

IN EVERY ISSUE

Joe's Room

BY MARY A. O'ROURKE

My triumph over cancer and wallpaper.

“Guys, I have some bad news,” I tell the boys, as we walk down Valley Road on a misty June morning. “I have breast cancer,” I say.

Jack flashes me a steely look. He’s the mathematician, the calculating one who likes order. Things aren’t adding up.

“It’s OK, though,” I say. “I have good doctors taking care of me. I’ll have to get sick to get better, but I’ll be fine after that.” With lowered heads, the boys hold a polite and deferential silence. We continue our walk.

“Jack, you wanna build a fort?” Joe asks.

“No, Joe,” Jack replies. “We’re playing baseball, remember?”

The phone rings in the second floor guest bedroom. “How are you feeling?” my sister, Mary Jane, asks. The dam breaks.

“I don’t know where to go, what to do. I can’t move backward or forward. I’m trapped inside a body that I’m certain is killing me.” Mary Jane listens, empathetic and helpless.

Dim light filters through vinyl shades. Medical bills and old homework assignments horde space on a cheap table. “And I hate this room,” I add.

Sunny and 70 degrees, a gentle breeze blows in from Lake Michigan as we settle into our bleacher seats. My husband, Leo, passes down two Cokes, a beer, and a Wrigley Field visor to protect me from the sun.

The Cubs lead in the ninth inning when Milwaukee’s left fielder cranks one over our heads to bring in the winning run for the Brewers.

The beer tastes bitter. I had started chemotherapy a week earlier.

I really do hate this room. We call it the guest room, but it’s more like the guest-office-what-should-we-do-with-this- old-crib room.

Joe, my second-grader, has been sleeping here for several weeks as a way of stepping out of his older brother's shadow. I want to fix up the room, create a place where Joe's personality will shine. But I can't move forward.

"You know," Mary Jane says slowly, carefully, "DIF works really well for removing wallpaper." Deep beneath the layers of emptiness, I feel my sister's gentle nudge. I listen to her talk about wallpaper and slowly move forward.

My hair is falling out by the Fourth of July. Leo sets up a lawn chair in the back yard and covers me with a white sheet. The boys take turns snipping off chunks of hair. After Leo buzzes my head, Joe says I look like Dr. Evil. I flip my wrist and bite my pinky. The boys laugh.

We watch fireworks that evening. I wear my new wig.

I'm drawn to a loose seam of wallpaper in the corner of the room. I peel off a long, satisfying swath. I move from panel to panel.

I'm learning the sad truth about wallpaper. The battle is not so much with the paper, as it is with the glue underneath. I scrape feverishly, angrily at one stubborn patch. As I gouge the wall, the razor pops out of my hand, flips upside-down and slices my right wrist.

The blade just misses my radial artery so I am in no immediate danger. The emergency room is busy on Saturday morning. I take a seat in the waiting room, relieved to be out of the house for awhile, away from my new arch enemy—wallpaper.

A woman in the corner sobs loudly. "Where am I?" she moans and covers her face with shaking hands. Her husband tries to calm her, while the daughter calls the psychiatrist on the cell phone.

I feel her anguish. I have been to the edge.

It's been four years since my diagnosis. On a frigid February morning, I climb the ladder to Joe's bunk bed.

"C'mon honey," I nudge. "We gotta work on those spelling words." Joe slowly comes to life. "Proceed," he mumbles. "P-R-O-C-E-E-D."

As he rattles off words, I bask in the warmth of his room. A pirate ship poster wilts from the vapors of Joe's fish tank. My carefully planned navy-amber-white color scheme clashes with his Civil War map and Kansas City Chiefs pennant.

The gouge in the wall warms my heart, and I reach under the blanket to squeeze Joe's toes.