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Amy Linn

Gaining Touch

The morning is clear and strangely balmy for Chicago in July, and I am sitting in the front seat of my sister's Subaru station wagon, handing back a Diet Coke and Egg Mcmuffin to my fifteen-year-old niece, Cindy, whose mother is dying. Cindy's mom, my sister-in-law, went to a doctor five weeks ago because she thought her ulcer was acting up. "You have cancer," the doctor told her. "You have so many tumors in your stomach, there's nothing we can do."

My own sister — my only sister, Judy — sits behind the steering wheel, sips coffee, eats a sweet roll, tosses quarters in the toll booth basket, sways in and out of the Cub's game traffic heading for downtown, tells me she could do this "with her eyes closed," tells Cindy, at the appropriate moments — "What a riot!" and, "You're kidding!" Cindy is telling stories about parasailing in Israel.

"They strap you into this harness, it's like a parachute," Cindy says, "but you've got a line tying you to the boat, and when the boat starts going, you fly up in the air. And once you're up in the air, the guys in the boat can't hear a thing you say. So I'm parasailing with this other kid — they let two of you go up at the same time—"

"You're so brave!" I turn to Cindy.

"And this other kid," Cindy says, "he's screaming to me, he says he feels kind of sick. And then he starts barfing, and it's flying back in the wind and hitting me. It was so disgusting. And we're both yelling, 'Get us down! Get us down!' But the guys in the boat

can't hear us. They wind up taking us on a thirty-minute parasail—"

"You're kidding!"

"And when they got me down the barf had dried all over me. It was so gross I couldn't believe it. I made my dad buy me a new bathing suit."

"Wait a minute," I say, "how did you get—"

"Oh Jesus," my sister Judy says, "excuse me, but Jesus, I just used this off-ramp yesterday, how can they close this off-ramp? I can't believe this, they just close an exit overnight?"

The Ontario Avenue exit, the sign tells us, is closed for repairs.

"It's so weird to be in traffic and on a highway again," I say. "In Montana you never see traffic unless it's—"

"Jesus," my sister says.

When we get to the hospital, it's impossible to find a parking space. Judy reaches for some Mike and Ike candy in her purse and pops some like pills while she circles the block. Northwestern Hospital sits in a neighborhood of upscale condos and department stores built with faux Italian marble. We pass shoppers clutching bags from Marshall Field's, women in tight white dresses and dark sunglasses, men with the flat, pale, Slavic look — dark hair, thick features, pasty skin. In winter there's not a city in the country where people look more sickly. These are the type of men who wear fur hats with flaps over their ears, who smoke cigarettes on State Street when it's ten below and the wind whips off the lake on a personal mission to search and destroy.

Cindy is telling us about a friend on the school volleyball team whose shorts fell off after she went up to spike a ball, and the girl just played for a while in her underwear while everyone collapsed

on the floor, laughing.

The three of us give up looking for spots on the street and pull into the underground hospital parking lot that charges twelve dollars for the first half-hour. My sister and I trade stories with Cindy about embarrassing episodes in high school, and a nurse on her way out holds the hospital door open for us.

I'm amazed. The lobby looks upscale hotel-ish, complete with baroque paintings on the ceiling and a uniformed man at an information booth who could pass as a bellhop. The three of us walk into a carpeted elevator. Cindy is wearing cut-off blue jeans rolled up twice above the knee, a plain white t-shirt, black leather belt, black Doc Martens and white ankle socks. She and my sister check out their reflections in the shiny metal behind the panel of buttons, and my sister pushes number fourteen. "At least I'm having a good hair day," my sister says.

On the panel above the door is a list of the different departments in the hospital. For floor fourteen, there's only one word. Oncology, it says.

This is my first time up to a cancer ward. I have no idea what to do, and have only the most painful scraps of family history to guide me. I imagine my sister-in-law lying in a hospital bed, her tiny, odd frame even tinier now, skeletal with cancer, entwined with tubes and, somehow, existing. I think about my own assorted journeys to hospitals for the odd mishap, and the way my sister, Judy, looked in those beds during the months long ago when she had a kidney disease and it looked like she might die. I think about my brother, Mark, who lived in an iron lung in the days when parents were only allowed to visit for half an hour a day, and lived six months in a sealed-off room with a cast from his

toes to his shoulders, and the nurses who fed him wore masks over their faces. Visitors could wave at Mark from behind a plate of glass that a black woman kept clean with ammonia and rags. He was four years old.

Polio did this to people — made them scared for their lives. Made mothers keep children inside during long, scorching summers when the best relief for a fidgety child was a dunk in the public pool or a sip from a public fountain in the park down the block. Touching things could kill you, people said, and it was true. Germs were everywhere, the doctors told my parents, and this was supposed to explain something.

But my mother didn't like being afraid. The germ frenzy reminded her of anti-communism, and anti-Semitism, and all the things that made people so frightened they were willing to turn in their neighbors in, or kill people, or simply stop lifting their heads to look around. And so my mother took my brother to the zoo on a hot, July day in 1949, and gave him a drink from a fountain, and two weeks later, her firstborn couldn't sit up. He could barely move enough to cry.

The elevator doors open to the fourteenth floor. Cindy slumps into a chair by a lone table, bare aside from a Scrabble and Monopoly game. Judy throws her purse onto the empty blue couch that matches the soft blue carpeting. The place is discreet, almost church-like in the way that it tempts me to whisper — temple-like, I correct myself. My sister-in-law and brother have taken pains to reclaim a Jewish heritage that the rest of us — my parents, sister and I — have either denounced or ignored. My father changed his name from Kaplan to Linn shortly before he married my mother. He said he was desperate to get a job and no one

would hire a Jew. My brother changed his name back to Kaplan before Cindy was born, and my father still hasn't forgiven him.

I sit on the couch and start going through my backpack, pretending there's something I'm looking for. Cindy leafs through a *People* magazine. My sister's manic; she won't sit down. I take out a legal pad and start writing.

Even in times of tragedy, I write, *we retreat to separate corners. Isolation.* I write, then stop. Writing is just another retreat that's isolating.

A couple gets off the elevator holding hands; it looks like a mother and a daughter. A lone man approaches from down the hall and walks past us to the patient rooms.

"That's Mr. Johnson," says my sister. Her own hands are in her pockets. "Mr. Johnson's here because his son has a brain tumor. It's really sad." Judy barely bothers to take a breath. "I hope Ed is here today," she says. "Don't you like Ed?" she says to Cindy. Cindy nods.

Ed is the gay nurse who everybody loves, even my father, which is amazing, since my father rarely loves anyone he can't control. Ed gives morphine injections best; Ed helped drain the fluid surrounding the mass of tumors in Janet's stomach. Her abdomen is so swollen, she can't eat. She can only suck ice chips, or on good days, a Popsicle.

Last week, Jan had told Ed she was scared she would never see the sky again. Ed disconnected her intravenous lines and wheeled her bed into the visitor's lounge. Ed parked her near the elevator bank, where a floor-to-ceiling window allows views of a massive stone building across the street, and above it, blue sky. Jan stayed there for a long time, until she had to go back to her room. The tumors were pressing on her lungs, and she was finding it hard

to breathe. She asked Ed whether she could ever go home, and he told her there were choices she could make. Choices about where to die. "Thank you, Ed," Janet said. She never asked about going home again.

Ed steps off the elevator just as my sister is talking about him. "Ed!" Judy says, "meet my sister, she just flew in from Montana."

People in the Midwest seem to find this fairly amazing, as if Montanans live somewhere beyond the arctic circle and never get a chance to leave. But I've gotten used to this reaction to where I live. I am the visitor in this family, the one who arrives from New York or Miami or Alkali Lake, Canada and who leaves as quickly as possible. Right now, I just want to help my brother — I just want to see Jan, I keep telling myself, even as I know that for decades I've made a point of avoiding them. It's been years since I've even been inside Mark and Jan's apartment. I can't begin to tell myself now, a day after landing in Chicago, that anything I've ever done in my life has actually helped Mark. Or Janet. Or Cindy, whose clearest memory of me, I imagine, is that a few years ago at a family get-together in Arizona (I flew in from Philadelphia) I french-braided her hair.

"Hi," Ed says to me. He takes my outstretched hand and walks past me to the ward. I can feel myself not liking this man. I feel guilty that he doesn't know me already.

Cindy gnaws a fingernail. Her knee pumps up and down and her foot taps the floor. She is long-limbed, dark, coltish. She looks nothing like my brother, who had a spinal fusion that stopped his growth, whose hips are crooked, whose right leg is an inch longer than his left. She looks and acts nothing like her mother, who has a genetic abnormality that gave her a stutter and a seizure disor-

der, who had a single mole on her face that would kill her, and who at four-foot-six, could medically qualify as a dwarf. Cindy was taller than her mother when she was seven years old.

"I'm going to go say hi to my mom now," Cindy says, and disappears down the hall. The nurses don't want too many people in Jan's room at the same time. I wait, obedient, to be given permission to follow.

"Jan will live at least a few more months," my parents have told me. My father didn't want me to make this trip to Chicago. He said it would be too upsetting.

"Death is supposed to be upsetting," I told him.

"There's nothing you can do," my father went on. I had called him and my mother from Montana to tell them I'd bought a plane ticket — I was desperate to come in to see Mark and talk to Jan before she died.

"Why don't you wait?" my father said. "Listen, kiddie, there are so many of us there each day now, the staff is getting upset with us, they tell us we're in the way. There aren't enough chairs in the waiting room, really honey, some days it's me and your mother and your sister and Sylvia and Sheila and Cindy, and Sheila's husband Jim, he's here from Colorado, and last week the Goldsteins flew in from Salt Lake City, and the rabbi has been here, and so has Mindy Seifer, Mom's old friend, you don't know her, the one who's in the wheelchair..."

I remind him that I know Mindy Seifer very well.

"You can't remember Mindy, can you?" he says. "I just don't think there's any room for you, and besides, there are so many people here already, you won't even get a chance to be with your brother."

"I want to get a chance to see Jan while she's alive," I repeat. My father is old and nearly deaf, which gives him license to yell at people and not to hear them. "I just want to give Mark a hug and tell him I love him."

"It'd be better if you didn't see her," my father says. "It'd be better to remember her the way she looked before."

She was tiny and pale and wore thick glasses and a lime-green and hot-pink dress above chubby knees. It was 1965 — I was nine; my sister was sixteen. My brother was twenty, and in love. That's when I first met Jan. That's how she looked.

Jan and I didn't hit it off. I wasn't happy when she and my brother got engaged. My brother had a handicap, and I wanted him to marry someone perfect. I fantasized that people with physical troubles needed to find a balance in the world by matching up with spectacular physical specimens. Fantasy was important to me in those days; reality let me down. My brother was going to leave the family to marry someone who didn't look nice, had a handicap herself and wasn't very friendly.

I was an ugly little kid and the whole thing confused me. In my friends I looked for bubbly, lush-haired redheads and big-eyed blondes who with their glitter made me, the dark, sallow-eyed girl, feel brightened. What made Mark love Jan? Ugliness and a sharp tongue wasn't sexy, I knew that. I couldn't imagine my brother and Jan even lying close to one another. Sex was for pretty, popular people; sex was for blondes. Sex was for my sister, who peroxided her hair and climbed out her window to ride in smoky cars with dangerous boys like Tex Henry. Sex was not for my brother, who played bridge with Rick Friedman, a guy who weighed 350 pounds and brought an orange crate to sit on

when he came to the house because he didn't want to break the furniture.

I never saw Jan and Mark kiss until the day of their wedding, a week after Bobby Kennedy was killed. And what I remember about the wedding was how happy they looked, and the fact that Bobby Kennedy had just been shot. The whole family remembers the wedding that way. "Oh, yes," we all say. "Remember how the rabbi mentioned Bobby Kennedy?"

At a big fancy dinner party the night before the wedding, the entree was quail. A tiny bird lay on my plate, bones charred and skin brown. I refused to eat. I was eleven years old and a flower girl. I wore a mint green, floor-length dress with puffed sleeves that I thought looked as good as Anne's did in Anne of Green Gables. I wanted to catch the bouquet that day, just to make sure I'd get married. But my sister, Judy, who was eighteen then and in love with a jazz piano player named Bob Aarons, jumped up in her new black pumps and her long brown hair bounced on her shoulders and she snatched the white flowers and held on. I was mad at my sister for a long time after that. I was mad at Jan, too.

Jan seemed to pick on my brother. She had an odd habit of telling us stories about how stupid or cloddish Mark was, as if she expected us to enjoy sharing in her contempt of him — as if she thought we'd all sit with her and shake our heads and laugh with her about what a dope he could be, this lawyer husband of hers, this University of Chicago grad who would stick his head in the fridge and bellow "Jan — where's the butter?" when two sticks of it were right in front of his nose. Perhaps she sensed a conspiracy that none of use were honest enough to admit.

For years we'd held Mark at arm's length. Was it because he talked too loud and sat too close and told boring stories? Was it

because of Jan?

My father's emphysema got worse when he was around the two of them. My sister Judy lived in Chicago but rarely saw them. I'd spent only one memorable moment with Mark and Jan since I graduated high school.

I was hospitalized three days for an asthma attack, and couldn't breathe without the IV in my arm. I was nineteen. My whole family had gathered together for Thanksgiving. No one came to see me but Mark and Jan. They asked the doctors to put my IV on a roller, so I could take a walk with them down the hall. I walked down the hall with them. I was happy.

I hear footsteps and look up to see two of Jan's relatives approaching — her mother and her sister, Sheila. I recognize both of them immediately, even though it was twenty-four years ago — the day of the wedding — that I last saw Sheila. Neither of them recognize me. I introduce myself. They tell me I look different and push past me to talk to my sister, Judy.

"Jan isn't breathing well," they tell Judy. "Her blood pressure is falling."

My niece, Cindy, is close behind. "Did you see your mom?" I say to her, absurdly.

"Yeah, I saw her," Cindy says. She's chewing gum loudly like any normal fifteen-year-old. "My dad said I should tell you to wait for a minute before you come in. He says he'll be right out to get you." Cindy smiles and tosses back her long hair. Everyone stands around looking at each other. I want to ask Sheila, "How are you?" but it doesn't seem right.

Judy excuses herself to go down to the cafeteria and bring back juice and coffee for everyone. "Could you get me a club soda?" I

ask her. She nods yes and I watch her walk away. "Don't leave," I want to say to her. But I don't say things like that. I watch the elevator go down, come back to fourteen, and open and close, open and close. No one gets on or off; the machine seems to be stuck at this floor. I'm afraid to go anywhere, even though the elevator begs me to do it. I'm afraid if I leave to get a newspaper, or a magazine, or to take a walk into the sunshine, my brother will come out looking for me and I won't be there.

The last time I was with Mark and Jan, we walked along a sidewalk at sunset. I was striding too fast for my brother, who lately has felt the affects of his polio coming back, and wears a brace to keep his ankle from flopping. Jan walked even farther behind. The three of us had just shared hotdogs and under-cooked hamburgers at a family picnic. It was just a month before Jan was diagnosed with cancer, and there was nothing about her appearance that would have given us a clue that she was dying. I'd flown in from Missoula, mostly because I wanted to see my sister. I walked fast because I couldn't think of anything to say to Mark and Jan.

A group of kids passed by in a souped-up Chevy; the teenaged driver was speeding up to a stop sign and slamming on his brakes, and on the hood of his car sat three kids who looked drunk enough to think this was a good idea.

I started screaming at them. "Hey, get off that hood!" I couldn't believe my voice. I sounded like a Chicago cop. "Get off that car! Get off NOW!" I screamed. "What are you trying to do," I shouted to absolute strangers: "You think it'll be fun to die?"

I didn't sleep well that night. I lay in the guest room of my sister's house and listened to the sounds of snoring through the thin walls and tried to figure out what happened with me and my

brother, but there were blank spots in my memory where my brother ought to be. He left for college when I was seven. But before that — where did he sleep? What did he do after school? Did he talk to me? Where did he sit at the dinner table when my parents screamed at my sister and I refused to eat, and my dad cut my food for me in tiny bites with big hands that always seemed angry?

I remember Mark when he was older. He played guitar and sang Pete Seeger songs. He was in college already, probably nineteen or so — I was seven or eight — and he asked me once to come into his bedroom to sing with him, and he stood in front of me in his underwear, and I sat on his bed, afraid to stay, drawn to the music, afraid of flesh so close. I'd never seen a naked man, I wanted to see one. But I didn't want to see Mark in his underwear.

I remember Mark on spring vacations in Miami beach, his body in his swimsuit. His scars. They were clumsy, ropy with the unrefined surgical techniques of the day. The seams crisscrossed his stomach from hip to hip, and his abdomen bulged out in between. The polio attacked his stomach muscles: distintegrated them. Without muscles in your stomach, you can't sit up. The surgeons took muscle from my father's thigh, and grafted it into Mark's torso, and slowly Mark could sit and walk and best of all, swim, where he was weightless and free. One foot clubbed inward. When he walked, he rocked from side to side. He wore madras bathing trunks and went to Yale on a scholarship.

I'd never seen the scars on my father, where they cut his thigh for the transplant. My father's scars have faded, perhaps. And they are always well hidden.

I was four when my dad stopped touching me. He didn't hug or touch me for eight years, maybe ten, he told me. "I was afraid of my daughters: I was afraid I'd get sexual with you," he'd said when I spoke to him from my dorm room in Madison, Wisconsin. A college counselor had urged me to make the call.

Not long after that conversation I decided to cut school and take a Greyhound bus to Warren, Ohio, to try out for a job as a groom for one of the hottest riders in the country. Bernie Traurig had dark, curly hair and beautiful thighs in tight breeches and I fantasized about falling in love with him and having him seduce me behind the heavy oak sliding doors of the horse stalls. On the bus — a fourteen-hour ride — I sat next to a man who wore plaid pants and smelled. The man had an endless number of road maps, and he unfolded them with arms that knocked into mine and stretched nearly halfway into my seat.

My dad's arms stretched over me on road trips we took when I was young. My dad would drive, I would sit between him and my mother, and he was always pointing at something out the passenger window, his arm in front of my face, beefy, threatening, telling me to do something or look at something, very nearly grazing the tip of my nose.

Being on the Greyhound was something I'd thought would make me feel better, but the long miles and the company wore me down. I kept my face to the window — Cleveland was like a black and white movie too boring to watch all the way through. And then I saw signs with names that looked familiar.

Warren Ohio. Halsey Taylor. I'd memorized the words from the letters on the drinking fountains at my elementary school. I

didn't drink, I let the water hit my lips but kept them closed and stared at the letters. The teachers let you be drinking fountain monitor, if you were good. Chuck got polio from a drinking fountain, my mom had always said.

Warren, Ohio, the signs told me, was one of the drinking fountain capitals of America.

When I got to the stable, Bernie Traurig pointed out a stall and told me to braid the mane and tail of his favorite hunter-jumper, a regal bay with two sparkling white socks. The mare cost him $65,000, Bernie said. He said he'd come back to check my work. He said if I got the job I'd have six horses like this mare to take care of from dawn until dusk.

I combed out the mare's mane and ran my hand down her neck to the warm silk of her chest, as soft as the breast of a bird. I'd never touched so much money in my life, and it was standing on four legs and ate hay. "How many welfare mothers could live off your price tag, baby — huh? What would Karl Marx have to say about you?" I crooned to the mare. As soon as I'd formed the questions, I knew I didn't want the job anymore. And six horses like this one would mean more work than triplets.

After I finished braiding I took a long walk in the woods, and from a branch already bare for winter, I saw my first owl. I'd always heard that owls were an omen; that seeing one could bring good luck. I watched the grey form until it flew away, and then I made a wish.

"Freedom," I said.

The footsteps come toward me, heavy and fast. Cindy is screaming, "Mommy! Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!" Her voice is like a child's.

Sheila, Jan's sister, is right behind her. "Cindy?" Sheila calls out. "Cindy!"

A nurse looks into the waiting room, sees me sitting there, looks confused. Everyone seems to be in a hurry. "Are you...?" the nurse asks.

"I'm Mark's younger sister," I say.

"I'm sorry, I was expecting to see Judy," the nurse says. "Could you come in here please? Could you come into this side room?" The nurse points to a door down the hall, and I open it and walk inside. Cindy sits in a chair rocking back and forth, back and forth. Sheila is kneeling on the floor next to her, holding her. "She loved you," Sheila says, crying. "This is the best thing," she says. "It's better that it was fast."

Cindy says nothing, sobs, hugs herself. "She was a beautiful person," Sheila says, "she loved you very much." I stand and watch, I want to touch them, I want to hold them. I sink into a chair not far from them and say nothing. I can't believe my heart is beating, I feel so still.

"Do you want me to leave?" I ask Sheila. Cindy and Sheila look at me with surprise.

"No. Stay here," Sheila says. Cindy's sobs are quieting. She's shivering now.

"Where's Mark?" I ask, helpless.

"He's still in there with her," Sheila cries.

The door opens. It's Judy, her arms loaded with orange juice cartons and cups of coffee, and she begins to chirp about the cafeteria and how long everything took. Why are we in here? she says.

"Judy," I tell her. "She's dead."

My sister freezes. "But I just was gone ten minutes," she says.

"I was just buying you a soda," she says to me.

My mother opens the door. "Your father is still trying to find a parking space," she announces. She sees Cindy's face.

"Cindy?" she says, and her grief has in it the break of an old woman's voice, and the sound, and the sound of Cindy's cries Mommy Mommy Mommy will haunt me for months. Now Cindy cries "Grandma, Grandma," and runs to my mother, and my mother lays her hands on Cindy's head.

I walk to my mother and hug her. I feel her breasts against mine. She is so thin now, so old. I haven't hugged her in a long time. We pull apart fast, eager to let some light come between us.

Mark comes in, sobbing, looks up to see me: "Oh God," he says. Cindy gets up and starts to run out of the room. "Cindy," Mark says, "Can you just stay here? Can you just hold my hand for a minute?"

"I have to go and call my friends," Cindy says, begging him. "Can I please go and call my friends?"

"Of course you can," my brother says. "Of course you can go call your friends."

Mark sinks into the chair that Cindy just abandoned. I sit next to him and put my hand above his knee and press firmly. I have no memory of my hand ever being on his knee before.

"Cindy was in the room," Mark cries. "Of all the times for her to be in the room." His voice cracks. "I can't believe she saw that."

"It was good that she saw it." I don't know what to tell him, but this feels right. "Cindy needed to be with her mother."

Everyone is talking, murmuring. "I didn't even get a chance to see her," I say aloud and hear how selfish it sounds.

"Jan knew you were here—I told here you were coming," Mark

tells me, and I don't believe him.

My father appears, talking about how long it took him to park the car and how expensive that damned garage is. My mother takes him by the arm to tell him the news. He doesn't have his hearing aids in. She shouts it to him twice.

"I'd like to see Jan," my sister says, and approaches a nurse in the hall. It'll take a few minutes to disconnect the tubes, the nurse says, then comes back and nods her head. My sister and I nearly run down the hall to Jan's room.

"No—no, don't go in there," my father is yelling after us. I don't even turn around. I pretend I don't hear him.

She is blue. Jan is blue-grey, with a white cotton blanket tucked around her at chest level. Her arms lie straight beside her. Her fingers are swollen. They don't look like real hands. But her eyes. One is half-closed and looks ahead; the other is wide-open and stares wildly to the left, and there is no peace, only agony, in their gaze into space. Why didn't they close her eyes? I say to myself, I thought they closed people's eyes.

Her mouth is crooked in a gasp, as if her last breath was filled with horror. Her collarbones protrude above a skeletal frame. I touch the blanket near her feet. I am whispering inside my head, Goodbye, Jan. Goodbye, Jan. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't get to say goodbye. I am apologizing, over and over, for the things I thought about her, for the way I avoided her. I want to be alone with her to say some kind of prayer, though I know none. But my sister is there, and then Jan's mother and Jan's sister, and then Mark, then my mother. This is the last time we will see her, and we don't want to leave.

I stand near her and memorize what I see. The flesh that cov-

ers her bones is bloated with the cancer and the fluid that drowned her. Sinews rise like sharp ridges in her neck; her head is a skull. This is the flesh that houses us, and if we are our flesh —if that is all life is—then what happened in this room? I can't take it in. I want to feel a spirit around us: this woman was just alive, ten minutes ago. Ten minutes ago, she was breathing and her daughter sat and tried to talk to her. But I feel nothing. I feel nothing sacred. I see only terror. I can't believe a person can be gone so quickly.

I move to the side of the bed, touch Jan's arm, hesitant, and leave my hand there. She is still warm.

"Oh, god," my sister Judy says. She too, is touching Jan.

I want to touch Jan's hair—it is grey. She turned grey in six weeks. She looks like an old woman. She is only forty-five.

Sheila, Jan's sister, comes in and starts taking pieces of paper off the hospital walls. *Get well soon* they say.

I begin to pack up Jan's clothes and carry the books in her room to the table outside. I help Sheila take down the origami hanging that she made and pinned over Jan's bed after Jan broke down and sobbed one day that she thought she'd go crazy, staring at the white ceiling. I am a wooden object willing to go wherever I am ordered.

I leave the room to see how Cindy is doing. She has stopped crying and is chewing gum again. I give her a hug. "I'm okay," she says, and smiles at me. "Did you reach your friends," I say. "Yeah," she says.

"You poor girl," my dad says and hugs her, and I can see her struggling to get out of his grasp. "You poor girl," he says, "life is going to be hard for you."

"I know, Grandpa," she says.

Nurses appear with clipboards and paper. They want to know what to do with the body. Mark has stopped crying now and is talking normally. "Do you need me to sign anything?" he is saying. I try to give him a hug. He is all bones and odd angles, and he's too anxious to stand still.

"What can I do for you, Mark?" I ask.

"Do you know what you can do for me?" Mark says. "You're the reporter in the family. Could you write her obituary?"

He's asked me the one thing in the world that makes me want to say no.

I am the reporter in the family. When I worked for newspapers, I talked to a young kid who watched his mother burn to death in an inferno inside a tunnel. I talked to a man on death row who stabbed an old woman seventy-two times with a bread knife and left his footprints in her blood on the way out the door. I wrote about an eleven-year-old kid who strangled his best friend, and the day after the story ran, the boy took a shoelace and hung himself in his cell. I wrote a story about a teenager who grabbed a seven-year-old girl on her way to school, raped her, stabbed her to death and set her body on fire. I tried, and failed, to talk to a teenager who tiptoed into his parents' bedroom, shot them in the head, painted their blood on the wall, turned the lights on and laughed. I refused, at one point, to talk to a woman who took her family to the waterfront in Oakland and watched all three of her kids fall off a raft and drown. I had to write an official explanation to my editor explaining why I had failed in my duties.

And then I quit newspapers. Never, I told myself, would I ever interview another grieving person. Never would I write another

obit.

"What do you want me to say about Jan?" I ask my brother. We sit at his kitchen table and he sounds strangely cheerful. No response seems appropriate anymore.

Mark tells me about where Jan went to elementary school, and how she went to Brandeis and was an English major, and how she got married and had Cindy. I'm trying to inflate the details so we can get this thing into the paper. The *Chicago Tribune* only runs the obits of the "important dead." A woman who raises a daughter and edits a medical journal part-time isn't going to make it.

"I was afraid I'd never get her out of Israel," Mark tells me. He is rambling now. Jan and Mark and Cindy were in Israel just four weeks ago, when Jan first got sick.

The trip to Israel was one of most dramatic things the family had ever done. When Jan's stomach started getting extended, she went to Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem and told them her ulcer was acting up and "please don't make me stay — I don't want to ruin my vacation," she said. They put her in intensive care.

"The doctors thought at first it might be ovarian, but then they said it was melanoma," my brother tells me, as he's told me before. "It had already metastasized all over her body. She'd probably had it for five years, maybe more."

Day after day, Mark tried to get permission to take his wife home from Israel. The hospital refused; Jan's kidney's were failing — it was too risky. Finally, Hadassah agreed to release Jan if she flew back to the states with one of their doctors by her side.

An ambulance met the family, when they landed in Chicago. Medics strapped Jan onto a stretcher. She didn't protest. She'd been on a plane for twelve hours, and now she was home. The

driver hit the light, and ahead, finally, was a hospital where her family could visit and everyone spoke English.

Jan felt the pull of the ambulance — she'd lived in Chicago all her life. Even lying down, she could tell that the driver made a wrong turn.

"You're going the wrong way, you took the wrong exit," she shouted at him. "You're headed toward Milwaukee for chrissake! There must be ten signs that say Chicago, exit right for Chicago."

"Hey, I'm sorry," the ambulance driver said.

"And the guy," Mark tells me, "tries to make a U-turn in the middle of the highway!"

"Mark," I say. "Did Jan belong to any organizations? Did she do any volunteer work?" I'm gently trying to keep him on track. I'm drinking a gin and tonic, and it's helping.

Mark shakes his head. We talk about Jan for another half an hour. I work and work on the obituary until late that night. I can only get three paragraphs.

I am asleep in my sister's house, I am lost in a store, and I need to buy something important, I don't have money, I'm going to have to steal it, I have my hand on it when a man, huge, a black shadow of a featureless man leans down so that his nose is next to mine, he's right here in the room, I can feel his breath…

NNNNoooo! I shout in the garbled voice that crawls from the throat of the dreaming. I say it so loud I wake myself, and I'm amazed, and shaking. I've never shouted in my sleep before.

I turn on the light and try writing. I can't get Jan's face out of my mind.

I write: *I want to create abundance around me.*

I write: *Fate brutalized my brother once; that's all anyone should*

have to bear.

I write: *I'm thirty-five, and my father still tells me to look both ways when I cross the street.*

I write: *I think, therefore I'm fucked.*

The day of the funeral dawns brilliantly sunny. A cantor sings and the rabbi—the same one who married Mark and Jan—delivers the service. The immediate family sits packed into the front row of the funeral home. I cannot stop crying. The cantor's voice hits the same notes that must make wolves howl in the darkness.

Mindy Seifer, one of my parents' oldest friends, sits next to me in her wheelchair. When I was a girl I was afraid of Mindy. Her wheelchair and paralyzed body said to me that my brother might end up like that, that his legs might become two pieces of flesh that have nothing to do with walking. Now, I love the gentleness I see in Mindy. I love the familiarity of her face and the fact that she is still alive. Mindy doesn't recognize me at first, and she beams when I tell her who I am. I sit there and hold Mindy's hand. I am so grateful.

My sister sits farther down, her hands in her lap. When the service is over, she stands up and hugs her son and daughter and I stand behind her, watching. "I love you," she says to her children. "I love you, too, Mom," they say back.

At the graveside, we stand beneath a canopy and watch the coffin lowered into the ground. The wheels of the pulley creak. I'm afraid I'll start crying too hard and lose control. A part of my family has died, and I think about the wedding, and my young, hopeful brother, and his life with a loving outline, his future eased by the knowledge that he'd found a partner with whom he could

grow old and have a family, which he desperately wanted to do. The rabbi chants. Cindy sits quietly next to Mark. I am standing near my sister in front by the grave, until a girlfriend of a distant cousin pushes in front of me and blocks my view. The coffin hits bottom and the pulleys rest.

Just beyond us is a pile of dirt. We will fill Jan's grave. We will say goodbye by shoveling dirt on her coffin. We get in line and march toward the shovel, each taking turns scooping the dirt and throwing it onto the plain, wood box. My mother stands in line and I watch her frail body stoop for the shovel and push in the earth that falls like heavy rain on something hollow.

"Mir, no, don't do that. You don't have to do that. It's unnecessary," my father is calling to her. He repeats the same thing to me. "Please don't," he says.

I enter the line, and take the shovel. I want to do this right. I want to keep doing this, over and over, until it is me, just me, who has filled the whole grave. I take my one shovelful, and step aside.

"I have to talk to you," my cousin Marel says. She is wearing baggy white shorts and beach clogs.

My brother's home overflows with mourners, and the tables are crammed with food from caterers who huff and puff under the load of coldcuts and sweets as they march up the apartment stairs. People trickle in from the funeral. Many of them I've never met.

I haven't eaten all day. Eating seems a grotesque thing to do. But my relatives urge me to go to the table. Marel, a cousin who I was closer to than any other relative growing up, tells me the bagels are incredible. Marel says she wants my advice on moving to Washington to be with her new boyfriend. She wants to ask me what she should wear and things like that. She is giggling and

looks like she can't wait to leave so she can go work on her tan. "You've moved so much, I know you can really give good advice," she says. "How are you, cous'?" she says.

"Not so good," I tell her.

"How come?" she asks.

"Why do you think?" I say.

I move to the buffet table and start filling my plate, and I put some bread in my mouth. Suddenly I don't want to stop. It feels like eating is the whole proof that I'm still alive; the fact that life for me is still possible seems centered on my tongue. I know now why they serve so much food at funerals. It separates the living from the dead.

"Amy!" my uncle Harold calls to me. He is someone I've never had a conversation with in my life.

"I read the obituary today in the paper," Harold tells me. "It was a beautiful job, really nice job. I clipped it out to save it."

"Thank you, Harold," I say. And I mean it.

The prayers are said each evening. For a week, the apartment is constantly packed, and there's barely room to stand. I can't say the prayers, I don't know them; I've only been in synagogue four times in my life. Those who do know them read along with the cantor and glance at me every now and then as though I were a traitor to my people and my family. I lean on my grandmother's Steinway, touch the smooth wood, imagine her playing Scarlatti and Chopin. She willed the piano to my brother, which made my sister furious, since my sister was the pianist in the family and my brother quit playing in second grade. I stand and look at the Hebrew figures on the prayer cards passed out at the door. My sister stays in the kitchen cutting up the cakes.

Afterwards, it's another flurry of shocked recognition.

"My God, look at you," says my cousin Andy, who I haven't seen since I was twelve. "Meyer, look!" cries Dolly Zake. "This is Amy! You remember Amy — Neil and Mira's little girl." Dolly takes me by the arm and wants to know all about me.

My aunt Mona looks me in the eye and holds my cheeks between two fingers, the way she's always done. She kisses me right on the lips. "Don't be such a stranger," she says. "I have a feeling you think sometimes you don't have any family."

I start to cry. "I have to find my brother," I tell her. It's been impossible to get to Mark ever since the funeral. He is constantly surrounded by people, people touching his arm, people listening to his stories, asking him if they can help. I find him in a corner of the living room. He carries a scotch in his hand. He's broken down only once tonight, reading a prayer, a line about cherishing grief, for it is holy. I stand near him now and listen to what he says to a group of men from the synagogue. He is telling them the story about Jan in the ambulance. I hear in his voice the pride for Jan's spunk; I feel in him, stronger than I've ever felt it, the love he had for her.

"Mark," I say to him when he is finished, "can I talk to you for a second?" It's as if I'm on the edge of a canyon and every word has an echo.

We go into a narrow side room that passes as a den. Mark sinks into a worn green chair. I sit facing him, our legs nearly touching. How are you holding up? I ask him, and he tells me he thinks he's okay.

"Oh God, I don't know," he says. "I don't think it's sunk in yet." The drone of what sounds like a party filters in through the doorway. I look down at the floor, at my feet, and the familiar shape

of his.

"I'm sorry I haven't been there for you," I say to him. "I'm sorry we haven't talked more."

"I haven't been very good either," Mark says. He shakes his head, looks out the window, looks back at me. He is smaller than I realized. "I haven't done a good job of talking to you either," he says.

I put my hand on his knee and squeeze my fingers tight. I look at him, into brown eyes that I notice are flecked with green. They are beautiful eyes. Soft, kind brother's eyes. I'm uncertain, pull my hand away. "I love you, Mark," I say. He doesn't answer. He reaches for my hand, and pulls it back toward him. He just reaches for my hand and holds it.