Lexi was determined to introduce her baby girl. I feared HINI and a flight from the Midwest, not to mention whatever lurked in the hospital, but my daughter insisted, recalling Brenda saying, "I just want to hold the precious little baby."

Neither Palmer nor I agreed with the urgency although we had opposing views as to what was reality. Ray's original words and what I'd since seen on the internet, made six months practical. Palmer on the other hand, vacillated, but his expectation was never as limited as mine. Nonetheless, my daughter could not be dissuaded.

With the extended admission, Brenda would receive at least two more of the four chemotherapy treatments that comprised the first in a

series of three. Ray designed a twenty-nine day protocol to alternate and combine 5FU and Adriamycin; balancing the treatments with the necessary dialysis. His opinion was that dialysis was a low priority. The chemo was the only possibility for extending her life and he could make no judgments on success until after he'd administered three series, twelve treatments in approximately three months.

It was a miserable circumstance for her but her confinement provided us priceless sister time unlike any we had previously shared.

Early every Sunday in the sparse African American community of El Paso, radios tune to National Public Radio for gospel music and news. While Brenda was in the hospital, we listened, sang, prayed and reminisced. I speculated about the longtime host with her raspy voice. "She still sounds the same and I never would have thought she'd be successful."

"She's very popular," Brenda said. "The churches love her."

"That explains it; she probably brings the station a lot of money during pledge cycles."

Black churches in El Paso are influential and the foundation of the small black community in the completely integrated city. Since blacks represent only about three percent of the overall population, it's the only place to find the culture and customs associated with being African American and so in that respect, Ms. Robinson is a treasure.

On that first Sunday in the hospital, when the show culminated,

the two of us were alone when she asked me to call her church.

She told me to ask for the 85-year-old Deacon who'd been a friend of Daddy's. I did so and explained the situation and provided him with her room number. He said they'd already been praying for her but appreciated the update since they hadn't gotten an answer on her home phone.

When I ended the call, she was crying softly, "You should have told him I was terminal."

I put my arms around her and whispered, "We're all terminal."

Regaining her composition, she asked me to make another call. "I want you to tell Elfie, but you need to leave the room. I don't think I can listen but I want her to know. It's going to be hard for her because she just lost her sister. Tell her I don't want her to come; I just want her to know."

Elfie was the German lady who helped Brenda care for Mother. During the four years she did so, she and Brenda became like twins. Elfie knew how Brenda liked things done; how immaculately she kept her house; how she folded her towels hiding the tags with the creases on the same side; and how she organized her kitchen drawers and the garage after Palmer had tinkered there. After Mother died, Elfie and Brenda were staples at all the significant events in each other's lives; *Teacher of the Year*, retirements, funerals, Elfie's remarriage to her first husband and her citizenship ceremony.

Later, as visitors arrived, I slipped away to call Elfie.

She sobbed.

The next morning, she was at the hospital at dawn and remained until dusk. It was a difficult day. Brenda was weak and diarrhea was extreme. Almost infantile, it took both of us to adjust Brenda's position in bed or assist with her frequent moves to the commode. I was grateful for the help

The day was a blur for Brenda. Later in the week, she pointed to a small angel figurine on the window seal, "What's that?"

"It's the angel Elfie bought, for your collection in the angel room."

"Elfie was here?" she asked earnestly.

"All day; don't you remember?"

"I guess I do, barely," she answered as I handed her the angel for closer inspection.

The angel had a hollow space with a blank paper rolled and stuffed inside for a prayer. She asks me to write, *Lord, Thank you for my healing.*

Placing the angel back on the windowsill, I quizzed her about that ominous day. Her friend and coworker Gloria also had made a brief appearance. She'd stood in the doorway, tears filling her hazel green eyes and running down her cheeks as Elfie and I shifted Brenda in the bed. Had she been aware?

Brenda had no recollection whatsoever of Gloria's brief visit.

As the state of incapacitation became her norm we made a conscious effort to be with her around the clock. Our decision was reinforced because we only spoke English and due to the city's proximity to the border, discovered occasionally the nursing assistants, responsible for providing the most constant care, only spoke Spanish.

While medical professionals generally were concerned and devoted, the hospital business is about economics and the staff was routinely stretched thin.

Add to that, Palmer, typically easy going, was now perpetually on edge, not sleeping much, drinking and taking sleeping pills. At one point he expressed aggravation about virtually everything and the two Palmers decided to consider moving Brenda to intensive care for uninterrupted medical care as opposed to our simply being present. It would mean relieving Ray as the primary care physician. After much discussion and dialogue, the conversations stopped abruptly when Brenda expressed, "Please don't do anything to upset him or I won't have anybody to take care of me."

In the meantime, routine blood test results yielded more unwelcomed news; Brenda had another infection, this time *staph*, also known as the "superbug" or MRSA, resistant to antibiotics and common in the hospital setting. She'd now be on lockdown for another ten days. We'd heard the horror stories; this was as frightening as the

cancer itself. These preventable infections thrive in clinical surroundings, killing more than eighty eight thousand people a year in the United States; one dying every six minutes. I knew it had no respect for person as I recalled the case of the St. Louis County Executive Buzz Westfall, who contracted it and died in 2003 while hospitalized in North County.

This development persuaded the entire family to disregard the previous caution to be conservative in scheduling visits and soon the four beige walls, bordered with a strip of gold and maroon paisley, were incessantly inhabited by hosts of friends and relatives draped in precautionary yellow paper hospital gowns.

They came from New York and California and everywhere between. With so many visitors, in such small quarters, I relinquished my shifts to those whose time in El Paso was limited. Their presence also gave me the opportunity to run errands.

I had wondered if Brenda wanted to be buried in street clothes or a negligee but I didn't know how to bring it up. One morning, after her shower, she told me.

"I had a dream last night. You were in Dillard's and you saw this beautiful gown; it was kind of like the one we buried Mother in, except it was trimmed in feathers. I don't know who you were with but you asked if you should buy it or wait."

Though Mother has been deceased for the twelve years, I

vividly recalled the memories of buying that gown at Brenda's side. With my daughter in town, she and I did the same for Brenda. We got the chiffon gown with a sequined bodice and matching satin robe, sequined on both sides of the collar. I stuck my arm through the sheer chiffon sleeve with the flared opening and considered it would look very pretty laying flat. The negligee was almost as Brenda described it but for the feathers. We made a valiant effort but if we'd found it exactly, it would have been chilling.

With so many visitors, Elfie also chose not to come to the hospital again. Instead, she worked around Brenda's house, doing things Brenda would have done had she been there and able.

In the hospital, Brenda had her own agenda. She sent me to pick up "parting gifts" for friends and caregivers. It was during one of these discussions that she told me about things she wanted to bequeath, including her cherished jewelry. With an appreciation for fine gold and gems, she told me where to find her scrap metal. "Look in Aunt Jewel's black lacquer box on the dresser; there are some pieces in there that can be melted down; the price of gold is high."

She said I should also locate her charm bracelet and include it, adding, "It's worth a lot."

I questioned melting it. I knew it meant a lot to her. She'd had it since she was teenager, a Christmas gift from our parents when she was fifteen and they'd first discovered credit. She'd added charms on it

through the years to the point where it was clunky and heavy and told the story of her life; all the substantial moments that comprised her essence.

“Who’d want it? It doesn’t mean anything to anyone but me.”

“It’s your life story,” I said.

She then mentioned diamond earrings that were a retirement gift. She wanted them given to a teenage niece.

Although I’d been at her retirement ceremony, two years prior, I didn’t remember the look of the earrings, but I did remember how graciously she’d accepted them.

That evening, she’d worn an ultra feminine pale green outfit reminiscent of the nineteenth century, complete with crepe bodice and embroidered with small flowers on the front panel. Both the skirt and sleeves were trimmed in fine lace.

She’d accessorized with delicate dangling pearl earrings and a matching pearl drop, hung on an 18’ inch gold chain.

Our brother-in-law arrived at her house just as we were leaving.

“I’m glad I caught you; ever had diamond earrings?” he asked, not waiting for an answer, “I have some for you.”

“They’re beautiful,” she exclaimed taking off the flattering pearls and replacing them with tiny diamonds that were specks in comparison to the genuine two-carat diamond studs stowed in her jewelry box.

The ceremony itself had been melancholy because Brenda

hadn't been ready to retire. She persevered for as long as she could after the onset of dialysis but ultimately surrendered, it had become too much for her.

"I wish I could work two more years; I would like to do thirty, but I don't have the energy and I'm doing the kids a disservice."

Those who worked with or were taught by her knew on her worst day, she was competitive. She believed herself substandard because treatments prevented her from working beyond the duty day as she was accustomed. Whether tutoring, mentoring, rehearsing or simply updating her room, she was always in her classroom. One of the last to leave, she had a special rapport with the maintenance workers as she was there with them in the evenings, on weekends and holidays. In addition to not putting in the extra hours, her energy level was down.

Still everyone admired how she'd adapted and took the life-changing dialysis in stride. On the surface, it appeared, she was doing the same with the cancer. Talking with her, watching her, it was hard to accept the finality of her existence.

Yet, fully aware of the prognosis I was helping her prepare to depart this life. Palmer, on the other hand, was modifying his lifestyle to make her as comfortable as possible for as long as possible. I was silent when he mentioned he anticipated the chemo would give them a few more *years* together.

Regardless of what chemo held for the future, the short term effects were fully present; diarrhea and nausea now commonplace and Brenda was progressively weaker. She had intense pain in her chest and stomach. She was forced to wear adult diapers because there was no assurance she'd make it to the bedside commode. She'd developed a bedsore as a result of thinning skin exacerbated by harsh industrialized toilet paper. She needed aid using baby wipes to clean away the tar like waste after each bowel movement and help hobbling back to bed.

Standing became a chore and she required assistance getting up. Generally, we stood in front of her, bent over so she could put her arms around our necks to support her weight. Whenever Palmer helped her, she kissed his cheek.

Ten days in, Brenda had little or no appetite but tried to follow doctor's orders to keep her strength up. She made a valiant effort but could get little down. When she swallowed, the food stalled just beneath her throat, between her breasts. She held her hand across her heart as if to pledge allegiance and said, "It feels like a man's boot is pressing on my chest," then she routinely regurgitated.

Finally, when an aloof male nurse force-fed her oral medication crushed in applesauce, her eyes watered profusely and she gagged until it foamed in her mouth. A gurgling sound rose from her throat; she was choking. That's what led to the necessity of inserting a

Nasogastric Tube (NG) through her nose, down her throat to introduce nutrition and medication.

I didn't verbalize it but the tube reminded me of Mother's last days when her stomach couldn't process food and instead a tube continuously suctioned out mucous and bile. Ray assured us the tube was temporary pending immediate radiation treatments to reduce the tumors, to open the passage so nutrients could flow.

After the second infection, Brenda had been moved to a more isolated room where she was deprived of the view of the mountains and the welcomed noise of the outside world zooming by on the interstate. While still on the oncology ward, the insular room still had a large picture window with wooden shutters, but the outside view was limited to the hospital's meager courtyard.

Except for a mounted television, the staff's dry erase board and a used needle receptacle, the walls were bare. To combat the ugliness, with her permission, I began reading get well cards out loud and then taping them up as visual testimonies of affection.

We read the Bible when she was alert but increasingly she wasn't. Occasionally, she said things that made no sense and often dreamed of our deceased parents and other dead relatives. She understood that she was having trouble separating fantasy from reality and sometimes asked, "Did I make that up?"

One day, seemingly out of nowhere, she told me someone would be coming for her. She wasn't sure who, but it reminded me of a related story that had been floated through our family when Poo died. She was essentially comatose, hadn't spoken for several days, and then just before she died, uttered, "Where are we going son?" It was speculated she'd been led to the other side of life by her son who had died in youth.

I considered the possibility and pondered who would come for Brenda. Would it be Poo, Daddy, Mother? I chuckled to myself; not likely it would be Mother. I didn't have the heart to say it to Brenda but I considered that Mother wouldn't cooperate. During the years Mother was bedridden, whenever she was frustrated or anxious, she'd habitually comment that whenever she "got away from there, she'd never come back."

This had become a source of amusement for our family because even in our dreams, Mother never returned to Brenda's home, remaining true to her conviction.

However, it occurred to me that if Brenda died in the hospital, Mother might come for her. With this notion, for the first time, sitting alone with her in the hospital room, I felt fear; her approaching death was real to me.

When the moment passed, we continued with our rituals that had unfortunately become quite comfortable.

She usually still wanted to shower, but we'd stopped washing her hair because the threat of losing it has made her paranoid. Instead, we simply wet it and add gel. The days she asks for makeup are diminished.

Once, as I turned to get a towel, she slipped in the small space between the shower and the toilet and fell to the floor. With her hands propped on the toilet seat, I tried unsuccessfully to lift her. We were forced to seek assistance and with the aid of staff, finally stabilized her. Because of this and her overall weakened condition, she was then limited to sponge baths.

So Brenda, a person who loved her baths and had been restricted to showers, now, is only allowed what essentially amounts to a *wash up*. Though the damage was done, I replayed the scene in my mind a thousand times, considering what I could have done differently. The good news, except for a slight bruise on her back, she was no worse from the fall.

When Palmer Junior, a nurse and respiratory therapist, came in town a few days later, he gave her a sponge bath took nearly an hour compared to the twenty minute quick wash and linen change the staff and I performed. We were all grateful when he discovered additional skin damage under her breast and just below her stomach.

In that setting, though weakened, Brenda was joyous and proud of her only child, observing his interactions with peers.

Through it all, Brenda's spirituality remained inspirational. Wearing her mustard seed necklace, she quoted scripture whenever medical personnel asked about it.

"Faith of a mustard seed; Matthew 17:20," she said.

When the healthcare workers were interested, she'd tell the whole story. If she was feeling weak, she'd ask me to recount.

On a sunny afternoon after she'd been in the hospital more than two weeks, she asked to go to the courtyard for fresh air. Palmer acquired a wheelchair to honor her wishes and once outside, soaking up the El Paso sunshine, she began discussing how she wanted services conducted for her *home going*, specifying every detail. She gave me specific instructions for my oldest daughter.

"You know I've always wanted Lexi to sing *If Anybody Asks You*."

"She will," I said.

"But tell her she needs to start practicing so she can do it without crying. I want her to get through it without crying."

Palmer, uncomfortable with the discussion said, "Do we really have to talk about this now?"

The conversation wasn't difficult for me because there was optimism the treatments were effective, and especially encouraging was that they were considering giving her ice chips. If she could suck them without choking, the next step would be to remove the tube and

put her on a light liquid diet. If successful, going home would be considered again. Nervously, Brenda accepted the ice chips and prayed there would be no obstruction to the small chunks as they liquefied.

“Ummm,” she moaned, tilting her head back, closing her eyes.

“It’s like heaven, marvelous.”

Once the tube was removed, she drank water and tea easily.

She was feeling absolutely no pain; something was working, if only the morphine.

The four day admission rolled into twenty four and on the twenty fifth day she was finally discharged for a week. We anticipated the discharge all day but didn’t leave the hospital until nearly 10.p.m. Part of the delay was attributed to her requirement for another three units of whole blood, the other, Ray’s tardiness.

All afternoon, we’d sat ready, waiting among numerous clear plastic bags printed with blue lettering, *Patients Belongings* and Brenda’s overstuffed night bag. She’d skipped her sponge bath, saying publicly she’d shower at home; telling me privately she wanted to take a bath in her own tub.

Palmer was visibly angry that his friend was tardy and approached the desk to consider leaving without the formal discharge. The head nurse advised against it for several reasons, the least of which was insurance would consider it “against medical advice” and

wouldn't pay. So instead she offered her assistance by calling the doctor on our behalf.

When Ray finally arrived, the evening shift change had begun and the staff was sequestered together comparing notes and sharing information. We 'd grown accustomed to waiting at least two hours before the nurses were available after staff change but somewhat oblivious to protocol, Ray demanded the night nurse make Brenda the priority.

As she began to dress in street clothes for the first time in nearly a month, Brenda felt pain. The nurse administered morphine.

Then Brenda pulled her jeans over her thighs and stood, a little wobbly, attempting to zip them after heaving them over her hips. It wasn't happening. Her tummy was distended to the point where her jeans were gapped more than five inches.

"Maybe I bought the wrong jeans," I offered.

"No, these are the right ones, but my stomach's swollen. I can't wear them. I will just have to wear my pajamas."

She pulled her pajama pants back up and put on her bed jacket, eager to get home.

After nearly a month, Brenda was back at home.

With all that was going on, she never felt sorry for herself, never asked "why me?" with the exception of her preoccupation with losing her hair, and now, having struggled with weight all her adult life,

perplexed her size twelve jeans didn't fit. She sent me shopping for stretchy jogging sets.

Her five days at home were magical. She did very, very, well. Although she had daily dialysis or radiation appointments she slept in her own bed each night, ate meals at her own wooden table, watched television on the forty-two inch plasma while relaxing on a plush soft leather couch. When she and Palmer returned home from appointments, she'd sometime sit on her back porch, listen to the crows caw and the wind chimes clank, and watch the water ripple in the pool.

Sitting at her kitchen table, she began reading the journal entries. When she started writing, she quickly realized the ambitiousness of the project, in her condition even wielding a pen was tiring.

During her short reprieve from the hospital, Palmer's older brother and his wife visited from Chicago. It was fascinating watching their interactions; it reminded me of how I'd felt when I first observed my sister with her coworkers and witnessed their sincere affection for one another. With her in-laws as with her friends, Brenda asked about their children, grandchildren, and cousins by name with the same sincerity she used with me. She discussed their trials and triumphs

through the years and when I later asked for back-story, she provided it in great detail. It's no wonder these relationships were authentic.

It was clear Brenda had an alternative life where she'd spent time and had experiences with others that were as precious as the memories we'd shared.

Brenda delighted in watching Palmer and his brother bicker and banter about everything from politics to the best kind of television. Though he feigned exasperation when he accused his brother of being a closet republican, Palmer was the most relaxed since my arrival.

The time at home was perfect but for the fact it was increasingly hard for Brenda to get around, sit, stand and get into her high rise bed which sat on top of drawers and stood about three feet from the ground. It was virtually impossible for Brenda to get into bed without assistance. She asked Palmer to order a hospital bed for the angel room; the room where Mother died; now the dwelling for angels of every medium, in every corner of the room.

Palmer ordered a walker and bedside commode but delayed ordering the bed. He purchased shower accessories to include a stool and a grab bar but was unwilling to relinquish Brenda to the angel room.

Nevertheless, we made the best of the time at home. Her desire to have a bath was ever present. I don't like her tub, it's very shallow and narrow and requires substantial upper body strength so I did my

best to discourage her, but to no avail. She waited for the opportune time to spring it on me. Palmer had taken his brother and sister-in-law to a ranch just outside El Paso widely regarded for its steak and the Clint Eastwood and Denzel Washington movies filmed there. She knew they'd be gone at least three hours and suggested it as the perfect time for a bath.

"Are you sure?" I asked. *

"Your bathtub is difficult to maneuver."

"Yes," she said. "I'm sure I can do it. I'm used to it. I really want to take a bath."

"What about having a long shower, using the bench, won't that work?" I pleaded.

"I don't feel clean and it's been so long," she said sadly.

I relented. We had no trouble getting her in the tub. She sat back and relaxed as the lukewarm water glided over her legs and she sponged herself off. Such a simple pleasure provided her ultimate satisfaction. I went about gathering the accoutrements and waited. Sooner than I'd expected, however, she was ready.

She was frightened when she realized the upper body strength she'd taken for granted to get out of the tub, was nonexistent. As the water drained, she instructed me to layer towels in the slippery wet tub, and she eventually rolled out.

Relieved, she dressed in a night gown, put gel in her hair and

sat relaxing on the couch when they returned. I'd assumed the panic and angst from earlier would be between us, but she blurted it out before they were completely in the house. From that point on, shower seat and grab bar sufficed; the pleasure of the bath for her, now was no more than a memory.

Though Ray had initially indicated subsequent chemo treatments would occur on an outpatient basis, there was no such provision and she'd have to be readmitted at the end of the week. We were told it would be a truncated admission for only three days, but our previous experience left us doubtful and leery.

Before leaving for the hospital, we decided to take pictures because a friend had sent us matching picture frames inscribed with the word *Sisters* and we didn't have a good recent picture. She dressed in a leopard print gown so I put on a similarly styled blouse. She made her face and put on large hoop earrings. In doing so, she told me an associated story.

"Kenny bought one of these and I bought the other," she said.

She couldn't remember if it was Christmas or her birthday. She'd accompanied him to the jewelry store where they both had charge accounts. When he went to pay, the clerk informed him the purchase would put him over his limit.

"I really wanted them," she said, "So I asked them if they could split the price and put half on my account and half on his."

After we took the picture, she took the earrings off and handed them to me, "from me and Kenny."

She was only in the hospital for the weekend and thankfully, the admission, the chemo and the discharge went remarkably smooth except for the fact she didn't have a bowel movement and her stomach continued to swell. She asked Ray for medicine which he prescribed but she's wasn't satisfied.

"I need more medicine," she said to the nurse "it's not working."

The nurse gave her a double dose but even that left her anxious. She woke me in the middle of the night insisting upon sitting on the potty. She grunted and strained but to no avail.

"You really have to give the medicine time to work. It's not instant."

"I'm worried," she said, "If I don't go, they won't let me go home, people die from this."

"I know but you'll go, just relax and let it work."

Still restless, she casually mentioned her funeral services.

"I can't remember the name of the place but it's on Carolina Street, where I want to go."

Accepting that she was not going back to sleep, I pulled out the *Yellow Pages*, reading off names until she stopped me.

"That's it. Hillcrest on Carolina."

"Okay, but why?" I asked.

"I don't know, they do good work and they're cheaper than Martin."

She said she'd told Palmer, but didn't think he remembered.

Since we were both wide awake, I suggested she dictate answers for journal entries. I first read the entry and then gave her time to respond. Many of them were stirring; I hoped she hadn't detected when my voice cracked.

Not a surprise in the least was the love she had for her only son. She wanted to ensure he knew how proud she was of him. She dictated, "*My darling son, You're everything a mother could ask for in a son. Thank you for being such a good son...You're my angel.*"

She also had great love for my children. My oldest, essentially raised as her son's baby sister, had written: *When I'm asked where's home? I've always been lucky enough to have two, my mother and my Aunt Brenda.*

Brenda answered, *you've been my daughter; I claim you as my daughter and it's been a joy helping to raise you.*

She dictated several other entries to brothers, sister-in-laws and nieces, friends and her long term housekeeper.

After a while, she eventually drifted off to sleep.

Just after sunrise, the medicine kicked in and it was *explosive*. She smiled sheepishly as the aide and I cleaned up and packed up.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Don't be. You're fine," the aide assured her. "Go home and have a good day, don't worry about it."

She'd be readmitted again the following Friday but as this admission had gone smoothly, we gave ourselves permission to again be optimistic, hoping the worst was behind us.

At home, Brenda settled in on her comfy leather couch and surprised Palmer and me when she began answering the ringing phone.

As the evening progressed, Brenda decided she didn't want to go to the bedroom because of difficulties navigating the bed. Instead she wanted to sleep on the couch. The first night, she slept there comfortably after discussing plans for Thanksgiving dinner. We anticipated she'd be at home, though not able to eat with us.

The next morning, Palmer placed the order for the holiday dinner, and then stopped by the furniture store to order an adjustable bed. Determined to bring Brenda back into his bedroom, he made his bed on the opposite end of their sectional couch in the meantime.

Daily, Palmer continued shopping for things to make her more comfortable. He'd been excited to discover a chair that lifted. Showing her the picture, he described it.

"I wish you wouldn't," she said.

"It's really nice," he answered, pointing to a remote control device "you press this button and it stands you up."

"I'm not going to be here long enough to enjoy it."

"Sweetheart, don't say that. Please think positively, if you sit in it just once, it will be worth it."

She didn't argue with him and she relented but she continued with her alternate plans whenever a thought crossed her mind. She said she was considering asking Edmund, her longtime hairdresser, to get her a wig. "I don't want it for now, I'll use scarves and turbans, but I was thinking I might need it; to be buried in."

Once again, I was relieved because this was another of those critical decisions that needed to be addressed and I hadn't been able to find a way to surface it.

"Let's call him," I said "Do you want to talk to him, or do you want me to?"

"I'll talk to him," she said, "he doesn't know."

I dialed the number and handed her the phone.

"Edmund," she said, "I'm terminal."

She spoke to him for several minutes and when she hung up she commented, "I really wish he'd do my makeup, but he won't. He's scared. He's such a girl."

We laughed and reminisced about Edmund's colorful lifestyle. In his youth he had worked for the Miss El Paso and Miss Texas

pageants and flamboyantly admitted he'd slept his way to the top. Though he was derailed by a drug addiction, he'd never lost his cosmetology skills.

Later that night, as I left them asleep on the couch, she prayed she wouldn't die before Thanksgiving, concerned she'd spoil it for everyone.

A couple of hours later, about two a.m., Palmer's voice woke me from a sound sleep. I walked groggily towards the family room where Brenda lay crumpled in a pile in the hallway.

"What happened?" I asked.

She said, "Call nine-one-one."

Palmer refused.

"She fell," he said, "but I think we can get her up."

She hadn't been eating and was very weak. We tried giving her regular Coke but she couldn't swallow and it spilled down her chin. Within minutes, she became lethargic; slurring her speech, though we could still make out that she was asking us to call nine-one-one.

Instead, Palmer pulled a quilt underneath her limp body and we slid her easily across the Pergo floor to the bedroom. Once we got there, we struggled but eventually lifted her onto the bed. She was nearly catatonic and completely unresponsive.

"Should I call the doctor," he asked somewhat rhetorically.

"Yes," I responded with unintended but unavoidable sarcasm.

Dialing the number, he said, "I hate to bother him so late." He spoke briefly to Ray, hung up and dialed again. "He said call nine-one-one."

I twisted my mouth into a smile to keep from crying as I stood watching Palmer carry out the deed, following Ray's recommendation.

I wondered why he hadn't listened to Brenda who eyes had gone blank. I washed her face with a wet towel but she wasn't speaking, nor mumbling; only gurgling. While we waited, I pondered why, how she, an intelligent and educated woman, allowed herself to end up in this predicament; completely reliant on a quack.

Momentarily, the Emergency Medical Service personnel arrived. They were amazing; strong, polite, and smart. They came in, performed assessments, suspected a stroke and rushed her to the hospital. Before leaving, they asked if she should be resuscitated. I said "no" because she'd articulated that to me, but Palmer intervened and without looking my way, told them the discussion was premature.

In route to the *Emergency Room* (ER) Brenda's blood sugar dropped to an unacceptable level and she was given glycogen. By the time we arrived, she was her own self. Remarkably, she was now sitting up in the gurney style bed, eating cake and yogurt.

"I'm fine now. I told ya'll to call nine-one-one," she said.

They'd immediately taken a urine sample and when the ER physician delivered the results, he explained she had yet another infection and he'd been advised by her primary, to admit her.

Based on the circumstances, coupled with our holiday plans, Ray gave his word he'd personally administer the chemo early Saturday and release her. She was started on antibiotics and though she would have preferred to be at home, her spirits were high with the prospect that she'd be back home with us for the holiday. Her enthusiasm was unmistakable. She was up before dawn on Saturday, eager to have the chemo.

I turned the television on "The Today Show" and she asked me to change the channel.

"Why, don't you like Matt, Meredith and Lester Holt?"

"They're all right," she said, "but you know they hired the Bush daughter, one of the twins I don't like her.

"Politics aside, maybe she's a good reporter. Is she the one who got married?" I asked.

"I don't know, I think so, and I don't care about her politics or whether she is any good but it's just not fair," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Can you imagine how many other people graduated with those same credentials or maybe even better ones? And then how many were given consideration for that cushy job?"

"I see your point," I said, "but it is the world we live in, you know that's just how it works."

I changed the channel to "The Early Show," which didn't have the same exhilarating flavor, but ever since, I've found my loyalty to the National Broadcasting Company and its morning show, waning.

When Palmer came to relieve me, she'd already had me pack her up and she frowned with disappointment when she realized he wasn't Ray.

"Sorry dear, I thought you'd be glad to see me," he said.

"I'm glad to see you; I adore you, and it's still early I guess."

Hopeful that Ray would be true to his word, I left to wait for them at her home.

However, when Palmer Junior arrived near dusk, we learned the doctor had remained absent and characteristically, they'd been reluctant to call him. Agitated and frustrated, Brenda finally asked the call be made; she wanted to go home. She asked him to discharge her; she'd changed her mind about continuing the treatments. Her mood was somber and restless

Palmer was distraught believing she was irrational, yet, he had no legitimate good argument to convince her otherwise.

"I don't want any more chemo. I'll continue the radiation and dialysis but I don't want the chemo. I just want to go home."

Palmer, choking and stammering, reminded her of a promise and said, "You said you'd finish chemo and give it a chance to work."

"I know," she said, "but I'm worse; I can't even stand."

"That's why I'm here dear. We'll get through this together, like we've always done. We took vows, for better or for worse."

"Palmer, it's time for me to go," she said. "You're going to have to let me go. I'll wait for you there."

Finally, and, as if on cue, Ray appeared in the doorway.

Brenda repeated her assertion; she didn't want chemo.

Ray pulled a chair next to her bedside and listened patiently but then suggested she allow him to administer the drug. He said, "It's like water compared to the F5."

"I wanted to go home today," she said.

"Well, you can still go home. I will administer the chemo now and you can be home by midnight."

Almost as a child relents when a parent cajoles them, Brenda gave in.

She was home by midnight, but wiped out.

Weaker than usual, she rested well in the new bed, stepping easily into it, appreciating the adjustability. She showered and sat briefly in her newly acquired lift chair. Though she had no appetite, she agreed to eat tomato bisque soup and sip diet root beer. She couldn't keep it down and within an hour, she was back in bed.

I sat at her bedside considering how to engage her; recreate the atmosphere when she was at home earlier in the week, before the dreaded night when we were forced to call nine-one-one.

"I'm sorry I've had to rely on you so much. I hope I haven't ruined your marriage," she said.

"What? Where's that coming from? Don't be ridiculous," I responded, "my marriage is fine unless you know something I don't," I said hoping to solicit a chuckle. When she was unresponsive, I continued, "He'll be here in a few days. He's a good guy and he loves you just like I do."

She remained in the bed, hardly stirred, refusing to get up. She wasn't interested in showering and she wouldn't try to eat. Predictably, her sugar was low. I sat with her trying to ascertain her mood. She apologized again for needing help.

I reminded her of all the times she'd come to my rescue and told her how blessed I felt to have her as my sister. I also told her I was grateful for an opportunity to help her since I'd always been on the

receiving end. I thanked her for the privilege of allowing me to give a little back to her and told her I loved her.

She mumbled, "I love you more."

Monday night before Thanksgiving, she'd grown lethargic and disoriented. Palmer Junior and Susan employed their medical expertise and I was grateful that Brenda didn't have to rely on me and big Palmer. I was thankful that I could move into the background and observe the scene instead of act in it.

They first tried Coke but she couldn't swallow it without choking and spitting it up. They tried giving her spoonfuls of sugar but it just caramelized in her mouth, having no affect on her overall countenance. The scene disintegrated until it mimicked the one we lived through a week earlier when emergency workers rushed her to the ER.

However, this time, Palmer Junior first administered a glycogen shot but it too proved ineffective. The dreaded, yet lifesaving call to nine-one- one, was initiated.

Unfortunately however, this time, there was no quick fix. On admission, she'd remained weak and listless. When she was able to talk, she tired easily; sleeping virtually all the time.

Palmer wasn't giving up but he was angry with Ray because he believed him to be over his head and said, "He'll never admit it."

There was consideration to put a stint/shunt into her esophagus but after an initial evaluation, no blockage was detected. Yet, Brenda remained unable to tolerate anything by mouth and when whatever she attempted, came back, it came back bloody. Though it made her miserable, she insisted on seeing the sputum each time. She held the receptacle and gazed at it.

An NG tube was inserted for nutrition; but her stomach was not processing the liquids which sat in her stomach, exacerbating the bloating;

When the gastroenterologist made rounds, she and I were alone. He was matter of fact; holding her hand tightly after shaking it.

Looking directly at her, he said, "You're strong. You're a fighter but what you're up against is a monster. I'm going to try something but I'm not hopeful."

"I don't think I want anything else," she said.

"Well, that's understandable," he said, releasing her hand. "It has to be your decision but you will need to talk to your primary doctor and then we'll see."

After he left her bedside, Brenda asked if I'd understood him and asked if I knew why Palmer wouldn't let her go. I told her I supposed he just couldn't imagine his life without her.

"But you're letting me go," she said.

I knew I didn't want her to endure pain or have a poor unsatisfying quality of life so I said, "I don't want you to suffer."

To which she immediately answered, "Well, I'm suffering."

Then she said she needed to sit on the toilet and when I approached the side of her bed to lower the rail and help her out, she looked in my eyes and said, "I'm dying."

I hugged her loosely as she'd become fragile and commonly hurt when touched. I pulled away and asked, "Do you know the Lord? Is He your savior?"

She answered, "Absolutely."

Quietly, she moved to the bedside commode.

She sat and after a few minutes of silence, revisited her agenda; planning, plotting, making arrangements.

"I know you don't like mink, but you need to take Mother's coat; it has her name in it. There's no one else. You're the only daughter."

"You're right," I said, "I'm an animal activist sympathizer, but I'll take it."

Later that night, when I pulled the mink out of her hall closet to pack it in my suitcase, I tried it on and was immediately fascinated by

the luxuriousness of it, though still philosophically opposed. I sported it, rubbing it across the breast plate; it did have a marvelous feel and I rationalized that I wasn't purchasing it. I likened it enjoying the amenities associated with a first-class airline upgrade, though I'd never pay full price.

The hope to have Brenda home for Thanksgiving evaporated, yet she insisted we carry out our plans. In the meantime, the gastroenterologist inserted a tube into her mid section and drained fluid from around her stomach, suspecting the constriction of the stomach was hindering its ability to process the nutrients. Medically, we didn't know if it worked but esthetically, it boosted her spirits when her waistline shrunk.

"It was like I was pregnant," she said. "I might actually be able to wear my clothes, she said.

Though her mood was elevated, she remained focused and initiated a *Do Not Resuscitate* order though it was difficult for Palmer.

Two days before I was to leave, she asked me to bring her jewelry to the hospital. I gathered it in baggies after taking it out of the drawers of the armoire. Like a cat burglar, I loaded her treasures into a pillowcase. As difficult as it was, I was comforted; doing it with her instead of without her. At the hospital, she gave me specific instructions, all the while, sharing personal stories about each piece. That night, she'd been the most alert I seen her since being readmitted. She replicated how she'd been at home after the initial admission except that now there was a sense of urgency.

She held the charm bracelet that she'd previously told me to melt. Triple link, 14 carat-chunky gold, it bordered on gaudy, with seven half-dollar sized charms encircling it.

The charms shimmered as the light bounced off them. The first charm with tiny pearls and rubies came with the bracelet when my parents presented it. All of the others had been gifts from her spouse, marking special occasions. The first one he'd given her was in the shape of an octagon, a facsimile of a stop light with three precious stones; red, green and amber. The inscription, "*I go for you*" was added on her sixteenth birthday. There's one with a birthday cake, one for high school graduation, and a larger one, the size of a silver dollar, etched with the Acropolis; it came from Greece where they lived when they were first married. There's one with a little raised head on it, with two genuine emeralds for eyes, marking the birth of her son and finally

there's a delicate number twenty-eight, representing the years she taught.

I suggested her son might want the bracelet and her high school class ring with the little gold bust of Stephen F. Austin superimposed on the ruby colored glass. She was delighted with the prospect.

Then she identified faux pearls she wanted to be buried in. "I like them because they look expensive but they're really cheap."

Though I reminded her I would return for a week at a time every month thereafter, for as long as she needed me, she insisted upon answering the remaining entries in the journal even while we continued to sift through her treasures.

She wanted a niece to have the pearl earrings and necklace she'd originally planned to wear to her retirement. The niece had written in Brenda's journal that it was she who modeled behavior she emulated, *probably without knowing it, you showed me the Biblical example of a woman building up her home...I thank you for giving the entire family roots, a place to come home. You are an original. I hope that I am even half the woman you are.*

Brenda responded, *you're a beautiful young mother and wife and if I had anything to do with that, I am grateful. You are quite a young lady in your own right.*

At one point, tiring, she asked how many more journal entries. I counted five.

She sighed and said, "Just tell them all I love them," and then quickly reconsidered, "Okay, read me the next one."

She personalized all five of them.

The day before I left El Paso, uncharacteristically, it snowed. My daughter said it was El Nino: Brenda said it was God. The city of El Paso doesn't own snow removal equipment and the motorists don't know how to drive. Most public, state and federal agencies close and if employed elsewhere, many "call in sick." Most everyone was miserable: Brenda, on the other hand, was delighted and inspired.

"It's a sign from God," she said. "He's showing me He's not forsaken me. I'd wanted to go somewhere, Ruidoso or Cloudcroft, or somewhere to see snow. I prayed for it. Since I can't go, He brought it to me."

When Ray interrupted our girl party, we'd just begun trying on scarves, tying them this way and that and modeling turbans. He'd broken up our banter and chatter, and he reeked of cologne. He leaned over her, moving his stethoscope rapidly from one place to the next and she looked at me and smirked.

I looked away for fear that I'd laugh out loud because he was

practically sliding the instrument from her chest to her stomach without stopping to really listen. All the while, mumbling something, slurring his speech. He'd stayed longer than necessary and when he finally left, she'd made me laugh, mimicking his actions and asking, "What was he doing with the stethoscope?"

"I don't know," I said, "You were looking so crazy though that I nearly lost it. And what's up with the cologne?"

"He'd been drinking," she said, her tone serious. He was trying to mask it but I smelled it on his breath; he's worried about me. Bless his heart."

Afterwards, we returned to the scarves we'd thrown across the foot of her bed. Though she was nearly bald in the back of her head, up top she was only thinning. She tried on each scarf, some turbans and knit hats, and looked at herself in the mirror, commenting, "Who knew being bald could be so fashionable?"

I used nail clippers and polish remover for her toenails which were faded and chipped. We'd tried to get away for pedicures with the silver metallic nail polish Gloria had brought her in the hospital but it hadn't worked out.

As the evening rolled into the night, her energy level stayed high. She asked if there were more journal entries to answer, there were none so she dictated to some who hadn't written her.

She made an addendum to the response she written to her son.

She said, *May you have fifty years of marriage; that is my prayer for you.*"

After the dictations, she made phone calls. She first talked with Elfie, then Gloria.

Finally, she asked to speak to Shannon, a colleague who'd moved to Galveston, Texas. Shannon called the house a few times but had not been able to connect with Brenda. When I'd spoken to her, she was seeking advice, asking if she should visit or wait for the services; it wasn't feasible to make two trips across the vast state.

She'd sent several cards, letters and pictures. I'd posted a long letter in Brenda's journal. Shannon had written, *I want you to know that though I am far away physically, I am right beside you in spirit. You already know this; you're a sister to me...*

Brenda had responded, *I love you like a sister but you know that. Our prayer time together will never leave my heart. You are my sister in Christ.*

I dialed Shannon's number and Brenda spoke clearly, getting straight to the point, skipping pleasantries, "Shannon, I told you a long time ago I wanted you to speak at my funeral. Though you're out of town, if possible, I would like you to speak."

When she hung up I asked why. "What's so special about her?"

"She's a very good speaker and I just know she'll do a good job," she answered, "and you can get somebody else to read *The Dash*."

She'd previously designated my youngest to read the poem but considered that it might not be feasible due her strenuous schedule. She wanted her to know that it was all right if she couldn't come to the services. She'd already written a loving message to her via the journal.

My daughter had written, *I am writing to a most amazing woman. A great example of who God created us to be, someone who truly recognizes life is a gift. While we still have this present, I want to tell you something, share what you have given me. I just hope my grammar is correct. ☺ ... You always understood when I didn't get along with Mom or Lexi...*

Brenda responded, *what can I say after that? I am very unworthy but thank you for thinking so highly of me.*

I asked if there was anyone she'd want me to consider for the reading if my daughter couldn't come, suggesting Gloria.

"I don't think she can. She'll be too broken up," she said.

Then she told me how she'd learned of the poem and that it had made such an impression on her because she loved the message it conveyed. She was entering church services to attend a funeral for her friend's father when she was handed it and asked to read.

"I did all right with it," she said, "but don't do that; whoever you get to read it, give them some lead time."

As the night wore on, she finally began to wind down; I asked if there was anything else.

"I've told you everything," she said.

Around midnight, we turned the lights out and slept.

At sunrise, however, she was antsy. She wanted to walk to the lounge to escape the claustrophobic setting but the short walk exhausted her.

We sat waiting quietly when Palmer arrived to take me to the airport, and characteristically she worried about me. "She's going to be flying and she needs to eat. Take her someplace nice for lunch."

I didn't want to leave, I wasn't ready to say goodbye but as we discussed it, the dialysis technicians came to take her to treatment. I quickly got between them, kissed her forehead and casually told her I loved her. There was nothing finite about the moment and I was confident I'd see her again. I'd be back next month though I couldn't help to think about my daughter's *Facebook* entry: **How do you say goodbye to someone when you think it might be the last time?** I didn't allow myself to think that. As they wheeled her down the hall one direction, Palmer and I preceded the other, heading to the elevator that would take us to the parking lot.

ACT THREE

The Final Act

When I initially arrived in El Paso, six weeks seemed long, but passed quickly. I'd been in constant contact with my husband and he'd joined me at Thanksgiving. Beyond that I was disconnected from my life. I'd used all my sick days and was saving vacation days for future visits. I believed I would be back and forth to El Paso until at least March so I returned home to St. Louis. Personally, I needed to escape, to return to the mundane of work, home and seemingly good health.

I would have preferred to leave when Brenda was at home as opposed to in the hospital. I was haunted by the memory of the phone call when she'd asked me to be with her in the hospital. I rationalized she'd be home in a few days. There was no stability but nonetheless, I made travel arrangements. In doing so, I deserted my brother-in-law.

On the way to the airport, Palmer bought me lunch. At a nearby Applebee's, with a beautiful view of the rarely snow-capped Franklin Mountains in the background, I sat across the table from a broken man.

Worry and anxiety were choking the life from him in much the same way that the cancer was chipping away at Brenda. Both of them had visibly aged, resembling those age progression photographs you see when children go missing or fugitives are on the run for years.

"I realize that people go through this all the time; people die, but somehow, it seems to me like I am the only one in the world suffering, bearing this burden and I don't know how to do it," he said.

"I can understand that," I responded, "Actually, you are the only one going through this as Brenda's husband. There is no one who will have your experience, or understand your loss."

I promised to return in January after asking if he'd make their holiday special because when my father was dying, Brenda suggested we make his last Christmas memorable. Though it never came to pass for him, I'd hoped Palmer would consider pushing the balance of chemotherapy treatments back. He wouldn't entertain it, saying "Christmas is just another day."

We ate in silence. That was the last time during the course of the forty plus days I was in El Paso, that Palmer and I were at odds. We both wanted the best for Brenda, but not necessarily the same thing. However, at this moment, we were simpatico, giving into the helplessness of our situation; feeding our grief.

On a cold Tuesday afternoon, the first day of December, I exited the car at the airport curb with Palmer reluctantly reminding me to write the obituary. I kissed him goodbye and pulled my suitcase through the automatic glass doors to the self serve kiosk.

I was emotionally exhausted and looked forward to boarding the plane, not pondering the reality of the moment. I arrived home this side

of midnight but nevertheless reported for work the next day. As it had been before I left, I was careful with whom I spoke personally about my circumstances. I didn't want anything associated with Brenda to be cheapened, so most didn't know. I left it that way, exchanging casual greetings and only stopping momentarily when questioned about my absence.

"Hey, haven't seen you around. Been on vacation?"

I'd say, "Something like that," and keep walking. Those in my office were aware but even so, if I doubted their sincerity, I shared only minimal details, usually stating that though she was dying, her spirits were high.

Because I'd returned home at the height of the season, the associated joy and frivolity were unavoidable. The first weekend at home, my husband suggested looking for a tree, I put him off. At work, however, grown people dressed as green elves and Santa's helpers dancing around twenty feet artificial pine trees in the atrium, frolicking in halls, and exchanging friendly greetings and hugs, were inescapable.

At home, my daughter put out modest decorations, a wreath, a candle, a centerpiece. While I didn't overtly object, multiple boxes of ornamentation remained undisturbed in my basement. Instead, I sorted through Brenda's jewelry, cleaned it and stored it in baggies.

While sitting at my home computer, reviewing her biography, the

phone rang. Recognizing the number, I cloaked myself in optimism and reached for the receiver.

"Did they let her go home?"

Palmer's voice cracked with characteristic long pauses he employed when fighting back tears. I swallowed hard, my heart beating rapidly.

"What's wrong: Is she all right?"

She was stable and alert when I left, but the memory of riding a roller coaster at her bedside was fresh; things changed minute to minute, hour to hour. I waited for him to gain composure.

"She's not home," he finally uttered and then he said she'd decided not to continue treatments, including dialysis.

"Dialysis?"

"Yes," he said, "and the doctors don't think that it would prolong her life significantly anyway. They are saying," he stopped and after a long silence, continued, "seven to ten days."

Just like that, the dire six month prognosis which was to have carried us through March was now ten days and if she followed through with discontinuing dialysis, it would likely come to pass.

Her weakened condition had left her downhearted. After I left, they'd inserted another NG tube and Brenda was tired.

She asked for her son and he was in route. After hanging up and digesting the news, as I had done since the beginning of Brenda's

end, I sent an email to family and friends, recapping the conversation. I added that she would be going to her earthly home with assistance from hospice and solicited prayers for both she and Palmer.

I typed, but it was surreal as if I were scripting a novel.

In El Paso, the hospital bed that Palmer had not wanted was delivered to disrupt the ambiance of Brenda's cherished, antique-furnished, angel room. Nearly all the furniture had come from our grandmother's home in Mississippi. The full size Jacqueline style metal bed which Brenda had lovingly refurbished was dismantled and moved to the garage along with the restored vintage trunk that was filled with quilts. The ancestral pictures in period frames which had rested atop the dresser displaced to accommodate the massive amount of medical supplies and prescriptions. In the corner, right of the closet, the curio cabinet remained filled with Brenda's angel collection; ceramic, medal, cloth, dull, shiny, beige, black and white.

Brenda was now resting with her angels, virtually silent, sleeping all day, coaxed by the hospice drug cocktails. As she had been with Mother, Elfie was at her bedside. Palmer continued to busy himself but his direction was altered. He met with the pastor, the print shop and the mortuary.

Three days after she returned home, on their forty-first wedding

anniversary, Palmer placed four dozen fragrant, brilliant red roses in a vase on the dresser. Occasionally she opened her eyes and smiled but she didn't speak. Puffy because she discontinued dialysis, she moaned incessantly; it's a matter of time.

I boarded a plane to North Carolina for my step daughter's commencement but rather than reveling in her accomplishment, I was counting the days of my sister's life. The tally was not large however. Arriving back in St. Louis, not quite at home, my daughter relayed the essence of a text message she'd received from my nephew.

His mom, her aunt and my sweet sister: *gone*.

My daughter and I scheduled flights and assumed our new roles. I, the understudy, was now called upon to play the leading part, do what Brenda would have previously done. My daughter would fill my shoes, play my traditional part, and be the subordinate, steady and reliable sounding board, the extra set of hands, and the voice of reason when a sanity check was required.

After a difficult flight and an eight hour delay, I was back in El Paso. Palmer had begun identifying pictures to use in the slide show and we also built three large poster collages to display at the wake.

Though we were sad, looking through pictures that chronicled her life, it was impossible not to appreciate all those she'd positively influenced. We included black and white wedding photographs, colorful

memories captured during vacations, and school and birthday moments. In doing so, we rejoiced, celebrating as she'd requested.

In preparation for the trip to the funeral home, I packed stockings, underwear, and reflective of her style, gorgeous Lucite slippers with bushy gold tassels. I got her makeup and her signature perfume, not the one she'd worn in the hospital but the expensive *Boucheron* which she said, "smelled like a million dollars." Finally, I located her Bible, adding it to the bag as she had insisted each time we traveled to the hospital.

Palmer disapproved of the light-colored wig Edmund purchased.

"I don't like the style," he said, "It looks like something she might've worn years ago but not now; she wore her hair shorter."

"Yeah, maybe," I said, "Let's ask him to cut it. He'll do it on me, not her. Brenda had said he was fearful, 'He's such a girl.'"

I packed the wig in the bag and grabbed clear and silver polish we'd hoped to use for pedicures for her toes.

I climbed into the back seat of Brenda's car with the clothing and makeup. Palmer placed a folder filled with legal papers next to me. He drove and his son rode up front. I looked beyond them at the dash mat embroidered *Brenda*, recalling her insistence I see it when I first arrived.

Along the route that morning, the El Paso sunshine's brilliance was blinding and the conversation was stilted and mundane with

awkward silences. Finally, father and son began talking about cars. I was relieved; no need to interject, I was alone with my thoughts. Though I knew the meeting was business and finance, I pondered what to expect and whether I'd see her there.

It wasn't long before we turned the corner at Yarbrough and Carolina to see Hillcrest Funeral Home in full view. A city road crew with orange hats and brown sun baked skin milled around just in front of the edifice so we proceeded cautiously to park in the oversized but empty parking lot. As we headed down the path to the nondescript building, we noticed a scruffy crew working loudly on the roof.

We pulled the heavy dark mahogany door which opened into a dimly lit foyer where a middle aged Hispanic woman with salt and pepper locks cascading around her shoulders, stood to greet us.

Pastor Williams, in a black suit and signature cowboy hat and boots, was seated in the corner and stood saying, "They're with me."

She half smiled, sat down, picked up the telephone receiver and alerted the mortician. A slender black man in a gray suit appeared in the doorway and led us down a narrow hallway to a small modestly furnished room. Palmer Junior sat on a small copper-colored couch just beyond the table where his father sat with the Pastor, the Mortician and me. R. Dozier introduced himself and handed each of us a packet. He sat down and then stood abruptly, "Did you bring the clothes?"

"Yes we did," I said.

"Did you bring the underwear? I need to make sure we have everything before we get started here," he said.

I stood to retrieve the bag I had deposited in the corner, placed it on the couch next to Palmer Junior and pulled out the Lucite slippers asking if they'd fit since I thought her feet might be swollen?

"Let me go see, I can check right now," he said taking the slippers, exiting through a door adjacent to the one we'd entered

He reported the shoes slipped right on. At that moment, I conscientiously considered, Brenda was there, somewhere in the bowels of this building with us. I visualized her in her nakedness, him sliding the slipper over her foot as she lay on a stainless steel or porcelain table like those seen so often on television or in movies.

He took the nail polish but said to keep the wig and makeup and return with them the next day when his cosmetologist was scheduled.

"Can I show her the coffin?" Palmer asked.

Agreeing, the mortician guided us to a brightly lit backroom filled with steel and wooden full sized and partial containers while reminding Palmer they were caskets. Palmer asked me if Brenda wanted wood though he was concerned that it couldn't be sealed like steel.

"I don't think she knew that," he said.

I affirmed she wanted wood and said I didn't think she'd care about the sealing.

Once we were again seated at the table, Mr. Dozier talked fast, confirmed Brenda would be buried in the national cemetery and swiftly began flipping through his pages, instructing us to do the same.

"Turn to page three, review items one through nine. Look at page five."

I wasn't following and objected. "I'm sorry, I didn't understand." He said it was routine; professional services, embalming, use of the hearse and police escorts, but agreed to slow down and be explicit.

On page five, he referenced a previous meeting with Palmer saying, "You've selected carnations but didn't decide on color. You can have various colors or a solid color."

"Are you talking about the spray for the blanket?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "Four dozen dyed any color combination."

"She wanted red roses," I said.

The room went silent but for the sound of the roofers above.

Finally, Palmer Junior interjected carnations were selected because they held up better and stayed fresh longer.

"She wanted red roses," I repeated.

The mortician indicated roses were more expensive. The room remained hushed though we listened to the roofers and their noises.

Palmer broke the silence, "Red roses it is; that's how we stayed married all these years; I made sure she had what she wanted."

The next line item was family cars, we needed three. There was discussion of death certificates and an honorarium for the minister. We talked about the private family and public viewing and then considered the order of services with the pastor directing the discourse.

The young lady who sang *Jesus You're the Center of My Joy*, at both Mother's and Daddy's funerals was still available. Reverend Williams indicated he had already tapped junior ministers to read Old and New Testament scriptures.

Palmer asked that Shannon speak to honor Brenda's wishes in one respect but didn't want *The Dash* though he knew Brenda liked it. Palmer felt it overused. I said I'd since found an adaptation done by Ellis specifically for teachers and suggested we substitute it.

There was final discussion about the bottom line charges but when Palmer signed the documents, it was done.

On the way home, we were talkative and more relaxed, having taken care of the dreaded business.

Driving back down Yarbrough, Palmer turned left into a series of pink/orange duplexes with Mexican tile roofing. He circled to the right at the first corner and pulled into a driveway in front of where he thought Edmund lived but we'd been on the wrong street. If Edmund had answered, they would have waited in the car and the pressure would have been on, but there was no answer so we returned to Palmer's house; I'd have to get used to calling it that.

In the meantime, many of Brenda's associates brought a variety of food including brisket and chicken from Eastside meats. Neighbors brought fried chicken and potato salad, soft drinks, chips and cold cuts. It felt natural being there, eating and enjoying each other's company in her space. The celebration of her life had begun and it was as she had requested, punctuated by joy and laughter.

When I arrived at Edmund's complex, he stood in the doorway decked in a bright red button down shirt; sleeves rolled up, and shoulder length hair pulled back into a pony tail. As he held the screen door open, I walked past him and waited for him to lead the way.

"You need a haircut," he said.

"Nice to see you too and yes I do," I said, "I've had no time for anything. Maybe you can take care of me too."

"Let's see, come on in here girl."

I followed him through the small, clean and perfectly coordinated kitchen, through his living room, past the plush white leather sofa with a burnt orange afghan thrown across it, to arrive at the small room, off to the right that served as his shop. I pulled the wig out and sat it on the table.

"Put it on," he said, "It's really not that long."

I hadn't had a wig on since I was a teenager when my hair was long and I wanted a short afro. I pulled the silky hair down around my ears, looked in the mirror and agreed it looked shorter on. Still I knew Palmer wanted it cut so I suggested he take just a little off, maybe only on one side since that was her signature do.

"She hasn't worn that in years;" he said "she'd gotten tired of it."

He hesitated and finally said he needed to see it on her.

I was silent; I wouldn't do anything to try and influence him but I was at once overwhelmed at the prospect. He guided me to the chair and wrapped the black drape around my shoulders before pulling the wig off and placing it back on the Styrofoam head. He ran his fingers through my hair, then sprayed some water on it, combed it back and began snipping, changing the subject entirely.

"Who cut it last?" he asked

"I had it done at home but it's been two months," I answered.

"Is all your family here?"

"Not yet," I answered. "Many are, but more are coming."

"What about that little brother of yours. He probably needs somebody to send him money."

Brenda had made provisions. We laughed and marveled that he knew and remembered so much about our family. He'd garnered and retained a tremendous amount of details over the years standing above Brenda, styling her hair.

When done, he brushed away clippings, pulling the drape away.

"What time are you doing her hair?" he asked.

"Not until tomorrow morning," I said, "They've got a lady there to do her makeup but I need to be there to make sure it looks good."

"Maybe I'll go with you," he said.

I held my breath and looked at him curiously especially after he'd dropped the subject when I first arrived. I decided to be blunt.

"No pressure Edmund, but that would be so wonderful. Also, you can tell me whether we need false eyelashes because she said I should use them if necessary."

"Definitely get them, natural look, dark brown," Edmund said.

"What brand?"

"Doesn't matter, stay away from anything extra, feathered, fancy, it should say natural look."

He said he'd cancel his morning appointments and ride with us.

I thanked God audibly as I got into the car to leave; another level of my anxiety dissipated.

The next morning, Lexi and I drove towards Starbucks on the way to get Edmund. She called to ask him what he'd like. He suggested we pick him up first to use his partner's discount. When we drove up, Edmund came to the car with a large bag containing the tools of his trade. He was accompanied by his partner Jeff, a slender blond, twenty years his junior. Jeff was subdued in comparison to

Edmund's flamboyancy and outgoing persona. At Starbucks, inside Barnes and Noble, with Jeff's discount we each had a pastry and drink of choice for less than what two coffees would have ordinarily costs.

We bantered about nothing and discussed everything; from drug addiction to his experiences working in the beauty pageant world.

We had a common purpose we wanted to be done with, but none of us was eager to begin. Eventually we moved to the door.

At the funeral home, Brenda was already positioned in the casket at the front of the chapel. I walked slowly toward her, squeezing my lips together tightly. Her hair was slicked back; her freckles more prominent than I remembered. They'd cinched the robe tightly around her to cover the embalming cuts at the base of her neck, not allowing the sequined bodice to show the brilliance of the shimmer and pearls. Jeff sat in the pew but Edmund and Lexi stood with me. I rubbed her arm as I'd done so many times in the hospital and told Edmund about the negligee and boa she'd envisioned but we'd been unable to find.

About the same time, the mortician entered; seeking approval. Edmund moved to unpack his bag but the mortician discouraged him.

"Young man, you're not going to be able to use that on her hair, it's in bad condition. Let me show you."

I hadn't realized Edmund planned to actually style her hair; I'd anticipated him scrunching it. He wouldn't consider it, we'd use the wig.

He quickly applied the false eyelashes though hers were visible. The lashes were true to their advertised name, natural looking. We waited, and milled around, anticipating the mortuary employee when Edmund hastily asked for her makeup kit.

"I'll do it," he said.

He dug in her bag for a sponge to apply liquid makeup he said was too light. He didn't find it and added, "I taught her better than that."

When the mortician finally returned with a young lady dressed in a cheap looking mauve colored polyester suit and pink blouse, she seemed relieved that Edmund was doing the makeup.

The mortician returned the nail polish and walked to the opposite end of the casket, to show me silver toes in nude toe stockings, positioned in her Lucite shoes. Except for the stockings being a little twisted and the seam showing, Brenda would approve.

"I could've just told you but I wanted to show you," he said.

"Thank you," I said.

At the other end of the casket, Edmund worked his magic, smoothing away the freckles and other minor flaws before applying eye shadow, brow and blush. He pointed out a bruise on Brenda's hand and said her lips needed work; they were pulled back too tightly, making them wider than natural. He painted them appropriately but asked the mortician to add wax to fill in gaps in the corners.

Edmund pulled the wig over her scalp and she looked beautiful, not exactly like Brenda but gorgeous as if a sleeping beauty or a life-sized doll. Maybe it's impossible to make a person look like themselves, after all they're not; they're a shell. People say they look good or they don't, but they're no longer the beings we loved.

I sat with Jeff who beamed with the pride one shows when acknowledging the accomplishments of a loved one as he whispered.

"I knew he was going to do it. He kept talking about it, we were walking in Wal-Mart and he said he couldn't, but I knew he would."

When we left the funeral home, we were different from how we had entered it. We'd successfully accomplished our mission, done what Brenda wanted, what she would have done for us. When I dropped Edmund and Jeff off, I hadn't expected to see them again but he asked me to pick up a lip brush so he could finish her lips prior to the wake, providing the mortician had done as he'd requested.

At the wake, I entered the building through the same heavy mahogany doors, walked across the foyer and down the poorly lit hallway that led to the chapel. Several people were gathered around outside and I recognized many of Palmer's relatives from pictures or memories Brenda shared as she designated jewelry.

Edmund arrived a few minutes later and though it's unlikely anyone would have noticed since the mortician had corrected the shape problem, when Edmund was done, her lips could have been featured in a Maybelline advertisement. He surprised me, pulling a strand of white boa feathers out of a Joanne's Fabrics bag. He threaded it around her neck along the collar of the satin gown and tucked the ends underneath her crossed hands into the sash. He'd created the gown Brenda envisioned. She was a work of art.

The services began in a dignified manner with a memorial rendered by Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. Pastor offered a prayer and a hymn before asking if anyone wanted to speak. For the next two hours, there was a steady stream of former students, relatives and coworkers who approached the podium to sing, share humorous stories or simply state how Brenda impacted their lives

Her grandson spoke first, paying tribute to his grandma teacher.

"I spent summers with them and she'd always want to make me do math before she'd let me swim. She told me that I'd thank her one day. I'm graduating from high school and I want to thank my Grandmother who I loved and will miss."

One of Brenda's coworkers who'd sung *Wind beneath My Wings* at her retirement, sang it again explaining that though she knew other songs, Brenda always wanted this one.

Becky worked with Brenda early in her career and recounted how my sister befriended her as a first year teacher. Gloria and Shannon both spoke and said it was difficult to choose only one vignette from their litany of memories.

Her friend and walking partner Jackie shared that Brenda had been her friend when others had shunned her due to bi-polar illness.

Then there was her longtime Principal, a little woman who'd notoriously held everyone to a higher standard, including many of those in attendance. Brenda always met the challenge, but never really knew where she stood. When she spoke, she said, "Brenda was the finest, most proficient teacher I've ever known."

There were many others who spoke highly of Brenda that night. And, as she requested, the occasion was joyous and celebratory.

At the funeral services the next day, Brenda's final act, the mood continued, although by virtue of the occasion, a little more somber.

I wore weighty leopard spotted button earrings from Brenda's collection. The earrings matched a leopard scarf dickey she'd bought me which I wore under a V-neck black dress. The earrings were heavier than I liked. My husband suggested I take them off.

"I want to wear something of hers today," I said.

"She wouldn't want it to hurt. What would she say?" he asked.

"She'd say, 'Be glamorous. You can take it for a few hours.'"

At church, we watched as they positioned the casket at the altar. The services began promptly with the processional followed by one of the solos and the scripture readings.

The obituary was read silently as soft music played.

Brenda Ann Carlisle Ruffin (July 16, 1948 - December 13, 2009)

Lexi sang *Goin' Up Yonder* flawlessly, without crying. When she returned to her pew, she collapsed into her husband arms, sobbing.

When Shannon stood to speak, Gloria walked beside her. Shannon, pushed her blonde locks aside and said, "I couldn't do this without my friend Gloria. We were always together."

Gloria spoke confidently, "There is a poem that Brenda loved *The Dash* by Linda Ellis and I'm going to read it today. Palmer and I had considered we had overruled Brenda when we substituted the *Teacher's Dash*, but Brenda, working through her friends, ensured her desires were honored.

When Shannon spoke, she talked about how Brenda influenced her professionally, always setting the bar high and then ended with a delightful story which illustrated Brenda's love for life. She'd invited friends over for red enchiladas and offered them white linen napkins. Shannon said it had been difficult to use them but Brenda insisted. "She'd told us that was what they were for. She wanted us to live life to the fullest as she did."

That evening, back up at Palmer's house, there were wall to wall people and so much food comparable to a smorgasbord restaurant. Many of her friends and coworkers came by including Edmund, to share stories and memories. He evoked laughter when he said Jeff was in awe at the funeral, never having been to an African-American funeral he'd commented, "It's just like in the movies."

We talked and laughed into the night. I helped put the house back in order before returning to St. Louis.

On New Year's Day instead of participating in a gathering with my in-laws for a traditional soul food menu of greens, corn bread and chitterlings, complete with laughing and joking, I chose to spend the time alone, writing *Thank You Notes*, finishing up one of the last things Brenda asked. She'd wanted all those who'd sent flowers or prayers to be adequately acknowledged.

Writing this story allows me to complete another of the assigned tasks.

Now, no longer the understudy, I am learning to play the role without my sister, my mentor, my friend.