

## THE DAY THE TEARS CAME

I was strong during her rapid physical decline. I was strong during her painful suffering and death. I was strong at her funeral and at the graveside. But today the tears came.

They came in simple, trivial ways. Shutting off her cell phone. Cancelling reservations in Branson. Closing a department store account. Returning books received but never opened. And each required a brief explanation... and tears.

As we were just beginning this cancer journey, she made a request. "If I die before you do, I'd like for you to do my funeral." I agreed, not realizing how little time remained. And from the agony she endured during her last month emerged the three words of encouragement I shared at her funeral. Perhaps they'll endue you--as they have me--with strength to carry on despite prevailing circumstances.

### DO NOT LOSE HEART

Despite the pain, she never gave up, never quit, never complained. Though the body was failing O so rapidly, the person on the inside waxed stronger day by day. She'd often quote the Bible verse, "Let the weak say I am strong." And the last recognizable sound I heard from her lips was a faint but distinguishable "strong."

With great difficulty I managed to transport her from the hospital to our home for a week of hospice care. On the way she asked, "Is this how people go home to die?" "No," I answered, "we're going home to pray for deliverance." She thanked me.

### DO NOT LOSE HOPE

On our first night back home she awoke at 3:00 a.m. wanting to be repositioned. As I rubbed her back and Barrett assured her that all was well, she remarked, "This is good. We're all here, and we love each other." It was true.

A couple of nights later before weakness prevented her from sitting upright, I enfolded my arms around her. "Mother, if this is too hard for you, and you catch a glimpse of the other side where Jenny is, I release you to go there. You have been strong in faith and are the bravest person I know. What an example of endurance you are."

"No, I'm not ready yet," she whispered. "Good," I replied. "We'll keep praying." Soon, however, she confided to her sister Betty, "I'm ready now." Betty released her, as did Barrett. Instead of abandoning hope, she chose the path that seemed best to her.

### DO NOT LOSE HEAVEN

While the Christians do not forfeit their places in heaven, they can miss its manifestations as they live out their lives. In her waning days heaven rained upon us.

There were, of course, outpourings of food, housekeeping, errands, chores. And my mind swims with countless striking images. Luke Stanton by the bedside holding her hand. A friend on her knees seeking forgiveness. Patty Wolf and Adrienne Redding reliving literary favorites. The McNair and Baker families' renditions of uplifting hymns. Katie and Kacie Blankenship's bedroom harp and vocal recitals. The Thompson family holding hands around her bed and praying. Amid my own tears, I often remarked, "Surely heaven must be like this."

On that final morning I attempted to comfort her as she labored for breath. "All is well, Mother. You are strong in the Lord, and I'm here." Bending to wipe a tear from her left eye, I laid a hand upon her head and prayed for her deliverance one last time. Then with just moments to gather the family around, peace gently erased the furrows and wrinkles pain had viciously carved upon her bright countenance.

And in that single glorious instant, our daughter Jenny, blind and retarded here on earth, saw her mom face to face for the first time.

In the Bible Jesus spoke of times like this. "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

So to you, Mary Winborn McAlister, my faithful companion and partner of almost 40 years, I do not bid you farewell. Rather, I assure you of this: I'll meet you on the other side where there are no more tears. And may much fruit spring up from the good seed you planted throughout your life and watered with your pain. All is well.