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Reliving the Last Days

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I'm in the midst of the season when I relive the last moments of a life I no longer live, one that offered me the greatest grief yet the most unconditional earthly love I've ever known. A life with a man who I loyally loved and cherished and who passionately loved me back, even to a fault. This past life of mine continues to bless me beyond measure. But now, during this season in early March, details of the last days weigh heavy in my heart.

We resided in hospice now, three years ago. We arrived at the decision when emergency room doctors told us he'd never be able to eat again. The cancer's obstruction would prevent the passing of any food. He looked at me, 'I'm not going home.'

No, not ours, he would be going to a heavenly home.

I remember telling him how he had done perfectly, he'd tried SO hard, how so very proud I was of him and that he could rest now. I told him those things over again but most importantly, *'You can rest*

now.' I said it with more love than I'd ever said anything, surrendering all I'd been fighting for.

He looked at me and cried. We held each other. Hard and long we embraced as if we held our married life and all the loving memories right there between us so we wouldn't have to relinquish everything just yet. His tears, he told me, were not of sadness but because I'd just given him the greatest gift I'd ever given him aside from my hand, my blessing for him to peacefully pass.

He was relieved. And for that, we were blessed and could breathe.

Did you know that a brain and a body remembers all this, reliving it, without any intention? All the details. At least mine does. Scenes. Smells. Nurses who nurtured us both knowing much more than I about what loomed before me. They knew what I now recall so vividly, the progression of life lingering and then, in one last breath, lost.

I recall what I ate…and what he couldn't. The Bible verses and letters I read…and how he listened. The clothes I wore after showers in that small hospital stall…and the sponge baths I gave him. The sweater I bought in the hospital gift shop now hanging in my closet….the small gift I'd bought him. The love we shared…

There's more, so much more! I lived a lifetime in just eleven days, I'm sure of it.

The way we sat together on his bed looking at photos.

The one and only time he cried in those last days saying, 'Stella, oh my sweet Stella. And Evelyn, my silly little baby who won't ever really know me. My Daddy's girls…'. He moaned in anguish over missing them. He'd already seen them on two very special visits and said his goodbyes.

I promised they WOULD know him.

Then there's that one moment when he stood for the last time with my help. He looked down at me, skinny and skin pale, tubes entering his nose and said, 'Funny how we even learn so much more about real love in death.' My heart skipped a beat….even then. I hope he meant he could truly tell how much I loved him…how much I'd always love him.

The details linger in the depths of my mind and each year they return without my permission. They creep up, unannounced, and plant themselves so palpably in my awareness that I might easily believe three years ago occurred just earlier this morning. I sometimes say it's all a blur but really the blur began only after I returned home, after I'd left him (or what was left of him) behind in that hospice room.

It's both excruciating and breathtaking to live through these days each year, these days when Kevin withered away physically ***yet soared with brute strength spiritually***. His demeanor in hospice must have delighted the Lord!

Anyone visiting during those first days in his last home, witnessed his unexpected childlike yet elderly appearance as he gladly announced his upcoming entrance into eternity. He'd boldly boast of the feast he'd soon savor, joking about how Taco Bell and all his other unhealthy earthly favorites would fill the feast table. Kevin calmed everyone's nerves as he spoke of his excitement to 'meet his Maker' and his unshakeable confidence that the rest of us would be okay.

When I worried alone with him, we'd hold hands and say, ***'In the blink of an eye….'***, a saying that later adorned the canoe displayed at his funeral.

As he ran out of energy, I'd read to him more from the Word, wash his feet and wet his gums. I'd always ask a nurse to sit with him when they cajoled me to 'go get food...eat.' Upon my hasty return, they told me he'd asked for me, eyes closed he knew I wasn't there. Yeah, it's heartbreaking and heartwarming.

When he spoke his last reassuring words of love, I was there to hear it and continued long after murmuring my affection into his ears. When he squeezed my hand for the last time, I felt his hand's perminent impression on my heart.

Those last days are impressed in my memory crystal clear, like the letters of our last name he wrote in wet cement in the garage floor when we built our home, the home we were to raise our children in, the one now housing two girls and a single mommy still bearing open wounds of grief.

As God made His final preparations for Kevin's entrance through the heavenly gates, Kevin rested peacefully quiet on that hospice bed. I wrote, I read, I walked the hallways of hospice with a surreal strength that could've only come from my Savior.

Then one evening, a Friday evening on March 11, 2011, I came across a verse I wanted to share. I read it twice out loud, the second time telling Kevin I wanted him to *really listen*. 'It's meaningful right now', I said. We'd been praying for God to take him home. Hospice is no way for a 33 year old man to live.

But I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be. I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven. Philippians 3: 12, 14

Kevin was on the last leg. The last leg of this life, the last leg of the race, ready to find real rest.

I then stood up to stretch my legs and walk around a bit, but not before kissing his forehead. Entering another room to make a phone call concerning the coming services, I watched Kevin's nurse slowly approach. No sound. I knew. She nodded, 'It's time.'

Kevin had taken his last breath.

I rushed to the doorway of his room, closed throat and heart pausing in trepidation, time stood still. For just an instant, crossing the hall, I couldn't understand as I silently urged him to breathe again. But when I saw his peaceful body and felt the indescribable restfulness of the room, I almost hit my knees in relief.

NOT GRIEF but in relief!

I recall my words, quiet but audible, 'Thank You, God!' and to Kevin, 'I'm so proud of you! You did it!' I'm not exactly sure what I was proud of. I think it was **how** he finished the race. Kevin completed his mission and I was so proud of his grace, faith and courage. He was my husband and I'd never been prouder. I'm still so proud.

And that's how those last days, the ones I will always relive, ended. Abruptly.

I talked and prayed as I packed up the room. I hugged his body knowing he no longer lived there. I removed his wedding ring and the little bracelet Stella had placed on his wrist during one of her visits.

There's more, so much more! But, for now, during this season of reliving the last days three years later, that's all I'll share.

Time marches on and no matter how painful the early March days are, the reliving keeps me close to the love and to the lessons. The lessons from a life I no longer live.The lessons that will always, always linger in my mind.

Reliving the last days….and proud of it,

Katie

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