

## AN UNORTHODOX COMMUNITY

by Suzann B. Goldstein

The radiologist pointed to a faint shadow on the chest X-ray. Maybe he's wrong, I thought. Maybe it's nothing. It certainly didn't look like much. Soon after, though, the second set of X-rays arrived and shattered all my hopes. That shadow, confirmed as a malignant lesion, had metastasized from the tumor in Val's right leg, to the lower lobe of her right lung, and now, to the two upper lobes. Since there were no other signs of cancer, the specialists agreed: remove the lung. *Omygod. She's only eight!*

Dr. Abbott discussed the implications with us. Finally, he said, People do live comfortably with one lung, you know. Ed's grip on my hand hurt as we nodded our agreement to the operation, Val's fourth in five years.

As day ended the following Sunday, we told Val of her return to Babies Hospital for surgery early the next morning. I held her on my lap and Ed knelt by her side as she gave way to tears. Stacy, two years older, raced away to the sanctuary of her room.

Before long, Val was free of her tears but Stacy remained upset, alternating between a sulky silence and brooding one-word responses. She knew that her world as well as her sister's would, once more, shift into strained confusion.

Dinner was a brief, unhappy affair, and glad when we were done, I packed a small suitcase including Valerie's Donald Duck nightgown, her tattered sleep blanket, and Gumby. Raggedy Ann would be hand-carried. Since I'd be staying in the hospital room with Val, I crammed my underwear, jeans, and turtlenecks into a paper bag along with a large bottle of homemade iced tea and a box of Mallomars.

We had to be on the road no later than seven-thirty for our eight-thirty arrival at Babies. I wanted it to be a slow and easy separation from home for all of us, but as the minutes sped by the leave-taking became rushed. Ed and I hugged and kissed Stacy good night, our reluctance to let her go overwhelmed by our need to hurry. Coaxing Val forward, we moved to the car.

The hour's drive to Manhattan was a silent one. Both Ed and I were talked out and no longer able to think about what lay ahead. Valerie, slumped against her car seat in the back, slept soundly.

Once at the hospital, Ed began the search for a decent-looking chair roomy enough for me to sleep in. He found one in an empty patient's room, and enlisting a nurse in his effort, he and his partner shoved, grunted, and tugged it a few doors down the floor and into our room.

It's ours, he said, a big grin on his face. It was just misplaced. A final heave-ho settled the black, ill-treated chair into a corner facing the doorway. Ed stood back, looked at it, and his grin faded. I gave him a quick kiss on the lips. It's fine, Eddie. He left soon afterwards for the drive home to Stacy.

I stood outside Val's room, and watched as the elevator doors shut my husband off from view. Within seconds, the loneliness and panic that had been undercover swiftly emerged. It's this place, I mumbled to the hall floor, and with a jerk of my head to clear thoughts of cancer, I turned back to my younger child.

She was undressing Raggedy Ann without much enthusiasm, but perked up when a bunch of familiar faces, nurses and residents from past hospital stays began dropping by to say hello. They joked with Valerie and ate all my Mallomars. *Bye bye breakfast!*

Ultimately, though, the fun was over, and our friends metamorphosed into health care workers. In a flash, the stethoscope and blood pressure cuff appeared, blood was drawn, Val's

belly was poked, and questions were asked. Fifteen minutes passed; their work done, they were gone.

I sat on Valerie's bed, smoothed back her silky hair, and straightened her blankets. Okay, honeybun, it's getting late. The Sandman's coming. Pick a book and get under the covers.

After I read Val's choice, Dr. Seuss's Green Eggs and Ham, I covered her cheeks with little kisses, left her bed, and tiptoed a few steps to the chair. Our tiny room's latest acquisition was clearly a used up member of the hospital's furniture brigade. It suggested endurance but was no beauty. Saggy, spotted, and erratically stuffed, the chair's lumpy cushion expelled a vulgar swoosh of air at the slightest pressure. I threw a hospital blanket over the lumps, added a pillow from the eleventh floor storage closet, and declared it my bed for the duration. True to form, that rambunctious cushion drew a giggle as I sat down and an Oh, Mommy! snicker from Val. But she was worn out and asleep even as her giggle's last note waned.

Light from the hospital hallway allowed me to read without disturbing Valerie but I couldn't concentrate. I took my glasses off, threw my legs over the chair's arm, and leaned back. There was no hiding from it now. The crackling of voices over the intercom, the drone of rubber-soled shoes on linoleum floors, and the strained silence confirmed the hospital's presence and our reality within it. Trying not to think about tomorrow, I willed my eyes closed and attempted to nap.

Ed returned Monday morning, and we talked, our voices low, until Valerie, mildly groggy, was wheeled to an operating room on the ninth floor where surgeons removed her lung. When the procedure was over, Val was moved into the ninth floor's intensive care unit. Ed and I hovered around her bed all day feeling useless and depressed. After a fast, late night sandwich, he left for New Jersey and Stacy.

My retreat was the visitor's lounge on the hospital's eleventh floor. Because the intensive care rules were strict, I was allowed to be with Val only when she was awake. If she slept, I had to leave. Valerie complained but the nurses were tough. They made sure their rules were followed.

And so, each time Val fell asleep I'd return to eleven, pull off my shoes, lay flat on the lounge's one sofa, and wait anxiously for an intensive care nurse on nine to call a floor nurse on eleven.

I'd hear the holler from down the hall: Mrs. Goldstein, Val's up, or Mrs. G., I just got the call, you're on, or simply, ASue, she wants you. Ramming my feet into my shoes, I'd grab my bag and move fast.

The elevators were sluggish and unpredictable. Unable to cope with the wait, I ran down the two flights of concrete steps to my daughter. Daytime was no problem; the stairs were a standard form of in-hospital travel. But at night, they were dimly lit, rarely used, and creepy. I ran faster at night.

After two days of intensive care, Val was transferred back to eleven where nurses and technicians continued the post-surgical vigil. They checked her vital signs and incision, compared new chest X-rays to older ones, punctured fragile veins for endless blood tests, and ordered more effective pain killers. I held Val's hand, searched for clean bedpans, and tried to keep her comfortable.

On our second day back, and despite the nursing activity surrounding Valerie, a chunky, brown-haired woman in a print dress and sturdy oxfords poked her head into our room: her pallid complexion and red-rimmed eyes identified her as an eleventh floor mom. She spotted Valerie asleep in bed, paused an instant, then studied me. How are you doing? Want company?

Tired and edgy, but unwilling to reject my caller's offer of friendship, I smiled, said, We're okay, and reset my brain for social mode. With that, she stepped into our room and introduced herself. AI'm Sarah. Welcome back to eleven.

At first, we discussed trivia: overworked nurses, tardy or incorrect meds, and sleepless nights. The small talk ended, however, as Sarah, without warning, described her recent annoyance my family and our noisy evening admission several days before.

We had to check into the hospital early Sunday morning: administration policy, we're told. You ignored the rules we had to follow and checked in at night. Also, the staff spent too much time in your room. You were so loud!

Sarah had watched us from the doorway of her son's room, letting her fancy unfurl like a flag billowing out at sunrise. I was sure your daughter was in for minor surgery, probably to have her ears pinned back or her nose bobbed. She bounced around so energetically.

To Sarah, on that Sunday night, our child looked healthy and alert. Her son, on the other hand, was suffering from some unknown disease and appeared sallow and ailing. Yet the staff, visiting Valerie in droves, was not hanging around *him*. So Sarah simmered.

Unable to control herself, she talked to a floor nurse about us. Those people are so boisterous. What's wrong with them? This is a hospital! Trying to calm Sarah down, the nurse described Val's medical history, adding that because of her many hospitalizations, she was well-known on the floor.

Sarah's voice softened. She said to me, I know that your daughter has cancer and had a leg amputated last year. But the cancer's back and she just had a lung removed. I'm so sorry, so very sorry.

Sarah then told me that she was a rabbi's wife. A little testy myself, I wondered what I

was supposed to do with that information. By definition, wasn't she the one to be kindly, even-tempered, rabbinical? My body stiffened, but not only in response to her story. It was more than that. I couldn't bear to talk about Val's cancer to people I didn't know. It was too hard to look at their faces, to see their reactions, to hear them say, How awful, to nod as they floundered for words or shaky platitudes.

Yet Sarah didn't sound flustered. Instead, she was forthright and a mother on the eleventh floor of Babies Hospital. Just like me. She uttered no truisms, no religious declarations, no stale slogans. Her role as a rabbi's wife had been placed in storage.

Forget it, I said, liking her candor.

The getting-acquainted part over, Sarah and her twelve-year-old son Elliott dropped by Valerie's room as often as they could. The two children bonded and compared notes on life in the hospital as we mothers kept guard.

Sarah told me that Elliott had an undiagnosed kidney problem. She had two younger children at home and a husband who was an Orthodox rabbi. Her nights were spent in New Jersey and her days in New York at Babies.

Because of her religion, Sarah couldn't travel on the Sabbath so she slept in Elliott's room every Friday night, took the bus home at sundown every Saturday to be with her healthy children and her husband, then circled back to the hospital and Elliott every Sunday.

The Monday evening after we first met, however, was the beginning of the Jewish New Year, Erev Rosh Hashanah. I was busy and didn't think too much about it. Brought up as an Orthodox Jew, I had lost interest in religion, although I still liked the traditional holiday meals with my family as well as the occasional trips to the synagogue. In contrast, Sarah's life was

steeped in Judaism, and so she thought a lot about the holiday. It saddened her that she and Elliott would not be able to celebrate with their family.

But they would celebrate. Where there's a will there's a way, right? *Right.*

Sarah solved the problem by planning to hold her own service in the visitors' lounge, the only room on eleven with a table. I was trying to shift a pain-ridden Valerie into a more relaxed position when Sarah mentioned her project. I'll go home, pack a bag of holiday things, and return to the hospital. Without looking up, I said, Great, and put another pillow cautiously behind Val's shoulders. The holidays were not my biggest concern.

Monday morning, Sarah was back at the hospital after her night at home carrying paper bags bursting with >stuff.' I became curious but wasn't given any insider information B clear payback for my earlier disinterest.

Toward the end of the day, the three of us, Valerie, Ed, and I, were asked to join Elliott and Sarah for their makeshift service. We piled a wheelchair high with pillows and blankets to help Val sit up, and wheeled her into the lounge.

When we were settled, Elliott, his life-sustaining IV pole close by, followed his mother into the room. At once, Sarah began to arrange items on the scratched and worn-looking table that squatted in front of the lounge's sofa. Over the years, troubled family members would sit gingerly on its edge, eat on it, and prop their weary feet against it. It was an awful-looking, wobbly-legged, pitted rectangle, but when Sarah was finished with it, that table was simply splendid.

My new friend had covered it with a sparkling white, lace-bordered tablecloth. On top, she placed tall white candles in two freshly-polished silver candlesticks, and surrounding them,

an ornate silver Kiddush cup, a bottle of kosher red wine, and symbolizing the wish for a sweet new year, a dish of honey placed next to a plate of thinly-sliced apples.

Several other Jewish parents and their hospitalized children had joined us in the lounge, and we all waited patiently as Sarah whispered last-minute instructions to her son.

At sundown, Elliott, tall and gaunt in his brown-checked pajamas, walked side by side with Sarah to the magically transformed table. Standing in front of the newly lit candles, her manner regal, Sarah covered her eyes with both hands and recited the blessings that welcomed in the holiday.

Then, focusing on her son, Sarah moved back a few steps. Our attention turned to Elliott. With one hand, he clutched his IV pole. With the other, he lifted the wine-filled Kiddush cup high in the air and began to chant the Hebrew prayers for the first night of Rosh Hashanah.

Nobody in the lounge spoke. Only Elliott's voice was heard.

I looked around, saw Valerie enthralled by Elliott's solemn bearing, saw my husband's teary eyes, saw Sarah standing with her back straight, her head high, the pride in her son visible to all.

And I noticed for the first time the people, so *many* people B the young patients, their parents, nurses, doctors, Jews and non-Jews from all over the hospital, crowding into an antiquated hospital lounge to hear this young boy honor his faith.

Ignoring all religious, racial, and class boundaries, those of us in the lounge that night were transformed into a rare community based on love though beset by anguish. Together, we observed the ritual of Erev Rosh Hashanah.

###

*This chapter, from Unexpected Lives, was abridged and published in New Jersey's Star-Ledger, September 13, 2007.*