

## The Privilege Was All Mine

*For the purposes of this story all names and locations have been changed.*

In May of this year I will celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my nursing career. As I reflect over those years I am reminded of some of the patients in whose lives I have played a small part, and how those patients have touched my life in return.

Marcia. A 34 year mother of 3 children under the age of 5, you were 30 weeks pregnant when abnormal bleeding brought you into hospital. A cancerous mass was discovered on your cervix. At 32 weeks you underwent a Caesarean section, swiftly followed by a radical hysterectomy. Your baby daughter went straight to the Special Care Baby Nursery. You came back to us on the ward after two days in intensive care. , You were pale, in pain, scared, and you ached for your baby. Your recovery was complicated. There was treatment for the cancer. You went home but were readmitted after a month. The cancer had spread. I remember your husband bringing your children to visit. I watched your face light up as you held her in your baby in your arms, cuddled your twin boys, all pain forgotten for a moment. You passed away in the hospice a few short months after the initial surgery. Your baby was five months old. I remember you.

Mrs Browning. The call came to the ward at midnight. "We've got a patient for that empty bed. Elderly lady, 92 years of age, constipation, UTI. Frail. Hasn't been coping. Needs an enema tonight. Sorry." The ward doors swung open at 1 am and in you came on a trolley, pale and thin with an embarrassed smile. You apologised for disturbing the ward and

praised the offer of a cup of tea as though I'd presented you with a winning lottery ticket. When I put you on the commode you turned to me with those twinkly eyes and in your cut glass English accent you said, "My dear, I'm full of shit." I still see us now, bent double with laughter at two in the morning, you on the commode and me beside the bed. Your enema worked well, you apologised profusely. I gently brushed your apologies aside and you slept soundly for the rest of the night. In the morning you called me over and apologetically asked for another cup of tea, which I gladly made. "It's the little things in life that make you the most happy," you said, and I understood.

Kathy. You were 42. It was Day Four after your surgery and at 2.30pm on a Monday afternoon you collapsed outside the bathroom in cardiac arrest. Despite all efforts you could not be revived. I can still see your legs on the floor, one slipper slightly to the side. But what I can see most of all is your two young children who were already on the way to the ward to visit you. Your brother and his wife had collected them from school and were bringing them to see Mummy. We stop them at the ward entrance and take them into a room where your shattered husband waits to break the news. Your children are brought into the side room where you lie on a bed, looking to all the world as though you are sleeping. I see your nine year old son holding your hand, kissing your face, stroking your hair. I see your twelve year old daughter clinging to her aunt. As I talk to the aunt she tells me her mother died when she was young. I tell her my mother is dead as well and suddenly your daughter is looking at me, searching my face. "Do you miss her?" she asks. What do I tell her? I have a lump in my throat, but I manage to speak because it's important that I do

this right now, for your little girl. “Every day. And you will, too. But you’re going to be okay. It doesn’t feel like that now, but you will be.” She looks away. That was twenty six years ago and I still think about your children, Kathy. I hope they’re okay.

Luke. You were eight years of age when you were riding your bike and were hit by a car. You’d had external fixation to a fracture on your leg and with MRSA in your wound site you were being barrier nursed. The isolation was torture for you and you wept as I changed your dressing. “I want to play outside. Please. PLEASE!!!” Your tears turning to smiles after we got you a walkie talkie and you were able to chat with the other children on the ward outside. I remember you screaming with laughter later when you terrorised the nurses with a remote control car which you drove at our feet at top speed. I loved hearing your laugh. You were good at getting my ankles. I pretended to scold you but we both knew it was okay. I hope you got back on your bike, Luke.

Elsie. You were in your eighties, cuddly, with a friendly face. You smelled faintly of Lily of the Valley talcum powder. Everyone on the ward gravitated towards you, the other patients called you Nan. I don’t know why, you were just special somehow. Your family were frequent and loving visitors. Frames containing family photographs covered your bedside locker. “Who’s your favourite nurse?” we asked, teasingly. “Which one of you has the biggest bum?” you shot back. You wore a pink bed jacket, pink nighties and pink fluffy slippers. As the days passed you slept for longer periods. You still smiled but the light was fading. As we put you to bed one night you closed your eyes and spoke. “You’ve all been

very kind but I've had enough now." The next morning we discovered that you'd passed away peacefully in the early hours of the morning. It was hard to smile that day.

Nasreen. I had nursed you many times on the gynaecology ward through your multiple miscarriages. You came to us in your tenth week of your eighth pregnancy, your face pinched with pain and worry. "I just want a baby. Why am I being punished?" you wept. I held your hand and sat with you. It was all I could do. Did it help? I don't know. You stayed with us until you were transferred to the maternity unit at 22 weeks. We hugged and I told you that I would push your pram. We looked at each other and I could see the fear in your eyes. Almost exactly 22 weeks later and you came to the ward with your husband and your beautiful, beautiful son, and I did, Nasreen, I pushed your pram. We all wept but they were some of the happiest tears I've ever shed.

Charlie. I got to know both you and your wife, June through your frequent visits to the short stay unit. An ex-Londoner, you strolled in with a twinkle in your eye, freshly shaved, suit jacket, smart pants, leaning slightly on your walking stick. "Back with me waterworks again," you'd say, proffering an arm for the blood pressure measurement. Our chats got longer with each visit. You told me stories of your childhood in post war London, your journey to Australia with June, your life as a teacher and your pride in your family. When I left the ward we kept in touch. One day at my new job I received a 'phone call from June. You were succumbing to your long standing heart failure. Your life was ebbing away. Could I come? I raced across town, arrived on the ward and saw two nurses at the desk. When I

asked for you, they looked at me with concern. “Are you a friend?” one asked. I paused.

“Yes, I’m a friend.” I gave my name. She ushered me away from the desk and her colleague walked away towards a side room. “Have you spoken to his family lately?” she asked, and it suddenly hit me. I had done this myself so many times and now I was on the receiving end.

“I spoke with June about an hour ago.” She nodded. The other nurse returned and took me to Peter’s room where June was sitting. She rose from her chair and hugged me. “He’s gone, love.”

June and I sat with Peter and waited for June’s daughter and son in law to arrive. June talked to Peter and stroked his hand. He looked peaceful. “I’m so glad you could come. Charlie would have been pleased. It’s a privilege to have you here.” I was genuinely surprised. “The privilege is all mine, June.” And I meant it.

We talk about the difference that nurses make to the lives of patients, but we don’t talk enough about the impact that patients make on us. I have given a lot to nursing in the last thirty years, but it has given me more than I could ever imagined, or that I could ever repay.

The privilege has been all mine.