

From the desk of:
Noreen Corr Dowling

Dear Friend,

"If I go to Calvary, I'm giving up," my brother Thomas told me. *"And I'm not giving up!"*

When it became clear Thomas wasn't going to be cured of cancer, I tried to get him to go to Calvary. Our mother had died of cancer years before, and suffered terribly at the end of her life. I swore that the next time a family member was dying, it would be different.

I never expected that person to be my brother. Thomas was only 36 when he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. Unfortunately, it had already spread to his liver.

Growing up Irish Catholic in the Bronx, we all knew about Calvary—the hospital for people dying of cancer. Calvary had the reputation of being a place of unbelievable compassion. Towards the end, Thomas was so sick and in so much discomfort, and so anxious all the time, I prayed and prayed that he would let us take him to Calvary.

"Admitting you're dying isn't giving up," I tried to convince him. *"We're all going to be there someday. It's a transition to another life. It's not giving up."*

But Thomas was always a fighter, and he refused to let go of life. All through a terrible year of chemotherapy, he insisted he was going to make it.

During much of that year, Thomas lived with me. He was an independent person who never wanted to be restricted by family expectations. He had long ago stopped going to church, for example. So I knew that living with me was hard on a rebel like him.

But he was so weak he couldn't object. Towards the end of the year, he frequently needed to be hospitalized. Finally, on a Sunday afternoon, I sat with him at the hospital and he was so uncomfortable and tired he finally said, *"Okay, take me to Calvary."*

I went home and cried for hours. The next day, I made the phone calls. Two days later, we brought Thomas to Calvary.

Part of the reason Thomas was so uncomfortable at the other hospital was that he refused to let anyone take care of him. He wouldn't let them comb his hair or shave his stubbly face. He had always been a free soul who didn't stay down long, but fear, pain, and anxiety took their toll. He was so often scared and angry that we hardly recognized him.



(over, please)

On Tuesday morning, we rolled Thomas into Calvary in a wheelchair and it's as if the world changed. Something about Calvary immediately began to ease his anxiety and fear. I left him in the care of nurses and went off to do paperwork. A short while later, I found him in his new room. What I saw was a blessed reminder of the old Thomas.

His hair had been trimmed. His beard shaved. He was comfortable and in less pain. He smiled his old cheerful smile when I walked in. I almost broke down. How the nurses got him to let them clean him up, I'll never know.

The next day, one of Calvary's Catholic chaplains asked if he could talk to Thomas. I didn't have much hope, but I said sure. When my father and I looked in a little later, Thomas was saying his last confession and accepting the anointing of the sick.

This time, my father cried.

To this day, I wonder how the chaplain got through to Thomas so quickly. But truthfully, Calvary was one amazement after another. I assumed that nurses at a place like Calvary must burn out quickly. But one after another told me they had been there 10, 15, even 25 years. They are the most caring, comforting people I have ever met.

In the delirium that often comes at the end of cancer, Thomas sometimes thrashed around. Most hospitals would have strapped him down. But Calvary is one of only a few hospitals in the country that never uses restraints. Whenever we weren't there, they put someone else in the room, a nurse or volunteer, to make sure Thomas couldn't hurt himself.

Those days when Thomas was at Calvary were hard on my father and my brothers and me. We knew we were spending our last days with him. Even though he resisted going to Calvary for so long, I think Thomas was the one who was the happiest once he got there. Those were the most peaceful days of his long, sad illness.

The Friday after Thomas went to Calvary, I was sitting with him in the afternoon when his breathing became labored. I called the nurse, who called the doctor. He told me to contact my brothers and my father. We stayed all night, gathered around Thomas.

At about 7:30 on Saturday morning, my brother quietly left us and went to heaven.

Thinking about Thomas still hurts, and there is a hole left in my heart that will never be filled. But I am eternally grateful for everyone at Calvary and all those who support that amazing place. It's hard for me to believe Thomas was only there five days. So much happened for him that my only regret is that he didn't go to Calvary sooner.

From the moment we walked in with my brother, everyone we met said, "*What can we do to help you?*" And the tenderness with which they cared for my brother is impossible to describe. It was an amazing prayer of compassion.

All I can tell you is that it all made me absolutely convinced that Thomas was in the right place to live his last days. The love of Calvary made it easier to be with him; easier to say goodbye; easier to finally let him go. And most of all, easier to keep happy memories of him in my heart always.

I hope you'll join me in supporting this amazing hospital by sending a generous tax-deductible gift today. God bless you!

Sincerely,


Noreen Corr Dowling