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You went so suddenly at the end, Gemma. All those weeks when you kept your lips sealed against the pain -- the months that followed that October morning when pain finally felled you and forced from you the unfamiliar plea, "Help me!" -- all the agony of your slow, excruciating dying, surely earned you the peaceful end that came just before eleven that quiet Saturday night.

It's the way you would have wanted it, given a choice. You were never one for the spotlight. You'd woven a protective cloak through the years, a cloak you wore so easily, so casually, that only a few knew that it masked sensitivity too keen for display, and covered scars too livid to be probed. It covered, too, a depth only your very closest friends could plumb. You kept your counsel and your casual brusqueness, but every now and then the cloak slipped a little, and the Gemma you tried to conceal peered through. Then you wrapped the cloak about you once more, and turned away. It was better not to be too vulnerable.

You were always surprised at kindness, Gemma. Always a little amazed -- and grateful. "Why is everyone so good to me?" you said at Christmas as the cards and remembrances poured in. You couldn't know just how stunned your Sisters had been last autumn when the news first reached them that "Sister Gemma's in the Infirmary -- it's terminal!" It was hard to believe that Sister Gemma, strong, robust, the picture of health, was dying. You kept that secret as long as you could, didn't you, Gemma? -- asking questions about cancer and its symptoms, but always from an objective, professional viewpoint, just because you "wanted to know."

What were your thoughts, Gemma, when your fears were confirmed, and you knew you couldn't keep your secret too much longer? How did you keep going every day -- walking a little painfully, true, but still on duty? -- how did you bear the long nights that you spent propped in a chair because the pain was easier to bear that way? And what were your thoughts that October morning when you couldn't go on any more, and in a gesture of finality you reached out a hand for help?

You kept the cloak about you even during those last months. Dying was a personal thing, and you preferred to keep it that way. But you were grateful for the care, for the remembrances, the friends. There are two who will remember always, sitting at your hospital bedside in the October twilight, talking quietly of other times -- of novitiate days -- of uncertain tomorrows. A little talk about the pain and what was being done to alleviate it, but no mention of the road that was ending. But you knew, Gemma, and as you said goodbye, you were crying -- and it embarrassed you. "I don't like to cry!" you said. "I don't cry often!" And you added, "Just pray that I can take it!" You knew, Gemma -- oh you knew!

In the months that followed, there were times when you spoke of "getting better" or "going back to work soon," -- days when you wondered if your job would "still be waiting" for you when you got on your feet again. Were you drawing the cloak about you then, Gemma, or was it a wistful hope that maybe -- MAYBE! -- you COULD get well?

If it was a fleeting hope, it surely waned at the end. Feverish, restless, you murmured incoherently throughout the day, "Hurry! Hurry!" Now at the last you were ready to go -- "Hurry! Hurry!" In the early evening you were resting quietly; then at 10:55, unhurried, with no anguish, no struggle, you simply went away.

And you probably said a surprised "For ME?" as Eternity opened, Gemma. . . And then the cloak dropped away from you forever.

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