CHERI

JO ANN BEARD

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For Cheri Tremble
1950–1997

They came slowly down the street, two boys on bicycles, riding side by side through the glare of a summer afternoon. She's on the curb, and the sun is so bright and hot it feels like her hair is on fire. If she glances down, she can just see the rubber toes of her sneakers and the skirt of her sundress, the color of root beer. The boys are playing tug-of-war, leaning away from each other, front wheels wobbling, each grasping one end of a long black snake. They have pale matching hair that stands up like the bristles of a brush, and their mouths are open in silent, gleeful shouts. The snake is dusty and limp, but as they sweep past she sees its eye, wide awake, and the sudden flat ribbon of tongue, scarlet against the boy's white wrist.

This is the way Cheri's life is passing in front of her eyes, in random unrelated glimpses, one or two a day. They come from nowhere, the bottom of her brain, and are suddenly projected, intense and silent as the Zapruder film, while she watches. This morning as she was eating her oatmeal

what passed in front of her eyes was her first husband, shirtless against a blue sky, tying up tomato plants. And now tonight, climbing into bed, the Riley boys with a river snake, circa 1955.

The bed feels like a boat on choppy water. She pulls her foot out from under the covers and rests it on the floor for ballast. That's what they used to say to do if you were drunk and had the whirlies. The phone rings in the living room and she hears Sarah's voice against the sound of the television. In those old TV shows and movies way back when, the husband and wife had to keep one foot on the floor during the bed scenes. It meant everything was friendly instead of passionate. Well, the trick is working here tonight, the nausea is receding.

A wand of light appears and then widens; Bone's head is framed in the doorway. He pads across the room on velvet cat paws and freezes when he sees her bare foot on the floor. He stares at it in the dark with wide terrified eyes, then takes his place

next to Nimbus at the foot of the bed. The girls were helping her burn leaves all afternoon and now the cats smell like marijuana smoke. In this morning's vision, her first husband was standing waist-deep in some unkempt garden of theirs, hair in a ponytail, a small frown on his face, and a joint behind his ear. Back in New York, one of her chemo doctors had discreetly mentioned marijuana for nausea, and some kind soul had given her a plate of pot brownies that she had taken like medicine, eating one each morning for breakfast. She had wandered her Brooklyn apartment in a state of muffled calm, straightening bedspreads and dish towels and staring slack-jawed out the window until the monster awoke, nudged her back into the bathroom, pushed her face in the toilet.

Cheri stretches her toes reflexively, making sure they still work. She's seen pictures of her spine, ghostly negatives resting against a light box, and the cancer looks tiny, like a baby's grasping fingers. The doctor used a pencil with bite marks on it to

show her the metastases: Here, here, and a tiny bit here. Her relaxation is so complete that the bed now has the soothing, side-to-side rocking motion of a train car. Scenery floods past, mostly clumps of rocks and little hillocks scattered with dark green trees. *Here, here, and a tiny bit here.* A farm, a collie dog loping next to the tracks, and then the sudden startling face of a long-dead uncle. It seemed like he had shouted something but she couldn't catch it.

"What?" she says into the dark.

"Nothing," Sarah whispers from the doorway. "I was just standing here for a second."

How had she done it, raised these two exotic wild-haired daughters? They were back in Iowa City temporarily, crowding their personalities into her little house, blearily eating bowls of cereal each morning before raking the leaves into bright piles or spading the flower beds. The rest of the time they lounged on the front porch where they kept their packs of cigarettes, smoking and having long murmured

squabbles, going from flannel shirts to tank tops and back to flannel shirts again as the fall afternoons waxed and waned. Every evening one of them would ease out of the house and clunk away in motorcycle boots and vivid lipstick, down the street and into the neighborhood tavern. They mostly took turns, one of them swigging beers, shooting pool, and punching up embarrassing, elderly jukebox songs, the other at home sprawled in front of the television, pale as a widow, drinking cups of fragrant tea and eating malted milk balls by the handful.

Tonight it's Sarah standing silent against the door frame, staring intently at the floor, hands gripping elbows, listening to her mother breathe. Cheri feels the stirrings of a cough deep inside her lungs. It's the monster locked in the basement, and eventually it will storm up the stairs and burst forth, attacking her in her own home, swinging a mallet at her chest over and over. Once she can breathe again, she makes a joke out of it: I'm Buddy Hackett, I'm Gene Hackman.

Nobody even pretends to laugh at this anymore; they're too tired.

"I thought you were sleeping," Sarah says. "The phone was for you."

Cheri nudges a cat away from her hip, making room, and Sarah climbs in bed beside her. It's a slumber party minus the fun. She was awake; she could have taken the call.

"He said you should rest," Sarah answers.

Who said?

Besides *terminal* and *cancer,* there are no more final-sounding words in the English language than these. Jack Kevorkian. That's who.

And then, despite themselves, they are starstruck for a moment at the idea of this spry ghoul from the evening news picking up his phone in Michigan and dialing Cheri's little house in Iowa, with its polished floors and eccentric armchairs. Backlit from the hallway, the cats' ears are almost transparent, like parchment lampshades. They watch the humans in their giddiness, faces sharp and impassive.

They'll be wide-awake alive and I'll be dead, Cheri thinks suddenly. Not just the cats, but everyone. Sarah, Katy, her best friends, Linda and Wayne. Linda and Wayne's children, the lady at the pharmacy who calls her Churry instead of Cheri, the man covered in dirt and desperation who sometimes slept on her stoop back in Brooklyn. Her first husband, her second husband, *her own mother,* all those medical professionals.

His nickname is Dr. Death, and yet when it's over, he'll still be alive.

The lump was discovered during a routine mammogram two and a half years earlier. She spent the last normal afternoon of her life on the train, Baltimore to Penn Station, taking tickets and trying not to notice that an elderly passenger had a dog in her pocketbook. Amtrak had a rule against animals riding its trains, but unless someone complained, Cheri didn't intend to notice. She planned to frown at the lady when they got to Penn, but she didn't even do that since it

was quitting time and she felt cheerful. The Chihuahua's tiny face was poked all the way out of the bag by then, smugly gazing about.

Before her appointment, she went to the gym, ran and sweated, saunaed, showered, and tried to fluff her hair up a little. She needed a haircut more than a mammogram, but what she really needed more than either was to find her Mastercard, which had better be home on her dresser, because otherwise she had no idea where it was. She walked to the radiology place in her running shoes, going over the past three days, mentally taking her credit card out at various moments—grocery store, dinner at Ollie's, a weak moment with an L. L. Bean catalog—and putting it back in her wallet. The waiting room was disappointingly full and so she looked at fashion models in a magazine and watched the other patients until she was called.

The X-ray technician was a young woman with cat's-eye glasses and an unprofessional sense of humor. She wore bright yellow clogs. Here comes the S and

M part, she said as the machine closed its jaws. Click, flash; other side. She collected the trays and went off to show the films to the doctor. Be right back, she said as she left the room. And didn't return.

Cheri sat waiting, searching her mind until she thought she might have located the credit card in the back pocket of her black jeans, which were probably stuffed in the hamper. As the minutes wore on and then on, her hearing became heightened and her hands turned damp and cold. She rubbed them on her paper shirt. There was activity up and down the hall, doors opening and closing, voices leaking out. After twenty-six minutes had passed, she no longer wanted the technician to return. Every time she heard footsteps in the hall she willed them in the other direction. *Get lost, get lost,* she said under her breath, and they did get lost, until once they didn't and then the knob turned and the room was filled with the starched air of courteous detachment:

"Doctor wants more films."

And that's how everything changed, not with the pronouncement, even, but with a woman's disengaged expression. The room was engulfed in a tinny silence as she worked, arranging Cheri like a mannequin, folding her against the stainless steel, placing an arm up here, a breast in there, sending her home. Once, a long time later, when Cheri's life was passing in front of her eyes, she caught a glimpse of it again—saw the bright yellow cartoon feet of the technician and then saw her own naked left arm, in slow, muted motion, rising obediently to embrace the machine.

The lump was a dreamy smear on the X-ray, barely there, unfeelable except in her throat when she tried to talk. She spoke to Linda late at night, each of them standing in a dark kitchen, one in Brooklyn and one in Iowa City. Lump, lumpectomy, chemo, Cheri said. Yes, Linda said, that's what they do. A silence in which both of them wished they were seven-year-old hellions again instead of what they were—a train conductor

and a nurse; mothers; women who wore uniforms and looked sexy in them. Best friends since age five. It seems to be happening to both of them, although it isn't. For the duration of the phone call, they manage to remain calm.

And the illness proceeds on its trajectory, a knife, a scar, a plant-filled atrium where people sit in cubicles getting their treatments. One of the things she learns is how to vomit into a curved plastic trough while lying flat on her back. After six months another pale lump is photographed, no bigger but resolute, like a schoolyard bully who comes back even after getting a terrible pummeling. Linda waits for the phone call and when it comes she sits down. Lump, mastectomy, more chemo, Cheri says. Okay, Linda says, and she covers her face with one hand.

This time there's a tray of knives; she sees them right before the anesthesia erases her. When she awakens, her breast is gone, melted into a long weeping wound across her chest. The first time she sees it,

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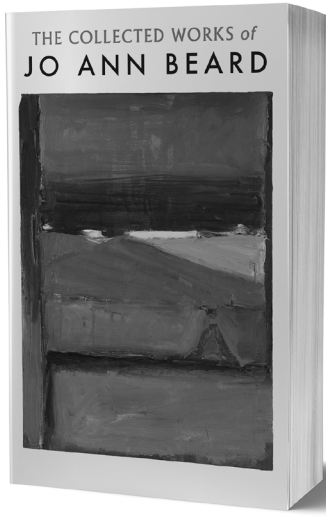

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