

At Children's Hospital

Rosalynde Frandsen

I LEANED AGAINST THE GLASS DOOR, struggling to open it against the air current that held it closed. With both hands now I pushed until finally I forced it open and found myself in the lobby. My breath snagged suddenly in my throat as I looked around at the familiar scene painted in April sun and anemic fluorescent light. Brightly-colored signs shouted, "Children's Hospital of Los Angeles." Walls buzzed and danced with grinning papered elephants and giraffes. I looked toward the information desk, expecting to see the ancient teddy bear presiding solemnly over the room. Instead there sat a giant bunny with flopping ears and bulging eyes. My stomach tightened as I walked past the desk into the hall.

"Oh, Miss, may I help you with something?" Turning toward the girl at the desk, I felt my shoes slip across the tiled floor. I grasped the edge of the desk to steady myself, sweaty fingers bruising the wood surface with damp dark-colored streaks. The moisture evaporated slowly as I answered, "I'm going up to 4-West. You know, the cancer ward?"

"Yes, I know. But I'll need the patient identification number to let you go up there."

Patient identification number? I stood there silent, watching my fingermarks disappear just as silently from the desk. My mouth felt as wooden and dry as the pine plank I was looking at.

The girl blinked at me. She had lipstick on her teeth and her hair straggled darkly around her neck like ivy around the tree in somebody's back yard. Her pencil tapped against the telephone.

"Well, I . . . see, my brother was here last year, and . . . well, I was just going up to visit for a while. I don't have a number or anything."

The girl stared for a moment, then consulted her computer screen.

"I . . . suppose I could . . . well, here. Put on this badge, and I'll let you through this time. In the future, though, please have the ID number."

I nodded, pinning on the large scarlet piece of plastic branding me an "Outpatient Visitor" as I walked toward the elevator. A woman in a red dress carrying a grocery bag looked from the badge to my face as she

passed. The badge stared back out at me from her pupils. Those eyes reminded me of the bunny's in the lobby.

I arrived at the elevator just as it was closing, so I reached my hand between the doors to stop them. I squeezed my body through, pinching my fingers and banging my knee. Finally I stood trembling in the elevator, heart pounding and shouting. My hands shook a little as I pushed the button for the fourth floor.

The doors opened to reveal 4-West, the cancer ward. I stepped out of the elevator and stood still, assaulted suddenly by the memory of the place.

Feb. 3, 1988. Went to go visit Jacob in the hospital for the first time yesterday. 4-West is like another world—another world where skinny bald kids and red-eyed parents live and die together. They even have their own language full of words like “MRI scan,” “T-cell count,” “phenobarbital.” I feel like we’re just visiting this place though, like we’re just foreigners here to check out the tourist attractions.

May 10, 1988. Spent last night here with J. —slept on the blue cot and ate the leftovers from his dinner tray. Fran came in three times to check his vital signs, but other than that we had a pretty good night. We’ve decorated our room and reserved our own shelf in the fridge—feels almost homey here sometimes.

The shrill beeping of an IV machine—a cruel mockery of the opening strains of Beethoven's 8th Symphony—rescued me from my memories. I peered around myself, myopically dizzy and disoriented, as the first steps off a merry-go-round. I recognized the nurses' station and began to walk toward it slowly. My shoes clicked a cadence across the beige linoleum, the sound growing, expanding to fill my ears and crowd the hall. Examination rooms and hospital gurneys pinwheeled past me, colors colliding and blossoming into shifting patterns bigger than myself, bigger than the hospital, bigger than this last year and a lifetime, his lifetime. I folded my arms hard against my ribs as if to close a door against the rising sound and color. I couldn't hold it back, though, and it spilled down my cheeks.

A nurse blurred and jumped into focus in front of me. Her white uniform was rumpled, and her slip leered up at me from under the hem of her skirt. “Are you looking for something, Miss?”

I blinked and brushed tears from my eyes with the back of my hand. I wondered if my mascara had smeared black streaks across my cheeks just as my fingers had smeared the dark damp bruises across the information desk a few minutes ago. Angry red stripes from the elevator door

still decorated my fingers. "Um . . . well, is Fran here? She's a nurse on 4-West . . ."

The nurse looked at my badge for a moment. "Fran who? Do you know her last name?"

My face flushed and I looked away quickly. The walls, I noticed, weren't papered in elephants and giraffes, after all. They looked more like monkeys or maybe zebras. "I'm not sure. See, my brother was in the hospital for a while last year, and Fran was his head nurse . . . and I was just wondering if maybe she was still here. I don't know . . ."

"Well, we don't have any nurse by that name here now. Can I help you find someone else?"

"No, it's okay. Maybe I'll just walk around for a while. Would that be all right?" Not zebras, either. Rabbits, then, like the bulging-eyed bunny in the lobby? Or *were* they elephants . . . ?

"Sure. Go ahead." The nurse started to walk past me, then turned and asked, "Are you sure you're all right? Are you feeling well?"

"Yeah. I'll be fine. It's just . . . well, it's a little strange being back here after so long, that's all."

Sept. 12, 1988. *Every day I'm amazed at how much better J. seems—some days it's almost like he's a new boy. Still the nausea and weight loss, of course, but no more headaches or seizures. They've just remodeled the play-room down the hall, so most afternoons we go there and play with the new games. J. likes to give shots and draw blood from the stuffed animals.*

Nov. 28, 1988. *They've taken J. off the chemotherapy because of the kidney damage and hearing loss—his hair's growing back dark and curly. His eyes are getting darker too, I think. I hardly recognize my blond blue-eyed brother from a year ago. Sometimes I hardly recognize myself.*

The nurse continued down the hall until she reached an examination room, where she opened the door and went inside. The door was painted slate-blue, with a small window spying in on the occupants of the room. Like the CIA, I thought. Center for Institutionalized Agony. I started to smile until I realized that my mouth was still as wooden as the desk. A red light winked at me hilariously from above the door. I wondered what kind of cancer the child in the examination room had. Astrocytoma, like Jacob? Leukemia, maybe?

I wandered through 4-West like an exhausted child at Disneyland, not really wanting to stay but not ready to leave. I walked toward the orange-carpeted waiting room, where a TV set blared rapid Spanish from the corner. "*Todo nuevo, cien por ciento garantizado . . .*," shouted the announcer. "All new, one hundred percent guaranteed." Sound and color

again wheeled crazily, and again I folded my arms tight against it. " . . . new . . . all new," I whispered.

I left the waiting room and walked fast past the playroom, then turned and walked back toward it. Standing on my tiptoes to look through the window, I recognized my own face darkly gazing back at me, distorted in the glass. I cupped my hands against the pane in order to see beyond my own reflected eyes into the room, my fingers leaving cloudy smudges on the surface. The door slid open easily at my touch and clicked quietly after me.

I flipped on the light switch, then stood squinting as my eyes adjusted to the painful light. I felt strangely conscious of my body—I heard my heartbeat, tasted the salted blood in my veins, my eyes straining against their sockets, the lines on the palms of my hand. Kneeling on the floor, I concentrated on the pattern and texture of the rug, fingers tracing a nubby purple thread as far as I could reach. It disappeared into the confused maze of color for a few inches but then resurfaced and changed direction. Or maybe that was a different thread—somehow the purple looked brighter and the fiber stronger than before.

Mar. 4, 1989. Jacob's birthday today—five years old. Or five years young. Or something. We had a celebration for him this morning—he couldn't stand up to play the games or anything, but at least he was able to stay awake for a while. This afternoon, though, he couldn't remember a thing about it. "When is it gonna be my birthday?" he asked me. The tumors are affecting his memory more and more every day.

Apr. 6, 1989. I really thought (hoped?) it would be today. He started chain-stoke breathing, and I heard the doctor say death was "imminent." I never really knew what that meant until now. Take him soon, Father, please. The game isn't funny anymore. Oh God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it—I never meant any of it.

From where I knelt on the floor facing the entrance, my eyes were level with the doorknob. I remembered measuring Jacob against the doorway one afternoon, marking his height with a pencil on the cracked white paint. There had been no eraser on that pencil, I remembered, and it had needed sharpening. Pivoting toward the door frame, I saw the lines still there, blurred and faint. "11/9/88." I licked my index finger, wanting to rub the lines from the wall and from my mind, but instead I held my finger upright in the air as if testing the wind.

May 3, 1989. It was last night. After he died we washed him and drove him to the hospital where they took him into a room and closed the door and then

we got back in the car and drove back home. I don't know where he is now—still at the hospital? The mortuary? Upstairs in his bed? But why, Jacob? And how? How, when only yesterday I held you? And tell me how will the days go by me, Jacob, and the years. Show me, because it's dark in here and I can't see. I don't know what to say. There is nothing that I can say anymore, is there.

I reached over to touch the light switch, the harsh fluorescent bulbs flickering briefly before surrendering the playroom to graceful darkness. "Sweet Jesus," was all I could say, repeating the words over and over in the dark.