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NON-FICTION | SPRING 2017

## CANDACE

By Jutta Braun

I was twenty-one when I started working in this awful place. On the tenth floor of this crumbling, cold building in the largest medical center of the state, in the downtown part of this dirty city, I felt like a fish out of water, like an imposter. I was a new nurse, learning through the “sink or swim” method. And most of the time, I felt submerged. There were things happening in these musty, rickety rooms that I couldn’t fathom, that I could not have even imagined before I saw them, even beyond the mice and the cockroaches hiding in the corners of rooms. I was completing a six-month rotation on the gynecological oncology unit. Women’s cancer. Only the worst cases were referred here, to this regional hospital. There were women in agony from fist-sized anal-vaginal-urethral fistulas with odors that made me feel faint, women dying despite surgeries claiming most of their abdominal organs, and women suffering through the crude removal of their most feminine parts – vulvas, vaginas - nothing was sacred here. My memory of Candace, unlucky enough to end up here, was of just one moment, one image.

A sweet, Southern, wholesome girl was lying in the only bed in the room. She was nineteen, had gotten married two months ago. Her freckled, fresh-faced husband, little more than a child himself, stood next to her, mutely holding her hand. She clung to him desperately. I remember her orchid skin, her brows furrowed, the soft, short brown hair framing her heart-shaped face. Her fear filled the stark hospital room. She was so young. Her pain was emotional now – the robbery of the very ordinary life she imagined, the specter of the battle she was thrust into – but the physical pain was yet to come. And that would be devastating.

She had just been told she had ovarian cancer. She would have to decide – would she want to have extensive surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation? The ravaging effects would take her simple beauty away overnight. And even the strongest treatments would not extend her life for long. I remember wanting to distance myself from her, as if the cancer was contagious. I found myself staying at the outskirts of the room, in “safe” territory, feeling guilty, trying to avoid eye contact with her. What could I say to her? What could I do to help? I was powerless, afraid. Did she remind me of myself? I came here because I wanted to help, to make a difference in suffering. I did not expect to be silenced by the enormity of her illness. I wanted to stay with her, tell her everything was going to be alright, that this was all a bad dream. And I couldn’t. And I am ashamed when I think that I didn’t reach out to her, hug her, offer her my presence. I did take care of her physically – gave her medication, made sure she had her diagnostic tests, offered platitudes that did more to reassure me than her. But I was inadequate. I couldn’t meet her needs, they were too overwhelming.

I don’t remember what she decided. I only have the snapshot of her fear in my mind. I did learn from that moment. In the ensuing thirty-odd years, maturity and experience have finally

taught me how to “be” with people who’ve had life explode in front of them like Candace. I would be different if I faced her today. I would look her in the eye. I would look her cancer in the eye.

But she is gone.

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**Jutta Braun is celebrating her fortieth year in nursing in 2017. She has never quite figured out a specialty and has instead dabbled in different health areas, including renal transplant, intensive care, home care, cardiac rehabilitation, psychiatric and pediatric nursing. In the last twenty years, she has been privileged to share her knowledge with her nursing students. She has always wanted to write about the blessing of being a witness to the most profound moments of life – birth, death, and the whole journey in between – and is thankful to have that opportunity now.**

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