

I was a nurse and Rebekah was a young mother who thought she would have a lifetime to raise her three girls

# The Last Tape

by Nan Pinkston, Stone Mountain, Georgia

The bustle of the hospital was a welcome distraction as I opened my new patient's chart and headed for her room. My son, Eric, had just brought home a disappointing report card, and my daughter, Shannon, and I had argued again about her getting a driver's license. For the next eight hours I wanted to throw myself into helping people who I knew had much more to worry about than I did.

Rebekah was only 32, admitted for chemotherapy after breast-cancer surgery. When I entered her room it took me a moment to spot her amid the bouncing forms of three giggling little girls.

I told Rebekah I would be her nurse and she introduced her husband, Warren; six-year-old Ruthie; four-year-old Hannah; and two-year-old Molly. Warren

coaxed the girls away from their mother with a promise of ice cream and assured Rebekah they would return the next day.

As I rubbed alcohol on her arm to prepare it for the intravenous line, Rebekah laughed nervously. "I have to tell you I'm terrified of needles."

"It'll be over before you know it," I said. "I'll give you a count of three."

Rebekah shut her eyes tightly and murmured a prayer until it was over. Then she smiled and squeezed my hand. "Before you go, could

you get my Bible from the table?" I handed her the worn book. "Do you have a favorite Bible verse?" she asked.

"Jesus wept." John 11:35."

"Such a sad one," she said. "Why?"

"It makes me feel closer to Jesus, knowing he also experienced human sorrow."

Rebekah nod-

ded thoughtfully and started flipping through her Bible as I shut the door quietly behind me.

During the following months I watched Rebekah struggle with the ravages of chemotherapy. Her hospital stays became frequent and she worried about her children. Meanwhile I continued to contend with raising my own kids. They always seemed either out or holed up in their rooms. I missed the days when they were as attached to me as Rebekah's little girls were to her.

For a time it had seemed Rebekah's chemotherapy was working. Then doctors discovered another malignant lump. Two months later, a chest X ray revealed the cancer had spread to her lungs. It was terminal. *Help me to help her through this*, I prayed.

One day when I entered her room, I found her talking into a tape recorder. She picked up a yellow legal pad and held it out to me. "I'm making a tape for my daughters," she said.

I read the list on her pad: starting school, confirmation, turning 16, first date, graduation. While I worried how to help her deal with death, she was planning for her children's future.

She usually waited until the early hours of the morning to record the tapes so she could be free from interruptions. She filled them with family stories and advice—trying to cram a lifetime of love into a few precious hours. Finally, every item in her notes had been checked off and she entrusted the tapes to her husband.

I often wondered what I would say in her place. My kids joked that I was like an FBI agent, with my constant questions about where they'd been and who they'd been with. *Where*, I

thought, *are my words of encouragement and love?*

It was three o'clock one afternoon when I got an urgent call from the hospital. Rebekah wanted me to come immediately with a blank tape. *What topic has she forgotten?* I wondered.

She was flushed and breathing hard when I entered her room. I slipped the tape into the recorder and held the microphone to her lips. "Ruthie, Hannah, Molly—this is the most important tape." She held my hand and closed her eyes. "Someday your daddy will bring home a new mommy. Please make her feel special. Show her how to take care of you. Ruthie, honey, help her get your Brownie uniform ready each Tuesday. Hannah, tell her you don't want meat sauce on your spaghetti. She won't know you like it separate. Molly, don't get mad if there's no apple juice. Drink something else. It's okay to be sad, sweeties. Jesus cried too. He knows about sadness and will help you to be happy again. Remember, I'll always love you."

I shut off the recorder and Rebekah sighed deeply. "Thank you, Nan," she said with a weak smile. "You'll give this one to them, won't you?" she murmured as she slid into sleep.

A time would come when the tape would be played for Rebekah's children, but right then, after I smoothed Rebekah's blanket, I got in my car and hurried home. I thought of how my Shannon also liked her sauce on the side and suddenly that quirk, which had annoyed me so many times, seemed to make her so much more precious. That night the kids didn't go out; they sat with me long after the spaghetti sauce had dried onto the dishes. And we talked—without interrogations, without complaints—late into the night. ◀

