

Hope Is the Thing With Feathers

Category: Stories

written by Lori Jakiela | March 17, 2023



When my son Locklin was a month old, he became very sick. He started throwing up and kept throwing up and ended up in the hospital.

The hospital ID band on my son's wrist fit on my ring finger. I could cradle my son's whole body in my hands.

The oxygen meter clamped to his finger was the size of a paper clip. It glowed red and blue, the colors of emergency, like tiny police lights flashing against bleached hospital sheets.

Helpless, terrified, I sat by my son's hospital bed for three nights, pumping milk from breasts he was too sick to suck while a nurse kept bringing me food I couldn't eat. My husband was working long hours then, with a power-suit-wearing boss who said that a sick kid was no reason to take time off.

"Oh, please," the boss said. "Your wife can handle it."

I was trying.

"You have to try," the nurse who brought my meal trays said. "You need to eat to keep the milk coming for when he's better."

The nurse was lovely.

Most nurses are lovely, but some more so.

This nurse, whose name I don't remember, such is the mind under stress, wore

a smock with Elmo and Big Bird all over it. Her lips were pink satin. She wore designer clogs painted with cardiograms, the visual rendering of healthy, beating hearts.

She brought me cartons of milk. She brought me hospital brownies. She brought me Saltines and tea and grilled-cheese sandwiches. She brought me Jell-O, that hospital staple that still makes me gag.

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As a child, I spent so much time in hospitals. Born with badly clubbed feet, I had many surgeries.

My first memories are of hospitals—the squeak of nurses' white shoes on linoleum, the clang of bedpans and call bells, the icy press of stethoscopes on bare skin, the way the squeeze of blood-pressure cuffs made, still makes, me nauseous.

Once, when I was in traction, a nurse's aide left a tray of green Jell-O for me to eat. She laid the tray across my stomach. Both of my legs were suspended in midair. My head was supposed to stay flat on the pillow. There are many things impossible to eat when in this position, but Jell-O might be the most impossible.

"You have to eat," the nurses said back then, not unkindly, and I tried. I wanted to be a good patient, the best patient. My mother was a nurse, and I wanted to make her proud. I wanted not to be an embarrassment.

But the Jell-O. It seemed alive. It squirmed off my spoon and plopped onto the white sheets, the way frogs sometimes fell from the sky in the Bible and in my parents' beloved Florida.

Sometimes I can still see my mother's lovely, worried face, the way it seemed to hover above my childhood hospital bed as I drifted like an astronaut in and out of drugged sleep.

* * *

"You have to eat," the lovely nurse caring for my son said.

She said, "Please."

She said, "Try, Mom."

When you're a mother, everyone in the medical establishment calls you Mom. Your name, whatever that meant once, is over. Whoever you thought you were is finished. The body you thought was yours becomes not yours.

At first, I was angry about it. Then I was grateful.

There is nothing more honest. Nothing in my life has ever felt more honest.

* * *

My son looked so fragile in his bed, with the hospital rails pulled up on both sides like a jail cell.

I slid one hand through the bars and kept it on his chest to feel his breathing. I watched the oxygen meter flash blue for oxygen, red for blood.

I've read that blue and red are designated for emergencies because everyone can recognize those two colors, even the colorblind. People who are colorblind to red can see blue, and vice-versa. Anyone looking at the tiny body of my son in that bed could see this emergency for what it was. Everything around us smelled urgent—alcohol swabs and bleach and metal, sweat and breast milk. My job as Mom was to watch and wait. Check the colors. Make sure my son kept breathing. Suction his nose and mouth. Keep his airway clear.

"Please, Mom," the lovely nurse said.

My job was to pump and keep pumping my breasts, which leaked and hurt and swelled. I expressed the milk. God, that word, "expressed"—*to convey a thought or feeling, to squeeze out.*

The milk leaked then sprayed, pale bluish white, the color of oysters, cataracts, thin as rain, sugar water, into tiny bottles the nurse gave me. I labeled them with my son's name just in case he could keep anything down.

The nurse took the bottles like sacred offerings back to a refrigerator filled with other bottles labeled with the names of other mothers' children.

So many children were sick that year. There was a virus. There is often a virus, but once you have a child, that word becomes more terrifying. The hospital hallways echoed with the sound of crying, and the air felt heavy, as if worry had the power to shift gravity.

I think it does.

* * *

The disease my son had, respiratory syncytial virus or RSV, is so common that nearly all children get it by the time they are two years old. I didn't know that then. I didn't know anything about parenting, or the terror and joy that come with it. I'm still learning.

My son is twenty-one years old now, beautiful, healthy. Sometimes he falls asleep on the couch after work, and I'll drape a blanket over him, then take a minute.

Express a thought or feeling.

Still here.

Still here.