

**‘Beautiful’**  
by  
E.L. Valentine

The last night of her life was the most beautiful.

One final friend stopped by around 9 p.m. By the time my friend Stephanie had seen my wife, Lisa could no longer communicate. I even wondered if she knew we were there. Was her breathing voluntary and controlled or was it just a reflex expiring?

The last few days had been like this so I thought nothing of having my friend stay for coffee and catch up on the past few months. My family was also there and wanted to visit with her too. My wife had her mother and sister next to her in case a need arose, it felt OK to be outside the room. So in our one-bedroom beach apartment my wife lay, reflexively breathing, on a hospital bed next to our larger regular bed. She was taking in just enough oxygen, in just enough time, to keep her body going. On our regular bed sat her sister and her mother taking in Lisa's physical details, her soft hands and elegant fingers, her high cheekbones and full face, the curve of her hairline around her ear, all for future memory when it would be hidden underground. At the kitchen table my mother, my friend, and myself drank coffee. We were all fatigued and only sleep or caffeine could make us feel semi normal.

My high school friend had come to show me support, the same way my wife's friends had come those two weeks before. Good people respond well when crisis occurs. Some pray, some think of you and your pain, its injustice and mystery. Whether they are present or not they experience it with you. We talked about work and Stephanie's marriage plans. We talked about the difficulty Lisa had the past two months but how the pain medication had given her some physical peace at last. Later we went back into the bedroom.

Lisa's breathing was a bit more shallow than before. My friend tried communicating but only received awkward and muttered, quick half-replies. Earlier that day we heard one full sentence. My wife had said "I have pain."

We tripled her morphine and figured she would die that day. All day her mother said "Eric, she doesn't have much longer, maybe an hour or two."

Around noon I noticed it was Valentine's Day, the day my wife and I had fallen in love.

"She'll wait until we'd had our first kiss," I told everyone.

It happened Valentine's night sometime between 11:15 and 11:30 p.m., three years earlier. We were all speaking about this day once again when Stephanie figured she should go. She said something very nice to Lisa, I can't remember exactly what. I walked her to the door, she gave me a hug and was crying.

"I'm just happy to be here for her," I consoled her.

She said, "I know, if this were me or Peter we'd be there for each other too ... I'm crying because it's beautiful."

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My friend was right.

I said, "It is beautiful, isn't it?"

Stephanie left and I went back into the bedroom to lie by my wife.

After about an hour everyone came into the room, Lisa's gargled breath had gradually slowed more. It was time. Her mother sat down beside the bed and whispered in graceful conviction, "Go to the light Lisa, go to the light."

"You'll be OK baby, we love you." I whispered in her other ear.

My wife let out a sigh, it was supposed to be a sentence but we all knew what she meant. She took a breath, her head fell on my chest, and she made one final breath sounding more like an exhale than an inhale. And then she breathed no more.

One moment alive, one moment not. How strange I thought.

"Death can't end our love," she'd always promise.

I felt some scattered energy in her body but as we took her off the hospital bed to clean her up and place her one final time on our regular bed, she was definitely not in that body. I tried sensing a change in the air hoping my wife's spirit was present, floating. There was no difference. I watched her sister weep silently and thought of all the silly quarrels and tiffs that had separated Alexandra and me. Alexandra used to think, when she was a small child, that Lisa was her mother, not her sibling. All their lives they were dear friends, more than blood. Somehow our love got in their way. I put my arm around Alexandra and said, "Lisa sure loved Alex. She loved Alex so much."

I realized after my statement that it was kind of involuntary, a reflex like my wife's labored breaths. I knew then where she had gone. With her last, almost exhaled, breath I believe she overtook me, inspired me. She kept her promise. Death cannot end love.

Lisa's soulless naked body hung in my arms now, the first time in a month we lay on our regular bed together. I remembered how upon ending her showers I'd grab her and hold her on that same bed, oblivious to wet clothes and saturated bedding. I had to get up when Jim, my mother-in-law's boyfriend, wanted to show me something outside. I remembered how he and I, Lisa and her uncle all went out together on a summer night in Palm Springs and got crazy drunk. She was singing songs inside my head.

Jim and I walked to the porch and stopped.

"Look at that," he said, and pointed to the nighttime sky.

I looked heavenward and saw the moon directly overhead and half full. Next to it was a golden star.

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“She promised she'd give me a star so I'd know. She said she would give my mother a hug and then put a star in the sky,” Jim explained.

“It's beautiful,” he wept.

I thought about the color, its brightness, its position in the sky and wondered if it were a star or a planet. So I noted the day and the time and would look it up in the charts later. It was Valentine's night, sometime between 11:15 and 11:30 p.m., three years after we had fallen in love, three years after we had our first kiss. It seemed all I knew on earth and all I would ever need to know.

Jim headed back inside.

I stood on our porch staring at the sky, and said, “It is beautiful, isn't it?”