

Prologue

Pony Party

MY FRIEND STEPHEN AND I USED TO DO PONY parties together. The festivities took place on the well-tended lawns of the vast suburban communities that had sprung up around Diamond D Stables in the rural acres of Rockland County. Mrs. Daniels, the owner of Diamond D, took advantage of the opportunity and readily dispatched a couple of ponies for birthday parties. In the early years Mrs. Daniels used to attend the parties with us, something Stephen and I dreaded. She fancied herself a sort of Mrs. Roy Rogers and dressed in embarrassing accordance: fringed shirts, oversized belt buckles, ramshackle hats. I'd stand there holding a pony, cringing inwardly with mortification as if she were my own mother. But as we got older and Stephen got his driver's license, and as Diamond D itself slowly sank into a somewhat surreal, muddy, and orphaned

state of anarchy, we worked the parties by ourselves, which I relished.

We were invariably late for the birthday party, a result of loading the ponies at the last minute, combined with our truly remarkable propensity for getting lost. I never really minded, though. I enjoyed the drive through those precisely planned streets as the summer air swirled through the cab of the pickup, rustling the crepe-paper ribbons temporarily draped over the rear-view mirror. When we finally found our destination, we'd clip the ribbons into the ponies' manes and tails in a rather sad attempt to imbue a festive air. The neighborhoods were varied, from close, tree-laden streets crammed with ranch-style houses to more spacious boulevards dotted with outsized Tudors. Still, all the communities seemed to share a certain carbon-copy quality: house after house looked exactly like the one next to it, save for the occasional cement deer or sculpted shrub. A dog would always appear and chase the trailer for a set number of lawns—some mysterious canine demarcation of territory—before suddenly dropping away, to be replaced by another dog running and barking behind us a few lawns later.

I liked those dogs, liked their sense of purpose and enjoyment and responsibility. I especially liked being lost, tooling through strange neighborhoods with Stephen. As we drove by the houses, I gazed into the windows, imagining what the families inside were like. My ideas were loosely based on what I had learned from TV and films. I pictured a father in a reclining chair next to a lamp, its shade trimmed with small white tassels. Somewhere nearby a wife in a coordinated outfit chatted on the phone with friends while their children set the dinner table. As they ate their home-cooked food, passing assorted white serving dishes, they'd casually ask each other about the day. Perhaps someone would mention the unusual sight of a horse trailer going past the house that day. Certain that these families were nothing like my own, a certainty wrought with a sense of vague superiority and even vaguer longing, I took pride and pleasure in knowing that I was the person in that strangely surreal trailer with the kicking ponies and angry muffler, that I had driven by their house that day, that I had brushed against their lives, and past them, like that.

Once we reached the party, there was a great rush of excitement. The children, realizing that the ponies had arrived, would come running from the back yard in their silly hats; their now forgotten balloons, bobbing colorfully behind them, would fly off in search of some tree or telephone wire. The ponies, reacting to the excitement of new sounds and smells, would promptly take a crap in the driveway, to a chorus of disgusted groans.

My pleasure at the sight of the children didn't last long, however. I knew what was coming. As soon as they got over the thrill of being near the ponies, they'd notice me. Half my jaw was missing, which gave my face a strange triangular shape, accentuated by the fact that I was unable to keep my mouth completely closed. When I first started doing pony parties, my hair was still short and wispy, still growing in from the chemo. But as it grew I made things worse by continuously bowing my head and hiding behind the curtain of hair, furtively peering out at the world like some nervous actor. Unlike the actor, though, I didn't secretly relish my audience, and if it were possible I would have stood behind that curtain forever, my head

bent in an eternal act of deference. I was, however, dependent upon my audience. Their approval or disapproval defined everything for me, and I believed with every cell in my body that approval wasn't written into my particular script. I was fourteen years old.

"I *hate* this, why am I doing this?" I'd ask myself each time, but I had no choice if I wanted to keep my job at the stable. Everyone who worked at Diamond D had to do pony parties—no exceptions. Years later a friend remarked how odd it was that an adult would even think to send a disfigured child to work at a kid's party, but at the time it was never an issue. If my presence in these back yards was something of an anomaly, it wasn't just because of my face. In fact, my physical oddness seemed somehow to fit in with the general oddness and failings of Diamond D.

The stable was a small place near the bottom of a gently sloping hill. Each spring the melting snow left behind ankle-deep mud that wouldn't dry up completely until midsummer. Mrs. Daniels possessed a number of peculiar traits that made life at Diamond D unpredictable. When she wasn't trying to save our souls, or treating Stephen's rumored homosexuality by

unexpectedly exposing her breasts to him, she was taking us on shoplifting sprees, dropping criminal hints like some Artful Dodger.

No one at Diamond D knew how to properly care for horses. Most of the animals were kept outside in three small, grassless corrals. The barn was on the verge of collapse; our every entry was accompanied by the fluttering sounds of startled tats. The "staff" consisted of a bunch of junior high and high school kids willing to work in exchange for riding privileges. And the main source of income, apart from pony parties, was hacking—renting out the horses for ten dollars an hour to anyone willing to pay. Mrs. Daniels bought the horses at an auction whose main customer was the meat dealer for a dog-food company; Diamond D, more often than not, was merely a way station. The general air of neglect surrounding the stable was the result more of ignorance than of apathy. It's not as if we didn't care about the horses—we simply didn't know any better. And for most of us, especially me, Diamond D was a haven. Though I had to suffer through the pony parties, I was more willing to do so to spend time alone with the horses. I considered ani-

align myself with their knowledge. I thought animals were the only beings capable of understanding me.

I had finished chemotherapy only a few months before I started looking in the Yellow Pages for stables where I might work. Just fourteen and still unclear about the exact details of my surgery, I made my way down the listings. It was the July Fourth weekend, and Mrs. Daniels, typically overlooked, said I had called at exactly the right moment. Overjoyed, I went into the kitchen to tell my mother I had a job at a stable. She looked at me dubiously.

"Did you tell them about yourself?"

I hesitated, and lied. "Yes, of course I did."

"Are you sure they know you were sick? Will you be up for this?"

"Of *course* I am," I replied in my most petulant adolescent tone.

In actuality it hadn't even occurred to me to mention cancer, or my face, to Mrs. Daniels. I was still blissfully unaware, somehow believing that the only reason people stared at me was because my hair was still growing in. So my mother obligingly drove all sixty-odd pounds

of me down to Diamond D, where my pale and misshapen face seemed to surprise all of us. They let me water a few horses, imagining I wouldn't last more than a day. I stayed for four years.

That first day I walked a small pinto in circle after circle, practically drunk with the aroma of the horses. But with each circle, each new child lifted into the tiny saddle, I became more and more uncomfortable, and with each circuit my head dropped just a little bit further in shame. With time I became adept at handling the horses, and even more adept at avoiding the direct stares of the children.

When our trailer pulled into the driveway for a pony party, I would briefly remember my own excitement at being around ponies for the first time. But I also knew that these children lived apart from me. Through them I learned the language of paranoia: every whisper I heard was a comment about the way I looked, every laugh a joke at my expense.

Partly I was honing my self-consciousness into a torture device, sharp and efficient enough to last me the rest of my life. Partly I was right: they were? staring at me, laughing at me. The cruelty of children is immense,

almost startling in its precision. The kids at the parties were fairly young and, surrounded by adults, they rarely made cruel remarks outright. But their open, uncensored stares were more painful than the deliberate taunts of my peers at school, where insecurities drove everything and everyone like some looming, evil presence in a haunted machine. But in those back yards, where the grass was mown so short and sharp it would have hurt to walk on it, there was only the fact of me, my face, my ugliness.

This singularity of meaning—I *was* my face, I *was* ugliness—though sometimes unbearable, also offered a possible point of escape. It became the launching pad from which to lift off, the one immediately recognizable place to point to when asked what was wrong with my life. Everything led to it, everything receded from it—my face as personal vanishing point. The pain these children brought with their stares engulfed every other pain in my life. Yet occasionally, just as that vast ocean threatened to swallow me whole, some greater force would lift me out and enable me to walk among them easily and carelessly, as alien as the pony that trotted beside me, his tail held high in excitement, his nostrils

wide in anticipation of a brief encounter with a world beyond his comprehension.

The parents would trail behind the kids, iced drinks clinking, making their own, more practical comments about the fresh horse manure in their driveway. If Stephen and I liked their looks (all our judgments were instantaneous), we'd shovel it up; if not, we'd tell them cleanup wasn't included in the fee. Stephen came from a large, all-American family, but for me these grownups provided a secret fascination. The mothers had frosted lipstick and long bright fingernails; the fathers sported gold watches and smelled of too much aftershave.

This was the late seventies, and a number of corporate headquarters had sprung up across the border in New Jersey. Complete with duck ponds and fountains, these "industrial parks" looked more like fancy hotels than office buildings. The newly planted suburban lawns I found myself parading ponies on were a direct result of their proliferation.

My feelings of being an outsider were strengthened by the reminder of what my own family didn't have: money. We *should* have had money: this was true in practical terms, for my father was a successful journal-

ist, and it was also true within my family mythology, which conjured up images of Fallen Aristocracy. We were displaced foreigners, Europeans newly arrived in an alien landscape. If we had had the money we felt entitled to, we would never have spent it on anything as mundane as a house in Spring Valley or as silly and trivial as a pony party.

Unfortunately, the mythologically endowed money didn't materialize. Despite my father's good job with a major television network, we were barraged by collection agencies, and our house was falling apart around us. Either unwilling or unable, I'm not sure which, to spend money on plumbers and electricians and general handymen, my father kept our house barely together by a complex system of odd bits of wire, duct tape, and putty, which he applied rather haphazardly and good-naturedly on weekend afternoons. He sang when he worked. Bits of opera, slapped together jauntily with the current top forty and ancient ditties from his childhood, were periodically interrupted as he patiently explained his work to the dog, who always listened attentively.

Anything my father fixed usually did not stay fixed for more than a few months. Flushing our toilets when

it rained required coaxing with a Zenlike ritual of jiggles to avoid spilling the entire contents of the septic tank onto the basement floor. One walked by the oven door with a sense of near reverence, lest it fall open with an operatic crash. Pantheism ruled.

Similarly, when dealing with my mother, one always had to act in a delicate and prescribed way, though the exact rules of protocol seemed to shift frequently and without advance notice. One day, running out of milk was a problem easily dealt with, but on the next it was a symbol of her children's selfishness, our father's failure, and her tragic, wasted life. Lack of money, it was driven into us, was the root of all our unhappiness. So as Stephen and I drove through those "bourgeois" suburbs (my radical older brothers had taught me to identify them as such), I genuinely believed that if our family were as well-off as those families, the extra carton of milk would not have been an issue, and my mother would have been more than delighted to buy gallon after gallon until the house fairly spilled over with fresh milk.

Though our whole family shared the burden of my mother's anger, in my heart I suspected that part of it was my fault and my fault alone. Cancer is an obscenely

expensive illness; I saw the bills, I heard their fights. There was no doubt that I was personally responsible for a great deal of my family's money problems: ergo, I was responsible for my mother's unhappy life. During my parents' many fights over money, I would sit in the kitchen in silence, unable to move even after my brothers and sisters had fled to their bedrooms. I sat listening as some kind of penance.

The parents who presided over the pony parties never fought, or at least not about anything significant, of this I felt sure. Resentment made me scorn them, their gauche houses, their spoiled children. These feelings might have been purely political, like those of my left-wing brothers (whose philosophies I understood very little of), if it weren't for the painfully personal detail of my face.

"What's wrong with her face?"

The mothers bent down to hear this question and, still bent over, they'd look over at me, their glances refracting away as quickly and predictably as light through a prism. I couldn't always hear their response, but I knew from experience that vague pleas for politeness would hardly satisfy a child's curiosity.

While the eyes of these perfectly formed children swiftly and deftly bored into the deepest part of me, the glances from their parents provided me with an exotic sense of power as I watched them inexpertly pretend not to notice me. After I passed the swing sets and looped around to pick up the next child waiting near the picnic table littered with cake plates, juice bottles, and party favors, I'd pause confrontationally, like some Dickensian ghost, imagining that my presence served as an uneasy reminder of what might be. What had happened to me was any parent's nightmare, and I allowed myself to believe that I was dangerous to them. The parents obliged me in this: they brushed past me, around me, sometimes even smiled at me. But not once in the three or so years that I worked pony parties did anyone ask me directly what had happened.

They were uncomfortable because of my face. I ignored the deep hurt by allowing the side of me that was desperate for any kind of definition to staunchly act out, if not exactly relish, this macabre status.

Zoom lenses, fancy flash systems, perfect focus—these cameras probably were worth more than the ponies

instigating the pictures. A physical sense of dread came over me as soon as I spotted the thickly padded case, heard the sound of the zipper, noted the ridiculous, almost surgical protection provided by the fitted foam compartment. I'd automatically hold the pony's halter, careful to keep his head tight and high in case he suddenly decided to pull down for a bite of lawn. I'd expertly turn my own head away, pretending I was only just then aware of something more important off to the side. I'd tilt away at exactly the same angle each time, my hair falling in a perfect sheet of camouflage between me and the camera.

I stood there perfectly still, just as I had sat for countless medical photographs: full face, turn to the left, the right, now a three-quarter shot to the left. I took a certain pride in knowing the routine so well. I've even seen some of these medical photographs in publications. Curiously, those sterile, bright photos are easy for me to look at. For one thing, I know that only doctors look at them, and perhaps I'm even slightly proud that I'm such an interesting case, worthy of documentation. Or maybe I do not really think it is me sitting there, *Case3, figure 6-A*.

Once, when my doctor left me waiting too long in his examining room, I leafed through my file, which I knew was strictly off-limits. I was thrilled to find a whole section of slides housed in a clear plastic folder. Removing one, I lifted it up to the fluorescent light, stared for a moment, then carefully, calmly replaced it. It was a photograph taken of me on the operating table. Most of the skin of the right side of my face had been pulled over and back, exposing something with the general shape of a face and neck but with the color and consistency of raw steak. A clamp gleamed off to the side, holding something unidentifiable in place. I wasn't particularly bothered; I've always had a fascination with gore, and had it been someone else I'd have stared endlessly. But I simply put the slide in its slot and made a mental note not to look at slides from my file again, ever.

With the same numbed yet cavalier stance, I waited for a father to click the shutter. At least these were photographs I'd never have to see, though to this day I fantasize about meeting someone who eventually shows me their photo album and there, inexplicably, in the middle of a page, is me holding a pony. I have seen one pony party photo of me. In it I'm holding on to a small

dark bay pony whose name I don't remember. I look frail and thin and certainly peculiar, but I don't look anywhere near as repulsive as I then believed I did. There's a gaggle of children around me, waiting for their turn on the pony. My stomach was always in knots then, surrounded by so many children, but I can tell by my expression that I'm convincing myself I don't care as I point to the back of the line. The children look older than most of the kids at the backyard parties: some of them are even older than nine, the age I was when I got sick. I'm probably thinking about this, too, as I order them into line.

I can still hear the rubbery, metallic thud of hooves on the trailer's ramp as we loaded the ponies back into the hot and smelly box for the ride back to Diamond D. Fifteen years later, when I see that photo, I am filled with questions I rarely allow myself, such as, how do we go about turning into the people we are meant to be? What relation do the human beings in that picture have to the people they are now? How is it that all of us were caught together in that brief moment of time, me standing there pretending I wasn't hurt by a single thing in this world while they lined up for their turn on the

pony, some of them excited and some of them scared, but all of them neatly, at my insistence, one in front of the other, like all the days ahead.

ONE

Luck

KER-POW!

I was knocked into the present, the unmistakable *now*, by Joni Friedman's head as it collided with the right side of my jaw. Up until that moment my body had been running around within the confines of a circle of fourth-grade children gathered for a game of dodge ball, but my mind had been elsewhere. For the most part I was an abysmal athlete, and I was deeply embarrassed whenever I failed to jump bravely and deftly into a whirling jump rope, ever threatening to sting if I miscrossed its invisible boundaries, like some science-fiction force field. Or worse, when I was the weak link yet again in the school relay race. How could one doubt that the order in which one was picked for the softball team was anything but concurrent with the order in which Life would be handing out favors?

Not that I considered myself a weak or easily frightened person; in more casual games I excelled, especially

at wrestling (I could beat every boy but one on my street), playing war (a known sneak, I was always called upon to be the scout), and in taking dares (I would do just about anything, no matter how ludicrous or dangerous, though I drew the line at eating invertebrates and amphibians). I was accorded a certain amount of respect in my neighborhood, not only because I once jumped out of a second-story window, but also because I would kiss an old and particularly smelly neighborhood dog on the lips whenever asked. I was a tomboy par excellence.

But when games turned official under the auspices of the Fleetwood Elementary Phys-Ed Department, everything changed. The minute a whistle appeared and boundaries were called, I transformed into a *spaz*. It all seemed so unfair: I *knew* in my heart I had great potential, star potential even, but my knowing didn't translate into hitting the ball that was coming my way. I resigned myself early on, even though I knew I could outread, outspell, and outtest the strongest kid in the classroom. And when I was picked practically last for crazy kickball or crab relays, I defeatedly assumed a certain lackadaisical attitude, which partially accounts for my inattention on the day my jaw collided with Joni Friedman's head.

Maybe I was wondering whether Colleen's superiority at dodge ball would be compromised by her all-consuming crush on David Cassidy, or maybe some other social dilemma of prepubescence ruled that day's game. I do know that the ball I was going for was *mine*. I hadn't even bothered to call it, it was so obvious, and though it was also obvious that Joni was going to try to steal it away from me, I stood my ground. The whistle to stop playing began to blow just as the ball came toward us, toward me. I leaned forward and Joni lunged sideways, and suddenly all thoughts about Colleen's social status or Joni's ethics were suddenly and sharply knocked out of me.

I felt the force of our collision in every one of my atoms as I sat, calm and lucid though slightly dazed, on the asphalt. Everyone was running to get on line. I assume Joni asked me how I was, but all I remember is sitting there among the blurred and running legs, rubbing the right side of my jaw, fascinated by how much pain I was in and by how strangely peaceful I felt. It wasn't the sensation of things happening in slow motion, which I had experienced during other minor accidents; it was as if time had mysteriously but logi-

cally shifted onto another plane. I felt as if I could speculate and theorize about a thousand different beautiful truths all in the time it would take my lips to form a single word. In retrospect, I think it's possible I had a concussion.

My jaw throbbed. Rubbing it with my hand seemed to have no good or bad effect: the pain was deep and untouchable. Because the pain was genuinely unanticipated, there was no residue of anxiety to alter my experience of it. Anxiety and anticipation, I was to learn, are the essential ingredients in *suffering* from pain, as opposed to feeling pain pure and simple. This alien ache was probably my first and last experience of unadulterated pain, which perplexed me more than it hurt me.

"Are you all right, dear?"

Interrupted in my twilight, I looked up to see Mrs. Minkin, who was on playground duty that afternoon. She fell into the category of "scary" adults, and from there into the subcategory of adults "with cooties." In her plaid wool skirts and thick makeup, luridly ugly to schoolchildren's eyes, Mrs. Minkin was not someone to whom I was willing to admit distress.

"I'm fine, thank you."

And I was fine: as quickly as it had happened, the sharp ache in my jaw receded and my sense of self transported itself back to the playground. I quickly stood up and brushed myself off. The looming issue now was how far back in line I would have to stand because of this bothersome delay. By the time I was back in the classroom I had forgotten the incident entirely.

I was reminded of it again that evening as I sat on the living room rug earnestly trying to whip up a book report I had been putting off for two weeks. Now, to my grave dismay, the report was due the very next day. Gradually I became aware of possible salvation: I had a toothache. This wasn't as welcome a reason for staying home from school as a cold or a fever because it would entail a visit to the dentist. Had it been only a minor toothache I'd probably have preferred to suffer the wrath of my teacher rather than my mother's inevitable agitation, but now that I had noticed the ache it seemed to be worsening steadily.

The dentist and I were already well acquainted. I was cursed with terrible teeth. We were told it was a common trait among people of Anglo-Irish descent, but my

mother felt personally affronted by this bit of information and, as if by osmosis, I too felt a sense of shame about my teeth. Dr. Singer convinced my parents that if there was to be any chance of my having normal adult teeth growing in, he must be allowed, posthaste, to do everything imaginable to my baby teeth. I can't even remember the work he did, but it seemed as if I went to the dentist every week for some mysterious procedure. No one likes the dentist, but what I resented most about Dr. Singer was that he made a practice of lying to me.

"Hold out your thumb and I'll show you how I'll make your tooth go to sleep so that nothing will hurt it."

I'd hold my thumb out.

"You see, I'll put this medicine on your tooth just like I'm putting it on your thumb," he'd say as he pushed a syringe lightly into my finger, releasing a jet of clear fluid.

"It won't hurt any more than that."

Then he'd turn to his instrument tray, his back blocking my view, and switch syringes. Before I could see what flashed before me, he'd stick the needle deftly into my waiting gums. I was always surprised that a simple

stream of fluid could hurt so much. Even after he had performed this dirty trick many times, I believed there must be something extraordinarily wrong with my gums. I suspected I had some terrible problem in my mouth and, afraid that complaining would only bring some new and certainly painful treatment, I kept my suspicions to myself.

As the evening wore on, I could no longer pretend the toothache wasn't there. Finally I went to my mother and confessed my pain in the guarded tone I might use to admit the loss or destruction of something valuable. As I had expected, she was angry. Of course, she was angry at the situation, at the bother, at the possible cost, but at that age I had no way to distinguish such subtle gradations. I painfully presumed that her anger was directed at me alone.

Only when my father walked into the room and asked what was going on did I remember my collision earlier in the day. This new information seemed to irritate my mother even more, especially when my father, characteristically trying to dissolve the tension of the situation, ventured the prognosis "She's just got a cold in her tooth, that's all. She'll be fine in the morning."

He meant well, but his dismissal of the problem confirmed my mother's belief that she was the only one in the family who faced facts. This was true in a sense, but she never recognized that her anger scared all of us into retreat. By churning problems through her own personal mill, she kept us from ever discussing a problem outright, which, in turn, exacerbated the problem. My mother was always particularly annoyed when my father put on his good-fellow-Irishman act and dispensed comforting misinformation about the world, such as the backward notion that a tooth could have a cold in it. I was sent off to bed with two aspirins and a promise of reappraisal.

"You've got lockjaw!"

My brothers pronounced this happily the next morning, obviously excited by the idea.

I mumbled back to them as best I could.

They were only too pleased to describe in detail how I would never open my mouth again, that everything I ate from now on would have to come through a straw. It was true that I had woken up with my jaw swollen and seemingly locked—it didn't hurt when I tried to open it

so much as it appeared to be stuck—but a diet of milkshakes didn't seem like such an awful fate. Primarily, however, I was excited by the idea that something really *was* wrong with me, that I hadn't been overacting the previous night, as I had allowed myself to believe; I was authentically sick—no school *definitely*. I felt cheerful. My mother made an appointment for me to see the family doctor later that morning.

"Well, considering the swelling and this immobility and that she had a hard knock, I'd say it's probably fractured."

A broken jaw. This would be the first of many diagnoses and surely the one most completely off course. Dr. Cantor explained plainly to me that if it was broken I'd have to have it wired shut so it could heal, but first I had to go over to the hospital to have it x-rayed. I wasn't particularly thrilled with the wired-shut part, but I was too involved with the idea of venturing off to a hospital emergency room to think much about it. My two absolute, hands-down favorite television programs were *Emergency!* and *Medical Center*, and the possibility of personally living out one of these thirty-minute dramas

elated me. My mother kindly indulged me as I sat on a trolley in one of the curtained cubicles, humoring me about what an adventure it all was and how jealous my brothers would be that I was the principal player in such a drama. She told me how brave I and how lucky we all were that this had happened to me and not Sarah, my twin sister, an avowed scaredy-cat. Sarah would have cried horrendously, but I was courageous and didn't cry and thus was good. It seemed a natural enough equation at the time.

The x-rays came back: it wasn't a broken jaw, but something called a dental cyst, probably caused by the blow to my jaw forcing one of my back molars down into the gum, nicking the mandible. It was nothing serious, but they would have to operate and remove the cyst right away to avoid an infection. I went back home with my mother to collect my pajamas, and off we went to Pascack Valley Hospital, a small community hospital in the next town over. Surgery was scheduled for the following day.

What I remember most from that first night in the hospital is that I didn't sleep very much. I devoted most of the time to a silly conversation about David Cassidy

with the girl in the bed across from me. Also I had to have my temperature taken throughout the night to monitor possible infection, and much to the delight of my neighbor, who stood up in her bed to watch, my nurse insisted on taking it rectally without bothering to draw the curtain. My neighbor giggled and I thought her a fool, but I didn't yet have enough resources of dignity to do anything except giggle along with her at my absurd situation. At midnight a nurse came along and taped an NPO sign to my bed: Nil Per Oral, nothing by mouth. I felt special, singled out, and I allowed myself a condescending tone as I explained to my neighbor what it meant, just as the nurse had explained it to me thirty seconds before.

Every hospital has its own quirky protocol. Some hospitals make you put on the surgical gown in your room, some make you wait until you reach the O.R. Some anesthesia departments have rooms in which you are put to sleep, others take you tight on into the operating room itself. Pascack Valley Hospital subscribed to the latter and also, bless their hearts, to the theory that it's best to knock the patient out as quickly as possible and

then assign the IV's and other assorted needles and tubes to their final bodily destinations. Medically this isn't the most desirable procedure, as there should be instant access to the blood and airway systems in case anything goes suddenly awry during the initial stages of administering gas. Presumably this small pediatrics department figured it wasn't worth all the tears, screams, and struggling: get the conscious entity out of the way as quickly as possible, then insert instruments to your heart's content.

Still living in the fantasy of a television show, and slightly dopey both from the pre-op medication and from my sleepless night, I was impressed with the sight of a real live operating room, just as I had been pleased by my view of the corridor ceiling during the trolley ride down there. I was somewhat disappointed when I failed to detect a glass-domed amphitheater through which row after row of doctors would peer down, intrigued by my fascinating case, but the gleaming metal and impressive lights, exactly as I'd anticipated, placated me. My first authentic surgically masked face peered down at me, blocking the bright light from the overhead lamp.

"I'm going to put this mask over your face and give you some air to make you sleepy, it might smell a little funny."

Funny was an understatement. Through the black rubber mask came chemical fumes, so alien to me that I could never have imagined such a smell existed. I thought I would suffocate. I struggled slightly, trying to turn my head away and reach for the mask with my hands. Someone I couldn't see reached out and grasped my hands, squeezing them too tightly, while someone else put his hand on my forehead. This last gesture calmed me instantly.

"Now I want you to close your eyes and breathe and relax and think about some nice things. Do you have any pets?"

I began to list the names of the menagerie back home, aware that a faint buzzing was growing louder and louder. The things around me began to lose their borders. The doctor's face and the bodies of people hovering nearby no longer appeared in terms of what they were but in terms of what they were not. It became increasingly difficult to speak. After listing the names of two cats, I was reduced to producing only a syllable at a

time with each breath, and even that seemed like a great effort.

"Close your eyes."

This was unthinkable. First, I didn't want to miss a thing, and second, what if they thought I was asleep and began cutting me open when I was merely resting my eyes? This last fear was to haunt me through subsequent operations. Even after I admitted my fear a couple of years later and had the whole process patiently explained, I remained wary.

I felt nauseated. The gas was overpowering, the buzz now drowning everything else out, and finally I couldn't take it any longer and rolled over to vomit. A viscous magenta liquid with swirls of green poured out and created an interesting stain on the white sheet. I must have groaned, because someone put a metal basin near me, into which I vainly tried to deposit more of the smelly but curiously pleasant concoction. I still felt nauseous but could bring nothing else up. I lay back and closed my eyes, exhausted from the effort. A strange nurse was standing beside my bed insisting I acknowledge her visually and then, to my great annoyance, verbally. The very last thing I wanted to do just then was open my

eyes, let alone speak to this woman, who was now asking the most ridiculous question I'd ever heard: Lucinda, what time is it? I wasn't used to people calling me by my full given name. With an outstretched arm she directed my gaze to a clock on the wall. This is nonsense I thought. Couldn't she understand that sleeping was the single most desirable act in the world, the only thing I could ever want to do with the rest of my life? She asked me a third time, and only to rid myself of her I gathered my wits and focusing powers and told her. was eleven-ten. My first operation was over.

Six months later, sometime near Easter, I came home from school with the right side of my face swollen and hot. I'd been going in to the hospital sporadically to have x-rays taken of my jaw ever since the first surgery. A bony knob had appeared on the very tip of my jaw just under my ear shortly after the initial surgery, and my mother had asked the doctor about it repeatedly.

"It's just a bony growth; it's nothing to worry about, Mrs. Grealy."

"But surely it's not normal, a young girl to have a lump like that on her face?"

"It's just a bony growth, Mrs. Grealy, nothing unusual after such surgery."

The doctor, who wasn't a doctor but a specialized dentist, smiled condescendingly after each inquiry. Nothing infuriated my mother more than this condescension, which even I recognized as endemic in the medical profession. Unfortunately for my mother, I was still a typical nine-year-old, and I seized upon every opportunity to be embarrassed by her. Why did she have to make such a fuss? Couldn't she just accept what they said? Not brave enough to actually speak up, I mentally rolled my eyes at each encounter between my mother and the doctor.

If I had suspected how classic and common my tendency toward parental shame was I'd surely have abandoned it and sided with my mother. I was vain and proud when it came to wanting to be different from everyone else. I wanted nothing more than to be special, and so far the role of patient had delivered. My teachers had given me a noticeable amount of special treatment, and I'd gained a new level of respect from my friends since going under the knife.

When my mother marched me back to Dr. Cantor's office, it was with a sense almost of righteousness. It was obvious I had a bad infection that they could no longer ignore, and my heart thrilled when I heard the words "emergency surgery" used in conjunction with my name. They had to drain and clean out the lump, which was growing almost visibly and looking angrier by the minute. I asked if I'd get to go to the hospital in an ambulance and was abjectly disappointed when told no.

As far as I was concerned, I was still on a great adventure, the star of my own television special. Up until that point my great trials in life had been the emotional upheavals of our painful family situation. This physical drama seemed a bit of light relief to me. Besides, there was yet another unfinished book report looming. Just when I thought it was hopeless, I'd again been handed this brilliant stroke of luck. Something as impressive-sounding as Emergency Surgery had to be worth as long an extension as I could ask for, as well as another round of presents. It seems odd to me now that a deed as relatively easy as not crying over a needle was rewarded so lavishly, while my Herculean efforts to sim-

ply not fall apart during one of the many family crises went completely unnoticed.

After the surgery my parents were instructed to take me to the Strang Clinic, which translated to me as a trip to the City. I was thrilled: I loved any chance to drive through the filthy, bewildering streets of New York, see so many different types of people, marvel that so many noises could exist all at once—horns, sirens, human yells. At the Strang we met the eccentric Dr. John Conley, a leader in the field of head and neck surgery. After a thorough examination, he arranged to have me admitted to the children's wing of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, known as Babies Hospital.

When a film's heroine innocently coughs, you know that two scenes later, at most, she'll be in an oxygen tent; when a man bumps into a woman at the train station, you know that man will become the woman's lover and/or murderer. In everyday life, where we cough often and are always bumping into people, our daily actions rarely reverberate so lucidly. Once we love or hate someone, we can think back and remember that first casual encounter. But what of all the chance meetings that

nothing ever comes of? While our bodies move ever forward on the time line, our minds continuously trace backward, seeking shape and meaning as deftly as any arrow seeking its mark.

As I sat there on the playground's sticky asphalt I experienced time in a new way, but perhaps that memory has significance because of the way my life has unfolded. It seems almost uncanny to me that I didn't know; how could I not have? A year before, my class had gone on a field trip to a museum where I became fascinated with a medieval chart showing how women contained minute individuals, all perfectly formed and lined up like so many sardines in a can, just below their navels. What's more, these individuals contained more minute versions of themselves, who in turn held even more. Our fates were already perfectly mapped out within us, just as we once waited perfectly inside of our mothers, who themselves were held within the depths of their mothers, our great-grandmothers.

It's impossible for me not to revisit this twenty-year-old playground scene and wonder why I didn't go right when I should have gone left, or, alternatively, see my movements as inexorable. If the cancer was already

there, it would have been discovered eventually, though probably too late. Or perhaps that knock set in motion a chain of physical events that created an opportunity for the cancer to grow which it might not otherwise have found. Sometimes it is as difficult to know what the past holds as it is to know the future, and just as an answer to a riddle seems so obvious once it is revealed, it seems curious to me now that I passed through all those early moments with no idea of their weight.

TWO

Petting Zoo

AT FIRST THERE WAS ONLY THE PRESENCE OF THE boy beneath the bed to horrify me, but before I knew it his father was under there, and then, most shocking of all, even the doctor squatted down and tried his own ineffectual cajoling. This last bit of vaudeville was too much; not only were the doctor's assurances on par with some villain's comforting homilies, but it was all so ... so ... *undignified*. I was mortified. The boy, a year or two younger than me, wore red pajamas with feet; his father was almost completely bald and wore thick glasses. He reminded me of a father-actor on a black and white TV show I watched in reruns every afternoon after school. Partly I felt embarrassed for the father and the doctor, though I also maintained a degree of scorn toward them for indulging the boy's behavior. But mostly I found myself deeply embarrassed for the boy. How could anyone sink so low as to hide beneath a bed? This went against every belief I held dear. One had to be good. One

must never complain or struggle. One must never, under any circumstances, show fear and, prime directive above all, one must never, ever cry. I was nothing if not harsh. Had I not found myself in this role of sick child, I would have made an equally good fascist or religious martyr. The subtleties of my first visit to the emergency room, where I'd been praised as good for being brave, were already arranging themselves into a personal treatise in much the same way that a seemingly inconsequential architectural miscalculation on the ground floor can result in a sweeping chasm in the penthouse. At a time when everything in my family was unpredictable and dysfunctional, with my mother recently discharged from a brief stay in a hospital herself, here I had been supplied with a formula of behavior for gaining acceptance and, I believed, love. All I had to do was perform heroically and I could personally save my entire family.

At that point heroism was still fairly easy: I'd been on Ward to in Babies Hospital for only about an hour. I wasn't happy about being associated with babies, but I was thrilled by the notion of being in the city, in a hos-

pital that had twelve floors and an elevator. To this day I find riding in an elevator a basically pleasing act, the progression of lights marking a sense of excited anticipation. Ward 10 was an old ward. Babies Hospital was nothing like the shining, clean techno-miracles I was used to on television and had experienced at the considerably newer Pascack Valley Hospital. The walls were pale green, and the floor was dark green tiles speckled with gray, worn to an even darker shade where people had paced over the years. All the doors were wood, and the partitions, strategically placed for viewing purposes, were made of thick sea-green glass reinforced with mesh wire. There were bars on all of the outside windows. Though the hospital was undeniably clean, a dingy air prevailed throughout. I was always a fan of the gleaming new, but in time I came to find this dinginess comforting, more humane than the fascinating but alien landscapes of newer wards I would later visit.

I heard my name called. Again they called me Lucinda. Previously that name had belonged only to the first day of school, but from that moment on I recognized it as the property of all people in uniforms standing in the unflattering fluorescent light of hospitals. The doctor

asked my parents a number of questions about my mother's pregnancy and my infancy, and sometimes my mother and father had to confer with each other in order to answer I wasn't used to seeing my parents defer to people in positions of authority; I wasn't used to seeing them act together, pair up like this; and I wasn't used to seeing them act so *normal*, like the parents of the friends in my neighborhood, like parents I had seen on TV. It was generally assumed that we were not a normal family, a feeling we proudly carried and tried to hide at the same time.

We—my parents, two older brothers, older sister, twin sister, and I—had immigrated to America five years earlier, when Sarah and I were four. My father, a well-known television journalist in Ireland, had been offered a job he couldn't refuse with a major network in the States. He packed us all up and, in what was probably meant to be some sort of tongue-in-cheek joke about immigrants, had us travel to America by boat. Unlike our earlier countrymen, who came in steerage, we sailed on the *Queen Mary* on what was her penultimate voyage. Surely this grand act was to be the harbinger of the riches already awaiting us. As with most of my father's

gestures, that voyage was well meant, but later, when things were not going quite as well, it was referred to with scorn, and even later, after his early death, it seemed an act filled with literary bathos, and pointedly sad.

Of course, at the time it was an adventure extraordinaire, especially for a four-year-old gathering first memories. My brothers used to play Ping-Pong on a back deck and sometimes lost the ball over the side. I loved nothing better than to run and stare at its lostness in the churning water far below. The chaos held me tightly, endlessly. One day Sarah drank a glass of cream instead of milk and was sick all over the place; another time we were invited to a children's party in the gigantic ballroom, and I won a prize at Duck Duck Goose. In the ship's gym there was an electric horse and a peculiar machine with a large strap that vigorously jiggled the fat atoms in your bottom to smithereens. The most predictable memory of all, the Statue of Liberty, draws a complete blank, but I remember looking up and simultaneously hoping and fearing that the ship's stack would hit the Verrazano Bridge as we passed beneath it. New

York, when we disembarked, was rainy and filled with broken windows.

"Where are we now?" Sarah and I asked our mother several days later in our new kitchen. She stood near the sink, her hair short and ash blond, her shirt white silk. I was convinced my mother was the most beautiful woman in the world.

"We're in Spring Valley now." She was patient with us.

"But when are we going to America?"

This struck her as funny. Her face lit up and I knew we'd pleased her, but exactly how escaped me. Spring Valley was just a name, a place, but America, now that was something big, a whole way of life, an idea, a piece of magic. Judging by the way everyone spoke of it all the time, I was eager to know when we were going to be there.

My oldest brother, Sean, was seventeen when we left Dublin, Nicholas a few years younger than he, and Suellen a few years younger than that. For Sarah and me, Dublin was just a collection of vague shadows, but for the rest of our siblings, Ireland was home. This new place to which they'd been unwillingly transported, America, could never match up. The virtues of Ireland