

## 1. *The Last Day*

**T**he room was bright and noisy, not what you would expect for the event taking place in it. The brightness came from the warm September sun streaming through the window. The noise came from people busy about their work.

Some of the noise came from people who were not working. In fact, their normal routine had been interrupted by the event unfolding in the room. The noise they provided was from their conversations, low-voiced, occasionally punctuated by a quick laugh. Family conversations.

The auburn hair had long ago faded into silver. The skin that once was smooth and supple now was wrinkled and gnarly. The blue eyes that once sparkled at the voice of a certain young man now stared wide and vacant.

“They say it won’t be long now,” said my nephew Mike, who had met my daughters and me in the parking lot of Wyandotte General Hospital. We had driven four hours in our little red Neon from Columbus, Ohio, to Wyandotte, Michigan. It was Sunday, September 13, 1998.

Most of the people in the room had not been born yet when I was a little boy in Windsor. A few had. My older sister Diane. Another older sister Pat. My younger sister Lynne. An assortment of their sons, daughters, spouses and grandchildren filled the tiny room.

I stepped up beside the lady who lay wide-eyed but silent in the bed. A clear plastic tube brought oxygen to her, but her breathing was shallow and infrequent. It was hard to believe this delicate, frail body had endured so much, survived so much, accomplished so much.

“She was asking for you the other day,” said my niece, Pat’s daughter. “She kept asking, ‘Where’s my son?’”

“Hi, Mom,” I said. “It’s Tom. I’m here.”

Did the eyes flicker just a little in the brightness of the room? Did the mouth try to form the name it had formed thousands of times before? Or was the expression vacant, empty of all recognition?

Was her mind still active? If so, what thoughts flitted about inside, flashing briefly center stage only to be pushed aside by another fleeting memory? Was there perhaps an ephemeral picture of a small brick house on a quiet street where six children played and grew? Or perhaps a transient view of another house where eight young people danced to the