

## Angels Among Us

KIM HARCROW

I WHIP MY HAIR up into a ponytail and run out the door for another clinical day. I am thinking of what challenges I will meet today. I hit the med/surg floor, drop my bag, and head for my assignment. Looking at the list of patients and their diagnoses, I decide I can meet my objectives for altered cardiac output by choosing Mrs. Jones, an 87-year-old woman with coronary artery disease. I head to report with my primary nurse and she informs me that Mrs. Jones is actually in congestive heart failure and at the present time she is comatose and expected to die soon, most likely on this shift.

I feel the blood flush from my face; my heart picks up the pace a bit and a sense of distress runs through me. "Oh, I didn't realize this," I tell the nurse. "I will run this by my instructor." I head out to the hall and locate my instructor to inform her of the news. "Perhaps I should choose someone else," I manage to mumble. "No," she tells me, "I think this will be a good experience, keep Mrs. Jones as your patient for today." What?!?!? Oh no . . . she cannot do this to me! I've dealt with death but only as a certified nurses' aid (CNA), not as the nurse! "Please God," I start to pray, "don't let her die on my shift!"

I'm feeling a little overwhelmed, so it is time to regroup; I somehow manage to pull myself together. I review Mrs. Jones' chart, get report from my primary nurse, and head to Mrs. Jones' room. My palms are a little sweaty and I feel queasy. I knock on the door and slowly push it open. The room is dimly lit and quiet, so quiet. There is a pale, elderly woman lying on her bed on her back. She is wearing a nonrebreather mask on 100% oxygen. Her eyes are closed and her breathing is shallow. Sitting at her bedside is a middle-aged woman with salt and pepper hair. She looks exhausted. She raises her head and gazes at me. "Hi," she says quietly, trying to force a smile. I introduce myself and now my day has begun.

The woman at the bedside is Mrs. Jones'

daughter. She tells me her brother is on a flight from St. Louis and will be here around 2:00 PM. Throughout the day, I assess Mrs. Jones, hold her hand, stroke her hair, and talk to her. Her daughter shares stories about her mom and sheds tears.

I am here. I am the one to lend my ears and my shoulders. I am the support Mrs. Jones and her daughter need. It is me, all me, and it is okay. My uneasiness has seemed to pass and I am strong. Although I feel my heart strings being tugged, I hold myself together.

I medicate Mrs. Jones with morphine at anytime she seems distressed with her breathing or when her daughter feels she may need it. I feel awkward, a strange place to be. Is she suffering or just a natural part of the dying process?

I decide that it is appropriate to leave Mrs. Jones and her daughter alone for a few minutes. I encourage her daughter to speak to her mom because she can still hear. I head to the break room to take some time to think about things and to be alone; just a few minutes later I hear my name being called. I head out to the hall and see Mrs. Jones' daughter, she is teary-eyed and says "Kim, she's gone." I am speechless and motionless. What do I do? I left them alone for less than 5 minutes! Did I do the right thing? Should I have stayed there every minute? I stop questioning myself and tell her, "I'm sorry."

We proceed into the room together. The once shallow gasps for air have stopped and there is complete silence other than the oxygen running through the mask. I check Mrs. Jones for a heart-beat and breathing. I turn off the oxygen and turn to Mrs. Jones and stroke her pale face and white hair, "Rest in peace darling, it's okay now," I tell her. I turn back to her daughter and offer my arms to hug her. She accepts me openly and begins to cry. She steps back to take a breath as she says to me, "She's in a better place now, I can't believe it's finally over." I sit quietly with her for a few minutes until her daughter arrives. They share

tears and hold each other. I tell them I am going to leave them alone and I will be back shortly.

I step into the hallway and proceed to take a deep breath as I see a middle-aged man step off the elevator. He seems hurried, looking around everywhere. I look at my watch, it's 2:05 PM. "Oh no," I think to myself, "This is her son; he didn't make it in time." I feel a lump in my throat as I approach the gentleman to ask if I can help him. He informs me he is looking for his mother, Mrs. Jones. I motion him down the hall to her room as I introduce myself. He stops just short of the door and turns to ask, "How is she doing?" What do I say now? Oh, this is so hard! No one around to bail me out of this one . . . "I'm sorry," I begin. He needs to hear no more. "She passed on a few minutes ago." His eyes well up with tears and he walks away. "I can't go in there right now," he tells me. After a few minutes he decides he is ready to see his mother and greet his sister and niece and I escort him into Mrs. Jones' room. He hugs his niece and his sister and he goes to his mother and speaks softly to her, kissing her on the cheek.

My heart is aching. I do not know what to say. I feel so horrible for them. I feel that Mrs. Jones is at peace and this is a good thing—except for the family. The family is always left behind to bear the heartache. They feel relieved that their mother is no longer suffering but they are so sad to have let her go.

I ask them if there is anything I can do or get for them. They of course say no and thank me for the "wonderful care" I gave their mother. I ask to give them each a hug and express my deepest sympathy. I hug the niece, the daughter, and lastly the son. The son reaches for my hands as we let go and he says, "See, Mom, there are angels everywhere, just look at this one right here in front of me . . ." I thank him kindly and say good-bye to them and once more to Mrs. Jones before leaving the room.

I can barely hold myself together as I walk briskly down the hall to the break room. I sit inside and silently allow the tears to run down my cheeks. My fellow classmates come to me and of-

fer their support and reassurance. I lean on them and cry about the heart-wrenching experience I had today. I share my feelings with the primary nurse and with my instructor.

The day is over. I made it. When I started this morning I thought, "Please don't let her die on my shift." Now, after several hours of care and just plain being there, my feelings have changed. I am glad I had this experience. It was a hard thing for me to go through, but it is real life. I can think about this and share my feelings with others.

A week goes by and I still think about Mrs. Jones. I seem to have a hard time processing this and it is taking a while. I feel okay now, better than that day, anyway. My alarm rings and off to another clinical day I go. Today I am in endoscopy. Nothing seems out of the ordinary until someone asks for me to come to the desk. Standing at the desk is Mrs. Jones' son. He is carrying a large basket arrangement of beautiful flowers in all the brightest colors. He smiles at me and says hello. We talk for a minute and he proceeds to tell me, "My family and I cannot thank you enough for what you did for our mother and us; we hand picked these flowers from the funeral arrangements and made this basket special for you. Kim, you are an angel from heaven, thank you." He hugs me for a moment and hands me the basket with a thank you note. He tells me he is heading back to St. Louis this afternoon but he couldn't leave without seeing me one more time.

Wow! What a feeling! I have touched someone and made a lasting impression. I do not know that I feel like an angel, but to them, I am. This experience will be with me forever and I believe that the true angel, Mrs. Jones, will watch over her family and has taken a piece of me with her to heaven.

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