

SHIREEN CAMPBELL

BENDING TIME

No one can prepare a parent to hear that a child is seriously, perhaps fatally, ill. In mere minutes of diagnosis, time itself may become unstable. Such diagnosis throws present and future into chaos, casts doubt on memories, and threatens to rewrite the past.

April 10th, 2001

"Can't you tell that isn't a space? Are you blind?" I engage both clutch and brake again. The white Lincoln ahead of us has stopped and idled at the halfway point of three entire parking garage floors before turning left to snail upward another level. Now, it sits, the blue-white head of the driver barely visible above the steering wheel as she ponders whether or not to park in a spot clearly covered with yellow stripes.

"Relax, honey. It's only ten till." My husband Jeremy pats my right thigh. I tense my quadriceps and shift my thigh to the left.

"We can't be late. These specialists have tight schedules."

"Shireen, we're on time," Jeremy looks over at me, but keeps his hand on the truck seat, "and we'll be out of here in an hour."

Sixty minutes later, we only wish we were bickering in the Ford F150.

My son Jonathan is struggling as hard as a three-month-old can against the echocardiogram. A technician is attempting to map his heart functions, but Jonathan screams and kicks. The older child being tested in the other half of this small room, divided by a plastic curtain, begins wailing.

"Honey, shh, shh. It's ok." I stroke Jonathan and bend over to hug

him on the gurney. Electrode goop smears on my chest as my dress rides up in back: Jeremy quickly pulls down the hem. *Who cares if my butt shows right now?* I furrow my brow at him; he furrows back. Dr. Sherman, the senior pediatric cardiologist we met for the first time today, comes in. He's short—and I mean short, as in five feet, three inches tall—but commanding.

After glancing at the read-out on the technician's machine, he turns to us. "Can't you give him a bottle, quiet him down?"

Jeremy responds: "No, he's breast fed, and we didn't remember to bring one."

"Look at that heart rate! We've got to calm him down." He turns back to the technician, and they confer quietly. Jeremy stiffens. We don't look at each other.

Maybe nursing will help. I force my right breast up out of my neckline, recline sideways on the gurney, and rub the nipple across the baby's lips. Jeremy starts to hold a green striped receiving blanket around me, but gives up. The technician is busy with her probes and machinery anyway. Jonathan latches on and sucks, shutting out the cold and the noise and the strangers who keep touching him. Now, as he settles, the technician begins her measurements.

The echocardiogram screen features greens and blues and reds and yellows. Periodically, the technician freezes a frame and measures the distance between two blobs, then moves her probe on Jonathan's chest. Blue gives way to red gives way to blue again. *Is that what a heart looks like in action? Is what I'm looking at good or bad?*

Over the hills and far away

Teletubbies come to play

I snap toward the noise. A video has begun playing on a TV mounted high in the other child's corner. Purple, lime, yellow, and then a smaller red being spring out of a dome.

Time for teletubbies

Time for teletubbies

Oh, that's what they look like! Now the tubbies are introduced, each waving to the camera. *Which one's supposed to be gay?* I can't understand their speech, but watch anyway. It hurts to look at the video slumped sideways, but Jonathan seems hungry.

Another doctor, twenty years younger and even shorter than Dr. Sherman, enters, and the technician asks him to look at the screen. He smiles