

## In Support Of

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I hope that given enough time the pain will ease, and I will at some distant time move among the others, and they won't know anything about what haunts my days or keeps me awake at night, or if I will ever be fully able to discern where the differences lie. I see them everywhere, the people and the places, but they somehow remain just beyond my reach. I feel that I can almost put my fingers on them, but then, they move away. I think I know; I could almost sit right down and tell you, but then I don't. I just like to think I do. I can tell you how it was; at least the part I think I remember.

We were on vacation, all of us: Megan and I with the kids—all of us together. This was an unusual thing. We actually managed to arrange time for a vacation. How unusual it is that our schedules worked out so well that we could have time off together. Megan is an attorney, within an eyelash of making partner. This is unheard of in the short time she has been with Braden & Hatcher. It is a family owned company, and Megan is neither a Braden nor a Hatcher. However, she is beautiful and bright—articulate and determined. She is the golden girl—golden hair, golden skin, but with a will of hardened steel. The numbers of hours that she has put in are enormous. It has tried us all, but we know that we have to make it work for her.

She is close to reaching her dream. We can all feel it hovering with every breath. I'm back home on extended medical leave, so I thought I'd have more time to help. She is used to making it on her own, but I say, "What the hell. I know that I won't be a great deal of help, but an extra set of hands, right?" All of us are making sacrifices—the children, Megan, and now there is me. I'm learning to cook since I've been back, although cooking still doesn't rate at the top of my somewhat short list of domestic accomplishments. I get the feeling that she thinks I am kind of in the way. It isn't anything she says, really. It is just a current of irritation that slides into conversation now and again when I try to do something to help.

However, I, with the help of our neighbor and friend, Dorothy, have taken over most of the chores for the kids. I do a good bit of the chauffeuring, and some of the homework and laundry. I'm required to attend group meetings at least three times a week, more if I can, so I can't do too much—that's where Dorothy comes in. She helps during the times when I can't be there; for instance, to take them to friends' houses or early and late pick-ups. She also bakes, and many times, they go to her house and make cookies and fudge. They think of her as their surrogate Granny since both of their grannies live miles away—one on each coast, so there are many miles to each.

The kids, Hannah and Davis, manage a somewhat normal schedule of afterschool activities, sports, the usual deluge of activities surrounding preadolescents these days. They are limited to two extracurricular activities each, but some days that seems like two too many. Some days I do better than others. Some days my skin feels itchy and raw, and I want to snap at them about everything. Still, I'm doing better now. I have better control than I did. Much better control now, I think.

Megan's schedule has become more erratic. Her hours seem way too long. I hate that. For the last two months, she has hardly been home until well past the time the children have been bathed and put to bed. Sometimes, I have the kids send a text before they go to bed; but even then, they may not get a reply until much later. In fact, it seems that I've had to depend on Dorothy more and more to watch them when I have had to go to my meetings. I hope that this will not put a strain on our friendship, but Dorothy is the soul of patience. Also, as a semi-retired nurse, who works prn weekends, I know that she'll be able to help out for almost any emergency that might arise.

“Ray, you know these are probably the next best thing to my own grandkids that I'll ever have. I love being able to be here for your babies. My husband was in Nam, and it wasn't easy for him when he came back, either. They said he had the Vietnam Vet Syndrome. He got through it, mostly. I love having time to play grandma. Don't worry about it. You go to your meetings. I'll watch the kids if you're late.” She laughs—a deep large happy sound. I do, though, I worry a lot; I can't help it.

My meetings are usually good. They help on some nights; some they don't. The guy that leads them was in Nam. I think it must have been different then. The one guy I can talk to, Andy, he was in Iraq before, the first time and this time too. He gets what I'm talking about. He's big into history. Sometimes, we go to a bar afterward and get a beer—sometimes two, but no more than that. He talks about stuff he's read about World War I, and the tin masks guys used to wear. He says that if soldiers had their face parts blown away that they'd get copper masks to cover their faces. These masks were painted to look like their real faces. One big problem, though, was that the face only had one expression. I can relate to that. Sometimes, that's me. There are days when I feel that I

only have one expression. I asked Andy how did these guys eat and drink. He says he doesn't know. God, I'd hate that. I think it'd be pretty damned scary.

Megan is sometimes apologetic. At these times, she sighs a lot and tells us that she feels like she is taking advantage of everyone, but I keep telling her that we'll get through it. I tell her that I know she has the potential to make it at Braden & Hatcher, and that I'll do whatever I can to see her through. She has an odd expression on her face when I say that, and I don't read it very well. There are days when I have my doubts, but I know it's important to her to see us as successful, to be successful, and to have the life that neither of us had when we were kids. She's tough, oh so tough; she'll make it.

Vacations, for us, have always been sacrificed to the god of "not enough time and money right now." It was truly unexpected. We managed two weeks just after the July 4th holiday. Man, I hate that time with all the pops, whistles, and booms. It seems that it starts earlier and lasts longer every year. The kids love it, though. They love the shooting flares, the bright lights, and the rainbow of colors. I used to too when I was their ages.

We got a small windfall of cash from my stepdad who felt uncharacteristically generous, or guilty; he wanted to do something for us for a change. We got to thinking that a vacation might be possible. The kids had a gap in the stream of their summer kid activities. It looked like we might have a shot at a short space when the four of us could spend time together and act the part of a normal happy family. I'll have to say that I, and Megan too, I'm sure, were both glad, though reluctant to admit even to one another how much, that we could be together for two whole weeks with no one else having claims to our time but us, not even Dorothy. Our friends gave me some weird looks when I tried to explain how excited I was to have our children totally to ourselves for two weeks. Even

when Dorothy hinted that she'd be glad to go along and act as nanny, I didn't exactly blow her off, but I avoided taking the hint. She asked if she should ask Megan, and I said that it really wasn't necessary.

We planned to take almost the entire two weeks at the beach—twelve days actually, since we needed to include the time to drive both directions and a little time to get ourselves packed and unpacked. I found a spot recommended by the solo female in our group, which was promoted as an unspoiled and pristine oceanfront paradise that was Florida as it used to be. To me, that speaks of a place where people fish clear unmuddied waters for fish that are caught to be eaten, and not to be hung as trophies on walls in rooms where no one visits once the fish are mounted and attached to overdressed designer walls. Megan tells me until the day we actually leave that she isn't sure that she'll be able to work out this trip. It isn't that I want to make her feel guilty about going, but since I was able to get everything planned and paid for, what could she say?

Hannah jumps up and down for joy at the thought of going to the beach. Her round compact five-year-old body lifts gracefully considering that she is still well-padded with baby fat. Her dimpled chin and cheeks are round and glowing with the prospect, even though she is mildly disappointed that she won't be allowed to take her new kitten, a semi-birthday gift from her grandmother who, as usual, sent a check for her to get what she wanted. We immediately landed at the animal shelter that acts as a dump for all the unwanted pets that are debris from departing military families.

Davis, on the other hand, solemnly evaluates the possibility from the elder brother position of an eight-year-old. With his mother's gift for analyzing all parameters of a situation and choosing the most expedient solution, he has to decide if it is worth

becoming excited to give up the possibility of missing three days of baseball practice. His coach assures him that his position in left field won't be contested, so he resolutely decides that, yes, the trip will be a good thing.

We have a great first ten days. There is little rain, although we are right at the edge of hurricane season. We have a couple of brief showers, but they come late in the day. By this time, we are tired and sun burnt and ready to do nothing more than head to the restaurant by the marina that have the great fried mushrooms that Hannah loves and eats with the grease running down her little pointed chin, and that we don't have the heart to tell her that she shouldn't eat. I don't care what the pediatrician tells us, a growing child needs some fat to grow. She can watch her diet when she gets home. What is a vacation for, anyhow? I dare Davis to say a word with a with a long hard look, which he seems to catch, about Hannah rotunda or any of those inane or insane eight-year-old jokes that he loves to come up with much to the chagrin and dismay of his little sister. At least, he doesn't say anything disparaging about her weight, at least this time. Why is it that little boys that age can eat non-stop and not gain an ounce? I know that I was that way, too, but it might start to catch up with me anytime now. It's just at that age you never have to give it a thought.

On the eleventh day, I am already becoming nostalgic about our time together coming to an end. This is the next to our last full day. Then we will stuff everything back in the car, all that we brought and all that we have accumulated, and have the long drive back and then another day to get our lives back on schedule. I remember all that I feel that day. The clouds float in soft bursts through my mind. I am there.

I am lying on a green and white beach towel, and the day is perfect. It isn't too hot. The breeze is slight, and the clouds are puffy and lumpy—mashed potato clouds Hannah calls them. Megan is reading a book—her head tilted to block the sun. No Kindle this time; just a paperback chick book with some trashy romantic title. There is some over muscled guy on the cover, and a blonde with boobs almost falling out of the top of her dress. What crap! This is so unlike her, a serious reader, with only books reviewed and approved by NPR. Megan notices me looking, and she looks over at me with one eyebrow raised. I shrug and look away. I shut my eyes and pretend to sleep. She leans over to give me a light almost kiss on my cheek. Her hair glossy and shining in the sun swings forward over one shoulder to brush against my shoulder. The tang of citrus comes from her shampoo or perfume; I'm not sure which. I would enjoy it more except that I feel something sting me in the back of the neck, right behind my left ear. I look under me and in the sand, but I can't find a thing. Dang, sometimes you get these little critters in the sand that you can't even see. I hate when that happens. Well, I guess it's better than shrapnel, thank God. I have the beginnings of a headache, so I will be content to lie here and let the ocean do its magic. The breeze is soft—light and playful; the sun is so warm.

I open my eyes briefly to look over at the kids. Davis is actually letting Hannah help him with a sand castle. Normally, he disdains this kind of activity, saying that the tide will just come up and wash it away. Today he sits with his forehead scrunched in concentration with knobby knees splayed out before him in the hot wet sand letting Hannah dig with him. I love to watch their heads together—hers covered with soft blonde down and his with brown thick wiry boy hair.

Sometimes he acts entirely too practical. I really think that's all it is—an act—him trying to be the totally grown up big brother. I think he is pleased to impress his little sister, and so, his indifference is largely studied and counterfeit. She doesn't buy into it, entirely; she has his number, but I'm not certain that he knows it. She may look like me, but she has her mother's mind when it comes to figuring out what makes the male mind tick.

I am becoming sleepy for real. Yet, I can't go to sleep, because my head is really throbbing now. I don't want to bother Megan for aspirin—I should have brought my own or maybe something stronger— and I just don't want to get up and go back to the room. Maybe I can just wait it out. Since I didn't bring along anything worthwhile to read, and my head hurts too bad, I think that I will just lie here and, if I feel like it, watch the progress of the castle construction. With the sun and the breeze, I now feel my eyes shutting again in spite of my pain and best intentions.

I feel the pressure of the sand on my back. I hear the hum of a helicopter overhead. I force my eyes open to see the children still busy at their work. The helicopter noise is becoming louder and louder. My heart starts to pound, and my mouth is becoming dry. All I can think of is to protect these children. These children could be destroyed if I can't help them—unlike those others. I come up off the ground in one move and dive over them covering them with my body with fragments of sand castle scattering in wet lumpy globs like body parts flying in all directions. They are screaming, and so am I. I push against them harder and harder to keep their faces pressed down into the sand.



When I awake, I am in a dim cool room. I hear the rhythmic hum of machinery somewhat like the rhythmic wash of waves on the beach. My head still hurts. It's swollen and pulses with a white hot pain. My mouth is parched, and my lips feel swollen and cracked. Not cracked as if I have been in the sun too long, but cracked as if I have been in a dry desert wind. My neck feels stiff. I sense a movement in the room. I see a shape move, but I don't know if it is human or not. My eyes feel cracked. I can't focus well, although my eyes are gradually becoming adjusted to the dimness of the room. I hear a low voice speaking and another low voice answering in response. I can't make out the words because the hum of the machinery is too loud. I seem to be pinned to a bed like an unlucky butterfly trapped alive and skewered on a board.

The first voice is saying now to the second voice, "See if his wife is in the waiting room." The second voice replies, "Let me just run out and check. I don't understand what comes over people sometimes. Why can't they just get over it?"

I feel profound relief. At least Megan is here. She can explain to me why I am here. My skull feels hollow, the pain now a dull pounding. Where am I, and what is happening to me? I hope there is some kind of reasonable explanation. I can't think of one. Oh God, I am so thirsty. It is a little easier to see now. My vision seems to be clearing somewhat. I am trying to ask for water, but I can only hear a croaking sound where my voice used to be.

The first voice says to the second, "Here, Helen, help me turn him before you go." The second voice repeats firmly that she will go now and check for the wife and be right back. I see the door open, and a shaft of light lays a band of color across the dull beige of the floor. I can make out a broad back moving out the door. I struggle to sit up, but there

seem to be wires and needles everywhere. I lie back exhausted. I will wait here. Megan will explain everything.

I hear footsteps approach the door—short quick steps and the slow padding of heavier feet. I make out a woman who appears to be a doctor or nurse of some kind large and squat with broad shoulders and hips as she shoves the door open and comes in. Another woman follows at her heels partially blocked by the girth of the one in scrubs. She is tall and slender—thank God, it looks like Megan. Good, maybe she can get me out of here.

The one dressed in scrubs acts as if I am not able to hear or understand the conversation. “We’ll be sending him to a hospital longer term where he can get more therapy and extensive rehabilitation. It isn’t always safe to have small children around when they are like this. They have times of bleed-through where they see all kinds of dangers. Scenes like that can traumatize children. Did he have a head injury—maybe from an IED or RPG, something like that? Maybe by the time he is ready to be moved to the rehab center, the children might be able to visit him there.” Megan replies, but I can’t make out the words. What is she saying? I hear her words, but I can’t understand her. Surely, she can’t agree to this. Where are my children? Why can’t I see them? Do they think that I could hurt my children?

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exquisitely it is formed is still a shell—a fragile empty shell. I hope that given enough time the pain will ease, but do I really want it.

I want to go back to sleep. I want to remain in that quiet oblivion of sea and sun and warmth. I want to hear my children laugh and giggle and make silly jokes. I want to return to the beach where small children make sand castles even when we know that the waves will wash them all away. I want the Florida that used to be where people fish in clear waters to catch fish they will eat and not just hang them on decorated walls to gape forever in eternal surprise at people who don't bother to see them once they are caught and mounted. I close my eyes.