

pulled, and I was knocked out for about ten minutes. Afterward I waited in recovery for my mother to take me home. When she came in, she pulled the blood-soaked gauze out of my mouth and gasped. In the course of the surgery two of my lower front teeth had been partially knocked out, leaving two very ugly stumps. Apparently no one had been planning to tell us about this complication, and it was only by chance that my mother discovered it while we were still there. Justifiably, she exploded in anger. The surgeon's response was predictably patronizing, and a full-fledged battle ensued as I sat there feeling a bit woozy and slightly bewildered, still pleasantly lost in the fading buzz of the anesthetic.

Once home, my mother, still fuming, turned to me and said, "You don't have to go to school tomorrow if you don't want. I understand that you might not feel very good about the way your teeth look." We looked straight at each other. Something had just happened, but I wasn't sure what. All I'd ever wanted was to be left alone and allowed to stay at home. I had spent a great deal of energy trying to convince her that I had to stay at home because of some counterfeit physical ailment, and suddenly it wasn't what I wanted at all.

She stood over me in the living room, the cats howling for their dinner because we'd returned home so late from the hospital, and offered me, what, compassion? As I think of it now, I'm certain her offer to let me stay home was an attempt to understand what she must have known instinctively. But it was too late. I'd already given up that fight. I understood my mother's offer only as barbed verification of what I believed to be the indisputable truth: I was too ugly to go to school. I pretty much stopped going to the seventh grade, but I was moved along with everybody else to the eighth. My grades were mediocre, and my passing surely had to do more with ineptitude on the school's part than with academic accomplishment on mine.

I relished that summer as no other. My friend Jan and I took our infatuation with horses to ridiculous proportions. We spent all of our play time pretending we were horses, galloping around her yard, jumping over whatever obstacle we could set up. Whoever got around better was given a homemade blue ribbon, and afterward we would kneel on her lawn and dare each other to

graze, the curiously familiar and sour flavor of grass filling our mouths and turning our front teeth green.

Jan's parents were paying for her to take riding lessons that summer, and I was filled with envy. We couldn't afford them. Sometimes she'd invite me to go with her and I would, though I hated the superior tone she took with me then. I went because the very presence of horses overwhelmed me, filled my whole body with a sensation so physical and complete that I'd be transported during those hours. I did nothing but fear the passing of each moment as I sat by the fence watching Jan ride, because I knew that eventually we'd have to go home and all I would have left was the wonderful, peaty smell on my palms to remind me of the horses. Jan started boasting that her parents were going to buy her a horse, that they'd build a stable for it in the empty field by the lake, and that, maybe, just maybe, she'd let me help her take care of it. We spent long afternoons thinking up names for the horse, though according to my taste, her ideas were sentimental, unoriginal choices such as Beauty and Black.

Jan never got her horse, but that June, shortly after my fourteenth birthday, I got my job as stable hand at

Diamond D. It was the perfect environment for me. Most of the other hands were girls who were a couple of years older than me, and there were two boys, Sean and Stephen. The girls were nice enough to me and eventually became my friends, though I never felt completely at ease with them. We came from different worlds. They were raucous and wild, and I loved them for this. Epithets the likes of which I'd never heard even from my own wild brothers flew from everyone's lips, and there was a glorious delight in getting as muddy and dirty as possible. When I came home at the end of the day my mother always made me undress in the garage. I was proud of the mud all over me and the tired ache from trying to hoist bales of hay, however ineffectually. As the summer wore on I got tanned and gained weight and grew physically stronger every day.

I loved how basic were the needs of the animals, how they had to be fed and watered even if you were tired or hot or late. There was a primacy to it, a simplicity I recognized from coping with the pain of my treatments, a shedding of all extraneous grievances to reveal a purely physical core, a meaning that did not extend beyond the confines of one's body. When feeding time was near,

pandemonium broke out among the horses, filling the barn with neighing and kicking and squealing. And as soon as our work of dragging buckets and hauling hay was over, peace descended. It was a quiet filled with chewing sounds and soft snorts and a sense of rest that felt ancient and good. Sometimes late at night, when I couldn't sleep, I would call the barn, knowing no one was there, and imagine the sound of the phone echoing in the horse-filled barn.

I kept my new world, with its physical pleasures and new social experiences, completely hidden from my family, who did not seem particularly interested anyway, though they were glad I'd found something "healthy" to do with my time. School was coming around again, and I actually looked forward to returning: horse fever is common among junior high school girls, and I thought my new job at the stable might improve my status at school. Everyone at the barn was preparing to return to school as well, including Jeanne, who was boy crazy and had a crush on Sean.

The day before school began, some six of us girls were sitting on top of the hay pile. Jeanne stood on top, pointing to each person and asking, "If Sean asked you

out, would you go with him?" The girls were mixed in ages and in physical development, Jeanne being the oldest at sixteen. Alison and I, at fourteen, were the youngest. Alison looked fourteen, but I, my body still reeling from the effects of all the chemotherapy, looked about ten. Puberty was still a year away. Jeanne seemed to be asking everyone systematically, but she wasn't actually thinking of asking me, was she? Sean would never ask me out; it was a completely ridiculous question, and the thought that we all might have to acknowledge this fact together seemed worse than anything else in the world.

Finally, Jeanne turned to me and, only because she didn't know how to politely leave me out, asked the question. I hesitated, not sure how to respond, but then Chris came to my aid and answered for me. "Why would Sean want to go out with her?" "Well, I'm just asking," Jeanne replied. I shifted uncomfortably on the hay, glad Chris had spoken for me. This was the moment when I knew definitively that I would never have a boyfriend, that no one would ever be interested in me in that way. I suppose I had learned this already from the boys at

school, but never had I actually formed the inner sentence, expressed it in real terms to myself.

Because I was never going to have love (this realization, too painful to linger over, I embraced swiftly and finally), I cast myself in the role of Hero of Love. Instead of proving my worth on the chemotherapy table, I would become a hero through my understanding of the real beauty that existed in the world. I decided that it was my very ugliness that allowed me access to this other beauty. My face may have closed the door on love and beauty in their fleeting states, but didn't my face also open me up to perceptions I might otherwise be blind to? At the end of each day, as I lay in the bathtub, I looked at my undeveloped child's body. I considered the desire to have it develop into a woman's body a weakness, a straying from my chosen path of truth. And as I lay in bed at night, I considered my powers, my heightened sense of self-awareness, feeling not as if I had chosen this path, but that it had been chosen for me.

Beauty had nothing to do with the ephemeral world of boys, of this I felt sure. This was driven home to me when junior high school started again and I watched my sister and her friends begin their own puberty. They put

on blue eye shadow, blow-dried their hair, and spent interminable hours at the local mall. My own notions of what made a woman beautiful were more classically oriented: if I could look like anyone in the world it would be either Marlene Dietrich or Botticelli's Venus. I definitely did *not* aspire to look like Farrah Fawcett, of this much I was sure. I looked at girls in my class, with their perfect faces, and wondered why on earth they ruined them with so much makeup, such stupid hair. If I had a face like that, I told myself—then harshly reprimanded myself for any stirrings of desire. My face was my face, and it was stupid to wish it any other way.

At school the gang of boys from last year appeared to have dispersed, and I was free to eat in the lunchroom again. But a new group had formed, and they tracked me down every day between fourth and fifth periods as I went from gym to English class, which were at opposite ends of the school. By the time I reached the staircase near my English classroom, nearly everyone else was already there, leaving me to climb the stairs alone. Alone, that is, until that group of six boys discovered they could find me in this stairwell each day at the same time and took to waiting for me. Their teasing was the

most hurtful of all because it wasn't even directed at me but at a boy named Jerry.

"Hey, look, it's Jerry's girlfriend. Hey, Jerry, go on, ask your girlfriend out." I heard Jerry meekly protest, but I knew that he was as much at their mercy as I was, and I knew that to have me called his girlfriend was just about the most malicious insult the other boys could level at him. I even felt sorry for Jerry, though I never saw him, for I refused to lift my gaze from the floor. What morons, I thought to myself, what misguided morons. Martin Luther King, one of my heroes, had said, "I will not allow my oppressors to dictate to me the means of my resistance." That seemed like a far truer thing, a far deeper thing. I wanted to hate them, but instead I tried to forgive them. I thought that if I could do this, the pain they caused would be extinguished. Though I had genuine glimpses of what charity and transcendence meant, I was shooting for nothing less than sainthood; often, after my daily meeting with them, I only ended up hating myself instead.

The horses remained my one real source of relief. When I was in their presence, nothing else mattered. Animals were both the lives I took care of and the lives

who took care of me. Horses neither disapproved nor approved of what I looked like. All that counted was how I treated them, how my actions weighted themselves in the world. I loved to stand next to them with no other humans in sight and rest my head against their warm flanks, trace the whorls in their hide with the fingers of one hand while the other hand rested on the soft skin of their bellies. All the while, I'd listen to the patient sounds of their stomachs and smell the sweet air from their lungs as attentively as if I were being sent information from another world.

In the middle of the school year, several months before my fifteenth birthday, I went to see Dr. Conley, the surgeon who had removed my jaw, to discuss plans for reconstructing it. I had known all along that something was going to be done to "fix" my face, but up until this point I don't think I had really believed it.

Without the threat of chemo or dental work, being in a doctor's office seemed so simple and easy. As Dr. Conley examined me, he held my head in his hands, touching my face as no else had in years. It was only then that I realized how guarded I had become about my face;

simply relaxing and allowing him to touch me there was akin to surrender, the closest I ever got to experiencing trust. After the examination, he sat down and spoke to me in the tone of someone speaking to a child, which served to both instantly destroy and strangely build the trust in him I had felt only moments before.

He explained that the biggest obstacle to reconstruction would come from all the radiation treatments I'd undergone. Irradiated tissue tends not to take grafts too well and presents a higher rate of reabsorption; even if the graft wasn't actually rejected, it might simply be "taken back" by my body and shrink down to nothing. He proposed a technique that required the use of "pedestals," which would require several operations. In the first operation, two parallel incisions would be made in my stomach. The strip of skin between these incisions would be lifted up and rolled into a sort of tube with both ends still attached to my stomach, resembling a kind of handle: this was the pedestal. The two incisions would be sewn together down its side, like a seam. Six weeks later, one end of the handle would be cut from my stomach and attached to my wrist, so that my hand would be sewn to my stomach for six weeks.

Then the end of the tube that was still attached to my stomach would be severed and sewn to my face, so that now my hand would be attached to my face. Six weeks after that, my hand would be cut loose and the pedestal, or flap, as they called it, would be nestled completely into the gap created by my missing jaw. This would be only the first pedestal: the whole process would take several, plus additional operations to carve everything into a recognizable shape, over a period of about ten years altogether. Ten years! I was horrified. I would be twenty-five years old in ten years: ancient. Did I have to devote the next ten years of my life to one surgery after another? Ten years—my God.

I was crushed. It must have shown, because Dr. Conley started explaining that I shouldn't worry about how I looked, how everyone had something they didn't like about their face. Why, he himself had had terrible acne as a teenager, and that had made him feel awful. Acne, was he serious? How could my problem actually be compared to acne. Any hope I'd allowed myself died right then.

My despair worsened a few days later when I went to the library with my father. While he stayed downstairs

and picked among the fiction, I went upstairs to the nonfiction department and secretly looked up books on plastic surgery. In the middle of giant, outdated tomes, I found photographs of the pedestal procedure. The people in the photographs looked like freaks. With their own skin and muscle sewn to disjointed parts of their anatomy, they looked like illustrations of some brilliant medieval torture device. Worst of all, the final outcome made them look exactly like what they were: people with alien bits of flesh sewn to them. To my eye, many of the people used as examples looked even worse afterward. I was so frightened I could not get my breath, and I had to sit down with my head between my legs until the buzzing was gone from my ears. Was this what my life was going to be? I felt utterly without hope, completely alone and without any chance of ever being loved. Feeling as if I had uncovered some horrible secret, I went downstairs to meet my father.

As we drove home together, he asked me what was wrong, but I couldn't tell him. At home I went to my room, where I wanted desperately to cry, but even the tears were numbed back. I lay frozen on my bed watching a spider walking back and forth on the ceiling until

my mother called me for dinner. For the first time I wished I were dead.

Relief came in two unexpected ways. The first occurred some months later, toward the end of eighth grade, when Kelly, a girl I had met at the stable, had to move to another state. Unable to take her horse, an ex-racehorse named Sure Swinger, she arranged with my parents to give him to me. I'd never understood just how quickly, how splendidly and suddenly, reality could change, how you could look down at the shoes on your own two feet and wonder if they were real.

The second form of comfort came in the person of Dr. Daniel Baker, a younger associate of Dr. Conley's. He and some other doctors were working on a reconstruction technique involving microsurgery, a very new field at the time, to graft vascularized free flaps. This "state of the art" surgery involved taking a large chunk of soft tissue, probably from my groin, and sewing the whole thing, veins and all, onto the jaw area. This not only dispensed with the cumbersome, multistage pedestal procedure, but it also offered a greater chance that the graft would survive, because the new tissue would have its

own blood supply. Dr. Baker explained that it would be best to wait another year or so, perhaps until I was sixteen, so that I could grow some more first. I would have to have a major operation followed by lesser ones to shape the graft, but Dr. Baker seemed to think there was a good chance of achieving "a near-normal jaw line."

I can still see my father's reaction as he stood in the corner of Dr. Baker's office, listening to his words and beaming. I had never mentioned my fears concerning my face to my father, and in my solipsism I had never thought that he might share my unhappiness. The halo of joy that surrounded him now was a revelation to me. His joy made me feel better, though it also occurred to me that my face must really be as bad as I feared if he found such relief at the possibility of this surgery.

Maybe life was going to be all right after all. Maybe this wasn't my actual face at all but the face of some interloper, some ugly intruder, and my "real" face, the one I was meant to have all along, was within reach. I began to imagine my "original" face, the one free from all deviation, all error. I believed that if none of this had happened to me, I would have been beautiful. I looked in the mirror closely and imagined the lower half of my

face filled out, normal. Reaching my hand up, I covered my chin and jaw, and yes, even I could see that the rest of my face really was beautiful. As soon as I took my hand away, the ugliness of the lower half canceled out the beauty of the upper half, but now this didn't matter so much: it was all going to be "fixed."

What would it be like to walk down the street and be able to trust that no one would say anything nasty to me? My only clues were from Halloween and from the winter, when I could wrap up the lower half of my face in a scarf and talk to people who had no idea that my beauty was a lie, a trick that would be exposed the minute I had to take off the scarf. To feel that confidence without the threat of exposure—how could I possibly want anything more? If they thought I was beautiful, and here I could almost not dare to think such a thing, they might even love me. Me, as an individual, as a person.

I'd rationalized my own desires for so long that I was genuinely perplexed as to whether this sudden and glorious sense of relief at the prospect of having my face fixed was valid. Was the love that I'd guarded against for so long going to be the reward for my suffering? I had

put a great deal of effort into accepting that my life would be without love and beauty. In order to be comforted by Love and Beauty. Did my eager willingness to grasp the idea of "fixing" my face somehow invalidate all those years of toil? I did not trust the idea that happiness could be an option.

For a few months I settled into a routine of living what felt like three separate lives. Days were filled with school, where I tried to be as fiercely intelligent as I could. My armor would be my academic prowess, from which I was developing a superiority complex as earnestly built as it was defensively acquired. In my second life I still lived in a violent fantasy in which I had no choice but to appreciate the life I led in reality, the one in which my face seemed a frivolous thing compared with a land mine or a pogrom. The third life took place after school, and all day during the summer, when I went to my horse, Swinger, with whom I was conducting nothing less than a romantic relationship.

I knew his whole being. There was not one part of his body I could not touch, not one part of his personality I did not know at least as well as my own. When we went on long rides through the woods, I would tell him

everything I knew and then explain why I loved him so much, why he was special, different from other horses, how I would take care of him for the rest of his life, never leave him or let anyone harm him. After the ride I would take him to graze in an empty field. I would lie down on his broad bare back and think I was the luckiest girl alive, his weight shifting beneath me as he moved toward the next bite of grass. Sometimes I took him to the stream and laughed as he pawed at the water, screaming in delight when he tried to lie down in it. Best of all was when I happened to find him lying down in his stall. Carefully, so as not to spook him, I'd creep in and lie down on top of his giant body, his great animal heat and breath rising up to swallow my own smaller heat and less substantial air.

NINE

World of Unknowing

WHEN SCHOOL STARTED AGAIN, MY NINTH-GRADE English class began reading poetry. Our first assignment was Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz." I read it dutifully the night before class and recognized in the image of the father's dirty hand and the boy's dizzying bewilderment something beautiful and important, something that vaguely had to do with my own family. And as I recognized myself, I also realized the precision of language; I knew that the poem could not have been written in any way except exactly as it had been. The poem's power over me came from the author's unassailable ability to say what felt so right and true. I think I already understood that beauty was somehow related to mystery, but for the first time I saw that mystery was not just a cause but also a natural result of beauty. I tried to say all this in class the next day, but my teacher wanted us to talk about whether or not the boy loved his father. As we spent the forty minutes debating along

those lines, what I knew about my love for my own father seemed to grow only more distant and closed off.

Earlier in my childhood, when my father came home late at night, he would shout greetings to everybody as he came through the door, and Sarah and the dogs and I would go running to greet him. But as we got older we were less interested in this ritual, and eventually only the dogs would get up to greet him, while Sarah and I tossed off distracted greetings from our seats in front of the television set. One evening I had a terrible premonition of the time, after Sarah and I had grown up and moved out and the dogs were long dead, when he would come home and there would be only his own voice echoing emptily up the stairs. I felt a strange chill, a hollow and unspeakably sad chill, almost as if I had seen a ghost. From that day on I made a point, even when I didn't particularly feel like it, of greeting him at the top of the stairs. I saw this in terms of my future absence from his life; it never occurred to me that he would ever be absent from mine.

Just seven or eight months after that premonition, I had my first experience of death. Only four months after I received him, Swinger developed an infection in his

hoof. I watched carefully as Gene, one of the few regular adult employees of the stable, gave Swinger the prescribed penicillin injection in his neck. Then I went down to the tack room to put something away. After finishing my chore, I turned back to the ring, where Gene was leading Swinger. I was about to crack a joke like, "What do you think you're doing with my horse?" when I realized something was terribly wrong. Swinger was falling down and trying to get back up, only to fall down again. Finally he could not get back up at all.

A crowd had gathered and everyone was yelling and shouting and trying to rouse him, but his legs were sticking almost straight out and trembling and his eyes were rolling into the back of his head. Gene shouted at me to run and get a blanket from the barn. I tore away and fumbled to get the blanket off its rack. With it in hand, I ran back to the ring, but as I got closer I saw that everyone was just standing there, not shouting anymore. Gene reached the gate before me. With one arm, he held it shut and wouldn't let me back in. I looked at him, dropped the blanket, and burst into tears, all the while strangely aware of the melodrama of it all, as if I were remembering this scene from a movie I'd seen. The

shot was of Gene's strong and hairy arm barring my way, of everyone standing so silent, of Swinger's huge dark body on the ground. Although I had never liked Gene very much, I allowed him to hold me as I sobbed. I smelled the sweat on his clothes and looked toward Swinger and saw the slow line of urine seeping into the lightly colored dust. I had read that you peed and defecated when you died, and now I knew it true.

I couldn't bring myself to call my mother to tell her what had happened — I asked someone else to call for me. When she came to pick me up, for some reason I was frightened by the prospect of her reaction: would she be mad? Naturally she was very sympathetic, but I couldn't shake the feeling of shame. When we got home I went wordlessly down to my room and watched television in a stupor of grief. Finally I heard my father come home, shout his usual greeting, and walk up the stairs into the kitchen, which was above my room. I could hear my parents' footsteps above me, and I knew she was telling him. I listened as he walked down the stairs then silently over the thick rug toward my room. I felt the same sense of shame I'd experienced with my mother, not unlike the times he'd visited me in the hospital.

He offered his condolences and kissed my ears, which tickled and annoyed me so that I pushed him away, and then left.

My mourning was so untouchable that I had no clue as to what to do with it. Perhaps Swinger had died because I loved him too much: what other reason could there be? Why else would God allow the being I loved more than any other living thing in the world, including myself, to die like that? If this had some kind of meaning, if I was supposed to learn some lesson, I didn't care. Ever since the moment when Gene stopped me at the gate, I had been unable to stop observing everything from an untraceable distance. Even as I felt the worst pain I could ever remember feeling, a sense of the drama of my situation crept in, and there, in front of my private audience, I played my role of the hapless and ill-fated lover once again.

I was stricken over Swinger's death for several months, but time eventually did perform its healing task, and gradually I became excited at the prospect of getting another horse, promised by my parents. I knew that money was still an issue and that this new horse might

not materialize straight away, but I knew they would not go back on their word. But sometime after Christmas my mother received a phone call from my dad's boss, explaining that he had gone to the hospital because of stomach pains. My first reaction was that this would put a wrench in my new-horse plans. My mother was certain he was only being a hypochondriac, that it was nothing at all. Maybe it was his ulcer acting up again and he was just overreacting. But he was still in the hospital the next day—they were keeping him for tests—and he was there the day after that and the next day, too. My mother started visiting him every day, yet the rest of us stayed behind, assuming he would be out the very next day.

The weeks turned into months, and each day we received a new report on my father's health. He had pancreatitis: no one would say if he would get better or not. One day toward the end of March, my mother came home and told us they'd put my father on oxygen. Inwardly I shuddered. Everything I knew about hospitals told me that this was a bad thing. My father was going to die, and as bad as this knowledge was, it was made worse by my notion that I was the only one who

understood it. My family was not the sort to openly discuss things. Though we all must have been hurting, we did not speak of my father except with a forced optimism.

Just before my father had gone into the hospital, he'd bought an expensive hand-tailored suit, and he'd joined a record club, which began sending recordings of Beethoven's complete works. The fancy suit that he'd been so proud of—the source of a fight between him and my mother because of its price—hung unworn in his closet. And each week a new selection of records arrived, wrapped in plastic, which we piled unopened next to the phonograph in the living room.

My father's bedroom was a disaster area, filled with stray papers and dirty socks and odd cups and occasional forks. I went in and surveyed it all just as I'd done when I was younger and he was away at work, but now I was looking for something else. I had no idea what. Before, I'd wanted some kind of clue as to what it was to be my father, what it was to be a man, to be an adult. Now I was looking for something that would explain my father's life to me. I couldn't find it.

Back in the living room, I could no longer bear the sight of the unopened records. Ripping the plastic off, I put on one after another of the records and listened for five or six hours. I wanted to see why my father loved Beethoven so much. Finally I fell asleep lying there on the carpet; I was awakened by the dogs barking at my mother's return. Hurriedly, I put the records away. I'm not sure why, but I didn't want anyone to know I'd listened to them.

The whole time he was in the hospital, I went to visit my father only once. Even after all these years, I don't understand why we stayed away. Were we so adrift in our own sea of grief that we were able to convince ourselves that it was better this way? He grew more and more disoriented. My mother reported that he kept pointing to a pin she wore, a pin he'd bought for her before they were married, pointing to it as if he were picking it out again for the first time. He became paranoid, talking about Germans and the dogs the Germans had set on him when he was a prisoner of war during the Second World War. He'd been a pilot in the RAF, and we had a dashing, fuzzy photo of him in his flak suit, smiling at an unseen person casting a shadow near his

feet. It was easy to forget about that part of my father's life because he never spoke of it. I remember once watching *Hogan's Heroes* while he was in the room. He was appalled that a television comedy would be set in a German POW camp. Knowing nothing of his war experience at the time, I told him I thought he was overreacting. It pained me to think that now, near the end of his life, he was reliving this nightmare, as alone as he had been the first time. We spent the next couple of weeks waiting. Every time the phone rang, the whole house went silent.

I was dreading the inevitable phone call, mostly because I did not want to see the rest of my family's reactions to it. I knew that Sarah would break down and cry, but I didn't know what everyone else would do. I wanted my father to die and for there to be no fuss, no outbreaks, no displays. I was terrified.

When the call did come at last, one afternoon some six weeks before my sixteenth birthday, my mother was on the phone at the far end of the kitchen, my brother Nicholas was sitting at one end of the table, Sarah was sitting at the other end, and I was standing in the doorway. Susie was away at college and Sean was living in

California. Sarah, Nicholas, and I remained motionless as we listened to my mother speak, thanking the doctor for all he had done, and when she got off she told us matter-of-factly and very sadly what we already knew. To my great surprise, it wasn't Sarah who cried but Nicholas. He put his head down on the table and wept, and all I could think of was that I didn't expect this, just as I didn't expect Sarah to sit there so calmly. I turned my head and looked at the painting on the wall next to me. It was a head of Christ painted by Sean, one I'd passed several thousand times, yet I felt I was seeing it for the first time. I'd never noticed how much brown he'd used in the thorns, how much gold for the skin. It all seemed so very odd, so very distant, and I was reminded how I'd seen the ceiling in Dr. Woolf's office so clearly that last day there. Was this feeling that everything was happening for the first time real, did grief heighten vision, or was it only an illusion, a way to distance myself from what was happening?

Along with sadness, a sense of relief followed my father's death. At least we weren't waiting anymore. Also we were going to receive some money from the insurance company, and the prospect of paying off some

bills and finally getting ahead offered a guilty sense of pleasure. I was sitting in the kitchen a couple of days after my dad's funeral. Perhaps we were still in shock, but Sarah and I were laughing hysterically over a new joke we'd heard, and just as we were in the thick of it, the phone rang. It was my surgeon, Dr. Baker. I was shocked to hear his voice, for he was nothing less than a monumental figure in my life, but when he offered his condolences, all I could do was jauntily reply, as if he'd just apologized for stepping on my shoe, "Oh, that's all right, it doesn't matter." As soon as I hung up the phone I realized what I'd done. But as I told Sarah about the call, the two of us burst out again in uncontrollable laughter.

That June, a few weeks after my sixteenth birthday, I went into New York University Medical Center for my first reconstructive operation, my first microvascularized free flap. I liked this hospital: it was newer and better staffed than Columbia Presbyterian, and I was no longer relegated to the children's ward. My ward was devoted solely to plastic surgery, and I was shocked to see how

many people were having their noses done, their faces lifted.

The woman in the bed next to me was having her breast reconstructed after a mastectomy, and she insisted on telling me all about her scars and her feelings of ugliness. I had no patience with her lament: her face was beautiful, and she had a husband who brought her a dozen red roses. It was true she was missing a breast, but I didn't see how that mattered as long as she had these other things. No one could see her missing breast when she walked down the street, no one would make fun of her or think she was ugly, and someone loved her. I listened to her and realized that she was genuinely suffering, that her feelings of ugliness consumed her as much as mine consumed me, but she was mistaken, I thought, for there was no doubt she was beautiful. Her problems lay in her perception. Talking with her only strengthened my conviction of the importance in this world of having a beautiful face. Still, I liked her, and I liked being treated as an adult by another adult. We ordered out for Chinese food for what I kept calling "my last meal." "No, no, don't say that," she tried to reassure me. I just couldn't get her to see that I

was joking; I could tell she was new at this hospital stuff.

The anesthetist came to see me that night and decided that it might be hard to intubate me—insert a breathing tube into my windpipe—so he would do it while I was awake. It didn't sound like a big deal, and I didn't think twice about it.

The next morning, however, as I lay dazed on the stretcher, I heard them talking about nasal intubation. Immediately I started worrying, and for good reason. First they tried passing a tube up one nostril. It didn't hurt, but when it reached the back of my throat I gagged. Worse, they kept prying my mouth open to see where it was going. They couldn't reach it, so they pulled it out and tried the other nostril. By now I was upset, but I lay as still as I could. That nostril didn't work either, so they decided to go straight through my mouth. This required prying my mouth open and keeping it open, which hurt like hell, but worse was that at each attempt to pass the tube, my airway was temporarily blocked and I couldn't breathe, which put me into a panic. The pre-op medications were slowing my

reactions and making it hard for me to understand what was going on.

I instinctively started to struggle, reaching up and trying to push their strangling hands away from me. When two nurses came and held me down, I started to cry and struggle even more, but they only held me tighter and kept pushing the tube down my throat. They must have sedated me even further, because my reactions grew more sluggish and all reality ceased to exist outside of the confines of my stretcher. I begged them to stop, but no one responded. This upset me most of all. No one cared, or seemed to, and I wailed even louder.

Suddenly everyone seemed to disappear and I was left in peace, floating, but still crying hard. I looked up and there was Dr. Baker, looking down at me. He reached out his hand and placed it on my forehead, replicating the gesture I'd received during my very first operation. I was calmed instantly, as if all my sorrows existed within that one single point on my forehead. I remember having a surreal vision of myself as if I were a bystander in the room, looking at the clownish cap they'd made me wear to hold back my hair, the clear,

greenish tube arching awkwardly out of my mouth, and then I was asleep.

When I awoke I was in a lot of pain, but the pain was in my hip, where the graft came from, far away from my face, my "self," so it was easier to deal with. As soon as I remembered why I'd had an operation, I reached up to touch my face. I felt a large, warm, very soft mass where there used to be an indent. I felt a complicated trail of stitches, and near my ear was a drain. Turning my head, I tried to see my reflection in the metal bed rails, but I could only glimpse a distorted image of something I didn't recognize as my own face. When my mother came to visit, she asked how I felt and I responded with a question.

"What does it look like?"

"Well, dear, it's a bit hard to tell. It's very swollen."

"But do you think it will be all right?"

"Well, he's definitely filled it out. But it's so swollen now, you have to wait and see."

I didn't want to wait. After she had gone I asked a nurse to describe it to me. "You have to understand that it's very swollen and bruised. It will change." I asked for

a mirror. Sitting up was too painful, so I lay there and held the mirror above me, staring up at an image I only vaguely recognized. "Swollen" was an understatement. This new thing on my face was huge, almost touching my collarbone. What repulsed me most was a large strip of foreign skin, much paler than my facial skin, running along the lower half of my new jaw line. Surrounded by dozens of minute stitches, it looked just like what it was, a patch. The rest of my face looked horrible as well, all pale and puffy, and my hair was full of dried blood. I handed the mirror back to the nurse, thanked her, and went back to sleep.

When I woke up again I tried not to think about my face. I tried to remind myself that it had been only a few hours since the surgery was finished, and I couldn't judge the end result by what I had seen in the mirror. There would be more operations to revise the graft, to remove the extra skin, which had been purposely placed there to allow space for all the swelling, and to allow the graft to be monitored.

The next few hours were crucial, and it was important that the graft keep its blood supply. Every hour a nurse walked in and touched me there to feel its

warmth, then poked me to test capillary reaction. I saw the hand coming near my face, but I couldn't feel a thing. I wasn't the least bit concerned with whether the graft would survive; I assumed it would. Far more important to me was whether or not the operation had been a horrible mistake in the first place. I knew better than to expect perfection, yet I had not anticipated how *foreign* it would look. I shut down, tried not to think about it. When I did think about it, I projected my thinking forward to the next operation, the one that would fix this one.

I turned my attention to the process of healing. At first lying still had been no problem, but now I was getting cramps in my legs. To relieve the cramps I had to move my legs, and that sent shooting pains through the muscles in my torso. I felt as if I were in some kind of science fiction movie in which people are kept prisoner within bizarre, invisible force fields. At the same time, I didn't really mind the pain. Pain, if nothing else, was honest and open—you knew exactly what you were dealing with.

After the first few hours I was taken out of Intensive Care and sent to Special Care, which was one rung lower on the attention scale. There were three other beds. The one directly across from me was empty. In the one next to that, kitty-corner from my bed, was a girl who, I found out from eavesdropping, was dying from a brain tumor. Relatives came and gave her presents, which she opened with a blank, unknowing face. When she spoke, her words were unintelligible. She would grow frustrated when no one understood her and would throw a tantrum, sending objects flying across the room and toward the bed next to mine, where a teenage boy named Michael was recovering.

Michael's first comment to me was about my stuffed kangaroo, which my mother had bought for me and which all the nurses commented on. He said, dryly, that my kangaroo had usurped his monkey as the cutest toy on the ward. His monkey hung from a bar at arm's length above his bed. I didn't know what *usurped* meant, and when I asked him he laughed. He was only a year older than me, but he seemed to have lived a whole life already.

Michael would reach up to the bar hanging over his bed and use his arms to hoist himself up. He didn't wear a pajama top, so when his back was momentarily off the bed, I could see his muscles flex and the red lines indented into the pale skin of his back from lying on the sheets too long. He told me he'd dived off the top of a two-story building into a pool and had hurt his back.

"Why'd you do that?"

"I don't know," he answered, looking up at the ceiling. "It was a friend's pool," he said after a moment, as if that should somehow clarify the situation.

Whenever he spoke, he sounded slightly bored, slightly distant. But he talked with me quite a bit over the next couple of days, and I always felt privileged that he was speaking to me at all. If he were at school, would he be one of the boys who made fun of me? I stole sideways glances at him, his long wavy hair, the stubble on his chin and upper lip, and thought that, probably, yes, he would be. Yet here we were lying next to each other, both of us in a lot of pain, and I knew that here he would never dream of saying anything mean to me. I felt faintly triumphant. Someone from that "other world" had come over to mine.

One night Michael refused to take a particular pill, and the doctor came to argue with him about it. Michael fought with the doctors all the time, always questioning them and refusing to do things he didn't want to do; he was my complete opposite, for I still looked for praise as a "model patient." It was the middle of the night and the main overhead lights were off. His curtain was drawn, and I saw Michael's and the doctor's shadows thrown against the yellow curtain. The pill Michael was refusing to take was something he needed for his stomach. The doctor was explaining that when you spent so much time lying down, your digestive juices didn't work well, and this pill would counteract that. Michael kept refusing, his voice rising in protest, which I didn't understand at all. Why didn't he just take it? Then, inexplicably, he started crying and screamed at the doctor to leave. As the doctor left, I lay there looking at Michael's shadow, wondering if I should say something.

A few minutes later a nurse came to empty his mine catheter bag. I knew he had one—I had one too—but I'd never thought about how it might work with a man. The nurse didn't close the curtain properly, and when I looked over I saw for the first time an adult male's

penis, this one being pushed up and held falsely erect by the tube inserted into it. It came as a shock because it was the first time I acknowledged that Michael, at the age of seventeen, was permanently paralyzed, all because of a stupid trick that took him ten seconds to perform.

I couldn't help but compare his situation to my own. My life was "different" from most people's, but it was essentially my own. I hated the face I remembered having a few days ago, and I knew nothing of the face I had now except that I feared it. But it existed, and I had only to look at it to know what it was. Michael had lost something he was never going to get back; my face had only changed into the next shape it was meant to have. I could not dare to think I might actually want or like that shape, but I had a sudden realization that to have it at all meant something.

Two days later I was transferred to a regular ward. As I was wheeled away I promised Michael I would come visit him, but I never did. As soon as I was back on the ward filled with nose jobs and jowl tucks, I grew fearful of my distorted face again and put Michael and his predicament out of my mind. I was walking to the bath-

room by myself now, and each time I opened the door I saw my own face reflected back at me. Was that really me? I knew it had to be, but how could it possibly relate to the person I thought I was, or wanted to be? I considered the whole operation a failure, and when the doctors came around and told me how well it was healing, how good it looked, my heart sank. We were speaking two different languages; if this looked good, then what I thought would look good must be an impossible dream. I felt stupid for having had any expectations or hopes at all.

When I got home, I thought of Michael again and again. Did he ever reimagine himself standing on that roof or try to remember what it was like to not know his fate for just one split second longer? If he didn't, I did it for him. I'd close my eyes to feel the height, see the bright blue of the pool winking below me, bend my legs, and feel the pull in my calves as I jumped up and then down, falling from one world of unknowing into the next one of perpetual regret.

TEN

The Habits of Self-Consciousness

IT WAS ONLY WHEN I GOT HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL that I permitted myself to look more closely at my new face. It was still extremely swollen (it would be months before it went down), and a long thin scar ran the length of it. In the middle of the scar was the island of pale skin from my hip. Placing my hand over the swollen and discolored parts, I tried to imagine how my face might look once it was "better." If I positioned the angle of my face, the angle of my hand, and the angle of the mirror all just right, it looked okay.

Actually, in my mind, my face looked even better than okay, it looked beautiful. But it was a beauty that existed in the future, a possible future. As it was, I hated my face. I turned my thoughts inward again, and this strange fantasy of beauty became something very private, a wish I would have been ashamed to let anyone in on. Primarily it was a fantasy of relief. When I tried to imagine being beautiful, I could only imagine living

without the perpetual fear of being alone, without the great burden of isolation, which is what feeling ugly felt like.

The beginning of high school was a couple of months away. Each day I checked my face in private, wondering what I would look like by my first day at a new school. I expected to have a second "revising" operation before school started, but as it turned out I would have to wait at least another three months, a span of time that seemed useless and insurmountable. What was the point, if I still had to walk into school that first day looking like this?

There was only one solution, and that was to stop caring. I became pretentious. I picked out thick books by Russian authors and carted them around with me. Sometimes I even read them. *Anna Karenina*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Dead Souls*. I read *Jude the Obscure* simply because I liked the title, and anything else that sounded difficult and deep. Often I missed the subtle nuances of these books, but they presented a version of the world in which honor and virtue and dedication to the truth counted. The stories comforted me, though it didn't escape my attention that these qualities were ascribed

primarily to men. The women might be virtuous as well, but their physical beauty was crucial to the story.

On the first day of school I rode the bus, entered my strange homeroom, and went through my day of classes as invisibly as possible. By now my hair was long, past my shoulders, and I walked around with my head bent, my dark blond hair covering half my face. Having decided against seeking anything as inconsequential as social status, I spent the days observing my peers with a perfectly calibrated air of disinterest. I remained the outsider, like so many of the characters I had read about, and in this role I found great comfort. Doubtless I was more keenly aware of the subtleties of the various dramas and social dances of my classmates than they were themselves.

For the most part I was left alone. People were a bit more mature, and it was rare that anyone openly made fun of me. But I was still braced for the teasing. Every time I saw someone looking at me, I expected the worst. Usually they just looked the other way and didn't register much interest one way or the other. Then, just as I would start to relax, to let my guard down, some loud-

mouthered boy would feel a need to point out to his friends how ugly I was.

One day when I went to my English class, I found a copy of Hesse's *Siddhartha*, his version of the story of the Buddha, lying on my chair. My notions of Buddhism were sketchy at best, but the opening pages immediately reminded me of the messages of grace, dignity, and light that I'd first encountered in those Christian publications, which had long since ceased arriving in the mail. I'd almost forgotten about my quest for enlightenment, imagining my momentous meeting with the great guru. Now, after so much time and so much loss, I took it as a sign that someone had left this book on my chair. Desire and all its painful complications, I decided, was something I should and would be free of.

Two months after school started, the long-awaited revision operation was scheduled. I started focusing on the upcoming date, believing that my life would finally get started once I had the face I was "supposed" to have. Logically I knew that this was only one of many operations, but surely it would show promise, offer a hint of how it was all going to turn out.

When I woke up in recovery the day after the operation, I looked up to see a nurse wearing glasses leaning over me. Cautiously I looked for my reflection in her glasses. There I was, my hair messed and my face pale and, as far as I could tell, looking exactly the same as before. I reached up and felt the suture line. A few hours later, when I was recovered enough to walk unaided to the bathroom, I took each careful step toward the door and geared myself up to look in the mirror. Apart from looking like I'd just gotten over a bad case of flu, I looked just the same. The patch of paler skin was gone, but the overall appearance of my face was no different from before.

I blamed myself for the despair I felt creeping in; again it was a result of having expectations. I must guard against having any more. After all, I still had it pretty good by global standards. "I have food," I told myself. "I have a place to sleep." So what if my face was ugly, so what if other people judged me for this. That was their problem, not mine. This line of reasoning offered less consolation than it had in the past, but it distanced me from what was hurting most, and I took

this as a sign that I was getting better at detaching myself from my desires.

When I returned to school I had resolved that my face was actually an asset. It was true I hated it and saw it as the cause of my isolation, but I interpreted it as some kind of lesson. I had taught myself about reincarnation, how the soul picks its various lives with the intent of learning more and more about itself so that it may eventually break free of the cycle of karma. Why had my soul chosen this particular life, I asked myself; what was there to learn from a face as ugly as mine? At the age of sixteen I decided it was all about desire and love.

Over the years my perspective on "what it was all about" has shifted, but the most important point then was that there *was* a reason for this happening to me. No longer feeling that I was being punished, as I had during the chemo, I undertook to see my face as an opportunity to find something that had not yet been revealed. Perhaps my face was a gift to be used toward understanding and enlightenment. This was all noble enough, but by equating my face with ugliness, in believing that without it I would never experience the

deep, bottomless grief I called ugliness, I separated myself even further from other people, who I thought never experienced grief of this depth. Not that I did not allow others their own suffering. I tried my best to be empathic because I believed it was a "good" emotion. But in actuality I was judge and hangman, disgusted by peers who avoided their fears by putting their energy into things as insubstantial as fashion and boyfriends and gossip.

I tried my best, but for the most part I was as abysmal at seeking enlightenment as I had once been at playing dodge ball. No matter how desperately I wanted to catch that ball, I dropped it anyway. And as much as I wanted to love everybody in school and to waft esoterically into the ether when someone called me ugly, I was plagued with petty desires and secret, evil hates.

I hated Danny in my orchestra class because I had a crush on him and knew that he would never have a crush on me. Anger scared me most of all, and I repressed every stirring. Every time I felt hatred, or any other "bad" thought, I shoed it away with a broom of spiritual truisms. But the more I tried to negate my feelings, the more they crowded in. I not only harbored

hatred for Danny even while I had a crush on him, I also hated Katherine, the girl in orchestra *he* had a crush on. Trying to repress that feeling, I found myself hating Katherine's cello, of all things, which she played exquisitely well. The cycle eventually ended with me: I hated myself for having even entertained the absurd notion that someone like Danny could like me.

I didn't begrudge Danny his crush on Katherine. She was pretty and talented, so why shouldn't he want her? I was never going to have anyone want me in that way, so I mustn't desire such a thing; in this way I could be grateful to my face for "helping" me to see the error of earthly desire. This complicated gratitude usually lasted for about five minutes before giving way to depression, plain and simple.

When my father's insurance money came, and before we learned of the accumulated tax debt we owed, my mother generously kept her promise and bought me another horse. Her registered name was even more silly than Sure Swinger, so I simply called her Mare. I kept her at Snow-cap, a more professional and better-kept stable than Diamond D. There I undertook learning to

ride seriously. I fell in love with Mare just as I had with Swinger, and again I had bad luck. Not long after I got her, she broke her leg while turned out in a field. As she limped pathetically onto the trailer to be taken away, they told me they could sell her as a brood mare, but I knew she was too old for this and would be put down shortly. Again my heart was broken, but this time I saw it in much more self-pitying terms. I told myself that anything I loved was doomed, and even as I was aware of my own overblown melodrama, just as I had been that night I nearly collapsed on the hospital floor, I took a strange comfort in this romantic, tragic role.

Luckily, the owners of Snowcap permitted me to continue on at the barn as their exercise rider. This was ideal. Not only did I get to ride horses for free, sometimes as many as six a day, and gain a great deal of experience in the process, but it also gave my life a center. I withstood school all day, knowing I would go straight to the barn afterward and stay there until eight or nine o'clock at night. The barn became the one place where I felt like myself, and I relished the physicality of riding, performing acts I was good at, feeling a sense of accomplishment. I spent as little time at home as possible.

During tenth grade I had one more operation to work on shaping the free flap, and the results seemed as trivial and ineffectual to me as the last time. The following summer I spent every day with the horses. One day when it was too hot to get very much accomplished, I went along for the ride on an errand with some people from the stable. We got caught in traffic on the main road, and as we crept along at a snail's pace, I looked out the window and got lost in my own world. A bakery storefront, its door set at a very odd angle, caught my attention, reminding me of something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Then I remembered that I had been to this town some ten or twelve years earlier with my father. He loved to go out for a drive on a Sunday and explore the area, and Sarah and I loved to accompany him. We'd stand up in the back seat and sing songs with him, songs from his own distant childhood, so familiar and lovely to him that we could both hear that strange, sad, love in his voice as he sang. Unexpectedly, and consciously for the first time since his death, I missed my father.

The one time I had visited him in the hospital, I had had to wait outside in the hallway briefly. The smells

and sounds were so familiar—the sweet disinfectant and wax, always an aroma of overcooked food in the background, the metallic clinks of IV poles as they were pushed along the floor on their stands. Yet I was only visiting, passing through. I had felt alone and without purpose, unidentified, not sure how to act. Now, more than a year after his death, I again didn't know how to act. I didn't want to ignore the grief or even get over it, because that would mean I hadn't loved my father. When my horse died, I had cried almost continuously for days. The loss was pure and uncomplicated. Loving my father had been a different matter. I finally and suddenly found myself consumed with a longing for his presence.

I started imagining my father standing next to me in the hospital, visiting me. With all my might I strained to hear the background noises of the hospital, feel the starch of the sheets, and hear my father's footsteps approaching, hear the rustle of his clothes as he stood near me, his cough to see if I was awake. I'd imagine opening my eyes very slowly, very carefully, and try to see him, standing beside my hospital bed. All I could conjure was the vaguest of outlines, a passing detail that

only seemed to obscure the rest of him: how his watch fitted on his wrist, how he would trace the edge of his ear with one finger.

Spending as much time as I did looking in the mirror, I thought I knew what I looked like. So it came as a shock one afternoon toward the end of that summer when I went shopping with my mother for a new shirt and saw my face in the harsh fluorescent light of the fitting room. Pulling the new shirt on over my head, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in a mirror that was itself being reflected in a mirror opposite, reversing my face as I usually saw it. I stood there motionless, the shirt only halfway on, my skin extra pale from the lighting, and saw how asymmetrical my face was. How had that happened? Walking up to the mirror, reaching up to touch the right side, where the graft had been put in only a year before, I saw clearly that most of it had disappeared, melted away into nothing. I felt distraught at the sight and even more distraught that it had taken so long to notice. My eyes had been secretly working against me, making up for the asymmetry as it gradually