
NON-FICTION | FALL 2015

Rounds

By Susan Ito

After midnight, I hear my 92-year old mother's voice jar me awake. "Susan? I need some help." I struggle to my feet and find her in the hallway outside our bedroom, two flights up from her own room. Her pajama top is drenched in blood. I yelp out to wake my husband. "John! JOHN!"

His physician voice is calm from the dark of our bed. "Let's just get it cleaned off." He's less panicked than I am.

The back of her head is matted with dark blood, and dark rivulets trickle down her neck, her chest, into her underwear and pajama bottoms. She perches on the edge of our tub and we mop her up with bath towels. I can see the pulsing of blood, bubbling like the mudpots at Yellowstone, coming through her hair. She sits quietly while John puts on sterile gloves and cleans away the wound. It's still bleeding. He does a neurological exam. "Stick out your tongue. Do you know where you are?"

She looks at him like he's stupid. "We're in your bathroom!"

"What happened? How did you hit your head?" She can't remember. Maybe she tripped on her suitcase on her way to the bathroom. Maybe she didn't. Later, I'll find a metal curtain pull broken off at the wall, and blood spattered on the white carpet below.

I bundle her into the car and drive the dark, carless roads down the Berkeley hills to Alta Bates Hospital. Across from the hospital is John's old office building, where I'd bring our daughters to visit him at work, and he'd let them sprinkle food into the fish tank. I pull up in front of the Emergency Room and hold my mother's hand as we walk slowly up the concrete ramp. Both of our hands are streaked with blood.

After submitting her name, she and I sit in vinyl seats and struggle to stay awake. Every few minutes, the automatic doors slide open and others stumble in, seeking care. Young parents hovering over a small infant. A few other middle aged people with elderly parents. A few lonely, suffering souls, talking to themselves and the furniture. Finally, near three in the morning, a nurse leads us to a room. I'm nauseated from fatigue. I slouch in a plastic chair while we wait for blood test results, EKG, brain scan. I drift in and out of sleep. In my haze, I'm passing through the walls of Alta Bates hospital, visiting the rooms I knew so well.

August 1982: Conference Room

Employee orientation: I'm a new physical therapist, in my first job after years of grueling study where I was always on the verge of flunking out. Three thousand miles from my alma mater in New York, nobody knows this. All they know is that I've graduated from an accredited program, I've passed the California state board exams, and I've been hired. I like that this place is named after a nurse who started caring for patients in her family home in 1905. I've got a plastic name tag with my name and the letters RPT. Registered Physical Therapist. I'm official.

In the darkened room, we are shown a terrifying videotape of earthquakes, and how we are to respond to them. A man's voice rumbles over footage of swaying, collapsing buildings. In the event of a major earthquake in San Francisco, the narrow streets between downtown skyscrapers will be filled with close to twenty feet of broken glass. I imagine thousands of office windows

shattering, then raining down on pedestrians. Below, a river of blood and glass shards. I vow to never, ever set foot in downtown San Francisco. We are told that as health professionals, if there is a catastrophic natural disaster, we are to make our way to the hospital to help our community. My mouth is dry with anxiety. When I get home, I will stock an earthquake preparedness kit with water, flashlight batteries and packages of Oreo cookies, which I will eat and then replenish, telling myself, “I doubt the earthquake will happen tonight.”

Next, the female employees are warned to never be alone in the hospital’s parking structure. Women have been raped behind cars this summer. I take a laminated card with the phone number of hospital security and tuck it into my wallet. “Call for an escort; don’t walk alone!”

I had no idea that beautiful, laid-back California was so dangerous. Earthquakes, tons of shattered glass and parking garage rape. I leave those details out when calling my parents to celebrate my first job.

September 1982: North Wing Elevator

I’ve got my own caseload on the rehab team. I’m a pro at running from room to room, coaxing patients to their feet after surgery. Supine-to-sit. Sit-to-stand. Ambulate ten feet, twenty feet, down the hall with SBA, CGA, SUP. Standby assist, contact guard assist, supervision. I’ve got my squeaky white shoes, my navy pants and white lab coat.

On my way down to the cafeteria, I stand next to a doctor. The embroidery on his lab coat tells me his name is John. He has John Lennon spectacles, coffee colored hair and dimples. “Hi,” he says. I say hi back. I hug my clipboard to my chest, blushing.

Cafeteria

I’ve made friends among the other physical therapists in the rehab department: Jill, who is Japanese-American like me; and tiny Bonnie, who drives an old Volvo and talks about wanting a job in Saudi Arabia, where salaries are supposedly astronomical. They treat me like one of them; a colleague. I’m only twenty-three years old. They don’t know that I failed anatomy, that I choked when I saw the little pins with numbered flags on them, piercing graying muscle bellies and branching nerves. I couldn’t tell my cadaver’s brachioradialis from his anconeus. But they don’t know this. We like each other. We sit together in the high-ceilinged cafeteria and eat our salads off plastic trays.

Physical Therapy Outpatient Department

On the third floor, there’s a room with parallel bars, a few walkers parked in a corner, thick Velcro belts to hold onto. If the patients slip and fall wearing nothing but hospital gowns, they’ll just slide through our fingers. The belts have sturdy canvas loops, something to grab when they wobble. I like the ritual of taking patients for their First Walk After Surgery. Most of them believe it’s impossible, and they’re shocked and proud to take a slow, shuffling lap around the unit, while I steer their IV pole on wheels.

But today I’m filling for somebody in the Outpatient clinic on the first floor. I fill up the stainless steel tanks for hydrotherapy. Dip the patients’ arthritic hands in melted paraffin. I prepare the hot packs filled with sand. Later, when the low back pain patients come in, we’ll lift the packs from the steaming water with stainless steel tongs and wrap in terrycloth cases and then lay them onto the spasms.

I don’t like Outpatient. Outpatients usually have pain. Usually low back pain, which I feel helpless to fix. They wince when they ease their spasming bodies onto the treatment tables. I wish I had healing hands. I wish I knew how to provide relief. I remember what we learned in Modalities:

75% of back pain patients will improve whether they get treatment or not. 25% will get worse in spite of any treatment. Feeling powerless, I wrap hot packs in thick layers of industrial toweling. I lay the steaming weights onto their lumbar spines and pray that it helps, even for an hour.

October 1982: Fourth Floor Nurses' Station

There's a beautiful view of the whole San Francisco Bay from here – on clear days, the distinctive red shape of the Golden Gate Bridge is visible. I lean on the counter of the nurses' station and write my shorthand SOAP notes for the morning's patients. S is for Subjective ("patient reports pain level 2/10," O for Objective ("right knee flexion to 84 degrees as measured by goniometer") A for Action ("ambulated 50'x2 with SBA (standby assistance) and QC (4-footed quad cane) and P for Plan ("increased to 100' walk by tomorrow").

I look up from my clipboard and see Dr. dimpled John from the elevator, scribbling his own notes in another chart. "Hi," he says. He has a short stack of index cards in his chest pocket, with his own coded notes about his patients. "I'm in GI," he says. Gastroenterology. "I'm PT," I say, and I point to my name tag. Later that week, he slips one of the index cards across the counter. His whole name, and a phone number. Maybe we can get together sometime, he says.

I call his number and he asks, "Could you do me a favor?" He's going on a trip, and he wonders if I'll babysit his plants while he's gone. Of course, I say. He drives to my studio apartment in outer San Francisco and carries a carton of cactus, ice plants and a fern up to the third floor. I've made a pot of spinach soup from the Moosewood cookbook. It's green, fragrant, creamy.

A week later, I bring the plants back to his little house in Oakland. He answers the door in blue jeans, a white buttoned shirt and bare feet. I swoon a little. We have a few dates in bookstores and restaurants, hikes in Tilden Park. But then I panic at his seriousness, at the way he is so grown up. He's been married already, and divorced. I'm only twenty-three. I'm too young for serious, I say. I retreat.

December 1982: Burn Unit

This is my least favorite place, even worse than Outpatient. But I have to go where they send me. The burn unit is like Hell. Patients are severely charred and in more pain than I have ever witnessed. Physical therapy is called in to do range of motion, or else the patients will end up frozen like mannequins. Unlike the geriatric population in the general wards, the burn patients are mostly young adults or teenagers. So many car or motorcycle accidents. I gingerly move their gauze-wrapped limbs and I struggle to be professional, to keep from crying as they cry.

Martin, the burn nurse, says it's his favorite place to work. He's from North Carolina, and his voice is soft and lilting as he peels layers of gauze from blackened skin. He laughs and tells silly jokes. He brings his banjo to the unit and plays for the patients. His kindness melts me. He leaves a message on my answering machine that sounds like a verbal letter. "Dear Susan Ito, would you like to take a drive? Love, Martin." We drive in his dented van through the tawny hills of Sonoma and stop at an outdoor bluegrass concert. I like him, but before long he's taken his banjo and moved back to the Carolinas. Decades later, I find his obituary on the internet. Cancer.

June 1983: Parking Garage

None us have been raped, and we've stopped calling Security for escorts. It's Bonnie's last day of work at our hospital. I lean on her sturdy, sun blistered Volvo and give her a little wrapped box with a porcelain camel inside. Have fun in Saudi Arabia, I say. I never see her again.

1984: Inpatient Physical Therapy Gym

One of my favorite patients, Oscar, a UC Berkeley professor, has terminal cancer of the spine. It's his dearest wish to die in Argentina, his home country. Although his first language is Spanish, he is fluent in Japanese. The doctors say if he can stand and walk a few feet to transfer into an airplane seat, they'll give the stamp of approval to his final journey. We work on the parallel bars, one dragging step forward at a time. Sometimes he crumples into the wheelchair after just a few seconds. I've got a stopwatch in my pocket and I count the time he can remain upright. When he reaches ten seconds, they discharge him home. I ask to be transferred to the home care division so I can continue working with him there.

Home Health

I pull up in front of Oscar's small Berkeley bungalow. Japanese electronic music by a composer named Kitaro is playing on the stereo. It's both sweet and eerie, wafting through the wood-trimmed rooms. "This music gives me strength," he says, and he positions his wheelchair in front of a wheeled walker. "I'm ready," he says. I grasp the back of his belt, and he labors to stand on trembling legs. He shuffles across the oak floor, fifteen feet across. Both of us are teary. "You did it, maestro." He is cleared for travel to Argentina.

Before he departs, I drive him to Macy's so he can purchase new pants for the trip. He stands shakily and holds onto a circular metal clothing rack while I measure the trousers for length and girth. A week later, his nurses and doctors gather in the backyard for a farewell barbecue, balloons and cake and champagne, to send our beloved friend and patient off to die.

GI Lab 1985

It's been a few years since I've worked at Alta Bate. By chance, I run into that John, that dimpled gastroenterologist, in a café nearby. A little skittish, we exchange numbers again. I've grown up a little; maybe I'm ready to try serious. I'm working in pediatrics now, at a special school. I decide to dress up as a surgeon. I call John and ask for a favor. "Could I borrow a pair of surgical scrubs?" It's as likely and necessary a favor as asking to plant-sit for a week.

I knock on the door of his little office near the GI lab. He's smiling, and the dimples are deep. He's awfully handsome. "Is this what you came for?" he asks, and hands me a pair of neatly folded green scrubs. "Thank you," I say, "I'll bring them back next week." "Or sooner," he says, and our hands touch.

Sept 1989: Maternity Floor

John and I have been married a year now. I have been gaining weight rapidly, in my sixth month of pregnancy. We stop by his medical office across from the hospital, just to check a few things. We had planned on browsing a bookstore, then a restaurant: our usual date. I ease onto the exam table and held out my arm, impatient for spanakopita.

I hear the Velcro tearing open the cuff, feel its smooth blue band. I dangle my feet and smile at John, the stethoscope around his neck. I love this small way he takes care of me. I feel the pounding of my heart echoing up and down my fingers, through my elbow.

"Lie down," he says quietly. "Lie on your left side."

The numbers are not good. He shakes his head and tells me to pee into a cup. "Let's check your urine for protein."

He dips paper strips into the cup of gold, cloudy liquid, and the color changes from white to powdery blue to indigo: my protein level is off the chart. “No,” he whispers.

“Your kidneys aren’t working,” he says. He pulls me across the street to the hospital and before I know it, I’m in the maternity ward. A nurse rushes me onto a bed. They pull at my clothes, my shoes; here comes another another blood pressure cuff.

A squirt of blue gel on my belly for the fetal monitor, the galloping sound of hoof beats, the baby riding a wild pony inside me. What a relief to hear that heartbeat.

There is a name for it. Preeclampsia.

Well, preeclampsia is better than eclampsia, and as long as it is pre-, they can stop it, right?

They slip a needle into my wrist, attached to a squishy bag of magnesium sulfate to prevent seizures. You may feel a little hot. As the drug oozes into my bloodstream, I feel a flash, like my tongue is baking. My scalp prickles, and I vomit onto the sheets. I feel as if I am being microwaved.

Ultrasound Lab

I am wheeled down to radiology. I stare lovingly at grainy images of the baby onscreen—waving, treading water. A real child, not a pony or a fish. An ultrasound tech with a red Coca-Cola shirt asks, “Do you want to know the sex?” I sit up. “Yes!”

She points. A flash between the legs, like a finger. A boy. I nearly leap off the gurney. “John! Did you see? A boy! It’s Samuel!” Sahn-well, the Spanish pronunciation, named after the beloved host father we’d stayed with in Nicaragua during our honeymoon.

He turns away from the screen; he doesn’t want to look, or celebrate having a son. He knows so much more than I do.

Maternity Ward

The neonatologist recites numbers slowly.

“Baby needs at least two more weeks for viability. He’s way too small. But you...” He shakes his head. “You probably can’t survive two weeks without having a stroke, seizures, worse.” He means I could die.

“What are the chances...that we could both make it?”

“Less than ten percent, maybe less than five.” The space between his fingers shrinks.

I am toxemic, poisoned by pregnancy. The only cure is to not be pregnant anymore.

I look at John hopefully. “I can wait. It will be all right.”

“Honey. Your blood pressure is through the roof. Your kidneys are shutting down. You are on the verge of having a stroke.”

I smile. Having a stroke at twenty-nine would not be a big deal, I think. I am a physical therapist; I know about rehab. I could rehabilitate myself! I could walk with a cane. Lots of people do it. I imagine leaning on the baby’s stroller handles, supporting myself the way elderly people use a walker.

We struggle through the night. “I’m not going to lose this baby,” I say.

“I’m not going to lose you,” he says.

After the longest night of my life, I relent. I sign papers of consent, my hand moving numbly across the paper, my mind screaming, I do not consent, I do not, I do not.

The doctor enters with a tray, a syringe, and a nurse with mournful eyes.

“It’s just going to be a bee sting,” he says.

And it is just like a sting: a small tingle, quick pricking bubbles beneath my navel; and then a tube that goes into my skin with a barely audible pop. It is so fast. I think, I love you, I love you, you

must be hearing this, please hear me. And then a Band-Aid, with its plastic smell of childhood, is spread onto my belly.

“All done,” he says. All done.

The medicine will stop his heart. To lay him down to eternal sleep, so he won’t feel what happens next, the terrible thing. Evacuation is what it is called in medical journals.

I wonder if he will be startled by the taste—bitter, or strange, or just different from the saltwater he is used to. I pray that won’t be noxious, that it won’t hurt. That it will be fast.

John sits next to the bed and holds my hand as I press the other against my belly. I looked over his shoulder into the dark slice of night between the curtains. Samuel, Samuelito, jumps against my hand once. He leaps into the darkness and then is gone.

1995 Maternity Floor

I haven’t set foot in this hospital in six years. I’ve had two other children, both daughters, in another hospital five miles away. I can’t bear to come through these doors. But my friend Alixe is in labor, and she has called for me. I ride the elevator, trembling, to the Maternity floor. I walk past the nurses’ station and my skin prickles. I remember the way I entered here six years ago, the wild commotion, the blood pressure cuffs, the magnesium sulfate.

Today, the nurses look ordinary and serene, even bored. I brush away the ghosts and step through the double doors to hold Alixe’s hand. We breathe and count, breathe and count, and when her son Gabriel takes his first breath, my eyes fill with tears of welcome.

2015 Emergency Room

John is in his first year of retirement. Our daughters are grown. Once again, I’m working as a home health physical therapist in addition to writing and teaching. My mother, at 92, has been living with us for eleven years since my father passed away.

Her fall brings me back to Alta Bates for the first time in decades. As I drift through the windowless hours of dawn, I remember all the moments I’ve lived here. The ultrasound lab down the hall, where the curly-haired technician introduced us to our never-born son. The gift shop where I bought Alixe some slippers and a teddy bear after her own baby was born. I think about John standing up to hand me the green scrub outfit, a wink at the edge of his eye.

A physician comes in and staples my mother’s head seven times with a white plastic staple gun. “I think we need to keep her for monitoring,” he says. “We’ll just look at her heart for 12 hours or so.”

Look at my heart. My heart is here. It’s in this building. They wheel her gurney into the elevator. I stand on the spot where I first met John. The floor rises and rises. When we step out on the sixth floor, there’s the view that always took my breath away. The sun is a bright fingernail on the horizon.

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