

and England were constantly extolled. Many years later, when I moved away from the country I'd grown up in, I came to understand how small things from that previous life such as a brand of candy or a particular television show took on great symbolic meaning.

But these transformations of loss and symbol came much later. When we first arrived, I could not even eat an American candy bar without being reminded by one of my brothers that it stood for the entire political and social inferiority of America. Sometimes a Crunchie, a British/Irish candy bar, would appear in the house—perhaps someone had mailed it—and the feel of that orange wrapper in my hand seemed to conjure everything that I was missing. Television, I was reminded, was vastly superior back in Ireland. I watched American shows and felt guilty for liking them, wondered why their counterparts across the ocean were so much more refined. I never doubted Ireland's superiority, I only assumed it was some failing of mine that prevented me from seeing it in precise terms.

My poor brothers, missing their home more than they could admit, felt nothing but contempt for this new country thrust upon them. Their worst insults became

That's so American; don't be so American; how American. If we were selfish or acted spoiled, we were *becoming American*. When we used up all the hot water in the bath, that was an American thing to do. Gradually my earliest memories of Ireland transformed into pure myth. Where I was now was not only no good, it was getting worse all the time. The flawless times of the family were past; I had missed them simply by being born too late. I began a lifelong affair with nostalgia, with only the vaguest notions of what I was nostalgic for.

Apart from its vulgar culture, the worst aspect of America was its politics, according to my brothers. They had leaned toward the left back in Ireland, and in reaction to our conventional Republican neighborhood in a country different in almost every way from the one they knew, they became radical. Added to the list of insults along with *American* were *Bourgeois* and *Capitalist*; *American-Bourgeois-Capitalist* was the most searing of all. I had no true idea of what these things meant, but I developed a healthy disdain for them too. I remember my teacher in the third grade talking about some great and famous capitalist. It was during the first snow of the winter, and she had a hard time keeping everyone from looking out

the window except for me. I sat there tensely, wondering why she was describing this man with such admiration in her voice. I was waiting to hear the awful truth of what this capitalist had done, but instead the teacher gave up and placated the class by having us make snowflakes from colored paper.

If I intuited that our family was different and in some ways superior, there were also obvious oddities about us not as easily defensible. Neighbors and schoolmates made fun of our different accents. Though I didn't understand this at the time, Sean was in the early stages of what would be diagnosed as schizophrenia. Apart from that, he had long hair and lived a "hippie" life, much different from the lives of our neighbors' sons. My mother herself suffered from depression, an illness I could not understand at the time. There were always money problems, even before my father lost his job, and if nothing else, our home's drastic state of disrepair served as a reminder that there were things I had to keep from other people.

Seeing my parents act so much like, well, *parents*, other people's parents, there on Babies 10, surprised me, and momentarily fooled me. They spent the entire

afternoon with me, talking to doctors, talking to me, to each other. I met some of the other children and their parents. I watched the drama of the boy in the red-footed pajamas unfold as he was eventually extricated from beneath the bed, saw how his mother held him in her lap the entire time the doctor did whatever he was doing to him. At one point I was sent down to Hematology for a blood test. I'd had several blood samples taken from my arm, but this was a finger stick. I watched the entire procedure, fascinated. When I stood up I couldn't understand why I heard a faint buzz and felt so light-headed. Afterward I reported my dizziness to my mother, who simply remarked that I had been silly to watch. I was perplexed because I'd actually enjoyed watching the blood test and only now felt embarrassed by my "weakling" response. Since then I've always turned my head whenever someone approaches me with a needle.

I visited Radiology for a chest x-ray. This department was newly renovated and, unlike the rest of the hospital, was painted in bright colors. It was the only floor that actually fit my picture of a children's hospital. Murals of cartoonish animals and clowns stared merrily at me as I walked down the halls. In the waiting room I found an

absurd number of half-broken toys and giant stuffed animals sitting dejectedly in the corners, too big and unwieldy to really play with. Being all of nine years old, I disassociated myself from all this baby stuff anyway, and made a point of looking disdainful and bored. I'd consciously packed no stuffed animals to bring to the hospital. It was of paramount importance that I appear adult, strong, unafraid.

As the day wore on, I began to believe that maybe my parents really were like the other parents after all, people I normally would have castigated for their indulgence, for letting their worries and fears hang like pictures on a wall for everyone to see. Finally, as dinner-time approached, the intern who'd examined me earlier explained to my parents (I listened in as he talked about me in the third person) that he was going to do a bone marrow test on me. We were all standing in the hall together. I don't remember whether I was afraid of this test I'd never heard of, but when my parents said, "Well then, we'll be off," I looked at them panic-stricken and asked, "Aren't you going to stay with me?" They looked at each other, then back at me, and said something about the traffic, and besides, I wasn't scared, was I?

I felt my face flush. Things seemed to rush at me as if I were the focal point of some unseeable camera's close-up. Immediately I regretted all my assumptions. The embarrassment I felt then stays with me still, though of course it wasn't embarrassment. That feeling was about as different from embarrassment as a patch of soil is from a tree, an egg case from a spider, a lump of stone from a sculpted hand lying heavily on an even stonier lap. It was the moment when I understood unequivocally: I was in this alone.

As it turned out, there really wasn't much to fear, at least not just then. The treatment room was small and overheated, even cozy, being too old for fluorescent lighting. The two interns who did the bone marrow test had only arrived on the ward that day, the first of their rotation. I lay on my stomach on the stiff, clean-smelling white sheets covering the table. Outside, night was settling, but the sky was still velvety blue from the city lights. The interns seemed to know each other from working together in the past, seemed bent on entertaining each other more than me, but I liked them instantly. I had no idea who this Mutt and Jeff team was, but they

had a little routine down, switching into alternately squeaky and rough voices. They even thought it was funny when they pressed down on my numbed lower spine and my legs reflexively kicked the contents of the tray all over the floor. As it clattered on the green tile I tensed, waiting for the flare of anger I normally associated with even the most innocent of accidents. Instead they laughed at themselves, made jokes silly enough that we all groaned, awarded me ludicrously high points for being such a good sport, allowed me to feel at ease, at home even.

This sense of comfort continued in the following days and weeks. There were definite problems to face here, but to me they seemed entirely manageable: lie still when you're told, be brave. It didn't seem like so much to ask, really, considering what I got in return: attention, absence from school, occasional presents, and, though I wouldn't have admitted it to anyone even if I could have articulated it, freedom from the tensions at home. My father would stop by after work to say hello when he wasn't working too late, while my mother, who hated driving into the city, came in less frequently. Some of the other visiting parents, the ones who came in every

day, felt sorry for my lack of visitors and sneaked me contraband food items. I played up to this expertly whenever I sensed a particularly orphan-sensitive audience. My mother would have been appalled if she'd known. I slipped in and out of my various personae with great ease, even flair. Being a child, my past was not yet a burden to me. It was merely there, and I felt a certain freedom to suit the present to my needs, doing whatever might get me an inch somewhere.

I felt perfectly fine. Each day one test would be scheduled, typically an intricate scan or x-ray, and these were relatively painless. I made friends with the other children, quickly discovering the hierarchy on that and all other wards. The truly sick were at the top, but of course being too sick worked against you as you couldn't enjoy the status. Anyone having an operation also ranked, though we always factored in how long your operation would take, how many you'd had before, and how gruesome the resultant scar would be. But the true deciding factor was seniority, how long you'd been on the ward, and in this, Derek was king.

Derek was a handsome boy with a serious case of asthma, and, I would find out much later, he was from

an unstable home, which inclined doctors to keep him in the hospital, with its warmth and wealth of food, albeit bad, longer than was medically necessary. He had been in and out of the hospital many times already, and by the time I arrived he had a week's stay under his belt. Despite his asthma he seemed to feel fine, and the two of us together, relatively healthy and with far too much time on our hands, spelled trouble.

Afternoons were long. Sunlight pushed in past the barred windows and lay down heavily on the green floor like an algae-infested lake. When the nurses shut off the bright overhead lights you could almost hear them sigh, and this was the moment Derek and I waited for each day, naptime, when the ward was quiet and the nurses sat around their station, pretending not to care what we were up to as long as we didn't make noise.

Sometimes the afternoons were planned for us. We were taken to another floor with a playroom that boasted a large, ornate dollhouse, a real collector's item probably, donated by some well-meaning person. You could only look at it from behind a glass partition, but it was too nice to be played with anyway. It was really a doll's mansion, with dozens of intricate rooms filled

with luxuries like tapestries and fluffy feather comforters on brass beds. There were perfect little spoons and forks, neatly made beds with teddy bears in the children's room, a bowl of milk in the pantry with *Kitty* stenciled on it. There were also old-fashioned items, possibly of a sort still in use when the house was donated: washboards and iceboxes and chamber pots. This house had absolutely nothing to do with any of our lives. Most of the children in the hospital came from the surrounding poor neighborhood, and this little house was a rarefied version of everything they would never have and, with its protective glass partition, were not allowed to touch even in miniature. Sometimes you'd see a child standing there, staring, but for the most part the giant miniature house, despite its prominent position near the door, was ignored.

Every once in a while they showed a movie, usually just cartoons, in a lecture hall in another part of the hospital. Getting there was half the fun, passing through the main halls in our slippers and bathrobes, passing people in their street clothes. It was as if clothes spoke to each other, our childish pajamas murmuring something special about us as we brushed past the suits and

white coats and work clothes. The movie itself was usually awful, but Derek and I enjoyed making fun of it later and guessing what was wrong with the other kids who filed in with us, pushing their IV poles, holding parts of themselves delicately. Anyone who looked truly shocking or particularly ill or sported an impressive piece of machinery was treated with respect. There was an implicit honor code: you never stared openly, you always did whatever you had to to help, you were always extraordinarily patient. Not that we weren't perfectly capable of being right little assholes, and indeed were in other settings, but in the hospital a kind of dignity reigned.

It was when nothing official was scheduled that Derek and I got up to our own tricks. At first we stayed on the ward, sneaking around in the storage room or any other place that carried a forbidden air. Gradually we took to sneaking off the ward, where we risked getting caught by a dutiful nurse. The lobby was attractive for its gift shop. We stole get well cards and gave them to other patients, signing them *Love and Kisses, Michael Jackson*. We thought this was hysterical. A few times we ventured down near Emergency. That waiting room had

all the good magazines, and there we lived in eternal hope that someone covered in blood would stagger in through the door, maybe even clutching a knife sticking out of his heart. It never happened. Over in Postnatal we could see the minuscule preemies. They hardly looked human, caged in their incubators like rare specimens on display, hooked up to all kinds of fascinating tubes and machines. It was a good thing they'd never remember any of it, we decided, and thought this lack of memory gave us leave to ogle them in the painful technological aftermath of their precarious entrance into this world.

Though it seemed like an eternity, that hospital stay probably lasted only two weeks or so. Every day I'd have some test, and it never occurred to me to ask what was going on, what the tests were for, what the results were. At least this is how I remember it, though my mother tells it differently. In my version, when the day came, the doctors took both my parents into my room alone. They stayed in there a long time. Finally my mother emerged, explaining that I was going to have an operation on my jaw, but that I could come home for the weekend first.

I remember being thrilled, as if I'd only heard the part about going home for a weekend. My mother looked at me aghast. She was acting strangely, I thought, not herself. I had to explain that it wasn't the operation I was excited about. I knew that if I went home for a weekend I'd get special treatment, and I did. My father let me go horseback riding not once, a big treat in itself, but twice. When my sister complained about the favoritism, my father virtually snapped, an uncharacteristic response, but I was too excited by the proximity of horses, with their sweet, grimy smell, to even try to figure it out. I don't remember going to visit my school at all.

In my mother's version, when she came out of my hospital room I jumped up, hearing only that I was going home. But after that, she says, the doctor asked to speak to me, as if I were an adult. He told me I had a malignancy. He explained they would do everything they could, that I should do my best to get well and they would help. As my mother tells it, I did go to school, where I thanked my teachers and classmates for the cards they'd sent me. I told them I had a malignancy. My mother said I seemed rather happy about it, and my teachers were shocked by my attitude. I told my teacher

and all of my friends, probably with pride: I had a malignancy, I was going to have a *big* operation now.

Some years later, I don't remember exactly how many, as my family was milling about the kitchen and I was leafing through the paper at the table, someone dated an event as something that had happened "before Lucy had cancer." Shocked, I looked up.

"I had cancer?"

"Of course you did, fool, what did you think you had?"

"I thought I had a Ewing's sarcoma."

"And what on earth do you think that is?"

My family seemed rather incredulous, but it was true. In all that time, not one person ever said the word *cancer* no me, at least not in a way that registered as pertaining to me.

It was as if the earth were without form until those words were uttered, until those sounds took on decisions, themes, motifs. There may have been thousands, millions of words uttered before those incisive words, but they had no meaning, no leftover telltale shapes to show that they had existed. I loved words, the sound of them. One of my favorite experiments was to pick a

word and repeat it ceaselessly to myself until I was in awe of it, until it transformed itself entirely into an absurd sound having nothing at all to do with the thing it signified. *Gull. Truck. Banana. Formula.* And then, *malignancy*. I can reconstruct now that its important syllables probably charmed me, its promise of rare and dangerous implications made me feel important, but its lack of meaning provided me with just enough echo to act as background to my shock at hearing the word *cancer*.

Lack of meaning had its own shape; it groped in the darkness, spoke to me only from a hole in the wall late at night, when I dreamed of witches who apologized profusely before inserting their singing knives into me, explaining that they were sorry, they didn't want to kill me but they had to, they were witches, it was their job. I never recognized these dreams as related to what was happening to me. I thought only of what was right in front of me, like my experiments with words, shredding their meaning through repetition. My experiments seemed no more significant than my attempts to observe the moment when I fell asleep at night, watching in the dark like some prowler for that thin line between conscious and unconscious.

I remember all the things I did with Derek very clearly and even nostalgically—going to the movies, peering through the glass at that dated dollhouse, blowing up surgical gloves into mutant udders. Yet the random dreams, the casually forgotten words, point elsewhere, strike me as inelegant and incomplete. Language supplies us with ways to express ever subtler levels of meaning, but does that imply language *gives* meaning, or robs us of it when we are at a loss to name things? I can think of several interpretations to ascribe to a girl who doesn't remember invoking the word *malignancy*, yet what do those theories have to do with me, who resists feeling anything other than bewilderment at the image of a child walking casually down a hall chanting agreeable, historyless words?

Sunday afternoons in the hospital were the stillest and longest—formless hours to be gotten through. With all the departments closed, there was none of the weeks bustle. The familiar nurses were off, leaving us in the hands of unsympathetic aides who didn't care if we were entertained or not. In the stillness, the traffic on the street below sounded louder. There were more of the

other patients' visitors to watch, obscure relatives who made the trip from out of town bearing useless flowers and ornately wrapped toys. But I grew tired of scrutinizing them, grew to recognize the swirling patterns and dynamics of every family that walked onto the ward complaining of how hard it was to park around here, how long the elevators took. Some older brother or father would find a surgical mask and put it on and laugh, believing he was the first to discover this antic. I'd sit on my bed looking for words hidden in a jumble of letters or vainly attempting to put together an incomplete jigsaw puzzle I'd found in the game room. The stiff sheets made the bottoms of my feet red, and I was always in trouble for not wearing my slippers when out of bed. A tart smell drifted down the hall from the sluice room, where they cleaned the bedpans and kept the sterilizer.

I could always count on Derek, who would appear beside me when I most needed him, decked out in his blue bathrobe with *Columbia Presbyterian* spelled out in fading black letters across the chest. There was one particular Sunday we'd been waiting for all week. Several days earlier we'd overheard a conversation between two

of the staff nurses and a resident, something about the building where they kept the animals. Eavesdropping on adult conversations was something I did automatically, but the word animals pricked at me.

"They have animals here?" I interrupted.

"A whole floor of them, over in one of the other buildings. They try out new drugs and operations on them, to help humans."

I was very sensitive to being patronized, and I resented the tone in which this was said, but I was interested too. "How do you get there?"

The nurses and the doctor were all young and good-looking. Though couched in jargon, their conversations often held overtones of flirting, their true meanings as clear to me as a shiny present, unseen by the intended receiver, held clumsily behind the besotted one's back. I was probably annoying them.

"You have to go outside, across the street," the young doctor said.

"Aren't there tunnels to it?" a nurse asked.

"I guess so, but I've never been down there. I'm not even sure how you get to them."

Then they were off again, talking to each other, ignoring me, but it was too late. This was the adventure I'd been waiting for all my life. As I raced off to tell Derek, the doctor shouted at me to walk. Just to annoy them, I stopped short suddenly and surfed a good three feet along the well-polished floor on my socks.

Our main problem was that we didn't know how to get to the tunnels. Finally we were able to dupe a recently arrived teenaged candy striper into taking us, artfully making sure she didn't spill the beans to the nurses, who surely would have forbidden such an expedition. We convinced the candy striper that the nurses had said it was okay, and, just our luck, she even knew where the animal labs were because she used to work there as a messenger. She fell for it so perfectly that she even invited two of the other children to come along. Sunday was the brilliant choice because the regular staff, who were always suspicious of us, were off duty, and there was almost no chance of a doctor or technician coming to seek us out for some boring test.

This particular Sunday coincided with the first uncomfortably warm day of spring. All the windows were open, but they offered no relief. My T-shirt clung

to my back as I slipped off the bed. Whenever possible, I dressed in street clothes. Wearing pajamas during the day, even though everyone else was wearing theirs, made me nervous and depressed. It brought to my mind the old practical joke of getting someone to show up in a chicken suit for a formal ball.

Once assembled in the hallway, Derek, the candy striper, the two other children, and I headed for the elevators. I knew there was a basement beneath the ground floor, but I didn't know there were levels even beneath that. Our bodies were transported through space to the very bottom, the terminus, SB2, subbasement level 2. The elevator doors opened on a long hallway with concrete walls, illuminated intermittently with bare light bulbs cradled in bell-shaped cages of wire dangling from the ceiling. It smelled cold. You could clearly see the imprints of the wood used as forms for the concrete, like vast slabs of petrified wood.

Derek leaned over and whispered in my ear, "This is where they keep the dead ones."

The notion that at any moment we might see a white-sheeted body being rolled down the hall made my fingers fall asleep. I shook them, bewildered by the

effect. The candy striper walked forward authoritatively. But only fifty yards further, faced with an intersection, she faltered. We scanned the walls for signs pointing toward the building that housed the animal labs.

For days I'd been looking forward to this. Once or twice a year a traveling petting zoo was set up inside the local mall. For a small fee you could walk around the sawdust-filled pen and pet the obese goats and sheep. For an extra ten cents you could buy feed out of a converted bubblegum machine. I couldn't get enough of the animals, their smell, the clicks their cloven hooves made on the tile floor showing in patches through the sawdust. I was crazy for animals. Any book or television show or movie about animals I consumed greedily, though I shied away from the ones that anthropomorphized the animals. I thought it degraded them to be too closely aligned with the human species.

Uncharacteristically, Derek allowed me to walk in front of him. Normally there was a silent battle between us about who was in charge, but this morning he seemed distracted, or perhaps he wasn't as excited as I was. There were things about Derek I didn't understand; he could get sullen like this sometimes. Though I never

would have admitted it to him, I envied the fact that he lived in the city year-round. I thought it made him exotic. Once I awakened to find him standing over me and two other boys peering in from the doorway: he'd kissed me. Perhaps they had wanted to watch, thinking I'd be grossed out, but my reaction obviously disappointed them. All I felt was somewhat confused as to why Derek, who looked equally confused, would want to do such a bizarre thing.

Eventually we found the tunnel that led to the correct building. We piled into the elevator and took it all the way up. The doors opened onto a large foyer. Open windows with spectacular views of the city took up most of two walls. A cool, strong wind came through the windows, whose unbarred expanses struck me as dangerous. With the unpainted ceiling and concrete floors, they gave the place a tenuous feeling. On either side of the foyer were sets of swinging doors. We went through one set and down a hallway, realized it was wrong, turned back, and went through the foyer again. As we opened the second set of doors the stink hit us head on. The tang of natural urea and ammonia mixed with the chemical fumes of disinfectants burned the inside of my

nose. This probably should have been an omen, but we continued on down the hall, following the smell, until we saw the doors: *Authorized Personnel Only*. There wasn't an authorized human in sight.

We pushed open the doors and found ourselves in a large room. Equipment of various sorts lined the walls, and in the middle stood four interlocking pens with metal poles for sides. In two of the pens were pigs, and in the other two, sheep. They had no bedding, and the concrete floor, dribbled with urine, sloped downward toward a system of drains. My first thought was, how can they sleep on concrete? The animals had been lying down, but our entrance startled them. They stood up, the sheep bleating hoarsely and the pigs harumphing, very human-sounding, and circled the tight interior of their pens. I'd never been so close to pigs before, and these were enormous. Pigs have human eyes, blue, with round pupils. After staring at you they look away, and you can see the whites of their eyes. Counter to every feeling I'd ever had about an animal before, I had no desire to go nearer.

We all just stood there in the doorway. Surely things were said, but I don't remember any conversation. As

the sheep paced around I noticed that patches of fleece had been shaved away in raw geometries, framed for recently sutured incisions. One of the sheep had what looked like a plastic bag sewn into her side. We stepped back out and went into the next room, where dogs had started barking. Half a dozen beagles in reasonably large cages greeted us joyously. One of the dogs looked unhappy and sick and ignored us, but the rest pushed with all their weight against their bars as we approached. As I neared the first one's cage, however, he stopped barking and growled at me. The candy striper heard and warned me not to get any closer to the dogs, most of whom looked desperate for attention. All of a sudden I hated her, with her stupid outfit and shrill, silly voice.

Desperation saturated the room in those loud, whining cries pacing back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. I was overwhelmed. On each cage door was a sign with handwritten details about the dog, filled with alien words. Instead of water dishes they had bottles with tubes they could lick, giant versions of what my gerbils used back home. Despite the warning, I let the dogs lick my fingers through the bars.

The tenor of the expedition was shifting rapidly, taking on a slow, almost viscous quality. Out teenaged grownup tried to hurry us along, now aware that she'd made a mistake. The next room was lined with cages. The wall directly across from the door was filled with cages of white mice, and to our right was an entire wall of cats, cage after cage stacked upon each other. Most were tabbies. I'd never seen so many cats in one place, and yet it was eerily silent. They crouched in their cages and stared at us, every single one of them, as we filed into the room. As we got closer, some of them came up to the bars of their cages and rubbed, opening their mouths soundlessly. Years later I learned that it is not uncommon to cut the vocal cords of laboratory cats, especially if there are a lot of them. They had the same water bottles and handwritten signs as the beagles, but their cages were smaller. A number of the cats had matchbox-size rectangles with electrical wires implanted in their skulls. The skin on their shaved scalps was crusty and red where it joined the metal.

It was too much now. There was a sound of monkeys in the next room, but we turned and left. In the elevator no one spoke; in the tunnels no one spoke. A sad, grop-

ing presence accompanied us all the way back to the ward, where the lunch trays were just arriving and the aroma of spaghetti filled the halls. When asked where we'd been, our candy striper replied casually that we'd gone for a walk, and not one of us said anything to the contrary. Sooner or later we all have to learn the words with which to name our own private losses, but then we just stood there in front of the nurses' desk, speechless.

THREE

The Tao of Laugh-In

NO ONE CLEARLY EXPLAINED TO ME WHAT WAS about to happen. Mary, the head nurse, did call me over at one point. Derek tagged along. The floors had just been polished, and the lemon scent of wax filled the air. Mary was one of my favorite nurses, always kind and always the one most likely to crack a joke as she walked into the room with that dreaded basin, the one they carried needles in. Though I didn't mind blood tests, I'd developed a fear of preop injections.

By now I'd had three operations, including a bone biopsy. Usually they gave two injections before taking you down to the O.R., one for each thigh, and the shots hurt like bad leg cramps for several minutes. Most nurses offered the hearty and useless advice of *Rub that spot hard! or Squeeze your toes!*, but not Mary. She'd stand over you, needle poised, and announce her own joking version of comfort, mimicking the syrupy tone neophyte

inflictors commonly resort to: *Now this isn't going to hurt me one little bit.*

I specifically asked Mary if she'd give me the injection before my fourth operation, the one that involved removing the tumor and no more than one third of the jaw. She seemed disappointed when she told me that she wouldn't be on duty for it. Late that afternoon, before she left, she called me over. "This is a big operation you'll have tomorrow, you know that, don't you?"

I'd been told it would take a whole four hours, which was certain to elevate my social status on the ward. Though I'd felt sick after my other encounters with anesthetics, I didn't comprehend what a four-hour surgery would mean. Somewhat chagrined at being spoken down to, I told her I understood everything perfectly, unaware that I hadn't a clue how sick I was or what was going to happen.

She looked me right in the eye. "Do you know you'll look different afterward?"

For Derek's sake, I made a joke about bandages, about looking like The Mummy. Horror movies were a major source of entertainment for Derek and me. Between us we'd seen every bad monster movie ever

made, and we had serious arguments as to whether or not Camera, a giant Japanese turtle, could win over Rodin, another Japanese creature with a pterodactyl look. Mary realized she wasn't getting anywhere with me. She shifted her weight, looked down, and let her shoe slip halfway off her foot to dangle on the edge of her toes. After a few moments of contemplating this effect, she put her weight back on the foot. I could hear the stockings rasp together on her thighs as she left.

The next afternoon, when I woke up in Recovery, I couldn't quite figure out where I was or what had happened to me. My entire body ached, and when I tried to speak, nothing happened. An elderly, overweight nurse approached my head from time to time with a long, clear plastic tube, which seemed to disappear just as a deep ache appeared in my lungs. I didn't realize I had had a tracheotomy. There was a constant loud sound of machines, and at one point I amused the nurses, who showed me how to speak by placing a finger over the hole in my throat, by asking if they could turn them off so I could get some decent sleep. My parents came in together for a minute, stood at the foot of the bed, and considered me from what seemed a long, long way away.

With no room in ICU, they decided to keep me overnight in Recovery. I held my hand over my throat, over my newest orifice, and felt my breath brush warm, almost hot, over the moist plane of my palm. The steady flutter didn't seem to have anything to do with me. For the first few hours I vomited up large amounts of blood I'd swallowed during the procedure. I began to welcome the deep, lungy urge to release the sweet-tasting fluid from deep within me. It tasted almost pleasant. Drainage tubes drifted down onto the pillow beside me, displaying the slightly shifting red and golden fluids of my body. An IV hung over me, dripping steadily and endlessly, producing a hypnotic effect similar to that of the watery chaos I'd been drawn to off the stern of the *Queen Mary*. If I lay perfectly still, I felt no pain. I dozed and woke, dozed and woke all night, slept my half-sleep with an image of myself as swaddled.

Bizarrely, after they removed half my jaw, I limped. It was my first day up out of bed, and I was going to traverse the entire four feet to the bathroom. This required a certain amount of preparation, of disconnecting tubes and wires.

"Why are you limping? They didn't do anything to your legs, Chicken-chops."

My mother was watching the nurse help me. I liked it when she called me Chicken-chops, the name she used with any of us when we were ill. I was back on Ward to, not only in my own room but with my own nurses around the clock. Most of them simply sat beside my bed and read, but the one that day liked to turn the television on without volume and chuckle at it continuously. Underdog wavered on the screen behind my mother as she put down her knitting to view the spectacle of my first journey out of bed. I placed my finger over my throat.

"I don't know."

It was everything I could do just to say those three words. My non sequitur limping seemed to amuse the nurse and my mother, and eventually it amused me. None of us understood that the body is a connected thing.

Fluid was the major issue. I refused to drink enough. Or, rather, that's how they perceived my inability to down more than a quarter of a glass at a time. Every

swallow left me breathless, two swallows exhausted me, three and then four made me feel I should be congratulated. Instead they made an embarrassing chart and pinned it on the door, a Magic Marker record of every cc I consumed. They thought the threats to never take out my IV would impel me, but they misjudged. I gladly would have spent the rest of my life on an IV if they would just leave me alone.

Day after day passed, and still I could barely manage a fraction of the ten glasses a day they wanted of me. Ten glasses! An unimaginable sum! Couldn't they see that? I knew my mother was getting annoyed with me, beginning to take it personally. How could I explain that I just wanted to lie there, becoming ever more intimate with my body?

I knew all of my body's rhythms now, all of its quirks. The smell of my wound was sweet and ever-present, the skin on my elbows and heels as sore and red as holly berries. Though at first I'd dreaded the daily injections, now I didn't even mind them, welcomed the dozy contentedness they offered. I learned that all I had to do was relax, that fear was the worst part. I became a machine for disassembling fear. Even the worst pains

could be rendered harmless if you relaxed into them, didn't fight. I grew lazy about speaking, and even after I was given a full-time plug for my trachea, I put little effort into speaking, reducing my vocabulary to only syllables at a time, passing them out as cautiously as I did my attempts to drink the most minute amounts of water. I grew weaker and weaker.

They started feeding me through a gastronasal tube, which had been inserted earlier. Each mealtime a tray arrived with my name on it, a tray filled with liquidated *everything* even turkey. I asked them to let me smell each container before they poured it into the tube. Aroma alone started to revive me. I could feel the hot or cold of the liquid pass through my nose and the back of my throat. Finally, at about five in the morning of my tenth birthday, I tricked a nurse into giving me some orange Jell-O. It was the first thing I'd eaten in a week, and instantly I felt better, began to see that this bed wasn't a continuous state, that one day, one way or another, I would feel better.

When my whole family came to visit me for my birthday, I sat in a wheelchair and gazed at them, feeling splendid. I could tell they were shocked at the sight of

me. I had been an absolutely normal nine-year-old the last time they saw me, some ten days before. My older sister spoke politely to me, as did my twin sister. They'd never been polite to me before, and I knew that a chasm had opened between us. How could I explain that the way I felt now was actually *better*? How could they ever know where I had just come from? Suddenly I understood the term *visiting* I was in one place, they were in another, and they were only pausing. We made polite conversation about people at school, from the neighborhood, talked about things entirely inconsequential because it wasn't the subject that counted but the gesture of conversation itself. You could have parsed each sentence not into nouns and verbs but into signs and symbols, artificial reports from a buffer zone none of us really owned or cared to inhabit.

My mother was the Visitor Extraordinaire. She'd arrive each afternoon, give me whatever bit of news or information about my health she had as quickly and simply as possible, then sit down in a chair and begin knitting. She'd spend the entire visit knitting. Human presence is the important part of visiting, and she understood that.

Her body occupied a space close to my body, but it didn't ask anything of it. Other visitors were more awkward—casual friends of the family who'd stop by and stand over me for long and clumsy minutes, trying to engage me in conversation, when all I wanted was for them to sit down, relax, not say a word.

My father was the worst visitor. He loved puns and would think of a more terrible one each day. But in the awkward silence that followed his rehearsed routine, what should he do then? Sometimes he'd put on a surgical mask and make a joke about Dr. Dad, the same joke I'd seen dozens of other fathers make with their kids. Then, bereft of a vector, he'd sit down and stare intently at the drip of my IV. He could sit like that for a long time, personally coaxing each drop to form and fall. I knew how hard it was for him, and he probably knew how hard it was for me.

On certain afternoons after that first big operation and in later years, I would recognize my father's particular gait far down the hall. He'd come on his lunch break, though he didn't have much time to visit, with his hectic work schedule. We both knew that his visits were slow and sorrowful for both of us and that it was okay for

him to come only occasionally. One day I heard his step echoing toward me. Carefully, still not entirely sure what I was intending, I got into bed and closed my eyes. His loud breathing and hard-soled shoes entered the room. Silence stood over me for a minute or two, contemplating. I heard hands fumble around in coat pockets for a minute, the crinkle of paper, a pen covering it with soft thips of sound. Then at once everything was leaving the room, pulling out of it and leaving behind that specific, hollow sound of emptiness. I opened my eyes and read the note I found on my night table. "Lucy, I was here but you were sound asleep. I didn't want to wake you. Love, Daddy." I felt I'd let us both off the hook, yet after that the afternoon seemed interminable, something to be gotten through.

Gradually I began to improve. I gained strength, the various tubes were removed, and walking became less of a heroic effort. I still resisted speaking, however, keeping my answers to a simple yes or no when I could not just nod my head. I allowed people to believe speaking was difficult, though my mother knew better and kept at me constantly. One day Mary came in when I was alone and

announced very casually that I was much better now, that someone else needed this room and, because there were no beds on this ward, I was to be transferred to the floor above. She left as casually as she had come. It was the first day I'd gotten dressed in regular clothes, a Spiderman shirt someone had brought as a present. A feeling of regret came over me. Perhaps if I hadn't gotten dressed they would still think I was sick enough to stay. A few minutes later an aide came in to help me pack. I excused myself and went into the bathroom, where I was overcome by weeping, the first tears I'd shed since I'd been in the hospital.

How could they throw me out like this? I had come to believe that the nurses there liked me, that they were my special friends, yet now I was just being tossed away. Only then did I begin to realize how accustomed I'd grown to being taken care of. I hadn't even had to wash myself. And as much as I hated to concede any points to my mother, I knew I had become too passive. An ornate surge of grief came over me, too manifold for me to know what I was grieving for. Luckily I tired easily, and the weeping could go on for only a few moments. I wiped my eyes. Ashamed of myself, I went back into the

room to help the aide gather my things into a red plastic disposal bag with WARNING: HAZARDOUS WASTE written in large black letters across it. My mother had taken my overnight case home early on because it took up too much room.

The new ward was laid out exactly like Ward 10, but it was filled with a different kind of patient. These were teenaged girls who giggled with each other and told jokes that I didn't get about the doctors, especially one Dr. Silverman, whom they all seemed to be in love with. One girl with long black hair and lovely dark eyes sang his name over and over again in a voice I told her was good enough to be on the radio. She looked pleased when I told her this. All of them were skeletally thin; knowing nothing of anorexia, I wondered what was wrong with them. There were no visible scars or signs of illness that I could see, apart from their weight. One of them was so thin she couldn't walk, and the others pushed her about in a wheelchair. Her arms were so thin that her elbows looked like giant swollen lumps, her hands like the oversized hands of someone who has worked long and hard for a lifetime. Though they were older than me, having already entered that mysterious,

enviable realm of the teenager, they wore toddler-sized name bands, the only ones small enough to fit their delicate and fragile wrists.

I spent a week on the new ward, but I never committed to making friends there. Derek came up to see me once or twice, but then he too was discharged. My body started orienting itself toward home, feeling stronger and more bored every day. I still had sticky circles on my chest, remnants of the EKG, and my fingertips were covered with small black marks, scars from the daily blood tests, but my body was my own once more. Though I had looked at the scar running down the side of my still swollen face, it hadn't occurred to me to scrutinize how I *looked*. I was missing a section of my jaw, but the extreme swelling, which stayed with me for two months, hid the defect. Before the operation I hadn't had a strong sense of what I looked like anyway. Proud of my tomboy heritage, I'd dogmatically scorned any attempts to look pretty or girlish. A classmate named Karen had once told me I was beautiful, and by the third grade two boys had asked me to be their girlfriend, all of which bewildered me. When Derek had delivered my first actual kiss, his desire had taken me completely by

surprise. On the day I finally went home, I felt only proud of my new, dramatic scar and eager to show it off.

School was already over for the year. The endlessness of summer stretched out before me, temptingly narcotic. I wasn't allowed to go swimming because the scar on my trachea was still soft and fresh, a pink button on my throat, but I didn't really mind. I was a hero. Neighbors stopped me on the heat-rippled sidewalks to ask how I was. Evan, my closest friend from the neighborhood, and the other boys seemed suitably impressed with my hospital tales (I embellished heartily) and with my coup: I didn't have to make up any of the two months of schoolwork I'd missed.

One afternoon when Evan and I were playing an intricate game of jungle in his living room, his father passed through on his way to the kitchen. Pausing in the doorway for a moment, he turned and addressed me directly. I knew that his wife had died of cancer several years before, but I couldn't have imagined what went through his mind to now see a child with the same disease, the same prospects. He was the first person to mention chemotherapy, and he looked at me steadily

and sadly for a minute before asking if I knew what it was. I'd been told I was going to have chemotherapy, but it had been described as simply another drug, another injection, maybe one that would make me a little flushed, no more. I'd had some unpleasant scans involving injected dyes, which had transformed the world into something woozy and hot, but nothing so bad that I felt unable to face it again.

My explanation wasn't what he was expecting, but, unable or unwilling to finish what he'd started, he mentioned something vague about chemical changes in my body, about how my hair might be affected. Having no idea what he was talking about and sensing something serious I'd rather not pursue, I made a joke to Evan about how my hair would turn green, my eyes purple. This was the second time an adult had tried to approach me directly and seriously about my situation, and it was the second time I had turned it around, refused to tackle it.

Death had become part of my vocabulary when I was six. The gerbil was the latest in a long line of family pets to die, and with my sister Susie, who was twelve at the

time, I was disposing of the body behind the house. Our dog Cassie had died a year or so before, and though I missed her, at the time I had felt confused by Susie's irrational tears and bad tempers in the days afterward. Now the gerbil was also dead, and though I'd had no real attachment to him, I was sorry. He lay on top of a brown paper bag from the A&P, soon to be his final shroud. His fur parted and clumped together in a strange way, the deadest thing about him, and when I touched him I couldn't believe how hard, how cold, he was. Susie picked him up by his tail, and the sunlight suddenly illuminated the dullness of his still open eyes. A strange idea entered my head, an idea so preposterous it couldn't be true. How could it be? Surely Susie would laugh at me for even suggesting it, but I felt I had to make sure anyway, for my own peace of mind.

I paused for a moment, considering how best to phrase it. I went for the negative approach.

"People don't die, do they?"

She looked at me with the surprise I'd hoped for, the faintly amused look that told me my fear was unfounded, but her response became proof positive that one should never ask a twelve-year-old sister *anything*. With

glee in her voice she commenced to describe in great detail how you went into the cold dark ground, how the skin fell off your bones, how your eyes fell out. In a truly inspired touch, she began singing:

*The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out,
in your stomach and out your mouth.*

I don't blame her. I was an easy mark, and had I been in her position I'd have done the same thing. Part of the job of being human is to consistently underestimate our effect on other people, and for the specific job of being a twelve-year-old with a younger sister, cruelty is de rigueur.

As we stood there near the driveway, Susie had no idea what she had just implanted in the deepest part of me. No one had any idea, not my parents or teachers or friends, because there was no way I could discuss it. If the word *death* was even mentioned in my presence, I would collapse. At night I dreamed of being carted off and left alone in a dark, cold room filled with bones, bones that would wake up once I was in there and dance around me. There was a small, dark hole in the steps in

front of our house that led nowhere in particular, but in my new dreams it became the gateway to a world that terrified me, a world where people had no heads or, if they did, they were filled with worms and beetles. This was what awaited me, there was no way I was going to escape death, and as the days passed I became more and more frantic. If I saw a movie or television show that involved someone's death, I'd hide under the covers. When a schoolmate I didn't even know died tragically in a fire, I was convinced that I was somehow responsible.

Why had we been born if this was the terrible end we had to look forward to? My six-year-old self was privately obsessed with my terrors and questions, when salvation appeared in the most surprising place—the television show *Laugh-In*. A repeating skit, mixed in with all the sexual and political innuendos that were over my head, was the scenario of a ragged, exhausted man climbing to the top of a large mountain. At the peak sat a man with a long gray beard. The climber would ask the guru, "Oh master, what is the meaning of life?" Of course the answer was always a silly one, usually resulting in the climber's falling off the mountain. I'd seen references to a similar mountain and guru in the

cartoon "B.C." Then I saw a National Geographic program that located this mountain, with its guru, in an actual place called Tibet. Immediately I went to my father. He was sitting in the living room, reading on the red couch so accustomed to his body that it obligingly hollowed to hold him more comfortably. After his death I used to curl up into this space and lie there with the cats, the warmth of his physical dent as reassuring as some ghostly hand in my hair.

"Daddy, how much would a plane ticket to Tibet cost?" I asked, offering no explanation for my question.

His eyes went up into his head and he scrunched up his forehead to let me know he was thinking. Looking down at his palm, he pretended to do calculations, muttering to himself. After a minute of this he turned and looked at me as he would an adult. "One million dollars," he announced, as seriously as I had asked him. I thanked him and left. For a six-year-old, one million dollars was about as unintelligible as one hundred, but I decided to start saving. I understood it might take some time, possibly years.

Gradually my obsession with death was replaced with other obsessions, with new, daily discoveries about what

it meant to be alive. But for a long time I put myself to sleep at night by imagining the mountain, the long, arduous climb. I counted off each step the way other people counted sheep, and each night that I made it to the top I'd ask my question, yearning to hear every minute answering vibration of sound, believing that perfecting my ability to listen was all I needed to know the answer. Truth was something that existed; it's just that it lived far away.

I had long forgotten the trauma of the gerbil when I became ill, and the idea that death had anything to do with me directly didn't even enter my mind. It wasn't so much avoidance but the simple belief that nothing bad would ever, *could ever*, happen to me. Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't this disbelief that kept me alive. Even later, when I could not avoid realizing that I was very ill, I didn't understand that what was happening to me was important, dangerous. Despite my knowing that people died, it never occurred to me that I might personally be implicated.

Later, as a teenager, I worked in a library, and one day as I was reshelving books I found myself in the medical section, where a book on pediatric oncology caught my

eye. Pulling the heavy thing out, I laid it on the table, opened to the index, and looked up my cancer, Ewing's sarcoma. I turned to the given page and read a brief description of the various manifestations of it, followed by a table of mortality rates. A reasonable chance of survival was given at five percent.

The paper of the book was heavy and almost cream-colored, and I ran my finger along the letters, which were so black I half expected to feel them raised up on the page. I looked up. The room was empty and buzzing with both bad light and the numerous stacks of books I still had to shelve. *Five percent*. I felt obliged to say something, but no one was there, and I didn't know what I was supposed to say anyway. Placing my hand on my neck, feeling the pulse there, I stood for some minutes on the verge of moving or speaking or sitting or *something*. Then the impulse passed, and I was on the other side of it, feeling as if I'd forgotten something, some name or object or emotion I'd meant to take note of but had carelessly allowed to slip by. Finally someone walked into the room, breaking the silence with the squeak of winter boots, and I turned, reaching for another book to shelve.

FOUR

Fear Itself

THE STREETS IN NEW YORK CITY ARE THEIR OWN country. A knowledge of them gives one a sense of power. It makes no difference that for the most part New York is a giant grid, supremely traversable compared with such labyrinths as Paris or London. Its power heaves up from the pavement right in front of your eyes, steam escapes in fits and starts as if the whole place were going to blow any minute, people who have already blown apart lie crumpled in its crevasses, and all the while there is a thin promise, a slight wheedling tone, that something important, something drastic, is about to break.

I drove with my mother into the city five days a week, every week, for two years for radiation and chemotherapy treatments, and then once a week for another half year to finish out the chemotherapy, which was administered most Fridays, with periodic "vacations." My mother worked mornings in a local nursing home and would come to pick me up at our house at midday.

We got into the car in our suburb, drove for just under an hour through the relative countryside of the Palisades Parkway, propelled ourselves across the Hudson via the George Washington Bridge, and found ourselves deposited smack in the middle of another world. Billboards advertised the good life in Spanish, ancient cobblestones emerged in patches from the tar, which shivered and smelled in summer and shone black and cruel in the winter. Grotesque figures loomed everywhere, but they didn't frighten me, nor did the filthy and the slobbering insane, the homeless and the drunk. I felt keenly the great expanses, the chasmal spaces between all of us, which one seemed prepared to reach across. Even as I was spooked, I was impressed by and admiring of the constant chord of toughness and strength, which acted to harmonize all the many and varied notes in the city, the thousand and one vignettes of overheard conversations, glimpsed lives.

My mother and I usually drove the miles to the city engulfed by our own private, inner travels, the radio's sound filling the front seat like an anesthetic. Once we got to the city and went through the customary parking ordeal, we walked the few blocks to the hospital in

silence. This was the routine we fell into, and it seemed natural to both of us.

The Radiotherapy Department existed deep in the guts of the hospital in a specially built section with cement walls many feet thick. Chris, my "radiotherapist," explained that careful regulations made the walls so thick. She placed her hand on the otherwise innocuous, pale yellow plaster and told me in reverent tones about the care one had to take around radiation. She herself wore a thick green smock made of lead. She let me hold it once, and it seemed to weigh as much as I did.

On my first visit I could tell Chris was keen for me to see her "as a friend." Her hair was streaked blond and her arms were strong and athletic. Her uniform was an unbecoming yellow that clashed with the yellow walls. The entire department had a different feel from the rest of the hospital, set off by a cocoon quality and by genuine attempts to make something human of this lead and cement hole in the ground. The employees hung up family photos on the reception area walls, and if they didn't have kids of their own, they put up overly cute pictures of cats and dogs. Posters of orangutans pro-