

Monica

A Memoir

“It's one day at a time. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow is questionable.”

Written By Chelsea Andres and Kathy Vaillancourt

I.
Left to Wait

“A my name is *Amy*, I’m married to *Adam*, and we live in *Alaska*.” My best friend, Shantel, sang the words as she bounced a green rubber ball and swung her leg over it whenever she said the capital *A* words. Then she passed the ball to me so I could do the *B* words. “*B* my name is *Barbara*, I’m married to...”

“Monica! Hurry up! Your father will be here in five minutes!” My grandmother shouted to me from her front window.

I can still hear her voice, loud and deep, as it dropped from the third floor to the sidewalk where Shantel and I were playing ball. Dad was coming to babysit me so that my grandmother could go shopping. It was always an adventure when I went with Dad, because he usually took me to strange buildings and made me wait for him in some lobby all by myself.

My grandmother lived alone in the Bronx, but the rest of my family lived just outside the Bronx with great-aunt Sally: me, my parents, my mom’s sister and her husband, and three cousins, James, Susan, and Mary. My grandmother usually took care of all us kids, because the parents had to work. But when grandmother was sick or had to do some shopping or whatever, Dad or Mom or one of my cousins’ parents watched over us. We kids were like little sheep with our shepherds always changing shifts. I don’t remember being with both my parents. Ever. I was either with my grandmother, my mother, my dad, or one of my cousins’ parents.

I pretended not to hear my grandmother on this sweaty August morning in 1952. I was having too much fun playing ball and devouring whiffs of the neighbors’ morning cooking. It’s funny, but food smells from the tenements are mostly what I remember about spending time in the Bronx with my grandmother. You know those old movies showing buildings with “railroad” apartments, the ones with long corridors and boxcar rooms, just like on trains? That was the Bronx. And the door of every tenement was a portal to all kinds of life. Take my grandmother’s building. Down one hall was Shantel’s African-American family, and down another hall were Puerto Ricans. Other floors had some Italians mixed in, and Irish, too, like my family. My cousins and I spent a lot of time sitting on the front stoop or standing next to the dumbwaiter in my grandmother’s kitchen to fill up on mouth-watering smells...lasagna, fried chicken, spicy black-eyed peas, plantains. Today, my cousins were at home because they were sick, so I was sharing the delicious aromas with long-legged and pigtailed Shantel.

When Mr. Adamo came out of grandmother’s building, the smell of Mrs. Salazar’s plantains came out, too. And when the smell reached us, Shantel dropped the green ball, grabbed my arm, and pulled me to the front door. We bent our knees and crouched low as we crept through the doorway, the tops of our eight-year-old heads grazing the doorknob. As we made our way down the hallway, we tripped over muddy shoes, broken umbrellas, empty soda bottles, and a few dried-up pots of flowers. When we reached apartment 1-A, Mrs. Salazar’s place, Shantel pushed me against the door. “Your turn, Monica.”

I shook my head with a firm “No!”

“Monica, I did it last time.”

I shook my head so hard that my straight mutton brown hair flapped against my cheeks.

“C’mon! I ain’t doin’ it again!”

I pinched Shantel’s arm, and then rose with dignity. I knocked on the faded brown door that was splintering at the edges. “Mrs. Salazar!” I yelled in my most adult voice. I heard a clanging sound like a pan being dropped in a sink and a soft *tap tap tap* of footsteps. The door opened, and Mrs. Salazar stood there with coal black hair and eyes, wearing a blue and yellow flowered dress covered in the front with a food-stained pink apron. She was the prettiest woman I knew.

“Hola, Monica.” The savory smell of garlic and salt wafted through the doorway.

“We were wondering, if...well...maybe...Mrs. Salazar...if you might have...well, do you have any extra plantains today? We could smell them all the way out to the sidewalk.”

Mrs. Salazar leaned forward and peeked behind me. “Hola, Shantel. You like my fryin’, too, no?”

Shantel nodded.

I licked my lips when Mrs. Salazar went to the table next to the door and picked up two steaming plantains wrapped in white paper napkins. She handed one to each of us and then patted our heads and smiled. Before Mrs. Salazar could say anything, Shantel and I muttered a quick “Thank you, Mrs. Salazar,” and ran outside to sit on the front stoop and eat the plantains. As I bit into the crisp outer layer and then through the soft middle, I remembered how dull Irish food was...you know, beef brisket, cabbage, corn chowder, boiled potatoes, meat loaf...boring stuff like that. I bit into the plantain again, and its salty taste was spoiled by my grandmother’s shrill voice.

“Monica! I’m not calling you again! Your father will be here any minute now!”

“Com-ING!” I yelled.

Shantel licked her fingers. “See ya.”

As I ran up the front stairs, I was thinking about where Dad would dump me today. Last time he babysat, he took me and my cousins to the Newark Airport, which was an hour’s drive from our apartment. The drive was comfortable in my Dad’s three-year-old Packard, until we went across the Jersey Turnpike. Smells like oil and plastic burning, probably from some of the refineries in the area, burned our noses and turned our faces green. We were all sick to our stomachs when we reached the airport, except for Dad. I guess he liked the smells or was used to them. When we arrived at the airport, he hurried us out of the car to a terminal, and then pushed us through

the turnstiles to a big window where we could watch the planes take off. “Stay here, kids. Watch the big planes! I’ll be back soon.” The four of us sat there with our small mouths open as he walked away from us. We must have looked like baby birds waiting for food to be dropped in our mouths.

Four kids—ages eight, seven, six, and four—can only sit still for so long. And one of them will have to go to the bathroom sooner than later. Mary, the youngest, had to go pretty bad, so we all went out the turnstiles to the bathroom. We didn’t know you had to pay to go back through them, and Dad didn’t leave us any money. What a pitiful picture we must have been with our tear-stained faces asking for money. “Please, sir, Daddy will pay you back once he gets here.” But, our tears and pleas got us through the turnstiles, and we even got extra money for hot dogs.

When Dad came back, which seemed like forever, we were no longer in a row but in a whimpering huddle.

I tugged at Daddy’s pant legs. “You left us here without any money...we...”

He ignored me and, like a good shepherd, he herded his little sheep together again. “Come on. Let’s get to the car.”

That’s the way it was when Dad took care of us. Maybe today it would be fun, maybe not so bad.... I wished my cousins were with me today.

When I reached the front door, my grandmother was standing in the doorway. She had her big red purse, empty except for her wallet and a book to read while she took the train to go shopping.

I went to the front window and looked past the fire escape to the sidewalk. Dad was almost to the front stoop.

My grandmother brushed back my hair from my sticky face. “You little sneak. I see that grease on your lips.” She ran a curved index finger under my chin, grinned, and then looked out the window with me.

“Dad, I’m here,” I shouted. But Dad was already at the door, and he startled me when he came up behind me and tapped me on the shoulder.

“Monica! We’ve got to run! I can’t be late.” He grabbed my hand, and *swoosh*...we flew down the stairs as if we had wings. We flew to the subway at the end of the block and into a crowded train. When our feet hit the floor on the train, Dad pushed me toward an empty seat. “I’ll take the window seat,” he said as he stepped in front of me. That was fine with me. There was nothing to see out the window except blackness, and I liked to look at the people on the train. Sitting across from us was an old man with a long gray ponytail drinking something from a small paper bag. The woman sitting next to him was wearing a bright pink skirt and blouse, and her bright orange hair was piled high on her head. It looked like a beehive. She kept nudging the man in the shoulder with her fist. Maybe she wanted a drink, too. The man took another drink, and then he put the paper bag in his shirt pocket.

“Hey, Dad. What’s he drinking?” He didn’t answer, so I poked his thigh, and then kneeled on the seat so that my mouth was right in his ear. “HEY, DAD.”

“What? What?” He was rubbing his eyes. “Can’t a man get a quick nap without being bothered?”

“What’s he drinking, Dad?”

“Stop staring at people, Pussycat.”

“Where are we going?”

“I told you, we’re going downtown.”

“Ya, I know, but *where* are we going?”

“Sit still, Pussycat.” With one arm, he shifted me to a sitting position facing away from him.

I can’t remember what stop we traveled to or the name of the street with its pigeons and tall buildings. I only recall Dad leading me by the hand through the doors of a brick building. The lobby had moldings with fancy carvings, and the ceiling seemed almost as tall as the three flights of stairs to my grandmother’s apartment. We stopped at a desk in the front of the lobby, and Dad said something to the woman sitting there. She nodded her head, and Dad turned to me and sat me down on one of the chairs next to the desk. “Pussycat, you stay put. I’ll be back soon. Sit in this chair and mind this woman here. Did you bring a book? Just sit still.” He walked away and climbed the staircase near the front door, pulling at his suit jacket and wiping down his hair.

The chair I was sitting on was green plastic, very shiny and slippery. I had to hold on to the sides of the chair so I wouldn’t slide off. Now, what to do...what to do while Dad was gone who knows where and for God knows how long. I stared down at my loafers, watching the brown creases fold and unfold when I bent my toes. Beyond them was a white and black speckled tile floor. I played a game where the tip of my right shoe tried to touch one speckle, then another and another as fast as it could. When I got tired of the game, I spread my cotton dress across the edge of the seat so that the thin line of lace on the bottom would lie straight. The lace procession would bubble near my knees causing me to poke it with my fingertip. That got boring pretty quickly, so I leaned toward the woman’s desk to hear the radio. The voice I heard sounded kind of familiar, like the voice of Bishop Sheen, the bishop great-aunt Sally liked to watch on TV. Bishop Sheen was the only TV show my aunt Sally watched, and she made the whole house watch it, too. But we didn’t just watch it; we had to dress up for it. Oh God, how she would ‘shh’ us when he started his sermon in front of a heavy purple curtain! I don’t remember much of what he said, but I do remember aunt Sally sitting proper.

I was leaning closer to the desk to ask the woman to turn up the radio, when I heard a “*swiff*” and “*swoosh*” from the front door. A tall man entered, and I swear to God I could smell my great-aunt Sally. It was him, Bishop Sheen! Bishop Sheen, the TV preacher, was walking toward me!

He was wearing a dark black cape, which tied in a bow over his white priest collar. His shoes were black and glossy, clacking with force. He was coming toward me, and I started to shudder and blink. I looked around like I had better things to do than sit there.

“Good morning, little girl. What brings you here?” He squatted next to the row of chairs. His voice was deep, and he smelled like the perfumed combs in a barbershop.

“Um, my daddy brought me.”

“Oh? Where is your father? Why aren’t you with him?”

Now, God knows why, but I was bored and I thought it would be fun to get a little attention.

“I’m waiting for my daddy. But I have to go to the bathroom!”

Bishop Sheen stood up from his crouched position and looked down at me. He shook his head. He didn’t say, “Oh, let me help you” or “That’s okay, little girl.” He walked up the same steps Dad had taken, and I thought, “What a mean man.” But, in a few minutes, some young priests tapped down the stairs—the Bishop’s underlings were given the duty of helping me.

“Are you all alone, little lady?” one asked me, his hand stretched out.

“I’m waiting for my dad.” I stood up and didn’t take his hand. “And I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Yes, we know. It’s this way, if you’ll follow us.” Then priest No. 1 whispered to No. 2. “I can’t believe she’s been left alone in the lobby. Can you believe her father?” No, priest No. 2 could not believe it, emphasizing the disbelief with a low whistle.

When we got to the bathroom, I was too nervous to pee, so I didn’t. The two priests walked me back to my chair and said they were going to sit with me until Dad came back. Oh God, was I nervous. It wasn’t like Dad was a full-fledged Catholic who admired every priest he saw. I thought he’d be mad to see me waiting with them.

“Oh, you don’t have to stay with me. I’m fine.”

Such an idea was nonsense to the priests. They sat in the green chairs next to me for about 45 minutes. Again I stared at the floor, but I looked at their shoes instead. They weren’t shiny like Bishop Sheen’s. They looked like the pair my uncle got at a Bloomingdale’s sale. They were a dark brown, the kind of brown that has a red tint to it. The soles were thin and smooth and good for making the clear sound of a footstep on a hard floor.

Tap, tap, tap. Dad was coming down the marble steps. I squeezed the side edges of my chair with my fingers. I wondered what he’d say, and if he would get into any trouble for leaving me there. I kinda hoped he would. He was picking some lint off his sleeve as he approached, slightly smiling. But when he saw me with those two priests—Oh God, did his face fall!

“Um, sir. Is this your...” No. 2 started to say.

“Come on, Pussycat.” Dad cut him off and reached to take my hand. I looked back at the priests and giggled to see their red faces. They looked like little kids who had just gotten their faces slapped.

“They were pretty silly, Dad.”

“Ya, well. They should mind their own business.” His voice was gruff as he led me back to the train, but his grip on my hand was soft.

I’ve always wondered if Dad left me waiting for him to see if I could learn to fend for myself and to withstand the stress of being alone. Oh God, his lessons were tough to take at times. But maybe it was his rough upbringing in Hell’s Kitchen that caused him to want me to be ready to face anything, to prepare me for real life, for when I grew up and had to be on my own. Whatever his reasons, his lessons served me well when I became a nurse.

II.
Billy and the Bosco Baby

Billy was back. Such an amazing boy, so resilient. But it seemed that every time I turned my head, he was rushed back to the hospital. Oh God, I hoped we could fix him up again.

I had been a pediatrics nurse at Columbus Hospital on the north side of Chicago for ten or twelve years when I first met Billy. He was a newborn then, and it was always tough to see him return to the hospital. Billy wasn't just any little kid; he was a three-year-old dwarf, you know. His torso was long, but his arms and legs, and especially his throat, were short. Poor little Billy. His small trachea made it difficult for him to breathe properly, so he was often rushed to the hospital with symptoms of heart failure.

I was usually on the day shift when Billy was admitted, but this time I was working evenings. It was around six o'clock when I went into Billy's room and found his mother perched on the side of his bed like a hen on her nest. She was a dwarf, too, and she didn't look much bigger than most of the kids in the pediatric ward, except that her belly was as big as a 20-pound watermelon.

"Oh God, Paula, I see you've got another one there!" It seemed like she was always having babies.

"Monica! Ha, it's a big one this time!" She smiled and swung her short legs over the side of the bed like a kid. She was holding one of Billy's hands, and she leaned sideways to kiss it. "Ah, but our little Billy here, he had it bad last night." She wasn't smiling now, and I could see the worry and exhaustion in her eyes.

I went to the other side of the bed and looked at the weary boy. His curly black hair was matted, and his eyelids were drooping over his dark brown eyes. His skin and the bandage on his throat were the color of his bleach-white pillows. They had done a tracheotomy on him again. Poor little guy. He was always so brave when the doctor made an incision in his throat and put in a respiratory tube. Well, at least the tube was out now, and all Billy had to deal with was a bandage on his throat.

"Hey, Mister. Back so soon, huh? Musta missed me." I rubbed the stethoscope on my sleeve to warm it up before I put it on his chest to check his heart and lungs. Billy's breathing was shallow and short, as if he was afraid to breathe deeply, and his heart was racing pretty near 120. "Hey, Billy, relax now. We're gonna fix you up." I stroked his forehead while I checked the throat bandage. "You'll feel better soon. Promise."

His eyes blinked fast, and he whispered a raspy, "Pwomise?"

As I was marking Billy's chart, Dr. Kelly gave a quick knock on the open door as he entered the room. "Evenin' everybody." He was one of the top Peds doctors at Columbus, and he was one of those men that most people looked up to, literally. Kelly was over six foot two, with the shoulders of a bull. His hands were the size of baseball mitts, and he put them on Paula's small

shoulders. “So, Billy’s stable now. We’d like to keep him for a day or two, to make sure he heals properly. And you, you need some sleep—especially with another little one on the way.” Dr. Kelly had given that same talk to Paula many times. I could tell by Kelly’s fatigued tone and Paula’s nonchalant nod that both of them were tired of the familiar words

“Hey, Billy,” I said. “Can you believe it? I can’t remember your favorite color.”

Billy smiled without showing any teeth, as if to stifle some excitement. “Gween” came out as a whisper.

“Oh God, how could I forget? Well, how ‘bout some green Jell-O?”

He nodded his head slightly and clasped his small hands together.

I brushed back his hair and wiped his damp forehead with a face cloth. “Alright, then. I’ll make sure that green Jell-O comes right up.”

Paula smiled at me and leaned her head back on the pillow next to Billy. The two of them were holding hands when Dr. Kelly and I left the room.

I headed toward the nurse’s station carrying Billy’s chart in my hand and thoughts of him in my heart. Did Billy ever wish there was a magic door in his hospital room that would lead him to a place where he would be all better...a magic healing kingdom of sorts? Oh God, did he think about death? Was he scared? Will we be able to fix him up again? I didn’t know that all this worry went along with nursing when I enrolled at Marquette University in Milwaukee. I just listened to Dad’s advice. “You’re going to have to work after college. Make sure you study something that will get you a job.”

I put Billy’s chart away when I reached the nurse’s station, and I gave the green Jello-O order to Mary, a Certified Nursing Assistant who was on duty that night.

“Make sure it’s green,” I told her. “It *has* to be green. Special order for little Billy, you know.”

“Oh, the little darling. I’ll get it right away and feed it to him myself.”

I could hear the crinkling of Mary’s freshly starched uniform as she rushed down the hallway.

It was a quiet evening on the ward, with only an occasional whimper from a child—a bad dream?—and the *ding-ding* of the elevator when it stopped on my floor.

Sally, one of the nurses, came out of the office in back of the nurse’s station carrying a folder. “Do you want me to bring this down to Dr. Stevens in emergency, Monica? The Connolly boy just came in again. Another asthma attack.”

“Oh God, he was in just five days ago. Here, I’ll take it down. I need to stretch my legs a bit.” I took the folder and headed toward the elevator.

Sally's voice followed me down the hallway. "If you bring me back a cup of coffee, I'll love you forever!"

"Sure thing," I said as I stepped onto the elevator and pushed the ground floor button. The doors closed, and a few seconds later the elevator stopped. The doors opened onto the emergency floor, and I was greeted by shouts of "Help me, y'all! Y'all have to help me!"

My heart froze.

A tall thin woman was racing towards me with a bundle in her arms. Her mouth was moving as fast as her feet, but I couldn't understand her words. She ran headlong into me and pushed the bundle into my arms. Inside the bundle was a naked infant, a boy, about two months old, covered in feces. Oh God, his face was as blue as the blankets he was wrapped in, and he smelled as putrid as a dead mouse out in the sun.

"Code Blue! Code Blue!" I shouted as I ran towards the emergency room. The mother followed me and gasped out a few more words. "What y'all think's wrong? Is ma boy gonna die?"

"Code Blue, Emergency Room! Code Blue, Emergency Room!" A nurse had heard my alarm, and now the message was being broadcast on the hospital intercom. Within a minute, it seemed, I had put the baby on an examining table, and a team of doctors and nurses was hovered over the infant boy, trying to hydrate and stabilize him. The mother was on my heels, and I turned around, grabbed a chart and pen from the side counter, and drilled her with questions. "Any allergies? How old is your son? Has he been sick like this before. When..." The questions went on and on, and the mother answered with a nod of the head, a shrug of the shoulders, an occasional "Las' night," "No, no al'lagies," "Y'all think he'll be okay?" Being a New Yorker, I wasn't used to hearing a southern drawl, but it wasn't so bad that I couldn't understand her.

In the background, a doctor was shouting, "Need to find a vein. Find me a vein!" The baby was so badly dehydrated, its tiny veins were almost invisible. "Got it!" a nurse replied. "Here, on the leg." I watched the doctor hook up an intravenous needle to a leg almost the size of a pencil, and a nurse put an oxygen mask on the blue face. There were tubes and wires coming from every part of the small body, you know. Oh God, I can still hear the slow *beep beep* of the baby's heartbeat echoing from the monitoring machine. I held my breath, hoping the beeping continued, no matter how slow it was. And I prayed that he wasn't so far gone that his kidneys would fail.

The mother was standing in front of me on her tiptoes, as if she were trying to see over the shoulders of the doctors and nurses. Her blonde hair was a tangled cobweb. I half expected a spider to peek out from the top of her head.

"Can you tell me again when your son started running at the bowel?"

"Dillon. Ma boy's name is Dillon." Then she scrunched up her face, not understanding

my question.

“Okay...how long has Dillon been pooping like this?”

“Oh! Um, sance las’ night. It’s bin a mad flow.”

“Did Dillon eat anything unusual yesterday?”

“Whaal, he wern’t finshin’ his bottles, so I put somethin’ in his milk.”

“Something in his milk?”

“Y’all heard of Bosco sauce? Dillon likes h’it. He drank the whole thang.”

“Bosco Sauce? You fed Dillon chocolate syrup?” Oh God, didn’t she know an infant’s system can’t handle chocolate?

“Whaal...I like h’it.”

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep. “He’s coming back!” one of the nurses called out.

The mother pushed past me and went to her son. She ran her fingertips across her son’s toes, as if they were piano keys. Then she put her head on the pillow and sobbed.

I handed the chart to one of the nurses, and, as I left the room, I saw one of the doctor’s go to the mother and put his hand on her back. “Remember now, no more chocolate for your son. Not even a little bit. It almost killed him. Yes, yes, he’ll be okay, but he’ll have to stay here a month or two. We have to completely rebuild his GI tract. Where’s your husband? Does he....” The voice faded as I walked to the coffee machine next to the elevator. I was surprised that with all the commotion, I remembered to get some coffee for Sally.

It was almost eight o’clock when I returned to pediatrics. Sally was at the front desk in the nurse’s station, and she gave me a big smile when I handed her the cup of coffee. “I heard the Code Blue on the intercom,” she said. “Figured you got caught up in it. All okay?”

I told her about the mother and the Bosco sauce, and she shook her head in disbelief. “Glad the little tyke will make it,” she said, “but I bet that’s one mother you’ll never forget.”

I nodded and asked, “All quiet when I was gone?”

“Only a few peeps from little Samantha in room 210. Still fighting the colic.”

We both laughed, remembering the words of a young nurse, straight off the boat from Ireland, when she tended to Samantha the night before. “T’is amazin’, simply amazin’,” she said, “that with all ye tests and scans and med’cine, ye still can’t cure the gas.”

It felt good to laugh after the emergency room drama.

“Eight-fifteen,” I said. “Time to check on the little ones. May as well see Billy first.”

I walked the two doors to Billy’s room, hoping that the little guy would be sleeping peacefully. He was wide awake sitting up in bed, and Paula was sound asleep in the cot next to him. I smiled at the boy with the dark eyes and dry lips. The bandage over his trachea incision was clean, so I straightened his blankets and poured him some water.

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping?” I whispered to him.

“I’m not sweepy.”

“Well, you gotta try if you’re gonna get better. Here, drink some water, and I’ll tuck you in.” I held the water glass to his lips while he took a few sips, and then I helped him lie down and get his head comfortable on the pillow. I stood by his bed for a few minutes, and whispered “Sweet dreams,” when he finally closed his eyes. I tiptoed to the door, but stopped when I heard Billy’s voice.

“Monica, I’m gowing to be a big boy, wight?” I turned around and almost cried when I saw his eager and hopeful face. “I want to be big, weal big, like Dr. Kelly.”

I pulled a chair next to Billy’s bed and held his hands. “Billy, I promise you this...you...you might not get as big as Dr. Kelly, but you’ll get bigger than you are now.” I swallowed hard when I said this, because I didn’t know if he would live long enough to grow much taller.

Billy looked at me and searched my face. Children are such detectives, always looking for truth clues. I guess he believed me, because he closed his eyes and smiled. I sat with him for a few minutes and tucked the blanket under his tiny chin. I continued my rounds, but I couldn’t stop thinking that Billy might not live long enough to see one more inch of growth.

My next shift wasn’t until two nights later. Sally was at the desk, and before I took off my coat I said, “I’m gonna check on Billy. Be right back.”

Sally smiled. “Don’t bother. He isn’t there. Kelly let him go home yesterday. And, the little Bosco baby is improving, too.”

“Oh God,” I sighed. “That makes my day.” I sat down for a few minutes to let the good news sink in. I was worn out from all the worrying about Billy and little Dillon, the Bosco baby as we all called him. It was hard to believe that I thought my work as a nurse’s assistant was stressful back in the 1960s. I laughed to myself when I recalled my very first job in a hospital while I was studying nursing at Marquette. My supervisor, nurse Thompson, a large white woman from the South, actually asked me to go from room to room on the floor and to segregate black patients from white patients. “Y’all want everyone to feel comfortable,” she said with a smile on her face. “Ya’ll need to keep like with like.”

I knew what she asked me to do wasn't right, but I was young and shy, so I did what I was told. I didn't want to get into trouble. Oh God, it was difficult making up stories to get the patients to transfer to another room. Most of the patients didn't bat an eye. They were probably too sick to even notice that they were being moved in with their "own kind." But one small African-American woman wasn't too sick to catch on to the game of musical chairs. I found her and her Caucasian roommate playing cards and having the time of their lives. Before I could even start my speech, she looked up at me and said, "Listen here. You move me, but I will *not* be quiet about it. I've heard of these 'transfers' goin' on. You're movin' the black people. I know it. And everybody's gonna know about it now!"

I finally mustered the courage to tell the head nurse about nurse Thompson's orders. The segregation stopped but Thompson stayed on. Why, I don't know. The stress of those first days can't be compared to what I was doing 20 years later—rescuing poor babies from the mistakes of mothers and watching after little kids like Billy.

I stood up to take my coat off and to start my rounds. In a way, I wished Billy was still there. I missed the little guy. But, I was so happy that we were able to fix him up again. I picked up some charts and headed down the hallway when the intercom blasted "Code Blue, emergency room. Code Blue, emergency room!" I shuddered as if a cold wind had just blown down the hallway. The words "Code Blue" put ice in every nurse and doctor's arteries. I wondered who was struggling for life now...a child, old man, young woman. I shook my head and continued down the hallway.

A few hours later, I was sitting at the front desk in the nurse's station when Sally came in.

"Monica," she said. "I was filling in for someone in emergency tonight. The Code Blue...it was...it was little Billy."

"Billy...you mean...?"

"He was already gone when he arrived. His heart failed in his sleep. Paula didn't hear a struggle or...."

"Is Paula still downstairs?"

"Yes, she's waiting for her mother to come."

I'm sure I sat there for a while, just staring into space as if I was trying to find something. Billy?

I remember going down to the emergency room, taking a last look at Billy, hugging Paula, waiting with her until her mother arrived. I don't recall finishing my evening shift.

I went home around midnight to my carriage house shared with my roommate, Josephine. She was always asleep when I got home. A nurse herself, she worked the early shift in a hospital on the south side of the city. I'm not sure if I fell straight to sleep or if I read a little. Some details don't stick with you like others do. But I do remember a breeze through the front window, where

you could see my prayer tree, a large red Japanese maple. It had big curved limbs that looked like outstretched arms ready to embrace me. I wouldn't call myself very religious, but I always thought God must dwell in that tree. I prayed for Billy and thought about how death was so strange. One little boy was saved and one little boy died. It made me wonder why things like this happened and who chose for them to happen.