

COULD I HAVE THIS DANCE?

IT CAN BE LONELY LIVING IN A NURSING HOME. Always surrounded by people—nurses, nurse aides, cooks, laundry personnel, janitors—many people, but still alone. The bright spot in many days is a visit from a family member. I'll always remember one such visit.

I was the charge nurse on the first floor. We called it One North. It was a cheerful, bright home for the 34 men and women who lived there. Everyone had a story. I want to tell you Jane's.

She had several strokes over the years. Each robbing her of some independence and mobility. When I met Jane she lived in room 141. Every day I brought her the medicine her doctors ordered to control her blood pressure and her pain. She could not move. She could laugh and she could cry. She could not speak. She could answer, "yes" and "no" by blinking her eyes. Jane's mind was trapped in her stiff, unresponsive body.

The custom was for her husband, Bill, to come to the nursing home several times a week to feed Jane. He told her the latest news about what was happening with their children and grandchildren. Jane laughed, sometimes she cried.

On one particular day, everyone had finished eating their noon meal and was escorted to their room for their afternoon rest time. Everyone except Jane and Bill. I was busy with the distribution of the noon medicines. After I finished I went back into the dining room to be sure everything was in order. What I saw and heard brought tears to my eyes. A country western radio station played in the background. The song that was playing was *Could I Have This Dance*. I stopped short as I rounded the corner into the dining room. Bill held Jane's hand and stroked her hair. His touch was so gentle. I heard Bill sing along with the radio:

*Could I have this dance for the rest of my life
Would you be my partner every night
When we're together it feels so right
Could I have this dance for the rest of my life?*

*I'll always remember the song they were playing'
The first time we danced and I knew
As we swayed to the music and held to each other
I fell in love with you.*

*I'll always remember that magic moment
When I held you close to me
As we moved together, I knew forever
You're all I'll ever need.*

*Could I have this dance for the rest of my life
Would you be my partner every night
When we're together it feels so right
Could I have this dance for the rest of my life?*

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Jane didn't do well in the months that followed. It became more difficult for her to eat and to swallow. Finally all her nourishment came from tube feedings, and she was given pain medicine every 30 minutes. The days passed and Bill was at her side many hours every day. He still held

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her hand and stroked her hair. She laughed less and less, and she cried more and more. Her lungs filled with fluid and every breath was a terrible struggle.

When I came to work one day, the nurse on the shift before me said that Jane was not doing well. She seemed to be near the end. I hurried to give her another dose of pain medicine and arranged her blanket and pillow to make her

as comfortable as possible. I gave the other residents their medicine and again hurried back to Jane. Bill and I stood beside her bed. We could do so little to comfort her. He held her hand, and I gave her morphine. Then it happened. Jane drew in her last breath, and then it was over. She was gone. I put my stethoscope to her chest, but I didn't hear a heartbeat. I put a blood pressure cuff around her arm, but I couldn't detect a blood pressure. Bill was crying. I was crying. I put my hand on his shoulder and said, "Bill, I'm so sorry. Jane is gone."

He said, "I need to call our children." I brought him to the nurse's station to use my phone. Bill picked up the receiver, but quickly put it down again.

He turned to me and said, "Can we check one more time. I just want to be sure."

I told him, "Of course, we can."

Bill and I walked the long hall back to Room 141. Again I listened for a heartbeat, and I tried to detect a blood pressure, but there was none. He

was ready to make those phone calls to his children. They came to the nursing home. Other staff members gathered in Jane's room. As was the custom in our nursing home, I led them as together we recited the Lord's Prayer and the Twenty Third Psalm.

Why do I tell you this story? Sometimes, as nurses, we get so busy doing our job, that we miss out on seeing who our patients are, and how much they are loved by their family and friends. We miss out on getting to really know them. We need to take an extra minute, no matter how busy we are, no matter how many pills we need to give, no matter how many pulses we need to check. We need to hold a hand, give a hug, offer a word of encouragement and comfort. We cannot be too busy to touch another person's soul. ♥

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