

# The Prairie Light Review

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Volume 13

Number 1 *The Dreaming Tree*

Article 57

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Winter 3-1-1994

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### Recommended Citation

Burke, Michael (1994) "There Are No Answers," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 13 : No. 1 , Article 57.

Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol13/iss1/57>

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## There Are No Answers

by *Michael Burke*

My daughter Cory is at that age where she asks a lot of questions.

"Take your fingers out of your mouth," I'll say and she'll ask why.

"Germs," I'll say and she'll ask what are germs.

"They make you sick," I'll say. "They're little, bad things. They're invisible."

"Why are they invisible?"

"Because," I'll say. "Just because."

I now see my daughter once a week every week, on Sundays. Buck, her father, my husband, drives Cory to the hospital on Sunday mornings to see me because Sunday mornings seem to be my best time lately. My best time used to be Saturday nights. And before that, when I first came to this hospital, my best time seemed to be Saturday afternoons. So I consider this some measure of progress — from Saturday afternoons to Sunday mornings — but all the psychiatrists do is shake their heads.

They don't know.

"Mom," Cory will ask, "can we go outside?"

She has a way of asking probing questions.

"Not today," I'll explain and that is my answer on every day she visits.

What else am I supposed to say? "They don't let me?" "It's for my own good — and yours, too, honey?"

It's obvious that Cory doesn't like being in the hospital — she squirms, pulling on the ribbon in her hair, sighting more than a kid ought to. At times, I think this means that Cory doesn't like being with me. Buck can tell when I get that feeling. He'll put his arm around me and say something like, "She asked about you Tuesday after school. She wanted to know if she could bring you her finger painting." Then Buck will squeeze my shoulder and say, "She's such a little show off."

"Oh," I'll say, "she's just a kid."

Sometimes, at those times, I feel like we're a real family, sitting around the fireplace at home, watching our little girl play on the rug before us.

But, instead, we're sitting in stiff white chairs around a small white table in a well-lit room where the T.V. is always on and the couch is covered in see-

through plastic. The hospital day room. My new living room.

"Mom," Cory will ask, "what's wrong with her?"

She'll be pointing at another patient, a women in a white gown who might care that her hair's unkempt if she cares about anything at all.

"Don't point," I'll say.

"Why is she walking funny?"

"Don't stare," I'll say, getting snappy. "Come here, honey."

"Is she sleepy?"

I tug on Cory's sleeve, pull her toward me. "Who isn't," I say. All I've done these past three months is sleep and still I've never been more tired.

Buck has his arm around me again, squeezing my shoulder softly. He looks at me and frowns. "You do look pale," he says.

Cory looks up at me with Buck's blue eyes and I can't help remembering that very early in our marriage Buck told me he never wanted children.

"I love you, Mommy," Cory says, giving me her best hug, as I close my eyes to hold back tears. The tears come anyway, surprising me that I still have tears to weep.

"I love you, too, honey."

"Do you have bad germs, Mommy?"

I find I cannot speak.

Buck says, "Show Mommy your finger painting again."

"When can you come home, Mommy?"

My eyes are still closed. Bucks says, "Where's your painting, honey? Show Mommy again. It's a pretty painting."

Cory finds the painting on the small white table and hurries it back to us, holding it forward with both hands. It *is* a pretty painting, with a million finger scribbles and every color in the world; red and blue and yellow and black and green and brown and orange.

"Don't run," Buck says.

"Cory," I say, dabbing my eyes with a scrunched up Kleenex. "This is a masterpiece."

"What's a 'masterpiece'?"

"Something very special," I say. "This is just gorgeous, honey."

Buck kissed the top of my head.

Cory lets the painting slip from her hands and float to the floor.

"Pick it up, honey," Buck says.

Cory steps on my feet. "When can you come home, Mommy?"

I close my eyes again.

"Soon," Buck tells her. He kisses the top of my head once more. "Just as soon as Mommy's all better."

Soon, I tell myself with my eyes still closed. All better, I say inside my head. But time, today, is against me. The darkness I see is suddenly broken with



a bright yellow scribble that curls and curls forever. Soon, I tell myself again. When will that be? A pink scribble coils over the yellow and lashes across the darkness. A purple scribble follows. When can I come home? A blue scribble streaks back-and-forth like lightning. What are germs? Why are they invisible? Doctor, does this mean I'm getting better? Red scribbles now. And green scribbles, too. Why can't we go outside? What's wrong with that woman? Doctor, am I going crazy? Doctor, does my husband want me? Doctor, does my daughter love me? When can I come home?