

Andrea Rains Waggener Memoir Excerpt

(Names have been changed to protect identities)

A monitor shrieks. Piercing, brain-drilling alarms ululate in dissonant counterpoint. My attention is still on Frank and Aaron, but I can see a *flat line* streaming across a screen near Aaron's bed.

Frank's features are contorted in frenzy of dread, as if both stretched and compressed by unseen hands. Every line of his forehead and his cheeks look like they're being scored deeper and deeper into his skin. His eyes are so wide open they seem to be on the verge of shooting from his head. His gaze darts around the room in desperation, clearly seeking the help he's calling for. I have never seen my husband's face express so much panic and pain.

Frank looks like he wants to tear from the room with his son in his arms, wants to race toward help, any help. But Aaron is hooked up to tubes and lines, and even in his crazed shock and grief and panic, Frank has the presence of mind to know he can't just yank Aaron from his medical mooring lines. So he just grasps Aaron tightly and bellows even louder for help, help that can't come fast enough.

And Aaron. *Oh my baby boy!* He's seizing!

Gripped in his father's arms, Aaron's body arches in Frank's grip. Aaron's head is tilted back, his eyes rolled upwards so I can't see his irises. His limbs are limp. For maybe a couple seconds, which feel like a couple centuries, I stare at Aaron's dangling feet, his small white, precious, lifeless feet.

I'm not sure if it's the sight of Aaron's flopping feet or Frank's continued shouts for help that spur me into action, and I don't know how much time passes between waking and standing—probably just a few seconds—but I finally move. I erupt from the recliner and sprint toward the door of Aaron's room to get the help Frank's calling for.

At the door, I run into a phalanx of help.

Nurses and doctors rush past me, flowing around me like I'm an insignificant stone in a raging river. I'm nearly hit with some kind of machine on wheels. A defibrillator? I don't know. I know a "Code Blue" is being called. I know it's for Aaron. I know my son is dying.

I can still hear Frank yelling. "*Save my son!!*"

Others are shouting too. Nurses? Doctors? I don't recognize the other voices. Some of the voices are trying to get Frank to leave the room. He's refusing. I know my husband. They will not get him out of that room. He will *not* leave Aaron's side.

I hear him again, roaring, "*Don't worry about me! JUST SAVE MY SON!*"

Later he will tell me that they try to push him from the room, but he plants himself. He stays out of the way; he doesn't want to impede the professionals helping Aaron. But he has to be there. He says if he hadn't been there watching this "military-like operation" to save Aaron, Frank wouldn't have survived the experience. For Frank, not knowing is worse than knowing even the bleakest facts.

Stumbling away from the medical team running in to save my son, I stagger a few feet, barely aware of my surroundings. I'm not sure how it happens, but I find myself sitting on the floor, leaning against a wall about 20 feet from the door to Aaron's room.

The floor is cold and hard. I don't care.

The team in Aaron's room is speaking in codes. A variety of voices bark medical lingo—initials, words that make no sense, numbers. I hear snapped orders, clipped responses. More shouts. Over the intercom, more codes are thrown out, along with Aaron's room number. From the room, I hear the initials, "DIC." I don't know what that means. Later, hearing them again, Frank and I think it means, "Death is coming." It doesn't, but what it does mean is nearly as devastating.

I'm sitting just inside the entrance of the PICU, near the front of the nurse's station. I'm tucked in a spot where I'm not in anyone's way. From here, I can see Aaron's door, but I can't see inside the room. I'm not trying to look anyway. My eyes are barely working for some reason. Everything is unfocused. Even the tile squares beneath me, slick pale peach, black-speckled squares alternating with white, black-speckled squares and interspersed with the occasional light blue and other colored squares start to blur beneath me, melding into an abstract collection of spots and color.

My hearing is okay, though. In fact, it's too acute. I still hear Frank's voice; so infused is it with Frank's powerful emotions—his love, his fear, his hope, his desperation—it rises above every other voice in the room. I use it as a tether, keeping me connected to him and my son even though I sit out here alone.

I hear him command over and over, "Help my son," and at one point, I hear him instruct, "Someone please help my wife."

*Help my wife?* I think. I don't need help.

The idea that I need help feels silly. I'm fine.

And truly, astoundingly, I *am* fine.

My eyes still aren't working properly, but I'm not concerned. Now my ears are taking a vacation too. The shouts and screeching alarms and clattering cart wheels—they all begin to mute, as if someone is turning down the volume on the scene. And then suddenly the noise is nearly entirely extinguished, or if not totally gone, it's at least moved far, far away.

Or have I moved?

No. I'm still here, on the floor.

But I feel far away. I feel like I've been transported from the hospital. I don't know where I am, but it's not here where my body is.

I'm not in this chaotic space and time filled with a fight to save my son's life. I'm in a peaceful place, a place so filled with sweetness and lightness that I almost feel like I'm floating. I'm floating and basking. I'm basking in the knowing, the absolute *knowing* that everything is okay. Everything's fine.

Am I in a different reality? On another spiritual plane?