





[ FICTION ]

*Kathleen Hennessy is a transcendent child amid the*

*emotional din of America's underclass in this excerpt from*

*the author's upcoming novel, The Rise of Life on Earth.*

# *The* **FACE** *of* **INJURY**

**P**eople made false estimates of her—how was she to blame? Rarely did she lie. She was too proud to lie. Nor even to compose her face in an artful manner to deceive.

For instance, when she was first admitted to Children's Hospital the nurses marveled that she was only 11 years old. In her hearing one of them exclaimed, "Oh I can't believe it—*her?—that one?*"

Kathleen Hennessy with her pie-shaped face, pie-shaped maturing breasts, her pale plump soft seemingly textureless flesh like that of a mollusk pried from its shell . . . and her recessed eyes that were darkly bright and alert, though betraying no expression; her delicate complexion riddled with tiny

pimples like buckshot. There was something unsettlingly adult in her stoic resistance to pain and such extremes of discomfort and physical humiliation as she was obliged to bear at the hands of the hospital staff, and something precocious about her small, pert, moist, pink rosebud of a mouth, a miniature mouth.

Her hair was gone as if it had never been. Frizzed matted hair of the hue of woodshavings and with that degree of languid curl. They'd had to cut it off in clumps, in the emergency room, then shave her skull, to treat her for head injuries. They'd perhaps have shaved her hair off in any case to rid her of lice.

When near the end of Kathleen's hospitalization she began to smile at

## BY JOYCE CAROL OATES

certain of the nurses, the nice nurses, the ones who were kind to her, it was remarked how her entire face and even, in a way, her quivering-soft body seemed to shift with an expression of . . . radiant hope. Yes, something like that. But of course Kathleen Hennessy did not smile often.

Kathleen had been brought by ambulance to Children's Hospital, Detroit, Michigan, early in the morning of April 6, 1961, with a head concussion, broken ribs, a broken finger, a blackened eye, and numerous bleeding wounds and bruises on her head and face, torso, legs from a severe beating her drunken father had given her after the disappearance of her mother from the family's current place of residence in the Motor City Inn on lower Dequindre Street. Mr. Hennessy had beaten both Kathleen and her six-year-old sister Nola in what was described as a "rampage"; Nola never regained consciousness, dying in the ambulance en route to the hospital. That her little sister had *died*, was thus *dead*, that Mr. Hennessy had been arrested and locked away in a maximum security detention center, charged with murder, aggravated assault, and resisting arrest, no one explicitly informed Kathleen. Yet even in her entranced, blank-eyed state she seemed to know these facts. And the fact too, as it would be borne out by time, that her mother would never reappear to claim her.

**Y**et the miracle was, a small miracle it was but remarked upon, how, by degrees, slowly at first then with visible acceleration, this battered child came to bloom in Children's Hospital, even in the crowded public-welfare ward of 16 beds and continuous commotion. Even in the face of her injuries, the insult of the shaved head and nowhere to hide: very like one of those plumped-out hydrangea blossoms on the potted plants the nurses sometimes brought her, not gifts exactly, but borne with the smiles of gift-giving, plunder of an innocent sort retrieved from the rooms of patients who had died—for it was a fact of life in Children's Hospital that family members, stricken with grief and numbed with shock, had little interest in taking home the melancholy accumulations of flowers, candy, stuffed toys, books and the like brought to such patients.

"Here, Kathleen—something nice for *you*," the nurses would call out, "—just for *you*." For Kathleen Hennessy had no visitors except now and then someone from the social welfare agency, thus no gifts. Yet she was so uncomplaining; so docile, so seemingly sweet-natured. If only all their patients were like Kathleen Hennessy!—so

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the nurses concurred. Repeated blood samples, two spinal taps, brain scans, IV fluids dripping into her veins, even for a time a catheter—Kathleen bore such procedures with an adult fortitude that few adults in fact possess. For even the most excruciating pain, from the spinal tap needle for instance, evoked in her a palpable resistance to the expression of pain, not screams and struggle but subterranean shudders pulsing through her, a slick clammy sweat breaking on her body, her eyes rolling up in her head as "*Oh—*" she whispered, the very expulsion of sound muffled, muted, apologetic, "*—oh oh oh—*" It was as if whatever her father had done to her had left the girl so permanently entranced, little else might draw out her fullest response.

Certain of the nurses vied with one another in their little acts of kindness to her. A nurse named Betty Lou and a nurse named Hazel, both older women, mothers, their children long grown and departed. They loved to make Kathleen Hennessy smile—that sudden, startled, almost-pretty smile roused out of the rather slack, sallow face. That faint embarrassed murmur, ". . . oh thank you," barely audible, out of the miniature mouth. But you could see in her eyes how much it meant to her: a pilloined box of chocolates, a stuffed panda with a synthetic glare to its fur, unused coloring books, a pot of hydrangeas with big blue blossoms that looked dyed but were genuine.

Much of the time, however, Kathleen Hennessy was wordless and preoccupied; perhaps not preoccupied but dreamy, inert, blank, her left thumb loosely stuck in the corner of her mouth, damp with spittle. She was not waiting for anyone to come to claim her, she showed no sign of wishing to leave the hospital, or of anticipating her discharge. Now the staff knew she was only 11 years old and not 15 or 16 they attributed her passivity to her age. She ignored or did not in fact hear conversations at other beds in her ward; rarely did she acknowledge remarks made to her except by nurses, interns, residents she'd come to know. In the day room she did not watch television so much as gaze toward it, her eyes' surface attracted by that motile surface, otherwise unengaged. Regaining her strength, by visible degrees, she began to eat with more appetite, her jaws slowly grinding, insect duty and rapacity it sometimes seemed, her small dark recessed eyes gleaming and her entire body involved in the act of swallowing so Betty Lou or Hazel might be moved to say, "—That's a good girl, Kathleen," stooping over her, smiling, motherly, "—what a *good girl*."

It was known on the ward that Kathleen Hennessy's father had beaten her and that he had killed her younger sister. It was not known why.

The whereabouts of Kathleen's mother—or if in fact there was a mother—no one quite knew.

The nurses were incensed. "Isn't she sad!—tragic!—do you suppose she'll ever talk?"

And, "Isn't she brave—do you suppose she remembers?"

And, most vehemently, "God love her, what a *saint!* So young!"

At the end of her 26-day stay in Children's Hospital Kathleen was to be discharged to Wayne County Children's Welfare Center, no mother having turned up, no relatives, and Mr. Hennessy in jail unable to post bond, and as she was preparing to leave her nurse friends hugged her goodbye one by one, and she made an effort to hug them in return, clumsily, shyly, not accustomed to such extravagances of affection, her face flushed and her eyes damp with tears, there was Hazel so yeasty smelling giving her a wet kiss on the cheek, there was Betty Lou, stocky, big-breasted, an older image of Kathleen Hennessy herself, Betty Lou with the light eyes in the red-ruddy face was one who had often brought Kathleen any number of surprises and treats and now at their farewell this woman pressed into Kathleen's hand a mysterious object the girl took at first to be a necklace of crystal beads, or were they actual jewels: their octahedron shapes, their precisely cut glittering facets, so lovely and so unexpected! And there was a tiny silvery cross at one end with a tiny silvery figure meant to be a man's, near-naked, the man's arms and legs outstretched so Kathleen stared and stared, and Betty Lou whose scent was of germicide-detergent solution and talcum powder hugged Kathleen with especial vehemence and said, fierce in her ear, "This is a rosary. Kathleen—you'll find out what it's for." ■

"The Face of Injury" copyright ©1991, Ontario Review. Joyce Carol Oates's short novel, *The Rise of Life on Earth*, from which this story was excerpted, will be published by New Directions in May 1991.

DAVID GROVE, who created the illustration for this story, is a freelance illustrator based in San Francisco. He is a 1962 graduate of the College of Visual and Performing Arts. Grove has earned commissions from clients all over the world, including advertising, film, corporate, and publishing clients. His work has been exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, and Tokyo.

# JOYCE CAROL OATES

The story of Kathleen Hennessy, a battered child who grows into a woman of the Detroit underclass, is not an unusual tale for Joyce Carol Oates. The female as victim is a familiar theme. As critics often point out, her work is full of tension, despair, violence, and dark vision, often intensely disturbing to read. Oates has called it "nitty-gritty realism."

"I tend to see the arena of tragedy as the testing ground of strength," she has said. "People going through hardships discover strengths in themselves they never knew they had. You certainly aren't made strong by life's comedies."

Joyce Carol Oates is one of the most widely discussed writers of her generation. When Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev visited the United States last year, Oates was one of 50 artists and intellectuals invited to meet with them at the Soviet embassy. She has been honored with awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and the Lotus Club, and is the winner of a National Book Award. She has won the O. Henry Prize so many times that a special award was created for her continuing achievements.

Her output is staggering. She has written nearly two dozen novels (several under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith) and many volumes of short stories, poems, essays, and drama. She frequently reviews books for the *New York Times* and writes on a wide variety of topics for many national publications. Her 1987 nonfiction book *On Boxing* was widely acclaimed. She recently completed the screenplay for *Because it is Bitter* and *Because It Is My Heart*, one of three novels she had published last year.

Oates is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University. She also co-edits the *Ontario Review* with her husband of nearly 30 years, Raymond Smith.



NORMAN SIEFF

Oates began writing short stories and novels at an early age, while growing up in rural Lockport, New York. She attended Syracuse University on a full scholarship, the first in her family to go to college. As an undergraduate she was named co-winner of *Mademoiselle's* college fiction award for her short story "In The Old World"—the event that launched her publishing career. A member of Phi Beta Kappa, she graduated with a degree in English in 1960, having written a novel-length manuscript each semester. She earned a master's degree in English from the University of Wisconsin the following year, and has spent her life teaching and writing.

She is said to be incredibly disciplined and almost semireclusive, writing daily, early in the morning and often late into the night. Although she is known to write a short story or essay in a single sitting, the process of writing is hard work, she says, often tedious and slow.

She obviously doesn't mind. "Writing is my life," she has said. "And I'm not in a hurry to get through my life."

—RENÉE GEARHART LEVY