Mission of Mercy, Ocean of Guilt

By SUSAN STEWART

At 3 p.m. on a Friday afternoon, I am racing through a Toys "R" Us, searching for a Winnie the Pooh gift wrap. Not the Disney version, with Pooh in the tacky T-shirt, but the original Shepard Illustrations, where Pooh is naked, but so British you don't notice.

The gift wrap is for my daughter's "senior page" in her high school yearbook. It is due today. It's not going to get done today. This Toys "R" Us is in Winston-Salem, N.C., about 440 miles from my house and my 17-year-old, and about three miles from the major teaching hospital where my brother is a patient in an intensive care unit. Nurses are taking care of my brother, and I am taking care of business.

I am pretty good at this. I took care of business, and, to a lesser extent, my mother, for two and a half years. Home care, assisted living, nursing home, hospice. All from 520 miles away. Compared to that, the ICU is a piece of cake. When you live a great distance from your family, the hospital is your friend. I used to breathe easier whenever my mother was admitted. For a few days or a week, I wouldn't be responsible.

People who live close to their families don't understand this. They treat the hospital as a haven of horrors from which they must protect their loved ones. They all show up: generous cohorts of relatives, operating generations, usually dressed in sweatsuits and carrying plastic foam boxes of food and donations because they're going to keep a vigil.

I dress up, and keep business hours. I get there for morning rounds, because that's when I can buttock a doctor, and I take a wash in the hospital's little retail therapy — Pooh gift wrap, show, something for the children at home. I dress up for the hospital personnel, so they will know I am a person of substance whose relatives must be treated well in my absence.

As I walked down the hall to the operating room, following the gurney that held my sedated brother, a nurse complimented me on my short-shear print espadrilles. Does fashionable footwear translate into better medical care? There is no way to test this theory, but I considered the nurse's remark a victory for my brother.

When visiting hours are over, I leave. I go to the motel where relatives of patients get a reduced rate, and I have a glass of wine and a cheeseburger at the little restaurant, where the waiters actually know me. Then I spend two hours lying on the bed in my room, watching TV shows I would never allow myself to indulge in if I were at home.

That's another thing you learn when you live a great distance from your family: being with the sick one is the easy part.

When my mother was sick, and I was not with her, I wished I had a cellphone surgically implanted on my person. Some days there were 50 calls. I had to deal with them while living my regular life, which contained two children, a husband, a dog, a job and a house. It was too much. But when I was with my mother, all the rest receded into the background. A vacation from your regular life, it turns out, is a vacation, even if you're taking it in a nursing home.

Nobody else knows this. When you're there, you're on a mission of mercy, even if you're looking for Pooh gift wrap in a shopping mall. When you're not there, you're selfishly living your own life, even if you're working like a dog.

Naturally, this is all about guilt. If you asked me to describe what guilt feels like, I couldn't tell you. I suspect that is because guilt is the air I breathe. When I'm with my family of origin, I feel guilty about my husband and kids, who never complain or second-guess me about leaving, and who always pick up the slack when I am gone. When I'm with my husband and kids, I feel guilty about my family of origin, which is equally valid. My mother, even at the end, never asked me to stay. "Get on the plane," she would say from her bed. "Go home." Wherever that is, I would think, walking quickly out of her room so she wouldn't see me weeping.

People with families close by can cry in front of them, knowing they won't be leaving them with an image of misery. They can act on their impulses.

Once, when I described my mother's medical condition to a woman who has three sisters within 30 miles, she said: "Why are you standing here talking to me? I'd already be in the car."

A few weeks ago, when I explained to a nurse at the ICU that I had a job I needed to get back to, she said, "You can always get a job."

Just writing those statements makes me so angry I want to spit. Here is how I look at it: Two people in a surgical waiting room is one more than necessary; three is an indulgence. That's the word: indulgence. When you live far away, and you have responsibilities in two places, you don't get to indulge in your own hysterical impulses. Of course you want to jump in the car when you hear your mother is sick. Of course you want to sit by your brother's bed. But what about the job that is helping to put your own children through college? What about their dinners? What about the senior pages in your yearbooks?

There ought to be some sort of ethical equation here: child's senior page versus brother's oxygen saturation level. Parents' weekend at college versus lonely mother in assisted-living apartment. But I was never good at math. I just do whatever seems more important, from one day to the next.

And I feel incredibly grateful that I have two daughters. I talk about how one day they'll argue over who has to deal with me.

"I had her at Thanksgiving," I imagine them hissing to each other. "You have to take her at Christmas." The thing is, I'm not really joking.