I RECEIVED a very touching, very moving children's book in the mail last week. Painfully, it is a book I wish the need for did not exist. It is called, The Cancer That Wouldn't Go Away: A Story for Kids about Metastatic Cancer, by Hadassa Field, illustrated by Christina G. Smith.

As the title suggests, it is a book geared to helping children cope with the profound psychological effects of their changed life under the impact of the serious illness of a parent.

It is unlike other children's books about cancer. They deal with the beginning stages of cancer, and then, when it heals, a child can learn to integrate the experience as part of his or her past.

Or they deal, G-d forbid, with end stage cancer. In these heartrending books, when the relative dies a child can learn about the reality of death and of saying goodbye.

This book is about that time in the middle. A time that could realistically turn out to be years.

How do you negotiate that limbo existence, a time that can form the building blocks of a child's childhood?

The books's editor, Sara Mosak Saiger, explains:

"This book is not about death. Although the family dealing with metastatic cancer knows what the end is, if the spread of cancer was not to a vital organ they have no idea when the end will be. It could be years. Terminal stage cancer is not what they need to think about right now. Such a family needs to figure out how to carry on living in the meantime, and that's what the book aims at."

WITH that in mind, we meet Max, the child in the story whose mom has just been diagnosed with recurrent metastatic cancer.

Max is almost eight-years old. We meet him at the beginning of the book, confused at learning his mother is ill again, since this time she still looks regular with a full head of hair and has normal energy.

“Mom did not even look tired. Last time Mom was sick, she was so tired that she stayed on the couch all day. Now, mom drove carpool, went shopping and made dinner. Maybe this cancer thing was a mistake.”

This depiction of learning about his mother's illness through the eyes of Max is skillfully conveyed through very realistic and authentic dialogue; an understanding of the emotions of a little boy.

The book gives Max a chance to air his emotions and worries about his mother. When he is angry and upset, his parents’ response is a sense of permission for his little meltdown. Max’s emotions are validated.

“I hate chicken! I want a baby brother! I want mom to be like everyone else! I am tired of cancer!” shouts Max.

And when he expresses worry, his mother tenderly and openly talks with him about the anxiety of being in a place of “not knowing.”

Her message to Max, and the message the book is focused on, is to take one day at a time.

MOST young adults, and certainly most children, have a sense of immortality. There is a sense that the future is there to be taken, as plainly as a concrete object. Mortality is a vague, far off thing. A sense of immortality rules.

Not so for a family, and especially its children, stricken with cancer. Suddenly and prematurely, an acute awareness of mortality or at least some kind of limitedness interrupts sharply and acutely.

Max senses this. He senses he is different. He senses that his life has taken an unexpected and a different turn. While Max does not ask outright, “are you going to die?” he processes his emotions into a new awareness by wondering about a baby brother.

“Does this mean I definitely won't get a baby brother?”

Mom shook her head. She looked kind of sad.

“No, Max,” she said.”My body is going to be too busy with cancer to do that . . . Max was really disappointed . . . It seemed like everyone else in the second grade had a new baby, or a mom with a big belly. All that Max had was a goldfish. A goldfish . . . and a mom with cancer.”

Yet the book illustrates a loving family, continuing its life, sharing ordinary moments.

The conversation between Max and his mom is always open as they navigate the changes in their day to day life. Through Max's childlike anxiety and uncertainty, we see that he is cared for and comforted by his mother as she plays with him. She explains, days are good and some days are bad.”

Throughout this short story we get a sense of the quality of life of Max's family during illness.

Without sugarcoating anything, the dialogue by Max's parents is, while always honest, also gentle

For Max's eighth birthday, his parents surprise him with a little kitten.

“It's not the same as a baby brother,” says Max.

“I know,” says Mom.

The book ends with a good feeling. There is a feeling of closeness between Max and his mom. They are talking after playing and having a little adventure with the new kitten.

“Like I always say, one day at a time,” sighs Mom.

“Yup, just one day at a time,” says Max.

THROUGHOUT the book, each page's dialogue is depicted in emotionally expressive drawings that capture the essence of the book. The drawings are quite communicative on their own, telling a story in and of itself. They are a wonderful companion to the story.

At the back of the book is a pretty extensive guide for parents and educators in how to use the book; the guide is by psychologist Dr. Rinat Green, a child trauma specialist.

As excellent as the book is, its key lies in being an effective conversation starter for anyone needing to talk about this painful topic with children. The book is a tool in creating dialogue relevant to each child's circumstances and anxieties.

I see this book as something schools and hospitals should be investing in. It is a book to be read by parents or other relatives and caretakers to a child, but it could also be used by

teachers reading this story to classmates of a friend suffering and coping with such a situation.

This is a very sad book to hold in your hands and read. You will feel like crying.

But you will also know that when this book is read, it is helping a little one out there live through this pain with just a little more softness, a little more manageability, one day at a time.

The Cancer That Wouldn't Go Away is available on Amazon.

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