

PRAYER WHEEL

DAVID HASSLER



CRAIG J. SATTERLEE

CAMP Y-NOAH

A few days after our mother entered the hospital, my brother and I left for summer camp. Our mother, who could still sit up in bed, wanted us to go, and our father did too. We'd been looking forward all summer to sleeping in tents under the stars, rappelling down the sides of cliffs, and hiking along streams. Our mother had already written our names in indelible black marker on our underwear, socks, and t-shirts. We had to go.

After we arrived at camp, I didn't think about my mother very often. In fact, I tried not to think about her at all. I wanted to forget how she'd looked when we'd last seen her in the hospital. I stayed busy trying to catch bullfrogs, canoeing in the lake, and learning to make sassafras tea by boiling roots,

bark, and leaves.

One night near the end of our first week, my brother and I were sitting on logs around a fire with the other boys, watching a large iron pot and waiting for the peach cobbler inside to slowly rise. My brother was whittling the tip of a long stick that he was planning to use to spear marshmallows, and maybe bullfrogs. He had promised to take me out in a canoe to hunt them in the marshy area of the lake, where we'd heard them croaking at night. He said I had to eat frogs' legs roasted over the fire before the end of summer. "You need to know how to do these things," he said, "in case you ever have to survive in the woods."

As we were talking, a camp employee I had never seen before ran up, out of breath, and announced that he was looking for Donald and David Hassler. I looked to my brother, who stopped whittling and raised his hand. The man said that our grandfather was waiting at the main lodge for us; we needed to pack our things as quickly as possible. We were going home.

These essays are from an unpublished memoir.

— Ed.

My brother and I ran to where our sleeping bags were airing on a rock and rolled them up. We grabbed our socks off a nylon line tied between two trees and fumbled in our tent for our flashlights and Swiss army knives. We stacked our mess kits together, screwed them tight, and stuffed them into our packs. Then we strapped our packs onto our shoulders and ran.

It was nearly dark, but we knew our way along the hard-packed dirt path to the main lodge. We jumped over tree roots, crossed a wooden bridge, and splashed through a stony creek. We ran through a stretch we called the "pine forest," stomping over soft needles, ducking hanging branches. My mother had been transferred to intensive care and was about to have the first of seven surgeries, but I didn't know this. I believed my mother was dead, and that she had died because we had left her. I could not run fast enough.

INTENSIVE CARE

My brother and I stepped through the swinging doors of the intensive-care unit as though illegally crossing a border into a foreign country. Children under the age of fourteen weren't allowed in the ICU. I was eleven, and my brother was thirteen, but no nurse or doctor was going to stop us from seeing our mother.

The ICU at Akron City Hospital was a single room with thirty or more beds lined up along the walls. The patients had wires and tubes attached to them, and large machines billowed, blinked, and beeped alongside their beds. They lay under white sheets, and it frightened me to imagine what all that whiteness covered. There were no curtains to divide one bed from another. It was not a room meant for visiting, and we were never allowed to stay for long. Standing beside my mother's bed, I felt sure we were in someone's way. Sometimes my brother and I waited in the lounge while our father went in. I knew intensive care was the last room where patients could go.

The doctors stepped in and out of the swinging doors and stood briefly in the hallway to talk to us. They made slow, considered movements and spoke in quiet, tender voices, as if we were sleepwalkers who shouldn't be awakened. But their tenderness felt as if it were covered by the latex surgical gloves they peeled off and discarded after each patient. A thin barrier covered my father, my brother, and me too, allowing us to function, helping us to make it through our days.

My mother's arms lay on top of the bedsheet, her skin swollen and bruised with bright purple patches like crepe paper. My father said that her IV had caused the bruises. I watched a single drop of liquid fall from the bag into the tube, like water dripping from a gutter after a violent thunderstorm. I was suspicious of this small, peaceful thing.

My mother's eyes were calm but darker and more opaque than usual. Even the bright hospital lights, which reached into every corner where death might hide, could not light up my mother's eyes. I looked into them, but they didn't look back.

My mother had a thin white tube in her nose. I couldn't imagine why she wasn't bothered by it. Years later a friend who was a nurse explained to me how this tube pumps fluids from

the stomach; she said her patients likened it to having a garden hose shoved down their throats. But, standing by my mother's bed, I didn't know this. I didn't know either that a nurse had to turn my mother every two hours to prevent bedsores and bathe her with a sponge every other day. I didn't know about ICU psychosis, a condition patients suffer from after three or four days under the twenty-four-hour lights of intensive care, the around-the-clock beeping and whirring of machines and monitors, the doctors and nurses coming and going and patients being wheeled in and out. There is no night or day in the ICU. No one ever really sleeps.

The man in the bed next to my mother's had dived into a coral reef and now had brain damage. I wondered what "brain damage" meant. I thought about how I'd once dived into the shallow end of my neighbor Steve Mitchell's pool, even though my mother had warned me many times not to, and I had a scar on my chin to show for it. Had I broken too many of my mother's rules? Was that why she was here? She rarely moved or even blinked her eyes. Sometimes she seemed to want to say something, but she couldn't part her dry, chapped lips. I don't remember her ever speaking in that room.

Each visit, before we left, I held my mother's hand and whispered, "I love you, Mom." I leaned down close to her ear and said these words as if to claim her as my mother. I was afraid that when we left the room no one would know who she was.

For seven weeks we returned almost daily to the hospital. And over seven operations the doctors tried and failed to stop an infection in my mother's stomach. Nearly every day after school we drove through the dusky gray streets of Akron, past the red-brick Goodyear and Firestone factories, the dark gray office buildings, the storefronts with their chipped, peeling paint. We walked the shiny white hallways to the bright, blinking lights of the ICU. Each time we entered that room, it seemed her bed was in a different place.

My mother died one September morning a couple of hours after midnight. I remember my father came into my room to wake me. He sat on my bed and touched my shoulder. When I picture this moment now, I always view it from the side, as if I am not in my body. Calmly, I watch my father and me hugging on my bed and crying.

(end of excerpts)