

PREMATURE GOODBYES: MY FIRST

It was Sunday, June 5, 1960. Charlotte sizzled under a relentless sun as Mr. and Mrs. McGarity, gentle and loyal family friends, drove my sister and me through the tree-lined, suburban streets of the aggressive southern city. The post-church traffic seemed to be heavier than usual for a summer Sunday and the imprisonment of endless red lights seemed unbearably long within our silent automobile. Stone-faced policemen took charge in-between the electronic signals to further delay our journey in order that the hurried, candorless churchgoers could exit from their sanctuaries and Sunday duties.

To our pediatrician, who had met us in the parking lot, Presbyterian Hospital was a home away from home. For us, it represented a recognized, but discomfortingly huge structure of sterile brick and empty windows. I'm not really sure how my trembling legs pulled my chubby ten-year old body up the hospital's awesome, cold granite steps, but they somehow did. My sister's legs, however, stumbled repeatedly in her attempts to keep up with Dr. Rutledge and her heavier, but silent footsteps led us through the massive revolving doors.

We entered a smoky reception area bulging with people from all walks of life. The sea of faces seemed to share a common anxiousness as they observed, without acknowledging, our entrance. I was relieved that we were not to be implanted in the maze of their hushed conversations, but were instead led towards the colorless doors of the elevator. I remember noticing for the first time how silent it becomes once those doors shut and how automatically all eyes focused upwards on the floor numerals.

After this brief observation, however, my own eyes, too young to yet be indoctrinated by elevator protocol, studied my shiny, Sunday-only, patent leather shoes.

Once at our fourth floor destination, my endless (and mostly unanswered) questions persisted regarding my brother's condition. I knew he was very sick when Mom and Dad rushed him to the hospital earlier that morning, but I couldn't understand why he was way up on the fourth floor. Hadn't they treated him already and shouldn't he be ready to come back home now? Dr. Rutledge had told us, "Lee's doing fine, just fine." I didn't realize until many years later that when speaking these words, she neither looked at me or my sister, but stared straight ahead as we walked, her stethoscope swinging rhythmically across her white coat.

My Sunday shoes squeaked embarrassingly on the polished terrazzo floors as the three of us traveled through the hospital's darkened corridors. My sweaty-wet hand tightened around Dr. Rutledge's finger as she momentarily hesitated before knocking on the closed door of Room #418. My father's voice softly acknowledged her knock and as we entered, I first noticed a bed of starched sheets, fresh, clean and empty. Before my confusion could be voiced, my mother's exhausted, pale arms reached out for my sister and me. As she embraced us, I began to become painfully aware of why we had been brought here so abruptly, so hurriedly, and so silently. My mother's words pierced the silence, "He's gone, he's gone. Our little boy is gone."

The overworked intercom system paged overworked doctors. Stainless steel meal carts clanked as they were pushed obediently down the halls. Nurses uniforms rustled hurriedly past us. I don't remember how we got out of the hospital the same way as we came in? Elevator? Stairs? It's a blank. I do recall the airplane flying directly overhead as we climbed into Dad's immaculate company car.

I do remember wondering (as if it mattered) where it was going and why it was going there. As quickly as the plane had appeared from seemingly nowhere, it disappeared.

As I stared at the blank space of sky where it had only moments before glistened under the sun, the first tears crept silently down my cheeks.