

# Chapter 23

## Aunt Evelyn's Legacy

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The author's aunt Evelyn Wilson, an experienced registered nurse who is also a black woman, had to navigate the quite challenging transition from healthcare provider to melanoma cancer patient. Her extensive medical background equipped her with a thorough understanding of cancer, its treatment options, and patient care, giving her an edge in managing her illness. However, this same knowledge brought with it an acute awareness of the potential complications and outcomes, increasing her emotional strain. While melanoma is less common in Black individuals, the presentation and diagnosis of the disease pose significant challenges. By increasing awareness and understanding of how skin conditions can be presented differently in various skin tones, healthcare providers can improve their diagnostic accuracy and patient outcomes. It is the hope of the author, by sharing her family's experience with melanoma, to shed light on this important issue and inspire others to take proactive steps in their health care journey.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

My aunt Evelyn, whom I affectionately called Boey, passed away last year from melanoma. The news of her death still feels surreal. How could someone who dedicated her life to nursing others not realize she had cancer? How long did she wait before telling us? Could I have done more to support her on her journey? These questions continue to haunt me.

I vividly recall the conversation I had with my aunt when I informed her that I would not be coming home for Thanksgiving. I had just accepted a new position in California and only had two days off for the holiday. My plan was to save my days off so I could take a two-week vacation during Christmas and spend more time at home. The journey itself was lengthy; if I left on Thursday, I would not arrive until Friday, and to return to work by Monday, I would have to leave on Sunday. This would leave me with only one full day at home. Waiting until Christmas seemed like the most sensible decision at the time. Little did I know what awaited me when I finally made the trip home.

My plane arrived late that fateful day, and my father picked me up from the airport. Despite my exhaustion, he insisted we go to my grandparents' house that night. I found it strange but complied. After her diagnosis my aunt had decided to move back to her childhood home, my grandparents' house.

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Nothing could have prepared me for the sight that greeted me when I entered my grandparents' bedroom, now my aunt's room.

What I saw shattered my heart. My aunt, who had always been the epitome of strength and care, was lying in a hospital bed, receiving hospice care. Tears blurred my vision as I struggled to recognize her. She looked nothing like herself. The vibrant woman who had spent her life caring for others now appeared so fragile, almost like a burn victim. What began as a small spot on the bottom of her foot had spread, taking over her entire body. I could hardly believe this was my aunt Boey. She had spent her entire life taking care of others, and now she needed us to care for her and I was too late. I felt deep guilt for not being there sooner and hurt that my family had not told me how sick she was.

The following week was a blur of emotions as I spent every moment I could by her bedside, surrounded by family. My mother, aunts and the hospice nurse took turns changing her dressings while I gently placed a sponge dampened with water on her lips. The hospice nurse warned us that the end was near and that we needed to keep her comfortable. I could not believe that the last time I spoke with her, she had said that when I came home for Christmas, we would celebrate Thanksgiving, my birthday, and Christmas all at once. This was not the homecoming I had envisioned.

Time seemed to stand still as we all took turns sitting with her, sharing memories, and holding her hand. In the mornings, my aunt Ann made breakfast while my aunt Peggie spent time with us. My mother and I listened to a New Year's service on my cell phone. During this service, as we sang hymns of praise to God, my aunt began her transition. She passed away on December 31, 2023.

The night before, I could not sleep. My mother and I shared the bed in my grandparents' room while my aunt Evelyn lay in her hospital bed. Down the hall, my aunt Ann slept in her childhood room. Although no one openly admitted it, we all wanted to ensure aunt Evelyn did not die alone, so someone was always by her side. That night, sleep evaded me, and I felt a compelling urge to read my Bible. It must have been divine intervention because I was drawn to a chapter in Luke. As I read, I realized God wanted me to deliver a message to my aunt.

With my heart heavy, I read the chapter to her aloud and told her it was okay to let go. I knew I could not muster the strength to do this alone, and I felt confident that God's presence guided me. Even now, as I type these words, tears flow freely. I do not recall much after that, but I know I eventually went to bed.

What I thought were my aunt's last moments unfolded with me holding her hand while my mother and her sisters left the room to begin making arrangements. I assured my aunt that she could rely on me to take care of her sisters and that everyone would be fine. I expressed my deep love for her and sat silently, unsure of what else to say. When my mom called me, I left the room. My sister, a nurse who had been working tirelessly and visiting whenever she could, came to check on my aunt. She informed us that my aunt still had a faint pulse, she had not passed when we thought she had. I felt immense gratitude that my sister was able to spend time with her as she transitioned.

In those final moments, surrounded by love and the comforting presence of family, my aunt found peace. The strength we drew from each other and our faith carried us through this poignant chapter of our lives. The love and bonds we shared will forever be etched in our hearts.

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