

claiming *Every time I figure out the rules, they change them* and of puppies thanking God it was Friday adorned the ceilings of the treatment rooms, demanding attention as I lay on my back.

Radiation treatment itself was a breeze, about as complicated as an x-ray. I'd get up on the table, and Chris would don her lead smock and turn out the lights. Bulbs inside the clunky machine hanging from tracks on the ceiling would shine down on my face, waiting to be aligned with the Magic Marker x's drawn on my neck and face. "Hold your breath!" the command would come from somewhere in the corner, and I'd inhale as deeply as I could, almost always thinking about a movie I'd seen, a maritime disaster in which the hero had to swim a long distance underwater in order to save everyone else. I'd held my breath along with him, wondering if I too had it in me to save the others. Believing that one should be prepared for any emergency, I went about trying to improve my breath-holding capacity, and lying there on the gurney in Radiotherapy seemed as good a place as any to practice for a disaster at sea. As the machines over my head clicked and whirled softly, my body swelled with air, trembling almost imperceptibly

with the desire to let it all fall away from me, deflate back out to the place it had come from. Just when I was about to abandon all hope and let the salty water fill my lungs, Chris's voice would sound from the dark corner.

"Breathe!" The overhead lights came on, Chris appeared without her lead burden and helped me off the table, and it was all over until the next day.

If it was Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday, that was the whole procedure. I'd find my mother in the waiting room, and we'd take the long elevator ride back up to street level, get back in the car, and head home, hoping to avoid rush-hour traffic. Friday was different. Every Friday, usually around three o'clock, was my appointment with Dr. Woolf at the chemotherapy clinic.

I was already two weeks into the radiation treatment before I had my first appointment with Dr. Woolf, and despite Evan's father's early warning attempts, I went into it completely unprepared. Radiation at that point seemed like a good deal—all that time off from school, no pain, or at least not yet, the meditative drives into the city with my mother. The only thing that really worried me about chemo was the prospect of weekly injections, because that's all I thought it would be, an

injection. If I had been blind to what the original operation would be like, and blind to warnings about chemo, once I entered the clinic I got my first intimations of what was about to happen.

In sharp contrast to the new Radiotherapy Department, the chemotherapy clinic was old-looking, drab. The main waiting area was on one side of a much-used hall, a main thoroughfare for the hospital. It was completely open, like a lounge, and on the walls hung dark oil portraits of men whose names I never bothered to learn. The couches and chairs were covered in dark green vinyl, the floor was black tile with white traces almost worn out of existence. My mother wasn't allowed to smoke, which drove her insane, especially since week after week for two and a half years we had to wait at least two hours past the scheduled time before my name was called.

The other people in the waiting room fascinated me. We all looked exhausted, though relative health seemed to vary widely. Over the years I became expert at diagnosing the drugs each child was receiving from his or her appearance. Some looked bloated and sluggish, others were thin as rakes, and almost everyone was in some

stage of losing or growing in their hair. Hats, scarves, and wigs covered the naked scalps. On that first visit I felt apart from the rest of them, felt a million miles away.

When we were finally in Dr. Woolf's office, my mother ready to scream from the long wait, we encountered his telephone, apparently a permanent appendage. He could carry on a conversation with my mother, me, his nurse, his secretary down the hall, and someone on the phone simultaneously; he had it down to an art. My mother thought him incredibly rude, and she was right. Dr. Woolf's manner was gruff and unempathetic. The first time he examined me I could only flinch at his roughness as his large fingers pressed hard into my abdomen, pried open my still stiff mouth. His appearance didn't help. Tall, large-featured, and balding, he had a peculiar large white spot on his forehead, which caught the light in an unflattering, sinister way. His nose was tremendous, his lips invisible. He scared me.

His office was as drab as the waiting room but was saved by a large, multipaned window that looked out onto a well-tended courtyard with banks of blue flowers and ivy-clenched trees. I spent a lot of time looking out

that window. I spent a lot of time forcing myself to look out that window, because even on that first visit I knew that this room was no place for me. The only thing I wanted to know about this particular interior was its implicit exterior, an existence that had nothing to do with me, Dr. Woolf, my mother, the treatment table, which was too tall for me to get onto by myself, or the two 60-cc syringes waiting patiently in their sterile packets.

This first examination was more thorough than the ones I would later receive. I was asked to strip down to my underwear, which I did, feeling humiliated and exposed. While the doctor talked to the nurse, my mother, and the person on the phone tucked beneath his chin, he prodded me with his hands, hit me just slightly too hard with his reflex hammer, and spoke far too loudly. When he touched me I could feel the vibrations of his voice in my own chest, feel them lapsing through my body's cavity the same way you feel a car passing too closely. He got out a tourniquet and wound it tightly around my arm, pinching the skin just like a kid on the playground giving an Indian burn, and despite every ounce of strength I could muster, I began to cry. Not

loudly, not even particularly heartily, just a few simple teats, which were as accurate and prophetic as any I'd ever shed.

The butterfly needle, named for the winglike holds that fanned out from its short, delicate, bodylike cylinder, slipped into my arm, a slender pinch I barely felt. Because it was inserted into the crook of my arm, I had to sit with my arm rigidly straight, held up awkwardly and overly self-consciously. I began to grow warm, a caustic ache began settling into my elbow. For a split second, a split of a split second, the sensation was almost pleasurable, a glowing, fleshy sense of my body recognizing itself as a body, a thing in the world. But immediately it was too much: I felt the lining of my stomach arc out and pull spastically back into itself like some colorful disturbed sea anemone.

It was an anatomy lesson. I had never known it was possible to *feel* your organs, feel them the way you feel your tongue in your mouth, or your teeth. My stomach outlined itself for me; my intestines, my liver, parts of me I didn't know the names of began heating up, trembling with their own warmth, creating friction and space by rubbing against the viscera, the muscles of my stom-

ach, my back, my lungs. I wanted to collapse, to fall back onto the table or, better yet, go head first down onto the cold floor, but I couldn't. The injection had only begun; this syringe was still half full and there was a second one to go. My head began to hurt. Not sure if my brain was shrinking or swelling, I squinted around the office, not in the least bit surprised to see a yellow-green aura surrounding everyone, everything, like some macabre religious painting.

My body, wanting to turn itself inside out, made wave after wave of attempts to rid itself of this unseeable intruder, this overwhelming and noxious poison. I shook with heaves so strong they felt more like convulsions. Someone lifted a metal basin to my face, and I quickly deposited in it everything my digestive system owned, and when that wasn't enough I came up with the digestive juices themselves, pitiful spoonfuls of green bile, and then I just threw up air, breathing it down in deep gasps between bucking it back up in spasms that ached with fruitlessness. It was the emptiness that hurt the most. When my stomach had something to offer back it was happy to do so, but when it was empty, the convulsions still came, my stomach

pressing inward with even greater self-spite, punishing its own lack by squeezing ever harder.

Gradually the waves of vomiting subsided, leaving behind an unacted-upon nausea that seemed to involve not just my stomach but all of me, even my feet, my scalp. As a result of the vomiting my sinuses swelled and ached, but knowing nothing about sinuses, I could only report that my nose hurt. Dr. Woolf looked puzzled but didn't follow up with any further questions. Someone helped me put my clothes back on; I don't remember the walk back to the car.

The sky was so blue it was almost transparent, and it moved seamlessly outside the window as I lay in the back seat. The trip home was straightforward, from the bridge onto the parkway, then off the parkway down a few streets, and up the driveway. Once we were off the bridge, it was a half-hour trip, and I calculated there were only nine turns from start to finish. From this unfamiliar vantage point, without the normal visual landmarks, I stared at the sky and attempted to guess where we were. Each time the car turned I tried to visualize what it was turning toward: Exit 14, the supermarket, the stone house on the corner, our house.

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Somewhere along the way I messed up. I thought we were at least two more turns away, but suddenly I felt the rise of the driveway and knew I was wrong, but it would be the last time. Over the years I perfected the mental drive, could do it even when I was half asleep, even when the rhythm was interrupted by a sudden need to vomit into the kitchen mixing bowl my mother placed on the floor.

That first time I arrived home I remember feeling not quite so bad. I'd begun to feel less nauseous, or at least better able to control it. My father suggested I eat something, some ice cream perhaps. My head swimming, I sat at the kitchen table and ate several spoonfuls, my parents looking at me expectantly.

"It wasn't so bad, was it now, Lucinda Mag?" my father asked.

I shook my head no, purposefully bringing another spoonful of the vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry mixture up to my mouth. Speaking seemed like something one could grow tired of.

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some reason I started to cry. My mother put her hand on my head and tried to soothe me, and when I was done began to explain that there was no need to cry, that everything would be all right, that I mustn't cry.

How could she know I would take her so seriously? She went on to explain how disappointed she was that I'd cried even before Dr. Woolf had put the needle into me, that crying was only because of fear, that I shouldn't be afraid, it would be all right. It was one thing to cry afterward, because she knew that it hurt, but why did I cry beforehand? Hadn't I always been so brave before?

I looked out the kitchen window over the sink I had just thrown up into. Straggles of spider-plant cuttings had taken over most of it, the brown, tangled roots filling an assortment of drinking glasses placed on the ledges. There was also a collection of small ceramic houses, presents and mementos accumulated over the years. Immediately outside, the overgrown, sloppy fir trees prevented any clear view of the front lawn or street.

Sometimes the briefest moments capture us, force us to take them in, and demand that we live the rest of our lives in reference to them. What did my mother mean?

Part of me knew then, and still knows, that she was afraid for me. If somehow she could convince me not to be afraid, we could rally around the truism she had grown up with: there was nothing to fear but fear itself. My mother didn't know how to conquer *what* I was afraid of, nor could she even begin to tell me how to do it for myself. Instead, out of her own fear, she offered her own philosophy, which meant in this instance that I should conquer the fear by not crying. It was a single brief sentence, a fleeting thought she probably did not mean and doesn't even remember saying but I, who would have done anything to find a way out of this pain, would never forget it. As I made my way downstairs to my room, I resolved to never cry again.

I kept my bedroom dark and watched the light from my television change color on the wall beside me. Every hour or so I felt a great urge to lean over and retch into the mixing bowl on the floor. I drank water constantly so as to have something to throw up. As soon as the vomiting was over I'd feel whole continents better, and the intense nausea that had been unendurable only moments before was suddenly bearable, exposed as a fake, something I'd only mistakenly thought I could not

bear a second longer. I'd lie back on the pillow feeling both energized and exhausted. Gradually, over the next hour, the feeling of unbearableness would return, subtly, insidiously, until I again had to lift myself up and hang over the side of the bed, my intimate bowl beneath me. This went on all night.

The second day was better. The cycle between nausea and relief would gradually extend so that I was throwing up only every four hours, every six hours, only three times during the night. The third day was the breaking point. I could actually eat something innocuous like tapioca. I quickly learned to judge food not by what it tasted like in eating but how it tasted when I threw it back up. Vanilla pudding was best, though it turned an unfortunate color, making me opt for chocolate for purely aesthetic reasons. I'd try to leave it down long enough so that I could digest most, possibly even all, of it before my stomach rebelled yet again.

Sometime during the late afternoon, relief would come. A flicker at first, only a moment, but for that brief moment I understood I was going to get better, that this was going to end. I sat up in bed, felt the strength of my body support me. Another moment would go by and I'd

feel ill again, my head beginning to throb, but an hour, maybe two hours later, the feeling would return, stay for just a few breaths longer before abandoning me. The next period of illness would be a few shades briefer, and so it would go on through the evening. When I woke up on the fourth day I felt only a little weak, a little washed out, but glorious and high, that sanguine, comfortable feeling one gets after performing some great physical feat. I had swum the Channel. I had climbed Mount Eiger.

I sat up, listening for the sounds of my mother's footsteps, the clicking of the dog's nails on the tiled floor. A tree obscured my window, shattering the light into patches on the ditty glass. I didn't understand how I could have overlooked the sheer joy of these things for so long, how the intricate message of their simplicity had escaped me until just this moment. This weightless now-ness, this ecstasy could sometimes last me all day, at least until that afternoon, when it was time to go back to the hospital for the radiation treatment, which, as I've said, didn't seem so bad, not really, anyway.

The fifth day was Tuesday, my favorite day of all. All but completely recovered, yet excused from the burden

of school, I was free to wander about the still house, form intimate relationships with the cats and dogs, who regarded me nonjudgmentally as I tracked their movements over the living room floor, sleepily following the inexorable arc of the sun. Tuesday, still far away from Friday, was futureless, thoughtless, anxiety-free.

The house itself mothered me. With everyone else away at school or at work, I somehow thought my eavesdropping created a new meaning for the clock, the hot water heater, the cats growling over their food. I felt that my listening made for them, and for myself, a real home. The house empty was a different place from the house occupied.

With so many brothers and sisters, I'd never had many opportunities for privacy. I liked to go into my mother's closet and sit there in the dark for the sheer pleasure of smelling her, at the same time knowing how annoyed she'd be if she knew I'd invaded her privacy. I became a snoop, going through everyone's drawers, looking for clues to how other people lived their lives. I liked to lie on my sister's bed, look out her window, think to myself, *So this is what she sees when she wakes up in the morning*. What was it like to be somebody else? I

went into my father's bedroom, dark and cluttered, and saw all the bits of paper, the stray ties, the dirty cups, as marks of how little he was touched by his personal surroundings, how little they, in return, touched him. It all seemed so random, so accidental. In my brother's room I found magazines with pictures of naked women, fascinating me for reasons I couldn't determine. His room seemed the most alien of all. Even when I lay down on his bed and what he I knew I wasn't even close.

The long, elliptical mornings of invading other people's privacy while alone in the house seemed endless, but eventually I'd hear the car drive up to the house and know it was time to leave for the city. Except for Fridays, I looked forward to the drive, counting groundhogs serenely eating grass along the highway, seemingly unaware of the danger a few feet away from them. I pretended I was riding alongside the road with great, graceful swiftness on a large black, gleaming horse, its sensual mane tangling in my face, the rhythm of its hooves a hypnotic lecture on how to arrive someplace entirely different.

Inexorably, Friday, or D-day, as we began calling it, would approach. Wednesday held anxiety at arm's

length, but it was there on the edges, and I knew it. Thursday was almost unbearable. Friday morning I woke up early, as always, but I did not want to get out of bed, even to go lie on the floor with my best friends, the dogs, who I imagined understood my suffering and whose wet tongues licking my face weren't random or casual but pointed, intended, full of sympathy.

The second week of chemo was worse in that I knew what to expect. This presented a curious reversal of fear for me, because I already understood that with other types of pain the fear of not knowing about it usually brought about more suffering than the thing itself. This was different. This was dread. It wasn't some unknown black thing hovering and threatening in the shadows; it had already revealed itself to me and, knowing that I knew I couldn't escape, took its time stalking me. This was everything I ever needed to know about Fate.

We went through the whole routine again, the endless waiting, Dr. Woolf's eternal phone call, his strong hands on my body. I tried not to look at the syringes beside me, but when I looked out the window Dr. Woolf invariably passed in front of my line of vision, casually holding a syringe in the air. When I looked down at the

floor, I somehow chanced to look at the exact time and the exact spot where Dr. Woolf would send a brief spurt of fluid out of the syringe to clear the needle of air. A graceful, thin arc of liquid would fall directly onto the tile I was concentrating on. I took it as a sign to cry, which I did, ashamed of myself, unable to meet my mother's eyes as she began telling me not to, to hold it back.

The tourniquet went on, and it began all over again, just like the week before, except that this time when I got home I went straight to bed. I didn't even try to sit up or to eat anything as grotesque as ice cream. I felt that my mother was disappointed with me. I hadn't gone straight to bed last time—why was I doing it this time? She came to my room and sat on the edge of my bed. She looked tired but beautiful, always beautiful to me, her makeup exact and perfect, the redness of her lips, the faint hue of her powder, the distinct, musky smell of her perfume.

"You can't let this get you down, you know. I know it's hard, but you can't get depressed by it. Don't give in to it. You were not so bad last time, so make sure that what you're feeling isn't just in your head."

She sat there a moment longer, staring at me sadly, before asking if there was anything else. When I said no, she stood up and left me alone with the television. My father had rigged up a buzzer to the kitchen, which I could press if I needed anything. For the first few weeks I pressed it every time I threw up, but as time passed and I failed, as I saw it, to not vomit too much, I began leaving the vomit in the bowl, even when it smelled awful, and only buzzed when the large vessel was full. I lay there in my room as if alone in the forest at night, dimly sensing something large breathing close by and feeling the eyes of something unfathomably lurid turning upon me.

My father bought me toys, not because he believed for a second that they would sufficiently compensate me but because it was as close a gesture as he could manage. He didn't really have the stomach for the treatments, and only on the rare days when my mother was ill or busy would he take me in for chemotherapy. His rhythm was entirely different from my mother's. We arrived late, so there was not as much waiting time, though he seemed happy to sit for as long as he could reading the paper. Once my name was called he'd

accompany me into the office and exchange greetings with Dr. Woolf, but as soon as I was asked to take off my clothes he'd turn to me and say, "Right then, I'll go get the car." Perhaps in part he was embarrassed to see his daughter half naked, but I knew that he did not want to see me suffer.

He'd jangle the keys at me, just as he did with the dogs, for whom the level of excitement at that familiar sound approached heart attacks. He'd smile and announce, "I'll be right back," adding, "This way you won't have to walk so far when it's over. I'll double-park right outside and come get you."

I watched his back as he left and felt relief, because his embarrassment and awkwardness caused me as much pain as they did him. There was no blame in those moments, no regrets, no accusations, not even despair. Those things came later, when I learned to scrutinize and judge the past, but at the time his leaving was enabling. Knowing that my father had his own burdens, his own failings, allowed me to continue on through what would otherwise have been unbearable. As an adult, I wonder how he could have left me alone in there, but as a child I knew the answer to this clearly,

and knew that as soon as he was out of the room I was, if nothing else, free to respond as *I* chose. My father's nervous whistling of Bobby Sherman's *Julie, Julie, do you love me* faded down the hall as Dr. Woolf turned to me with his tourniquet and I turned to him with my unfettered grief.

My moment of truth with my father was brief, followed mercifully by privacy and a sense of relief. It was harder to maintain a sense of transcendence during the appointments with my mother. She stayed in the room and still, despite my repeated failures, insisted that I not cry. But one summer day—it must have been summer because we were all hot and red-faced—I remember my mother bending beside me. The needle was in my arm, and I was feeling the first hot flushes in my stomach. I could smell her perfume, stronger than usual because of the heat. "Don't cry," she was whispering to me, as if it were a secret we were sharing. Dr. Woolf's voice was resonating over our heads, talking to neither one of us. Perhaps it was something in her voice that day, maybe it was the way everything shone and vibrated with the heat, but for the first time in a long time I lifted my eyes from the still empty basin and looked at her. Her own

eyes were filling with water, tears that would never fall but hovered there, only inches from my own.

Suddenly my perception of the world shifted. I wasn't the only person in the world who suffered. I had always heard other children wailing from behind closed doors all along the corridor outside Dr. Woolf's door, so it would be false to say that I found myself hearing them for the first time or more clearly. What happened was more hallucinatory. My sense of space and self lengthened and transformed, extended itself out the door and down the corridor, while at the same time staying present with me, with my mother, who, to my profound discovery, was suffering not just because of, but also for, me.

Moments never repeat themselves exactly. Simply because I understood something important and urgent and graceful there on the examination table, looking at my mother's red-rimmed blue eyes, didn't mean that only seconds later I wasn't back in another moment in which I hated myself for crying, for not being strong enough. The beautifully simple revelation I had with my father in Dr. Woolf's office was followed by his parting,

his footfalls dimming down the hall, leaving me alone to contemplate what I had just learned. My mother's very presence forced me to be present, disallowing me to dwell, and the comfort I gained from understanding her pain was both fleeting and insidious. Fleeting because that is the nature of all moments, and insidious because once I had tasted the freedom and transcendence of my epiphany, I wanted only to return to it. I confused that graceful state of mind with the attached solace it brought, so when the next injection came, the next bout of crying, and I *wasn't* *Me* to not suffer I felt I had only myself to blame, felt that I had failed in some unknowable, spiritual way. In my mind I didn't have what it took: I didn't deserve to be comforted.

At night I dreamed that the children I was baby-sitting for had slipped down to the bottom of the pool we were standing by and had drowned. Try as I might, I could never fill my lungs with enough air to reach the bottom, where they lay struggling, the eerie light lapping over them. Afterward their useless corpses rose to the surface. I had to go to their parents, my empty arms outstretched toward them, my clothes soaking wet, and

explain what had happened, how I had tried my best, really I had, but still, it wasn't enough.

FIVE

Life on Earth

NEXT TO THE GARAGE THERE WAS A SMALL ISLAND of grass between the sea of driveway asphalt and the front walk of cement. Smack in the middle, a meager fir tree splayed its boughs just high enough off the ground for me to sit in the shade beneath them, the earth dark and sweet smelling. To the south I was able to survey what amounted to my version of a grassy plain; to the north a jungle of thick moss grew up around the mouth of a gutter drainpipe. This was my kingdom. Plastic animals bought at the local drugstore inhabited it, and together we lived our urgent lives.

The lion, my favorite, had muscles permanently rippled into his hard plastic body. He lived in the cave I built for him out of stones not far from the gutter drainpipe. Every morning I took him out of the fresh grass bed I'd made the previous night, and together we surveyed the island, checking on the other animals safely tucked into their own domiciles. The aardvark was

stashed beneath the tree, the ibex and giraffe installed on the border of the grassy plain, the zebra roamed between the jungle and the plain, and the snake I relegated to the rocks near the tip of the island. Manufactured by a different company, the snake was slightly incompatible with the other animals in size and coloring, and as a result he never received my most complete care. The animals never came inside the house, never left the island, which to me was the most authentic aspect of their lives.

My mother insisted that I wasn't taking very good care of them when I complained that one of the dogs had chewed on my giraffe or zebra during the night. How could I explain why it was crucial for me, safe inside my bed at night, to think of them out there, living their continuous lives regardless of my presence. I especially loved the nights when the weather became wild, imagining my animals braving the elements, the wind howling and rain beating down. Every morning I had the distinct sense that I was simply opening the door on an ongoing world, constant and sure, that went on into the growing dark even if I was stuck inside, too sick to get out of bed.

When I wasn't on my island, I was riding for the pony express, though sometimes I was a Martian, sent to this planet on a surveillance mission. I was myself only in the briefest of moments, the most passing encounters, a stranger walking brusquely by in the hall. As an alien, I could transform myself anywhere, anytime. Sometimes I was still a human, but one sent here from a future so distant I could in no way comprehend what the everyday things of the present time meant; other times I was an alien who'd taken on human form and walked imperceptibly among a race that mistook me for one of their own. Sitting in the car or a waiting room, I'd examine everything around me carefully, objectively. What exactly was this peculiar ritual of the tollbooth? What was the significance of the different types of footwear? The whole trick was to forget myself, forget what I really knew, break all my preconceptions.

The only time I was ever completely myself was on Fridays. There was no way to escape the pain. Yet with each successive visit to Dr. Woolf's examining room, my feelings of shame and guilt for failing not to suffer became more unbearable. The physical pain seemed almost easy in comparison. Was this how my body dealt

with the onslaught, veering the focus away from itself, insisting that its burden be lessened by having my mind take on more than its fair share? Whatever the process was, it worked—worked in the sense that I became adept at handling my pain, deft at addressing its various complaints and demands for attention.

Afterward I'd lie in bed and concentrate on letting the tremors run their course, allowing them free access to all of me so that, like some bear sniffing me out, they'd gradually grow bored and amble away, leaving me alone and exhausted but still alive. Some pain, like the pain of a needle or the site of an operation, is specific: it announces itself in no uncertain terms. Often I tried to balance the pain out with the rest of my body, a sort of negotiation in which I'd isolate one section. I'd lie there and list to myself the parts that didn't hurt, trying to feel them, aware that normally I'd have no reason to "feel" my body or know it so intimately.

I was becoming aware that I was experiencing my body, and the world, differently from other people. For hours I'd lie in bed either at home or in the hospital and run my finger back and forth along the wall or the bedrails beside me, conversing silently with myself in

the third person, rationalizing the situation, setting down the basic premises of my secret philosophy, occasionally even telling myself I was lucky, lucky to have this opportunity to know such things. At times I was desperate and could find no solace anywhere. Nothing seemed to work, and the weight of being trapped in my own body made it difficult to lift even a hand off the sheets. Other times a sort of physical awareness would take hold of me. Each breath was an important exchange with the world around me, each sensation on my skin a tender brush from a reality so beautiful and so mysterious that I would sometimes find myself squealing with the delight of being alive.

Pain centered in my head was the most difficult to deal with. It's one thing to ignore your arm or your stomach, but ignoring your head isn't quite so simple. The radiation treatment was beginning to take its toll, and open sores began appearing all over the insides of my cheeks. The first time I felt them was while eating a bowl of tomato soup. Each mouthful stung, and, since no one had told me that radiation burns were a common side effect, I suspected the soup of being no good. When I thought no one was looking, I carried my bowl from

the living room, where I was eating in front of the television, into the bathroom, where I overturned it into the toilet. The soup sunk in scarlet, silty swirls to the bottom of the white porcelain, and I let it lie there for a few moments before flushing it away. I didn't want to say anything to my mother because I was afraid she'd see this as yet another of my ploys to not eat. I was losing weight rapidly, and everyone seemed to be shoving food in my face, food I had little interest in. Eating had become a monumental effort, and I couldn't explain to my mother or the nurses that simply finishing one boiled egg was tantamount to an act of heroism.

Now there was a new item on the already long list of why it was hard to eat: not only did I have trouble chewing and swallowing, not only was my stomach in turmoil half the time, but now it actually *hurt* to put food in my mouth. It got worse. As the radiation treatment went on, I could eat only the blandest of foods. Any sort of fruit was out of the question: drinking orange juice felt like I was rinsing my mouth out with battery acid. Anything salty or even vaguely spicy, such as ketchup, ignited my tongue and the raw, tender skin of my cheeks. I lived almost exclusively on oatmeal, disgusting

protein drinks that practically had to be forced down my throat, and endless dozens of junk-food chocolate cream rolls, my mother's welcome bribe for the protein drinks. I loved eating entire boxes of these disgustingly sweet and fatty things slowly and with embellished delight in front of Susie and Sarah, who were eternally on some new diet.

After every six weeks, I was admitted to the hospital, to my beloved Babies 10, for a five-day course of intensive chemotherapy. I actually looked forward to these times in the hospital. The doctors set up the IV and administered the yellow fluid slowly and continuously, which didn't make me feel as intensely ill as the weekly injections of a concentrated dose. And if I did feel ill, I simply threw up in my basin and lay back in my white bed, secure in knowing that no one cared too much if I threw up or not, cried or not: I felt free and sovereign. I was considered a "regular customer" on the ward. I knew all of the nurses, knew the routines and the jargon, and often found myself explaining things to the rookie doctors who rotated on and off the ward. With no school responsibilities to speak of, no family tensions to deal

with, I considered going into the hospital something just short of a vacation.

Even now, hospitals elicit intense nostalgia in me, the vague longing that attaches itself to almost any version of the past, as if it is context, not content, that really counts. A feeling rises up in me, and though I know I was often in pain, I remember myself as being happy in the hospital, lying in the heavily starched sheets, hearing the sounds and movements of other people just outside the door.

At home it was different. Those long quiet mornings in the house still gave me pleasure, but as soon as the silence was broken, as soon as anyone entered the front door, tension and shame accompanied them. Unable to locate my unhappiness within the difficult and complex family relationships we all shared, I thought that it all originated with me, that I was somehow at fault. If I couldn't overcome my growing depression, I deserved it, and how unfair of me to inflict it upon everyone else, upon my mother especially.

I was willing to try anything to get out of the weekly chemo shots. The only way to do this was to be too sick to withstand it. Holding the thermometer up to the

light bulbs heat and other elementary-school tricks were ancient history. I had to be *really* sick, had to have a measurable increase in my white blood cell count, indicating an infection.

My first experiment in making myself ill came about innocently. It was a Thursday in early winter, and everyone was asleep except my father, who was working late again. Icy rain was falling all over the state. News reports warned people not to drive if they could avoid it. The temperature was hovering just at thirty-two degrees. The local television station showed a map of New York with cotton-ball clouds floating over it, clouds weeping blue raindrops mixed with white circles of hail. The whole picture looked like the thought balloons over cartoon characters' heads, as if New York State itself was *considering icy* rain, thinking it over.

I lay in bed thinking about my island, and suddenly I was overcome with a desire to go outside and see how my animals were faring in the storm. I thought of the teal cows I'd seen from the car, standing staunchly in their fields, shivering, the black part of their hides gleaming wetly, a faint steam rising from them. I got out of bed and pulled down my long flannel nightgown,

which had bunched up around my waist in bed. Without bothering to put on shoes, I walked toward the garage door and let myself out as quietly as possible, trying not to waken the dogs. I felt the chill run up my legs.

My animals were fine, just where I'd left them. I was disappointed that the rain only shellacked their bodies instead of being absorbed into them in dark, shiny streaks, as real skin and hair would allow. Standing there, only a few feet from the door, I began to shiver. That's when it hit me that if I stayed outside I was going to catch cold. I was going to get sick, perhaps even sick enough to raise my white blood cell count. It seemed like the perfect plan. Walking into the dark back yard, I found a spot where I knew that no one looking from inside the house would be able to see me, and lay down on the cold wet grass. I tried looking up at the black, chalky sky, but the rain kept splashing into my eyes, forcing me to close them. How long would I have to stay out here? What would I do with the evidence of my wet nightgown? If I hung it near the heater, would it dry before my mother saw it in the morning? The cold began to get painful. My teeth chattered. If I couldn't stay out here long enough, if the discomfort of the cold

drove me inside before I had a chance to get really ill, would that mean I was a failure even in this?

My nightgown soaked through, making it almost transparent. I could see my tiny nipples, pink and hard, and below them, my sharp hips sticking up. I lay there until I couldn't stand it anymore, until my fingers were stiff and red and starting to swell. Once inside again, I pulled off my nightgown and hung it over a chair. If my mother found it, I would tell her I'd thrown up on it and washed it myself in the sink. It was sensual and delicious to be back in my warm bed, the sheets absorbing the water from my naked skin. I fell asleep almost instantly, a rarity for me.

But the next morning I felt fine. I woke up and saw the wrinkled nightgown still on the chair and remembered what had happened. I breathed in deep, expecting to hear soft rales in my lungs, but there was nothing, not the slightest hint of congestion. Sitting up, I tried to gauge how I felt. Did I have a fever? Was my throat sore, did I feel weak at all? No. I felt perfectly fine. I didn't even feel tired. In fact, I felt better than I had all week, which seemed like the crudest joke, seeing that it was

Friday, and in only twelve hours I would be right back in this same bed, throwing up.

I sought out different ways of getting sick. I experimented with drinking dishwashing liquid, but all that did was make me *feel* ill without actually *being* ill. I was too scared to try any other poisons I could find under the sink, having met two boys in the hospital whose lips, tongues, and throats had been burned away from drinking substances found beneath the sink. Roy, the one boy I was friends with, had a feeding tube in his nose, which he swung about like an elephant's trunk. Charlie, the other mouthless boy, was younger and had a mean look in his eye; whenever I was admitted to the ward I scanned the chart list for his name, hoping he wasn't there.

My pet project was inhaling water. Once, while nauseous, I'd inhaled some of my own vomit, and my lungs had reacted instantly with a case of pneumonia. Unfortunately for me, the pneumonia came right before Christmas, at the very end of a cycle of shots, when they were planning to stop anyway. If I could somehow get a small amount of fluid into my lungs, I figured I'd be set. I filled the bathtub and on the count of three submerged

my head. Breathe, I'd tell myself, *breathe*. I saw it as a battle of my own will. I saw it as a test of *forcing* myself. I'd lie there until I ran out of breath, reemerge for air, then sink back under again, firmly telling myself that this time I was going to do it. When I finally found it in myself to open my mouth under water after countless attempts, my body would automatically heave itself up, sputtering water. For a moment my mouth and maybe even my throat filled with water, but the violent coughing I couldn't suppress prevented the water from reaching my lungs. The water in the bathtub sloshed around me and splashed over the sides, and the white towels, soaked from mopping up the water on the floor, hung like flags of surrender over the tub.

Most drastically, I experimented with scratching my arms with rusty nails I found lying on the street. A case of tetanus—the lockjaw everyone thought I'd had in the very beginning—still seemed preferable to chemo. I remember sitting on the stone steps in our back yard one afternoon, the summer sun glaring down. I was listening to the screams of the neighborhood children I hardly ever played with anymore and trying to scratch myself with the top of a dirty tin can. Again something

held me back; while I could raise a good welt, I never scratched forcefully enough to break the skin or draw blood. Something always held me back, and for the longest time I thought it was cowardice.

Letters from strangers all across the country started arriving in the mail. Somehow my name had found its way onto a Catholic prayer list. The letters, on colored stationery bordered with flowers, cats, intricate motifs, were usually short, written in rounded hands. All of them assured me that Jesus loved me, and if I loved him he would take on his share of the burden. One woman sent me a picture taken from her kitchen window, a snowy back yard with a bird feeder covered with sparrows. "When I'm sad," she told me, "I look at my birds, and they make me happy." Letter after letter confessed similar thoughts, advised me to think happy things, think of kittens, of foods I like to eat. My family got a kick out of reading these letters. With our bitter, cynical air we mocked them out loud, laughing at their naivete, their unbounded simplicity. Every letter promised a prayer said in my name.

I laughed along with my brothers and sisters, but part of me longed for the world of those letters, just as I longed for the world I watched on television, on *Father Knows Best* and *The Brady Bunch*. I fantasized about these shows, imagining what would happen if one of their children got cancer. Everything would be talked about, everything dealt with. No one would ever lose his temper. No one would go unnoticed.

Along with the letters came pamphlets, Christian publications mostly geared toward children. They told stories of mysterious strangers who appeared on the doorsteps of troubled families, strangers with a special shine to them, a kind look and a light in their eyes. A quality of calmness and fairness infused the difficult tasks the stranger performed, whether mediating an argument between parents or helping an invalid. He glowed with love and peace and understanding. The aura was as palpable as a physical feature, and everyone who met him could not help but notice it. After a few days he would leave the family, having impressed upon them how they too could be happy and peaceful if only they let God into their lives.

In the secrecy of my room, I decided I wanted this light, this peace, this glow. But the scenarios always ended the same way, with the stranger leaving and the troubled family left alone to ponder and resolve to change. I always wanted to turn the page, to know how or what the troubled family could actually *do* in order to believe. After all, I was sold, I *wanted to* have Jesus help me out and make me good and strong and pure, all of the things I was sure I wasn't—but exactly *how* was I supposed to do this?

Sooner or later we're all driven to this point. In secrecy, away from my family and our shared scorn over the cards and their simplistic sentiments, I sat down in my bedroom on the blue carpet and asked, "God, if you exist, prove it to me."

What was I expecting? A voice, a verbal affirmation? A physical one? I looked down at the carpet, half expecting it to change color. A sudden light, maybe? I looked up into the air above my head for it. I knew I only half expected an answer. Was my partial belief preventing God from speaking to me? Didn't I have to *fully* believe, or did all this simply mean that there *was no* answer? I hugged my knees close into my chest and rocked back

and forth on my heels. I couldn't bear to think I was wrong, that somehow everything I was going through didn't actually have meaning.

I stretched my arm out in front of me and flexed it, opened and closed my fingers. I resolved to Believe, even in the face of this lack of response. Was it possible to prove my worthiness by repeatedly asking the question, even in the brunt of this painful silence? In the same way I was sure I could prove my love, and lovability, to my mother by showing her I could "take it," I considered the idea that what God wanted from me was to keep trying and trying and trying, no matter how difficult it was. My goal, and my intended reward, was to understand.

Life became more complicated at home when my father lost his job in the news department at ABC. The loss of his job meant the loss of his medical coverage. Luckily my mother's job was able to take up part of my coverage, but we were still in a bind. Family life became more tense. Days were filled with phone calls and letters and endless forms. Nights were filled with even more arguments about money. Under my father's plan, the hospi-

tal pharmacy had sent the drugs used in my treatment up to the clinic. Now we had to pick up and pay for the drugs ourselves. To my extreme horror, this meant we had to store them in the refrigerator at home. Every time I opened its door, there they were, a row of short glass vials lined up in the butter rack. The cold light glinting off them made my stomach lurch.

For some inexplicable reason, the new coverage, so inadequate in so many ways, paid for an ambulance to transport me to the hospital each day. The notion thrilled me. But the day the ambulance actually pulled up in front of our house I felt self-conscious and awkward as I walked down the lawn. A group of neighbors had come out to see what was happening and stood there in a circle, watching. "I'm not really that sick," I wanted to tell them. "This is just a big joke, get it?" Though I knew I'd lost weight and was a bit pale, I never considered myself all that sick. I thought of myself as separate from them because of what I'd gone through, but it didn't occur to me until then that people might actually *pity me*. The idea appalled me.

Horrified as I was that people might feel sorry for me, I also knew that I possessed a certain power. After all,

people noticed me. Wherever I went, even just to the store with my mother, I was never overlooked. I could count on some sort of attention, and I discovered that people were embarrassed when I caught them looking at me. I stared right back at these strangers with my big blue eyes, which appeared even bigger now that I'd lost weight and now that, without bone to shape it, the right side of my face was starting to sink in. They always looked away quickly, trying to pretend they hadn't been staring.

If this type of attention wasn't always comfortable for me, it nonetheless further defined me. Most people struggle all their lives to avoid fading unnoticed into the crowd, but this was never my concern. I was special. Being different was my cross to bear, but being aware of it was my compensation. When I was younger, before I'd gotten sick, I'd wanted to be special, to be different. Did this then make me the creator of my own situation?

The ambulance rides continued for only a few weeks. Then my father got a new job at CBS and I was again covered by his medical insurance, meaning no ambulance and no more storing the drugs in the refrigerator. I was relieved on both counts. My mother and I once

more took up our daily drives to the hospital. The whole way there I stared out the window and as before imagined myself on a horse, galloping along the strip of grass beside the road, jumping the irrigation ditches and road signs.

SIX

Door Number Two

EARLY ON IN THE TREATMENT MY HAIR BEGAN TO fall out. Although I had been warned, I was taken by surprise the first day I reached up to sweep my hair back and found a handful of long blond hair in my hand. I guess I'd never believed this really would happen. I was sitting in the car with my mother when I first noticed it, and I started to cry. At a loss to say anything that would truly comfort me or stop my hair from falling out, my mother reminded me that I had known this would happen, that I shouldn't get so upset—as if foreknowledge of an event could somehow buffer you from its reverberations. Feeling, again, that I had failed simply by being upset made me cry harder.

I'd never thought much about my hair. I had been complimented on it, but such remarks had never particularly interested me. More often than not, my hair seemed like a bother to me, something that got in the way when I wrestled or climbed trees. But now? When I

undressed at night, I heard the static of my sweater as I pulled it over my head, then saw the long strands on the collar waving in the breeze of its electricity. I'd sit up in bed in the morning and look down at the tangles of hair on my pillow. As water ran out of the bath, I had to sit on the edge of the tub and reach over several times to free up the drain. Once an aggressive, careless brusher, I now patted at my head with a comb very carefully and very gently.

Involved as I was with the physical process of losing my hair, I somehow ignored the change in my appearance. I knew I was going bald, I knew I was pale and painfully thin, I knew I had a big scar on my face. In short, I was different-looking, and I knew my face had an effect on other people that I could sometimes use to my advantage. But I was still keeping myself ignorant of the details of my appearance, of the specific logic of it. My intuition must have known it was better this way.

In the same way that I understood the extent of my illness while not actually admitting I was ill, I spent a very long time not acknowledging that I was going bald, even as I swept my own hair off the dog's black coat after a particularly vigorous hug. I was too young, only

ten, almost eleven, to be any Samson. Sex appeal belonged to toothpaste commercials, while sex itself was still a mysterious thing, clues to which could be found in the pages of my brother's magazines. Though the pictures were mysteriously compelling, I mostly found them slightly repulsive, and I regarded sex, whatever it was, as something I'd surely never take part in. I looked at myself in the mirror with a preoccupied preadolescent view, which is to say that I looked at myself but didn't judge myself. When the first taunts and teases were thrown at me, usually by some strange kids in the supermarket parking lot, more often than not I was able to come back with an insult far more sarcastic and biting than their own rather unimaginative Baldy or Dog Girl. I understood that their comments were meant to impress each other more than harm me. I possessed a strong sense of myself—and I lived vividly in my world of hospitals and animals and fantasy. I had no sense of myself in relation to the "normal" people I walked by every day. I was naturally adept at protecting myself from the hurt of their insults and felt a vague superiority to them, for the moment, anyway.

Sometimes when I was in the hospital, days or even a week would pass before I was well enough to get up and wash my hair. I hated the way it got oily and lanky and bunched up in tangles behind my head from lying on it so long. That first morning when I could get up and wash it was always a great relief. But finally one morning, when I asked my mother to help me wash it, she looked at me sorrowfully and suggested, in a kind voice, "Maybe it's time to cut it." And that's what we did. She borrowed a pair of scissors from the nurse's desk, and while I sat in a chair she snipped off what remained of my hair, my white, white scalp shining through. We discovered for the first time that I had a large birthmark above my left ear.

The next morning my mother came in with a hat, a small white sailors hat, which I put on and almost never took off for the next two and a half years, even during the periods when my hair was growing back in. Sometimes it grew several inches and was perfectly presentable as hair, but I knew it was only going to fall out again, and I refused to be seen in public without my hat. My hat. It became part of me, an inseparable element of who I thought I was.

My hat was my barrier between me, and what I was vaguely becoming aware of as ugly about me, and the world. It hid me, hid my secret, though badly, and when people made fun of me or stared at me I assumed it was only because they could guess what was beneath my hat. It didn't occur to me that the whole picture, even with the hat, was ugly; as long as I had it on, I felt safe. Once, on television, I saw someone lose his hat in the wind and I immediately panicked for him, for his sudden exposure. It was a visceral reaction.

As the teasing continued, both from strangers and from the very boys whom I'd once regarded as friends, I began to suspect that something was wrong. I identified the problem as my baldness, as this *thing that* wasn't really me but some digression from me, some outside force beyond my control. I assumed that once the problem was solved, once my hair grew back in, I would be complete again, whole, and all of this would be over, like a bad dream. I still saw everything as fixable.

During this time my mother was working in the Occupational Therapy Department of a Hasidic nursing home, and most of my mother's coworkers were

Hasidim. Hasidic custom dictates that once a woman is married she must cover her hair. This used to be done with kerchiefs, but now most of the women wore wigs. I imagine they grew tired of their wigs the same way other women grow tired of their clothes, because there seemed to be a surplus of discarded wigs in the community. As my mother's friends became aware of my predicament, they generously began to donate these hand-me-down hairpieces. My mother didn't know how to refuse them, and the first time she came home with a wig we all had a good time in the kitchen playing with it, trying it on ourselves first and then on the cats. When I put it on, I looked as ridiculous as my brothers and sisters, not to mention the cats, so it was all a big safe joke.

But more wigs kept coming home with my mother. Sometimes it seemed she had a new one every day, and the house began to fill up with them. Each emerged as more atrocious than the last; it was impossible to take any of them seriously. When her friends at the nursing home asked how the wigs had worked out, my mother politely but truthfully told them that none of them fit me properly. One of my mother's closest coworkers

offered the services of her wig maker, who would measure my head and make one "just the way I wanted it, just like my real hair." Not wanting to appear ungrateful, I, coached by my mother, thanked this woman and agreed to go for a fitting, with the unspoken understanding between my mother and me that I did not really want a wig.

We drove to New City, a nearby town with a large Jewish population, and found the store in a small cluster of shops. I'd never been to a "parlor" before, and somehow I'd envisioned a fancy salon filled with glamorous women. But the room was harshly lit, with long overhead fluorescent bulbs, and instead of Warren Beatty, whom I'd seen in *Shampoo*, we were greeted by a small, old man who was bald himself. He affectionately beckoned me to sit in a chair facing a mirror framed with roughly carved pink and gold flowers. A large, dusty rubber plant with leaves as big as my head filled one corner of the room.

"So, the little girl wants a wig, eh?"

He smiled at me in the mirror. I shriveled inside, mortified beyond any realm I'd previously thought possible. He turned to my mother, and they began speaking,