



HANG GLIDING

They say I am lucky that I discovered it so early, that it hadn't spread. A little operation, a little excision from the muscle on my left calf. I can see it spinning in the little jar of alcohol my surgeon held up to me in the recovery room.

"Six weeks radiation for insurance and you'll be right as rain," he said. At least he didn't say little again.

What I want to talk about is something big. Permanent.

What they can't change is that at the age of nineteen years and thirty-two days a veil was ripped away from the world and nothing can replace it. I'm not of a mind to, although people find that hard to believe, but some days I can't stop blinking my eyes, the colors are so sharp, the odors so astringent. Maybe a veil is a bad metaphor. It isn't out there, after all, that the change has taken place. I remember my baby sister Cindy after she was given glasses exclaiming about how bright the world was. She discovered edges, categories. But I don't find this process reassuring at all. Maybe it is like, too late in life to assimilate it, having light hit the retina for the first time. I bet those late seers feel like me, betrayed, amazed, invaded by something so pervasive there is no relief. They too feel they'll never be able to relate any of the categories they've learned to this sensory bludgeoning the world calls sight.

I wonder what I will be able to say in the dorm when I return next month.

In my dreams, tumors orbit like planets.

There is a space that seems to last for a century between every word I hear.

I am cured.

My mother and my sister Cindy and my brother Will look at me when I come down for breakfast with the same expression of eagerness on each of their faces. They want me to tell them that everything is back to normal. It troubles me that I refuse them this little gift. They have been so loyal to me, why can't I reciprocate?

After my father died ten years ago, my mother did everything possible to make us feel that we were normal, that this shouldn't make us suspicious of the world, or our own genes, or God. My father didn't die of cancer, or someone else's drunken turn of a steering wheel. He died absurdly young of heart disease. A congenital valve defect that went undetected. I forget which valve it was now, although time and again Mom showed us the pictures in the medical textbook she studied constantly for the month following his diagnosis and the months following his death. Now, she keeps assuring us, the surgical techniques are better. We would none of us die on the operating table like my father did. If we had a similar defect. Which we definitely don't. She has taken us all to the cardiologist for ultrasounds and keeps the photos in a large brown envelope in his desk in the study, ready to pull them out to show us at a minute's notice that we are all fine. We went along then. I even went over their images with Will and Cindy to show Mom how well I understood those mysterious shadows, to show she could always count on me. I would keep up the refrain when she was at work or out shopping. Normal. We were all normal. Normally sad. Normally hopeful.

When I looked at that little glass jar with the tumor floating in it, I thought at first I was seeing a little embryo. It might be the after image from my first semester biology lab, all those embryos floating in the cabinet to the left of my desk. Sharks. Cats. Fetal pigs. Humans. All with a blur of red around the edges. Something to do with the preserving fluids. I had to blink and call myself back. Tumor. This is a tumor. But I wasn't really sure. The surgeon took the jar away too quickly. I couldn't bring it up clearly in my mind to double check. I had just the vague impression of something turning, whitely veiled, in a thick liquid. Focusing in, the edges of the jar dissolve and the image of that turning globe is everything. We could have been in outer space seeing the insubstantial moon of another planet mindlessly gyrating. Or inside a womb watching the future form. Outer space. Cancer. Fetus.

Crazy life. Nothing was in its established place anymore. Fetus encysted in a muscle, making it impossible to walk. Or in the lung, making it impossible to breath.

To understand how crazy this all felt, you have to know I'm a virgin and have never had a steady boyfriend. Here I was in the recovery room seeing a fetus floating before my eyes when I've only had one kiss touching tongues in my whole life.

I'm not deformed or anything, if that's what you're thinking. My mother calls my face studious. My brother Will calls it handsome. They mean I don't smile a lot, I have a steady gaze, and my cheekbones are sharp as a pirate's. I've always known what I wanted and a teenage lover was never on the list. It might be, as my mom hints, due to my having lost my father when I was so young, but I think it may have more to do with pimples and familiarity. It's hard to imagine sharing any kind of bodily fluid with boys I've known since I was five. You could call my focus on my studies a kind of sublimation, or a very conscious eye on the main chance. College, for me, was going to be the beginning of my life, my real life. It was when I was going to blossom, and I wanted to find the best place in the world to do that. For me, this meant staying close enough to home to keep an eye on Mom and Will and Cindy, but far enough away that I could do some straying from the straight and narrow if I felt so inclined.

I didn't, actually. I was so astonished by what was permissible at my college, it was hard for me to see what more could be included. We had, from our first week there, seminars in gay consciousness, racial consciousness, gender consciousness, new male consciousness, pacifism, class consciousness, eco-sensitivity. Some friends on the hall I lived on had one on silly jokes that respect the sensitivities of every living thing. All they did was smoke grass, look at each other meaningfully, and keen like hyenas. The floor below us specialized in crudities that would make corpses cringe if they were listening.

It was a happening place, my little liberal college 150 miles from home. I went home twice a month for the first semester. At Christmas, Mom let me know she was nearly weaned and could bear up if I just came back during regular vacations. The person who seemed most disappointed by this turn of events was my roommate Melissa. She liked coming home with me. She thought my family was so wonderfully normal, mainly because my father was dead and duly beatified, while her parents, recently divorced and