I must have a special affinity for blades. Or maybe the attraction is reciprocal, a type of cosmic magnetism pulling steel and me toward each other, the merging gravitons of history and physics resulting in the odd collection of razor-sharp silver-bladed instruments stashed with the boots jumbled in the bottom of my coat closet.

First is the bayonet. It belonged to my father's father, Michal Podufaly, who, if I have found the right Michal Podufaly in the Ellis Island records, and if those records are accurate, came to America in 1904 when he was twenty-five. Family legend holds that my grandfather Michal left my grandmother Rose behind, until he became established.

But left her behind where? Rose and Michal, like my other grandparents, Antoinette and Vincent Kadykowski, were Polish, but in 1904 Poland only existed as part of the Russian hegemony. Plus, the Ellis Island records identify Michal as coming from Kopycynce, which was in Galicia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an entity entirely absent from modern- day maps. Although on those same maps Kopycynce still exists. Only now it's now part of Ukraine. History, it appears, unlike silver blades, has no heft, no actuality.

Perhaps perspective on the past depends on who's looking at it, so I examine the bayonet. The words Armes di St. Etienne Juillet 1877 *flow down its blade in elegant cursive script. The words make sense* ─ Armes di St. Etienne Juillet *was a French armament manufacturer and family legend also holds that Michal served in the Austrian Army, which may have bought its arms from France.*

But the date, 1887, *makes no sense at all. Eighteen seventy-seven was two years before my grandfather was born, so maybe the bayonet belonged my great-grandfather. And maybe Michal lugged the bayonet to America knowing he'd never see his father again and felt that the memory of him expressed in his bayonet was worth displacing of a second pair of woolen*

trousers from his suitcase. Or maybe my grandfather just thought a weapon might not be a bad thing to have in strange country.

But time has pulled the cover over truth's drowsing head, so I'll never know why my grandfather packed a bayonet when he came to America. Maybe it's enough that its blade is still sharp. And that its steel still gleams. And that its heft expresses to Michal's granddaughter the long arc of effort and circumstance that has brought her to this comfortable home in Baltimore, where she has a closet full of boots and a blue bag with skates stashed next to a sword.

The sword belonged Michal's youngest son, my uncle Eddie. Of the nine siblings in parents' families, only Eddie went to college, but only because he went for free. To West Point. He graduated in 1940, served in Europe during WWII and Korea afterwards. At one point, he was stationed on Okinawa, where he most likely acquired the sword I have in my closet. It's a Japanese landing sword, a weapon Japanese soldiers used in hand-to-hand combat when they invaded. At one time a red tassel dangled from its hilt, signifying the sword had belonged to an officer. Embossed on the leather wrapping its hilt are six lotus blossoms, three on each side. Which means that just as he was about to slice his enemy open, the Japanese officer pressed his palm to the symbol of Buddhist enlightenment.

Doubtless, if the sword were American, it would have been embellished with the flag or some other symbol of U.S. nationalism. But the sword my uncle brought back from Okinawa has no symbol of Japan as a homeland. Rather, it has a flower, the symbol of a belief that something exquisitely beautiful and painfully transitory can blossom from mud. Or be rooted in it.

Flag or flower, one is as deadly as the other if its purpose is to inspire the absence of an "other," the absence of someone whose foreign features obscures their humanity and who therefore must be removed.

The newest blades in my closet are the ones in the blue bag. Like the bag, they were gifts from Bill, but their purpose isn't butchery, but beauty. Their essence, however, also is absence. The source of figure skating's possibilities is a depression running down the center of each blade. Until some anonymous smithy created a blade with a shallow gully, skaters had been constrained to the rigid linearity of medieval hunters who tied reindeer bones to their boots and stalked their prey down frozen lakes. But once a groove was impressed into blades, skaters were liberated to swoop and fly. In essence, absence renders grace on ice visible.

The groove is called a hollow, and grinding the hollow to a skater's desired depth is an art akin to a diamond cutter's. Millimeters of metal can make the difference between agility and awkwardness, between winning or losing. The minute presence or absence of matter matters.

Once, I paid no attention to my blades, not even bothering to properly dry them off after a session, a, self-destructive perversion of mine that manifested itself in other ways like leaving pins unfastened in my blouses, and handbags unzipped ─ I once courted the anxiety engendered by loss.

But, now, having experienced a tsunami of loss, I've gained the wisdom to treasure what I've been given. So I keep my blades wrapped in soft, plaid, booty-like "soakers" to protect them from nicking each other as twins in a shared crib might if their mother hasn't bothered trimming their tiny fingernails. "Soakers" also protect blades from rust. The chrome giving blades their silvery gleam stops at about a quarter of an inch from the edge, exposing the tempered steel to the air. Cold invites condensation, and even a pinhead of rust on a blade can

get snagged on ice and throw a skater off her rhythm. So now I wipe my blades off carefully and slip on their soakers, so that at seventy some years, I can be a fleet as I can be.

# # #

I am sitting next to a man slumped in the lobby of a rink, not Northwest, but the rink shimmed into the edge of a golf course. The man, who has a rounded physique and, thin, gray-hair mussed over his shining scalp, looks down at the floor and shakes his head.

"I can't. I just can't do it," he says. "Not now. Maybe in a week or two."

I have asked him to sharpen my skates.

"I can't. Not yet."

"I understand," I tell him. And I do. I understand that he has the skill to sharpen skates, but, for the moment, he hasn't the *will*. He sharpens skates in the basement of the sprawling brick home he and his wife Betsy bought after he won the lottery, and now he cannot bear the thought of carrying newly sharpened skates, their blades still warm from his wheel, up the stairs, and not finding Betsy in their kitchen. Or their dining room. Or one of the two greenhouses where Betsy so carefully tended her beloved plants.

He shakes his head again. "I just can't face it."

"I understand."

And he knows I do. Ten months after Bill died, in lobby where we're sitting I collapsed into shuddering sobs I could no more have stopped than I could have stopped an avalanche. After that episode, Joe, whom I hadn't known then, looked on me with sympathy, even giving me a free pair of soakers.

And when Betsy died, I wrote him a letter telling him how sorry I was that he had lost her. And how unfair it seemed. And how cruel the silent universe seems when our anguished

"Why?" goes unanswered. And how the season of grief belongs to the grieving. And that I understand that Joe is living in a space-time continuum wholly unlike the work-a-day world's.

But what I don't tell Joe is that how I never put my soakers on my blades nor take them off without thinking of Bill. Because the soakers Joe gave me are printed with Macintyre tartan, the tartan of Bill's great-grandfather, David Macintyre. Nor do I tell him that Bill once wore a beloved woolen cap with the same tartan. And that he was wearing that cap the New Year's Eve the first time we visited London. And that on our way to Trafalgar Square, London's version of Times Square, a gangly teen-ager playfully tugged Bill's cap down over his forehead, saying, "There you go, Scottie." And that Bill thought it was a great joke. Nor do I tell him how that cap now is wrapped in a black plastic bag to protect it from moths and is stored in the metal chest that had been Kurt's first toy chest, a chest Bill later painted with a scene of Baltimore harbor back when he and I took folk art classes.

I don't tell Joe that, as far as I'm concerned, the Macintyre tartan on the soakers he gave me is composed of lines of memory, because doing so would give him a glimpse of a future where the most mundane occurrence can loosen an ice jam of reminiscence. At the moment, I sense his grief is so acute, he's living in an eternal painful present. And to suggest that his pain might someday devolve into a melancholy sense of loss, something omnipresent, but bearable, as mine has, is unimaginable for him.

"I'm not crazy," Joe says brightly. He straightens up, squares his shoulders, and holds his head unnaturally erect in a posture of exaggerated strength and fortitude. Behind his glasses his eyes widen with self-mockery ─ he knows his is, indeed, a little nuts.

"I found a site for widowers, and according to what it says, everything I'm doing is perfectly normal. The clothes Betsy wore last. . . I don't want to wash them, and that's fine.

And how sometimes I just scream ─ I've told my neighbors 'If you hear anything, don't worry. It's just me letting it all out' ─ according to the web site, all that's normal. I'm not crazy."

Except that howling so loudly that the neighbors can hear isn't exactly normal, so maybe Joe is just a little nuts. After all, if someone who wasn't grieving screamed like that, neighbors would be correct to ask, "What's going on? Do you hear Joe?" But grieving persons are permitted a pass. Extenuating circumstances are understood. Exceptions extended.

But only to a point ─ his neighbors' sympathy for his nighttime howls will soon grow tepid, and their understanding less fulsome.

Three weeks after Joe tells me he's not crazy and after he has, indeed, sharpened my blades, he and I again are sitting on a bench at the rink. He asks "What's the point? I don't see the point of anything. The first thought that pops into my head when I open my eyes in the morning is 'Oh, shit, another day.' I don't see the purpose in anything." He is beginning to understand the thin scrim separating surpassing sorrow from insanity. Beginning to understand he's living in a void as barren as a polar landscape, one completely absent those milestones and routines marking life's purpose.

I understand, but don't tell him, how climbing out of the void demands a Herculean act of will, especially since reentering "normal life" means rejoining a world teaming with mixed signals, contradictory impulses, and opposing choices. A world overrun with false promises, confusing premises and destructive desires. I understand how sometimes the greater craziness seems to be leaving the time-space continuum of grief for that noisy, messy "real" world. Especially when grief's void is so pristine and silent. So absent any demand save one: Stay.

# # #

3/24/05 Thur. Skated early (did so-so). Bill and I squabbled. B has to have knee surgery.

Skating blades are not flat. They're shaped something like a very wide three-sided V, with slanting sides meeting at a level portion known as the rocker. If her blades are the appropriate size, the rocker is located precisely under the skater's metatarsal and serves as a pivot point, enabling a skater to switch whichever way she's facing by executing a "three-turn." With her knee bent, the skater torques her body into an ever tightening gyre until she senses she's reached the pivot point. Then, rising up on her knee, she traverses her hollow from one edge to another, leaving a 3-shaped tracing on the ice — hence the name, three-turn.

The most basic three-turn is the switch from a front outside edge to a back inside edge, and learning it had taken me years. I was just beginning to get the hang of the second — a front inside edge to back outside when Bill had to have knee surgery.

Since having laryngeal cancer in 1999, his health hadn't been robust. He'd developed type-II diabetes and then glaucoma. And suffered from such bad heartburn that I'd find him watching TV downstairs at 4 a.m. The photographs of the christening of Kurt's first son, Brett, in 2004, show a smiling man surrounded by his sons and grandsons ─ we had four at that point. But they also show a man for whom smiling is an effort. After his cancer, Bill almost seemed to embrace slowing down, to relish the details of yet another eye-examine, or his blood sugar count. But I had no patience for such picayune matters. For me they were the white noise of life, but now I think for Bill they were a sounding bell.

And then there was his knee. Back in the early eighties, when the procedure was new and the recovery period long and painful, he'd had arthroscopic surgery to remove cartilage from his knee, and we were anticipating another such recovery the morning he left me off near the rink and took his X-rays of his other knee for his surgeon. The determination about his knee would be critical because he and I were hoping to go to Venice. I had an hour to kill before skating began, so I decamped to Starbucks with my skates and Italian grammar. I was just settling in, when a woman in the craft-shop sweater interrupts me.

"Can I sit with you? I can see that you're busy, but it's just that it's so lonely sitting alone." I want to keep studying, but every table is *occupato,* so I move my things and the woman sits. Her eyes are cerulean blue, and gray, wavy strands have escaped whatever clasps her hair at the nape of her neck. Her amethyst turtleneck matches the abstract triangles scattered over her sweater — a put-together woman with a bohemian flair: qualities I find attractive. Under different circumstances we could have been friends.

I smile and resume studying . . . *cinque, sei.* The woman lays a small album on the table. Like most grandparents, I know those albums, know they're all variations of "Grandma's Brag Book." I want to keep at my Italian, but to ignore her book would be *maleducato.*

"Are those your grandchildren?" I ask.

From the first page, a chubby toddler on a beach stares at me.

"That's Katie," the woman says.

Those two are the last sane words she'll speak. She shows me a young soldier: "Kosovo," she says. "They think they're going to get us, but you know what? Something's rising. There are no answers." She smiles, and I feel that everything — my Italian text, my latte, my very body — dissolve into quicksilver, become unstable.

The woman turns another page: the toddler again. This time in a plush hat with rabbit ears pointing like purple plush antennae. "She was born with seven seals around her head, but now she only has five. What can you do? That's the way it's written. And you can't fight what's written, can you?" The woman's voice is normal. Her speech pattern too. Anyone looking at us would think we are having a civil conversation, a normal civil conversation.

The woman closes her book and smiles: “You know, they say the Aryans are in all in the north, but I say fuck ‘em. What do they know? Blessing and honor? For what? There is no blessing and honor.”

Phrases bespeaking an apocalyptic vision careen against perfectly reasonable ones. She asks me my name.

I lie. I never lie, but to this woman, I give a lie. I didn’t want to share any part of myself with her. “Mary,” I tell her and as soon as I say it, I sense a trap closing.

Every time she invokes my artificial name, I give an artificial response, and share more deeply in her lunatic conspiracy. When she says, “I think we all have to listen to what they’re saying, but not every woman who holds a cup is a whore. What do you think, Mary?” I have to think who is Mary? And then remember “Mary” is me. As though I can propitiate whatever haunts her, I shave of parts of myself and hand them over them to her. I am sitting in Starbucks, with my Italian text, my latte and my skates, and becoming something other than myself.

Her blue eyes look out on an alternate universe, one I’ve always felt lurking under the surface of civility. I sensed it in the picture of my daughter-in-law’s grandfather, a handsome man in a Marine uniform who came home from World War II, married, had three children and killed himself. I saw it in the house of my mother’s brother, where he lived in a warren of waist-high trash with paths turning on themselves, leading nowhere. The day I sit with the woman, I am in my sixth decade: I have looked over the precipice and seen the litter of false dreams, the ruin of empty expectations scattered below. I know what it was to slather on accomplishments and call them meaningful as if each of us weren’t but a single breath in the life of time.

I remember telling Sally, who specialized in psychiatric nursing, that insanity is seductive. The bubble of disassociation that had encased me when I had my breakdown the year

I lived with the Greenspans, separated me from normal life, but it also protected me from it. I could gaze out at the workaday world's toilers and pity them ─ so much effort for what? It felt better to rest, cocooned in a landscape where even words had lost their meaning. Where nothing mattered.

The woman appears so reasonable. Had she been sane, I wonder, when she matched her turtleneck with her sweater, got to Starbucks, and placed her order? What had transpired between paying for her coffee and sitting down across from me? What gave way in her mind so she fell through the scrim separating the rational world from an alternate reality?

"You know, Mary," she says, "there are many voices, but we mustn't be deceived. Who knows which one is right? We all must choose."

I gather my things and tell her I have to go. On her right wrist she wears three little plastic bracelets. She slips one off and hands it to me. The silly little, glittery thing, has no value whatsoever, aside from its own prettiness or ugliness, depending who is doing the ascribing. I thank her and head for the rink. I want to work up a sweat and to purge her from my pores.

On the ice, I practice my inside three-turns, concentrating on sensing the rock of my blades, rising up on my knees, changing directions. Over and over I practice, and when I look up from studying my tracings on the ice Bill is watching me. His expression says that the news about his knee is not good.

When we get home, the totems of our separate realities ― my skates, his crutches ― are side-by-side in the trunk, and the woman in Starbucks seems too much of a burden to hand to him.

Later that night, when I undress, he already is asleep, wandering in a realm that is unknowable by me, one wholly his. And whether it's one that's soothing or seething he's there

utterly apart from myself. Not five feet away, he has left me alone. I take off the woman's bracelet, a Kewpie doll trinket that could have revealed the fashion wit of a savvy mind or the skewed taste of the woman's untethered one. Its baubles signify neither the wealth nor the timelessness of real jewels. Large, dull pink beads separate clusters of smaller bright ones — a rosary strung in a madhouse. In place of a cross, a cartoon flower dangles. As if it is the key to the woman's mind I count the petals . . . *uno, due*. But the garish and tawdry flower tells me nothing.

But the bracelet is real. Oh, so very, very real. I lay it beside beside a tiny bronze mouse Sally gave me one rainy day forty years earlier when I and Kurt had spent the afternoon with her and her kids at her home in Maryland. But I touch neither the bronze mouse nor the bracelet: their power would scorch my finger. "Remember me. Remember this day," they say to me. And I do. And I will.

# # #

Bill and I do manage to get to Venice. He has his operation and then, a few months afterwards, we spend a whole week strolling along canals and riding to Murano and Marano. It is our third visit to that astonishing city, but it could have been our twenty-third and we still wouldn't have plumped all the treasures Venice holds. Every backwater piazza or tucked-away trattoria presents a new delight, and we experience them as when we were newlyweds and had wandered the alleyways of Baltimore. Always something to see. Something to share. Just the two of us, alone and together at last.

But we are living like passengers on the Titanic's first-class deck who didn't let evening gowns and tuxedoes deter them from having a jolly good snowball fight with the ice shaved from

the murderous berg. One evening, strolling under the porticoes lining the Piazza San Marco, Bill and I become separated, and then, from behind a column I spot a spiral of faint, blue smoke: a cigarette.

Despite licking laryngeal cancer six years earlier, despite knowing the risks, despite telling me he wasn't, Bill had continued to smoke. Because he was Bill, my anchor, and I needed to trust him, I believed him when he told me he was just indulging himself while we were on vacation, that his smoking under the portico of San Marco was a "one-time" thing.

I'll never know if it was that cigarette, or one of the others he had when he drove to Anne Arundel Community College, where he taught after retiring from the Baltimore City Public Schools, or when he went for a walk up the old millrace at the end of our yard, or when he stayed home on Sunday mornings while I went to church. I'll never know if it was one cigarette or the cumulative effect of all of them that sent us sliding into the sea.

Two years after our trip to Venice, Bill's back starts to hurt. It is early spring and I've just had a book about Baltimore's Lexington Market published, but he can't help me lug cartons full of the newly printed copies to a promotion arranged by the market. Then he develops a cough. And begins spitting up phlegm. He is cold all the time and watches TV draped in a shawl my mother had knitted.

But we still cling to our routine: going to the rink early every Saturday and then out for breakfast and then grocery shopping. Until came the April Saturday I got into the car after my session and Bill says, "I think I'd rather just go home." And the next Saturday when he can't get out of bed.

May 10, 2007. Bill really feeling bad. He can't eat. Today skated & Cleaned bedroom. Bill went for CAT scan.

A week later, Mother's Day, he is wandering from room to room, raising his arms over his head to rest them atop doorframes in a misdirected effort to ease the pressure on his chest and breathe. Matt is coming down to see us, but at one o'clock I tack a note onto the door telling him to meet us at the hospital. The x-rays and CAT scan our internist had ordered earlier had showed growths on Bill's right lung and liver, but the definitive test would be a biopsy and Bill's condition is too unstable for that. His lungs keep filling with fluid, which is then drained, only to return. He's in the hospital for nearly two weeks, and I spend all day, every day with him. At one point, when I am getting especially impatient about the lack of a biopsy, the hospital's social worker takes me aside and tells me about various support services available for cancer patients and their families.

"This, this is the best," she says. And hands me a brochure about a place called Hopewell, a center dedicated to supporting cancer patients and their caregivers. At first I balk ─ Bill and I don't need any help. We would cope. We would be just fine.

And when the final, fatal diagnosis comes, we are fine. But only because we don't quite believe it. Bill is only sixty-nine years old. He has so much more he wanted to do. We both do. We assumed we'd do them together just as we'd assumed we'd be together until the end of days. Plus, aside the oxygen tank he has to lug around, he looks so good.

When he comes home from the hospital I am determined not to let that tank stop us from doing whatever he is able. So, two days after he's home we buy geraniums at Lowes and he sits on our front stoop and watches while I plant them along the five-foot walk from our front door to the curb. And we go out for pancakes at a diner where no one blinks at a man maneuvering an oxygen tank. And on Saturday mornings he sits on a paint-pocked bench in Northwest while I do patch.

And, then, one afternoon I showed him the brochure for Hopewell. "Wouldn't hurt to check it out," he says. He is off the oxygen by then and responding very well to the chemo and looks so good it's hard to believe he's mortally sick. It is the end of summer, a wonderful, mellow time of year in Maryland, and we are both feeling a profound tenderness toward each other and a sense of living in time suspended from linear progression. But still ─ "It wouldn't hurt to check it out."

Hopewell is situated in a rambling former farmhouse not far from a cluster of shops and office buildings built on the site of the ice cream stand where, on summer evenings, we once had taken our boys for a treat and a ride on the ponies that bored teenagers had led around the little track behind the stand. All those memories come flooding back as I wait on a cushy couch in the cool white room that once must have been the farmhouse's parlor. I've come to meet with a social worker ─ there was no just walking into Hopewell and demanding someone help me, no having someone recognize my extraordinary circumstances, no getting anyone to understand that my husband was dying, *My* husband, *MY* husband, DO YOU UNDERSTAND? ─ there is none of that.

What there is are forms to fill out, and more forms to take home. And a suggestion that Bill and I probably would be best served by the Thursday night meetings conducted separately for patients and their caregivers. As it's explained to me, "there is a rhythm to these things." What there is, in the end, is a lifeline that lasts almost until life's end.

# # #

"You're a good looking woman."

I'm seated in a semicircle at Hopewell's regular Thursday night sessions where caregivers and patients meet separately. And I have just told the group how scared I am of facing life alone.

"Maybe you won't," a man seated with his back to the windows says.

"Yes, I will. Bill's dying . . . we know that. I'm only sixty-four. I'm going to be alone for a long time."

"I didn't meant that. You're a good looking woman . . . maybe you'll find someone."

His remark strikes like slap across my face and my head jerks toward his wife who shrugs and shoots me a look as if to say He's a fool . . . what can I tell you? And maybe her husband is a fool. Or maybe just a little nuts ─ his daughter, a physician, is dying. Cancer has flipped his world upside down; he's to be forgiven for losing perspective.

"Oh no, I'll be alone," I tell him, "I know what I went through to find Bill. No one gets that lucky twice. We're like eleven years olds when we're together. We just have fun."

"You mean like twelve year olds," the man says, "so there's sex." In the semicircle the other people stir, and the social worker suggests we "move on to someone else."

And so I don't get a chance to respond that I meant what I had said: Bill and I enjoyed each other the most when we were like eleven-year-olds: independent yet trusting; innocent, but eager for what would come next.

# # #

Eleven was my age the afternoon Uncle Leo brought me my cousin Carolyn's cast-off skates, and when a boy climbed out back steps and asked my mother if "Patricia could come out and play."

I didn't know Steve Soltis, and I don't know how he figured out where I lived, but he must have been lonely. In those days Bridgeport was in the midst of a building boom, and Steve had moved into one of the new chock-a-block Cape Cod-style houses a half a mile from ours.

Children played together outside all the time in the 50's, so there wasn't anything unusual about Steve and me wandering around northeast Bridgeport. Mostly we played in a large marshy field crosshatched by little streams across from the HyWay Theater. Our games involved a lot of jumping from bank to bank and throwing rocks into the water. And when we tired of that there always listening for the echoes of the shouts we hollered into the concrete culvert channeling the stream under Boston Avenue.

We also explored any half-constructed house — we never considered this trespassing — and pounded their wooden boards until their knotholes fell out. The worth of these useless little wooden disks stemmed from our having discovered them, in our getting them for nothing, and in our leaving our mark by their absence. Our way of letting the builders know we'd been there.

One afternoon as I was drying the lunch dishes my mother was washing she mentioned she'd been talking to a friend of hers who said that she'd be worried about having her daughter running around in the fields with some boy. "She said that you and Steve might do things that you shouldn't. But I told her it wasn't like that. I told her you and Steve just play. That's what you do, isn't it, Patsy? Just play?"

Somehow I knew my mother was referring to a trespass having nothing to do with houses and knotholes.

"That's all, Mom. We just play." And, in fact, that's all Steve and I ever did do that year when we were in the sixth grade. By the seventh, Steve joined a basketball team, and I developed a terrible crush on a boy named Jimmy Flynn, and Steve and I rarely spoke.

Bill and I were at our best when we took a respite from life and entered the realm of playfulness. Hunting in antique shops for dancing Santa figurines for the Christmastime mantles of our new one. Going out for soft ice cream on Saturday nights. In our marriage, sex was the cherry on top. The sweetest part of triple-scoop love.

Even going for his chemo treatments, in the early stages, is fun. We sit side-by-side and read, and then, since he has almost no side effects, we go to lunch in the hospital's cafeteria, which serves delicious hamburgers. The same is true of our Thursday-night sessions at Hopewell. Especially in the early stages during that summer and fall, when we go to dinner beforehand at an old inn once frequented by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Harry Truman and Clark Gable. And sometimes our son Matt joining us, our dinners, our talk leisurely and fortifying us for what lay ahead.

But as winter sets in and the chemo is buying fewer months, even Hopewell, where the sessions had been so supportive, becomes less effective, and it is time to put aside childish things.

One frigid night, as we pull out of Hopewell's drive, the sky was crazy with stars. And again the astral vastness overwhelmed me as it had nine years earlier in Vermont when I stumbled out of a poetry reading and searched the heavens for Sally.

"How will I ever find you?" I wail to Bill. "When I go, how will I ever know which star is yours?"

"I'll be right behind the door," he says, "right behind the door." My guy . . . "right behind the door." My God, what courage.

# # #

As they travel down Cancer Road Cancer patients and their caregivers, encounter platitudinous markers meant as guideposts. "Having cancer doesn't mean cancer has you"; "A positive attitude is half the battle"; and this one, meant for the caregivers: "Be sure to take care of yourself. Otherwise you won't be strong when your loved one needs you."

With winter's onset, Bill and I enter a season of lasts: Last Christmas, Last New Year, Last Birthday ─ Bill's seventieth ─ last Valentine Day. By late February a ratchet of anxiety drives me to grasp at anything, even a useless platitude. So under a sky about to split from snow I drive to the rink for an hour of skating and then downtown, for lunch at a women's club I belong to. Before I finish dessert, heavy wet flakes, the sort that turn roads into luge-runs, begins falling. I'm gripping my wheel and stopped at a red light when a fire truck pulls up behind me, its siren blaring. With nowhere to go so the engine can get by I maneuver my front end onto the curb, then as the truck's taillights fade into the snow I pray my tire stays on its rim as I back down to street-level. It does, but fate has a different surprise for me: about a mile from home, a tree dumps a huge wet wad of white onto my windshield. The few seconds of compete blindness my wipers need to swish it away telescopes into an eternity, and I'm so panicked I don't have to presence of mind to simply stop. I can't stop: home and Bill are just a mile away. But I have hours to go.

Our house is on the crest of a short but steep hill. Halfway up my tires begin squealing for purchase ─ I'm stuck dead in the middle of the road.

"Come sit with me," Bill says when I slam into our house. A pile of photo albums lays beside him on the couch. "This is the perfect thing, on a snowy day to look at these old pictures."

"I can't sit with you . . . I'm stuck. I can't get up the Goddamn hill." I grab a shovel and slam out again.

At first I try clearing two narrow paths for my front tires, but they grip only as far as I clear and I have twenty more feet before the ground levels off. Then I started filling my shovel with sand from the yellow box the city puts at our corner every winter for situations like mine. Our car has rear wheel drive, so I try flipping the sand beneath the undercarriage, only my shovel is too wide, and I can't flip it without spilling the sand everywhere but near my rear tires.

"You need to get out of my way." A neighbor with a four-wheel-drive SUV has pulled out onto the crest of the hill. "I have to get to work and you're blocking me." Rage at her callousness burns like a hot coal. Doesn't she know that Bill and I are losing traction on Cancer Road? Doesn't she understand that this was supposed to be my fucking day "to take care of myself?" Doesn't she see how hard it is for me to restrain myself from hitting her in the neck with my shovel?

I go for two more shovelfuls of sand before I resume clearing paths for my front tires, all the time my neighbor with the headlights her four-wheel-drive glaring down at me while she chides me for "going about it all wrong."

In the end, two other neighbors push from behind while I gun the engine, and the car shoots forward, narrowly missing the SUV.

But even when my car is safely parked I can't sit beside Bill on the couch and look at pictures. I have to shovel a path across our patio to the trash cans so I can set them out for the

trash men in the morning, and when I ask Bill if he can handle clearing the five-foot walk from our front door to the curb, he answers "Maybe."

Two hours later, after I've made dinner and we are watching "Jeopardy" like we do every night, the doorbell rings. A man with a shovel stands before me. To clear five feet I pay him twenty dollars. He dumps the snow on the flowerbed where, in June, I had planted geraniums while Bill sat on the brick stoop and told me how to squeeze the plastic pots so I could pull out the plants without breaking their roots ─ another last.

From time to time during that season of lasts my cousin Howard calls.

"I wish cancer were a person, so I could just slap it," I tell him. His first wife, Ellie, had died of colon cancer, and Howard knows what I am just discovering: that cancer is implacable, relentless, wily. That, as the fight gets harder, the prize gets smaller: another month, another week, another day.

"She was doing laundry," he tells me. "Two days before she died, she still was putting things in the washer." Ellie had been dead more than fifteen years when Howard told me how she spent her next-to-last day of life, but his voice still carried a note of wonder: How had she spent precious, time, on such a mundane task?

But now I think why not? The bucket list is a romanticized, Hollywood version of what a "last" should be. Skydiving, whale watching, visiting Machu Picchu are Technicolor fantasies that in actuality can be heart-breaking reminders of the selves we wished we'd been, maybe would have been, if we hadn't been the self we are. Better to find comfort in the sweet familiar: a washer's slosh, a game show's jingle, a blue bag holding silver blades on a Saturday morning.

As the winter wears on our routine of those mornings assumes the consoling rhythm of ritual: first the rink, then breakfast, then the grocery store. Bill never without his oxygen tank,

by then, but, still, the two of us finding comfort in the predictability of routine. Our way home takes us alongside Druid Hill Park, the site of The Baltimore Zoo. At an intersection I used to cross every day when I worked at the University of Maryland, we pull up to a stoplight. And our memories, like our lines of sight triangulate off it.

"This is where it all began," Bill says, in six words holding the truth of our union. Our first date, the zoo, the silliness of the penguins, my slipping on the little hill, Bill taking my hand . . . the electric shock we'd felt that this is IT. For four decades the unassailable simplicity of that most ordinary event had bound us. As if we'd been charged with protecting something extraordinarily precious. Something that existed outside of our selves, but which enhanced us each as we grew accustomed to the responsibility of protecting it. That IT, a gift, almost like grace, that neither of us had earned, but which had warmed and comforted us for four decades. And then the light turned green and we continued down Cancer Road.

"Don't let them see you cry. It will only make them feel bad," is another piece of platitudinous nonsense caregivers get. For me it meant living with rigor-like smiles and cartoon cheeriness. But, then, at the end of one Saturday session, someone slips into the DVD player Frances Black's "All the Lies That You Told Me," a song about loving and lying and I think of how Bill had vowed "from this day forward," and how that is going up in the smoke of thousands of cigarettes. And my brittle, cheerful façade cracks. Sobbing, I huddle on the bleachers out of Bill's sight until I can wipe my eyes, slap my smile back on and go to him. But the truth is I want him to see me cry. I want him to comfort me. I want him to just stop dying. Just fucking stop it!

Wed. Mar. 19, 2008. Today I skated & we went out to lunch at Petite Louis. Going to Petite Louis, s popular eatery in an old-money Baltimore neighborhood is Bill's idea. I skate at a

public session, and, then, when I get off the ice, he says he wants to go to lunch. I almost tell him no. I'm not dressed for Petite Louis — my shirt was frayed and my jacket spotted. But some guiding spirit presses its finger against my lips, and I say "Okay."

I remember everything: that Petite Louis was noisy. And that the woman next to us had paired a seed pearl necklace with bib overalls. And that afterwards Bill and I went to a toy store to buy a birthday present for our grandson Tommy. And that Bill couldn't get out of the car.

And that somehow, the next day, he manages to get himself to the grocery to buy my favorite Easter candy . . . yellow Peeps. And that the day after that, when he's getting ready to go to Tommy's party, he can't get into his coat. So we go to the hospital. But it is Good Friday, and the oncology unit is closed. And we have to wait in the regular emergency area. And that as we sit there Bill and I finally drop our cheerful facades and speak of things that need saying. That is, we talk in drifting non-sequesters floating on connubial subtext: the lousy weather; the gauge on Bill's oxygen tank; the unexpectedness of the oncology unit being closed; the long wait in the emergency room; the comparative comfort of the chairs in the oncology unit versus those we're sitting on. And then I say that we hadn't discussed what Bill wanted for the last ministries to his body. And he says the one word that says everything. He says "Cremated."

Early in April, he has surgery to correct the accumulation of fluid in his lungs, but it's only a stop-gap measure. He continues deteriorating. The first Friday in May the minister from the little Presbyterian Church in the center of our village comes to our house. It is late afternoon and the three of us sit on our patio.

"So, Bill, what do you think is happening?" she asks.

"I think I'm going home," he says and then shoots me a look daring me to contradict him. And then he chooses the hymns he wants for his memorial service, including one titled "Going

Home," a recurring refrain throughout Dvorak's "New World Symphony," as well as "Let the Lower Lights Keep Burning," a Salvation Army Hymn. And then our two boys come and we have dinner. That weekend Anne and Bill Barnes travel down from Pittsburg and visit with us and after they leave on Sunday, the supervising hospice nurse comes. On Monday I sweep the floor and find the slide he'd taken of Kurt and myself walking up a street in Charles Village so many years before. Then, another hospice nurse comes. And on Tuesday the hospice social worker, who recommends that Bill be transported to the facility. I call both boys and they join me at his bedside. Four of us in a little room. Then three.

May 6, 2008. "Bill died at 11:55 p.m." The nurse actually asks us which day we wants on the death certificate since it was nearly midnight . . . my guy, he never could stand being late. His death certificate reads May 7. The next weekend, Anne and Bill Barnes come back to Baltimore so Bill Barnes can deliver a eulogy, and my Bill's nieces and nephews are there, many of them the children of his brother Jim, up from North and South Carolina. The memorial service in the little Presbyterian church in the center of our village is on a Sunday afternoon and well-attended. But not as well as it might have been if it had been on another Sunday in May. On any other Sunday in May that wasn't Mother's Day.

# # #

I used to joke that the inner workings of the College of Cardinals would be easier to divine than how Northwest Ice Rink was managed. I skated there thirty years without ever understanding exactly how the rickety old place operated, but that isn't to say I didn't know how it was controlled. We all knew that answer: Jackie Eliasberg. The rink was a nonprofit entity and

Jackie was Chairman of the Board. Jackie was Queen of the Rink. Highness of Ice. But none of us regulars ever understood why.

The Eliasbergs were known to be wealthy — Jackie and her husband Lou would pull up to the rink in matching gold-colored Chrysler convertibles — surely there were causes other than Northwest Ice Rink that would have benefited from Jackie's devotion. And devoted she was, every Tuesday evening, every Saturday morning at seven, even when her knees grew so bad, she had to grasp the railing to pull herself up the three concrete steps before unlocking the door, there she'd be, her hair perfectly coifed, her body draped in a velour track suit. Such devotion. Such control.

From time to time someone would propose maybe having higher level classes. Or setting aside more time for competitive skaters — after all, Olympic gold medalist Dorothy Hamill and World Champion Kimmie Meisner lived nearby. But Jackie always said No.

"I want this to be a family place," she once told me. "A place where families can come and skate together. And have fun. That's what I want." But families are collective. And skating is highly individual. And sooner or later, someone in a family falls. Or outstrips the others. And feelings get hurt. But that didn't matter to Jackie. Year after year the rink was run as her private fiefdom, subject to her idealized notions of family.

May 24, 2008

Dear Bill,

I went skating, and I was late, so I'll have to learn how to set this damned alarm clock. But skating was surprisingly good . . . The evenings are very bad. I don't feel that I know who I am. The silence is so penetrating. It's not even silence. It's the sound of a vacuum, an absence, the sound of anxiety.

The death of husband or wife is more than the death of a spouse. Gone, too, is the life lived with that spouse. The fixed rhythms and set-pattern of every day's passing, the unspoken

regularities of entwined lives, the silent affirmations of assumptions — all are gone. Circling through the hours the survivor's hand may reach out, but her fingertips will touch nothing. And that nothing will be more real than anything.

Disentangling my individual life from the one I shared with Bill is a process I doubt will ever be over, but in the beginning, like Joe whose wife Betsy has just died, I could not even imagine that such a process was possible. Like a robot programmed forty years earlier, I filled my days with whatever I had filled them with when Bill was alive. Same bed time. Same dinner time. Same grocery lists. Same shopping. Same skating at Saturday morning patch sessions.

The patch sessions themselves, having as their whole purpose to impress a figure's pattern into my muscles' memory were reassuring — *Right foot in front, right hand extended. Push.* Round and round I'd go, not knowing if skating less than a month after my husband died was appropriately widow-like. Or who would take care of me if I fell. Or if I would even bother to get up.

And the patch sessions weren't the only skating I did that summer. Under Jackie, the programs and policies of Northwest Ice Rink never changed. The place had two schedules: one for the school-year; one for the summer, neither of which ever varied from one year to the next.

Wednesday evenings in the summer were always for an edge/show class, which consisted of stretching our muscles at the barrier, and then a period devoted to practicing our edges in increasingly complex patterns followed by a "Play" period when we were supposed to skate to a particular rhythm, sometimes with paper streamers fluttering from our hands. These "play" periods were coached by Eileen, and as the years went on, they became more slapdash, with Eileen smiling indulgently from the barrier as we skated by with our streamers, and Jackie in the office, glaring with dissatisfaction

The real challenge came in the earlier period, when we did our edges. No amount of flutter can hide poor execution then. Most of the pros at Northwest knew me, knew my limits, and knew that Bill had died. But that summer someone new, someone not Eileen, teaches the regular Wednesday class. Compact and blonde, this instructor is a powerful skater and an impatient teacher. By the second or third week, she is starting the better skaters up the rink in a new pattern before I was halfway down in the previous one.

One Wednesday, nothing seems to work. I can't even execute the first move George had taught me so many years earlier, the right outside edge. Right arm, right foot in front, I'd push with my left blade, but its toepick would catch.

"Something's wrong," I whine to the new coach.

. Like a farrier examining a horse's hoof, she grabs my foot and looks at my blade.

"Nope," she says, "everything's fine. You're just doing it wrong."

But later, when the session is over, and I'm drying my blades, my stomach turns in alarm: both screws holding my left blade to the heel of its boot are missing. Both. No wonder my toe pick has been catching. Every time I pushed, a gap formed between my blade and my boot's heel, forcing the blade to angle downward toward the toe pick. And a toepick catching the ice unexpectedly can snap a skater backwards, can land her on her head. I know, I have stitches to prove it.

I feel as if fate has sabotaged me. Or maybe is trying to warn me — time to hang up my skates. Time to stop trying to comfort myself in old rhythms that have lost their vitalizing beat. Time to find a new direction.

But I don' stop. Throughout the summer, week after week, every Saturday and Wednesday, I'm back at the old dilapidated rink.

Tue. Aug. 19, 2008

Dear Bill,

I think I'm losing my mind . . . Please help me. Everyone seems to be moving on with their lives and they're so busy. They're going to close the rink. I don't know what to do.

By the middle of August Jackie simply can't hoist herself up the steps anymore, and she is growing increasingly irritable and distracted. One evening she calls me into her office: she wants to say good-bye to all the regular "stakeholders." She has to read from a prepared script, while her daughter stands at her side and coaxes her.

I have no memory of driving home from the old place for the last time. Maybe there was no "last time." Maybe, I simply didn't go again, but always thought I would.

Nor can I say how long my skates sat in my coat closet, next to my uncle's sword and my grandfather's bayonet, before I took them out and began driving clear across Baltimore to the rink shimmed into the edge of a golf course. Back at Northwest, I began and ended my sessions with forward stroking. But when I start at the new place, even the fundamental of forward stroking has deserted my muscle memory. The proprioceptive nerves that detect the movement of muscles and joints operate at the subconscious level, but my subconscious is entombed in my consciousness of loss. Having no sense of who I am, I have no sense of where I am. Mind and body are in free fall.

But I keep going back. Sometimes to the midday public sessions. Sometimes to the early morning free style ones, where I'd see the young skaters materialize out of the mist. And so things go all the long, dreary winter and into March, when I crash.

I am lacing up my skates at the new place when a beautiful melodic ballad floods the lobby, and washes me in the heartbreak of Anne Murray's "You Needed Me," a song creating a

perfect confluence of sentiment and sorrow. Suddenly the deke I'd built to constrain my grief cracks and I'm overwhelmed by sobbing that I try to hide behind a curtain of hair.

Back then I only know Joe as a "volunteer" and, Bubba, the manager, only in passing since this rink isn't Northwest where people had seen Bill carrying my skate bag on Saturday mornings and seen his oxygen tank and then, his obituary. Shielded behind my curtain of hair, I hear Joe and Bubba murmuring, but they can't think of what to do with an old woman in a yellow jacket who apparently has lost her mind with one skate on and one skate off. Then I hear someone pass me and go out onto the ice. A few minutes later, someone plops down beside me on the bench, hugs me and rocks me back and forth . . . Peggy.

"I know . . . I know, Pat. Oh, Pat, I know." And, of course, Peggy knows. Better than anyone, she knows.

A year and a half before Bill died Peggy's daughter Marty had been killed in an automobile crash in Austria. Peggy, who skates like an angel, knows the hell of loss, so she hugs and rocks me until my sobbing stops. And then she pulls away. And I dry my tears. And finish putting on my boots. And get out on the ice.

"Give me your hand, Pat." Peggy says in her mother-of-five voice. No nonsense. No quibbling. No escape. "Give me your hand."

So I give Peggy my hand.

"You're skating all hunched over. I've been watching you. And you're all hunched over, Pat/"

I want to tell her "Of course I'm hunched over. Life's just sucker-punched me." But Peggy had been hit in the gut by loss, too, and she isn't hunched over.

"Straighten up," she says. "Straighten up. Don't look down. Look ahead. Lift your chin. Tuck in your hips. Center your head. Now begin on your right foot. I'll be with you. "

And she *is* with me. Around and around the rink we go. Two old women, broken to the bone. Bending our knees, straightening our backs. Solid in our boots, holding our edges, keeping our heads high. The two of us going round and round. In a display of spectacular *sprezzatura.* And amazing grace. Two old women balanced on silver blades.