I glanced out the car door window, gauging from the scenery our location. The ride to Mankato had become a familiar one to me over the summer months, and one glance told me we were about to take the exit that would bring us to Oak Lawn Nursing Home. I sighed. My mom glanced at me from the front seat.

“Are you ok?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I replied quietly. “I just don’t know about today. Do you think she’ll make it?”  
 My mom looked down. She didn’t answer.

“It sounded pretty serious,” my dad said. “What did you hear?”

“Just that the staff needed us to come,” I answered. “I really wasn’t awake. I should have asked more questions.”

“We’ll be there shortly,” said my dad. “I just hope roads aren’t really slippery in town.”

“I can’t believe this weather,” I said. “Who would have thought that it would be a blizzard in October?”

“And on Highway 14 too,” added my mom.

“I hate this road, Dad complained.

“You’ve always hated this road, Dad,” I said, ‘but I don’t want to think about this being our last time on it, either.”

“I know,” my dad replied.

The car became quiet. I sighed once again. I thought how this journey had started. Was it only five months ago?

My mom’s family is an extremely close one. My mom’s parents are dead; I have never known my grandparents, and my aunt and two uncles are the only family I’ve known. My aunt has cancer; she was a 40-year smoker, and three years ago, all that smoking caught up with her. At that time, she was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. For many people, that would have been a death sentence. Not Fran. She decided to fight for her life, and she agreed to a radical treatment plan that was still in the experimentation stage. To the surprise and delight of everyone, it worked and after 6 months, her cancer was labeled as “in remission.” The only problem was that this radical treatment had horrible side effects. The combination of radiation and chemotherapy short-circuited my aunt’s memory. My once independent aunt now became dependent on people for doing chores like cooking meals, balancing her checkbooks, and cleaning her house. I had always been like a daughter to her; it was not my turn to help take care of her.

Six months late, my mom called me.

“You won’t believe this,” said my mom, he tone desperately serious.

“What’s wrong? Who is hurt? Is Dad ok?” the questions tumbled out of my mouth.

“Fran’s sick—brain tumors.”

This was the start of the rollercoaster that was to become Fran’s health. The brain tumors disappeared, but another cancer appeared. That cancer was treated, only to give way to another. Soon, the tumors that were in her brain were back, this time causing strokes. My uncle, a fairly quiet, soft-spoken man, called, giving us the news we knew to be coming but which we did not want to hear. Fran, my lively, argumentative, stubborn aunt, was headed to the nursing home. The news hit us hard; my aunt was a college professor and had been on her own since her first husband had died twenty years before. She always took care of things by herself and in her own way.

“Are you sure, Frank?” I asked. “Can’t she live with one of us? Couldn’t someone come in and care for her during the day?”

“She can’t be on her own, Linda,” Frank patiently explained. “Her brain isn’t functioning properly. I don’t think it has for quite a while. I don’t think she can cook for herself—I know she can’t manage her finances. No, I’m afraid the nursing home is our option.”

“Gosh, Frank,” I replied. “She’s going to hate that. Does she know?”

“Are you kidding? If she knew she wouldn’t talk to me,” Frank answered. “Why don’t you come to Mankato with your folks? You can see the place I found and maybe if YOU like it, your aunt will.”

Oak Lawn Nursing Home was a great place. It was located next to Mankato’s hospital. This would be important, especially later in the summer. My aunt would have a first-hand view of the hospital when Corey Stringer, the Minnesota Viking who died of heat exhaustion, was brought there. The staff at Oak Lawn specialized in quality, personal care. They allowed my aunt to have her daily glass of wine after lunch, they allowed my children and her grandson unlimited access to her, and they treated her with respect. Her room was small, but everything my aunt needed fit.

On Memorial Day, 2001, my aunt entered the nursing home in room 125. She would never leave there again. I spent every Wednesday of that summer with her, talking with her, helping her learn to walk again after a series of bad strokes, and trying to make her eat that “. . .slop this place calls food.” We celebrated little things: Katie learning to ride a bike, Collins’ first official signature on a get well card, and sitting up at a table for a meal. At first, my aunt seemed to make steady progress. I looked forward to challenging her to walk the length of the hall or to lift the weights in the physical therapy room. At the beginning of August, though, that changed. I noticed this, because my aunt didn’t realize I was gone when I missed a week. When I came back, I sat down beside her. I touched her shoulder and there was no response.

“Fran,” I whispered, not wanting to wake her if she were sleeping. “Fran, I’m here.”

Fran slowly turned her head. I looked in her eyes. Fran’s beautiful blue eyes that before used to twinkle with mischief and amusement now stared at me dully.

“What’s wrong?” I asked both my mom and the nurse who had joined us in the room.

“She’s been like this for a while,” the nurse explained. We think she had another stroke. It’s nice that she responded to you—that doesn’t always happen>”

“Does she realize I’m here?” I asked, turning back to look at my aunt. Fran was now staring at the ceiling, and I felt a shiver go through me.

“I think so—she hears things, so be careful with what you say.”

“So I shouldn’t be telling anything that I don’t want coming back to haunt me, huh?” I said with a smile.

Fran turned and looked at me again. She seemed to smile in agreement. I began to cry.

All of these memories ran through my head as I got out of the car. Deciding I didn’t need a coat to stay in Fran’s room, I ran to the door. My mom and dad followed. Reaching Fran’s room, I knocked, and slowly opened the door. Music was playing softly on the CD player, and Frank was rocking back and forth in the rocking chair. I touched his shoulder, and he turned. He looked at me and slowly shook his head. I looked at Fran. For the first time ever in the nursing home, my aunt was wearing a hospital gown, something she had absolutely refused to do earlier in the summer. I turned to look at my parents. Tears ran down my mom’s face as she looked at her sister.

“They don’t think she’ll make the morning,” Frank said softly. “Her breathing is very erratic, and she’s bleeding internally.”

“Fran, we’re here,” my mom said softly, touching her shoulder.

My aunt groaned in response. Shaking, my mom straightened from the bed.

“I’ve been here since 4 this morning,” Frank said. “Would you mind if I went home and showered? I’ll hurry back.”

“Have Lee and John been called?” asked Dad.

“Lee’s plane will leave New Jersey at 9,” Frank answered. “John should be leaving soon.”

We nodded. Frank got up to leave.

“Sit with her, Linda,” he suggested. Maybe that will help her relax.”

I took a deep breath and moved to her bed. I wondered if I had the inner strength to be there for my aunt when she needed me. I prayed I would.

My aunt passed away at 12:53 that afternoon with Frank, my parents, John, my aunt and uncle, and me at her side. A hospice nurse monitored her heartbeat, indicating with a nod when Fran’s life was over.

I discovered that death could be very peaceful. This was a word I had never before associated with death. My aunt had given me many things, both in life and in death.