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It all happened so fast—and slow! As I flew from New York to Amsterdam, I realized that I was going to say farewell to my mother. As often as I had made that same trip, this time it seemed unreal. Already I felt my perceptions changing as my immediate surroundings seemed to fade away. I had a hard time listening to the pleasant lady on my right who told me about her daughter's college. I could not bring myself to buy earphones to listen to music or to follow the sound of the movie. I could not make myself read a book that would draw me into the complexities of other people's lives. Above the cold North Atlantic, I felt alone. Not lonely, not depressed, not anxious, not afraid, but alone in a new way. My mother was dying. She was waiting for me to come, she wanted to see me and to pray with me. It was this reality that began to fill my mind as the plane carried me home. I realized that something very new was happening to me.

Just a month ago I had been flying from Jerusalem to Rome. A sixty-year-old man sitting next to me explained

that he was returning to the United States to attend the funeral of his brother. I remember feeling uncomfortable, somewhat embarrassed, and self-conscious. I even felt some irritation because I had to sit for three hours beside this man with whom I could not have a “normal” conversation. Now I was the one who might embarrass or irritate my fellow human beings, people who did not want to be pulled out of their joyful anticipation of a happy holiday. I realized that sorrow is an unwelcome companion and that anyone who willingly enters into the pain of a stranger is truly a remarkable person.

At seven o'clock in the morning I finally walked through the long hallways of Schiphol airport. Two hours later I entered the hospital room in Nijmegen where my mother lay in pain. From the moment I saw her I knew that something totally new was beginning. I smiled and she looked at me, grateful that I had come. I kissed her forehead and touched her hand. Words were hardly possible or necessary. The only thing that seemed important was that we were together.

She was looking at me with the same eyes with which she had so often looked at me—when I went to the seminary, when I became a priest, when I left to live in the States: eyes expressing a love that could never be separated from pain. Maybe that was what had always touched me most deeply—her eyes, in which love and sadness were never completely separated. How often had I seen tears in her eyes when I left again after a day, a week, or a month at home! How often had I looked

into that lovely face, which expressed so beautifully that love causes pain!

I can still see her waving from the quay of Rotterdam Harbor as the large ship *Statendam* slowly left its berth, taking me on my first trip to the United States. I can still see her waving as I passed the “passengers only” sign and walked through the airport gates. I can still see her waving from the door of the house as I was driven away in my brother’s car. And—the clearest memory of all because it happened hundreds of times—I see her waving from the platform as the train rolled away from the station, making her figure smaller and smaller and smaller.

Always there was a smile and a tear, joy and sadness. From the moment of my birth when her tears merged with smiles, it has always been that way.

Now there was no doubt that she was dying; it was so clearly written on her face. I knew that we both knew. But there were no words. I bent over her face. So close, so intimate, so gentle, so painful. The tears in her eyes made me realize that while she was glad that I had come, she was also sad that we could now do no more than just look at each other—and pray.

“Shall I pray?” I asked softly. She seemed pleased and nodded. Knowing she would have asked me this if she had possessed the strength to speak, I realized that the words of the psalms would make it possible to communicate with each other in new ways. For a year now we have prayed with the same prayerbook. During

the many evenings we spent together we had read the hymns and psalms of the evening prayer, finding in them a time of shared tranquility. When I opened the book it was all so very normal, familiar, and safe.

Like the deer that yearns
for running streams,
so my soul is yearning
for you, my God.

My soul is thirsting for God,
the God of my life;
when can I enter and see
the face of God?

My tears have become my bread,
by night, by day,
as I hear it said all the day long:
“Where is your God?”

These things will I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I would lead the rejoicing crowd
into the house of God . . .

Why are you cast down, my soul,
why groan within me?
Hope in God; I will praise yet again,
my savior and my God.

—PSALM 41