

I stare out of the window at the black March fields. Bitter frost angels decorate the glass, and the windshield wipers are frozen beneath a layer of ice. We're going too fast, my husband Raymond clenching and unclenching his fists against the wheel. He gets nervous driving at night, especially during cold weather. The car could stall out here on the backroads, and what would he do with me then? I tell him not to worry. I tell him he can dump me by the roadside, the way people do with puppies.

Raymond has a full head of shocking red hair, and a carrotty beard to match. His face has a chubby, clownish look about it, the sort of face that no one wants to take seriously, although Raymond is an unflinchingly serious man. When confronted with a problem, he lowers his head and charges it like a bull. I grew up on a farm, and I know how bulls are. In spring, when they get their craziness, they charge trees and shadows and ghosts; sometimes they charge a wall of the barn until the wood splinters away and they're left with nothing but a ragged, foolish hole.

Cancer, Raymond instructs our friends, comes down to mind over matter. You have to learn how to fight it; you have to accumulate weapons.

He has bought dozens of self-help books, the two-for-one paperback kind, and each night after he's helped me to bed he perches in my wheelchair and reads to me about positive thinking, relaxation techniques, and miraculous avocado-grapefruit diets that will give me the zest of a twenty-year-old. He writes away for cancer cures he finds advertised in magazines, and every day our mail is cluttered with pamphlets on meditation, healing crystals, Swedish rolfing, and the Power of Prayer, all of which he puts on our nightstand and says that I should read.

Today I've been at my mother's, watching the bird feeder outside

her kitchen window. I stay with her on weekdays while Raymond is at work. There's not much there to do. I leaf through old issues of *Modern Maturity*; sometimes I knit, or if the TV has something good I watch that. Mostly I just wait. Mum comes in every now and then to ask do I want anything? is there anything she can do? Her voice is low, almost a whisper, like she's murmuring to a child she believes to be asleep.

This morning I saw strange warblers at the feeder, bright yellow migrants I didn't recognize. There were also rabbits. I saw them eating bird seed that got knocked down from the feeder. I never knew that rabbits would eat seeds, and I watched them for quite a while. But when Raymond asks what I've done today, I shrug and tell him 'nothing'. His questions make me angry because they come out of his books. *Show an interest in the patient's activities.* Raymond never showed any particular interest in my activities before I got sick.

I didn't lose my legs all at once. It happened gradually, the way you catch a cold. At first you're not certain that anything's wrong. Then you wake up one morning and it is. By then it's too late to do anything. You just have to make the best of it. You have to wait it out, no matter how long it takes.

The doctors were quick with answers. They stuck needles in my spine that sent me reeling away to Michigan and a friend I'd known there once. When I woke up it was over, and they told me to go home. I waited for them to say something more, but nobody wanted to say anything. What now? Raymond finally asked. One of them pushed a handful of prescriptions into my hand; then they gave us a list of other doctors they thought might be able to help.

But none of them say anything new.

The last one talked about multiple *growths*, and when I finally told him to just say tumors, he smiled. Raymond instantly lowered his head to charge; the doctor, however, whisked lightly away, and I saw Raymond's clenched fingers fall like petals from his hands. After that, he started buying books that, three months earlier, he'd have scoffed at. He started to use his Good Host voice whenever he spoke to me: a polite voice, certainly warm, but a voice that does not allow anyone to break through.

I pull my coat down over my knees, and squint beyond the headlights. The road we're on goes tunneling between two walls of hard-packed snow. Raymond hunches his shoulders, tucking his neck deep into his coat; he reaches for the heater, but its already set on high. Wisconsin winters bite deep to the bone. Autumn fades

early to a dull grey cold that seems to seep from the air itself. By December, deep snow has spread its white night across fields bordered only by distant, dark trees sharp as screams.

"You warm enough?" he asks me. His voice is carefully disguised. But I know he is tired by the time he picks me up; he's worked all day, he wants to rest deep in his own solemn pool of thought. "Don't pester me," is what he used to say when I tried to talk to him after work. Now it's strange to hear him in my old role, struggling for conversation.

I've been mad at him all day. This morning he informed me over breakfast that my cancer was probably the result of a death wish I've had since I was small.

"Our bodies are amazingly sensitive," he quoted proudly, "so sensitive that they can transform psychological stress into gross physical disorder."

I lifted my bowl of granola and herbs and shattered it like an ornament. Raymond's face spun with dismay: he'd sent away to Mexico for those herbs, they were rare and very expensive.

"What the hell'd you do that for?" he gasped. None of his books had prepared him for this, though I could see him flipping hurriedly through the pages in his mind. I wheeled away into the bedroom and sat with my hands pressed hard against my mouth. Within minutes, he was at my side, holding a cup of hot oatstraw tea.

"Drink this," he said in a voice that trembled with control. "To calm you down. Tension is hard on your immune system."

Raymond, I wanted to say, Oh god, Raymond! Instead, I drank the tea.

The road bends around a hairpin curve and Raymond checks his speed. "There's a blanket in back if you're chilly," he says, and his voice is smooth, professional. I want to slap those sickly words from his tongue.

Instead I look out at the road. It's a void here in the country after sundown. There are no street lights, no distant yellow rectangles of windows, no curious headlights from other cars.

"Look," Raymond suddenly says. "First star! Make a wish!"

There's a bright speck hanging low in the sky. He wishes hard, leaning forward in his seat. If he wasn't driving, he'd probably close his eyes. Lately, Raymond throws his loose change to the wishing well at the mall, and he even tosses a pinch of salt over his shoulder when he happens to think of it. He'd always laughed at superstition: he used to tease me because I liked to go to Mass once a year on Christmas Eve.

I narrow my eyes to watch the star. I remember being a little child, and thinking that the stars were the many eyes of God. Each time someone died their soul would travel up to heaven to become another shining eye. I picture myself shivering in the dark winter sky. Suddenly, I am hating God, a violent helpless hatred. The star seems to brighten; astonished.

The rabbit jumps out in front of the car, a shattered instant of frozen eyes, then impacts even before Raymond says, Oh. It makes a dull thump, like cracking your spine; not at all uncomfortable. I open my mouth and a crushed, dry voice says, "What did you do, aim for it?"

Raymond looks at me strangely, then pulls over to the roadside and switches on the hazard lights. He looks back down the highway, but it's too dark to see.

"It wasn't my fault," he says. He is shaken. I remember him hitting a raccoon two summers ago when we were coming back from up north. He'd winced, but kept on driving. The hazards wink in the darkness.

"Maybe it's still alive," he says. He looks over at me hopefully.

"No," I tell him. "You nailed it."

His mouth collapses. Then he clears his throat and says, "We should go back and look for it."

"It's dead," I tell him. "It *felt* dead," but he turns the car around. The hazards click, undisturbed. They remind me of being a child, when my mother would turn them on just because I liked them.

A lump in the road: it is the rabbit, its head flattened like a skid mark. Probably its back was broken. Raymond pulls over beside it.

"At least it died quickly," he says, and I think about how stupid that is, like when people say to me, At least you have your sight, At least you're not deaf. There is no such thing as *at least*. When it happens to you, it's nothing less that terrible. I know he's waiting to be forgiven. But I do not say anything.

He stops the engine and gets out of the car, leaving the door wide open behind him. The wind laps up his footsteps; I am shocked by the cold and call out to him, but he does not come back. He walks over to the rabbit, arms slashing wide stars in the air. And suddenly he has grabbed it and thrown it out into the fields. I do not see it fall. I am watching him as he stands, spot-lighted by the headlights, his face turned toward the darkness.

I am numb. The cold eats away my fingertips, murmurs at my ears.

When he comes back to the car, his face is wide open, choked tight with all the things he cannot say. At this moment I know he will do anything for me, and that it will not be enough. 🐼