

Mary Poppins was my nurse on Day 6. "Pretend you're at summer camp," she joked, encouraging every step I made toward healing and recovery. "We've got a whole bunch of activities for you to choose from."

"But instead of Newcomb and color wars and collecting orange salamanders or dancing to Tommy James and the Shondells," I said, "today's activities at the hospital include pain med management, ice chip crunching, and Dammit! Doll whacking..."

"Don't forget IV pole walking," she teased. "I always know when you're coming because your IV pole is the squeakiest." She tenderly guided me back into bed.

"But instead of early morning skinny dipping," I said, "someone signed me up for the johnny gown flash mob."

That really made her laugh. "I wish all my patients worked like you."

"Well, you help make it easy," I admitted. "I loved sleepaway camp. I'd pack my trunk with stamped stationary and Razzles, pick-up sticks and jacks. And my Magic 8-Ball. My bunkmates and I thought we could predict the future. Go figure. I could never have predicted this." She wrapped a warm blanket around my feet. "One year," I continued, "I was the last camper to be picked up and, on the way home, my sisters teased me that my parents wanted to leave me there."

"That's one of the reasons I love my job here," she smiled. "The staff is a family. We're planning a barbecue together this weekend."

It was August 2013.

Room for Grace

Dr. David Sanfred, our family practitioner, walked into my room at 6:45 a.m. and stood at the end of my hospital bed. "Maureen, we're getting ready to send you home soon," he said. And then, "It's time to talk."

It was time to face what I'd avoided all week.

"I'm sorry to tell you, but it's very serious." Though by our family's side for many difficult situations, I'd never heard Dr. Sanfred's tone this methodical. "We thought it was Stage 1 but the cancer metastasized from the colon to your umbilicus and has advanced to Stage 4."

The hospital symphony went silent. I turned my head and watched the early morning sunlight peek through the window. "Is it curable?"

He gave my hand a soft pat. "No, it is not curable."

I heard myself gasp.

I was in a panorama shot. I saw Mary Poppins outside the thin curtain share morning notes with the nurse coming on. They whispered, glanced sympathetically in my direction. I struggled for breath and gripped the Dammit! Doll.

"Will I be able to go back to my classroom?"

"No," he cautioned, "you will not be able to teach right now. But soon. We hope."

The tears kept coming. Mary Poppins came back into the room. She reached out and hugged me gently, with so much affection I could feel her heart break.