

his hand resting on my bird-thin shoulder. I kept watching him in the mirror, not because I was fascinated by him, but because I didn't want to look at myself. I knew the moment was coming when he'd ask me to take off my hat. I knew there was nothing I could do about it except pretend I didn't care, and when he turned back to me and the moment finally came, I took off the hat as nonchalantly as possible and placed it in my lap. I kept my gaze directed at him in the mirror while he took out a measuring tape and ran lines over the various angles of my head. I liked this part. My hair was growing in at that point—it was about half an inch long—and his dry hand stroked the babylike fineness of it with a tenderness that made the back of my neck go all goose flesh.

After the measuring, he went to the back room to get different samples. Knowing I'd had long blond hair, he brought back wigs of varying lengths and shades of blond, ranging from bright yellow to almost brown. He placed each one in turn on my head and discussed with my mother which types were closest to my "natural" state. He explained that all of the wigs were made of human hair, which made me envision a bizarre blend of the Christmas story "The Gift of the Magi," in which a

woman sells her hair for the sake of love, and the Holocaust, where I knew they'd shaved the heads and kept the hair of people about to die horrible deaths.

Now it was unavoidable; I had to look at myself in the mirror. As each wig was put on and adjusted, both the man and my mother would ask me what I thought, but all I could manage was a sullen nod or shake of the head. Looking at myself in these wigs, with their dull, however human, hair, horrified me, and each time the man commented on "how natural" it looked I could only see him, and eventually myself, as that much more alien.

How long was this going to go on? How many wigs were there in the world, anyway? Though inside I was growing more and more petulant, I made halfhearted efforts to look happy, and when the last wig was finally tried on, I actually smiled when the old man asked how I liked it. I hated it. At last the issue of cost came up, which in my mind signaled the end of this charade. I knew my mother would never want to pay for something as ludicrous as a wig, and besides, hadn't we more or less agreed we weren't really going to get one? The man quoted an astounding sum, far higher than we

could have even joked about. I sat in the chair, my feet swinging, ready to leave, and watched the reflections of my mother and this man talking in the mirror. To my great amazement, I saw a look on my mother's face that seemed to say she was actually considering ordering one of these overpriced, custom-made patches of hair. Could she be serious? I looked on in amazement, and when we finally left the store it was with a promise that she would think it over and call him tomorrow.

Once we were in the car, I thought she would look at me and we'd both laugh, share our private joke, but instead she turned and addressed me seriously. "Well, do you want one? It's a lot of money, but if you want one, I'll buy it for you."

What had happened? I thought we'd only gone to be polite to her friend. Wasn't it obvious how hideous those wigs were, how alarming? I didn't know how to reply. Back at home she called up her friend to tell her what had happened, and I heard her say, "It was the first time in a long time I've seen her smile. She hasn't smiled in so long."

So that was it. Normally I was intuitive and could guess what was going on behind people's words and

actions, but if my own mother could be so wrong about me, how could I know I wasn't mistaken in my own interpretations?

To keep the situation from getting too far out of hand, I went to my mother and told her outright that I didn't want a wig, that I thought they were ugly. She looked relieved because of the expense, but as she looked at me and smiled I thought again of what she'd said on the phone. I smiled at her, sick in my heart at this newly discovered chasm opening up between me and the rest of the world, as if there weren't enough chasms already. But out of my compulsion to continually seek the truth I questioned her about her conversation with her friend, which I saw as a betrayal of me. I insisted I was okay, happy even, that the wig was a big joke. She smiled back at me even more broadly, relieved to see my old self, and for that moment I was happy, content that I could at least give her that.

I kept on wearing my hat. But I couldn't shake the image of my face staring back at me with that ludicrous, grotesque halo of a wig. Did they actually mean it when they said, "Now doesn't that look nice?" I felt quite certain that I looked awful in those wigs, yet why did my

belief not seem to match up with everyone else's? Were they lying to me? Perhaps they didn't want to hurt my feelings. It was dawning on me that I might look much worse than I had supposed.

One morning I went into the bathroom and shut the door, though I was alone in the house. I turned on the lights and very carefully, very seriously, assessed my face in the mirror. I was bald, but I knew that already. I also knew I had buck teeth, something I was vaguely ashamed of but hadn't given too much thought to until this moment. My teeth were ugly. And, I noticed, they were made worse by the fact that my chin seemed so small. How had it gotten that way? I didn't remember it being so small before. I rooted around in the cabinets and came up with a hand mirror and, with a bit of angling, looked for the first time at my right profile. I knew to expect a scat, but how had my face sunk in like that? I didn't understand. Was it possible I'd looked this way for a while and was only just noticing it, or was this change very recent? More than the ugliness I felt, I was suddenly appalled at the notion that I'd been walking around unaware of something that was apparent to

everyone else. A profound sense of shame consumed me.

I put the mirror away, shut off the lights, went back into the living room, and lay in the sunlight with the cats. They didn't care how I looked. I made a silent vow to love them valiantly, truly, with an intensity that would prove I was capable, worthy of ... I wasn't sure what, but something wonderful, something noble, something spectacular. I repeated the same vow to the dogs.

My father worked odd hours, leaving late in the morning and not arriving home until long after dark. He'd cook his own dinner and eat it standing up near the sink while staring contemplatively out of the viewless and dark kitchen window. Some nights I'd get out of bed and go visit him there. He'd hear me pad into the room and stare at me, his face surprised for only a moment before it transformed into genuine pleasure at seeing me. "Lucinda Mag," he'd announce, as if he were only just then naming me, and I'd sit down on a chair, pulling my nightgown over my knees, stretching the material tight. He'd sit down at the table with me and

eat in silence while I watched, both of us perfectly content.

One night when I walked in he was wearing one of the wigs. They littered the house by then, and we'd grown careless with them. The cats slept on them, the dogs played tug of war, and they were still good for a few laughs when visitors put them on.

My father was standing over the stove, stirring a panful of something sizzling. "Lucinda Mag," he announced, grinning, inviting me to tell him how silly he looked. I didn't. I simply sat down as always and watched him finish cooking and eating his solitary meal until finally I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Daddy, take it off."

"Take what off?"

"The wig."

"What wig? I'm not wearing a wig."

"Daddy."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

It went on like this. I knew he was joking, and I knew he had no idea how much I *really* wanted him to take the wig off. I gave up. Freeing my knees from my night-

gown, I walked over to him, pushed the long hair aside, and kissed him good night.

I was still experimenting, unsuccessfully, with making myself ill. Pneumonia remained my pet plan, though I was still unable to inhale the water. Summer had arrived, so there was no hope of catching cold outside, but I'd seen enough trapped-in-the-desert movies to hope for heat stroke. I didn't have a clue what heat stroke was, but the word *stroke* made me envision some sort of tender caress. I did know that it involved seeing mirages. I wasn't allowed to go into the sun because of the extra radiation, so any exposure that might give me a tan was out.

I wrapped myself in a blanket and went to lie in my private spot in the back yard. I lay there and felt the ants crawl up on my skin. Although I liked ants and bugs in general, I occasionally tortured them, then felt guilty and sinful afterward. I'd vow not to, but I always did it again. I was finally cured after reading a German fairy tale that described a horrible little girl who liked to pull the wings off flies. When she died and went to purgatory, she was doomed to have all the flightless little lives

she'd ruined crawl all over her and get in her mouth and eyes. I stopped my tortures not out of morality but from a combination of self-preservation and disgust.

Sunlight came through the blanket in pinhole streams. Birds and chainsaws sang and wailed in the background. It was sweltering. I sat up and pulled the blanket cowl-like around my head and stared into the distance. Sweat rolled down the side of my rib cage, a rib cage so skinny I could feel the drops momentarily rest above the ridge of each bone. I stared into the distance. I was looking for my mirage. In the movies they saw either water holes or beautiful women, sometimes both. My eyes scanned the back yard: nothing. My T-shirt now was drenched with sweat. Even the backs of my hands were sweating, and my scalp, which itched against the blanket. I realized this wasn't going to work. Lifting myself up with great effort, I walked back into the air-conditioned house, the wave of cold hitting my face like a bucket of water when I opened the door.

The one time I actually got out of having chemotherapy, I wasn't even feeling particularly ill. But when the blood test showed a high white blood cell count, I was overjoyed. Deciding I should be put into isolation

for a bit, a porter came down to the clinic to collect me in a wheelchair. I loved riding in wheelchairs, and I waved gaily to Dr. Woolf as I was chauffeured past him.

"Better not look too happy," my mother advised me. Immediately I went into my waif mode, a style I'd been perfecting for some time. Since becoming slowly aware of my odd appearance, I'd decided to use it for all it was worth to have an effect on people, to matter somehow.

Isolation wasn't such a thrill after all. Because my admission was unexpected, I hadn't come prepared with books or toys, and, horror of horrors, the room had no television. I wasn't permitted to have any of the ward's shabby toys brought in because of germs, and there was no view, because the only window was blocked by a broken air conditioner. I kept opening the door to stick my head out, but someone always yelled at me to shut it, to stay inside and get back into bed. I felt perfectly fit. How could I really be ill? Lying face down on my bed, I felt my hipbones jut down into the overstarched sheets. Sleep was a long way off. I saved myself only by pretending I was a prisoner put "in the hole," which I'd read about in a book about a group of men in prison, a book I knew I wasn't supposed to read because in it the men

had sex with the prison's mascot, a donkey. I lay there and pretended I'd been framed.

That week was the exception, though. Most weeks Friday was still D-day. The chemotherapy became my entire life for two and a half years. To fill the time as I waited to see Dr. Woolf, I'd go to the public bathroom down the hall. I loved the feeling of my small body traveling in the same direction as all those large bodies in suits and white jackets striding effortlessly past me, street shoes clicking on the tile.

It was an old bathroom with only two stalls. Each stall door was wooden and closed on the inside with a silvery metal latch. There was no graffiti anywhere in the bathroom except on these latches. Someone, certainly the same person, had scratched onto each rectangular piece of metal a message. Sitting on the toilet in the first stall you could read *God Is Near*, and on the second, *Be Here Now*. I always pictured the person who wrote these messages sitting on the same porcelain as myself, bending forward, one arm raised up and resting against the warping wood of the door, a nail file in the other hand. I sensed that it had been done a long time ago, before my time. What was wrong with them? I

wondered. Why were they here? I never asked myself what might have happened to them.

Still spending my private moments trying to engage God in conversation, alternately attempting to barter him into answering my questions and silently trying to listen to the answer, these bathroom communications seemed important to me.

Each Friday I'd plod down to this bathroom, killing time before the inevitable, and I'd pause for a moment before the two doors, trying to decide which message I wanted to read. *God Is Near*. Well, okay, how near? Did this mean he was near in the way someone is near when they're coming toward you, moving closer and closer, not yet here but expected sooner or later? Or did it mean he was near but not showing his face, present but unseeable, someone breathing quietly in a closet? *Be Here Now*. I didn't want to be here now. My wanting was inconsequential. I *was* here now, whether I liked it or not. But something about this saying attracted me, either despite or because of its seeming simplicity, and two out of three times I went for door number two.

Some weeks I stared at it dumbly, thinking only of what was happening back in the waiting room with my

Derek used to say that word all the time, and I thought it a wonderful insult, though I didn't have a clue as to what a dildo was. After being reprimanded enough times for wielding this powerful insult, I finally asked my brother what it meant: an artificial penis, he informed me. I gave up using the word. I'd known children in the hospital with artificial limbs, and I'd known children with urinary tract problems.

The school year progressed slowly. I felt as if I had been in the sixth grade for years, yet it was only October. Halloween was approaching. Coming from Ireland, we had never thought of it as a big holiday, though Sarah and I usually went out trick-or-treating. For the last couple of years I had been too sick to go out, but this year Halloween fell on a day when I felt quite fine. My mother was the one who came up with the Eskimo idea. I put on a winter coat, made a fish out of paper, which I hung on the end of a stick, and wrapped my face up in a scarf. My hair was growing in, and I loved the way the top of the hood rubbed against it. By this time my hat had become part of me; I took it off only at home. Sometimes kids would make fun of me, run past me, knock my hat off, and call me Baldy. I hated this,

but I assumed that one day my hair would grow in, and on that day the teasing would end.

We walked around the neighborhood with our pillowcase sacks, running into other groups of kids and comparing notes: the house three doors down gave whole candy bars, while the house next to that gave only cheap mints. I felt wonderful. It was only as the night wore on and the moon came out and the older kids, the big kids, went on their rounds that I began to realize why I felt so good. No one could see me clearly. No one could see my face.

For the end of October it was a very warm night and I was sweating in my parka, but I didn't care. I felt such freedom: I waltzed up to people effortlessly and boldly, I asked questions and made comments the rest of my troupe were afraid to make. I didn't understand their fear. I hadn't realized just how meek I'd become, how self-conscious I was about my face until now that it was obscured. My sister and her friends never had to worry about their appearance, or so it seemed to me, so why didn't they always feel as bold and as happy as I felt that night?

Our sacks filled up, and eventually it was time to go home. We gleefully poured out our candy on the floor and traded off: because chewing had become difficult, I gave Sarah everything that was too hard for me, while she unselfishly gave me everything soft. I took off my Eskimo parka and went down to my room without my hat. Normally I didn't feel that I had to wear my hat around my family, and I never wore it when I was alone in my room. Yet once I was alone with all my candy, still hot from running around on that unseasonably warm night, I felt compelled to put my hat back on. I didn't know what was wrong. I ate sugar until I was ready to burst, trying hard to ignore everything except what was directly in front of me, what I could touch and taste, the chocolate melting brown beneath my fingernails, the candy so sweet it made my throat hurt.

The following spring, on one of the first warm days, I was playing with an old friend, Teresa, in her neat and ordered back yard when she asked, completely out of the blue, if I was dying. She looked at me casually, as if she'd just asked what I was doing later that day. "The other kids say that you're slowly dying, that you're 'wast-

ing away.'" I looked at her in shock. Dying? Why on earth would anyone think I was dying? "No," I replied, in the tone of voice I'd have used if she'd asked me whether I was the pope, "I'm not dying."

When I got home I planned to ask my mother why Teresa would say such a thing. But just as I was coming through the front door, she was entering from the garage, her arms laden with shopping bags. She took a bright red shirt out of a bag and held it up against my chest. It smelled new and a price tag scratched my neck.

"Turtlenecks are very hard to find in short sleeves, so I bought you several."

I was still a tomboy at heart and cared little about what I wore, just so long as it wasn't a dress. But turtlenecks—why on earth would I want to wear turtlenecks in the spring? I didn't ask this out loud, but my mother must have known what I was thinking. She looked me straight in the eye: "If you wear something that comes up around your neck, it makes the scar less visible."

Genuinely bewildered, I took the bright-colored pile of shirts down to my room. Wouldn't I look even more stupid wearing a turtleneck in the summer? Would they really hide my "scar"? I hadn't taken a good long, objec-

tive look at myself since the wig fitting, but that seemed so long ago, almost two years. I remembered feeling upset by it, but I conveniently didn't remember what I'd seen in that mirror, and I hadn't allowed myself a close scrutiny since.

I donned my short-sleeved turtlenecks and finished out the few short months of elementary school. I played with my friend Jan at her wonderful home with its several acres of meadow and, most magnificent of all, a small lake. There was a rowboat we weren't allowed to take out by ourselves, but we did anyway. Rowing it to the far shore, a mere eighth of a mile away, we'd "land" and pretend we'd just discovered a new country. With notebooks in hand, we logged our discoveries, overturning stones and giving false Latin names to the newts and various pieces of slime we found under them.

Jan had as complex a relationship to her stuffed and plastic animals as I had to mine, and when I slept over we'd compare our intricate worlds. Sometimes, though not too frequently, Jan wanted to talk about boys, and I'd sit on my sleeping bag with my knees tucked up under my nightgown, listening patiently. I never had

much to offer, though I had just developed my very first crush. It was on Omar Sharif.

Late one night I'd stayed up and watched *Dr. Zhivago* on television with my father. Curled up beside him, with my head against his big stomach, I listened to my father's heart, his breathing, and attentively watched the images of a remote world, a world as beautiful as it was deadly and cold. I thought I would have managed very well there, imagined that I would have remained true to my passions had I lived through the Russian Revolution. I, too, would have trudged across all that tundra, letting the ice sheet over me and crackle on my eyebrows. For weeks I pictured the ruined estate where Zhivago wrote his sonnets, aware that the true splendor of the house was inextricably bound to the fact that it was ruined. I didn't understand why this should be so, and I didn't understand why reimagining this scene gave me such a deep sense of fulfillment, nor why this fulfillment was mingled with such a sad sense of longing, nor why this longing only added to the beauty of everything else.

Elementary-school graduation day approached. I remembered being in second grade and looking out on a

group of sixth-graders preparing for graduation. It had seemed like an unimaginable length of time before I'd get there. But now I was out there mingling in the courtyard, remembering the day when I laid my head down on the desk and announced to the teacher, "I'll never make it." I could even see the classroom window I had gazed out of. So much had happened in four years. I felt so old, and I felt proud of being so old. During the ceremony I was shocked when the vice-principal started speaking about *me*, about how I should receive special attention for my "bravery." I could feel the heat rising in me as he spoke, my face turning red. Here I was, the center of attention, receiving the praise and appreciation I'd been fantasizing about for so many years, and all I could feel was intense, searing embarrassment. I was called up onto the platform. I know everyone was applauding, but I felt it more than heard it. In a daze I accepted the gift Mr. Schultz was presenting me with, a copy of *The Prophet*. I could barely thank him.

Later, alone in my room, I opened the book at random. The verse I read was about love, about how to accept the love of another with dignity. I shut the book after only a page. I wanted nothing to do with the world

of love; I thought wanting love was a weakness to be overcome. And besides, I thought to myself, the world of love wanted nothing to do with me.

The summer passed, and junior high school loomed. Jan, Teresa, and Sarah were all very excited at the prospect of being "grownups," of attending different classes, of having their own locker. Their excitement was contagious, and the night before the first day of school, I proudly marked my assorted notebooks for my different subjects and secretly scuffed my new shoes to make them look old.

Everyone must have been nervous, but I was sure I was the only one who felt true apprehension. I found myself sidling through the halls I'd been looking forward to, trying to pretend that I didn't notice the other kids, almost all of them strangers from adjoining towns, staring at me. Having seen plenty of teen movies with their promise of intrigue and drama, I had been looking forward to going to the lunchroom. As it happened, I sat down next to a table full of boys.

They pointed openly and laughed, calling out loudly enough for me to hear, "*What* on earth is *that*?" "*That* is

the ugliest girl I have *ever* seen." I knew in my heart that their comments had nothing to do with me, that it was all about them appearing tough and cool to their friends. But these boys were older than the ones in grade school, and for the very first time I realized they were passing judgment on my suitability, or lack of it, as a girlfriend. "I bet David wants to go kiss her, don't you, David?" "Yeah, right, then I'll go kiss your mother's asshole." "How'll you know which is which?"

My initial tactic was to pretend I didn't hear them, but this only seemed to spur them on. In the hallways, where I suffered similar attacks of teasing from random attackers, I simply looked down at the floor and walked more quickly, but in the lunchroom I was a sitting duck. The same group took to seeking me out and purposely sitting near me day after day, even when I tried to camouflage myself by sitting in the middle of a group. They grew bolder, and I could hear them plotting to send someone to sit across the table from me. I'd look up from my food and there would be a boy slouching awkwardly in a red plastic chair, innocently asking me my name. Then he'd ask me how I got to be so ugly. At this

the group would burst into laughter, and my inquisitor would saunter back, victorious.

After two weeks I broke down and went to my guidance counselor to complain. I thought he would offer to reprimand them, but instead he asked if I'd like to come and eat in the privacy of his office. Surprised, I said yes, and that's what I did for the rest of the year whenever I was attending school. Every day I'd wait for him, the other guidance counselors, and the secretaries to go on their own lunch break. Then I'd walk through the empty outer office and sit down in his private office, closing the door behind me. As I ate the food in my brown paper bag, which crinkled loudly in the silence, I'd look at the drawings his own young children had made. They were taped to the wall near his desk, simplistic drawings in which the sky was a blue line near the top and the grass a green line near the bottom and people were as big as houses. I felt safe and secure in that office, but I also felt lonely, and for the very first time I definitively identified the source of my unhappiness as being ugly. A few weeks later I left school to reenter chemotherapy, and for the very first time I was almost glad to go back to it.

My inner life became ever more macabre. Vietnam was still within recent memory, and pictures of the horrors of Cambodia loomed on every TV screen and in every newspaper. I told myself again and again how good I had it in comparison, what a wonder it was to have food and clothes and a home and no one torturing me. I told myself what fools those boys at school were, what stupid, unaware lives they led. How could they assume their own lives were so important? Didn't they know they could lose everything at any moment, that you couldn't take anything good or worthwhile for granted, because pain and cruelty could and would arrive sooner or later? I bombed and starved and persecuted my own suffering right out of existence.

I had the capacity of imagination to momentarily escape my own pain, and I had the elegance of imagination to teach myself something true regarding the world around me, but I didn't yet have the clarity of imagination to grant myself the complicated and necessary right to suffer. I treated despair in terms of hierarchy: if there was a more important pain in the world, it meant my own was negated. I thought I simply had to accept the

fact that I was ugly, and that to feel despair about it was simply wrong.

Halloween came round again, and even though I was feeling a bit woozy from an injection I'd had a few days before, I begged my mother to let me go out. I put on a plastic witch mask and went out with Teresa. I walked down the streets suddenly bold and free: no one could see my face. I peered through the oval eye slits and did not see one person staring back at me, ready to make fun of my face. I breathed in the condensing, plastic-tainted air behind the mask and thought that I was breathing in normalcy, that this freedom and ease were what the world consisted of, that other people felt it all the time. How could they not? How could they not feel the joy of walking down the street without the threat of being made fun of? Assuming this was how other people felt all the time, I again named my own face as the thing that kept me apart, as the tangible element of what was wrong with my life and with me.

At home, when I took the mask off, I felt both sad and relieved. Sad because I had felt like a pauper walking for a few brief hours in the clothes of a prince and because I had liked it so much. Relieved because I felt

no connection with that kind of happiness: I didn't deserve it and thus I shouldn't want it. It was easier to slip back into my depression and blame my face for everything.

Hannah was a cleaning woman in Dr. Woolf's office. She was quite old, or at least seemed old to me, and she wore a cardigan summer and winter. Her domain, when she wasn't polishing the hallway floors or disinfecting the metal furniture, was an oblong room off the main doctors' hallway, just a few doors down from Dr. Woolf's. I appreciated this room because it was painted pale blue, so unlike the sickly green that dominated the rest of the place. During the last year of chemotherapy I'd grown considerably weaker, and sometimes walking the few blocks to the parking lot after the injection seemed an insurmountable task. On particularly bad days my mother would leave me in Hannah's care while she went to fetch the car. Hannah would sit me down in a chair next to a small table with a kettle and some cups on it, her own small island where she took breaks.

The routine never varied. She knelt in front of me and asked, "How do you feel?" I could hear her slip rub-

bing between her stockings and dress. Looking her straight in the eye I'd confidentially report, "My nose hurts."

It was always such a relief to be able to admit this to her. I later learned why the chemo affected my sinuses, but as far as I could tell, Hannah was the only one who believed this comic complaint. She'd nod sympathetically and offer me a cup of tea, and I would politely refuse. Then we would sit and stare at each other, waiting for my mother to return. I knew that beyond a cup of tea, there was nothing she could offer me. But her gaze soothed me. Normally I despised the looks of others, but with Hannah I felt a vague sense of camaraderie, imagining that both our little lives were made miserable by these unknowing, cloddish doctors. To her I was probably just one of the many sick children who streamed in and out of the place, but in my mind I'd found a silent link with someone whose life was as difficult as I found my own. As ill as I felt, I always liked sitting there with her, imagining our parallel lives clicking quietly along like two trains beside each other, with similar routes but different destinations.

When I played with Jan or Teresa, my friends from that time now indelibly labeled *Before*, they treated me the same way they always had, though perhaps with an air of delicacy that seemed uncomfortable and unnatural for all of us. They asked me questions about the physical effects of my treatment—how much it hurt, why I was so skinny, when my hair would grow back. I loved to answer with vigor and embellishment. A third of my answers were shaped by the braggarts love of a good tale, another third by my instinctive knowledge that they'd never understand what it was really like, and a third by my own unawareness of what it was like a great deal of the time. I witnessed my life unfolding like someone who has awkwardly stumbled in after the movie has started. I sensed that something important had been revealed in the opening sequence, some essential knowledge everyone else was privy to that was being kept from me.

I could converse with well-intentioned neighbors, go the usual round of polite questions about my health, though I was highly aware of how different these conversations were from the ones with my friends on Ward 10, my friends from *After*. People who weren't ill or

involved in the daily flow of hospital life had their own ideas of what it was like to be ill. It seemed impossible to tell them how it really was, and I didn't particularly want to do so. I preferred to have strangers on the street imagine me as sickly, confident that as soon as I was back on Ward 10 my friends and I would redefine for each other what it was like to be sick.

I felt as if my illness were a blanket the world had thrown over me; all that could be seen from the outside was an indistinguishable lump. And somehow I transformed that blanket into a tent, beneath which I almost happily set up camp. I had no sense of how my life was *supposed to be*, only of how it was. Not that this meant I was actually happy, not in any normal definition of the word. Though I depended on my apocalyptic thoughts to keep my situation in perspective, they did imbue me with a rather depressed aura. "For God's sake, stop looking so morbid all the time" became a familiar phrase in my house. Whenever anyone else was present I felt incapable of being anything other than a depressed lump. It was only when I was alone that my ability to relish life surfaced.

Each week, with the first glimmer of returning strength after the days of vomiting, I discovered that, for me, joy could be measured in negative terms: of what I *didn't* have, which was pain and weakness. My greatest happiness wasn't acquired through effort but was something I already had, deep and sonorous inside of me, found through a process of removing the walls of pain around it. I knew the walls were inside of me, and I saw that most people, never having experienced deep physical discomfort on a regular basis, didn't, couldn't, know this.

I viewed other people both critically and sympathetically. Why couldn't they just stop complaining so much, just let go and see how good they actually had it? Everyone seemed to be waiting for something to happen that would allow them to move forward, waiting for some shadowy future moment to begin their lives in earnest. Everybody, from my mother to the characters I read about in books (who were as actual and important as real people to me), was always looking at someone else's life and envying it, wishing to occupy it. I wanted them to stop, to see how much they had already, how they had their health and their strength. I imagined how my

life would be if I had half their fortune. Then I would catch myself, guilty of exactly the thing I was accusing others of. As clear-headed as I was, sometimes I felt that the only reason for this clarity was to see how hypocritically I lived my own life.

Once, during a week of intensive chemotherapy toward the end of the two and a half years, I was sent to another ward, as 10 was already full when I checked in. My roommate was a girl who'd been run over by an ice-boat; the blades had cut her intestines in two, and she'd had to have them sewn back together. She got a lot of attention, lots of calls from concerned relatives and school friends, and I was both a little jealous of her and a little contemptuous because she was taking her accident a bit too seriously for my taste. After all, she'd lived, hadn't she? She'd had one operation and they might do another one the next week, but after that it would all be over, so what was the big fuss about?

It was late at night, always a bad time in the hospital, but especially on this ward, which I'd been on before and which was notoriously understaffed. Often there was only one nurse and a handful of aides to take care of

everyone. This was particularly bad news if you had an IV. They were still using butterfly needles instead of the flexible catheter-type needles they have today. The needle was inserted into the back of your hand and simply taped down to the skin. The chances of it puncturing the vein were high, and I'd learned to keep that hand absolutely still, even in my sleep. Worse, however, the limited staff often neglected to refill the IV bottles regularly and they would dry up in the night, causing the needle to clot with blood. Many nights I had to be woken three or four times in order to be restuck with a new butterfly. My veins were so tired that often it took three, four, even five sticks before the doctor, who was never happy to be woken for the menial task of setting up an IV, could get the fluid to flow properly. I learned not only to sleep without moving, for fear of hitting the needle out of place, but also to sleep in two-hour shifts so that I could wake up and check the bottle's fluid level myself.

This particular night I woke up on that strange ward and looked at the bottle in the blocks of light coming in through the city window. To my relief it was still half full. The light coming in passed through the clear solu-

tion and threw a marbled reflection down on the floor. I had to go to the bathroom. I tried to assess if I could walk the few feet unaided and decided I couldn't. Pressing the call button for a nurse, I sighed, realizing it wasn't a buzzer system, as they had on other floors, but simply a bulb that would light up over my door in the hallway. Chances were good that no one would see it for some time. I waited. I waited and waited and even tried calling out, but my voice couldn't carry that far. My roommate slept soundly, still heavily sedated from her operation that morning. I saw her open mouth, her fat cheeks, her whole face turned upward toward the ceiling as her thick, curly hair fell to the side.

She'd spent all of yesterday's dinnertime telling me about her parents' divorce, about how her father came to get her each weekend and always took her to do something. This weekend they had gone ice sailing. She spoke of it in a passive yet unhappy voice. While she was in surgery I listened to her mother fight with her rather, accusing him of causing the accident. He yelled back at her and, in my mind, won. They all seemed very impressed with the complications of their lives, with their divorce and their fights and their daughter, who

commanded the divided attention of her parents. Who would ever understand how jealous I was?

I kept waiting to see if a nurse would come. How much time passed I don't know, but I had to make a decision: get up and walk or pee in the bed, as I'd done once before in a similar situation. For a brief time during my father's unemployment I'd gone on Medicaid and had been sent to a completely different part of the hospital, to a gigantic open ward that was disturbingly understaffed. I called and called for a nurse or an aide, but finally I couldn't stand it any longer and, with great relief, let go and peed right there in the bed. I had to lie in it until it was cold and had spread through all of the sheets before an aide finally, almost comically, walked in with a bedpan. She looked at me disapprovingly and said she'd send someone to change my sheets. Ten minutes later a woman showed up and looked at me in surprise. She asked me how old I was, and I told her eleven. She shook her head and said that when she heard someone had peed in the bed, she thought it must have been a baby.

I wasn't going to go through that embarrassment again. All I had to do was be strong, I told myself, and I

could make it to the bathroom. Sitting up wasn't hard at all. Slipping down to the floor was fine as long as I did it slowly. Grabbing hold of my IV pole, which was on the wrong side of the bed, adding extra length to the journey, I began the seven or eight feet to the bathroom. I passed the foot of my bed. Even at this hour, traffic was still audible outside. My roommate breathed heavily, almost snoring but not quite, while my IV swayed and clinked against the metal pole as I pushed it along. I neared the foot of her bed and had almost passed it when I understood I would never make it. I was exhausted. I had to sit down, but the one chair in the room was even farther away than the bathroom or my bed. Tiredness and a creeping ache so overwhelmed me that I forgot I even had to go to the bathroom. Could I make it back to my bed? It was too far. Suddenly afraid I was going to faint, I crouched down to the floor, aware that I was adopting the pose of the crouched skeletal figures in the countless famine pictures I studied so hard in news magazines. *I'm okay*, I told myself, *I'm okay*.

I thought that if I could just rest like that for long enough, I'd regain the strength to make it back to bed. The five feet might as well have been five miles. My

knees began to ache, and afraid that I might fall even from this crouch position and dislodge the IV, I gingerly lay down on the floor. My hipbones and elbows hurt against the hard floor. If I lay here long enough, would someone come by and see me? After all, my call light was still on. What would they think, seeing me lying here? Maybe they'd feel sorry for me, maybe they'd sweep me up in their arms place me back in bed and lay a comforting hand across my forehead, whisper something sweet and consoling in my ear.

Until that moment I had believed in the drama of my life, the dramatic possibilities my tragedy called up. But now the floor was cold. The floor was just so cold. I didn't want to lie there anymore, and even though it would take a Herculean effort to ease myself back up, I didn't want to wait anymore for someone to come rescue me. I suddenly had a glimmer of what the person had meant when he scratched that message into the bathroom door eleven floors below: Be Here Now. I felt a bottomless sense of peace, of stillness. I decided it was simply a matter of will, that if I really concentrated I could make it back. And I did. It took a long time and I don't remember anything once I was back in bed. I must

have fallen asleep immediately, only to be woken from a deep sleep a little while later by an aide, answering my call light at last.

"Do you realize this is the last six weeks?" my mother asked late one Thursday afternoon while starting to prepare dinner.

"What?"

"The last set of shots. Only six more, and then all this will be over. What a relief. You must be overjoyed."

I was shocked. Over? It was almost over? I looked at her, speechless. "Thank God for that," I said, using a phrase she employed all the time.

I went down to my room and lay on my bed, utterly confused. Why wasn't I overjoyed? I was almost thirteen years old. I'd been doing this since I was ten; I barely remembered what life had been like before. No more shots, no more Dr. Woolf, no more throwing up. I was afraid, and I was afraid that I was afraid. Why wasn't I happy, the way I was supposed to be? What was wrong with me? I didn't want it to continue, did I? No, I knew I didn't, but life after chemo seemed unimaginable. Bewilderment filled the room. As hard as it was to

admit this to myself, I was afraid of it ending, of everything changing. I wouldn't be special anymore; no one would love me. Without the arena of chemotherapy in which to prove myself, how would anyone know I was worthy of love? But how could I ever want it to go on? I lay there turning these things over and over in my mind, more perplexed than I'd ever been in my life.

Counting off the days became an obsession. Thirty-eight more days until the last shot. Thirty-two more days. Fifteen more days. Three days and eighteen hours. Forty-eight hours and nineteen minutes. Three hours. Sixteen minutes. Now. I walked into Dr. Woolf's office, and it didn't seem in any way special or different. It was a bit gray outside, a bit chilly, but not exactly cold. Dr. Woolf was all business as usual, on the phone, talking in five different directions at once. For only the second time I looked at the syringes in the basin. There were two of them, and one was filled with a bright red solution the color of Kool Aid. I watched him attach the needles, watched him walk carelessly around the room with them, still on the phone but to someone different now. Then he put the phone down and put the tourniquet on and rubbed my arm with cotton ball, the smell of rub-

bing alcohol filling the air. As usual, it took a few stabs to find a vein, but the third one worked.

The hot flashes came, followed by the familiar nausea, and I painfully retched up nothing but the single Thorazine pill I'd been given an hour before. It was meant to help the vomiting, but every week I only threw it up, and there it was again, half dissolved, pinging into the basin. Slowly I realized that I wasn't crying. These last few months I had hardly cried at all: it wasn't that I actually cried less but that I controlled it more. Not crying had become the goal of my visits to the chemotherapy clinic. But now I felt absolutely nothing. My mother was praising me for being so good. I looked at her and at the beautiful window behind her. Robotically, I looked back to my arm, to Dr. Woolf's huge hands changing syringes. Nothing. I felt only a void. Even the usual pain floated around me. It seemed to belong more to the room than to me, and even then awkwardly, like a clumsy piece of furniture.

Then it was over. My mother and Dr. Woolf were talking. I couldn't hear them, though they were right next to me. I was looking at the ceiling. It was peeling, and there was a water stain just off to the right. Funny, I

thought to myself, all that time looking around and never noticing the ceiling. Had I never looked at it, or had I looked at it dozens of times, only now really *seeing* it? My mother finished speaking with Dr. Woolf and turned toward me; then she, too, before helping me off the table, wordlessly looked up for a moment, following my gaze.

She went off to get the car, and I was ushered into Hannah's room. "How do you feel?" she asked. I began to cry. Just a little bit at first, but soon I was sobbing and my whole body was shaking. I tried to stop, but it was out of control, and I gave myself over to it. Hannah bent over and put an arm on my shoulder for a second, only for a second, then withdrew it and straightened up. She stood there for a few moments holding her hands together over her stomach, then, without asking, busied herself making me the cup of tea she'd been offering me for years. Through my sobs, which were getting loud now, I heard the water rattle and hiss inside the electric kettle. My lungs were already filled with sorrow, and though I didn't think it was possible, I cried even harder.

A few minutes later, Hannah handed me the tea in a mug with a picture of the Statue of Liberty on it. Hold-

ing the hot mug in my hands, I cried just as hard, though conscious now that I mustn't spill the tea. My head was pounding. Slowly the crying began to stop. I felt so tired all of a sudden, but quietly tired, in a restful way, not the usual exhaustion. By the time my mother returned, I had stopped, not because of any effort on my part but because the crying had run its course. We said good-bye to Hannah and walked out. No one on the streets, bending their heads down into the cold wind, seemed to notice or care that this day was different from others.

EIGHT

Truth and Beauty

ONE DAY, WHEN I HAD A FULL THREE OR FOUR INCHES of hair, I was leaving the house with Susie. At the last minute I turned and ran back up the stairs, calling out, "Just a minute while I get my hat."

"You don't need it anymore, Lucy, your hair is fine, come on already," she called back to me, frustrated that we were going to be late.

I stopped in the middle of the stairs and, genuinely surprised, considered what she had said. Running my fingers through my hair, I had to admit she was more or less right. It wasn't nearly as long as it used to be, but I wasn't bald. I went out with her into the world, bare-headed for the first time in years. A warm and gusty breeze parted my hair and stroked it like a caress. We went to the store, and people gave me second looks as they always did, but not one person called me Baldy.

The next day I went to school bareheaded, and no one mentioned it. Had I been wrong in thinking that I

needed to hide behind my hat, had it all been a mistake on my part? Except people still looked at me. Though I had given up eating in the lunchroom, there were plenty of relentless daily attacks of teasing in the hallways. Girls never teased me, but out of the corner of my eye I could see them staring at me, and when I turned toward them, they glanced away quickly, trying to pretend they were concentrating on something else. Outside of school I'd catch adults staring at me all the time. I played games with them in stores, positioning myself just so and pretending I was absorbed in examining some piece of merchandise, only to turn my head quickly and trap them as they averted their embarrassed stares. Groups of boys were what I most feared, and I gladly ducked into an empty doorway if I saw a group coming my way that looked like trouble. It was easy to spot potential offenders: they walked with a certain swagger, a certain sway.

My relief—tinged with regret—at leaving the familiar and well-ordered world of the hospital didn't last very long. The radiation had been very hard on my teeth, the lower ones especially, and saving them would require a

lot of specialized work. Only a few short months after I naively thought I'd said good-bye to Columbia Presbyterian Hospital forever, we had to again start the routine of driving in once or twice a week for what turned out to be two years of dental work. The dental clinic was in a completely different part of the hospital, though we still walked through the courtyard that Dr. Woolf's office looked out onto. The hospital laundry was somewhere nearby, and the smell of it, which I associated with the walk to Dr. Woolf's, never failed to make me a little bit queasy.

There was, however, the benefit of getting out of school. By now I hated school with a vengeance and continually told lies about my health in order to stay away. Anything just to not have to face those boys each day. Luckily, my mother was fairly compliant; looking back, I wonder that I was allowed to pass into the eighth grade at all with my attendance record.

The various procedures, including at least a dozen root canals, kept me in pain most of the time. Codeine was prescribed. We kept the refillable prescription bottle in a kitchen cabinet, and within a short while I was taking pills almost constantly, even when I wasn't in pain. I

looked forward to the pleasant, sleepy feeling they offered. No matter how bad I felt about the world, about my position in it, I felt safe and secure and even rather happy thirty or forty minutes after I'd downed a couple of pills. As the months wore on and that pleasant effect became harder to achieve, as each pill seemed to touch the pain less, I started taking more and more pills. I was aware that I was taking more than I should, up to four times the regular dose, and I would alternately ask my mother and then my father to refill the prescription in order to keep my high consumption less conspicuous. They both noticed that the pills seemed to be disappearing quickly, but they assumed my brothers were pilfering them. All of this came to an abrupt end one day when my mother caught me shaking out no less than six times the prescribed number of pills into my palm. From then on I had to make do with aspirin.

My inability to open my mouth very wide caused a lot of problems whenever anyone wanted to work on my back teeth, and it was decided that I should be admitted to the hospital and have a whole slew of work done all at once under general anesthesia. This idea was fine by me. Not only did it offer even more days off from

school, but the thought of surgery seemed far more appealing than sitting wide awake in that dreadful dentist's chair.

This was my fifth operation, a number that seemed high at the time. On the morning of the operation, an aide woke me early and tossed a surgical gown and a small bottle of Betadine onto my bed. I was to wash my whole body and my hair with this iodine solution, put on the gown, and then wait in bed until the nurses came with the pre-op injection needles. This was the worst part of all. The waiting felt endless, crowded with an unspoken dialogue inside my head concerning the nature of pain.

It gave me pleasure to think that the boys who teased me openly at school and the adults who stared at me covertly elsewhere would never be able to stand this pain, that they would crumple. My whole body was tense and my stomach upside down, but I was convinced that because I did not admit these things, did not display them for others to see, it meant I had a chance at *really* being brave, not just pretending. Every time I heard footfalls coming down the hall, fear's physical rush swelled inside me, and as the footfalls passed my

room, a physical sense of relief came over me. These false alarms, however, only heightened my fear, knowing that sooner or later the approaching steps would really be for me.

When the moment came, a student nurse gripped my hand tightly, almost too tightly, squeezing the blood from my fingers, as a regular nurse injected my thighs with the premed. Paradoxically, the moment after the injection, which made my thighs ache and sting, came as a relief; every tension fell and floated prettily away like leaves from an autumn tree. As the minutes passed, the sweet and strange comfort of the medication lifted me up and floated me around the room, and when the orderly finally arrived and asked me to slide over onto the stretcher, I felt as if I were watching someone else shyly try to hold the short gown down over her legs as she awkwardly wiggled along the rough sheets.

When the operation was over I remember throwing up some swallowed blood and feeling terribly weak, though joyously relieved it was all over. In post-op the specially trained nurses checked on me every ten minutes. I was too groggy to sense what was going on, but I relished the aura of attention, the cool hands on my

warm arms, the way my name distantly sounded in their soft, I-won't-let-anything-bad-happen-to-you voices, the notion that I was somehow special, that I mattered. But afterward, back in my room, I dozed and waked for hours, each time more panicked than before at being all alone. I'd make up some excuse to ring for a nurse, just to have someone enter the room. I began to wish that the operation weren't over, that I was still asleep on the stretcher with a crowd of people hovering near me.

Later, as I underwent more and more operations, even when I was home in my own bed, upset about how much I hated my face, I could put myself to sleep by imagining myself lying on a stretcher. I could almost hear the movements of strangers in comfortingly familiar uniforms all around me, the distant beeps that were really heartbeats, the mechanical shushes of respirators, which meant someone, somewhere near, was breathing.

It wasn't without a certain amount of shame that I took this kind of emotional comfort from surgery: after all, it was a bad thing to have an operation, wasn't it? Was there something wrong with me that I should find such comfort in being taken care of so? Did it mean I *liked* having operations and thus that I deserved them?

At school the taunts were becoming only harder to take. Somehow I had reasoned that if a bad thing happened often enough it would get easier. It worked with pain, so why wasn't it working with teasing? Every time I was teased, which usually happened several times a day, it seemed incrementally more painful. I was good at not listening, at pretending I hadn't heard, but I could sense myself changing, becoming more fearful. Before I'd been an outgoing person, and in the right circumstances I still was, but now meeting new people was laced with dread. Except for the one time I went to my guidance counselor to complain, I discussed this with no one. Besides, I reasoned, what could I do about it? I was ugly, so people were going to make fun of me: I thought it was their right to do so simply because I *was* so ugly, so I'd just better get used to it. But I couldn't. No matter how much I braced myself, the words stung every time they were thrown at me. It didn't seem to matter that I was doing everything I could to know the truth, to own the fact that I was ugly, to make sure I was prepared for it, to be told nothing I didn't already know.

One afternoon I went to the hospital for some outpatient surgery. A tooth in the back of my mouth had to be