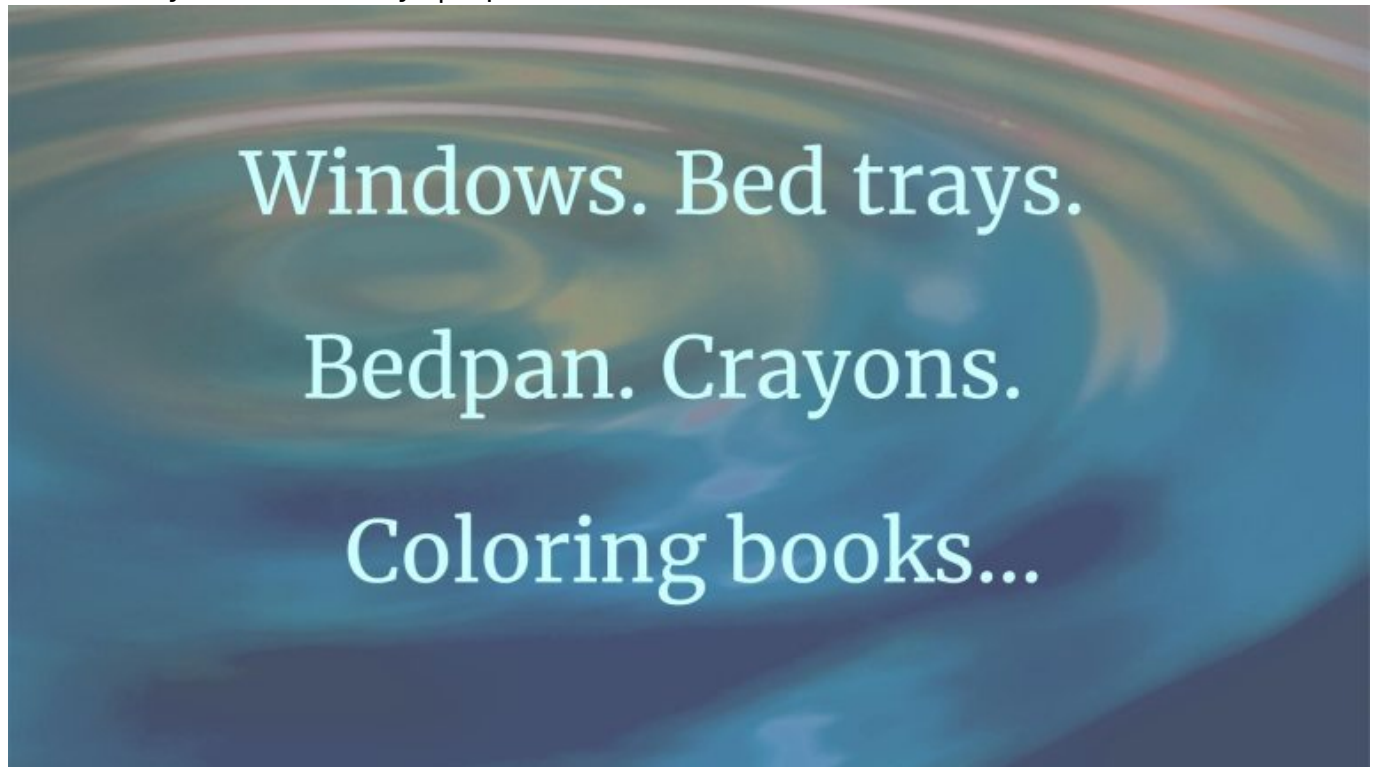


What Remains From the Pediatric Ward

Category: Stories

written by Aine Greaney | April 7, 2023



I wake up in a hospital isolation room, where everything smells weird. It's 1967 in Galway City, Ireland, and I'm four years old.

The worst smell is the antiseptic—a word I don't know yet. The second smell is the crayons and newsheet coloring books on the nightstand. Christmas is gone, so how can these be for me?

The family lore would say that I spent nearly seven weeks in that hospital. That's forty-nine days or 1,176 hours' worth of temperature checks, dosages, white-coated doctors.

Now, fifty-six years later, the medical parts have deleted themselves.

The next memory snapshot: A nurse in a white dress and matching cap watching me eat lunch from a tray. Runny mashed potatoes. Stinky cabbage. Carrot slices with a strange, chemical whiff.

Later, the metal bedpan is cold against my buttocks as I stare at the nurse's white-stockings legs while she watches me pee.

"Yes. All for you," she says at a different moment, coaxing me to open my crayons.

I was, reportedly, a rushed admission. One winter evening, my father and grandmother drove me the twenty-six miles from our small farm to the city. He drove because our house-call doctor said that if my father didn't take me, then Doc himself would.

Through the narrow window at the head of my hospital bed, I see painted concrete and grey sky. An interior window beside my bed gives onto the main pediatric ward with its double row of facing beds.

Windows. Bed trays. Bedpan. Crayons. Coloring books. These are what remain.

Years later, after I'd emigrated to America in 1986, a new boyfriend took me to a roadside diner where a waitress swished by our booth, arms laden with hot lunches. I got that chemical-y smell of canned carrots.

Later still, on a trip back to Ireland, I went to visit an aunt in a small-town hospital. Halfway up those wide stairs, I wanted to race back out to the parking lot. This time, the familiar smells were antiseptic and stewed cabbage.

Now, in 2023, I stop at a retail drugstore for shampoo, or at a local craft store for knitting yarn, where the whiff of new crayons delights me.

Recently, I read a novel in which a fictional psychotherapist asks his teenage patient, "What's the worst thing that ever happened to you?"

I longed to clarify. "'Worst'" as in real time? Or as seen and ranked through the fuzzy lens of memory?

Those white-dress nurses might tell it differently, but I don't remember weeping for home or family—maybe because, before and after hospitalization, I had spent days in a sickbed with tonsillitis and earaches.

My hospital crayoning memories are partly corroborated by that Saturday when my parents drove up to visit me. Words were exchanged when a pediatric nurse told them they couldn't enter my quarantine room. The nurse diverted this country couple outside, to a spot where they could stand and watch me through my bedroom window.

"We stood there, frozen with the cold," my mother reminisced later. "We waved and waved, but you wouldn't stop coloring to wave back."

How long before I got transferred to that big ward, where someone must have shown me how to use the shared bathroom? There, I discovered, just one pull on the cistern chain released a rush of water that didn't have to be bucket-hauled from a rain barrel or a spring-fed well.

A memory snapshot: I'm hunkering down to watch the toilet water swirling over white porcelain. I stand and reach to pull again. *Pull. Whoosh. Squat. Stand. Pull again.* The water always comes.

Here in my bathroom sanctuary, there are no clanking trolleys, no kids' voices, like that of the girl two beds down from mine, who wakes up, wailing, in a pool of her own feces.

Another snapshot: The ward sister in a navy-blue uniform dress and matching stockings striding between our bed rows. "No walking around barefoot, without slippers; not even when you're going down to the day room with parents.

And *always* flush the toilet.”

Her diatribes inspire me. Now, after my long flushing games, I squat to actually use that toilet, but leave *without* pulling that chain.

Some mornings I spot a new head on a pillow; I hear new voices and wails. As the tenured *grande dame* of the ward, I find this babyish crying irritating. My crayons and I have circled back to Book 1, Page 1 to give my clowns and trees a makeover.

Here’s my uncle, my father’s city brother, at the end of my bed. Days later, here he is again with a girlfriend or wife. I feel shy around this pretty woman in her dark beehive hairdo, but thrilled by the scent of oranges from that paper bag. On a different afternoon, I wake to Uncle standing there next to the bossy ward sister, heads together, whispering.

Easter Sunday. A whiff of chocolate. Swishy slippers and my wardmates’ and their parents’ voices. Uncle again—this time with a brown wicker basket full of chocolate eggs.

Easter is gone, and so are my chocolates. Every day now, I go to flush and flush and *not* flush—all while my blue slippers sit stubbornly abandoned beneath my bed. I’ve re-finished the coloring books, so I wiggle my hand underneath the Easter basket’s handle to color in the wicker strands. Green. Red. Yellow.

In all of these memories, there are still no stethoscopes. No pulse checks. No paper charts. □□On discharge day, who comes to fetch me and my pajamas and slippers and Easter basket? I don’t remember.

Neither do I remember the homecoming to the farm, or the return to school, where everything must have been blooming and loud and where, when we were moving away to a bigger, village house, I would rescue my Easter basket from a mildewed cupboard.

Years later, on a transatlantic visit back to our village house, my mother and I were having breakfast when she reminisced (again) about being barred from the isolation ward and hunted out into a cold afternoon where she and my father couldn’t distract me from my coloring books.

“We waved and waved, but you wouldn’t look up or wave b—”

In a fit of adult-child or American brashness, I interrupted: “But what was *wrong* with me?”

“You had tonsillitis. You *always* had tonsillitis.”

For a second, I could re-feel those throbbing tonsils and re-smell those fusty sheets from my homebound sick days. *Tonsillitis. Of course.*

Sometime after, a colleague in my then-job in Upstate New York posed my own question: “But what was wrong with you?”

We were chatting, swapping childhood fibs and mischiefs. Barbara was a former community-health nurse, so I thought my slipper-and-toilet standoff would amuse her. But now, here was this question.

"I had tonsillitis," I parroted.

She frowned. Then she enunciated slowly, as if to a dissembling child:
"Sepsis. Scarlet fever. You could have died."

Afterward, I took myself to the local library and the internet. As I searched, Barbara's words fused with newly remembered lines from my late mother: "You were covered in spots. They said you had to have three clean blood tests before they'd let you home. Back then, we didn't ask."

What was real or remembered? What was research-prompted?

I looked up sepsis—an overwhelming, life-threatening systemic infection. Almost 270,000 Americans die of sepsis each year.

This maybe-diagnosis re-colored what I'd previously claimed to know about my 1,176 hospital hours—huge chunks of which must have been spent sleeping. Now, I see my memory snapshots and the told, family snippets as flickers of light from otherwise lost time.

This morning, my Easter basket sits on a white bookshelf in my attic writing nook, a humble spot with a little white table that I rescued from a sidewalk.

Most mornings before work, I take my coffee to this table, this window, this top-down view of the neighbors' rooftops and the river.

Sometimes, I stop writing to pick up my wicker basket and tilt it into the daylight.

Green. Red. Yellow.

In fifty-six years, the crayon colors have faded, but they've survived.