

Holding Her Hand

Short Story

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## Holding Her Hand

The year was 1945, and he was holding her hand.

Even all these years later, Audie could still see the yellow, cotton dress with tiny red flowers that his beloved Kate was wearing that day. He could hear her giggling at his corny stories. He could feel the tender softness of her seamstress hands.

“Sir... sir!” The hushed voice of the critical care nurse roused Audie from his memory.

“Oh, pardon me, ma’am. Is it time for her injections again?” Slowly, he placed his weathered hands on the arms of the hospital chair and pushed himself up.

“That’s what I’m here to talk to you about,” the nurse explained. Her voice carried a gentle vagueness that can only be understood by those who have spent countless hours by the bedside of a dying loved one. “Going into this, we knew that there was only a thirty percent chance for the treatment to work. I’m so sorry, Mr. Woodson, but the medication just isn’t stopping the tumor’s growth.”

The elderly man stood there transfixed and gazed at his wife lying unresponsive on the bed.

“Would you like me to ask a spiritual counselor to come?” the nurse offered with timid kindness.

Audie did not move. After a few moments, he slowly turned and faced the nurse. She could see the pain that clouded his exhausted blue eyes.

“No, thank you. I don’t think I need a spiritual counselor. I’ve got the Great Comforter right here,” Audie replied, pointing to his heart.

The nurse smiled gently and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“How would you like to proceed with treatment, Mr. Woodson?”

“Would you call the hospice director for me?” Audie said.

“Absolutely,” the nurse replied.

Quietly, she made her way out of the room.

With halting, arduous steps Audie shuffled to his wife’s bedside. He extended a work-roughened hand and gently stroked the hair back from her forehead.

“Let’s go home, Kate,” he whispered in a breathy tone.

*Home...*

Once again he was lost in the memories.

The year was 1954, and he was holding her hand.

“Ashes, ashes, we all fall down!” Audie clung tightly to Kate’s extended hand and then released it as they plopped down into the thick, cool grass beside their five-year-old son, Tommy.

“Again! Again!” Tommy squealed with delight.

Audie and Kate looked at each other and chuckled.

“Tommy, I think your daddy and I have ringed around the last rosy for tonight,” Kate laughed.

Just then a twinkling speck pulsed in the dusk.

“Look, Mom, fireflies! Can I go catch one?” Tommy begged with pure adventurous excitement.

“Sure, sweetheart. Just be careful,” Kate’s tender voice instructed.

Audie slid his fingers through the lush green blades until he could clasp Kate’s fingers. In the fading glow of twilight, he lovingly held Kate’s petite hand as the two of them watched Tommy jump and try to snag one of the blinking lights around him.

“I’ve arranged for an ambulance to take you home, Mr. Woodson.”

The voice of the hospice director intruded into the old man’s reverie. Wiping the tears from his eyes, Audie placed his large hand on one of his wife’s *IV-riddled* arms.

“We’re ready,” he replied.

As he rode beside Kate in the ambulance, his mind went back to days gone by.

The year was 1986, and he was holding her hand.

“Oh, Audie,” Kate sobbed, “what am I going to do without him?”

The mourners had all gone. Now it was just the two of them sitting alone on a solitary cemetery bench.

“Kate, Kate,” Audie’s voice cracked as he tried to find the strength to speak through his tears.

“I knew that Cambodia was dangerous, but I never thought that the Lord would let this happen, not to our Tommy.”

Trying to comfort his grieving wife, Audie reminded himself and her, “He understood the risk of being a missionary, and he was willing to give his life for our Savior.”

“I think I want to say a final goodbye before we leave, but I just don’t know if I can bear to read my only son’s name on that tombstone again. A mother shouldn’t have to bury her child!” Kate tearfully explained as she pressed her head against Audie’s chest and wept inconsolably.

In the interminable stillness, Audie held his beloved wife in his arms. The two of them wept together. When the tears subsided, they joined their trembling hands and moved toward the grave.

“He finished his race,” Audie assured Kate. “It won’t be long. He’s waiting for us at heaven’s gate.”

Audie’s mind refocused again on the present as the ambulance pulled into the driveway of the modest frame house that he and Kate had called home for the last forty years. With great effort he slowly lowered himself out of the back of the vehicle, unlocked the front door of the house, and watched with tears in his eyes as the EMT’s transported Kate inside. For the next hour, he helped the hospice nurse prepare the master bedroom for Kate.

“Is there anything else that you need, sir?” asked the hospice nurse as she finished setting up the last machine.

“No, ma’am,” Audie responded quietly. “I’m afraid that it won’t be long before my Kate passes from this life into eternity.”

When the nurse went to the kitchen, Audie shuffled to the bed, holding on to the furniture for support. He sank down into his giant recliner that the nurse had helped him move up next to Kate’s bed. Tears ran down his face as he gently cradled her wrinkled hand, slowly brought it to his quivering lips, and kissed it.

Again his mind replayed memories of the years that they had spent together. Through it all he had held her hand. He had held her soft hand when they fell in love, he had held her sweaty hand after joyful afternoons of ring-around-the-rosy, and he had held her trembling hand when they mourned Tommy’s death. However, she now traveled a path he could not follow. She would have to pass through heaven’s gate alone. She would face her Savior without Audie by her side.

The irregular beeping of the heart monitor slowed. Kate’s home going approached. Tenderly, Audie clasped Kate’s hand and pressed it against his wrinkled face.

“Dear Lord,” he prayed brokenly. “Sixty-three years ago you blessed me with the love of my life. I have faithfully held her hand, but now, O Lord, I know that it is Your turn. She has run her race. All I ask is that You let me walk with her to the finish line.”

Kate’s Father heard. He reached down. The monitor fell silent.

The year was 2013, and He was holding her hand.