

Paintings by Sooki Raphael. *Sparky Walks the Neighborhood with Ann, Nashville 2020*

[Folio]

These Precious Days

by Ann Patchett

Tell me how the story ends

I can tell you where it all started because I remember the moment exactly. It was late and I'd just finished the novel I'd been reading. A few more pages would send me off to sleep, so I went in search of a short story. They aren't hard to come by around here; my office is made up of piles of books, mostly advance-reader copies that have been sent to me in hopes I'll write a quote for the jacket. They arrive daily in padded mailers—novels, memoirs, essays, histories—things I never requested and in most cases will never get to. On this summer night in 2017, I picked up a collection called *Uncommon Type*, by Tom Hanks. It had been languishing in a pile by the dresser for a while, and I'd left it there because of an unarticulated belief that actors should stick to acting. Now for no particular reason I changed my mind. Why shouldn't Tom Hanks write short stories? Why shouldn't I read one? Off we went to bed, the book and I, and in doing so put the chain of events into motion. The story has started without my realizing it. The first door opened and I walked through.

But any story that starts will also end. This is the way novelists think: beginning, middle, and end.

In case you haven't read it, *Uncommon Type* is a very good book. It would have to be for this story to continue. Had it been a bad book or just a good-enough book, I would have put it down, but page after page it surprised me. Two days later, I sent an endorsement to the editor. I've written plenty of jacket quotes in my day, mostly for first-time writers of fiction whom I believed could benefit from the assistance. The thought of Tom Hanks benefiting from my assistance struck me as funny, and then I forgot about it.

Or I would have forgotten about it, except that I got a call from Tom Hanks's publicist a few weeks later, asking whether I would fly to Washington in October to interview the actor onstage as part of his book tour. As the co-owner of a bookstore, I do this sort of thing, and while I mostly do it in Nashville, where I live, there have certainly been requests interesting enough to get me on a plane. I could have said I was busy writing a novel, and that would have been both ridiculous and true. Tom Hanks needs a favor? Happy to help.

"Do you even realize your life isn't normal?" Niki said when I announced my trip. Niki works at the bookstore. She has opinions about my life. "You understand that other people don't live this way?"

How other people live is pretty much all I think about. Curiosity is the rock upon which fiction is built. But for all the times people have wanted to tell me their story because they think it would make a wonderful novel, it pretty much never works out. People are not characters, no matter how often we tell them they are; conversations are not dialogue; and the actions of our days don't add up to a plot. In life, time runs together in its sameness, but in fiction time is condensed—one action springboards into another, greater action. Cause and effect are so much clearer in novels than they are in life. You might not see how everything threads together as you read along, but when you look back from the end of the story, the map becomes clear. Maybe Niki was right about my life being different, but maybe that's because I tend to think of things in terms of story: I pick up a book and read it late into the night, and because I like the book, I wind up on a flight to D.C.

Iwent by myself. I was going only for the night. I walked from my hotel to the theater and showed my ID to a guard who then led me to the crowded greenroom. I met the hosts of the event and a few people who worked for them. I was introduced to Tom Hanks's editor, Tom Hanks's agent, his publicist, his assistant, Tom Hanks himself. He was tall and slim, happily at ease, answering questions, signing books. Everyone was laughing at his jokes because his jokes were funny. The people around him arranged themselves into different configurations so that the assistant could take their pictures, each one handing over his or her cell phone. Audience questions arrived on index cards, were read aloud and sorted through. The ones Tom Hanks approved of were handed to me. I would ask them at the end of the event, depending on how much time we had. The greenroom crowd was then escorted to their seats, and we were ushered to the dark place behind the curtain—Tom Hanks, his assistant, and I. The assistant was a tiny woman wearing a fitted black-velvet evening coat embroidered with saucer-size peonies. "Such a beautiful coat," I said to her. We'd been introduced when I arrived but I didn't remember her name.

The experience of waiting backstage before an event is always the same. I can never quite hear what the person making the introduction is saying, and for a moment I wouldn't be able to tell you the name of the theater or even the city I was in. There's usually a guy working the light board and the mics who talks to me for a minute, though tonight the guy talking was Tom Hanks. He wanted to know whether I liked owning a bookstore. He was thinking about opening one himself. Could we talk about it sometime? Of course we could. We were about to go on.

"I don't have any questions," I whispered in the darkness. "I find these things go better if you just wing it." Then the two of us stepped out into the blinding light.

As soon as the roaring thunder of approval eased, he pointed at me and said, "She doesn't have any *questions*."

When the event was over and more pictures had been taken and everyone had said how much they'd enjoyed absolutely everything, Tom Hanks and his assistant and I found ourselves alone again, standing at the end of a long cement hallway by a stage door, saying good night and goodbye. A car was coming to pick them up.

"Come on, Sooki," he said, his voice gone grand. "Let's go back to the hotel. I need to find a Belvedere martini."

I hoped he would ask me to join them. I'd spent two hours on a stage talking to Tom Hanks, and now I wanted to talk to Sooki. Sooki of the magnificent coat. She had said almost nothing and yet my eye kept going to her, the way one's eye goes to the flash of iridescence on a hummingbird's throat. I thought about how extraordinarily famous you would have to be to have someone like that working as your assistant.

Neither of them asked me out for drinks.

Again it would appear this story had reached its conclusion. But a few months later, I got an email from Tom Hanks early in the morning. He was in Nashville. Could I meet him at the bookstore, Parnassus, in half an hour? I couldn't. My friend Sister Nena had just called. She'd fallen down some stairs outside of church the night before and twisted her foot and now that foot was swollen and sore. She needed me to take her to the hospital for an X-ray.

“I’ve got to take care of my nun,” I told him.

“*Your* nun?” he wrote, as opposed to what most people would say, “Your *nun*?”

I told Sister Nena the whole story while we sat in the waiting room, her foot propped up on a wheelchair. She was disappointed. “I want to meet Tom Hanks,” she said. I called the bookstore and let the staff know that Tom Hanks was on his way over. He thrilled them, buying stacks of books, signing books, posing for pictures, going next door to the Donut Den for an apple fritter. I had missed my chance. But months later there he was again. His wife, Rita Wilson, is a singer who writes with people in Nashville, where songwriting is a group activity. It turned out that Tom and Rita came to town something less than regularly but more than I would have thought. On this visit, we sat in the cramped office at my bookstore and talked about the one he was considering opening in Santa Monica while my dog slept in his lap. I was already years ahead of myself, thinking of all the good Tom Hanks could do for independent bookstores. Could any business wish for a better spokesperson?

Here’s a universal truth: people are interested in helping Tom Hanks. Our hearts have been filled with the comfort his films have given us, and that, coupled with the fact that he’s a nice man, made it easy to line up a group of booksellers who were eager to pitch in. But over time the idea drifted to the back burner. Our correspondence was less about bookstores and more about books. One more reason to like Tom Hanks: he’s a reader. He recommends books and asks for recommendations. I had just finished my latest novel, and on a lark of the highest order, I sent him an email asking if he might record the audiobook. He responded:

MAR. 17, 2019: *Hey! I’m in Albuquerque shooting a movie. I’d love to do your audio book! But when? I have limited time as I work til mid May, then leave the US in June until I come back to start another movie in September. So what are the deadlines, days needed, etc? Books are fun!*

I sat at my desk for a long time, trying to make sense of this: time when there was no time, and talent all out of proportion to the task. It hadn’t occurred to me that he might say yes. Had I thought it through, I never would have had the nerve to ask in the first place. A year and a half had passed since I had picked up his book in my office, and this was where it had taken me: Tom Hanks was willing to read *The Dutch House*.

I’d been in touch with Sooki once or twice when there was talk of a bookstore in Santa Monica, and now I pinned my hopes on her as she dug into Tom’s schedule at Playtone, his production company. Wonderful Sooki! She made the time, stitching days together. As we worked our way through trying to get contracts signed and making arrangements with the audio producer, our emails became an affectionate exchange.

APR. 30, 2019: *I imagine your kindness comes from you being kind. Just a guess.*

APR. 30, 2019: *My kindness comes from sincerely wanting this recording to happen. I am a huge fan of your work (and Tom’s, of course) and it just thrills me that you are collaborating on this! So happy to be the connector of good things.*

This wasn’t out of the ordinary for me, as I’m sure it wasn’t for her. Email tilts toward the overly familiar. I tilt toward the overly familiar.

I’d written a children’s book and was about to go on tour. Sooki had two young grandchildren in San Diego and made plans to bring them to an event I was doing there, but they didn’t show. I lost her for a while, and then she was back again. She apologized for her late response, saying that she’d had a medical procedure and hadn’t been in the office.

I asked whether she was okay. I had met Sooki, after all. We’d stood together in the dark of a Washington theater for a matter of minutes a year and a half earlier. I had liked her coat very much, those pink peonies as big as my hand.

MAY 21, 2019: *Thank you for your concern about my medical procedure. I am doing my best to keep it pushed off to the side, but I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in November (caught it early) so I’ve been dealing with surgeries and chemo. I’m still here—at Playtone and in general.*

She had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a year after we met. There was no reason for her to tell me this. We didn’t know each other, and for the most part our correspondence had come after this defining fact. Ours was an ephemeral connection common to the modern world. Except it was Sooki, and I liked her very much.

A week later, Tom Hanks started recording *The Dutch House* at a studio in Los Angeles. Sooki went with him every day. She sent updates—chapter eight now, chapter twelve. The producer of the audiobook sent me an article about Sooki from a 1978 issue of *New York* magazine. Sooki had gone to work for the New York City Department of Health’s Bureau of Animal Affairs right out of college. She was the bat squad. She was Batgirl. There were pictures of her at twenty-two, beautiful and dark-eyed, standing on somebody’s desk in little canvas tennis shoes, her gloved hands holding a bat and a net. I was struck by an overwhelming sense of wanting to know her, of not wanting to miss Sooki while she was here.

This is what it’s like to write a novel: I come up with a shred of an idea. It can be a character, a place, a moral quandary. In the case of *The Dutch House*, I’d started to think about a poor woman who suddenly became rich, and because she was unable to deal with the change in circumstances, she left her family and went to India to follow a guru.

Sister Nena shook her head. “Not a guru. She’s Catholic. She doesn’t have to go to India. She helps the poor like Dorothy Day.”

We were sitting at the bar at California Pizza Kitchen at four o’clock in the afternoon. It was our place, what Sister Nena called “vacation.” She ordered the house merlot and I had a seltzer with cranberry juice. She wanted to know about the book I was going to write next, the book I had just barely started thinking of.

“This woman goes to India,” I said.

“She could be a nun.” Sister Nena picked up a piece of bread and swiped it through the olive oil in the saucer between us.

I shook my head. “She’s married,” I said. “She has children. She has to have children.”

“It could happen. Plenty of nuns were married before.”

“They were widows, not divorced.”

“You never know.” Then she looked at me, her face suddenly brightened by a plot twist. “She could work for Mother Teresa. If she really wanted to go to India and she wanted to serve the poor, that’s what she would do.”

I wasn’t sure why I was negotiating my character’s future with my friend, but there I was, listening. Did my character want to be a nun?

When I’m putting together a novel, I leave all the doors and windows open so the characters can come in and just as easily leave. I don’t take notes. Once I start writing things down, I feel like I’m nailing the story in place. When I rely on my faulty memory, the pieces are free to move. The main character I was certain of starts to drift, and someone I’d barely noticed moves in to fill the space. The road forks and forks again. It becomes a path into the woods. It becomes the woods. I find a stream and follow it, the stream dries up, and I’m left to look for moss on the sides of trees. For a time, the mother in this novel went to India to work for Mother Teresa. I tried it but it didn’t work. What about the children who were left behind in that house she hated? What became of them? And what about the women who cleaned that house, who fixed those children their dinner? The ones who stayed turned out to be the ones I was interested in.

Putting together a novel is essentially putting together the lives of strangers I’m coming to know. In some ways it’s not unlike putting together my own life. I think I know what I’m doing when in truth I have no idea. I just keep moving forward. By the time the book is written, there is little evidence of the initial spark or a long-ago conversation in California Pizza Kitchen. Still, I’m able, for a while at least, to pick up the thread and walk it back. Everything looks so logical going backward—*Yes, of course, that’s what we did*—but going forward it’s something else entirely. Going forward, the lights may as well be off.

Sooki and I kept up a sporadic email exchange once the audiobook was done. I thought of her time as precious now. We wrote about painting because she painted. I sent her books on color theory. We wrote about artists we liked, about Pantone and the color wheel. *Dear* gave way to *Dearest*. *Love* became *Much love*. Then this:

JUNE 21, 2019: *As of last week, my six-month chemo run is done, and I had a follow up CT scan. My doctor paired up some words I never thought I would hear together: “pancreatic cancer” and “you’re in remission!” It seems like an early declaration, but I’ll take it! Here’s to more time to explore color and enjoy all the people—like you—who make life colorful.*

Later in the summer there was radiation, just to be safe.

AUG. 5, 2019: *Radiation has become a fascinating routine over the last five weeks.*

Twenty-two sessions down and six to go. Only on weekdays and not on the Fourth of July, because apparently cancer knows to take weekends off and observe federal holidays.

I leave the house at 6:30 AM every weekday morning to make it down to the bottom basement—floor 2B—at UCLA's Westwood Medical Center by 7:30 AM. There is a bright therapist named Hassan at my assigned machine, always the same, with a sweet attitude. He has me repeat my name, birth date and area of radiation each time before I enter the room. I want to envision it as a healing room, but it reminds me of a meat locker: freezing cold—I'm guessing the temperature favors the delicate machinery—with a rack of blue torsos lined up on hooks. My blue torso, the mold made on the day I came in for my fitting and tattoos, is already on the radiation bed and I need to bare my abdomen and slide onto the table so they can line up the laser beams with all my tattoos and red-sharpie x's before they cover me with a warmed flannel sheet.

I was impressed that first day when the therapists swarmed the table forming the mold around me and explaining about tattoos. I was told that although not everyone wanted to commit to having the tattoos, it was the most accurate way to align the radiation field that had been so meticulously laid out by a team of physicists working alongside my radiation oncologist. The only other option was to go with "stickers" which could shift or come off in the shower. Of course I opted for tattoos. Precision seemed like a good decision here. Three blue tattoos on the same plane as my prominent abdominal scar, it would hardly matter. So, I was surprised on my first scheduled day of radiation to have another technician pop in with a red sharpie to make three large x's near the tattoos as additional points of reference and stick clear round stickers over them.

Now I look like an improvised elementary school art project, and in addition to owning my permanent tattoos, I have to nurture my three little stickers and hand-drawn sharpie marks so they last six weeks. I feel like I could pop into Trader Joe's and have them replaced with those happy little stickers they hand out to well-behaved children—it undermines my confidence in the sophisticated nature of the whole process just a bit.

I sent more books: books I'd written, books I thought she'd like, Kate DiCamillo books to be read with her grandchildren. In return, she sent me pictures she'd taken of Los Angeles, a woman in an orange sari sailing past a city bus on a bicycle. The world that Sooki inhabited was electrified by greens and blues, purple bougainvillea draping over hot-pink walls, colors too vivid to be explained. She would pour color into my inbox for a while and then be gone again. Winter came without a word. I worried, and thought it was not my place to ask. Did Tom even know that Sooki and I were friends? Would he think to tell me if something had happened? I wanted to say hello very quietly so as not to bother her. I didn't want to be one more person tugging at her coat, but I was.

DEC. 27, 2019: *Sweetest Ann, I am traveling today—just for the day—up to Stanford for a second opinion, with the magician's elephant in my carry-on bag.*

I didn't need to hear about the first opinion to know what that meant. I said good luck because there was nothing else to say. Could I say that I would like to come see her? That I would like to meet her in the way I had wanted to meet my pen pals as a child? This was what I knew about Sooki: She lived in Los Angeles. She had a son and a daughter-in-law with two children who lived south of her and a daughter and son-in-law who had recently moved north. She painted. She once caught bats for the City of New York. She worked for Tom Hanks.

I saw Tom and Rita in Nashville two more times. The second time they came because Rita was singing at the Grand Ole Opry. My husband, Karl, and I sat in a dressing room with them for an hour and a half between sets. Dionne Warwick came in with her son. We talked about singing and touring and about the Opry. I told them that when I was a child, my sister and I would come to the Ryman on Friday and Saturday nights with the man who was then the house doctor at the Opry. He would bring us with his own two small girls, and the four of us would sit in the coils of snaking power cords backstage and fall asleep in dressing rooms, in this very dressing room. Every childhood is strange in its own way.

FEB. 7, 2020: *When last we typed you were on your way to Stanford for a second opinion. I think about you often and hope for the best. Much love. Ann*

FEB. 8, 2020: *I have wanted to write—every day—for forever. As I got ready to send the details of my second opinion, I was already looking to the third opinion and rethinking the story.*

My cancer marker—CA 19-9—is nonspecific to pancreatic cancer (it can indicate other inflammation in the body), but it's an indicator and is supposed to be at 35 U/L or less. It was normal in October, three months post—chemo and radiation—great news—but then started rising.

It has been an exercise in creative storytelling to try to think up more and more reasons why the number might rise while the scans (CTs! MRIs! PET scans) were showing no sign of disease. I looked up every anomaly online, settling on too much black tea, or maybe the wrong color shoes. As the number spiked this week at 1700 U/L, I ran out of excuses, and my PET scan on Wednesday showed a return of the cancer to my liver.

I am now sitting at the airport waiting to catch a plane to my next opinion, at Sloan Kettering in NY. (It was not reassuring to know that one of the nurses at UCLA thought that “Sloan Kettering” was the name of the doctor I'd be seeing.) It looks like I'll have chemo and maybe a clinical trial ahead. I will keep you more closely posted as I move ahead (in the right color shoes).

The last few months, the oncologists were watching the numbers and Western medicine offered nothing to do but to wait and see where the cancer showed up. I was convinced it wouldn't show up and embarked on a full-scale exploratory mission into holistic healing, prayer, juicing, yoga, meditation, sound waves, and magnetic magic (this last one, highly recommended by a friend, but in a clinic run by a reality-tv star). I gained back twenty pounds, and have been back hiking the trails and at work full time. I feel great.

But the doctors say, as they expected, the cancer is back, and they are ready to start up chemo again.

My reading on this flight is a book called Radical Remission. I am hopeful and feeling radical.

I promise to be a more reliable friend and pen pal. I miss our emails.

*Much love,
Sooki*

That night as my husband and I walked our dog around the block in the cold dark, I told him about Sooki. This was what we did at the end of the day. “Tell me the news of the great world,” Karl would say when he got home from work, and since many were the days I didn't leave the house, I relied on books and phone calls and emails in order to have something to contribute. As Sparky stopped and sniffed, I offered up Sooki's recurrence as a story to tell, not a problem to solve. Karl is a doctor, but Sooki had been treated at UCLA, Stanford, Duke, and Memorial Sloan Kettering. This wasn't about an inability to get good medical care; it was about not being able to find a clinical trial that both matched her cancer and could accept her immediately. The months she'd lost not being in chemo while they struggled to locate the new tumor had put her perilously behind.

“Tell me how you know her again?” he asked.

I told him she worked for Tom Hanks, that we'd struck up a little friendship over email.

Karl said she should send him her records if she wanted to, and that he would talk to Johanna Bendell, an oncologist at the hospital where he works. He said they were running more trials for pancreatic cancer than Sloan Kettering.

I had thought this was a story about Tom Hanks, the friendly actor-writer who had recorded my book, but I was mistaken. I kept up with a great number of people, and I didn't know to what extent I'd told Sooki's story to Karl before, and if I had told him, I didn't know whether he'd been listening, but now I had his full attention. To introduce Karl into this narrative as a general internist (he calls himself a pediatrician for adults) would be reductive. Simply put, Karl makes rain. He figures out problems that other people have tried and failed to solve for years. Other doctors are quick to do him favors because he's done so many for them. He holds a kind of medical currency, saved then spent, and when needed, he can marshal all necessary parties into immediate action, bringing them together so fast that whatever needs to happen can happen yesterday.

I told him about Sooki that night, but it was equally possible that I wouldn't have. He didn't know her, and I didn't exactly know her either. I made it a point not to tell Karl sad medical stories at the end of his long days of sad medical stories. I might have made the choice to let it go unmentioned had there been something else to talk about, maybe his mother or my mother or the spigot that had frozen in the garage. I could have forgotten Sooki altogether in that moment, because even though I followed her story with interest, it was one of many stories. But I didn't forget. I told him.

When we got home from our walk, I emailed Sooki and said that if she wanted Karl to check on the possibility of a trial in Nashville she should send her medical records.



Sparky Considers a Squirrel, Nashville 2020

There is nothing more interesting than time: the days that are endless, the days that get away. There are days of the distant past that remain so vivid to me that I could walk back into them and pick up the conversation mid-sentence, while there are other days (weeks, months, people, places) I couldn't recall to save my life. One of the last things I understand when I'm putting a novel together is the structure of time. When does the story start and when does it end? Will time be linear or can it stutter and skip? At what point does our understanding of the action shift?

We have come to the point in this story when time changes. It had been more than two years since I met Sooki in a theater in Washington. We had never spoken on the phone. The emails we'd exchanged could be printed out and slid into a single manila envelope. But the clinical trial she needed was here in Nashville at the hospital where my husband worked. Karl's friend Dr. Bendell knew Sooki's oncologist at UCLA and her oncologist at Stanford and her surgeon at Duke. They reviewed her records together. I was copied on a barrage of emails I had no business reading, reports of molecular profiling, adenocarcinoma, tumor tissue for genetic analysis. I now knew that she'd had a Whipple at Duke and twelve rounds of FOLFIRINOX followed by twenty-eight days of radiation over five and a half weeks at UCLA. UCLA had plans to start the same clinical trial that was up and running in Nashville, but not for another month or two, a unit of time that could not be lost to waiting. Plans were made for Sooki to come to Nashville. I told her I would pick her up at the airport. I told her, of course, that she would stay with us.

Let's go back to Karl for a minute.

This wasn't the first time I'd invited someone we didn't know to live with us. I once invited the daughter of a woman who ran a lecture series in Pittsburgh to live with us when she found a job in Nashville and couldn't find an apartment. Nell stayed for six months and we loved her. My friend Patrick, who lives in a tiny apartment in New York, spends a couple of weeks with us every year, writing in our basement, which, for the record, is nothing like a basement. He uses the library table to spread out his papers. Writers who do readings at the bookstore are often stashed in the guest room.

Karl has never once complained. He claims our lives are better for all the people I bring into the house. He thanks me for it. Still, I wanted to double-check. Sooki was coming as a patient, and more than a little of the work was going to fall to him. I emailed him at work. I asked him how he would feel about my extending an invitation to stay.

FEB. 14, 2020: PS—Just to be clear, I ran all this by Karl first, who said, “I favor having her here.” (Very Karl.)

FEB. 14, 2020: Oh, Ann. I don't even know how to respond to such generosity.

I would love to stay with you for my first night or two in Nashville—it would be wonderful to spend some time with you.

Once I'm there for chemo, I will find a place where I won't be worried about being a good houseguest. I just can't stand the thought of being so disruptive to your and Karl's (and Sparky's!) lives. I know that after my last round of chemo I would sometimes get up and eat in the middle of the night, or get up early and make noisy smoothies. I'm self-conscious about being in the way, especially if I'm not at my best through chemo. I just would worry too much about being a bad friend.

My husband, Ken, will come down for at least part of the time, once I've started chemo, and I may have other visitors, so I think I will explore some other options in the area, but I can't tell you how touched I am that you've extended the offer.

Sooki was married? I had pictured her going through this alone, a conclusion I reached on account of a lack of information and a florid imagination. Had I known she had a husband, might I have assumed that she was taken care of and so not followed the story as closely? I tried to find a place for this new fact in the equation but all I could come up with was the obvious—I didn't know her. I didn't know how old she was, I couldn't remember her face, but there have been few moments in my life when I have felt so certain: I was supposed to help. I was overcome by a sense of order in the world: if I hadn't picked up that book, if I hadn't gone to D.C., if we hadn't stayed in just enough contact for her to tell me a year after the fact that she had cancer, and if I hadn't mentioned it to Karl, she wouldn't have found her way to the only clinical trial in the country that both matched her cancer and could take her immediately. I wrote again.

FEB. 15, 2020: I will try to keep this quick as I know you have many fish to fry.

I hear you, and I know that if I were in your shoes and you were asking me to stay with you it would seem impossible. But I think once you're here and see the setup you'll understand. The bottom floor of the house is an apartment, separate entrance, no kitchen. We call it the VanDevender Home for Wayward Girls. There is another guest suite on the main floor and we live on the top floor. There are people here all the time. You will not be called upon to be a good guest.

I live fourteen minutes from the airport and five minutes from the hospital. I will pick you up very late on Tuesday and take you to see Johanna on Wednesday. Kate DiCamillo is coming later on Wednesday. You will love her. We are Southern, and it is like this here, always. Some people stay for months. It's like a Noël Coward play but not as witty.

I didn't know you had a husband!! What a good idea. Ken will like it here, too. Wait and see. And you will be surprised by how comforting it is to be very sick with an actual doctor upstairs. Karl is the king of the hospital. He'll make sure you get everything you need.

They can't do the Stanford biopsy here?

Much love.

We went back and forth. She agreed to stay for a few nights, but after that she said she would rent a car and find a hotel. Ken would come later. I tried to imagine chemo while living in a hotel. Surely there were sadder things, but none of them came to mind. My childhood best friend was staying with us while this discussion was going on. Her father was in the hospital and she had driven down from Kentucky to take care of him. “Don't worry about it,” Tavia said. “Once she gets here and sees the way things are, she'll be fine.”

Because if I didn't know that Sooki had a husband, how much did she know about me, about us? Nothing. We would meet on the level playing field of affectionate strangers.

Sooki arrived in Nashville on Sunday, February 23, just after Kate left. I had told her the make of my car, and she waved when I pulled up in front of the airport. She looked like a tiny rock star in her shaggy pale-pink coat and sunglasses and high boots. She looked like Los Angeles in winter. We hugged, and I hefted her enormous suitcase into the hatchback.

What had been a theory—*Sooki should come to Nashville for her chemo*—was now a fact. There she was in the passenger seat, a shy person with a quiet voice. I asked her about her trip to Stanford for the biopsy, her flight to Nashville. She repeated her gratitude and I waved it away. We did our best to pretend that what we were doing was normal. I asked her whether she had ever been to Nashville before, and she said yes, once, with Tom a long time ago. There had been a meeting of some sort. She'd only been here for a couple of hours.

I was leaving the next day for an event in New York. I would be gone for the night, and once I got back my friend Emma Straub was coming to visit. Emma and I would be speaking at a librarians' convention downtown. I would leave again on Sunday for Virginia. I had warned Sooki about all of this before she arrived. Everything was planned so far in advance and my spring was packed with speaking engagements. I would be in and out, other people would spend the night, which would be fine, plenty of room for everyone. We would all proceed with our lives except that now we would be together.

I had invited someone I didn't know to live with us for an undetermined length of time, and I was leaving the day after she arrived, leaving it all to Karl. Even if it wasn't a perfect plan, it was better than doing nothing.

Karl was home from work when we got to the house, and he and I showed Sooki around. There was a sitting room downstairs, the library, her bedroom and bathroom. I had cut a small bouquet of Lenten roses and put them on the night table. There was a bottle of water, a blue glass by the sink. I told her to take her time settling in. We would have dinner whenever she was ready. She gave us a giant furry blanket that I loved. She had brought a squeaky toy for Sparky.

"She seems very nice," Karl said once we were in the kitchen. As I was agreeing, there she was again.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Sooki said, looking around. "But have you seen my phone? It looks like a little purse on a long strap?"

I asked her if she could have left it on the plane, but no, of course not. She'd called me from outside the airport. "Let's try the car."

The cell-phone case also served as her wallet, containing her credit cards, cash, IDs, insurance cards—everything important. We looked in the car. We looked downstairs and in the kitchen and the den. She had been in the house for only a few minutes; there hadn't been enough time to lose anything. She gave me the number and I called it from the house phone, hoping we'd hear it ring. A man answered. The phone had been turned in to airport security.

"I must have dropped it. It must have fallen off my shoulder when I got in the car." Sooki was a tiny thing, with thick brown hair and olive skin. She told me she had gained back the twenty pounds she'd lost after the last chemo but she couldn't have weighed a hundred pounds now. "If I can borrow your car, I'll drive back to the airport."

I shook my head. "Then you'd have to park. It would be a nightmare."

Karl said he would go.

"They aren't going to give you her wallet," I said. "Go together. Karl can pull up and you'll run in. You two go and I'll have dinner ready by the time you get back." It was the practical solution, and so they left. While they were gone I tried to imagine it: the cancer back, the wallet gone, strangers.

Or maybe it wasn't as bad as that. The phone hadn't been run over, nothing in the wallet was missing. Karl and Sooki came in the back door together in the middle of a conversation. They were talking like old friends. "Sooki's a pilot!" Karl said. He wanted to know why I hadn't told him this. How could I not have known? Karl had started flying in Mississippi when he was ten. He had a single-engine Cirrus that he kept at the small hobby airport not far from where we lived.

"My mother was a pilot," Sooki said, and there she was, suddenly at ease.

"Sooki got her pilot's license before she learned to drive," Karl told me.

"Whenever I came to an intersection I would look to the right, the left, then up and down."

I lit the candles on the table and served the cauliflower cake and tomato soup I'd made that afternoon. The phone sat beside her on the table quietly—the prodigal returned—while we asked the kind of questions people ask on first dates: Do you have siblings? What do your children do? Where were you born? All three of us had lost our fathers, all three of us were close with our mothers. Now that things were going right I felt the jolt of just exactly how wrong they could have been. But this was right, and we would all be fine.

I flew to New York early the next morning, took a car to New Jersey, signed several hundred books, attended a cocktail-party fund-raiser for the Book Industry Charitable Foundation, gave a talk in a crowded town hall, got to my hotel room in Manhattan at midnight, got up in the morning to tape a segment for the *Today* show, then was back on a plane. It was such a short trip it hardly counted as being gone.

The house smelled of chickpea stew and rice when I came in the door that night. Sooki was making dinner. She'd gone to an Indian restaurant and bought bread stuffed with apricots and dates. Everything was lit up bright, the table set. In the twenty-six years that Karl and I had been together, I'd never had the experience of coming home to dinner being made. It was a minor footnote considering everything I got from Karl, but still, the warmth of it, the love: to walk in the door after a long two days and see that someone had imagined that I might be hungry knocked me sideways. This was what marriage must look like from the other side.

Karl found a giant bright-blue tarp in the garage and Sooki spread it over the floor and table downstairs, setting herself up to paint. Our lives ran the way they always did, only with the addition of a quiet person who did her best to take up as little space and be as helpful as possible. We took turns cooking or cooked together. Back before she came, when she was still insisting on finding a hotel, I asked her if we could talk for just a minute on the phone. I wanted to know what her worst fear about staying here was, and after a pause she told me she was a vegetarian. I laughed. I should have thought of that one myself. It's why I don't like to go to other people's houses for dinner: I never want to tell people I'm a vegetarian.

We kept a common grocery list on the kitchen counter. Writers still came and spent the night; bookstore events were still packed. Most mornings, Sooki set out in the darkness to walk the two miles to a power-yoga class that started at six-thirty, despite the presence of my car keys on the kitchen counter and explicit instructions to drive. She walked to the hospital for chemo and then walked home. Treatments were on Wednesdays—three Wednesdays on, one Wednesday off—with immunotherapy (the trial) every other week. They took ten vials of blood on one visit, twenty-eight vials the next. How did she have twenty-eight vials of blood in her? When her white count was too low to get treatment, she would run up and down the stairs at the hospital, down from the seventh floor to the first and back up again, over and over, and then get retested. Sooki had been a marathoner, though her best event was a 10K trail run. Those she won. Miraculously, after a spate of vigorous exercise there would be enough white cells to slip her in just under the wire. She asked whether that was cheating and was told not to worry about it. It meant she didn't have to sit out chemo for a week. She liked the team in Nashville. She loved Dr. Bendell. The treatments left her tired, but she was managing. This chemo wasn't the nightmare FOLFIRINOX had been. She was painting. She was doing every part of her job that could be done over email or by phone. The plan was that she would go home to Los Angeles during her weeks off, and once UCLA started the trial, she could go home permanently. We were loaded with plans in those days.

I was leaving for Virginia. In bed the night before, I asked Karl, "How do you think this is going?"

He put down his crossword puzzle. "It's an honor, really. I think about all the people who would want her to live with them. It's almost unbelievable that she's here with us."

It made me think of something our neighbor Jennie had said. Jennie and I walked our dogs together after dinner, and Sooki came with us most nights, unless she had a phone call to return, unless she wasn't feeling up to it. "Do you ever miss being alone in your house?" she asked me once. "Just you and Karl?"

I thought about it for a minute, shook my head. "No, it's wonderful having her here."

"Know why?" Jennie said.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's because she's a saint."

Sooki exuded such an air of self-sufficiency that I scarcely thought to worry about her. Maybe it had something to do with her job. She had worked for Tom for almost twenty years, and part of her responsibility was to go out on location before he arrived, find a place to stay in Morocco, get a driver, figure out the food, figure out what there was to see if there was any time, which usually there wasn't. Figuring out Nashville was small potatoes for someone who had put together a Thanksgiving dinner for a film crew in Berlin.

I went to Virginia to see my friend Renée Fleming in concert. Afterward we sat up at the hotel and talked about this new coronavirus and whether the rest of her tour would be canceled. A couple of authors who were scheduled to have events at the bookstore had pulled out. At first we'd rolled our eyes, but now I was wondering if it would be melodramatic to cancel my April book tour of Australia and New Zealand. I surely would go ahead with the dates I had scheduled in the States. "Don't go anywhere you wouldn't want to get stuck," a doctor friend had told me. I didn't want to get stuck in Auckland, but if flights were canceled and I was stranded in Tulsa, Karl could always come and get me.

While I was in Virginia, a series of tornadoes hit Nashville. Karl's cousin was visiting from New Mexico, sleeping in the other guest room. As the warning sirens kicked in at four in the morning, only Sooki was awake. "I didn't know what I was supposed to do," she told me later. "Should I have woken them up and made them come down to the basement? Were they awake and choosing not to come to the basement?" She wanted to know what constituted being a good houseguest during a tornado.

What if you come to Nashville to take part in a clinical trial for recurrent pancreatic cancer only to be killed by a tornado? Sooki told me about evacuating for wildfires in the canyon where they lived in Los Angeles, a year and a half earlier, the night before she was scheduled to fly to North Carolina to have surgery. She and Ken put what mattered most in the car and started driving, waiting to see which way the wind would shift the wall of flame. They were lucky and the fire skated past. They were lucky to get up in the morning to fly across the country so Sooki could have a pancreaticoduodenectomy, also known as a Whipple procedure. Her best friends lost everything in that fire. All that was left was the wall around what had been their garden. But they had survived. She had her surgery at Duke and survived. Twenty-five people died in Nashville the night of those tornadoes.

I came back from Virginia and took Sooki to see the daffodils at the botanical garden, but we were too early. The grass was still brown and only a handful of the thousands of bulbs had opened. I took her to the J.M.W. Turner exhibition at the art museum. We saw two movies with my sister. One morning Sooki had coffee with Sister Nena and me before she went to a yoga class across the street from the restaurant we went to for breakfast.

"Oh, she's darling," Sister Nena said. Sooki left for yoga just as the waitress was bringing our eggs.

"She has pancreatic cancer," I said.

Sister Nena stopped for a minute to lock Sooki in her heart. I could see her doing it.

"I'd be grateful if you'd pray for her," I said, because while I was uncertain about prayer in general, I believed unequivocally in the power of Sister Nena's prayers. I'd seen her work in action.

Sister Nena nodded. "We all will."

Good, I thought. Get as many nuns on this as possible.

Every day Sooki came upstairs looking spectacular—embroidered jeans, velvet tops, a different coat, a perfect scarf. No outfit ever showed up twice. "How is it possible?" I said as I complimented her again and again. "You must have Mary Poppins's suitcase."

"The clothes are small," she said. "And I roll them all up. I'm a good packer." She told me she had packed for good cheer, having had the reasonable expectation that times would be hard and cheer a necessity.

I said, "I have access to every article of clothing I own and I couldn't pull myself together to look as good as you do going to chemo."

She told me she thought she'd put too much of her creative energy into her outfits over the years since she had stopped painting, though she might have said it to make me feel better.

I flew back to New York for two more events, the first one in Connecticut. I met an old friend from school who lived up in Harlem and she drove me out. We left early, taking into account the traffic that turned out to be eerily absent. We found a diner down the street from where I would be speaking. Our conversation was continually derailed by the television hanging over the counter. It seemed we had just driven through the U.S. epicenter of the coronavirus.

"Looks like we're sitting on the edge of the apocalypse," Marti said, leaving her french fries on her plate. Marti and I had hitchhiked through Europe together the summer we were nineteen. We had been in some scrapes before. We both agreed that if this was the brink of extinction, it was nice to be together.

Walking backward is an excellent means of remembering how little you know. On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was sitting in a café in the West Village with my friends Lucy and Adrian when a woman ran in and said a plane had just hit the World Trade Center. A plane? we asked. Like a Cessna? She didn't know. She hadn't seen it happen. We went out to the street on that bright morning to see a fire high up in the distance. The waiter came out and told us to get back inside. We hadn't paid the check. I paid the check. Lucy said she didn't have time for this. She was

teaching at Bennington, in Vermont, and this was the first day of classes. She had to make her train. We said our goodbyes and Adrian and I walked downtown to see what had happened. We both wrote for the *New York Times*. Surely there would be a story there for one of us. We had just passed Stuyvesant Park when the first tower fell. I would tell you we were idiots, but that's true only in retrospect. In fact we were so exactly in the middle of history that we had no way of understanding what we were seeing.

I had thought I was writing a novel about a woman who had left her family to go serve the poor in India. That didn't work. The mistakes I had made were so clear once I had finished. I was interested in her children.

At the country club in Connecticut, the event organizers began to apologize as soon as we were through the door. What with all the news of this new virus they thought there was a good chance people weren't going to show up. But everyone showed up, all four hundred of them packed in side by side, every last chair in the ballroom occupied.

"Welcome to the last book event on earth," I said when I walked onstage. It turned out to be more or less the truth. By the time I was done signing books that night, the event I had scheduled in New York the next day had been canceled. I had breakfast with my editor and agent and publicist, and when we were finished they each decided not to go back to the office after all. I caught an early flight home. It was over.

After dinner that night, Sooki and I sat on the couch and tried to watch a movie, but her phone on its leash began to ding and ding and ding, insisting on her attention. Tom and Rita were in Australia, where he was about to start shooting a movie about Elvis Presley. He was to play Elvis's manager, Colonel Tom Parker. All the messages were about Tom and Rita. They both had the coronavirus.

I leaned over to look at her phone. "They've been exposed to it?"

She shook her head, scrolling. "They have it," she said. "The press release is about to go out." I sat there and watched her read, waiting for something more, something that explained it. Finally she went downstairs. She was Tom Hanks's assistant and there was work to do. I floated upstairs in a world that would not stop changing. I was going to tell Karl what was happening but he was looking at his own phone. He already knew.

Wednesday's chemo hit Sooki on Friday afternoon. It took me a few weeks to figure this out but soon I could track it, the way her voice got quieter, the way she was less likely to look me in the eye. "How's the painting coming?" I would ask.

"I fell asleep."

"Then you needed to sleep."

"I need to go home," she would say, like home was another place she could walk to.

"You can't go home, and we don't want you to go home."

"You've been so nice, but you didn't sign on for this." She stood in the kitchen, holding her cup of ginger tea.

"I signed on for this."

She shook her head. "I can't tell you how appreciative I am. But I can't just live with you and Karl for the rest of my life."

Direct flights to Los Angeles had been suspended, and even if she'd wanted to fly to Dallas to wait and see whether the connecting flight would be canceled (because that's what happened now), her weekly blood draws underscored the fact that she scarcely had enough white cells to qualify for chemo, much less protect her from a pandemic while on a commercial flight. And anyway, UCLA had suspended its plans to start the clinical trial for recurrent pancreatic cancer. All across the country clinical trials were being postponed or abandoned in an attempt to deal with the overflow of patients being treated for COVID-19. All resources were now directed at a disease that was not the disease Sooki had.

"You can't kill yourself because you're afraid of being an inconvenience."

"I need to go home," she said.

"Let's wait and talk about it on Sunday. You can't go home before Sunday."

She was serious, but she was also tired, and so I could get her to agree. By the time Sunday came the urgency would have passed. In time, all I would have to say was, “It’s Friday. You always feel this way on Friday.”

“I do?”

“That’s what I’m here for,” I said. “I chart your emotional life.”

There was an important piece of information that hadn’t been made clear to Sooki when she came to Nashville; it was that, unlike the FOLFIRINOX, which had carved twenty pounds off her over twenty-four weeks, this course of chemotherapy had no end. She was to stay in the trial, three Wednesdays on, one Wednesday off, until the regime was no longer effective or, to put it another way, until she died. Sooki, I found out, was sixty-four.

Karl was seventy-two. The other partners in his clinic asked him to stay home and practice telemedicine until there was a better sense of how the pandemic would be resolved. The risk was too high. He agreed, and then kept finding reasons to go to work anyway. Old habits. I reminded him that in choosing to work, he ran the risk of killing our houseguest. That was how I saw the coronavirus—as something that could kill Sooki. Finally he stopped going in. I went to the grocery store and piled up the cart. I had come late to pandemic shopping, but fortunately the staples I relied on—chickpeas, coconut milk—were still plentiful.

If I knew nothing about Sooki before she arrived, I knew very little more three weeks later when we were spending all of our days together. Or maybe I should say I was coming to know her without knowing very much about her. People are not composed entirely of their facts, after all. Our interactions stayed in the present: Do you want to go for a walk? How’s the painting going? While we pored over every detail of dinner (Sooki revealed herself to be a great cook), we didn’t talk about her family. I knew that she worried about her ninety-four-year-old mother in Rye Brook, New York, and read to her grandchildren in San Diego over Zoom. When I asked her how she was feeling, she might admit to being a little tired or having a bit of a stomachache, nothing more than that. Tom Hanks was so completely absent from our conversations that I once asked her if he knew where she was. She looked startled.

“I mentioned it to him,” she said.

Somehow I imagined that she had mentioned she was in a clinical trial in Nashville but not that she was living with us, which didn’t feel like too much of an evasion, seeing as how she managed to live with us in the quietest way imaginable. She was indefatigably pleasant and warm while maintaining her distance. Whether she was trying to hold on to her own sense of privacy or what she perceived to be our privacy, I didn’t know. The truth was that we had no idea how long we were going to be together. Daughter, husband, sister, friend—none of the people scheduled to visit her could come now that the world was on lockdown. She had set up her life in the basement of our house, a place we never went. She painted and slept and did her work; she had her Zoom meetings and her Zoom gatherings with friends. Many nights after dinner, I would ask Karl where Sooki was and then we would start looking around for her. “She was right here,” Karl said. It was more like a magic trick than someone turning in for the evening. She was there and then she was gone and we wouldn’t see her again until the next morning.

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to stay downstairs,” I said.

“Oh,” Sooki said. “I don’t.”

“We’re just reading. You could sit with us and read if you wanted, answer emails. We could all be boring together.”

But she rarely stayed upstairs. On the few mornings she didn’t come up at her usual time, I imagined her sick, needing something, not telling me because she didn’t want to bother me. That had been one of her greatest fears about coming to stay with us in the first place, that she would be unable to take care of herself, that she would be a burden, that she would embarrass herself.

I didn’t worry about her embarrassing herself. I worried about her dying. I finally asked her to write down the phone numbers of her husband and son and daughter, telling her that if she got sick, if she were in the hospital unexpectedly, I’d need to know how to get a hold of them. The truth was that I had no idea how Sooki was doing, and I had no confidence that she would tell me.

“I wonder,” I said to her one night while we walked Sparky around the block, “do you think you’re a good assistant because you’re a private person, or did you become a private person because you’ve been an assistant for a long time?”

“I think this is just the way I am,” she said.

“You know that you don’t talk about yourself, right?” We were living together. We were in the middle of a pandemic. I didn’t see how it could hurt to ask. “I’m just wondering if you got in the habit of not talking about yourself because of the work you do.” I told her about a friend of mine who worked as an assistant for a hedge-fund manager in New York, and how she parked every piece of herself at the door when she went to work in the morning.

Sooki thought about it, or she thought about having to tell me. “I hadn’t meant this to be my career. I worked at the Bronx Zoo during school and then I did the whole bat thing. I made a documentary about my father. He had a program where he taught kids with Down syndrome and autism how to ride bikes.”

As it turned out, Sooki had done a lot of things. She’d worked on a documentary about George Romero called *Document of the Dead* (she was a zombie in *Dawn of the Dead*). She’d been a location scout, made wedding cakes, started a children’s clothing company, taught ceramics. For a while she filled in for a friend and was the assistant to a film director, and then another friend introduced her to Tom, who was looking for someone. Her kids were in school by then. She thought it would be fun for a while. But it turned out to be a good job, and Tom was a nice guy, and the travel was interesting. “Still,” she said, “I can’t help feeling like I should have done more with my life.”

“Call me crazy, but that seems like a lot.” We were well into March by then. The spring was cold and wet and endlessly beautiful because of it. The cherry blossoms hung on forever. Sooki hadn’t answered the question, but that was the day I felt as though we started talking.

What Sooki thought she should have done with her life was paint. She had wanted to study painting in college but it all came too easily—the color, the form, the technique—she didn’t have to work for any of it. College was meant to be rigorous, and so she signed up for animal behavior instead. “I studied what did not come naturally,” she told me. She became interested in urban animals. She wrote her thesis on bats and rabies. “My official badge-carrying title at the New York City Department of Health’s Bureau of Animal Affairs was ‘public-health sanitarian.’ The badge would have allowed me to inspect and close down pet stores if I wasn’t too busy catching bats.” Painting fell into the category of what she meant to get back to as soon as there was time, but there wasn’t time—there was work, marriage, and children. And then pancreatic cancer.

Renée Fleming spent two years in Germany studying voice while she was in her twenties. She told me that over the course of her life, each time she went back to Germany she found her fluency had mysteriously improved, as if the language had continued to work its way into her brain regardless of whether she was speaking it. This was the closest I could come to understanding what happened to Sooki. After her first round of cancer, while she recovered from the Whipple and endured the FOLFIRINOX, she started to paint like someone who had never stopped. Her true work, which had lingered for so many years in her imagination, emerged fully formed, because even if she hadn’t been painting, she saw the world as a painter, not in terms of language and story but of color and shape. She painted as fast as she could get her canvases prepped, berating herself for falling asleep in the afternoons. “My whole life I’ve wanted this time. I can’t sleep through it.”

The paintings came from a landscape of dreams, pattern on pattern, impossible colors leaning into one another. She painted her granddaughter striding through a field of her own imagination, she painted herself wearing a mask, she painted me walking down our street with such vividness that I realized I had never seen the street before. I would bring her stacks of art books from the closed bookstore and she all but ate them. Sooki didn’t talk about her husband or her children or her friends or her employer; she talked about color. We talked about art. She brought her paintings upstairs to show us: a person who was too shy to say good night most nights was happy for us to see her work. There was no hesitation on the canvases, no timidity. She had transferred her life into brushwork, impossible colors overlapping, the composition precariously and perfectly balanced. The paintings were bold, confident, at ease. When she gave us the painting she had done of Sparky on the back of the couch, I felt as if Matisse had painted our dog.

Most of the writers and artists I know were made for sheltering in place. The world asks us to engage, and for the most part we can, but given the choice we’d rather stay home. I know how to structure my time. I can write an entire novel without showing a page of it to anyone. I can motivate myself without a deadline or a contract. I was happy, even thrilled, to stop traveling. I had spent my professional life looking at my calendar, counting down the days I had left at home. Now every engagement I had scheduled in 2020 was canceled. With each day, I felt some piece of scaffolding

fall away. I no longer needed the protection. I was an introvert again. Sooki had come to our house thinking she'd be staying with someone who was gone half the time and busy the other half of the time. And there I was, going nowhere. It was just the three of us now, Sooki and Karl and me.

Sooki and I stood together in the kitchen, one of us washing the vegetables, the other one chopping, making it up as we went along. I wrote and she painted and then we made dinner. But our truest means of communication arrived in the form of old yoga DVDs. There was no more walking to a class in the dark of morning—everything was closed—and so I asked her if she wanted to exercise with me. I did kundalini yoga in the morning, a practice that was built around a great deal of rapid breathing, and then I went on to other things.

But once we had finished that first short practice, she turned to me, blooming. “This is what I need,” she said, excited. “This is what’s been missing.”



Self-Portrait, Nashville 2020

This story—which begins and begins—starts again here. Of course we would exercise together; it was good for both of us. Kundalini is nothing if not an exercise in breath, and as it turned out, breath was what Sooki was craving. More breath. Almost from the moment we finished that first practice, she identified it as part of her recovery, the thing

she needed to stay alive.

I had never found a way of asking what having cancer had been like for her, or what it meant to so vigorously refuse the hand you were dealt. With every passing day I seemed less able to say, Do you want to talk about this? Am I the person you're talking to, or are you talking to someone else downstairs late at night? I was starting to understand that what she needed might have been color rather than conversation, breath rather than words.

My continuous and varied relationship with exercise was an inheritance from my father. He was not one to miss a workout and neither was I. I'd practiced kundalini devotedly for years and then drifted, picking up other things, and while I'd stuck with the short class, I had amassed no end of DVDs. Now Sooki and I sorted through them like old baseball cards. We did a different hour-long class every morning, identifying our favorites, ordering more DVDs. All that breathing and twisting and flexing fed her, and the calm voice of the instructor seemed to be speaking directly to her. "This one is good for your liver." "This will help all your internal organs." "You are beautiful. You are powerful. You decide." We laughed at the simple optimism but we also caught ourselves listening.

Every morning before breakfast, we waved our hands in the air. We danced. We did up dog and down dog in endless repetition. And then one night, for reasons I cannot imagine, we decided to do it all again before we went to sleep. And that was that. Yoga and meditation for an hour in the morning was augmented with yoga and meditation for an hour at night. Surely we would take off the Wednesday mornings when she had to be at the hospital at seven o'clock. Never. She was going to be stuck in a chair all day, which was why it was necessary to do it again at night when she got home. We laughed at ourselves, at the practice, at the voice that told us we were flowers, we were leopards, but we didn't stop. I thought some nights my back would snap. I wanted to go to bed and read. But my sixty-four-year-old houseguest with recurrent pancreatic cancer asked for absolutely nothing but this. How was I going to say I was tired when she was never tired? She lit up with all that breath.

Or maybe it was the company. We had finally found a completely comfortable way of being together. I saw my mother and sister. I went to sleep with my husband. Most days I went to work at Parnassus for several hours, filling boxes. The bookstore was closed to the public, but we were still shipping orders. Yoga was Sooki's necessary social hour, and what I got in return was time with Sooki. There were so many other people who would have done anything to be with her—her mother and husband, her daughter and son and grandchildren, her sisters and all of her friends. How thrilled they would have been to have even a few of the hours she wasted with us. *These precious days I'll spend with you*, I sang in my head.

Pay attention, I told myself. Pay attention every minute.

Even as Sooki's white count continued to hover in the neighborhood of nonexistent, her CA 19-9 cancer marker number (that unreliable indicator we relied on) was dropping. "Maybe it's the trial," she said, "but I think it could just as easily be the food and the yoga."

I told her it was all an elaborate hoax. "You think you're getting chemo three Wednesdays a month but really it's a test to measure the effectiveness of kundalini yoga and kohlrabi." I had signed up for a farm-share box, and every week we were overwhelmed with pounds of mysterious vegetables.

I knew there was a part of her that believed that maybe what Nashville had to offer in terms of fighting cancer was happening in our house, that she was improving because she was with us.

The day I picked up Sooki from the airport in February she told me she would need to buy dry ice for Wednesdays. She was supposed to wear a complicated Velcro gel pack (unfortunately called a penguin cap) on her head on the days she had chemo. The four frozen caps were to be stored in a cooler filled with fifty pounds of dry ice. She was supposed to lug this cooler with her to the hospital every week. They clearly didn't understand she intended to walk, though knowing Sooki, she probably could have carried it. The caps had to be switched out every twenty-five minutes during treatment to ensure that her head stayed more or less frozen. "It's supposed to keep your hair from falling out," she said. "Or it's supposed to slow it down." She hadn't lost her hair on FOLFIRINOX, though she'd lost her sense of taste and smell, the feeling in her feet and hands, and twenty pounds. FOLFIRINOX had also given her a profound aversion to cold.

“And you’re going to freeze your head for eight hours every week?” We’d been together for a matter of minutes. There was no reason to offer unsolicited opinions on a subject I knew nothing about to a person who had just gotten into my car, but the thought of a frozen gel pack on my own head struck me as boundless misery. Would it even work? I asked her. If she missed a session, would her hair fall out anyway?

Sitting there in her shaggy pink rock-star coat, Sooki told me how much she’d come to hate the cold. I said I thought it would be easier to be bald. The caps were in the Mary Poppins suitcase, along with her paints and easel, the large blanket she had brought us as a gift, and her extensive wardrobe.

A month later, I still hadn’t seen all the clothes she had brought with her, and I never saw the cold caps.

“Just think,” I would say to her on Wednesdays. “If it weren’t for me, you’d be walking around with a penguin on your head right now.”

Then one day she told me she was starting to shed. The next day she brought up the vacuum cleaner to vacuum off her yoga mat. The day after that she came upstairs wearing a sock hat.

“I’m going to have to have my hair cut,” she said. “Something happened to it while I was in the shower.”

“I can cut it.”

She shook her head. “It’s too weird.”

“There is no weirdness left between us,” I said. “And anyway, it’s my fault. I was the one who talked you out of the fifty pounds of dry ice.”

She took off her cap to show me the damage. It was as if 98 percent of her hair had fallen out, but somehow in the process, it had felted. The chemical tide that rose in Sooki’s blood had not only caused her hair to fall out; it caused that hair to mat into a solid surface. Small, flat islands of boiled wool were resolutely attached to her scalp by the 2 percent of hair that had not fallen out. It was a science experiment that could never be replicated.

“See?” she said.

I picked up one of the bigger islands and moved it gently back and forth. It was anchored by a quarter inch of hair at most but it was indeed anchored. Sooki got a stool and a towel and went to sit on the back deck. I went upstairs to get the scissors out of my sewing basket.

“You have a pretty head,” I told Sooki when the job was done. “I guess you never know if you’re the person who’s going to look good bald until you’re bald.”

She went inside to see for herself. She wasn’t about to tell me she looked good, but it was clear what I was talking about. There was a delicacy about her that was well-suited to baldness.

“I need to go home,” she said, looking at the pictures of herself she had asked me to take with her cell phone. Then she went downstairs and went back to sleep.

Later that day we sat side by side on our yoga mats, Sooki’s head wrapped artfully in a scarf. With our hands on our shoulders we turned left and right, left and right, endlessly.

“It’s so important to twist this way,” the gentle voice of the yoga teacher reminded us. “You’re detoxifying all your inner organs.”

That was what we had to hold on to, and so we held on.

When I look back on those first few months of the pandemic, all I will remember is recurrent pancreatic cancer. Recurrent pancreatic cancer kept me focused on the present moment. I wasn’t suffering the crashing waves of anxiety that battered down so many people I knew—though two hours of daily yoga and meditation also contributed to keeping panic at bay. While other people were left to worry about a virus that may or may not have been coming for them, I worried about Sooki. I had a concrete reason to be careful about the germs I was bringing into the house. It wasn’t that I could kill someone; it was that I could kill her.

I was also greatly occupied by the bookstore. Unlike so many other small businesses, we had the means to pivot. We still had customers even if they couldn't come into the store, and they were fantastically loyal. I was packing boxes, writing cards, and making cheerful videos in which I extolled the virtues of the books I loved. I would save what I could save, and, along with my business partner, Karen Hayes, and a small, ferocious staff (including my sister Heather) who never backed down, I was determined to save the bookstore. Sooki was desperate to be helpful. There were mornings we would go to the store at first light, when no one was around, and tape up boxes and stick on labels together. She was thrilled to get the chance to work. She kept saying she wanted to be the one to help me for a change. But all Sooki did was help me. She was the magnet in the compass. The very fact of her existence in our house kept me on track.

"What Sooki is," Tom wrote to me in an email later, "is all that is good in the world."

We lived in that good world made up of yoga and chemo, the bookstore, cooking, painting, talking over dinner. We filled up the bird feeders twice a day, scrubbed out the birdbath every morning, tracked the relationship of a couple of lizards who lived in the planter on the deck. Sooki told me they were skinks. Stranded at home, Karl studied to get his instrument rating as a pilot. He watched classes on his computer and worked through calculus problems at the dining-room table. He talked to his patients on the phone. He would tell me how lucky we were, the three of us together. And we were. We knew it.

On the first Sunday in May, in the late afternoon, a storm kicked up, not expected but not a surprise either. Karl was sitting on the front porch and he called for me to come out. "Look at this."

I came and watched from the open door. The sky had turned a tenacious gray, the rain sheeting sideways. The wind was coming down the street like a train.

Karl spent a huge amount of time studying weather as part of his instrument-rating prep. "I've never seen a storm come up so fast." He leaned forward over the porch stairs.

"Come inside," I said.

He wasn't listening. He was watching the weather.

A tremendous explosion rocked the house, something far beyond thunder. A transformer must have blown up somewhere close by. Up and down the street the lights clicked off; our house went dark. All the neighborhood dogs began to howl and bark. On the porch, Sparky joined in.

"We need to go downstairs," I said.

"In a minute."

"Hey guys?" Sooki called.

"God damn it, get inside," I said to my husband. Twenty-five people had been killed in the last round of tornadoes in Nashville, two months before.

Sooki came outside and was caught in the spectacle. It would take nothing for her to blow away. I could already see her tumbling down the street. "Do you want to come downstairs?" she asked.

I tugged at Karl and the three of us went downstairs with the dog. By the time we sat down it was over. It had been no more than seven minutes start to finish. The rain went on for another half an hour, and when it gave up I put Sparky on his leash and the three of us went outside to wander and gape with our neighbors. About a quarter of the trees were down. Giant hackberries had fallen into maples and split them in half. A forest sprung up in the middle of the street. Telephone poles were down, and electrical wires snaked across the asphalt. They were dead, the wires, weren't they? Gingerly we picked our way forward. Catalpa flowers littered the sidewalk, though I hadn't realized the catalpa trees were in bloom. I scooped up a handful for no reason and carried them with me. It was a straight-line wind, a freak occurrence that came out of nowhere. The trees were down but not the houses, and the trees, from what I could see, hadn't fallen on the houses. They'd fallen on the mailboxes. They knocked one another down like dominoes. Karl looked up the name for it on his phone. *Derecho*. Spanish for straight, direct.

"First the tornadoes," Sooki said, taking picture after picture, the giant root systems pulling up slabs of earth taller than Karl, the bright spring grass meeting the sidewalk at right angles.

“Then the pandemic,” I said.

“The freak wind,” Karl said.

“And pancreatic cancer,” Sooki said.

“Let’s not forget the cancer,” I said, and we laughed.

That night there was still no power, and so we lit candles. We lit the gas stove with matches and made dinner. We played Scrabble and did our yoga from memory after Karl went to bed. We breathed deeply and flexed our spines.

“Well,” Sooki said when we were finished. We just kept sitting there in the stillness, the kind of dark that electricity wants us to forget ever existed. It was the last hour of a long day.

“Let’s go outside,” I whispered.

Sooki got her flashlight and blew out the candles. Sooki had been working for the bat squad in New York when a bicentennial parade passed in front of the Bureau of Animal Affairs. People were dancing, laughing, and so she went outside. She met a group of sailors who had sailed around the world. One of them was shirtless and had a colorful parrot on his shoulder. Sooki had had a toucan in college. Surely there was a piece of this story she was leaving out because the next thing I knew she’d sailed off with them. She was twenty-one. She joined the ship’s crew. They sailed to St. Barts in a beautiful old wooden boat named *Christmas*. She had once shown me a picture of herself standing in the surf wearing a bikini, a sarong tied around her narrow hips.

I woke up the dog and the three of us left in the darkness. We weren’t the only ones who felt restless. People were sitting in their cars, in their driveways, charging their phones. People were out with their dogs. They were on their porches, laughing. I didn’t understand what it was, but something was in the air. Everyone was wide awake, waiting up to see if the world was going to end.

Sooki and I shined our flashlights on the smooth bark of the trees that lay across the streets. We shined them into the beds of purple iris that stood tall and straight, untouched. We climbed over branches, met an impasse, turned to walk another way. The water in the creek a block away skimmed the bottom of the footbridge. We talked and then we didn’t. It was enough just to be together in all that darkness.

The power was out for four days, those rarest of days in Nashville when it was neither too hot nor too cold. I cleaned out the freezer and the refrigerator and at every moment thought, *We are so lucky.*

Before I can start writing a novel, I have to know how it ends. I have to know where I’m going, otherwise I spend my days walking in circles. Not everyone is like this. I’ve heard writers say that they write in order to discover how the story ends, and if they knew the ending in advance there wouldn’t be any point in writing. For them the mystery is solved by the act, and I understand that; it’s just not the way I work. I knew I would write about Sooki eventually, I had told her so, but I had no idea what I’d say. I didn’t know how the story would end.

“She’ll die,” Karl said. “People die of this.”

But wasn’t there also a scenario in which she didn’t die? The chemo, the clinical trial, the yoga and the vegetables, the prayers of nuns and all the time to paint—what if it added up to something? What if there was some strange alchemy in the proportions that could never be exactly measured and, as a result, she lived, only to die at some later point from the thing no one saw coming: a pandemic, tornadoes, a straight-line wind.

There is a magnificent quiet that comes from giving up the regular order of your life. Sooki came to Nashville and stayed in one place, no more movie stars, no more trips to Morocco and Tan-Tan. In Tan-Tan there was no electricity at night, either. She and Tom would walk in the desert in the early mornings and she would feed him lines from a script while he memorized his part, cobras skating through the dust just in front of them. Death was there during those long, sunny days. Death was the river that ran underground, always. It was just that we had piled up so much junk to keep from hearing it.

Sometimes Sooki would leave money on the kitchen counter, “For groceries,” she would say, “for gas, for the books.” I would shake my head. “Don’t do this.”

That was when her eyes would well up. Sooki, bareheaded, her silver earrings dangling down her neck. “I have to feel like I’m contributing. I can’t always be the one who’s taking everything.”

But of course I was the one who took everything. Why couldn’t she see that? The price of living with a writer was that eventually she would write about you. I was taking in every precious day. What Sooki gave me was a sense of order, a sense of God, the God of Sister Nena, the God of my childhood, a belief that I had gone into my study one night and picked up the right book from the hundred books that were there because I was meant to. I had a purpose to serve. The CA 19-9 had gone from 2,100 to 470. The tumor in her liver was shrinking. A hundred thousand people in this country had already died of the coronavirus. We were still at the beginning then. But thanks to Sooki, there was enough quiet in my house, in my own mind, that I could hear the river running underground, and I wasn’t afraid.

Sooki worried about her mother, who had been admitted to a hospital near Rye Brook for a urinary tract infection. Sooki left messages for the doctors and put her phone at the end of her yoga mat, waiting for the call back while we practiced. When they called, she asked them all the right questions. She was an expert in dealing with the medical system, after all. It made her crazy not to be there to help.

“I can fly you up,” Karl offered, once her mother was safely home. “We can go up and back the same day.”

Sooki had twice flown down to Mississippi with us to visit Karl’s ninety-eight-year-old mother. She liked to fly. The idea of the considerably longer trip to New York was good news. Sooki’s mother lived two miles from the Westchester airport. From her patio, she could watch the planes take off and land. Once a pilot, always a pilot. Sooki’s two sisters, one in Connecticut and one in Massachusetts, could meet them there, a family reunion at the airport. Everyone could bring his or her own sandwich and stay safely apart.

“It’s too much,” Sooki said.

Karl disagreed. “It’s not too much. I’m supposed to be flying.”

The trip came together quickly. They would leave in four days. Karl worked out the plans. He would bring a copilot to split up the hours. They would stop each way to refuel in West Virginia. Her sisters were in, her mother was thrilled.

The problem wasn’t how the trip would be organized, but what it meant—pandemic, cancer, ninety-four. Implicit in the idea of everyone getting together was the reality that this could be the last time it would happen. How do you fly from Nashville to New York in a single-engine plane for a two-hour visit? How do you get back on the plane to come home?

Sooki hadn’t lost weight but she was losing her ability to project her voice. It had been happening for a while. Sometimes I had to get right in front of her to hear what she was saying. “It’s so amazingly generous of Karl,” she whispered uncertainly. She kept to herself, sleeping and painting, trying to wrestle it out. “Of course I want to go. It’s just . . .”

I waited but nothing came next. Nothing had to.

The next morning, we went to the bookstore early and picked out presents for everyone in her family. We went to the bakery across from the bookstore and bought spinach-feta bread and cinnamon-raisin bread. We went home and baked a spectacular cake that was especially well suited to travel. “It’s like you’re going home to the Ukraine for the first time in ten years,” I said as we loaded up coolers and bags. I had gotten up in the dark to make stacks of sandwiches. Whether all of this together was what helped, or whether she had made up her mind to see only the good, I couldn’t say. Probably it was some combination of the two. But by the time Karl and Sooki left for the airport she was happy.

They told me the story later: How after they landed, when they were all standing together on the lawn outside the small airport, a police officer came and told them they had to disperse. Westchester was still a pandemic hot spot and there could be no congregating, even outside. Karl, being Karl, took the officer around the corner to explain the situation.

“We have some picnic tables outside the police station,” the officer said. “No one will bother you there.” The station happened to be next door to the airport, so everyone picked up their coolers and walked over. All day long Sooki emailed me pictures of her family with the subject line *Where is our other sister?* She meant me.

When Sooki and Karl got home that night, they were elated. Karl loved Sooki’s family and they all loved Karl. He and the other pilot talked flying with Sooki’s mother. “She told me that she had to put Sooki on a leash when she was little because she ran so much. No one could keep up with her. Every time her mother turned around, Sooki was gone.”

Sooki, the middle daughter. “What about your sisters?” I asked.

“No leashes on them,” she said.

In bed that night, Karl told me about how happy they all were, how kind. He said that Sooki was good when they left. She had made up her mind that it was going to be okay.

I turned out the light and kept thinking about the leash, the marathons, the trail running, the yoga, the walking in the desert, the painting and painting and painting. The energy it took to stay alive, the impossibility of quitting. I didn’t know what I would have done in her place, but I imagined that upon getting the news of recurrent pancreatic cancer I would go see my lawyer and settle up my tab with the house. Maybe I would find the fight in me, but I was never much of a fighter. Sooki wore a leash as a child, the energy in her tiny frame too much for her mother to control. Many were the mornings the yoga felt endless to me, and so I would give her a wave as I left the mat and headed off to my desk. To the best of my knowledge, she never quit.

More news about planes: friends of mine in Nashville who knew what was going on with Sooki, and who have a house in California and a jet that takes them there, the nicest possible friends, offered her a ride home. They were flying out at the end of May. It was her only chance of getting back safely anytime soon. The same trial she was part of in Nashville had finally commenced at UCLA, twenty minutes from her house. Her California and Tennessee oncologists had conferred so that she could transfer from one hospital to the other without missing a treatment. Everything was lined up—except Sooki didn’t want to go.

My goal was to maintain neutrality. I told her as much. She shouldn’t stay for us or leave for us. She was welcome. No one had ever been so welcome. “You can live here for the rest of your life,” I said, and I meant it. These days were concentrated like no time I had ever known. She had moved in before the pandemic. We had been together for the duration of this new world. But of course the thing to do would be to go, wouldn’t it? She must miss all those people she so rarely spoke of.

“I’m afraid if I leave I’ll never see you again,” she said in a voice I could barely hear.

It was possible, and I had no intention of thinking about it. “I wonder whether it isn’t easier here because you don’t have to comfort us, you don’t have to make us feel better about the fact that you’re sick. You can just concentrate on yourself.”

She shook her head. “It isn’t that.”

It’s funny, but all this time I was sure it was exactly that. I’d come up with the answer months ago. Our house was a holding pattern, a neutral space without expectation where all that mattered was her recovery.

We were standing in the kitchen in the late afternoon, the time before dinner and between two yoga sessions. “I like myself here,” she said softly.

I had to listen to what she was telling me. I had to turn myself away from the movie of what I thought was happening, the movie I had made for myself, so that I could see her.

It was so hard for her to talk. I stood there, close, willing myself not to fill in her sentences. She told me that at home she had become impatient and angry. She had wanted her life to be different, and now it was. She had wanted to be a better person, and here she believed she was better. She liked herself again. She wasn’t just her illness. She was an artist. I saw her as an artist. “The fact that the two of you want me here, that you love me, that you believe in me—it makes me believe in myself. I don’t want to give that up.”

“You’ll never have to give up the friendship or the love,” I said. “And if you decide you want to stay, well, you don’t have to give that up either.”

Sooki the Tireless, Sooki the Indefatigable, looked as if she was about to split apart. She said she didn’t know what she was going to do. “I can’t just stay here forever.”

But she could. I had no idea whether it was a good idea, but she could.

That night I tried to explain it to Karl. “This whole time I’ve gotten it wrong. I thought I was helping and now I wonder if I’ve made it worse.”

“How could you have made it worse?”

“By showing her what her life might have looked like and then sending her home.” By seeing what I wanted to see instead of what was actually in front of me. Mine was the sin of misunderstanding, of thinking that a clinical trial was the point of the story.

The days went on and I could feel Sooki slipping, hounded by her own indecision. Here she was an artist who lived with a writer. Here she was the person she had meant to be. One night after we’d finished our yoga and meditation, we were lying on our mats, staring up at the ceiling. Sparky had crawled onto my chest and gone to sleep. I asked Sooki if she had any interest in trying psilocybin.

It’s essential to the life of a novel—to come upon the turn you never saw coming.

I knew people in college and graduate school who took mushrooms, and then about thirty years passed before I heard anything about them again. Now I knew several people who were using them as part of therapy. Plant medicine, they called it now. When you’re young you’re getting high, and when you’re old you’re using plant medicine, like herbal insect repellent. Still, wasn’t it worth mentioning?

Sooki said she’d heard about it, too, and knew other cancer patients who’d tried it, but she was hesitant, as any right-minded adult would be hesitant about adding the X factor of fungi into an already complicated chemical mix. We started looking up articles on the Johns Hopkins website. The reports were overwhelmingly positive:

Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer . . . High-dose psilocybin produced large decreases in clinician- and self-rated measures of depressed mood and anxiety, along with increases in quality of life, life meaning, and optimism, and decreases in death anxiety.

“Maybe,” she said.

I don’t drink. I’m a vegetarian. My only prescription is for vitamin D. If I’d had a coat of arms, it would have read QUALITY OF LIFE, LIFE MEANING, OPTIMISM. “Would you feel better about it if I did it with you?”

She looked at me. “Aren’t we talking about doing this together?”

“Oh,” I said. “We are. Of course we are.”

This is how we arrive at the next chapter of the story.

The trick wasn’t getting the mushrooms. I knew how to do that. The trick was coming up with the nerve to confess our plans to Karl. I presented him with the studies from Johns Hopkins. Seventy percent of participants rated it among “the most personally meaningful and spiritually significant experiences of their lives.” He rolled his eyes, but he kept reading. Marriage meant that he would hear out what on the surface may have appeared to be a spectacularly stupid idea. Marriage also meant that I would listen if he tried to talk me out of it. I wasn’t looking for permission, but it was a matter of mutual respect.

He read several articles while I waited. “Okay,” he said.

“Really? You don’t think this is crazy?”

“I didn’t say that, but I know you’re trying to help Sooki.”

When we turned out the light that night I felt myself buzzing with happiness: After nearly three months of lockdown, we were going to have an adventure. Travel while staying at home! I don’t know why I didn’t have the sense to worry, but I didn’t. My friends who had tried it all had positive experiences, new books extolled the virtues of seeing the beauty and connectivity of all life, and there was a chance that this experience, coming so far out of left field, might be just the thing Sooki needed.

It took a while to get the mushrooms. A friend who was well versed in the experience brought them over early in the morning on Memorial Day. I had interviews scheduled all day on Tuesday, Sooki had chemo on Wednesday, and my friends were leaving for California on Thursday. It was now or never.

My friend told us we should wear eye masks and cover ourselves with blankets. There was a six-hour playlist that the Johns Hopkins team had put together that was meant to somehow guide you safely through the experience. Sooki had downloaded it. We were ready.

“It’s important to think about your intentions before you start,” my friend told us. We were sitting in the den at 7:30 AM. My intention was to help Sooki. There was no other reason for me to be going on the cancer patient’s journey.

“It’s okay for us to be in the same room,” Sooki said, a statement rather than a question.

My friend tilted her head. “I wouldn’t. Things can get very confused. There aren’t a lot of boundaries. Or I should say the boundaries you think are there tend to fall away. I wouldn’t be on the same floor of the house.”

She said we could expect to be in the thick of things for an hour and a half, maybe two hours, with some residual effects for another three or four hours after that. “And even when you’re in the middle of it you can still get up and go to the bathroom. It’s not like you’re stuck in one place.” I would have given her a hug but for the pandemic. I promised to call when it was over.

Then Sooki and I went to the kitchen, mixed our pre-measured packets of mushroom powder in with yogurt, and poisoned ourselves. We headed upstairs to lie side by side on our yoga mats, deciding to disregard my friend’s advice about staying on separate floors. We were in this together. That was the point of everything. Karl and the dog went out on the front porch to read the newspaper.

We put on the music, the eye masks, covered up. We waited. Then came the moment one feels on a roller coaster just as the bar locks into place and the car starts to pull up, the body pressing back into the seat, knees out ahead, and you think, Wait a minute, was this the best . . .

“Ann?”

I pulled up my eye mask. Karl was standing in the doorway. He told me he was going to take his grandsons to the river to go boating. It was Memorial Day, after all.

“You’re not staying?”

He shook his head. I felt the car pulling up and up, just about to tip over the cresting track. Had we not talked about the part where he stuck around to oversee our health and safety? Maybe not. Remember in the future not to make assumptions. Click, click, click. I rose as I pressed against the floor.

“Is it working?” he asked.

“It’s working,” Sooki said.

And then, it seemed, he left.

The car was taking me into yellow, not a field of yellow but into the color itself. There are no words here, I thought. I had put a notebook and a pen beside me on the floor before we started. Forget that. There was only color and the color was keeping time with the music, color breaking apart into tiles the size of Chiclets, the color of Chiclets, from which cathedrals rose in the sacred spirit of the Johns Hopkins playlist.

It occurs to me that I should put that playlist on again and listen as I’m writing this, but I will not. Vivaldi, Vivaldi, Vivaldi—that’s how it starts.

There was never so much color, spinning, building, reconfiguring, splitting apart. I tried to enjoy it but it was difficult to breathe. The car I was locked into was now hurtling down through a million winking flagella, every one a different color. Who knew there was so much color? It was my intention to vomit, but the idea of getting past Sooki was overwhelming. Sooki, in her eye mask, was lying so serenely beneath the furry blanket she had brought us from California that I wondered if she was dead. Still, it seemed possible I could get off the ride early by expelling the mushrooms. I desperately wanted to vomit, to turn back time. I crawled around her as carefully as I could and collapsed in the hallway.

Reading about other people's hallucinogenic experiences is like listening to other people's dreams at a dinner party. What's fascinating fails to translate. Suffice to say the car I was strapped into followed a tunnel down into dark and darker colors, narrower spaces. Where I was going was death. My death. Two words I kept trying to bring up as I convulsed on the bathroom floor.

"You okay?" Sooki asked. There she was in the doorway, outlined in neon tubing.

"Sick," I said.

"Are you breathing? You have to remember."

Facedown on a bath mat, I forced myself to take a breath.

"You should come back to the music," she said sympathetically.

I couldn't muster whatever it would have taken to follow her, but I could hear the music fine from where I was, Górecki's Symphony No. 3, Arvo Pärt, pieces I had loved and would love no more. "We did this to ourselves," I said, or maybe I didn't say it. She was already gone. By the time the playlist had reached "Tristan and Isolde," my skull was a horse's skull, dry and white and empty.

"I 'm dying," my friend had said to me.

"I'll go with you," I said.

This was not a two-hour journey. This was eight hours of hard labor. I wanted Karl's comfort and was glad he wasn't there. I was sorry for what I'd done to him, by which I meant poisoning myself. We'd had a very good life. I felt like someone was slamming me against a wall, not in anger but as a job. My breath was roaring now, in and out, my lungs enormous bellows that would not tolerate my death. These months of exercise would save me. Save me. When I was very nearly at the end, I came to a beautiful lake, the kind you'd see on a Japanese postcard, or my imagined picture of a Japanese postcard. My little dog Rose, now ten years gone, came out to meet me, running giant circles of exuberance in the soft grass. There was my grandmother, my father. They were waving. That was my reward.

I had set my intention to help my friend, to hold her hand and go with her while she went to peer over the cliff, the cliff that, coincidentally, I fell off.

When it was over, I managed to make my way into the shower, perhaps the biggest single accomplishment of my life. Sooki went downstairs to her room. Karl came home and we sat on the couch and watched a storm tearing up the backyard. I thought he was angry and at the same time I knew my judgment to be flawed. I was angry at myself. I thought he *should* be angry at me. I pushed my face into his shoulder, apologizing. "For what?" he asked. He knew. Didn't he know?

"For being careless with our lives."

He got me a can of ginger ale and I tried to eat half a banana. Was this what COVID-19 felt like? I couldn't stay upright, a hangover from the last eight hours in which I had been quite memorably deboned. I was no longer sick or well. Where was Sooki? She couldn't be alone.

After a while she drifted up to the kitchen, taking a stab at the half of banana I had abandoned. "Are you okay?" I asked. I was having trouble with my own volume now. "I was so afraid I'd killed you."

Outside the rain was dark and lashing. Sooki had brought her computer with her. She was checking email or trying to make notes. "It was so important," she said, her voice pretty much vanishing in her mouth. I was trying to read her lips. I knew I should sit with her at the table but I couldn't imagine it.

"Are you not sick?"

She looked at me. "No, I'm fine. Are you sick?"

I nodded.

“Maybe it’s all the chemicals I have in me already. I’m good. It’s just.” She stopped. There were no words because it wasn’t about words.

“Was it like they said it would be, life-changing? Are you not sorry you did it?” I felt like it took me two minutes to put that much together.

“There are so many things I understand now,” she said. “All the people who love me and how hard this has been for them, the cancer. I could see them—my family and my friends. I felt their love for me. I could see what they needed and what they’d given me. I could see Ken and how he’s always been there for me, how he steps back to let me shine. I could see what the cancer’s given me. If it hadn’t been for the cancer, I never would have come here. I wouldn’t have had this time with you and Karl. That’s worth everything.”

“So it really was what they said, a definitive spiritual experience?” She’d seen people. She had felt their love and heard their voices while I was hacking up snakes in some pitch-black cauldron of lava at the center of the earth.

“Absolutely. I can’t tell you how grateful I am. Did you have a hard time?”

“I had a hard time.”

“What was it like?”

“Death,” I said. I didn’t say, Your death. I didn’t say, This thing you live with every minute, this heaving horse’s skull, I held it for you today so that you could talk it out with the people who love you. I had set my intention going in: I wanted to help my friend. In making the journey to Oz, she had found the strength and clarity she needed to go home again.

Someone wound the clock and suddenly the second hand, so long suspended, began to tick again, pushing us forward. Sooki let my friends with the plane know that she would be there on Thursday. She had to pack her boxes the next day, Tuesday. Wednesday was chemo. She’d scarcely left the house for more than three months and yet it was impossible to push the world back into the Mary Poppins suitcase. On her last night we sat in my office after yoga and I asked her every last question I could think of—when did she work on the documentary about George Romero, and when did she marry Ken? What was the line of children’s clothing called? When was she first diagnosed with pancreatic cancer? How had she known something was wrong? All this time I’d been afraid of prying, only to discover that Sooki was happy to talk, to tell me about the bats, the sailboat to St. Barts, the desert in Tan-Tan, the surgery. She told me that part of the reason she’d been hesitant to stay with us was that she didn’t want to trade on Tom’s friendship with me. That she’d always been so careful not to cross any lines, not to advance herself through connections she’d made through him.

“Not to advance your cancer treatment? Are you serious? Can you imagine Tom sitting at home saying, ‘I can’t believe Sooki used my connections to get into a clinical trial in Nashville?’”

“No, of course not, I’m just telling you. I remember when you asked me months ago if he knew I was here and I panicked. I try to keep all the parts of my life separate.”

We will never know all the things other people worry about.

She told me how lovely it had been to lay down the burden of her own vigilance. That at home she felt responsible for overseeing every aspect of her treatment, researching cures, double-checking medical orders—she had caught a few harrowing errors along the way, near misses—but here she knew that Dr. Bendell and Karl always had their eyes on her. She had their protection, and that knowledge had opened up so much time in the day. We talked about the nightmare of health insurance—and how the percentage of treatment costs she and Ken had to pay out of pocket had wiped out their retirement, had wiped out everything. “I should have planned better,” she said.

“You should have planned for the financial fallout of having pancreatic cancer twice?”

She said yes.

How had I not asked her all these things before? She was perfectly willing to talk, she wanted to, and now she was leaving in the morning. Why had I been so careful?

Because I was trying to protect myself. I had been afraid of how the story would end.

On Thursday morning I started to cry while walking Sparky. It came out of nowhere, like one of those weird storms that had plagued us in the spring. I never cry, and yet I had plans to do nothing else for the rest of the day and maybe the rest of the week. Sooki's impending departure touched a memory I made a point of not revisiting: My sister and I flew from Tennessee to Los Angeles for one week every summer to see our father, and on the morning of the day we were going back to Tennessee I would start to cry. There was no stopping it. It would be another year before I saw my father again, an unimaginable unit of time in the life of a child. There was no money or freedom or wherewithal to buy another ticket and see him sooner. And now there was a pandemic, recurrent pancreatic cancer, and so this goodbye reminded me of my father coming onto the plane with us, sitting with me and my sister, the three of us sobbing inconsolably until finally the flight attendant would tell him he had to go.

Sooki washed her sheets and towels, cleaned the bathroom, vacuumed. She lugged her suitcase out to the car without my knowing it. When she came upstairs ready to go she was wearing the black-velvet coat with the peonies on it.

"You had it here all this time?" The coat wasn't the way I had remembered it. It was so much more beautiful, the overlaying color of every petal, the very light pink against the blackness.

"I was saving it," she said.

How was that possible? How could anything have been saved? How could there still be so many things I didn't understand when our time was nearly over?

Karl had gone back to work by this point, but he canceled his afternoon appointments to drive us to the hangar where my friends kept their plane. We were early, they were late. I was grateful for both of those things. I was grateful. Karl went to talk to the pilots about the plane and Sooki and I sat in the little waiting area. We tried to be jolly and failed and cried again. Look at what a success this time had been! Her CA 19-9 was 170, down from 2,100 when she arrived in February. Now she would go home to her husband, her children, her grandchildren, her friends. Tom and Rita were back from Australia. They had recovered. There was work to do. UCLA would fold her into their trial, everything seamless. We had found each other and we would not be lost. We repeated these facts, we made them a mantra.

My friends arrived and we waved at one another from a distance as they gathered Sooki up. Out on the tarmac, I could see her again exactly as she was, resplendent in her velvet coat, her black beret. Sooki, who was light and life and color itself. A minute later everyone was on the plane and gone.

MAY 31, 2020: *I've already worked out this morning. I did a Pilates DVD we never got around to. It had zero spiritual component. Your hike looks gorgeous and loaded with spiritual component. If there were too many people there, you managed to crop them out. There are suddenly people everywhere. The park was packed this morning. What will happen?*

Forget about the heartfelt letters. You yourself are heartfelt, and all the love in the world has been expressed. There is no sense in putting that burden on yourself. Karl is not waiting on a thank-you note, I promise. I understand the impulse but I also think we've transcended it. (I say this as someone who is spending my days trying to write about our friendship and what happened here. It's HARD. I keep throwing things out. I'll get there but it's no small task to try and sum this up.)

I sent you another book that will show up eventually, a tiny French novel I love called The Lost Estate (Le grand meaulnes) by Alain-Fournier. It may resonate.

I'm around if you want to talk. Just remember, Wednesday chemo left you very sad on Friday and Saturday, so it stands to reason that Thursday chemo will break your heart on Saturday and Sunday.

All my love.

MAY 31, 2020: *I had the most unusual dream last night. I'm not sure I can describe it without it sounding like an extension of the mushrooms, but it had that kind of depth and clarity of message for me.*

There was an abstract image, and it was clearly you—not in a physical way, but as a soul. The most important human qualities were being applied to this form. They would flow on in papery layers, in a creation act. It seemed to be key to the way humans were shaped, and I was aware that this was going on for others around you. But for you, there was also a vapor that would come in and fill in any gap that was left in the process, and I realized, "Oh, this is what is special here and so essentially Ann." There was a completeness. No empty spiritual space. Everything filled in.

I'm sure these words can't adequately convey what was such a radiant message, but it stayed with me so strongly as I woke up during the night, and that's the best I can describe it. I've never experienced anything like it, or you.

Have a wonderful day today. I'll send photos from San Diego. I think we'll be back tomorrow.

LOVE

As it turned out, Sooki and I needed the same thing: to find someone who could see us as our best and most complete selves. Astonishing to come across such a friendship at this point in life. At any point in life.

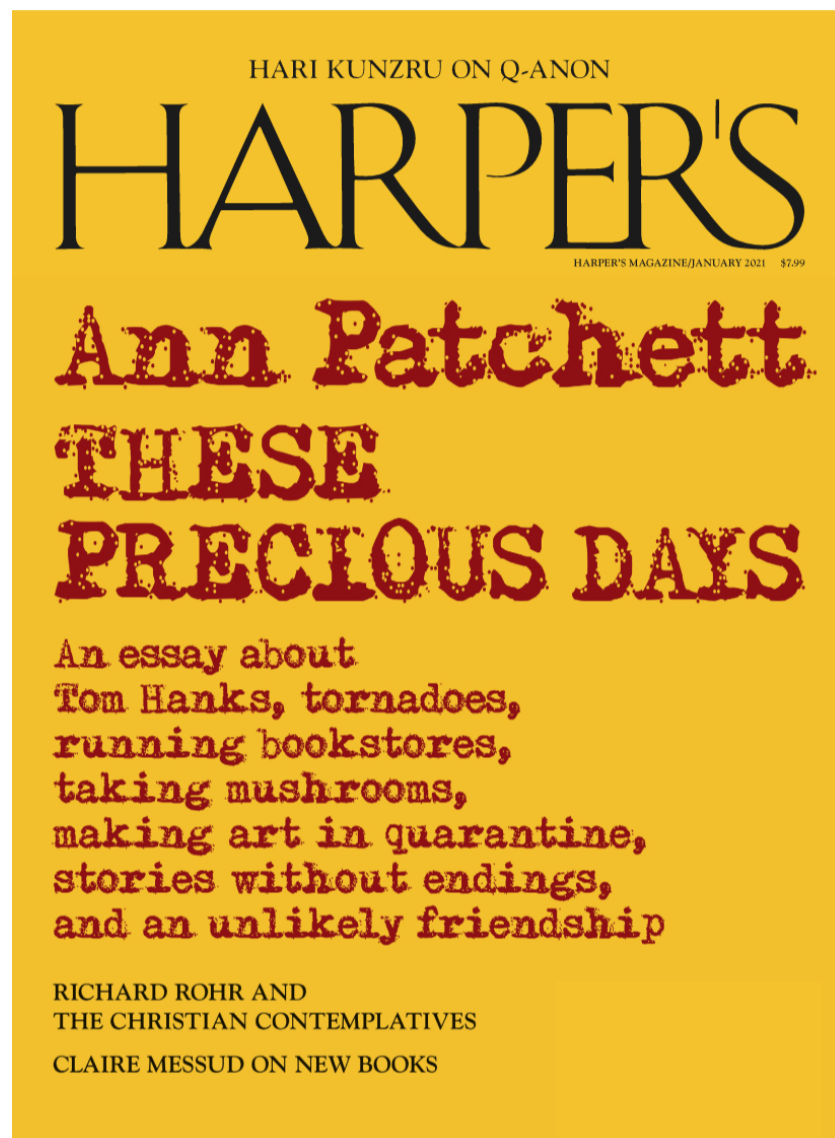
CA 19-9 is 66.7 as of this moment.

Tell me how the story ends.

It doesn't.

It will.

It hasn't yet.



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