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Melting My Shadow

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Tear

Jim Crawford

IT HAD BEEN ONLY **THREE YEARS AGO, WE WERE HIKING BRIGHT ANGEL TRAIL.** We had trudged the eight miles from the canyon rim down to the river when my complaining went over the top.

"My God, I can't feel my legs and I'm about to have a heat stroke. When I go, just cover me with rocks so the buzzards don't get me."

Laura just laughed and said, "Come on big boy. I'll carry the heavy pack. There's only a mile left to go."

Now, she lay in a hospital bed set up in our living room. The oxygen concentrator hummed and bubbled next to the bed. We had made this arrangement for the convenience of the hospice nurse who visited twice daily, and to accommodate the flow of visitors.

Her mother had struggled to convince me to make this arrangement. I thought that whenever Laura woke up, realizing where she was would be a horrible reminder of why she was there.

The last two years had been a series of losing one battle after another. The first battle was with vanity. Laura lost her hair, but no big deal. She still retained her natural grace and was the patient. Later, the side effects of chemo kept her from driving.

The battle for independence was the hardest for her. She held onto it for as long as she could, but when her sense of balance began to desert her, she had to rely on me to walk her to the bathroom, help her up and down, lift her in and out of the tub. I had to take control of her medications. The whole brain radiation affected her short term memory. I saw the frustration in her eyes when she would begin a sentence, but then couldn't remember the words she needed to complete it



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The cancer even assaulted dignity. The hospice nurse recommended a catheter when her legs became too weak to support her. Laura hated the catheter. She confronted the nurse, making her promise not to use it, even if she might not be conscious to resist. She made me promise, too.

I carried her to the bathroom for a while, but even that became too difficult. We resorted to the diapers. Changing and bathing her didn't feel like a burden. It seemed more a privilege to be close enough to serve in that way without causing her embarrassment.

It had been longer than a day since I had seen her conscious and longer than that since she had been able to speak. I watched her as I changed the damp sheets, trying not to disturb her. I saw her grimace as I lifted and rolled her back onto the clean sheets. I said, "I'm so sorry, Honey." I didn't know if she could even hear me anymore. I had spoken quietly, but inside my mind I screamed contradictory prayers. "God, please, one more remission." And, "Please, God, take her now. Don't let her suffer anymore." I was ashamed I could conceive such a thought.

I was adjusting the sheets when I felt her hand lightly touch my arm. I looked. Her eyes were half open, but steady, and focused directly on mine. Searching. Searching, and then, consoling. A point of light reflected from a tear, hanging, balanced in the corner of her left eye. As her eyes closed, the tear slowly slid away.