

Dr. Blue

by ANNE PANNING • January 10, 2011

No Comments

The ICU waiting room becomes your family's own personal den: pillowed afghans, wrinkled pillows, *People* magazines, bags of chips your father's hand loudly creeps into in the middle of the night. One day a box of Harry Potter Jelly Bellies surfaces. "Here," your brother, Mike, says. "Try Puke." You eat Dirt, Snot, Earthworm, Booger. You pass them around. Everyone laughs: what a riot. *This will be something we all remember later*, you think. And you do.



One day your whole family (except your mother) walks to Dollar General two blocks away from the hospital. Supplies now needed for a long-term stay: fresh underwear, deodorant, toothbrush, tampons. Never before can you remember your whole adult family shopping together like this. It's fun in the way that peeling your own sunburnt skin is fun: preferably you wouldn't have to be doing it at all, but since you do, it feels good.

On Night 14 in the waiting room, the loudspeaker startles you awake. "Dr. Blue, Room 1726. Dr. Blue, Room 1726." You quickly learn that Dr. Blue is not a doctor at all but a code blue emergency. A young nurse comes to tell you it doesn't look good. Your father's knees buckle, and he almost falls into the industrial coffee maker that has kept you all going for weeks. "It's time to say your good-byes," the nurse says. You all file forward in a weeping, clustered line. Surprisingly, her vitals snap back to life and the big machine slurps air in and out again. After that, everyone takes shifts. When it's your turn, you sing "Down in the Valley" very softly into her ear and brush her hair back with your fingers. "They say hearing is the last thing to go," a nurse whispers from a dark corner of the room. She sits behind a big panel of lights and buttons like an airplane pilot. "Don't mind me," she says, but, self-conscious, you fall silent.

On Night 22, a friend treats you all (except your mother) to a room at the high-end hotel attached to the hospital. You shuffle through underground hallways and elevators dragging your shabby pillows and duffel bags behind you. It's a nice room, dim and sleek, with a happy hour that includes free hors d'oeuvres. You and your siblings go for it hard while your father stays behind to watch the Twins. Big spender, you order a whole bottle of wine. You balance cheese cubes and chicken wings on tiny paper plates. How odd it is to be with your siblings, day in, day out, for weeks. "This is so great!" you say. "I *never* get to see you guys. And now, every day like this." Drunk, you all totter back to the hotel room where your father lies curled in the fetal position. Your sister, Amy, covers him with a blanket, and he stirs like an infant, then, mouth open, falls back to sleep.

There's a McDonald's attached to the hospital, and each day one of you takes the order and makes the run. There's an orange crème shake featured for July, and your father gets one every time. "This shake is so good," he says theatrically, "it could almost bring a tear to one's eye." He sucks the straw loudly with pinkie in the air. You roll your eyes, but secretly love this side of him you never-ever-ever get to see.

As the days accumulate, people bring pizzas, pasta salads, Diet Pepsi, positive energy. "Just keep praying," they say. "Don't give up. God is good." At one point the waiting room has become so full of relatives (except your mother) it's like Christmas. A cheery cycle has infused the wait as more people arrive bearing magazines, orange juice, even brand-new clothes for your father from Target. "I'm gonna be looking pretty good after all of this," he says. He models them, strutting. *Ha, ha, ha*. What a joker he is!

The loudspeaker breaks up the party: Dr. Blue, Room 1726. "I think this is it," says the nurse. Your Aunt Kandi forms a prayer circle and yells, "Someone call Pastor!" But it's too late.

When it's time to leave the hospital, you find you can't. Instead, you sit in the waiting room where a fresh pot of coffee is brewing and another family takes over where yours left off.

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