

STAY WITH ME

by Keith Thorn, author

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Chapter One — Thursday

Lunch

We had stepped out for lunch the way we had every day that week.

By then, routine had replaced urgency. The first days in the facility had felt fragile, like something might shift at any moment. But in those final days, the rhythm had settled into something quieter.

John and I would arrive midmorning, sit with her, take turns speaking even when she could not answer clearly, and then leave briefly for lunch before returning for the afternoon.

It felt practical. Necessary. Human.

That Thursday began no differently.

Her room was dim when we arrived. The blinds were half drawn, the light coming in soft and diffused. She had been sleeping more, though “sleep” was not quite the right word. It was more like drifting—her body present, her mind moving in places we could not follow. Her face had grown smaller in recent days. The strength that had defined her for decades had thinned into something delicate, almost translucent.

She did not speak that morning.

The last three days had taken her words from us. Before that, I could still piece together fragments—short phrases, a few recognizable sounds, the shape of her voice even if the words slipped away. But now even that was gone. What remained was the pressure of her fingers, the steady need to feel someone near.

I sat beside her for a while without speaking.

John stood near the window, hands in his pockets, looking out at the courtyard below. We had grown comfortable in silence. There wasn’t much left to say that hadn’t already been said.

Her breathing was shallow but even. No visible strain. No outward sign of distress. If someone had walked past the doorway and glanced in, they might have thought she was simply resting.

I remember thinking she looked peaceful.

That word is dangerous now. It suggests resolution. But at the time, it felt accurate. There was no crying out. No agitation. Just a kind of stillness.

The nurses moved in and out quietly. One adjusted her blanket. Another checked the monitors. They had become familiar faces over the past several days. Efficient. Kind in their own way. Measured.

I watched the rise and fall of her chest longer than I realized.

Eventually, John glanced at me. It was almost noon.

“We should eat,” he said softly.

We had learned the hard way that if we didn’t leave for a short break, we would forget to eat altogether.

In the earlier days, hunger had felt irrelevant. Now it was just part of the routine. Visit. Sit. Step out. Return.

I leaned close to her before we left.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, though I did not know if she understood.

Her eyes remained closed. Her fingers did not tighten. There was no visible acknowledgment. And yet I said it anyway. The habit of speaking to her as if she could hear everything had stayed with me, even after recognition began to fade.

John waited by the door.

We walked down the hallway together, the wheels of a supply cart squeaking faintly behind us. The air in the corridor carried that familiar institutional scent—clean but impersonal. Rooms on either side held their own stories, their own quiet endings unfolding at different speeds.

Outside, the heat pressed in the moment the automatic doors opened.

Florida in late July does not soften itself for anyone. The brightness felt almost offensive after the dim hallway. I blinked against it.

We drove the short distance to the same place we had eaten at most days. A simple spot. Nothing memorable. We weren't there for the food. We were there to reset for an hour.

Inside, the noise of clinking dishes and low conversation felt oddly distant. The world was functioning. People were talking about ordinary things. A couple at the table beside us laughed at something on a phone screen. A waitress asked if we wanted tea or water.

It struck me then how strange it is that the world never pauses.

Not for dying.

Not for endings.

Not for sons sitting beside their mothers in quiet rooms.

John ordered first. I followed without really reading the menu.

We did not talk much at the table. We had said most of what there was to say over the previous ten days. He had driven down from Tennessee the day after I called him, no hesitation, no questions about how long he might need to stay. We had slept at Mom's apartment each night and spent our days beside her bed.

He had sung to her when I couldn't.

I stared at my plate when the food came. Took a few bites. Chewed without tasting.

“Think she’s resting?” John asked.

“I think so,” I said.

It was the same answer I had given the day before. And the day before that.

There was a steadiness to him I leaned on without saying so. He didn't try to fix anything. Didn't offer explanations. Didn't force conversation. He just stayed.

We were midway through the meal when my phone vibrated against the table.

I looked down at the screen.

The facility's number.

For a moment, I didn't move.

Then I picked it up.

The Call

I knew before I answered.

There are moments when the body moves ahead of thought. My hand lifted the phone, but something in my chest had already tightened. The world around the table narrowed. The sound of dishes and low conversation thinned into a dull hum.

“Hello?”

The voice on the other end was calm. Measured. Professional.

“Mr. Thorn... I’m calling from the facility.”

There was a pause that felt longer than it was.

“You should come back.”

Not rushed. Not dramatic. Just that.

You should come back.

I do not remember if she said more. There may have been additional words—phrases about timing, about how quickly things had changed. But those four words are the ones that stayed.

John was already watching my face.

I don't know what expression crossed it. Something must have. He didn't ask what happened. He just pushed his chair back before I had even stood up.

“It's time?” he asked quietly.

I nodded.

We left cash on the table. I don't remember how much. I don't remember if we finished our plates. I don't remember thanking the waitress. The small mechanics of leaving blurred into instinct.

Outside, the heat felt different. Sharper. The brightness no longer offensive—just unreal.

We walked quickly but did not run. There was no urgency in our steps, and yet everything in me was moving fast. I remember unlocking the truck and sitting for half a second before turning the key.

“Okay,” John said, fastening his seatbelt.

It wasn’t a question. It wasn’t reassurance. It was simply presence.

The drive back was only a few minutes. The same route we had taken every day. The same traffic lights. The same strip of palm trees bending slightly in the wind.

I noticed everything and nothing.

My hands on the steering wheel felt distant. The air conditioner hummed. A red light held us for longer than it should have. I watched the cross-traffic pass and thought how strange it was that other drivers were heading somewhere ordinary. Grocery stores. Appointments. Home.

We were heading back to a room where something irreversible had just happened.

Neither of us spoke.

There is a particular quiet that settles between men when words would only get in the way. It isn't empty. It isn't avoidance. It is shared understanding.

I didn't pray.

I didn't bargain.

I didn't rehearse what I might say.

A part of me had known for days that this call was coming. Her body had been thinning. Her breathing more fragile. The last three days had taken her language entirely. Recognition had already slipped.

Still, knowing something is near does not prepare you for the moment it arrives.

We turned into the facility parking lot.

The building looked exactly as it had every other day. Beige exterior. Clean windows. A few cars

scattered in the spaces near the entrance. Nothing about it suggested that inside, a life had just ended.

I parked closer than usual.

When I stepped out, the air felt heavy. Not symbolic—just thick with July humidity. The automatic doors slid open as we approached, their mechanical sigh strangely loud.

The lobby was quiet.

A woman behind the desk glanced up at us. Her expression changed slightly when she recognized me. Not shock. Not alarm. Just acknowledgment.

“They’re expecting you,” she said gently.

I nodded.

We walked down the hallway we knew by heart. Left at the nurses’ station. Past the same framed artwork on the wall. Past the room where an older man watched television too loudly. Past a cart parked halfway along the corridor.

Everything ordinary.

Everything unchanged.

And yet something had shifted beyond return.

At her door, I slowed.

John stopped beside me.

For the briefest second, I felt the urge to hesitate—to delay by one breath the reality waiting on the other side. But delay changes nothing. It only stretches the moment before truth.

I pushed the door open.

The Room

The room was still.

Not quiet—still.

The difference is subtle. Quiet allows for sound at any moment. Stillness feels final.

The blinds were in the same position as when we left. Soft light filled the space. The monitor beside

the bed had been silenced. No rhythmic beeping.
No gentle mechanical accompaniment to breath.

Two nurses stood near the foot of the bed. One
looked up as we entered and offered a small nod.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

Her voice was kind, steady. Not rehearsed. Just
practiced in saying words no one ever wants to
hear.

I stepped closer.

Her face looked the same.

That is what surprised me most. I had expected
something dramatic—a visible sign of departure.
But her expression was calm. Eyes closed. Mouth
slightly parted. The lines of strain that had
appeared during the earlier days were gone.

She looked like she had drifted into deeper sleep.

I stood there longer than I realized.

John remained just behind my shoulder. Close enough that I could feel his presence without turning.

One of the nurses spoke again, explaining something about how it had happened quickly. That she had been resting. That there had been no distress. That they had called as soon as they noticed the change.

I nodded, though I am not sure how much of it I absorbed.

My attention was fixed on her face.

For weeks, I had watched that face shift—watched the independence soften into dependence, the clarity thin, the strength fade. I had searched it daily for signs of pain, for flashes of recognition, for anything that suggested she knew I was still there.

Now there was nothing left to search for.

I moved to the side of the bed.

Her hand lay atop the blanket, lighter than I remembered. The skin nearly translucent. For days, she had kept my hand in hers, gripping with surprising strength even after her words left her.

Now her fingers were relaxed.

I touched them gently.

They were cool.

Not cold yet. Just absent of warmth.

The finality of that detail moved through me slowly, not like a wave but like something sinking.

I did not cry immediately.

There was too much stillness in the room for that.

Instead, I stood there with my hand resting over hers, trying to understand the difference between presence and absence. Trying to locate the invisible line she had crossed.

The nurses gave us space. One adjusted a sheet quietly and then stepped out. The door closed with a soft click.

It was just the two of us.

And her.

John exhaled beside me.

“She’s not hurting anymore,” he said softly.

I knew he meant comfort. I also knew he was right. The chronic pain that had shadowed her for nearly a decade had vanished days earlier, puzzling even the doctors. They had acted as if the problem had resolved itself.

But standing there, looking at her face, I understood something different.

It hadn’t resolved.

It had ended.

I leaned closer.

“Mom,” I said, though I did not know why.

Her name in my mouth felt both necessary and unnecessary.

The room did not answer.

Outside, somewhere down the hallway, a cart rolled past. A door opened and closed. Life continuing in adjacent rooms.

Inside ours, time had stopped.

I remained there, my hand over hers, trying to memorize the shape of this moment without yet knowing how to hold it.

The Body

There is a moment after someone dies when you are no longer waiting for anything.

For weeks, I had been waiting.

Waiting for the next change.

Waiting for a clearer sentence.

Waiting for relief from pain.

Waiting for recognition to return.

Waiting for the doctors to say something definitive.

Now there was nothing left to anticipate.

Her body lay in front of me, and the waiting was over.

I moved my hand from over hers to beneath it, lifting her fingers slightly into my palm the way I had so many times in the previous days. When her mind had begun to slip, touch had become the only language left between us. She had held on constantly then—gripping my hand as if it anchored her to something solid.

Now there was no grip.

Her fingers rested in mine without resistance, without need.

The difference between holding someone and being able to hold someone is larger than it seems.

I studied her face again, looking for any trace of tension. The lines around her mouth had softened. Her forehead, often set firm in determination throughout her life, was smooth. She had been a woman who carried herself upright, even in

decline. Fiercely independent. Direct. Unfiltered. The kind of person who did not ask for help until she had no other choice.

In the end, she had not been able to ask for anything at all.

John stepped closer to the other side of the bed. He placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. It was not dramatic. It was not ceremonial. It was simple acknowledgment.

“She looks peaceful,” he said.

This time the word did not feel dangerous. It felt accurate.

There had been so much crying in the weeks before—midnight cries that echoed through her apartment, cries in the emergency room when sedation wore off, cries in the hospital room when pain surged and no one seemed able to quiet it. I can still hear those sounds if I let myself. The helplessness of sitting beside someone calling out when you cannot repair what is happening inside their body.

There was none of that now.

The absence of pain in her face was undeniable.

I realized then that the most difficult part was not the moment of death. It was everything that led to it. The nights. The decisions. The pressing of doctors. The pushing of ambulance crews. The arguing over codes. The uncertainty. The steady narrowing of her world.

Death itself was quiet.

It was the living that had been loud.

I leaned down and kissed her forehead.

The skin was cool and carried the faint scent of the facility—clean, neutral, impersonal. Nothing like the familiar smell of her apartment or the faint trace of perfume she had worn in earlier years. Time had stripped away the details of identity until only the outline remained.

I tried to picture her as she had been just months earlier—sitting at our Thanksgiving table at ninety-two, upright and alert, offering opinions without

hesitation. She had walked into our home then with the same independence she had carried for decades. She had eaten well. Laughed lightly. Observed everything.

Nothing about that visit had suggested we were this close to the end.

I felt the weight of that contrast settle into me.

John cleared his throat softly.

“We should let them know we’re ready,” he said.

I nodded but did not move.

Part of me wanted to remain exactly where I was, suspended between what had been and what would come next. The next steps would involve paperwork. Calls. Arrangements. Practicalities that felt out of proportion to the stillness of the moment.

I looked at her one more time—not searching for signs now, but memorizing.

The shape of her jaw.

The curve of her cheek.

The way her hair lay against the pillow.

This was the last version of her body I would ever see.

There is something final about that knowledge that lands slowly, not like a blow but like a gradual settling of weight.

I released her hand gently and laid it back atop the blanket.

For weeks, she had needed me to stay close.

Now she no longer needed anything.

The Silence

After the nurses returned and spoke quietly about the next steps, the room shifted from sacred to procedural.

A clipboard appeared. Forms were mentioned. Questions asked in careful tones. Did we have a

funeral home selected? Would we like additional time before they began preparing her?

I answered automatically.

Yes.

No.

That's fine.

My voice sounded steady. Detached. As if I were speaking on behalf of someone else.

John stood beside me through each exchange, not interrupting, not stepping forward unless needed. His presence filled the spaces where my thoughts thinned.

Eventually, the nurses stepped out again to give us privacy.

The room settled back into stillness.

I pulled a chair closer to the bed and sat down.

There was nothing left to do, yet leaving felt abrupt. For nearly a month, every day had revolved around her breathing, her comfort, her condition.

Each morning began with the same question: How is she today?

Now that question had no meaning.

I stared at the wall opposite the bed for a long time.

It was strange how quickly the mind moves to ordinary thoughts. I wondered who I needed to call first. I thought about Melody. About the drive back to the apartment. About whether we had enough groceries for the next few days. Thoughts drifted in and out without anchoring.

Grief does not always arrive with tears. Sometimes it arrives as emptiness.

John broke the silence first.

“She knew you were here,” he said quietly.

I nodded.

In the last lucid days, she had made sure to tell me what she hadn’t said often in earlier years—that she loved me, that she was proud of me, that she was glad I had come. The repetition of those words

had surprised me at first. They had not been common currency in our relationship.

The first time I remember her saying “I love you” was when I left for college at eighteen.

After that, the words appeared rarely.

Until the end.

And then they came daily.

I let that memory sit with me in the quiet room.

“She was proud of you,” John added.

I did not answer immediately.

It had taken us a lifetime to arrive at that simplicity.

The harshest critic.

The silent biggest fan.

Those roles had coexisted without announcement. I had sensed both, but rarely heard either spoken aloud.

In the final week before the hospital, when we sat by the window watching birds, she had looked content in a way I hadn't seen before. Not exuberant. Not sentimental. Just settled.

Now the settling was complete.

The hallway outside hummed faintly with activity. A cart rolled past. A door opened. Someone laughed at something in another room.

Life does not dim itself for private losses.

I stood slowly.

It was time.

I took one last look at her face and then turned toward the door.

As I reached for the handle, a memory surfaced—not from this room, but from four weeks earlier.

Her voice on the phone.

Something in it had shifted.

That was when this month truly began.

Four Weeks Earlier

Four weeks before this Thursday, she sounded different.

It wasn't dramatic. She wasn't panicked. She didn't say she was afraid.

But the strength in her voice had thinned.

She had just visited us for Thanksgiving not long before—ninety-two years old and still independent, still opinionated, still herself. Nothing in that visit had suggested urgency. She had walked through our home upright, observed everything, commented on what she liked and what she would have done differently.

That was her way.

But on that phone call, something underneath the words felt unsteady.

I couldn't name it. Couldn't point to a specific phrase that alarmed me. It was more instinct than information.

When we hung up, I sat with the silence for a moment.

Then I booked a flight for the next morning.

I didn't say the word dying out loud.

I didn't think in terms of final months.

I told myself I was going to check on her. To help for a few days. To make sure she was eating properly.

But something in me already knew this would not be a short visit.

Four weeks earlier, she was still in her apartment. Still looking out at the birds from her window. Still walking, slowly, with her walker.

Four weeks earlier, she could still tell me she loved me and know who I was when she said it.

That was where this month began.

And I did not yet understand what it would ask of me.