

For Madicken

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Mariangela Di Fiore

Riding Unicorns

“Ta-da!”

“Ooh, what? Where did the flower come from?”

“Magicians never reveal their tricks.”

“That’s unfair! But please do some more magic anyway!”

“Like what?”

“Like that Sindre will wake from his anaesthetic really soon!”

“Abracadabra ... a lolliwaitingpop! Someone will turn up while you’re eating this.”

I hate waiting. But here at the hospital I have to wait all the time.

It’s just about waiting and waiting.

And white.

The walls are white. Everything is white, really.

My brother, William, says he doesn’t want to come and see me because all the white hurts his eyes.

But today the sun’s shining through the large windows which makes the walls almost yellow. That’s a bit better.

I love building with Lego! And drawing. I draw rainbows and unicorns and pirate ships. All the things we don’t have at the hospital. I like to play games too. But the dice are missing from nearly all the games, so I have to make up my own rules.

I hope Sindre will play with me when he wakes up from the anaesthetic.

Actually I do like some white things.

Like snow, for example. And marshmallows.

And spaghetti before I put ketchup on.

I've had drawings from all my playgroup friends. But I haven't seen them for ages, so I don't really know if we're friends any more. I had to stop going to playgroup when I got ill. I probably won't have time to go back. Because this autumn I am starting school. If they'll let me. Olav says they have to see if my blood tests are okay. He's a doctor. I'm hoping and hoping and hoping they will be!

I like this room better than the one I had before. Because there the telly didn't work. And it was right next to the kitchen and the food smells made me feel sick. Since I've been ill I have nearly always been fed through my tube. It moves liquid food from my nose and into my stomach. When I throw up, the tube usually falls out. But now I've learnt a way of holding on to it with my finger, so that it stays put even if I'm really, really sick.

I wonder if Sindre is nearly ready! I've almost finished the whole lolliwaiingpop.

One day my legs started to hurt.

I almost didn't have the strength to stand up.

Dad was a bit fed up with having to carry me all the time.

Said I was a big girl!

But then he began to be a little bit worried.

“Is there something wrong with her legs?” he asked.

Then mum discovered some tiny red spots on my body.

“Isn’t she very pale?” wondered grandma.

We went to the doctor. She examined me, and then she took some blood from my fingertip.

I didn’t want to have a needle stuck in me so I scrunched up my hands.

But when the doctor said I’d get a prize, I let her do it.

Afterwards her face was very serious.

“You have to go straight to the hospital”, she said.

And then I was allowed to choose another prize.

By now I have several drawers full of prizes.

I’ve had all the things they have at this hospital, so now I usually get the same things all over again. Bouncy balls, plastic animals, stickers with eyes. I wish they had some different prizes. Like sunglasses. Because then I could give them to William to stop the white light from really hurting his eyes. Maybe that would make him come to see me.

I have some bad cells in my blood.

Leukaemia. That means cancer in the blood.

Cancer!

The bad cells get into the blood and eat up the good cells.

The doctors give me medicine which helps me to get well. It’s like poison for the bad cells.

But the medicines also make me very sick.

Isn't it weird that poison can make you well!

I wonder if William is cross with me because he has to stay with grandma now that mum and dad are living here at the hospital with me?

Sindre is the same age as William. Eight years old! But he still wants to play with me. I think we are best friends. We like making plasticine food because it doesn't make us feel sick. And pinching the music therapist's drums. Then we sit and play them on the stairs. It sounds really loud out there!

Sindre has a lump inside his head. The doctors tried to cut it out, but they didn't manage to catch all of it.

And then it began to grow. But Sindre doesn't spend too much time thinking about that. He thinks mostly about Ninjago. And about having a bike race with me in the corridors. Sometimes we crash into the nurses. But they are never angry. They just laugh.

I'm going to be taking medicines for two and a half years. Sindre doesn't know how long he will have to take medicines. It depends on how the lump grows.

But Sindre isn't afraid. He's never afraid. Because he has a special bravery bracelet. It's green and red and blue. And every time he's worried about something that's about to happen, he just looks at his bracelet. And then he isn't scared any more. I wish I had a bravery bracelet.

"Sindre! Finally!"

"Hi, Vilja Pilja"

"Do you want to play?"

"I just need to have a drink first."

“Shall we go on our bikes?”

“No, too tired. Let’s do interviews!”

“What’s the best thing in the world?”

“Swimming in the sea when it’s raining”, says nurse Mia.

“When I can have a peaceful cup of coffee all by myself!”, says mum.

“Having a long lie-in in the morning”, says the music therapist.

“And massage!”

“Juggling with three balls!” says Sofus, the hospital clown.

“Sitar music!”, says Farhad.

“Pancakes!” says Doctor Olav.

“You and William!” says dad.

“And mum, of course. And when Liverpool win.”

“Are you ready, Vilja?”

It seems to be my turn to be given a general anaesthetic. Just as we were having so much fun! The first time I was going to be put under, a nurse said it was just like sleeping. That’s when they found all the bad cells. Then they removed a piece of my bone marrow. They just took it out! Without asking me first. But now they’re not going to remove anything at all. They’re just going to squirt some chemo into my back.

“See you later, Vilja Pilja!”

“See you later, Sindre!”

“See you later, alligator!”

“See you later, hippopotamus!”

See you later, giraffe!”

“Da-a-a-d!”

Dad always messes about a lot when I’m going under. I think he dreads it. He doesn’t like having to leave the room and wait outside when I fall asleep.

“Hello, Vilja Pilja!”

“Hello Doctor Anders Farting-Panders!”

“Let’s give you some sleeping medicine.”

Dad and I always count down from ten. But I never get further than seven before I fall asleep.

Or, once I actually got to six.

But Sindre has got all the way to four.

Today I hurt all over. And I’m really tired.

I haven’t got the strength to do anything.

No magic shows. Or music sessions.

Not even playing with Sindre.

I’m sick of being bald! I’m fed up with lying in my bed and hurting!

I hate taking the awful medicines! I hate cancer!

Why did I of all people have to get cancer?

It makes me angry to think about it. But it makes me happy when Olav says that my hair will grow again. I'm just wondering when that will be.

The only good thing about not having any hair is that I don't have to comb it.

Before, mum and I always argued about hair brushing.

But when my hair grows back I'm going to brush it really well.

I promise.

William probably doesn't think I look very nice with my bald head.

Imagine if I'm still bald when I start school! How embarrassing will that be. Mum says I can wear a wig, but they are so itchy.

I wonder what my teacher will be like.

And who I will sit next to.

Sindre told me about a girl in his class who was given a desk that was far too high.

She couldn't even reach the top.

Will I be the only one in my class who has cancer?

Sindre is the only one who knows that I am actually a little worried about starting school.

He has offered to come with me on my first day.

Sindre was also bald, before. But now a little hair has started growing again.

It feels soft when you stroke it.

Sometimes when we're watching children's TV I stroke his hair. He likes that.

But if a grown-up comes into the room we just behave as if nothing has happened and then I stop the stroking.

“I’m going to give you some blood, Vilja. That’ll make you feel a bit better.”

When I’m having a blood transfusion it means that I get blood from another person into my body.

I wonder whose blood it is.

Maybe an old lady with a little yappy dog? Or a fireman?

Imagine if it was Spiderman-blood!

That would be really cool!

I think William, too, would think that was cool.

Sindre has got an infection and needs to be in an isolation ward. Nurse Mia told me he was moved there during the night. Sindre is probably really bored. At least I was when I was in the isolation ward.

I was very ill and had to stay there for several weeks. Neither mum, dad nor I could leave the room, and nobody was allowed to enter. The doctors and nurses had to wear special clothes and cover up their hair and faces. They looked a bit like astronauts.

If we wanted something to eat or drink we had to pull a chain. But mum and dad didn’t like creating a fuss. “It can wait”, they said, even if their tummies were rumbling. The only fun thing were the hospital clowns. They did a lot of messing about!

I could see them through the porthole in the door.

I hope they will let Sindre out soon.

“Let’s have some fun!” says Farhad. “Come and sit on my cleaning trolley and we’ll race down the corridor!”

Dad can't stop eating.

He eats all the food he brings in to me and that I don't want.

Because I feel sick and the food tastes really weird in my mouth.

Even ice cream tastes horrible. Chocolate too!

Before I was ill I dreamt of eating as many sweets as I wanted.

Now I hardly ever fancy sweets.

Today, dad brought me:

- two jam sandwiches
- one Nutella sandwich
- one cheese sandwich
- one green apple
- two probiotic drinks
- three pancakes
- one bowl of jelly and custard
- another bowl of jelly and custard
- three raisin buns
- one lollipop

He also brought me cod with potatoes and carrots for supper. But I have only eaten half an apple and a tiny bit of a bun. Dad ate all the rest.

Dad pats his stomach and says it's just as well we won't be able to go to the beach this summer. But I don't agree. I would much rather be at the beach than in here!

Mum complains that I won't eat, but she hardly eats anything herself. Sometimes I eat a little just to make her happy. Even if it makes me feel sick.

Is mum so thin because I have cancer?

Sometimes, when I'm given a medicine called cortisone, I eat loads!

Especially corn on the cob and omelettes. Cortisone makes Sindre hungry too. Once he ate five hamburgers in one day! Five! Not even William has eaten that many hamburgers.

If I get better at eating they'll let me take the tube out. I want to, I hate having this tube in my nose the whole time. And I really don't want it when I'm starting school. Then I want to have a lunchbox, just like all the others.

William has a dinosaur lunchbox.

I wonder if he'll come to my birthday party. I'm having a Spiderman cake. It's only two weeks away. But he probably won't. He's too busy with his football.

It's a bit rubbish having your birthday in hospital, really.

"Sindre! Are you out of isolation?"

"Yup! Shall we play?"

"Yes! Camel caravan?"

"Okay!"

I know something that is really bad. Something that is so bad that I just want to cry.

If Sindre's lump grows too much and the medicines can't stop it, he might die.

"What's dying really like?"

"I think that when you die you become like warm sunshine in the sky that shines down on everyone you love", says nurse Mia.

"I'm a bit busy", says Doctor Olav. "We can talk about it later."

"In my religion we believe that everyone goes home to God when we die. That's a good place to be and everyone is friends and has enough food", says Farhad.

“I think it’s like falling into a deep sleep and never waking up again” says the music therapist.

“I don’t know ... you just ... you just ... die ... I think”, says dad.

What if I die?

“Everyone has to die one day” says Sindre. “Just think about all the pirates who die because they fall overboard.”

I don’t like thinking about that. I don’t want anyone to die. Not even pirates.

Today is my birthday!

All the nurses came in and sang for me this morning!

They had flags and balloons.

And a present for me!

A pencil case.

Mum and dad gave me a school bag!

And then the best thing of all happened:

Olav came into my room and said that I’m allowed to start school!

“Sindre! I’ve got some news!

“Me too!”

“You first!”

“No, you!”

“I’m starting school. My blood tests are so good that I can start on the first day of school!”

“And I’m going to the USA.”

“Eh?”

“I’m going to get some new treatment there. They’re going to radiate my head.”

“You can’t!”

“But I have to. Otherwise I may not be well again.”

“But who’s going to come with me on my first day at school?”

“I’m going to give you my bravery bracelet. Now you won’t be scared of anything, Vilja Pilja.”

Having my birthday party at the hospital wasn’t so bad really. The only stupid thing was that I couldn’t manage to eat the Spiderman cake. Wait, no. The worst thing was that William didn’t come. He was playing in a football tournament. And that Sindre is going away. I don’t want Sindre to go away. But I don’t want him to die either.

“Ta-da! A flower for the birthday girl! Oh, dear, are you sad? On your birthday?”

“Yes, a little”

“Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“Can you magic Sindre well again so that he doesn’t have to go away after all?”

“Shall I tell you a secret, Vilja?”

“What?”

“I can’t really do magic. Just some very simple tricks, like that one with the flower. And the lolliwaiingpop. But when you eat this, someone you are waiting for is bound to turn up.”

“William?”

“Hi ...”

“Thought you were playing in a football tournament?”

“Yes ... but I changed my mind.”

“Did you really?”

“Yes, your birthday is more important.”

“Do you think so?”

“Yes.”

“Happy birthday, Vilja Pilja!”

“Shall I come right into the classroom with you, Vilja Pilja?”

“I think I can manage by myself, William. Because I’m wearing my bravery bracelet.”