

WHEN TOM LEFT, I cried

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We hugged goodbye on the porch. As he carried his suitcases to the car, my throat was tight as tears streamed down my face. He lifted the hatchback lid, placed the suitcases inside, looked up at me, waved, climbed into his car and drove away.

As I stood there sobbing, I
found myself wondering
why I was taking this so
hard.

It began in August 1990—the third time my mother’s cancer had returned and this time it was incurable. Doctors were able to surgically remove only 1½ of the three masses in her abdominal area. Two weeks later she was at home sitting on the couch watching her favorite show, Family Feud, when she had a stroke. A few hours later she lay in a hospital bed with her entire left side paralyzed.

Later that day, my four siblings, my dad and I were told by the social worker, “Your mother needs a skilled nursing facility.”

When we informed her that we planned to take her home and hire a live-in nurse, she shot back, “Oh, no, you won’t be able to handle that.”

After only a couple days the hospital was pressing us to discharge my mother, as they felt there was nothing more they could do. We all felt the pressure. My sister Lori took on the task finding a person who could fit the bill. Two days later the ambulance folks were wheeling my mother into her west Seattle home, placing her into the hospital bed that now occupied my parents’ bedroom.

For the next couple weeks, Mom’s new live-in nurse did his duties while three of the four of us kids stayed every fourth night to give Mom her once every four-hour tube feedings.

Things didn’t work with the first live-in nurse and soon we had Tom. Tom was different. He seemed more organized and really seemed to connect with Mom quickly. And, Mom connected with him! Despite the bleak future we all faced, we now settled into a routine with Tom Monday through Friday and Jeff, his replacement, on the weekends.

Because of our every fourth day shift, we all got to know Tom quite well. My dad soon began to use his endearing term when he liked someone: He was now “Uncle Tom” (don’t even go there.) As the weeks turned into months Dad would often say, “When Mom goes, you’re staying. You’re part of the family—you’re never leaving.” Tom would only smile.

Thanksgiving and Christmas at Mom and Dad’s house came and went. We all knew that these would be the last ones; and so did Mom. When the New Year came, we were all amazed that Mom had made it to 1991. Her birthday was in May, just after Mother’s Day and we all were sure she wouldn’t make it; but we were wrong.

Tom’s job was a constant one. Along with his stethoscope probing for sounds, his needles to deliver meds, and his sponges for the frequent baths, he maintained an upbeat demeanor. I would stand next to the door of her bedroom leaning against the wall and watch as he would check Mom’s heart or adjust her pillow and say something to her adding, “Isn’t that right?” and she would say, “Yes” with a smile that suggested some secret understanding that they had developed over the many quiet evenings they had spent together. Rather than feeling any pangs of jealousy, this gave me great comfort that we had found a person into whose hands my mother had placed ultimate trust.

As February and March came and went, we all wondered whether Mom would actually make it to her 67th birthday on May 8, Mother’s Day on May 11, or the arrival of Janée, her Boston University granddaughter scheduled for May 12.

Finally, her birthday and Mother’s Day arrived and the party was on. When we arrived, Mom was in her wheel chair dressed in a beautiful purple sweatsuit outfit. And when we asked, “Where did you get this?” she smiled and said, “Tom.”

Tom stood there, beaming. The celebration was great with presents, singing, videotaping, chicken, potato salad, and of course, cake.

The next day Janée arrived and Mom’s face lit up when she walked in to the bedroom. They hugged, talked, laughed, and were so very relieved that they had made it to this day. However, the very next day it was clear that Mom was beginning her downward trajectory. She became unresponsive to our verbal requests, was incapable of taking in nutrients through her stomach tube and by May 22, she lapsed into a coma.

By the next day we were wondering which breath would be her last. On May 23, we all stayed overnight. We were up most of the evening watching Tom move around the bed touching, lifting, checking, nodding, and reminding us that it could be soon.

Friday, May 24, at 6:20 p.m. Tom announced, “She’s close. Very close.”

I rounded up my siblings and Dad. There we stood around Mom's bed watching each shallow, halting breath. Tom continued hovering over Mom, saying, "Her heart rate and blood pressure are continuing to drop."

Each exhalation said, "This is her last breath. This is it. It's over" only to be followed by another breath and then another.

However, at 6:40 p.m., silence. Nothing.

It was over.

We stood frozen as Tom, for the last time, put on his stethoscope and listened, looked up at all of us and said, "She's gone."

I know that this moment is forever etched in the minds of all who were there observing the end of a life.

We cried, we hugged, we shook our heads. We cried again. And again. These things we had done before. But this time was different.

Before, it was in response to all the little losses that Mom went through, all the hospitalizations, the pain, the continued bad news. This time it was different grief. It was a grief that had a clear beginning at the moment a life had ended.

A few days before all this Tom had said something like, "I won't be going to your mom's funeral. She and I have already had a type of funeral. So, a few hours after she goes, I'll be leaving."

At the time, I remember thinking, sure, that's fine. He's worked hard. He needs to move on, take a vacation and then do what he does best—help another family.

But today, as I see his bags packed sitting by the front door,
I'm experiencing something I hadn't anticipated.

Here he is, hugging me, this man who came into our lives eight months ago. Why don't they warn you? Why didn't we get a form that said something like this?

"We give you Tom. He will live with you and do the most important thing you can ever imagine. He will take care of your loved one. Almost without realizing it, he will become part of your family. He will take some of the burden off your shoulders. You will grow to admire, trust and love this man who has chosen to do what few could imagine. One innocent day he will come into your lives. And then, another day will come when he will leave. And, if you are like most people you will be surprised at the tears you will shed as he drives away. Finally, what will this man do? He will take a short vacation and then he will do it all over again. He will join a family who doesn't realize it yet, but will be in desperate need of what this man has to offer. And, he will do for them what he has done for you. Finally, his last, most powerful words will ring in your ears for the rest of your lives. He will look up to all of you and say, 'She's gone.'"