

## Excerpt from *Half Way Round the Sun*

Rosemary Nixon

*Ce passage présente Allegra, le personnage principal, aux services des soins prénatals. Elle imagine sa fille ne prenant plus plaisir à jouer au football ni à se briser la jambe. Allegra et d'autres mamans rendent visite à leurs bébés malades. Elles entrent à l'hôpital comme en terre étrangère – les médecins et les infirmières parlent une autre langue, les parents posent trop de questions auxquelles le corps médical ne répond pas. L'hôpital est un pays avec ses propres frontières et gardiens, ses propres règles et lois. Allègra et sa fille passent outre (enfreignent la loi ?).*

Allegra Gillis sits in Neonatal ICU, and imagines a daughter. Fluorescent lights stare down, a worker vacuums. Ninety machines hum. Her baby. Her girl. The baby next to Kiala's isolette was born last night without a brain. His eyes stare out. There's nothing in there. Allegra has to look away. The mother sits beside his isolette. Unmoving. Iceberg face. Allegra feels choked up laughter. You look just like your baby. Looks down at her own. The baby's eyes are closed, legs splayed, blue diaper dwarfing. Her daughter. Inside burning. She will be reckless, this daughter, Kiala. She will play hard, be a tomboy, scrape shins, throw a football, throw herself into her history.

Throw away this picture, Allegra.

A friend of Allegra's sister is sitting on a hard bench in the waiting room. Allegra hardly knows her. The husband left her two, three months ago. Allegra has seen the woman, Judith, on occasion, at the grocery store, at church. Has never talked to her. What would she say? This morning Judith showed up at the hospital. She wears a dark coat, no earrings.

You can't enter, Allegra said. They only allow family. You can't stay. Even my sisters have trouble getting in.

Two hours now. There she sits, on a bench in the waiting room. Offering no words.

Allegra looks over at the iceberg mother.

Dr. Norton enters the nursery. The one doctor who never dresses like a doctor, who neglects to take on the identity. Today she's wearing a floral print dress, it shows beneath her lab coat. Dr. Norton will not last the month. She carries a chart, moves to the isolette next to Kiala's. Her sleeve touches that mother cast in ice.

"Good morning, Mrs. Angonata." The woman doesn't answer. The doctor pulls up a stool, sits down beside her. Expels a breath. "There's not a lot we can do for your son. This is hard. He's being kept warm and safe."

A twitch. The woman begins shaking. A shimmer. She shimmers in this cold blue-lit neonatal nursery.

"We don't know how long. Some hours? Perhaps several days. No, you don't have to hold him. No, some mothers choose not to. I can offer you little more than honesty. We're here for you. Please, call me any time. Wait, no it's not too hard. It's just the cords get caught. I'll help you lift him out. Of course it's good. This baby needs you." She lifts the empty baby, empty dangling legs, stare fixed on nothing. Lifts him from the mess of wires into a frozen mother's arms. Mother. Doctor. Allegra. Judith on a hard bench. Under fluorescent lights, four women without a language stare into the present.

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In this foreign landscape, Allegra carries her language like a tantrum. Her words relentless glare. What's that tube doing up my baby's nose? Why is a kidney doctor checking her out? She's not #524010. She's not Baby Draeger. This baby has a name. Kiala. This place has more machines than children. Why didn't someone tell us she needed a hearing test? Why are you taking blood? Why can't you find the vein?

The doctors live inside their stethoscopes, inside evasion, outright lies. When she sees Doctor Vanioc, she feels the urge to break and enter, take an axe, smash down the barriers. "Can we talk?"

Doctor Vanioc skids to a stop.

The bursting shame. "What's apnea?"

"When a baby forgets to breathe, Mrs. Draeger."

"What are bradys?"

"Severe apnea can lead to bradycardias, Mrs. Draeger. A dangerous slowing of the heart rate."

"You mean it might stop?"

The doctor looks at her.

"What's interstitial?"

"Fluid sometimes seeps into the tissue, Mrs. Draeger. We're careful as we can be."

"You mean the skin?"

"No, the tissue."

"Will that kill her?"

"Mrs. Draeger, it just swells up the tissue."

"And that won't kill her?"

"She's doing *relatively* well, *but...*"

"She's *some* better today, *although...*"

"Today's results are *somewhat* optimistic, *yet...*"

Allegra hangs on their intensifiers and conjunctions. "But what's wrong with her? Can you just give it a name?" She didn't have her hand up. She spoke out of turn. Babies are airlifted here from Brooks, Nanton, The Porcupine Hills, from Field, B.C. These names conjure pure spring water, mountain streams, the healthy outdoors. The brown walls blur as babies spin down corridors, a collection of nurses bagging on the run. Heralding another birth. Don't expect a forecast, Allegra wants to call. In here no one predicts the weather.

Instead she leaves the hospital, marches to the nearest bookstore and buys herself *Cartright's Medical Home Dictionary*. A thousand pages. Four pounds. Too hell with them, she'll find things out herself.

She stops at the grocery store, buys lettuce and cheese, goes to the bank, mails electricity and gas bills, fills the car, wind tearing at her clothes, pays her library fines, buys a new windshield scraper, renews *National Geographic*, buys Brodie's vitamin pills. The air waves resonate with people's sorrow. A gang of teenage boys' tough bravado, she wants to hold them to her chest, a woman in an electric wheel chair hailing a cab, a couple standing in Mark's Work Warehouse, fighting about jeans. Allegra feels like Jesus, sorrows penetrate her chest which has no protective cover. She breathes in heartache. One day at a time.

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Foothills Neonatal Intensive Care Nursery settles into a separate country. With its own time zones and weather. Well-behaved parents are allowed inside its borders after passport inspection, the ritual washing. After the donning of the gown. That gown: a barrier, a disguise. The yellow gown which forces mothers to look like invalids, unhealthy, patients like their

babies. What does Allegra bring to neonatal? Nothing. How can Kiala know her? You know your mother by what she surrounds herself with. Allegra flips open the Mother file in the filing cabinet of her head, watches her own mom bent weeding in the garden, moving under loads of wash, sprinkling clothes, making soap, cutting noodles, gutting chickens, canning fruit, alive with energy. While Allegra's mother fed her children from the soil, Allegra sent her child, soiled, into the world. She slid out in her own feces. Meconium-stained. A sign of distress, the doctors said. This baby made a poor pick of a mother. Allegra looks around the huge warehouse of a room, designed for optimal efficiency. Isolettes jut from the walls. Panels of wall plugs. Blinking, flashing, beeping monitors. Hell of a nursery she's created for her daughter. The nurses told her yesterday they'll take no more breast milk. Her baby cannot swallow; what's the point? Give up the breast pump. No work here that Allegra's allowed to do. Not even fold her clothes. The baby has none. Allegra's skills in working with seniors do not translate. The neonatal nursery doesn't want a program coordinator to set up crafts, exercise classes, book displays for two pound babies, the size of a hunk of cheese. Allegra passes through the quarantine room, sidesteps the large basket of soiled gowns. The mothers' job here in Foothills Neonatal is to stand around in yellow gowns like a hospital choir. If nothing else they are clean. What would the nurses do if they broke into song?

*I got a feelin' called the blue-ue-ues, O Lord,  
Since my baby said good-bye...*

The smell of camphor salve, dijoxin, formaldehyde, wet diapers. The smell of fear.

*Just a beautiful dream, I hate to think it's all o-o-ver,  
I've lost my heart it seems...*

A nurse looks up to see Allegra enter.

*I've grown so used to you somehow...*

Allegra marches her way among the babies and equipment to find Kiala, awake and waiting, left hand ballooned and purple.

"What happened?"

The baby looks past her through the glass.

"Her intravenous went interstitial," a nurse says.

Interstitial: occupying the place between.

"Nothing serious," they cry over shoulders, rushing from baby to baby. Bagging. Resuscitating. Administering physiotherapy and drugs.

Allegra looks down at her baby. An alphabet of needles. Number 524010 with the swollen hand.

A touch at her shoulder. "You'll have to leave soon, Mrs. Draeger."

It's Gillis. I have a name. Allegra.

The baby looks into the room's bright glare. Nurses rush pell-mell by.

Allegra has a sudden mental picture of a childhood trip to Banff. She slammed Rose's finger in the car door. They had to take her to the doctor. That night there weren't enough chairs around the cabin table; her dad paid Allegra five cents to sit on the suitcase. And through it all, her flock of sisters, crowding, chattering, interrupting, talking while they chewed. Their language tumbling, intimate, inclusive. The doctors here at Foothills Hospital don't speak Allegra's language. They navigate the crowded aisles in a choreographed dance just to avoid Allegra's outstretched hand, her questions flung against them. When confronted, they bend over procedures. Backs turned. Their faces guarded. While dancers open their bodies, these doctors shut theirs off, their movements exclusive, circling inward. It is always high noon here, always glaring light. When forced, the doctors speak in codes of graphs and charts, prescriptions, lab results.

"Your daughter has multiple problems, Mrs. Draeger, many undiagnosed at present."

"There is a swallowing disturbance (a disturbance? like a fucking cold front?) and abnormal electroencephalogram."

"How do you spell that?" Allegra asks.

"Electroencephalogram?" The doctor, startled, spells.

"At this point in time, it appears your daughter has pulmonary dysplasia and is in danger of potential sepsis."

Allegra scribbles. Dysplasia. Sepsis.

"She has intermittent cyanosis. We hear rhonchi and rales in her chest."

Allegra's presence reminds them they are failing. She reads their words for what they will not say.

"Can I just see her?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Draeger, you'll have to leave this morning."

She longs for emotion from them; what they want from her is none. This is a research hospital. Her baby is useful.

"Well, ma'am, the doctors have their rounds to do. No, you might overhear. All case information is confidential."

And before she can grab her purse, wave her goodbye's, the rounds begin. The white coats' march. The bona fide doctors in white long coats;

residents trailing in short. They swing from isolette to isolette, their voices cryptic. They stare at the babies, comment, prod, confer. They move to Baby Hargreaves, the size of two blocks of butter, sparrow legs dry, the tendons showing, to Baby Mueller, a fourteen pound elephant, brain damaged as he ploughed his way through his diabetic mother's birth canal, to Baby Leung, born without an anus.

Allegra takes a last hard look at those white backs, and files out with the other parents, passive as babies. Two parents go home, one walks the halls, Allegra looks up words in an empty waiting room.

Electroencephalogram: EEG – records the minute electrical impulses produced by the activity of the brain. Indicates the alertness of the subject.

Pulmonary dysplasia - dysplasia - any abnormality of growth. Kiala has abnormal lungs, then. No one's said.

Allegra waits. That's all. She waits. Day after week. She's emigrant turned immigrant, yoked to this hospital.

*Whither thou goest I will go*

*Whither thou lodgest I will lodge*

*Thy people will be my people, my love*

Yoked to this dreaded family of sick babies, receptionists, smoking relatives, green-suited floor polishers, anxious nurses, silent doctors.

A mother enters the waiting room, a runny-nosed three-year-old whining at her leg. Hands smoothing her daughter's dress, she tells Allegra the hospital is threatening foster care if she doesn't visit her baby more often.

They're telling Allegra her constant presence is getting in the way.

Sepsis – infection of a wound or body tissues with bacteria.

Cyanosis – a bluish colouration of the skin and mucus membrane. A sign of heart disorder, lung damage, fluid in the lungs.

She wants to strike at them, at the thick smoke of their secrets.

*If I didn't care...*

*The way that I do...*

The woman stands beside Allegra, watching her write. The child wants to colour Allegra's dictionary.

Allegra's dictionary won't transform into pretty pictures.

"What's wrong with your baby then?" the child says.

What a question! You win! Let's fill in the blanks. Give us an E, Vanna. Are there any E's?

"Does she look funny? Does your baby smell bad?"

The mother takes the child by the arm, turns her away, covers the child's eyes.

"Does your..."

Peek a boo," the mother sing-songs.

I see you

No, I don't

Yes, I do!

What kind of person made up a disappearing babies game?

Rhonchi – a rattling.

Rales – an abnormal sound heard on auscultation of the chest.

Once Allegra was safe. Once she owned herself. Now not even her grief is hers. The hospital owns it. She rents, can make withdrawals, like books on a library card. Time's up. Bear it. Buck up. Grow up. Quit sniveling. A headache the delicate centre of her storm. She wants to strike at them. Instead she puts her head into her coat and carries her four pound dictionary out into the ordinary world, into the harsh cold swell of winter. Ache in her gut. Pretend you chose this. Pretend you deserve this. It will make the explosions in your veins easier to bear.

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Foothills Neonatal ICU breathes story. Stories weave the isolettes, suction machines, heart monitors, the oxygen tubes, the heaving ventilators. They cling to the hems of nursing uniforms and ride the lapels of doctor's lab coats. They smell, these stories, these angry prayers.

Allegra holds Kiala on her lap. An intravenous needle stuck in the baby's head. Yellow bruises crisscross the shaved scalp where intravenous needles went interstitial. Even needles fail her baby. When she was a child, farm boys caught frogs, cut off their legs and let them go. The frenetic gyrate of legs, the bulging eyes. Stop it! I hate you! Allegra crying. The boys laughing.

Just being boys.

Kiala fights like that when the nurses suction her. Her fists punch out, head wheels from side to side. Allegra conserves strength for those suction episodes – twelve, fifteen times a day. A tube inserted up Kiala's nose, mouth open in a gag, push farther, farther, Kiala's frog legs jerking, a nurse hauling tubing like a hose snaked down a drain hole. White green gunk sucking up the hose, spastic limbs, her baby's face a caricature of anguish. Allegra sobbing. The nurses step around her, doing their job.

Dr. Summers enters. One of the boys. The head nurse is also one of the boys. This is an old boys' club and Allegra has crashed it. Nobody likes her here. Nobody likes her baby. She asks permission to bathe Kiala. To lift Kiala into a warm water basin. The surprise of skin on skin. Baby, you exist. We're really touching. She knows to arrange the gastrostomy tube inserted in Kiala's stomach, to keep hold of it five inches down the tube so gravity doesn't pressure and pull it free, to arrange the oxygen tube, the heart monitor attachment tubes, her intravenous lines. Allegra's fingers support the baby at the small of her neck. Kiala finds herself in water, her expression registers surprise. Allegra laps water against her belly, the soles of her feet. Cheek against the baby's head until her features lose their tenseness, her head moves to touch cheek to her mother's and she kicks. For one strange moment the institution smell lifts, and Allegra is a live whole mom holding a live whole baby.

No bath. Nurse says no time this morning. Beepers are going off. Babies are trying to die. The nurse has filled a basin with water, then abandons it when the baby next to Kiala goes into cardiac arrest. The nurse moves fast, her elbow catches Kiala's foot which hits the basin, knocks it to the floor, and now the cleaning staff have been called in – more bodies, more equipment.

Allegra hums. It's an act of rebellion. Hums to Kiala who ignores her bath water sweeping across the neonatal floor.

Allegra sees Kiala's life here at Foothills Hospital as one big awful song. Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall. Ninety-nine bottles of beer. Fragments. Bleak and rhythmic. The sickening repetitive pattern. Pass one down. Hand it around. Same tune, same words. Fewer bottles.