

The Hall Clock
By
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I saw Valerie – and the hall clock – as I raced from the elevator onto the eleventh floor of Babies Hospital. A wisp of a child, she stood with thin arms laced across her narrow chest and a comic frown transforming her small impish face. Traffic into New York City had been heavy. I was five minutes late to the hospital and in trouble.

My five-year-old made this obvious as she pointed to the round black and white clock above the hall doorway. She knew exactly what she was doing. That clock was a tyrant with unyielding power, indifferent to all who passed by. I was no match for either one – my daughter, or the clock.

The rebuke dragged on. Valerie's foot, tapping dramatically on the drab linoleum floor, punctuated her shout, "You're late, Mommy. Where were you? I've been waiting!" It was a few minutes after ten on Wednesday morning. Val was in her Donald Duck nightgown. Faded and permanently stained with fingerpaint, it was much too big for her but the down-to-the-floor pink nightie was loved beyond reason.

Her emerging smile quickened to a giggle, and, then, bursting with nervous laughter, she ran to me. I caught her in my arms and held on tight, repeating over and over, "SorrySorrySorry." And I was never late again regardless of traffic. I got up earlier in the morning, spent a little less time with Stacy, packed a sleepover's worth of goodies faster, and pushed my rides – friends who car pooled for my trips to New York – to speed.

Valerie was three when the diagnosis of Ewing's sarcoma shattered our family. Scary surgeries, chemotherapies, side effects, and unplanned trips to the New York oncologist or,

closer to home, the emergency room at Overlook Hospital, kept us agitated, uncertain, and separated from the normal existence our friends seemed to enjoy.

But finally, Val's two years of chemo had ended and she was now dealing with three days of medical testing in the search for residual cancer. She didn't complain about the overnights, but misery shone from her eyes; they followed me everywhere that first night as I unpacked her favorite blanket and pillow. Valerie's stuffed lion completed the picture and leaned cockeyed against the metal bed rail. It made her hospital room seem more home-like, but my little girl didn't smile. *O God. What will they find this time? Nothing. Nothing.*

Val knew the nurses on the floor from past inpatient stays and most catered to her whims. Since hospital rules prevented parents from sleeping over, the night staff assumed a surrogate's role. Some handled it better than others. Easily dodging the issue of substitute, a widespread belief existed – and I, for one, was a believer – that the nurse in charge of your child was special, that she was a kind and loving stand-in.

Normally, I'd arrive at the hospital before ten, well ahead of the morning's first tests. Valerie and I would then face unfamiliar medical staff, strange procedures, and weird equipment together.

We'd spend the medically free time in Val's room watching TV, reading to each other, and playing card games. In between, I followed her orders. "Mommy, I want some juice/an Oreo/Captain Crunch without milk/won-ton soup, "with only one won-ton, Mommy." The soup required a trip outside the hospital to a nearby Chinese restaurant.

Mostly, though, I ran child-centered marathons up and down the eleventh floor hallways collecting whatever my daughter wanted or needed. I was not alone. Other mothers ran beside me.

Ed joined us at the end of his work day and was welcomed as member number two of Val's private labor force. He and I took turns following her commands. Every so often, though, when Val gave me permission, I sat out my turn in the parents' lounge, feet up on the closest piece of furniture, and, after adding ice from the floor's fridge, drank my home-brewed iced tea. Poured into a large glass jar from home, the tea's pale color was occasionally mistaken for a urine sample.

Prolonging visiting hours well past the limit was common for us but finally we'd be forced to give Valerie a last hug and kiss goodnight and tuck her in. She knew that I would return early the next morning, no later than ten, with a suitcase loaded with cookies, little toys, and comic greeting cards from schoolmates.

Leaving her room at the end of the day, Ed and I would rush to our car for the hour's drive back home to New Jersey. We needed to tuck Stacy into bed. Listening to a summary of her day, I'd hug her, smooth her hair, touch her cheek, and try not to be too annoying. Ed gave her loud, mushy kisses and was very annoying. We made the Stacy-deadline more often than not. It was all in the timing.

Time. So precious. So scarce. It was my inner bully, and confined me to boundaries shaped only by illness. Governed by that black and white hospital clock, my day was an either/or, here/there affair. Always in hurry mode, I rushed to get somewhere, anywhere on time, and was often late. I fought to beat the clock, to move faster, to advance ahead of speeding time, and somehow to slow it down.

When Val was diagnosed with bone cancer, Stacy, my healthy child, was abruptly thrust into the background. It was not my intention nor my desire. I worried about my older child when we were apart, hustled back to her as soon as possible, and yet, when by her side, yearned to be

with her sister. Such were the overpowering demands made on behalf of the seriously chronically ill child.

In the wake of that, I became marked by the belief that time, forever pictured in my mind as that round black and white clock, had to be accounted for, every moment of every day. *Can't waste a second, not one second.* And I wondered, will I ever be able to saunter through life again? Will I ever lose the sense of urgency that surrounds me now? Or the impatience that stalks its footsteps? Was that even possible? *I surely don't know. But time will tell. won't it?*

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