

Fifty-Fifty

by Betty Kate Sexton

As Millie took that dreaded walk from her son's hospital room to the small conference area, the cold, unforgiving light injected its numbing horror through her.

"Have a seat," the doctor said, indicating the chair across from him. She sat in the hard vinyl chair, allowing only her bottom to hold her weight. She examined the large scratch on the wall at eye level as the doctor's words began in the periphery.

He tried to put everything tenderly. His words flowed around Milly as she sat stunned, paralyzed in motionless existence. She noticed the plaster hanging in bits around where the wallpaper had been savagely, ruthlessly violated. His words floated around her head, mocking her with their harsh reality. Chemo, port placement, white count, and so on. A dire alarm startled her, coming from somewhere down the hallway. She wanted to run towards the unknown danger but, instead she maintained her post against the concrete chair. Then the alarm stopped, and the eerie silence invaded the little room again.

His voice started again with the explanation, and possibilities were presented with the proper inflection and optimism. The doctor touched her knee, which was unexpected, as were the tears that began to fall into her lap. He went for Kleenex as she was left alone, the scratch mocking her. The room started to shrink, and she with it until she was insignificant, an old worn-out limp piece of clothing someone had left behind.

After the onslaught, she dragged herself back to her son's room. There Milly stood semi-conscious at the side of his hospital bed, her mind withering, her thoughts complex and impossible to harness. She felt spent, like wet rubbish hurrying down a sewer drain.

"Mommy," was all Ian said, opening his eyes quickly. Still, this simple action awakened Millie and drew her into bed with her son.

"Mommy," Ian said again.

"Hi, Sweetie, Mommy's here," Millie said quietly, touching his face. He reached out to her, placing his small soft hand on her cheek.

"You still my Ian Pooky Bear?" She asked him.

Using his nickname brought a degree of comfort to her but also caused her eyes to brim with tears.

"Yes, Mommy. E-Pook-Bee" was how he said it.

Millie snuggled in the hospital bed next to her son with little Lambie in between them. She brushed the delicate almost-white-blond hair across his brow as he shut his lovely long-lashed eyes. A sigh escaped his rounded pale lips as they worked slightly upon an invisible pacifier. She held his outstretched hand acutely, and then they both slept.

"Num, num," he asked for food when Millie opened her eyes.

"Okay, baby," she said.

This was good; he was hungry. Millie pushed the nurse's call bell.

"Can I help you?" the box on the wall said.

"Could you bring Ian some breakfast? He is hungry," she asked nicely.

"I'll check on that," was the answer.

Hopefully, it wouldn't take too long. Millie hopped up from bed and commenced tidying the room a bit. Baggy sweats hung off her frame, giving her an indistinct look. She shoved her feet into worn suede clogs and ran her hands through her hair. She had spent a fitful night in bed with her son dozing just before the nurse came in or an IV pump awakened her with its insistent beeping.

She heard nurses talking at the nurses' station like gossip girls all night long, their scattered voices rising and falling suddenly, further jarring her from sleep. She sat down to think on the couch at Ian's bedside, bringing her legs into a criss-cross position. She ran both hands through her brown hair until it stood on end, spiked around her face. Silver earrings had been thrown on the window sill the night before; she retrieved those as the nurse came in with Ian's food tray.

"Good morning," she said. "Why don't you go to the cafeteria and get something to eat? I can feed Ian."

"I don't want to leave him."

"I know, but sometimes you need to. All the parents need a break, but they all hate to take one. You have to keep up your strength. I have time to feed him his breakfast. Up to you, though."

"I guess so," Millie whispered, looking at her son.

Millie stood next to the hospital's front entrance and looked about as people hurried by her. The morning air was cool and moist, cascading over and around her, a brisk sensation. Over to her left, several smokers were chatting. They seemed to be the only relaxed people around. Some

were hospital employees, and others were likely patients and friends. Even a woman in a wheelchair was pulled up with them laughing and telling a story. It's funny how smoking brings people together. She wondered if they'd share a cigarette with her. She wondered how people could be happy at a hospital. And she wondered if she should take up smoking again. But instead, she just gathered her sleeve ends into her fists and folded her arms snugly across her chest as a shield against the penetrating air.

The air grew colder, seeping into her skin, drying her bones, and fixing her body next to the door like a sentinel. But her mind began working; its wheels, already rusty from their momentary lapse, started to crank and begin their course. Synapses in her head fired again, and the initial resurgence of thought transmission was as painful as the scalpel to her heart. That unspoken fear of all parents, the dreaded abyss we all try to avoid, had knocked on her door. When she first suspected something was wrong with Ian, Milly had managed to stave off this intruder.

Now it was cold, desolate reality.

Ester made her way confidently through rush hour traffic to see her great-grandson in the hospital. Drumming her fingers on the top of the steering wheel, with the gospel radio station playing quietly, she focused straight ahead as was her typical manner. She was going to surprise little Ian and see what all the fuss was about. Millie had been unable to explain herself clearly on the phone that previous evening. It was obvious that Millie needed her to handle this situation, and she had absolutely no doubt that she must immediately take charge.

Ester, admired by many for her common sense, determination, and ability to get any job done, seemed to show no signs of diminished capacity. Others her age would have waited for rush hour traffic to subside, but Ester never let those petty things get in her way.

As she turned into the hospital parking lot, she spotted a car about to vacate a place near the entrance. She turned her large silver Lincoln into the parking space, annoying another driver who had doubled back for that spot after driving around the lot for five minutes. Some people were luckier than others.

Ester entered the hospital looking elegant and well-turned out. She walked briskly, her outfit complete with the ubiquitous matching purse hanging on her bent left arm. Heads turned, as always, to pay a moment's homage as she passed.

"Grandmother, please stop telling me what to do," Millie said, stopping her ears like a child.

"Mildred, I'm not telling you what to do. I'm just making suggestions."

"Of course, I'm going to let them treat him! How can you suggest otherwise?"

"There are alternatives. That's all I'm saying."

"I don't know. I don't have time to think about that. The doctor said he should start chemo right away. I only want him to get better," she wept.

They both stopped talking as their voices were quickly overshadowed by the bleep-bleep of the heart monitor and the CNN news special update of the recent library shooting. Interviews with the survivors.

"Oh my God, please turn that off!" Millie said after hearing one woman say something about not knowing what life will bring you.

"If you're going to be here for a while, I'm going to go get some fresh air," Millie pulled on her oversized hoodie and wiped her tears away with her bare hands.

"Go right ahead. I'm going to stay here and pray."

"You do that."

Down she went to smoke with the happy people, to hear something pleasant, if only for a few minutes. Breathe a little fresh air, well, sort of. As she stepped off the elevator, she felt an empty place in her stomach starting to grow. At first, it was a small hollowness. The farther she moved from Ian's hospital room, the emptiness began to feel like a growing cavern, and all she could do was sink into it.

Millie approached the lone smoker and asked for a cigarette.

"I'm going to buy my own. I'll pay you back." Geez, she sounded like a teenager.

"Ex-smoker, huh?" the lady smiled in reply. 'Tech' was on her badge. "Many people do that - start smoking again; I get it."

"Yeah, my son is sick."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Thanks."

Silence sat between them peacefully momentarily, along with the dancing breeze and the sound of chirping birds. Millie was dizzy from lack of oxygen, but it felt good. Numbness.

"I hope your son gets better," the tech said as she extinguished her half-smoked cigarette in the grass at her feet. "Most of them do, ya know. That's why I like working in the children's hospital."

Millie remained on the outside bench after the tech left. She sat as still as possible, hoping the birds would land on her, thinking she was a lifeless statue. She even held her breath for a while. She finally went inside when the air was beginning to warm.

"Where have you been?" her grandmother said as Milly entered the room.

"I thought you were here to give me a break. Is Ian okay?" Millie exclaimed.

"They want to give him a transfusion."

Ian was sitting up, propped in the bed, so pale, not saying a word, not normal for a two-year-old.

The terror started in her throat as a sudden pain, a choking, and then spilled down to her motionless feet for what seemed like a suspension of time. Nausea started as she sailed to his bedside, her grandmother relaying the details that seemed to pound against Milly's head incoherently.

Yet grandma continued to speak in pleasant tones as if telling a soothing bedtime story to the both of them, a pretense of normalcy, as Millie stroked her son's weak body.

"Something's not right!" Milly interrupted. "Go get the nurse, Grandma. He is just too weak."

The glass door slid on its trajectory, and white shoes entered first, followed by a nurse around the curtain like a performer appearing on the stage.

"We've been looking for you, mom," she addressed Millie. "We need to give Ian some blood. His counts are low."

"He looks so pale, and I've never seen him this weak before."

"The blood will help. It will make him much stronger."

The nurse spoke emphatically, looking directly into Millie's eyes to be sure she was hearing. She explained how they wanted to "beef" him up. What a word!

Then the nurse explained that they wanted to start the chemotherapy. Sure, sure. Absolutely. She'll agree to all of it. Just fix her son!

It was as if they had stepped into a sinkhole, a mire, and were stuck, going down fast, she, along with her poor sick baby. Yes, please rescue us! Help!

Then, the nurse and grandma chatted, agreeing on how positive things were. This could, in fact, be a "blessing-in-disguise," grandma said. Millie wanted to scream at them, yet her brain told her they were only trying to help.

Instead, she sat paralyzed, staring at Ian like a mute. But, one more word from them and she might lose it.

The nurse explained the details of the treatment and the possible side effects. She seemed to drone on and on as Millie grew edgy and nervous. Just get on with it already!

But when the nurse came over and touched Millie softly on her shoulder, she understood something basic and gentle and kind, and the dam broke.

Her throat released its grip, and she covered her face with her hands and sobbed. All Milly could feel then was gratitude for the words of hope for her son.

On her umpteenth walk down the hallway, Millie almost passed the conference room where the doctor had given her the bad news the previous day. Instead, she decided to duck inside for a

moment or two. Wistfully, she hoped to capture just a few rational thoughts, as if sitting for five minutes would grant her the full use of her mind.

She leaned back into the same vinyl chair, rested all her weight against it, and closed her eyes.

Just breathe. In and out, in and out.

When she opened her eyes, she was surprised to notice the horrible scratch had been fixed.

Almost. The plaster was patched and painted. She reached over and touched the paint. It was still wet. When she withdrew her finger, it had a little white paint circle on it. Some things can become fresh, glossed over, so one can hardly tell there was a flaw there just the day before.

Who knew paint and plaster could render such corruption unstained? Amazing, really.

Resting, breathing, feeling lucid, and holding her finger to dry, Milly looked long at the spot where the scratch had been and slowly began to pray.

If it wasn't for the knowledge of why they were there, the serenity of holding her son for hours at a time and resting quietly as both of them gathered their strength, it might feel like a dreamy experience.

The waiting was already beginning. That's what everyone has said that one must do.

Wait.

It felt like they were curled in a small boat, gently rocking on tranquil waters, waiting for the next ship to hail them with new information. Two nurses came in with a bag of dark red blood.

They checked everything on him and listened to his breathing before starting the life-saving drip that flowed into the pumping machine.

The rhythmic sound seemed to accelerate as Millie watched the drops of crimson splash into the drip chamber, swirling and mixing with the fluid. Drops of blood awaited transport down the tube to be the next in the queue and eventually be absorbed into her son. It reminded her of science class and learning about the blood flow through the human heart. 'Trace a drop of blood through the cardiovascular system' was the assignment. The ventricles, powerful, muscular chambers expelled the newly oxygenated blood forcefully to the entire body. And how long are all the vessels when lined up? A football field?

Watching Ian receive his transfusion, Millie fell asleep next to him as they rode the rhythmic cadence of sounds and nurses entering in a phantasm of non-reality. The following person to enter the scene, for they had become the audience, was the kind doctor who had explained everything the day before. He again spoke of Ian's condition, a type of leukemia, the "good" kind, and reminded Millie of the treatment because he knew she probably couldn't remember everything from the day before.

'The human brain is a mighty organism, capable of processing...' Although unwanted and intrusive, unhappy words have a way of searing themselves in one's memory.

But Millie asked questions that day, having the freedom of thought and maturity that one-day-lived-in-these-shoes can bring. She drew from her memory and logic units of information that gathered themselves into coherent and reasonable questions.

At the onset of treatment, she rallied to join the others in her son's rescue.

And one question escaped her mouth, from somewhere intangible, from somewhere else in her brain. She asked it at the end of the conversation, not filtered by her fear.

And the good doctor answered with sincere conviction, "Oh, yes, Ian's chances are much better than fifty-fifty!"