CHAPTER 5

Among sports, only skating records its own execution. No airy rainbow trails a flying ball. No furrow divides water plowed by a swimmer. But a skater creates a silvery archive of skill whenever her blades fill a blank surface with loops and lines. Every stroke adding to a file of her strengths and weaknesses, a skater writes her own athletic history.

Once, every competitive skater had to master a type of Palmer Method. The very name ─ figure skating ─ comes from a set of "school figures" that she etched onto the ice and then practiced over and over. To create the initial pattern, she used a device called a scribe consisting of two metal rods about two and a half feet long and hinged at one end like an elbow.

A scribe works somewhat like the compass I once used to draw circles in geometry class, and it enables a skater to etch a pattern. When it's opened, a scribe's tubes form a right angle, with one pointing vertically toward the ceiling, and the other extending horizontally over the ice. Telescoped within this second rod are four more, which also can be extended. Using a handle on the vertical tube for leverage, a skater swings the horizontal tube, which is tipped with a point. Standing in the center of where she wants her circle and using the scribe as her circle's radius, the skater grasps the vertical tube's handle and swings the horizontal tube back and forth over the ice until she has etched a circle.

She then traces and retraces her circles with her skates until she has created perfection atop perfection. And no matter how many times she passes over the original pattern, she must never go outside the lines. Each perfection has to be a perfect reiteration of her first. As she becomes more skilled, her patterns become more elaborate. Circle Eight, Counter, Change Loop, Paragraph Three, Paragraph Loop ──she must master six in all, until her muscles have

memorized a figure so thoroughly they render it perfectly without the benefit of the inscribed pattern.

Even God's own creation, Earth, isn't required such consistency. A classroom globe may be as round as a basketball, but that's only an ideal shape. The actual Earth, however, is formed like I am —with a little bulge at its middle.

Nor is the pattern of Earth's orbit around the sun a perfect round. It's an ellipse. Moreover, it's not always the same ellipse. As if he knew his little green planet would get bored, God allows the Earth to alter its orbital path a little.

No such dispensation, however, was granted to a skater of the old school. At competition time, the figures were multiplied by four, depending on which foot and direction the judges demanded. For going outside the lines, careers were ruined. But that's not the case today.

Today, school figures are no longer an element in competitions. Skating's rule-makers, the International Skating Union, realized school figures made for bad television —like God with his Earth, the Union knew viewers would get bored — so, it eliminated school figures. And just like that, a skill that skaters once spent years mastering vanished from competition as surely as if they'd been washed away by one pass of a Zamboni machine.

Today the jump is all. Serious, modern-day skaters must be skywriters, twirling themselves above the surface, engraving their skills not on the ice, but in the air. Leaving no trace of themselves, today's skaters fly, as if they'd never been here at all.

# # #

My world splits. About the time I get my first skates my life fissures. The day, as I recall, it was a Saturday ─ relaxed expansiveness of the weekend lending itself to the lackadaisical, meandering discussion Sally and I have. Sitting on our twin beds, not five feet from each other,

we talk like we have all the time in the world. About husbands. Children. The houses we hope to have. Over the braided rug our mother made, we volley wishful words as if words alone can make dreams come true. At least I do. But Sally is fourteen and beginning to sense the future you get is the one you earn.

"You know, Pat, I'm going to be a nurse," she says, dropping her choice of a career so casually she might have been choosing a new barrette. Until that afternoon, I'd assumed I'd spend my life as I'd spent my childhood: in her footsteps. But when she says she wants to be a nurse I know our futures have come to a fork.

Even at eleven ─ the age I was when I got my skates ─ I know words, not sick people, are my thing. I had been seven when my mother taught me to take the bus alone to the treasure trove of the Bridgeport Public Library. There, I'd squat on low wooden stools and smell the rag paper of the bound volumes and run my fingers over the pebbled weave of their covers. Oh, the possibilities. Between those covers I meet the Bobble twins ─ Nan, Burt, Freddie and Flossie ─ my pals, until I entered The Secret Garden and later palled around with Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm and Anne of Green Gables and all the brave Little Women. What could taking care of sick people offer in comparison?

By the time Sally tells me she wants to be a nurse, I appreciate that stories are the result of a complex process. Just as our mother tore apart a blue coat, a red wool skirt and a green sweater for the strips she braided together for the rug between our beds, I mine stories, for the very elements of their composition ─ for their words.

Despite being a very poor speller whose cramped handwriting makes a mockery of the Palmer Method, by the afternoon Sally tells me she wants to be a nurse, I hoard words as if they are magical moonstones and showcase them whenever I speak.

I also am an avid constructor of sentence diagrams. I love the line. The straight ones for direct objects. The back-slanting ones for predicate nominatives. The dotted ones connecting subordinate to principal clauses. My teacher for the fifth and seventh grades in St. Ambrose Elementary School is Mother Elizabeth, a mountain of a nun from Scranton Pennsylvania, who controls her forty-plus students by the Great Swinging Ruler, not by hitting, at least, not very much, but by grammar. Sometimes for two hours a day. My classmates groan, but I get giddy. Oh, I love using my ruler to make the lines that enable me to organize my beloved words into elaborate diagrams giving me a feeling of control and mastery.

In a family whose chaos bores wormholes into my mind, diagramming gives me a feeling of dominion: What are you talking about? (The subject) What action does the subject perform? (The predicate) What receives the action? (The direct object) The more elaborate the sentences Mother Elizabeth assigns, the more the world of words seems rational. By the seventh grade my grammar papers are elaborate blueprints of compound-complex constructions draped with modifiers and sprouting towers to house infinitives used as subjects or objects. Heaven!

The dreary March afternoon my Uncle Leo brings me Cousin Carolyn's skates, I am already in full obnoxious grammarian mode.

As eager as I am for those skates, as soon as I hear him say, "Patsy . . . I bring Patsy skates," the grammarian in me wants to scream, *Brought, Leo!* Use the correct form of the irregular . . . you *brought* Patsy skates.

Would Leo's gift have been more perfect if his grammar had been? Of course not. Nor would the memory of his good-hearted generosity be less vivid. But his "bring" unbalanced me: if I knew the rule and my adult uncle didn't, what did that make me? A wobbly venture on a limitless, slippery expanse. Not only was I supposed to cross that expanse, but, once Sally said

she wanted to be a nurse, I had to cross it without her guiding footsteps. Looking at the future, I see only a vast, empty space devoid of landmarks, or guideposts, or even a horizon. No wonder I love grammar's unwavering rules. At eleven I am too new a person to master this abrading, chaotic space of time called life. (In some ways I still am.)

Recently, I asked some writer colleagues how old they had been when they knew they wanted to be writers. With surprising consistency, each one knew by his mid-teens. Bill Zavatsky, the author of two books of poetry, became committed after a high school teacher praised his work. Marian Winik, the author of several books even sooner: at eight she co-authored a novella titled *Bubble Trouble.* Baltimore-based writer Rosalia Scalia, knew when she was in the sixth grade, the same grade that James Magruder, a professor at Swarthmore College, was in when he wrote a tale about a Viking ship inspired by a picture in a textbook.

Apparently, before we writers experienced the narcotic elation of first love or the treachery of the world, we knew our hearts belonged to insubstantial constructs of our imaginations. Not old enough to drive or drink or vote we fearlessly consigned ourselves to heady aeries built on a foundation of a blank piece of paper and words.

Psychologists call this process of recognizing our *self,* as opposed to our nattering, internalized family, differentiation. For the developing psyche differentiation is akin to the body's proprioception, the constant, subconscious processing of neurotransmissions that helps us orient our bodies in space and to keep our balance. Only, instead of a steady stream of neurotransmissions, the long psychological process of differentiation requires a constant evaluation of the mind's grab bag. To grow up, to become our *selves,* our psyches must constantly reach in, pull out whatever is tripping us up, and evaluate whether it's a rough patch left over from childhood or a tailspin of our own making. For the child taking her first steps

forward, the process can feel treacherous. To get any traction in her adult life, she must orient herself in a new reality where the elders she once relied upon are suddenly seen for what they've been all along: flawed and frequently unreliable.

Twenty-four years will pass between that afternoon when Sally tells me she wants to be a nurse, and I have my first article published professionally. I had been co-editor of my high school newspaper, but, in college, I and had no time for writing.

I remember walking across the campus one afternoon and meeting Sister Norma, the tall, beautiful head of the English Department whose lectures were performances of wit and learning, and having her ask me to write a story for the college's literary magazine.

"You have talent," she told me, and then whisked away toward the library. Sister Norma may have meant her remark as praise, but it was faint praise. Albertus Magnus prized scholarship, but not talent. Courses like "The Age of Dryden" were worth three credits, but the one creative writing course in its catalogue was worth two.

Part of this attitude of self-abnegation arose, I think, from the tenor of the times. I went to college in the age when Hemingway and Faulkner still strode the Earth ─ I remember going to see T. S. Elliott lecture in a packed Yale auditorium. In the presence of such gods, how could any mere mortal aspire to climb the Parnassian heights?

But I think there was another reason talent was minimized. Scholarship demanded hard work, but talent was regarded like the gift grace, God-given and unearned. A freebie in a religion that parceled out indulgences attached to prayers as a means to salvation. Also, talent demanded expression and what it expressed was the self. But in the pre-Vatican II rigid Catholicism of the early 1960's, the self was dangerous, the source of sin that had to be expunged by the sacrament of confession. The examination of one's conscience, the state of one's soul, the secrecy of the

confessional, all were designed to relegate the self to a secondary position subject to judgment by a higher authority.

As Frank McCourt, the author of *Angela's Ashes,* says, "You were forced to look at yourself from the point of view of the church. The laws were laid down. Nothing was for yourself."

But how else are the words going to get onto the paper unless the writer's "self" asserts itself? The writer's brain, the home of her "self," is the very organ that selects the words, puts them in order, and prompts her hand to take up her pen.

I actually did have the story Sister Norma requested published in the college's literary magazine, *The Albertinum,* and on one of her trips to Maryland my mother brought me a copy she'd saved. It's the tale of Fooey Gould, a precocious boy no bigger than a man's thumb whose mother almost stabs him with her fingernail when she tries to extract the olive from her martini into which he's fallen. It's a witty and brisk tale that's hopelessly derivative of E.B. White. It also foreshadows a story I will write soon after Bill and I move to Ranny Road.

Among his slides of me is one of me sitting at a black desk in our bedroom, where I'm writing the story of "Toodge," the name he and I called Kurt before Kurt was born, in the way parents refer to their unborn child when they're too awed and scared to look the reality of the new life they've created square in the eye.

Again, borrowing from both E. B. White and heavily influenced by F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Benjamin Button," Toodge is another two-inch little boy who appears at our apartment one Sunday morning. Over the course of seventy-five pages, he has many misadventures, including a harrowing ride in the pouch of a kangaroo at the Baltimore Zoo, but when a new baby arrives, Toodge decides to leave, until his mother persuades him otherwise.

I still have that story and am surprised to find that it's not bad. Nor is the story about Fooey Gould nor another I had published in *The Albertinum.* Nor are the poems that I find stuck into the folding dummy that the pressman made me when I worked at Garamond –Pridemark.

They all have the quality I call "air." That is to say, they breathe, they move, they engage the reader. They evidence talent. Young, undisciplined, self-absorbed talent, but talent nonetheless.

But it's not until I'm in my mid-thirties and working for "Consumer Survival Kit" that I screw up my courage and have my story about the woman who became an entrepreneur of cheesecakes published.

# # #

Five hundred years before Christ, in the Greek city of Ephesus lived a grumpy philosopher named Heraclitus. While his fellow philosophers were struggling to formulate logical systems, Heraclitus looked around and said, "Hey, guys, know what? . . . You can't step into the same river twice? And if you ask me to repeat what I just said, I will, but it won't be the same. Know why? 'Cause I won't be the same. And neither will you." The Ephesians couldn't stand him, but that didn't stop Heraclitus from proclaiming his unsettling idea that everything — the river, its bank, himself on the bank — changes. All the time. The only permanence, he asserted, is mutability. In terse apothegms that he deposited at the temple of Artemis, he promulgated his theories" "You cannot step twice into the same river, for the waters are ever flowing on to you." "We are and we are not."

Ideas such as these could drive a body mad, and poor Heraclitus moved to the mountaintops above Ephesus, developed a mean case of dropsy and attempted to cure himself by jumping into a dung heap. Thereupon his neighbors liked him even less.

His idea, however, stuck and changed Western thought forever, influencing philosophers as diverse as St. Augustine and Nietzsche. It also sent scientists on a desperate search to disprove it.

"Atoms," scientists reasoned, "surely wee atoms are permanent, aren't they?"

Well, sorry, no. Other scientists, physicists, then grabbed some atoms and smashed them. And poof! Those atoms were gone — changed into pure energy. A change that would alter our view of reality as radically as Heraclitus's pronouncements had twenty-five centuries earlier.

Today, with the atom and the hope of some wee bit of permanence smashed, scientists and mathematicians search for algorithmic expressions in nature corresponding to the rhythm and meter of poetry. In language as well as genetic sequences, they hunt for complementary patterns that use the same algorithms in the hope of discovering general system dynamics that underlie patterns within planetary ecology. These patterns, scientists posit, form a genetic syntax and provide the foundations of food, medicine, and even mythology. According to this theory, these rhythmic genetic patterns give rise to grammars of expression and speech.

That rainy March afternoon, when I slipped on the skates Leo had brought and toddled across my mother's kitchen floor, I was taking my first stumbling steps to expressing my emergent self. But I was also expressing something both common and unique to humans. Like all God's higher order creatures, we humans move. But we alone have brains enabling us to think about *how* we move. And about how we can move *better*.

Moving is a must — the search for food demands it. But *thinking* about how we move also is a must — our superior brain is the only advantage we had against the saber tooth tiger when we and it were hunting the same wooly mammoth.

Without grammar, however, we'd have no way of ordering our thoughts. What are we thinking about? (Spear, subject) What does do spear do? (Kill, predicate). What receives the spear's action? (Mammoth, direct object).

What Mother Elizabeth probably knew when she taught those two-hour marathons of grammar, was that human brains, especially young human brains, can be shaped into modes of thought that become as ingrained as figures do into a skater's muscles from tracing and retracing the patterns her scribe has etched into the ice. Mother Elizabeth was arming the brains of her young charges with the skill to instantly compute what action was being performed by and toward whom. In a nanosecond they could judge whether both thoughts in a sentence had equal value, and, if they didn't, which was principal and which subordinate. And, so armed, they would be blessed with the ability to reason.

"All things flow . . . nothing abides," was one of the apothegms deposited by Heraclitus at the temple of Artemis, but "flow" implies movement that's fundamentally unitary and steady, even rhythmic.

When asked why he still played tennis in his eighties, the poet Richard Wilbur responded that writers have a need for "radical rhythm." The bird's cry, the ticking clock, our hearts' beat, the iams occurring naturally in our speech, Wilbur says create a rhythmic steadiness. Like a lullaby, each beats the set-pattern dance of our days and marks a cosmic syncopation. And if the algorithmic-searching scientists are correct, these radical rhythms underpin the verbal constructs we need to stay alive.

The susurrus scrape of a skate's blade, the rhythm of poetry, the graceful entwining of the double helix, maybe they're the minute-to-minute beats of a life that will end whenever we reach the outer darkness and go poof!

Or maybe they're something else. Maybe they're metronomic reassurances sent from the Great Swinging Ruler in the Sky to let us know we'll be all right in the end.

#.

"Watch out. He's giving her a gun."

"I always thought Uncle Bill was the smart Schultheis brother. But what kind of fool gives his wife a gun?"

"A Frostburg fool, that's who."

"That explains everything."

"No. It just explains why Uncle Bill is giving Aunt Pat a gun."

Early August and we're all gathered in North Carolina at the home of Bill's brother Jim together with the Jim's six adult children, their spouses and offspring, Jim's wife, Mary Catherine, and Bill's brothers Henry and Johnny and their wives are there for the annual Schultheis Family Reunion.

Usually these reunions include a birthday party for Jim who has had a stroke and whose birthday comes in August, as mine does. So when his daughter Kathy woke me up from my nap in front of the TV, I walked into the kitchen expecting to join a party for Jim.

Only this year the party's for me. Bill had planned it and somehow on the trip from Baltimore had managed to keep hidden a long, slim, cloth case like ones used for carrying rifles.

But I know it doesn't hold a rifle. Even before I unzipper it I know that case holds a scribe. My scribe. My fiftieth-birthday present.

I had approached my fiftieth birthday feeling optimistic. The careful plans he and I had made had come to fruition; Kurt and Matt had graduated from college; the value of our little house on Ranny Road had multiplied many times over, so we had sold it and moved to a restored

mill town called Dickeyville on Baltimore's West Side. And I had begun writing fiction, a paragraph or two before going to work at a nearby educational software firm, where a craft grammar lessons.

But it is those few paragraphs I write every morning before going to work that aomehow they release a pent-up urge within me, and somehow calm me down for the day ahead.

Between my fiction and my job at the software firm my life, as I approached fifty had felt as though it was directed toward a bright, attainable horizon. But my thinking had been delusional.

When Heraclitus wrote that all things flow, he should have added that some of those things are as tiny as an atom and some are so big they sink the mightiest ship ever built.

Yes, there had been warnings — the death of an esteemed uncle, the wholly unexpected death of my cousin Howard's young wife, followed three months later by that of his mother, my beloved godmother Jane just a few months before the reunion ─ each of those losses had hit me hard, sent me sprawling, but I'd managed to regain my balance.

And then, two weeks before my surprise party in North Carolina, I'm knocked so hard I don't know how I'll ever get up.

July 26, 1993. Today my parents packed for California. It certainly has been a chaotic time in my life — and this was a time when I expected calm.

My parents were very intelligent and dutiful people, but the constant flux that Heraclitus had identified as the nature of the universe unnerved them. Even happy occasions like graduations and weddings were ordeals to be gotten through; more than the expense was the disruption to routine such events caused and the life-changing events they celebrated. For my parents change was synonymous with problem. And every real problem meant fault had to be

found, blame affixed, guilt assigned. Nothing could be worked through. Their set response was crimson, reactive rage.

So when my father's health and his alertness declined the prospect of taking care of him overwhelmed my mother. Sally, whose nursing specialty was geriatrics, pronounced the situation desperate and that the solution was for my parents to move to California where she could help them. Susan, who was living in Oregon, agreed.

But I didn't. Yes, a change had to be made I had argued ─ everything is flux, after all ─ but all possibilities deserved consideration. A continuing care facility, perhaps, either in Connecticut, or even Maryland. Our father, I pointed out, had never even been to California, but Sally and Susan had been adamant: a condo near Sally was the only answer. Within six weeks my sisters had my parents packed and gone. Poof!

The situation became so fraught, I didn't even have their new address. To get it, I have to call a California realtor.

One evening, a few weeks after they've moved Bill and I strolled up the old mill race behind the house we'd moved to from Ranny Road.

"I don't know what to do," I wailed about my parents' move.

He waited, thought, then answered. "Don't have anything to do with them."

Perhaps if my life hadn't been so bifurcated into a before and an after, perhaps if it hadn't been divided into the chaos I lived in before that August afternoon I boarded a Baltimore-bound train and the surety I felt when I took Bill's hand a week later, I would have ignored him. But his "have nothing to do with them," was like his "Pat," the night he came home from Israel, the voice I'd been listening for all my life.

I remember standing beside him and thinking. “He’s right. In all the years we’ve been married, he’s asked only one thing of me . . . to be happy. And with him, I *am* happy . . . and with those others, I’m not. Who wouldn’t choose happiness?”

And so I’d gone down to North Carolina eager for the ready embraces of his brothers and their families. I needed to have two beers with lunch, nap on a rough coach, splash in an above-ground pool, and watch Bill and his brothers meld into the four-square unit they’d been raised to be. I needed to experience acceptance feeling like grace, unearned and freely given.

And I get it. The good-natured ribbing, the bottomless bowls of potato salad and coolers of soda and beer, the constant parade of nieces nephews, and grandchildren, they renew me and when Bill and I load my scribe into our car to return to Baltimore I’m refreshed, ready for the next step. Plus I feel that he’s endorsed my quirky dedication to skating. I’d been skating ten years by then and the scribe was his way of showing me that while skating wasn’t his thing, he was glad that it was mine.

So, I limit my interaction with my family in California to Christmas and birthday and turn my towards a post-parenting life with him.

# # #

And just like the rulers I used for those long ago grammar lessons, the scribe he gave me at his brother Jim’s became an additional tool for establishing order out of chaos. I use it at 7:00 a.m. Saturday “patch” sessions where skaters are assigned a “patch” of unblemished ice to practice their figures. Aside from the ambient noise of its generators and the scratch of other skaters’ scribes, the rink is almost monastically quiet.

Saturday after Saturday, I stand at the tangent of two circles forming a figure eight, and, right hand in front, push with my left to skate on my right outside edge, just as George had

taught me so many years earlier. Only the practice of patch comes with rules and each circle I've etched with my scribe must have a diameter one and a half times my height of 5' 1."

To go the distance around such a large circle requires a mighty push, a push originating from a deep bend of my knees. But I fool myself by bending from my waist. Consequently, my eyes feed my brain misinformation, telling it I've lowered myself, but neglecting to tell it that I've tapped the wrong source for momentum.

Just as those prehistoric hunters had to think about how to throw their spears, I have to think about how I push. Once I focus on bending my knees, the practice of patch becomes purgative.

How I position my arms, how I rotate them, how my free leg moves from back to front, and how I try to stay on the line suppresses all other thoughts. And as I go 'round and 'round, time stretches beyond the reach of clocks, unmasking itself for what clock-time actually is: an artificial construct that makes me feel harried and anxious.

At the end of every session I examine how well I've traced my pattern and see that Heraclitus was right: nothing twice. The evidence is on the ice. The patch of a very skilled skater will look like she only went around once. But every circle I've traced is different from the one before. My lines wonder from the original by several inches and leave a pattern as wide as the tread pattern of a very wide tire, maybe of a bus.

I don't care. I love the quiet, the way my mind clears and time becomes elastic. And I love when, one Friday night, Bill says that he'll go with me the next morning. And so begins shared skating experience I never had anticipated.

I have nothing in my diary about those Saturday mornings, perhaps because going to the rink together flowed so naturally from the simple dalliance and dialogue of our marriage. The

way Bill has my skatebag out of the closet when I come down the stairs, and how I tease him if my coffee isn't ready, telling him I'm going to hire another coach. And how we listen to NPR as he drives, and see Venus in the winter sky, and, in the spring, horses emerging from the mist at Pimlico Racecourse, and, how after patch, we go to breakfast at the basement café in the building where we once had waited while Kurt took his exam for Gilman. And how, after breakfast, we'd go to the grocery store and then home, another Saturday well begun.

Those shared Saturday mornings are just one enjoyment flowing naturally from the sweet spot our marriage has reached. Our house in Dickeyville is over a hundred years old and has very few closets, so we buy an antique wooden wardrobe.

One afternoon, after making love, he and I are lying in bed and looking at it when I remark that its simple lines remind me of the classroom wardrobes where the nuns hung up their black "wraps."

"Come on, Pat. It's probably Amish or something."

"Maybe. But I think the Amish would have used better wood. This is sort of flimsy."

A few weeks later, again after making love, I'm in bed, but this time alone. Suddenly I see a vision. The sunlight hitting the wardrobe's upper left panel reveals the shape of a crucifix, a sacred silhouette on a sun-blanched surround.

I grab a robe and run downstairs.

"Bill, Bill, we're going to burn in hell!"

Back in the bedroom we become hysterical with laughter. "What have we done? What have we done? Before the symbol of Christ's suffering we had sex! Damned! Damned! We're damned!"

We resolve that the wardrobe must be painted and start taking toll classes in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch Country. Our teacher is named Steph and she's big and stern enough to be Mother Elizabeth's twin. Our first class is three-days-long. Three days of near silence under Steph's stony stare, but we learn how to make comma strokes, float colors and the importance of base coating.

We get hooked and take over a dozen classes together. Bill paints a Baltimore harbor scene on Kurt's old wardrobe and I paint apples on an old wall cabinet of his mother's, where he'll store is slides. He paints a Noah's ark on a hat rack and I paint fruit matching my china pattern in a wall cabinet. And together we paint the damning wardrobe. We select which classes to take from a catalogue Steph sends. I read it first and make a list of what interests me, then Bill makes his list. Then we compare.

We adapt the same system when we travel, only for trips Bill makes the initial selection. Then I read the books he's brought from the library and together we plan. Without the boys, he and I go to London again, where I had struggled around the Queensberry Rink in rental skates that didn't fit because I didn't know how to convert American sizes to European.

And then we decide to expand our horizons to a country where we don't speak the language.

Dec. 26. 1994 Matt became engaged yesterday. A few more hours and Bill and I leave for Italy.

We go to Rome, just the two of us, a scattering Italian phrases in our heads and guide books in Bill's backpack.

Just the two of us, exploring the Coliseum, admiring the turquoise shutters framing the windows across from our hotel, seeing the Pope as he exited midnight mass on New Year's Eve,

buying underwear at a stall in the Campo de Fiori, climbing down four levels and nearly two thousand years in San Clemente to see a temple to Mithras, a mythic sun god, then climbing back up to take a nap. Grand monuments or narrow alleyways, sumptuous dinners or afternoon caffes make no difference to us, we experience them all like adventurous children exploring the woods behind our houses and out of earshot of our mothers. Stray cats in Tajan's Market, an aristocratic family enjoying a New Year's Day repast, a carousel in the Piazza Navona, we encounter each of them with surprise, and sense without speaking, the other's delight. The lack of hot water in our hotel room prompts some first-rate cuddling, and we fly home having affirmed something in our individual selves and between ourselves together.

Then six weeks after our trip I lose my job at the software firm, and, suddenly the deck chairs begin to slide; we're tumbling toward the stern; we're going down.

# # #

"Pat. It's Sally," the voice on the phone says as if it hadn't been the last voice I heard every night before I fell asleep in my twin bed five feet from hers. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

I expected to hear something about our parents: our mother is eighty-three; our father, eighty-five; bad news about them would have been understandable. But this bad news is beyond my imagination's reach.

April 24, 1995 Sally called yesterday ─ Sunday ─ she has liver cancer.

What follows in the intervening weeks is a flurry, first of letters, then of phone calls.

Sally's birthday is June fifth; she will be fifty-five years old. I go to Macy's and search among the racks for soft pajamas.

"They need to be all cotton and soft. They're for my sister. She has cancer." I tell the a small, gray-haired saleswoman who brings me a pair of cotton pajamas with fabric so soft it runs like silk through my fingers.

June 4, 1995. My sister Sally is dying. I doubt that she will live more than a few days.

Bill makes plane reservations for the end of June, but then my cousin Howard goes out to California to see Sally and calls me.

"Get out here, I've seen the signs. I went through it with Ellie," he says.

I scream at Bill to change the reservations and at 4:30 the next morning we leave. And when we land in San Francisco, I scream more because we've missed a shuttle to Santa Rosa, the closest airport to Sebastopol, where Sally lives. He rents a car and drives.

When he pulls up to Sally's house, Susan comes out the door. I haven't seen her for several years, but I don't so much as greet her.

Instead, I ask, "Is she still here?"

"She's still here."

With John, Sally's third husband, and Mike, Sally's son, Susan has been Sally's principal caregiver. She takes me to her.

When my mother had told me how the cancer had ravaged Sally, I thought she was exaggerating. But the figure on the bed is unrecognizable, not only as Sally but as human. Skin the shade of a rotten banana peel cover its skeletan, and a clownish tuft of pink hair jutting from an otherwise bald scalp. Only its high cheekbones and slightly protruding teeth are familiar.

"Pat," it says. A statement. A call. I sit beside her an answer with a kiss. And she throws her arm over me ─ "What an act of will. How she loved you," John will tell me later.

She asks for something to eat, and someone brings a yogurt.

I feed her. “One for Tippy dog,” I say. “One for She-She chicken.” Naming each mouthful for a pet or a relative was a game our mother used to play to coax us to eat, and when I start it, Sally laughs. She actually laughs ─ those old familiar bonds. But laughing costs her. She’s too tired to eat any more.

Bill and I stay an hour longer and then he drives me to my parents’ condo in the center of Sebastopol. There, they treat us as if we’re paying a social call, as if we’re friends of theirs like the Kranicks or McGuinesses and have popped in from the East Coast.

My mother serves an appetizer of steamed shrimp from the nearby Safeway, and a low cholesterol watermelon salad. And when she serves the roast we talk about Matt’s engagement, and how Kurt’s doing in law school. We talk about anything but Sally. At some point Bill and my father go for a stroll around the condominium complex and my father picks a lily. When he hands it to my mother she scolds him, because she’s afraid that the condo association will complain. Bill and I drive to Sally’s house once more, but she’s sleeping so we leave for our motel where he explains to the deskclerk why we’re in California.

At four o’clock in the morning the phone rings.

“Sally just told me that ‘It’s time for Sally to be with God,’ ” John says.

In the lobby, Bill tells the same deskclerk we don’t know if we’ll be back by check-out time.

“Just go,” she says, “Just go” ─ such a kindness.

Outside, the night is carbon black. There is no traffic. We come to a red light. Bill stops, then says “Fuck this,” and makes an illegal left turn. I never loved him more.

John is sitting beside Sally's left side ─ Susan has gone back to Portland, so he is alone. And I sit on her right. She's taking oxygen through a tube but still is struggling to breathe.

"I love you, Sal," I say.

She gasps, "I love you.

"I love you," John says.

"I love you, too."

She makes an irritated gesture toward the oxygen. He removes it. I think he's only adjusting it, but when he doesn't put it back on, I ask, "Doesn't she need that?"

He glares at me and lowers her down. Sally goes to God.

I go into her garden and start picking flowers. I see Bill on the porch, watching me, but I cannot stop picking. Sally loved flowers; she and Susan inherited my mother's green thumb, and I feel that as long as I keep picking her flowers I'll keep her with me.

Sally and John have chickens and their rooster begins to crow. But I keep picking, feeling that as long as I do, the rooster won't stop crowing and a day won't begin without Sally in it.

A hospice nurse comes to "clean her up," and when he says she's ready for me to see her, I notice he's dressed her in the pajamas I had sent her ─ she's wearing them still on hill in California.

I call Susan and she starts to tell me how I should break the news to our parents, how I shouldn't wake them too soon and disturb their morning routines. I let her believe I'll follow her directions. Susan runs the branch of a school teaching English as a second language. She is very successful, and, I know, at that moment at least, somewhat deranged.

Susan, who speaks French, would appreciate that the word, which according to *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion, has roots in the Old French *rangier.* And presupposes that something was once "ranged," in orderly rows, like first-class deck chairs on an ocean liner. . Within an hour, when Bill drives me to our parents, I will discover I, too, am as deranged as Susan

A beautiful little town between Santa Rosa and the Pacific Ocean, Sebastopol is washed in golden California light by the time we leave for my parents'. Along the side of the road a woman is walking with a little girl. The woman has long black hair, and the turquoise skirt draping her amble hips sways with every step she takes. The little girl whose hand she holds looks to be about five.

I want to kill them. Their holding hands offends me. Their *being* offends me. I think what a good thing it is that Bill is driving otherwise I would plow the car right into them. I believe I can arrange a swap with God. The woman and little girl for Sally. Two for one. I think this is a good deal for God. I think he should take it.

I (subject) want (predicate) to kill them (infinitive phrase used as a direct object). The rules of grammar, it appears, are as indifferent as the hand of fate. The rules, after all, are only the framework on which we hang our words. The framework serves equally the sane and the insane. That's why it's possible for a mustachioed little man to scream venom onto adoring throngs who would rather salute madness than think for themselves. And why it's possible to write precisely about the efficiency of gas chambers. The rules of grammar are reliable, but the human mind is not.

"She waited for you, Pat," my father tells me as I sit at the little breakfast table in the condo that morning. When we get back to Baltimore my cousin Howard will tell me the same

thing . . . “She waited for you.” I believe them, but don’t know how to consider what they told me. If Sally had held onto life until she saw me again, did I do her a kindness by releasing her? And if her love was strong enough to keep her alive until she saw me, why wasn’t mine strong enough to keep her alive once she did?

Howard also sends me a book that someone had given him when Ellie, died. I remember neither the title nor the name of the young widow who wrote it, but I do remember her saying that when we lose someone we grieve for that person and for ourselves as well. We grieve for the self we had been when that person had been in our lives. And for the self that person perceived us to be.

Yes, I hadn’t spoken to Sally for two years, but I never had stopped loving her. How could I? She was the touchstone that confirmed my earliest self. The repository of my earliest memories, the ones of She-She chicken, and Tippy Dog, and of our mother coaxing us to eat in the little house in Bridgeport. And of the maple table and four chairs between the sink and stove in its little kitchen. And of all the tacit codes our family operated under: of making our beds and cleaning our rooms, and returning our library books on time, and getting good grades and making sure we’d packed our bathing caps in the beach bag. And of saving a portion of our allowances, and wearing white gloves to Mass, and of reading and reading more, and of looking good but not pretty, and writing thank you-notes, and using sanitary pads, not tampons.

All this I shared with her in a silent communion as intimate as the laying of a wafer on a tongue. And all our histories of our infractions against the code were lost as well, as were the costs and rewards of those infractions. I knew this history, but when Sally died no one knew I knew.

The novelist Elizabeth Bowen writes that we never truly love another person; we love only the feeling that person engenders within us. Perhaps this is true. All love has a hallucinatory aspect. We see our secret selves affirmed in the other's eyes, and we love that someone else recognizes how wonderful we are.

Would I have loved Sally if I had met her as an adult? I doubt it. The woman who had affairs, who moved her children three thousand miles away from their father, who invited me to try crack? No, that woman would have intrigued me, but I would have been wary of her, would have kept my distance.

But that Sally wasn't the one who died, not the one my heart recognized, the one who spoke my name in the dark from her twin bed, or whose footsteps I followed up the aisle the rainy October afternoon I married Bill. And when that Sally dies, a chasm opens in my mind, a void so wide and deep that I have no idea how to cross or get around it.

I had lost my job at the software firm by the afternoon Sally called to tell me about her cancer and was to begin a new one at an ad agency the next day.

The woman who owns the firm had been left with four children when her husband was killed in a car accident, so she is sympathetic to my grief, but only to a point. One morning I get an assignment to write 50 words, but by noon I still haven't hung them onto grammar's elegant scaffolding. ADD makes concentrating difficult; grief makes it impossible. As though I were dreaming with my eyes open my mind simply flees wherever my body is. By October, I have lost that job as well.

In Maryland, the mid-Atlantic atmosphere makes seasons shift as abruptly as if someone has thrown a switch. Summer's heat may linger in patio flagstones and a profusion of roses but it

no longer blanches the sky white. One early September morning we in the mid-Atlantic region waken under cool blue perfection.

The September after Sally dies I hate that perfection. How dare the world travel into another season while she's not in it. Nothing dispels my pain:, not Bill, not planning for Matt's wedding, certainly not skating.

When I go to rink, I'm more tentative than ever. But it's not falling that I'm afraid of. I'm afraid of how much I want to fall, of how I want any excuse to not move, to just lie still and let my mind float away.

The first week of January I open the newspaper and see the obituary for Vida's husband, Byron, who lived around the corner from her. I drive through a desultory snow to her looming townhouse because in the bizarre logic of grieve, I need to refresh my pain in hers. If pain is all that remains after a loss, then pain is best when it's most acute.

Vida'scavernous townhouse snatches whatever light falls from her scattered lamps and quashes it in dark corners. A clutch of Japanese dolls, a bolt of burgundy velvet, a loveseat with a broken cane seat, they're shadow substances I pass on the way to her kitchen. She takes two beers from the vegetable drawer of her refrigerator and sets them on a tippy little marble-topped table ─ "I'm going for a Parisian look" she once told me.

We drink and she starts: "He had open-heart surgery, and then a stroke. They wouldn't let me put his teeth in, and he always was so vain about having false teeth. I brushed his hair. No one was with me. I was all alone."

Since Bill has died, I've become a volunteer working with bereaved clients of a hospice, so I know that in the early stages of grief people frequently repeat the story of their loved one's death. In these narratives, the sentences are always short: subject, verb; subject verb. Only the

facts are given, and they're narrated in the uninflected, hypnotic voice of the fireside bard ─ the voice of witness. Hung on grammar's bare bones scaffolding words become, a testimonial to the ultimate change: I was there when he last was and when he first was not. Anyone who has witnessed that pivotal moment can rightly claim a fierce, burning grace.

Vida gets up and holds back her hair so it won't singe in the blue flame as she bends to her stove to light a cigarette ─ she's out of matches. She gets another beer and starts again, always ending in "No one was with me. I was all alone."

I listen again and realize six months earlier I had done the same, telling virtual strangers, "Her husband sat on one side of her. I sat on the other. He took her oxygen off." Listening to Vida, I realize that I'm no longer gripped by the compulsion to testify; I at least have moved from that stage of grieve.

At last Vida gets up, grabs a Navy pea coat and jams a watch cap over her head.

"I need matches," she says. "I'm going to the tavern." And I let her believe that I believe her. From my car I watch her walk through the snow to the bar a block away. A middle-aged woman whose success I once had envied and who's now desperate for a light. And all alone.

But I am not. I turn my car in the opposite direction and head for home. I head to Bill.

# # #

. Although I continue writing articles for publications like *The Baltimore Business Journal* but, Sally's death dampens journalism's allure. Journalism seems superficial, an assemblage of facts that don't necessarily add up to truth. I need to hold the prism of experience up to the passing light to examine it first through one facet, then another.

Recalling the moment he became a poet, Vladimir Nabokov writes about watching a single raindrop sliding down the center vein of a leaf before it falls off and feeling that "the

instant it all took to happen seemed to me not so much a fraction of time as a fissure in it, a missed heartbeat." Before being moved by that single raindrop Nabokov had been one person, and afterwards he was another: he was a writer.

Nabokov, whose mind is infinitely more subtle than mine, only needed a raindrop to orientate him to his true self; I needed something much more dramatic. Still our sense of a before and an after is the same. Sitting while Bill as he drove through the dark to Sally's house I was one person, and when he drove away, I was another.

To say that from that point I became serious about writing fiction would be a mistake: a more correct observation would be to say that I escaped into fiction. My stories become what reading had been during my childhood, my secret garden. a fictive world, where I'm safe.

At fifty-two, I'm starting over and discovering who I am when I wasn't a little sister any longer. I begin teaching at a community college, but I manage to juggle class preparation and grading papers and writing fiction.

Almost year to the day after Sally's death, Matt gets married, and, although I'm keenly aware of the date, I keep my focus on him and his bride. A week later my father dies, and I'm in California again, holding his hand through his final night, then supporting my mother while arranging his funeral. Two years after that Bill's brother, Jim, dies. And again I pick flowers, but at a florist's this time because Bill's too upset to choose whether chrysanthemums or roses are right.

Six months later Bill has his first bout of cancer, cancer of the larynx, so I assume the portions of day-to-day running of our household that he usually shouldered, but I keep skating and teaching and writing.

If Heraclitus had written an apothegm for writers it could have been “Read like a writer,” meaning that anyone who wants to write should approach reading, not for pure pleasure, but to discover how another writer accomplished what he did. What techniques he employed to breathe life into the figments of his imagination, and have them inhabit worlds throbbing with emotional intensity. One of the techniques in a writer’s toolbox is imagery, the single crystalline correspondent to a character’s true nature.

I’ve begun reading like a writer, I’ve become aware of how frequently writers employ images of ice and skating. Sometimes they employ them to express the “joy of zeal,” as in “Skating,” by e. e. cummings, a poet we English majors in Albertus Magnus once considered so salacious. Or else they use it as in the last scene of Monica Ali’s wonderful *Brick Lane,* where the Muslim heroine asserts her new-found liberation by skating.

But at other times skating and ice make concrete a darker reality, for what Nate Haken, another writer I know has called “what’s beneath the surface . . . that hint of danger,” as in a poem about a knickerbockered boy who smiles while standing on the blade-scratched pond which will drown him. Or in a novel, where a night train flies off a trestle into a lake that will be freeze and hold fast all within it.

Or in taxi, where the adolescent Holden Caufield badgers a New York cabbie with an unanswerable question, “What do they do, the fish and all, when the whole little lake’s a solid block of ice, people *skating* on it and all? . . . They can’t just ignore the ice. They can’t just *ignore* it.”

Ah, Holden, not only do they ignore the ice, they *must.* How else can they do what life requires. How else can they buy soft pajamas, or dance at a son’s wedding, or choose chrysanthemums over roses. Or watch a husband wither under radiation.

# # #

March 15, 1999. Yesterday it snowed. It seems spring comes later and later every year. Went skating today, and, naturally, took a good long nap when I came home. Tomorrow Bill and I go to hospital so they can tattoo him to focus the radiation. Then begins a series of 33 treatments.

I am a very slow writer who would rather revise than start something new and face the blank page, so by 1999, my fictional *oeuvre* is all of four stories. Despite having so little to offer I am too numb to be self-protective, I send one off to the Bread Loaf Writing Conference and am accepted, even though the outcome of Bill's treatment is far from certain.

I don't have time to check out the writers who will lead the workshop, so I choose randomly, selecting one headed by a man named Bud Polverman

It's a bad match. The young post-modernists in Polverman's workshop could have inflected the Twenty-third Psalm with irony, and they eviscerate my story about the death of a Vietnam War veteran. Too long. Too many characters. Too much description. Too little action, they say, because they don't know what the story is about. They don't know about grief.

But one person does, a pretty blonde woman who's already had a novel published.

"Many people don't know this about me," she says one morning when she sits down beside me on one of the conference's famed Adirondack chairs. "but I'm a widow. I totally get what your story is about." Her name is Leslie Pietrzyk, and years later she will write a blurb for

the cover of my collection of short stories, but it's the words of encouragement she gave me that morning I treasure to this day.

Bread Loaf is an esteemed institution, steeped in tradition and the lore of Robert Frost, with whom it's closely associated, and one of its traditions that of having everyone gather in a large barn on the property to hear the conference faculty read from their own work. One evening I'm listening to a poet who's written about his brother dying of cancer. I sit through the first verse and the second, but when he begins the third, I have to leave. As surely as if the barn were burning, I have to get out. Stepping on feet and clattering over the wooden folding chairs I have to get out — just out!

Above me, the Vermont night sky is crazy with stars, and amid all that glowing glory I begin hunting for Sally's. She has been dead four years, and I am still assigning myself the impossible task of finding her. Although I now know that I've got what experts identify as complicated grief, my behavior doesn't strike me as odd at the time. No, do I think it's strange that I am on my knees, sobbing in the middle of a Vermont meadow. I feel entitled to my grief. Feel almost incandescent with it.

When Bill comes for me at the conference end, he kisses me and then says, "I have something to tell you."

"What?"

"I don't feel very good."

His radiation treatments have ended, and there is no sign of cancer, but still "I don't feel very good."

Two rows of red, round marks divided by his vertebrae march up his back. Despite the rash, despite his "I don't feel very good," we don't return to Baltimore right away. Instead, we

stay in Vermont and shop. For two days. Pigheaded and willful as teenagers getting stoned in the town square in front of a Police Station, we wander the streets of Burlington. We enjoy leisurely lunches and more leisurely dinners. In one shop, I try on a white leather jacket with a fur collar. I look good in it, and Bill says that I should get it, but I laugh and put it back. We note the bathroom in our motel and wonder if we can redecorate the powder room off our kitchen the same way. We watch night falling over the Green Mountains in the evening and linger over coffee in the morning. We ignore the red rash until it's almost too late.

When we finally get home to Baltimore, I call Riesa, wonderful ice dancer and a top notch dermatologist. She examines Bill's back and pronounces "Lyme Disease." And then she says, "It's a good thing you got here when you did. Lyme disease is not so easy to diagnose once the rash fades." I never tell her about the two days Bill and I spent tempting fate in Vermont. She's an imminently practical, realistic woman, and I don't know if I could have explained why we did that except it has its roots in the same defiance that impelled Bill and me to stay in Baltimore so many years earlier, when the city burned around us, but we sensed that we'd be all right in the end.