It was August in New York. More accurately, it was August in Brooklyn, and that is hotter still. Both the heat and the humidity approached one hundred, and Brooklyn does not provide many air-conditioned distractions from such an infernal onslaught.

That Summer marked the beginning of my second year as a Fellow in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Downstate-Kings County Hospital Centers. I was assigned to our Pediatric-Liaison Consultation Service. While I would dutifully respond to calls from the Pediatric Medical and Surgical floors, I would also, between consultations, take my car for drives around the long blocks of the hospital complexes. It had one of the few accessible air-conditioners within a five-mile radius.

I was in the car. It was the middle of the day, and the heat was striking its oppressive crescendo. My beeper signalled. When I checked in, the message operator said, "Go see Ivy on B-61." I dragged myself to the Pediatric Medical Floor in the Kings County Complex. As I arrived, trying to reengage a semblance of professional presence, the nursing staff began to joke. They suggested that the entire building should be infused with mega-doses of aspirin to relieve it of the stuflifying fever induced by the Summer sun. "Ivy," they nodded, and handed me a chart.

Ivy was a ten year old girl with leukemia. The diagnosis had been made two years previously, and a remission had been accomplished. She had returned home and done well until the recent end of the school year, at which time her mother noted extreme lassitude. Four weeks before I was called to see her, Ivy had been readmitted,
febrile, and with a host of pathological findings. Attempts to induce a further remission had thus far been unsuccessful. She remained febrile and had begun to appear more toxic.

Ivy was moved into what was euphemistically called the "private room" on this City Hospital pediatric ward, a small, sterile yellow-tiled room, about eight feet by ten feet—certainly an old bathroom—now used for reverse isolation.

The Pediatric Staff had tried to make the room look cheery, but their good intentions were easily wilted by the oppressive heat and the cramped quarters. The room took on a strange closet-like atmosphere, as it was overfilled with just a hospital bed, a television set, and poor pathetic Ivy. The child sweltered as a tiny electric fan moved small streams of hot air around. She was small, gaunt, and looked miserably unhappy. Islands of curly hair dotted her tiny scalp. The fan and the television were plugged into the only outlet in the room. An I-V bottle was plugged into Ivy, and Ivy was emotionally plugged into the T.V. set.

The T.V., she explained, had been her only companion for two weeks. Her mother and her aunts, her entire family, had stopped coming to see her, and she was very, very lonely. We chatted about the T.V. for awhile. The repertoire of shows provided her with minimal, but predictable companionship. Then, after a half-hour, as we were getting to know one another a bit, Ivy asked me to turn off the television. After I did so, she looked sorrowfully, but with deep resignation at me. She whimpered, "No one comes to see me anymore, except the doctors and the nurses. I think that now I am going to die forever. Can't you find my Mommy?" No more needed to be said, and I promised that I would try. At any rate, I would come back tomorrow.

I checked the chart to discover, almost predictably, that mother had no telephone. As I was about the leave the ward, I decided to ask Ivy if she had a neighbor with a phone. I returned to her room and stuck a quickly recapped and remasked head into her room. Ivy was asleep. "It'll keep," I thought. "There's always tomorrow." I doubled my pace to the elevator with renewed and refreshing thoughts of my air-conditioned car.

The following day I returned to the ward in mid-morning. When I saw that the caps and gowns were no longer outside the "private room," and the door to that old bathroom was slightly ajar, I, in total reflex, knew what I would find inside. The bed had been stripped, the mattress folded in half. The T.V. and the fan were gone. And so was Ivy. She had died in the night, and the hospital was still looking for her mother.

It occasionally still haunts me to think of that consultation