

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Through These Eyes, by Lauren Ann Isaacson

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: Through These Eyes

Author: Lauren Ann Isaacson

Release date: August 13, 2011 [EBook #37060]

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THROUGH THESE EYES ***

Last Revised August 5, 2011

Through These Eyes

The courageous struggle to find meaning in a life stressed with cancer

An Autobiography by Lauren Ann Isaacson 1961-1986

Original Hardcover Book: Copyright 1990

Released into public domain: 2006

Library of Congress Catalog Card #90 93276

ISBN 0-9628196-0-3

This publication is made freely available to all on the internet, and on any storage of your choice. You may copy it as often as you like, and send it in total or in part to whomever you wish.

PLEASE NOTE: for your convenience to locate certain chapters, actual page numbers (as presented in the original hardcover book only) are listed in this text:
For example - PAGE 1 or PAGE 33

To find a given chapter, please hold your "CONTROL" key, then press your "F" key.
On MacIntosh Computers, please hold your "APPLE" key, then press your "F" key.

In the dialogue box, insert the desired text or number:

For example - 111

Press the "ENTER" key.

(111 is found in the Table of Contents.)

Press "ENTER" again.

(111 is found at the beginning of Chapter 14.)

You can use this same procedure to conveniently find any word, number, or short phrase in the entire book (or in any text file).

If the text seems to be misaligned or difficult to read, you might change the font on your text reader program to these settings:

Courier (or Courier New) Font
Ten point (10 pt) Text Size

Select either "Normal" or "Bold" print depending on your personal preference.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 Early Years 1 Chapter 2 My Brothers 11 Chapter 3 Todd's Illness 16 Chapter 4 Fifth Grade 19 Chapter 5 Norm / Marriage 24 Chapter 6 Norm / Reflections 28 Chapter 7 Todd / Reflections 31 Chapter 8 Sixth Grade 33 Chapter 9 Discovery of Tumor 38 Chapter 10 Preparation and Surgery 49 Chapter 11 Diagnosis and Recovery 53 Chapter 12 Chemotherapy 70 Chapter 13 Year at Home and Diary 87 Chapter 14 Summer 1976 111 Chapter 15 Return to School 114 Chapter 16 Divorce 119 Chapter 17 Ninth Grade 127 Chapter 18 Summer 1977 133 Chapter 19 Tenth Grade 137 Chapter 20 Eleventh Grade 140 Chapter 21 Twelfth Grade 160 Chapter 22 Summer 1980 167

Chapter 23 Black Hawk College 175 Essays: Views on Choice 181 Views on Awareness 183

Chapter 24 Interlude 187

Chapter 25 Return of Cancer 195 Essays: Suffering 212 Quality in Life 213 Bargaining and Prayer 214

Chapter 26 Categories of Acceptance 216 Chapter 27 Frustrations 225 Chapter 28 Christmas 1981 230 Chapter 29 Self Imposed Barriers 232 Chapter 30 Autumn at Augustana 236 Chapter 31 Depression 243 Chapter 32 Basic Day 246 Chapter 33 Treatment / Hoax 251 Chapter 34 Journey to Greece 254 Chapter 35 In Limbo 263 Chapter 36 Reflections 267 Chapter 37 Zenith of Grief 276 Chapter 38 Personal Belief 284 Chapter 39 Reminiscence 286 Chapter 40 God, My View 288 Chapter 41 Continuum 291

THROUGH THESE EYES, written by Lauren A. Isaacson (10 Dec 1961 - 16 Jul 1986), is rare in several respects. At the age of twelve, she was diagnosed as having cancer of the stomach; leiomyosarcoma is a cancer prevalent in older women. She was accepted at the Mayo Clinic for research, and after a five year period was given a clean bill of health. During her sixth year following chemotherapy, she was diagnosed as suffering from the same cancer; it had invaded the liver.

Lauren decided to write her life story. Her treatment of elementary school days, junior high, her year of chemo and her home tutor, her return to ninth grade wearing her wig, the first day she went without that wig, high school experiences, her modeling contract, the way she coped with her impending death, the continuing of her college education until she could no longer physically endure, the trauma of seeing her 32 year old brother die; all relate an aura, a searching for quality in each given day.

Her thoughts on acceptance, awareness, anger, guilt, her views of an omnipotent being, God; her ability to write poetry as she viewed and photographed life around her; the maturity and depth of her writings bring with them humor as well as pathos. She was concerned about those who loved her and those who medically assisted her. It was her hope to help others facing adversity, or who have loved ones suffering the direct trauma. Her journal was her companion as she coped with life. It brought her

peace and acceptance; she would hope it could do the same for others.

Much of her manuscript is complete; it was necessary for her to outline journal entries she wished copied. I, her mother, have completed those listings and have related her final two and one half days at Hospice.

Journal entry June 29, 1986...The night is loud with thunder; the deep, sharp rumbling that shakes the house as if to remind the world that it is alive. It is not subtle, but in its brazen clap, I can find reason to rejoice; I live in the shadows of a wondrous and beautiful world, yet thunder is one element of nature from which I have not been excluded, for it penetrates walls.

Lauren's exclusion began after Christmas, 1985. She was confined to her hide-a-way in the upstairs of her home until Hospice on 14 of July, and died 16 July, 1986.

Respectfully submitted,

Muriel K. Isaacson (Mother)

Dedicated to...

those who came with culinary delights who shared of their time making crafts and visiting who brought lovely plants, curios and books who shared roses from their garden who, through Laurie's five year illness, remembered her often with cards and gifts of money and especially those who lifted her name and her family in supportive love and prayer.

Journal Quotes

"Carrying a secret would have been like transporting a dandelion seed head on a windy day."

"Cancer. One word, and yet it made such a difference; it was almost mathematical; just as surely as positive and negative numbers, multiplied, equaled a negative response, certainty coupled with uncertainty yielded uncertainty."

"Cancer knew no barrier and bore no prejudice; cancer took the weak, the strong, the indifferent, the proud, the cheerful, the embittered; it took all, greedily in an unquenchable hunger."

"Only acceptance can wash away the flames born of despair."

"The more the mind grows the more humble its 'master' becomes, for he realizes that knowledge is infinity and infinity cannot be encapsulated in the human brain."

Excerpt from Diary

June 22, 1984

...In a relationship, truth can often times hurt. So, I am faced with the problem of whether to tell the truth or speak nothing. I would never choose to jeopardize a relationship, yet if that relationship is full of deception, or other undesirable attributes, and undiscerned by the other, is it noble to hold one's peace? For to bespeak truths could lead to ruinous separation...yet, a one-sided relationship is of no account.

If I could but harness the energy begotten of my anger towards self-obsessive persons, I could heat the house for a month. Perhaps, with time, I shall be able to transfer that energy toward the thinking of constructive thoughts. Anger cannot be felt without sustaining internal damage; a raging emotional fire surely must char the mind.

DEATH

Man's basic instinct is to survive, and despite all the civilizing and technological factors of the present, that basic instinct has remained. Though the improvements rendered on society through modernization has allowed each individual to live at a more leisurely pace, those same devices, conveniences and services have also separated each life from the healing qualities inherent in a life lived close to nature.

So often I have heard the remark, "Nature is cruel," yet I cannot regard that statement to be wholly true; nature should not be given a character which is labeled, at various intervals in time, as "good" or "bad"; it merely functions to the mutual interactions of all life. For life to continue, there must also be death. Nature is the intricate mechanism behind all living and dying things; it is reality in its most elemental sense. Unfortunately, it is the one reality which modern society has attempted to purge from all minds, and replace with a perverted idea of life; since it is nearly impossible for a man to live naturally, society has also obliterated the idea that one can die naturally, and quietly.

Even though one is facing death, it is yet difficult to relinquish that instinct, as well as the instinct to escape pain. One will do everything in his power to escape a sniper's gun, just as he would remove his hand from the hot kettle or jump at the prick of a needle. It is natural to protect ourselves. While sightless and immobile elderly may "want to die," they would never take their life.

In the case of disease and debilitation, a line must be drawn. When no treatment is available, one must say "enough" and try to find peace. Perhaps mercy will one day be a part of medicine.

Death should not be shielded from the young, and borne solely by the old; when death is faced, one can better learn to live.

Overcoming Disability and Death

The True Hero

Some may argue that the only true heroes confronting a terminal and/or disabling disease are those who have overpowered that disease. May I respectfully disagree?

Lauren fought valiantly to retain a best level of health and ability, in spite of day after day, night after night, of chronic nausea, sweating, and fatigue. To give courage to anyone facing chronic disease, she fought to continue writing, even when physically and mentally exhausted. She continued to write, even up to her very last days of life. She was, and is, the true hero.

If you have faith in a higher power than either yourself or humanity in general; and if you have overpowered your disease or disability by faith, you are to be highly commended. If, by the grace of that same power, you have given your best effort, and your disease or disability either totally destroys your capacity, or demands your life; you are also deserving of honor.

Even those who found healing through faith in a higher power eventually met their earthly death; most likely by some disease that they could not, in spite of their faith, overcome. And death is a blessing, a relief from earthly suffering, not a horrid finality.

Faith in a higher power can afford courage in death, and timeless eternity in love.

Lauren's brother,
Todd Isaacson

Monday, April 3, 2006
Revised November 29, 2006

Spanish Letter (from a pen-pal from New Zealand)

Hola!

Me llamo Dean
Soy de Nueva Zelanda
Tengo 29 años

Hay cuatro en mi familia, Mis padres, mi hermana y yo. Mis padres viven en Auckland, Nueva Zelanda. Mientras mi hermana vive en Wigan, Inglaterra con Su familia.

Mi padre Uama Merv. Fune cincuenta y cuatro años. Frabaja en La policia. Habla Maori y Jngles. Juega rugby y tenis. Foca La guitarra. Es muy simpatico, generoso, introvetido, sincero y sentimental. No es cruel, terrible y impulsivo. Se gusta viajar con mi madre.

Mi madre Uana Jan Fiene cincuenta años. Habla Jngles, no habla Maori. No trabaja tambier. Se gusta nadar y beber. Es muy simpatico, generosa, servical, impulsivo y guapa. No es cruel, introvertido y rebelde.

Mi hermana Uama Tracy. Tiene Viente y seis años. Tiene un esposo y dos niños. La nina el mayor que la nino. Habla Italiano y ingles. No habla Maori. Es guapa, simpatica, maravillosa, Trabajadora y divertida. No es optimista, terrible, cruel, y aburrida.

Letter as corrected, with gratitude to Esther Erbele, Waterloo, Iowa, April 19, 2006.

Please note: Since the English alphabet lacks certain features commonly used in Spanish, the following words are given below, with explanation:

llamo - pronounced YAH-mo.

años - requires a wavy line (tilde) over the n,
pronounced AHN-yos.

nina - requires a wavy line (tilde) over the second n,
pronounced NEEN-yah.

nino - requires a wavy line (tilde) over the second n,
pronounced NEEN-yo.

niños - requires a wavy line (tilde) over the second n,
pronounced NEEN-yos.

Ingles - requires an accent mark over the es,
pronounced een-GLES.

simpatica - requires an accent mark over the a,
pronounced seem-PAT-ee-kah.

simpatico - requires an accent mark over the a,
pronounced seem-PAT-ee-ko.

Punctuation: In Spanish, the exclamation point (and the question mark) appear at the end of the sentence, and "upside down" at the beginning of the same sentence.

Hola!

Me llamo Dean
Soy de Nueva Zelanda
Tengo 29 años

Hay cuatro en mi familia, Mis padres, mi hermana y yo. Mis padres viven en Auckland, Nueva Zelanda. Mientras que mi hermana vive en Wigan, Inglaterra, con su familia.

Mi padre se llama Merv, tiene cincuenta y cuatro (54) años. Trabaja en la policía. Habla Maori e Inglés. Juega rugby y tenis. Toca la guitarra. Es muy simpático, generoso, ocupado, sincero y sentimental. No es cruel, terrible o impulsivo. Le gusta viajar con mi madre.

Mi madre se llama Jan, tiene cincuenta (50) años. Habla Inglés, no habla Maori. No trabaja también. Le gusta nadar y beber. Es muy simpática, generosa, servicial, impulsivo y guapa. No es cruel, introvertido o rebelde.

Mi hermana se llama Tracy, tiene veinte y seis (26) años. Tiene un esposo y dos niños. La niña es mayor, que el niño. Habla Italiano e Inglés. No habla Maori. Es guapa, simpática, maravillosa, trabajadora y divertida. No es oportunista, terrible, cruel, o aburrida.

Letter translated by Esther Erbele,
Waterloo, Iowa, April 19, 2006.

Hello!

My name is Dean
I'm from New Zealand
I'm 29 years old

There are four (4) in my family, my parents, my sister, and I. My parents live in Auckland, New Zealand. Meanwhile, my sister lives in Wigan (Manchester), England, with her family.

My father named Merv is fifty-four (54) years old. He works in the police department. He speaks Maori and English. He plays rugby and tennis. He plays the guitar. He is agreeable generous, involved, sincere, and sentimental. He is not cruel, terrible, or impulsive. He likes to travel with my mother.

My mother named Jan is fifty (50) years old. She speaks English, does not speak Maori. She does not work also. (She is not employed outside the home.) She likes to swim and drink (refreshments). She is agreeable, generous, a helper, impulsive, and good looking. She is not cruel, introverted, or rebellious.

My sister named Tracy is twenty-six (26) years old. She has a husband and two (2) children. The girl is older than the boy. (Tracy) speaks Italian and English. She doesn't speak Maori. She is good looking, agreeable, marvelous, a good worker, and enjoys herself. She is not opportunistic, terrible, cruel, or boring.

(Lauren's trip to Mexico is presented on PAGE 160
Chapter 21 - Twelfth Grade.)

"Having no definite values, one is nothing, insubstantial and devoid of character."

CHAPTER ONE

Early Years

Long before I entered the world, my family indulged in activities which germinated lasting memories in their minds, and though I do not personally recall such events, their existence often touched my life in some way. Had my ancestors lived differently over the course of time, the most insignificant alteration could have impeded my very life. Such is the delicate thread from which humanity is suspended and on which we depend to obtain, and retain life.

The two individuals to whom I am inextricably bound, are, of course, my parents. Through their childhood reflections, I have been able to meld history into my being, for their past is part of me.

I always loved older people, especially those who had not allowed themselves to become embittered by time and the changes it renders upon all living and inanimate things. Too often, old age is maligned, as if it is a communicable disease that, avoided or ignored, will never touch more than that which it has already claimed. Reacting thus, an individual gains nothing and loses the joy begotten of the remembrances related through wrinkled smiles and twinkling eyes. Older people have much to give; love, which like a fine wine, matures and is sweeter with age; reflections of the past that, unheard, will be buried and appreciated by no one; and the wisdom and tranquillity of character that comes with the acceptance of death and the ability to live.

Many times I hear the complaint that an older person is "set in his ways" and will yield to no fresh mode of thought. To me, this indicates that the older individual has an established ethical and moral code which evolved through a life-long struggle for inner peace. Predictability, under these conditions, is earned; each of life's problematic questions had been meticulously solved, carving daily the beliefs which became the man. Having no definitive values, one is nothing, insubstantial and devoid of character.

I cherish my father's childhood memories, and always listen with fascination when he tells and retells past events. Through his speech, I am able to grasp the bygone years and color the family portrait of which I was never an active part.

My father's father died before I was born and his mother shortly thereafter. John Emil and Hilda Isaacson; ancient names, they seemed to me, yet Dad's memory brought life to their photographs and instilled in me a wish that I could have known them as had my father. John Emil was a character; and insatiable tease who provoked the more serious Hilda: he made dandelion wine and tested it so frequently that it was entirely consumed before attaining an alcohol consistency. He ice-sailed on the Mississippi, showing little concern for the dangers of air holes and thin ice while traveling at a high rate of speed. He had learned to swim by being pushed off a river barge.

Dad never learned to swim, perhaps because he was never given as good an opportunity as his father. This served as no impediment to fun, however. He was always busy; if he did not have toys, he made them, setting to work with a natural expertise for the mechanical realm. From the Buddy L and other junk yards and garbage heaps, he and his brother salvaged rejected parts and recycled them into usable toys. He fashioned bicycles in the same manner; later, parts were gathered....a scrapped frame, a model T motor from a neighbor, a coupe body from another area....Bravo!...the finished product...a car! When the gas in the tank was low, it was necessary to go backwards up the hill, allowing gas to flow into the carburetor.

Dad told of dares waged between himself and a neighbor boy wherein each boy jumped from one large tree to the branches of another tree; he laughed about the crabapples which he blew sky-high using firecrackers and a metal pipe. He recalled holidays, from the Christmas when his father told the children, "There will be no toys this year because you'll have a new baby brother," and his accompanying joylessness toward that news. Joy returned, however, when he received a wind-up train and the accompanying round track. He reminisced about the Easter egg hunts where the hoard was heaped upon the table, and, under four watchful sets of eyes, divided by size and color until the remaining odd number of eggs were given to his mother. I heard of the one valentine which he received

in second grade that had been used and reused countless times. I learned, also, of the severe case of diphtheria, which at six, nearly claimed his life. He related actually seeing fiery flames leaping from his bed sheets while struggling to overcome his high fever.

About the time that my father had reached ten years of age, my mother was born in Elgin, Illinois. I was privileged to interact with my mother's parents whose heritage was somewhat different from that of my father. My grandfather, Leslie Howard Anderson, was a descendant of Mary Chilton, who crossed the ocean on the Mayflower with her parents James and Susanna. She became the wife of John Winslow whose family came from Dartwich, England. There follows such historical places as Plymouth and Bridgewater, Massachusetts; the era of the steamboats and Mary Chilton's name gracing one of the boats; the name "Howard" down through the lineage to my uncle, Leslie Howard Anderson, Jr.; the descendants move from Bridgewater to Detroit, Michigan and on to Dixon, Illinois; the trek from Illinois in a covered wagon to lay claim to a quarter of a section in Ole Brul County in South Dakota, and the stories of homesteading in the little sod house whose walls were papered with newspaper...all fascinating!

My Grandmother Anna's parents came from Germany to America before they were ten years of age. In the 1800's the Kaiser was mobilizing his forces. Immigration was popular during this period. Grandma tells of fighting with her sister over who was to control (by hand) the dasher for the wooden washing machine; of hitting a fellow schoolmate over the head with her lunch pail because of his incessant teasing, of the shoulder that was a little lower than the other, and how her brothers would sit in church and keep moving their shoulders up and down to remind her to hold that shoulder "up" while she led the group in "Opening Exercises." Church school was an important part of her life and she served as a Sunday School teacher well into her 70's.

It would be nothing short of a lie to say that I actually remember my first years of life, having, as it was, little to do with life's crises except assuring myself of thoughtless comfort. I indulged in the selfish desires that typify the usual child, gleefully absorbed in play until I discovered that I had soiled my diapers or was shot with a pang of hunger.

Perhaps it would be accurate to say that my earliest memories were not truly remembrances at all, but rather, images that were repeatedly described to me until I finally adopted them for my own.

My earliest actual memories evolve around the age of four years. By that time, I was capable of performing many duties for myself, and my vocabulary was developing rapidly. I had the ability to form conceptions of others, and thus relationships began to materialize. I could now be considered an active family member, for I was no longer solely dependent upon my parents, or my siblings, to be the mechanism behind my existence.

I suppose that one might say I was spoiled to the extent that good loving can spoil a child, although each member of my family agrees that I was not spoiled in the obnoxious sense of the word. I was never a nuisance, either to other children or to adults. I promptly did what I was instructed to do; so obedient was I, in fact, that a strong word or tone of voice had the ability to bring tears to my eyes. I caused no trouble, nor did I want any trouble.

I recall an encounter with Great Uncle Gust in which I was bidden to sit on his lap. Upon close observation, however, I was appalled to discover that the elderly gentleman had only four fingers on one of his large hands. I shied away from him. This was a rather traumatic sight to deal with at that age, for I had only been exposed to the facets of life which would be classified as "normal."

Despite my timidity toward sharp words and unusual events, I cannot say this trait carried over into the physical world of scrapes and bruises. I rarely cried for bodily injury, electing on most occasions to laugh and exclaim about the stupidity of my lack of coordination. A case in point, falling off of Mary's bicycle into her father's bed of roses. I was willing to testify that rose bushes have plenty of thorns; however, I felt no use for tears.

A very early and, at the time, quite unpleasant instance would have to include an ill-fated picnic at a local park. After having eaten my fill of grilled pork chops and corn on the cob, I gingerly led the way down a well-worn trail. As I descended, I gradually gained momentum, eventually finding myself duly out of control of my legs. Consequently, I hurdled over a projecting tree root and landed in a ditch of broken beer bottles. I rose in terror, admonishing a true battle scar on my right hand.

Once at the hospital, a doctor was doing his best to aid my injury. I considered myself to be in terrific pain, and when he began attempting to clamp my wound, I felt that he was doing me no service. Outraged, I bit the doctor squarely on the arm. Apparently he didn't relish my lack of enthusiasm and quickly bit me back. I was a trifle shocked; however, I accepted the unspoken truce with no further outbursts.

I was also given to occasional inexplicable fears, such as a fleeting intolerance for what I considered "fast and dangerous vehicles," including sled rides and motoring about in our home-made go-cart, dubbed "the chug." My mom would soon tire of my ridiculous reactions to those things most children would consider fun, and override my stubborn insecurity by making me ride. The other kids were right. It was fun!

More than anything else, I liked to be at home. I loved to romp through the woods or busy myself indoors. Aside from my neighborhood friends, I seldom sought interaction with others of my age; spending much of my time with adults or alone. I was content with my crafts, swing-set and the like. This attribute may account, to a degree, for my shyness and lack of enthusiasm for group activities. On the whole, I found it very difficult to speak at gatherings unless a question was deliberately pointed in my direction.

As do most children, I enjoyed Kindergarten, although I did not mingle with others during free-time. I found the various activities to be interesting and to my liking. I loved the many art projects, except those in which we were forced to use messy paste pots. I detested sticky fingers, and was shocked to discover that some children liked paste to such a degree that they would eat it. I recall stringing beads to create necklaces through the duration of many play-times; the teacher would sometimes suggest that I play with the other children, but that idea I strongly opposed. I would, on occasion, join the group at her bidding, but shortly I would excuse myself to once again make necklaces. I simply did not relish pandemonium.

Grade school proved to be neither a happy nor unhappy affair. I considered it an integral part of growing up through which every child must pass. I made acquaintances, for I could not truly label these individuals as friends, so cruel and insensitive they often showed themselves to be. Many would mock less fortunate children, reasoning that their standing amongst their peers would undoubtedly be raised for their unjust behavior. Only once did I resort to such base inclinations for the supposed purpose of gaining popularity, and once was enough for me. Coupled with the fact that I was nearly "caught" by the subject of my ridicule, I despised myself for behaving in such a lowly manner. From that day to the present I have kept my comments hidden, or if I do speak aloud, I am prepared to stand behind my statements. I speak only of my distaste for actions which I personally regard as wrong or spurred through a lack of control; any further comments are of no consequence unless the subject is able to change those things about which he is being ridiculed.

Although I excelled academically in school, I was always content when the time would come to be dismissed. I liked school only in the sense that I enjoyed the result of successfully completing my assignments. I felt a certain compulsion to produce perfection: I believed that if I was to engage in an activity at all, I should do my best, or my time thus engaged would be without worth.

This desire for perfection had a price, however, because certain activities conflicted with my personality. Although physical education was my ultimate terror, the only subject with which I grappled considerably was mathematics. After the most elementary techniques of addition, multiplication, and their counterparts were mastered, I found myself to be floundering in a sea of the seemingly "unknowable." I had extreme difficulty accepting the various theorems and equations without asking the method behind their stated form. I was alarmed to deal with absolutes, finding it hard to believe that any subject was so unyielding and allowed no room for error, however slight.

In my inability to accept the laws of mathematics "wholesale," I soon discovered that there were those teachers who disliked students who failed to grasp their subject matter. Perhaps they felt that one who did not understand was undoubtedly inattentive in class and was therefore undeserving of any further assistance outside of class, especially when the extra time was the teacher's own. In many instances, I would seek the mathematically inclined intelligence of my cousin, Gary, or attempt to work out my disaster through additional reading and calculation, rather than face the malignant stare of an insensitive instructor.

My other enemy throughout school was, as mentioned, physical education. Although I was not uncoordinated, I was unfamiliar with many of the sports, and my lack of social aggressiveness affected my performance in a way which could only be described as unfavorable. I felt the class to be senselessly competitive; so concerned were my schoolmates with winning that to say we were involved in a "game" was totally incomprehensible. Except for running, and a somewhat comical aptitude for standing on my head, I dreaded the activities, and detested any sport which dealt with balls. The teachers augmented a student's frail self-image by allowing individuals to choose their own teams, resulting, of course, in the less able participants being chosen last. Once the game began, I felt besieged by paranoia; my blunders were met by icy glances of derision, despite my desperate attempts to perform in an admirable fashion. I soon learned that sports were not games, but battles in which winning meant everything. Under such conditions, I had absolutely no hope or desire to fight.

I have always found it quite interesting that children will attack one another about many shortcomings, but will say nothing of certain other equally embarrassing occurrences. My observations include those bodily accidents which could be avoided, such as dirtying one's pants or vomiting in the classroom. One is always amply warned, but sheer embarrassment often will not allow the child to mention his predicament before the entire class is visually aware of it.

I once vomited in second grade, too afraid to raise my hand to ask permission of the substitute teacher to be excused. I was always wary of substitutes, and perhaps I also thought that my nausea would eventually subside if I remained very still. It did not, and I spewed gastric liquid all over my book and desk. I was allowed to go home, pacified only by the fact that my "boyfriend" happened to be absent that day. On my return to school I found that my anxiety was needless, for no one mentioned my catastrophe of several days earlier. No one ever ridiculed another person for those types of accidents. Perhaps there exists an unspoken truce amongst children to avoid such harassment because each child knows that it could have happened to him.

I fostered a slight fear toward substitute teachers throughout grade school. They often tended to be rather insecure, a trait which I felt they were justified in having. Substitute teachers paralleled chaos; either the class would be utterly uncontrollable and would be allowed to do as it pleased or the teacher would be unreasonably strict and foreboding. More than the substitutes, I hated when the regular teacher would return. Inevitably, he or she would verbally lash the class, leaving my spirit crushed, albeit the fact that I deserved no such punishment. Those who do not need chastisement, and for whom it was not intended, are always the ones who take it to heart.

Throughout my earlier years, my main playmate was Mary, a girl who lived several houses up the avenue. That her age bested mine by four years did not seem to restrict our friendship in the least; I had a habit of better enjoying the company of those older than myself, and obviously this was no exception.

Much of our play involved the riding of our tricycles, which placed us under the fire of the neighborhood boys, who were sporting bicycles at considerably younger ages. We would ride our trikes despite the ridicule, however, as they afforded a modest degree of mobility and could also be manipulated to serve as reasonable scooters if one so desired.

One of the boys whose tongue was particularly keen happened to acquire a bicycle after a mere six years of life. He would fly past us, wearing a smile of overt superiority, as we tramped our much slower vehicles up the avenue. We bore his stately self-assurance as if it were an inherent factor of childhood which would one day be relinquished for a more affable character, as eventually, it was.

We looked on as he joyously raced through the neighborhood amid a cloud of arrogance; he circled, and returned, then lifted the front wheel off the pavement a trifle too far, causing an irreversible conjunction with the unyielding cement. His back found the street as his bike crashed to its side nearby. I believe the entire neighborhood must have heard his pride dissipating into the humid summer breeze; after that decidedly rough lesson, he no longer jeered at our mode of transportation.

Mary and I rarely played with dolls, although we were both fortunate to have them. Playing with dolls, for us, consisted more of dressing our "Barbies" in their various costumes, and perhaps, dreaming that we would one day appear as shapely and attractive as they, rather than actually involving ourselves with dialogue.

We would often gather together an assorted array of trinkets and gumball machine prizes for the purpose of trading those we no longer treasured. Although I admired the appearance of certain "stars," my devotion was more pretense than real: I could not love an individual simply through reading a handful of trivia gathered by prying, assuming publications. The inclusion of an idol in one's imaginings could result in nothing short of disappointment, and is therefore a cruel waste of time. Thankfully, I was free of any form of infatuation for those in the midst of stardom by the time I reached junior high school.

Mary and I shared many entertaining hours, but the most memorable occasions were those of our overnight slumber parties. I loved going to her house, as her parents maintained a different store of food than did my own. We would often eat "Wonder Bread" spread with butter, accompanied quite nicely, we thought, with a bottle of Pepsi. (My mom always bought the kind of bread that would not stick to the roof of one's mouth, but, as she put it, "would stick to your ribs!" Health bread was not my idea of a good snack.) As we munched on our favored snack, our mothers would wince, believing that our combination was food fit for convicts. We were undauntedly convinced to think otherwise. Occasionally, we tossed a frozen pizza into the oven to complete our late night feast.

During these affairs we would occupy our time in idle conversation, watch television, or involve

ourselves in a singular form of diversion, paging through the telephone books in search of the city's strangest names.

When the party was held at my house, the usual schedule was not complete without my father grabbing our legs and dragging us from the couch and across the carpet. Rarely could we walk our arms fast enough to avoid a slight case of "rug burn."

Instead of bread and pizza we had popcorn and homemade cookies. As my mother was never an advocate of carbonated beverages, soda pop was seldom seen in our refrigerator. (To this day, she will bristle at the mention of "cola.") If we did have pop, it was the less-revered Lady Lee or Jewel brand.

Mary and I got along quite well, as neither of us possessed any fiery attributes. We were both mild mannered and soft-spoken; to my great relief, she shared my lack of enthusiasm for sports.

I was always amazed at her capacity for food; she ate heartily, yet remained a mere wisp of a shadow. Another of her characteristics which I deemed truly awesome was her ability to sleep undisturbed while her mother vacuumed around her bed.

It is difficult to venture those attributes which Mary may have associated with the essence of my character; maybe it was my joke, instead of tears, after an injury, or the humor which would evoke her smile and easy laughter. At any rate, I could have had no finer friend throughout the initial stages of my life, and although we now are far apart, and living in our separate worlds, those memories of our companionship shall persist for all time.

Steve, my other neighborhood buddy, lived next door. We were much closer in age than Mary and I, with our birthdays being only six months apart. I spent quite a bit of time with him, though more so during the summer months; we were in separate grades in school and that seemed to make a slight difference in our friends. In grade school, more than any other higher school of education one is more aware of age, somehow relating that directly to one's social status; in effect, a person of a higher grade should not be caught dead conversing with his younger neighborhood friends, at least not at school.

Once apart from our peers, we were the greatest of friends. We often sought out windfalls in the woods, which made terrific "camps," or simply hiked along the creek bed. Names were bestowed upon various landmarks according to their appearance; one drop-off was christened "dead man's bluff" while a small grove of wild chives was called "the onion field." There was a seemingly endless amount of diversion in the woods and we used it to our best advantage.

It was Steve I chose to accompany me on family excursions to parks and wildlife refuges; he was more game to tromp through the woods than were many of my companions.

One of the attributes which gave Steve rare character was his flawless honesty with respect to one's appearance or annoying habits. He would as quickly inform a person of a rip in his garment as he would another who was oblivious of the mucous running from his nose. If there was something amiss that by most standards should be set aright, he would see that it was done. Through Steve's keen insight and equally sharp ability to verbalize these faults, I was made aware of the fact that I walked "pigeon-toed" and soon corrected the matter through close observation. Personally, I feel grateful to Steve. There is no crime in voicing that which, with time or practice, can be overcome.

Some people who are quick to express the faults of others also lack all tact and sensitivity. This was not so with Steve. In his perceptiveness, he unquestionably found room for a great amount of personal concern and interest. Perhaps the most touching instance in which I witnessed this demonstration of care was when I was yet quite young. We were playing outside on the Tarzan swing in my backyard, when, without warning, a loud clap of thunder issued forth from the gray sky. So completely taken by surprise was I that I began to cry. It would have been so easy for him to mock my fright, but instead he jumped up and headed for his house, yelling, "Wait here!" Several minutes passed before he returned carrying a banana. He presented it to me, saying, "This will cheer you up!" He was not aware that I truly disliked bananas, but I was so touched by his show of affection that I humbly ate the fruit and thanked him for his kindness. That little episode of human kindness shall forever remain dear to me. It also altered somewhat my view of bananas.

Summer vacation brought almost unbelievable happiness, a magnetic appeal akin to freedom, for I was generally allowed to spend time as I wished. I seldom encountered schoolmates, and if there was a rendezvous, it was never brought about by my doing. It was far more convenient to call upon my two neighborhood friends, or to simply amuse myself.

Summer was not complete bliss, however, for yearly it brought a dreaded horror to life...camp! My first encounter following Kindergarten...Day Camp. I was terrified upon discovering that I was to exist amid a mob of virtual barbarians for the better part of each weekday. This lasted for but two weeks, yet

it seemed an eternity. Each morning I boarded a school bus brimming with children to then endure a jostling, thirty minute ride to the location of the camp itself. Once there, we were to join our assigned group and the daily activities would commence. There were art projects, games, competition, hikes and swimming lessons. Many activities would have been quite pleasing had I been in the company of friends. However, shyness had no place at camp, and I felt constantly ill at ease.

An additional undesirable factor possessed the name "Betsy." In effect, Betsy was the group bully, resembling, ironically, the "Peanuts" character "Lucy" in both form and personality. On one of her particularly shining moments, she told me and another equally shy girl that she would make us sleep overnight in the boys' tent on the last night. Needless to say, we were scared silly although the threat could never have materialized.

Another camp, owned and operated by the Girl Scouts, was also a source of much summertime duress, although I recall very little about this camp other than the fact that the homeward-bound bus was a welcome sight.

The final camp to which I was sent for a week's time during two consecutive summers, was a King's Daughters Camp. I never relished the idea of rooming with people I did not know, yet here I was obliged to do so. Again, the camp was regimented into various activity schedules to which each camper was to adhere.

I was friendly, but not outgoing and confident, and as time crept by at a snail's pace, I became more and more hounded by loneliness. I wrote my family many postcards lamenting my undesirable situation, but time thus spent only seemed to make the problem worse.

PAGE 11

Chapter 2

My Brothers

CHAPTER TWO

My Brothers

My brothers were both considered "good Kids" by societal standards, being law-abiding, and generally speaking, parent-abiding as well. However, blood relationships do not guarantee a likeness of character or form, and so it was with Norm and Todd. They looked nothing alike, facially or otherwise. Norm was muscular, with unstoppable health, while Todd was taller, thin, and prone to allergies. Apart from such obvious dissimilarities their personalities and interests also differed greatly. Such differences rarely evoked conflict, though, because they were on wholly separate planes. Norm and Todd were not incompatible in an obnoxious sense; they merely followed their own dreams. A coincidence of their respected circles of interest occurred mainly through their great love—and respect—for nature; thanks to Dad. They also shared a consuming interest in the chug and maintenance of the woodland trails and bridges on which they would ride. Basically, though, Norm and Todd were as different as apples and oranges. My memories of and love for each of my brothers varied greatly from

the other, and changed with the passage of time, for I, as well as they, underwent transitional phases. Thus, as characters were modified and outlooks were altered, relationships, also, transformed through the years.

My fondest memories of Todd, who bested Norm by roughly three years, were those of our early interactions. Todd had a wonderful ability to entertain children. He seemed to sense the exact type of gesture and manner of conversation which enthralled a young audience, and as a result, was rarely able to rest once a child noticed this value. He possessed an unbelievable attention span and tolerance for a child's endless and often irrational demands.

I found Todd to be an inexhaustible source of amusement, as he was quite adept at conjuring up names and personalities for my motley array of stuffed animals. He would then provide an endless flow of nonsensical banter for the animal of my choosing, which delighted and held captive my attention for countless hours on end.

I had two favorites, the first of which was an alligator; Todd would shake the green amphibious creature, emit a gravel-throated roar, and proceed to chase me about the house until I could no longer escape and irreversibly served as the alligator's dinner.

The second was a beloved bear whose eyes were so asymmetrically adhered to its face that it appeared to be immersed in a drunken stupor. Todd christened the bear "Coors Bear" in reference to the beer of the same name, and projected its character as that of a bum in desperate need of another drink. He would make the bear twitch and shake with obvious delirium moaning simultaneously, "Whe'm I?...Whe'm I?" This would continue unless the bear was administered an ample swig of Coors beer from a small bottle; the bear was then content to laze back into a dream-like sleep.

Both of my brothers teased me. It was the inevitable result of being the youngest member of the family and, of course, the least educated and self-sufficient of the entire group. They were not ruthless in their teasing; they never insulted my intelligence, only my ignorance, which was not as serious since ignorance could be reversed in due time. I felt transparent; they seemed to know what would bother me, from my petty insecurities to faulty rationalization.

I well remember the family excursions, in which I generally sat in the back seat between Norm and Todd. Like clock work, they would serenade to me in unison, "Souvenir, bathroom, bottle-of-pop" while we drove past the flat and blistering hot corn fields toward our destination, claiming that these were my three favorite aspects of the summer vacation; I would seethe and boil, but could do nothing, as I fully realized that they were probably right.

They would also grab Coors Bear, and, holding him at an arm's length out of the window while traveling 70 miles per hour, threaten to throw him into the fields. I panicked at the possibility, my eyes fixed on the battered bear as the wind fiercely buffeted its floppy arms and legs. The bear was always hoisted back into the car after an ample display of hostility from me and never suffered the cruel injustice. (Coors bear was eventually disposed of in the garbage can, a more humiliating, but less violent, retirement.)

Norm especially loved to tease and mock my childish idiosyncrasies; he derived immense satisfaction from quizzing me, and because he used words which were far beyond my capacity to understand, smiled uncontrollably at my frustration. He always called me "illiterate," and while I had no conception of the word's meaning, I knew it was something which I did not want to have as a permanent attribute.

Norm also enjoyed pelting me with the arsenal of pillows which the basement couch housed. As he fired away, making direct hits with each pillow I would gather the pillows and try, in vain, to throw one in his general vicinity. I rarely made contact with his body, let alone his head, as I hurled pillow after pillow at my assailant, only to be blasted again in rapid succession after he picked up my futile scattering of pillows from the floor and behind the couch. Finally, I would intentionally spill all of the pillows on the floor in front of me in overt exasperation and yell "The end!" I wanted no further conflict. After several such instances, he decided to mock my ultimate reaction to bombardments and he himself threw all of the pillows on the floor with an accompanying, "The end!" He then looked at me with one raised eyebrow until he received his reward; a screech of anger.

Other conflicts which evolved in the basement's TV room concerned the programs themselves. At 3:30 "Lassie" and "Star Trek" were aired, creating a daily duel between Norm and me. Mom settled the argument, declaring that every other day we would be able to see our preferred show. The system worked well, except for the fact that, on the days in which "Lassie" appeared, Norm would raise his hand in Lassie's dog-like gesture and emit a mewing howl similar to the one which characterized the dog. Liking the show, but rather embarrassed by that fact due to the show's incredibly rosy view of life, the mimicry bothered me. Luckily my taste changed and I soon truly preferred "Star Trek" because of

it's science fiction appeal, and thereby eliminated one tender spot through a transformation on my behalf.

Through my early years of life, my memories of Norm surrounded not so much the things we did together, but the way in which I saw his character. Norm seldom actually played with me; that was more Todd's arena. Except when he teased me, I was not conscious of being a child in Norm's company. I felt on equal terms with him more than I did with many other people who constantly maintained a distinction between my age and their own if only through a somewhat laughable change of pitch in their voice or a determinedly more animated style of speaking.

I always had a great love for Norm. He was easy-going and unobtrusive, and his presence was never unwelcome. He avoided unpleasant situations whenever possible and lacked aggression in areas where, for the generally accepted definition of success, that sometimes obnoxious trait was necessary. He rarely sought attention and money was of little consequence.

Norm valued simplicity and serenity; high-scale achievement was not among his priorities. He saw that "success" was a race which never ended, for another conquerable realm always presented itself. The race was everywhere; whether it was the attainment of placing oneself on the honor roll in school, or gaining promotions at work, or prestige and popularity in social circles. People allowed headaches to germinate in their minds simply because the thought of tasting success dominated their values. Why was "good" never "good enough?"

Norm was a virtual dynamo with regard to accomplishing a task. It had to go fast or Norm's patience would dissipate into the air. Whether it was a chore around the house or a dose of homework, he persevered until his work was finished and then retired to the front steps to sit. A job's completion did not always signify a flawless result, however. For instance, compared to Todd's smooth, taut version, Norm's bed was a haven for lumps, with the pillow stashed hurriedly beneath the twisted and rumpled spread. In school, Norm was a solid B student. He did not strive for his grades because perfection, to him, held no rewards. Norm did his work rapidly and fostered no hideous nightmares about tests. A slightly above average mark did not obliterate his happiness.

When under the employ of a firm, Norm was trustworthy and conscientious. Whether delivering newspapers or landscaping a yard, he made certain that the job was done well, from his punctual arrival through the day's end. Doing an honest day's work was less complicated than expending energy to connive a way out of it; he knew that he earned his pay and never had to look over his shoulder in apprehension when the boss strode by.

Norm did not worry about being good enough. He was confident and proud of who he was and what he wanted in life. Average grades or average jobs did not signify average intelligence and he felt no need to apologize for his position in terms of societal importance. It was a refreshing outlook which suited him perfectly.

Norm was very athletic; one could tell by the way he walked. Sports were a source of entertainment, and he succeeded in almost everything he tried. Only two aspects of his personality stood in the way of his being selected as "team material" for many sports. First, he felt that a game was a game; although he did his best, he could not take a game as seriously as did many of the others who became enraged by losing. He wanted it to be fun, and competition was fun only as long as the game remained free of hostilities. Secondly, he disliked sports demanding body contact; he was conscious of his own space and avoided being touched. Norm despised wrestling, but since it was required in physical education, he handled his distaste by promptly pinning his partner and thereby ending the match. Taking notice of his ability, the teacher eagerly teamed him up with the heaviest, sweatiest guys in the class. Sickened by their stench and glassy-eyed fervor, Norm determined to purposely shorten the match; he allowed himself to be pinned.

The sport which fit Norm's ideal was baseball and he served as pitcher for various teams. I recall hazy images of his ball games, especially those during which Mom and I crouched on the bleachers beneath a newspaper to ward off the rain, while she proudly feasted her eyes on the pitcher's mound with an inaudible, "that's MY boy" inscribed on her face. Dad's employment kept him from attending some of the games, but Mom always went, a fan until Norm lost his attraction for the game. Mom savors the memory of Norm being chosen to pitch yearly for the All-Star games.

Todd never went to Norm's games. He didn't have much interest in sports. It's difficult to know whether or not being good at something makes you like it. I happen to know that liking something does not make you good at it, for I love to bowl, but once bowled a 16—amazing by anyone's standards. (I was in high school at the time.) At any rate, Todd preferred to forego physical activity of the competitive nature, electing instead to pursue his penchant for gadgetry, electronics and in general, anything that would spin or balance. When drying the dishes he was not content to simply lay a lid on

the table; he first had to give it a hearty whirl on its rim, whereupon the kitchen would ring with a wavering "wong, wong, wong" until the swiftly fluttering lid collapsed onto the table with a final, resolute, "wop." Mom forbid such treatment of glassware and china, of course, or undoubtedly many items would have sustained irreversible damage.

In effect, Todd was the mad scientist of the family, having to take mechanical objects apart to view and study their internal workings, and obtaining chemicals for his experiments which ate holes through his bedspread. He had infinite patience and stuck to an idea until it worked, even if it took all night. Todd was a licensed ham radio operator and collected all the necessary equipment to seek and find countless stations as well as other operators. Much of his spare time was spent behind the "rig," although he found equal enjoyment in playing with or annoying the huge spiders in our garage. It was Todd who tried to power his bicycle with an electric motor, and gathered scum and algae from the ponds to gaze upon through his microscope. He was also the only person in the family who could start a particularly cantankerous lawn mower.

Todd loved the extraordinary and took time to notice the small things. One night, he took a walk down in the woods and found some fungi which glowed in a luminous shade of green. He returned to the house to report the strange phenomenon and together we threaded our way back down the dark trail to the uncanny sight. Sure enough, delicate points of light embellished the damp, rotting logs on the woodland floor, transforming decay into a hauntingly magical scene.

With all of his patience in creative and mechanical fields of interest, one might have thought Todd was unruffled and carefree. Despite his slow and deliberate reasoning, however, his demeanor could rapidly transform into reckless belligerence if tormented. While Norm hurried through his homework to pursue more pleasing objectives, Todd sat behind his books in angry defiance, as if the homework which he declared "unreasonable busy work" would somehow shrink before his abomination. As the night peeled away, he wasted in vengeance hours which might have been spent behind his radio. Though he was an achiever, he wanted to go about it in his own way.

Graduating from high school in the 60's greatly affected Todd's outlook and he adopted the prevalent anti-establishmentarianism attitudes with intense vigor. He also embraced the ecology movement as a worthy cause and between the two modes of thought, plus the fact that he had attained the classic age of rebellion, nurtured a rigid hatred of cars which, eventually, blossomed into anything but a delicate flower. Fuming internally about the inherent necessity for cars, despite their polluting effects on our society, Todd would actually vent his disgust upon the automobiles themselves (which produced simultaneous protectiveness and anger from Dad, who was uncertain of the safety of his car in Todd's hands). Ironically Norm bought a car which Todd sometimes used that was incredibly pollutive, yet Todd would angrily flop into the car and rumble out of the driveway, its muffler belching a toxic cloud of gray carbon into the air that followed him up the street as he drove to his ecology meetings.

Sometimes I felt as if Todd was like a spring aching to be sprung. In driving, it was obvious that Todd released frustrations behind the wheel. This trait, however, was not directly related to his anti-establishment/pro-ecology stance; other pressures, whether conscious or unconscious, were to blame for that. Moreover, Mom recalls that as a youngster Todd would ride his tricycle precariously down the hill behind our house, balancing on two wheels and cackling with enjoyment throughout the wild trip. Despite his history, one generally persisted to assume that Norm, sports-oriented and having little patience for the fine-honed arts, would have been the terror in the driver's seat. The fact was, however, that Todd was the reckless one, using cars in a hard, decisive way which demanded their utmost performance. I might add that his safety depended on such performance, for if brakes failed, or mechanical workings malfunctioned, results could have been disastrous. The rampaging tornado, however, was never involved in "the big crash" and continues to parallel park vehicles with one, exacting maneuver (a feat which, in my eyes, demonstrates brilliant skill). Perhaps I worried too much. Perhaps I still do.

Chapter 3

Todd's Illness

"Pain or no pain, I did not wish to go through life with my eyes closed to hardship, for only pure ignorance was bliss."

CHAPTER THREE

Todd's Illness

An individual often lives many years before his memories include any aspects of life other than those which have directly affected his own. My awareness of others improved remarkably in grade school, although it had not reached an acceptable level. I remembered the hurts and injustices of those around me, yet the memories of my pain still over-shadowed and dominated those which I viewed in other lives.

Within the home, I knew very little of the harshness of life. No serious injury had befallen me either physically or emotionally and I had every reason to be happy. It seemed that a protective shell surrounded my world, through which no discontentment could pierce.

I missed Todd when he left home to attend the university; phone calls bridged the miles to a certain extent, but within these I sensed a melancholic note which bespoke loneliness and homesickness and involuntary tears would cascade down my cheeks as I hung up the phone. Letters, however, had a way of concealing emotion better than conversation, and the proclamation "I'm fine" was easier to believe in the written form. It was obvious to me that Todd's cheerful remarks were sometimes the work of mechanical, socially expected responses, but I had no idea that they had eventually grown into outright lies with regard to his health.

A visit to the university clinic provided sufficient evidence to support the fact that Todd was a very ill student and he was told to return home for more adequate testing in a hospital situation. Relying on valium to ease and relax his malfunctioning system, he took a bus from the university, insisting to Mom and Dad that he would be all right. During the several hours which spanned his two bus connections, he stretched out in a vacant lot to rest, as the terminal itself frowned on "loiterers" and therefore had no benches of adequate proportions for Todd's needs. When Mom was told the above incident, she immediately envisioned tall grass, dandelion heads and broken whiskey bottles, which might not have been far from the mark, and exclaimed "But you could've been arrested...or...mugged!" Todd, indeed, had true grit.

After approximately three weeks in the hospital, Todd's health returned. A hypothesis was drawn in which nephritis, a kidney ailment, and rheumatic fever were determined as the culprits behind his problem, and drugs were administered which appeared to relieve his symptoms. During this time, Mom was taking final exams and Norm was graduating from high school, which altogether spelled chaos for the family. At eight, however, I did not gather the magnitude of worry which encircled Todd since I was rather unexposed to his sickness. I was too young to visit him at the hospital and life, for me, went on fairly well.

That winter the doctor decided to take Todd off the steroid. If his kidney could function normally, it would be better to avoid extensive use of the drug. Once he returned to school, it soon became evident that his health, again, was on the decline. My parents picked him up at the university, and he came home so weak that he rested on the main floor instead of in his usual upstairs room. The doctor was alerted concerning his condition, but a decision was made for Todd to remain at home through the weekend. However, Todd's state grew increasingly worse, and the doctor was phoned in desperation whereupon he immediately made plans for Todd to journey to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. The drive lasted an exhausting eight hours, but it saved Todd's life.

In a matter of several hours, the test results had been analyzed and a name was given to Todd's symptoms which could widen the most apathetic eyes: Wegener's Granulomatosis. Simply stated, Todd's disease was one in which his own immune system radically over-reacted and actually became allergic to, and would have killed, himself. Due to acute kidney failure, his body had neared its

saturation point regarding its tolerance of impurities, beyond which no endurance could have impeded death. If not for prednisone and Imuran his survival would have been impossible.

As near as he came to death, I remembered nothing of his stay at the public hospital or the weekend during which his life slowly dwindled before our eyes. Perhaps it was a lack of awareness on my part combined with a degree of exclusion, due to my young age, from the facts and seriousness of the affair that I suffered from such a dearth of recollection; at any rate, my consciousness was jarred into reality only after Todd had reached Mayo Clinic and a noon-hour phone call from Dad to my mom caused me to comprehend the grave plight in which my brother was stranded. As Mom hung up the phone, I gasped, "Todd's not going to die, is he?" This, finally, was reality; among the dish of peaches, carton of milk and loaf of bread that decorated the kitchen table, it stuck in my throat like peanut butter.

I never forgot that lunch, nor the ignorant bliss which departed when reality caught up with me. A selfish person suffers insignificant wounds, for his shallow love is generated only toward himself; however, when one is able to extend his love and concern beyond himself, the pain is much deeper. I learned that the world did not revolve around me; I controlled nothing. Just as I had been virtually oblivious to my brother's failing health, so was the world oblivious to me. Life became larger than it had been as my eyes gradually opened, widening the scope through which I gained my image of existence. Pain or no pain, I did not wish to go through life with my eyes closed to hardship, for only pure ignorance was bliss. It seemed that change was the only certainty in life. If I could instill that thought in my mind, growing up would prove to be less of a battle.

Todd recovered slowly and after regaining his strength returned to the university at the beginning of the next semester. Complications caused by ill health no longer wreaked havoc upon his plans, and under the protective wing of medication he successfully completed his education without further setbacks.

The following summer, Todd traveled to Mayo Clinic once again for restorative surgery on his nose. His illness caused the cartilage to dissolve completely, making a noticeable recess. The surgery was the last of the weightier consequences of Todd's disease though, it too, possessed few endearing qualities.

Todd would never be free of the drugs, for they alone allowed him to survive. It did not appear that my brother's life would ever again be "normal," but that, I later found, depended on one's definition of the word.

PAGE 19

Chapter 4

Fifth Grade

"To maintain a friendship, one must have unrelenting endurance, yet should never need the companionship of another so desperately as to justify the acceptance of a flagrantly inconsistent personality."

During the latter half of fifth grade, I decided to keep a diary. Entries were, at best, sparse and infrequent throughout the school year. Upon the arrival of summer, they subsided altogether. While the entries persisted, however, the content consisted merely of the days events, amassed in broken sentences and one word implications. I also made certain that major events did not pass without notice.

Jan. 19, 1973... Gerbil's tail fell off today. He was going out on the carpet and so I grabbed onto his tail. Guess what? This much (one inch) of his tail fell off. It's in a bag.

Yes, I even saved the tail.

Jan. 20, 1973... Made a bet with Dad about snow. Church, Rainy, wet day outside. Popcorn at night. 2 bottles of pop. Got the hiccups. Played with gerbil.

I was painfully concise.

Mar. 13, 1973... I stayed home and am sick. I barfed in the sink and then watched T.V.

My diary also reminded me of the double standard that exists between parents and their children. Many battles ensue due to the fact that parents can do that which a child is not permitted to do; initially, this would include such privileges as touching objects in stores and staying up after 10:00 p.m. Arguments increase as the child seeks maturity. My exposure to the double standard involved not so much the things I could not do, but rather, the things which Mom had never done, yet forced me to do. Admittedly, I would never have ventured from the house had it not been for Mom's insistent prodding, for I liked it there. Through her dictation, I attended swimming lessons, piano lessons, and Girl Scouts. By this age, I liked swimming a great deal, and it was no longer a source of resentment. Piano lessons required that I practice a half-hour each day; after walking stiff-legged to the piano and playing several notes, I relaxed my limbs and, on good days, tried to conceal my musical enjoyment from Mom. Girl Scouts, however, was a continual menace. Through my affiliation with the organization, I had to wear an ill-fitting green dress to school on the day of the meeting. Each year I bore the humiliation of refusal which came with selling Girl Scout cookies. On one of our field trips to a local beauty school, I was placed under the hair drier (which was on "high") and promptly forgotten.

It was no surprise, then, that when the Girl Scouts offered roller skating lessons, Mom applauded the idea. I cringed, knowing that a protest would have been futile despite her history of roller-rink nervousness. (Her arms hurt from thrashing.) At any rate, the lessons began and I learned that I was not meant to travel on wheels. It was completely different from ice skating. Being confined to the rink created the probability of multiple pile-ups. Already feeling hopelessly out of control, I was horrified at the thought of turning by lifting one skate over the other; skating was hard enough with both skates planted on the floor. Stopping consisted of rolling around in circles until I lost momentum, or slammed into a wall. Performing figure eights and skating backward were feats which bordered suicidal nightmares.

After the lessons ceased, I was quite relieved and, for the most part, as much an amateur at roller skating as I had been at the beginning. However, I had relinquished the wall for the rubber "brakes" and no longer became traumatized when the announcement to "change directions" resounded through the skating rink. I had not failed utterly and completely.

Popularity is, indeed, a curiosity. I noted that the means toward popularity changed in various age groups and social situations. For instance, during the initial years of grade school, one could attain a certain degree of popularity through excelling academically. Since I was naturally an achiever, I received a fair amount of friendly attention through these years. With my fellow achievers I competed for the high score which would bring exaltation and admiration from one's peers and teachers, and had little difficulty holding my position as undefinably determined by the class.

As years passed, the more outgoing personalities reached the pillar of esteem and without trauma, I settled back into a station more agreeable with my character. If I was not asked to a party or special event, I felt undeniably relieved; I then would not be obliged to listen to the inevitable cutting gossip which always seemed to accompany closed parties and the like. In a sense, I could have been described

as "everybody's friend and mediator," as I never chose to involve myself on any particular side of a dispute, especially when the two sides seemed equally at fault. When two friends were not on speaking terms they would both speak to me; I took care to avoid asserting my views, electing instead to mechanically nod my head in silence.

Aside from Mary and a handful of others, I believe that I enjoyed the company of boys over girls, possibly because their personality was more consistent. In most cases, a friend on Monday would still be a friend on Tuesday. Moreover, boys liked tromping through the woods and were usually not squeamish; I had little tolerance for those who panicked at the sight of an insect. (I feared only spiders, for they had a nasty habit of biting me at night while sleeping.) I enjoyed their coarser sense of humor (after all, gas is funny)! I also had a high regard for bravery in the face of bodily injury; chronic whiners and screamers won no points with me.

Although the rowdiness of certain boys initially caused a degree of alarm, I was soon able to relax and enjoy the companionship afforded by their more self-assured personalities. The boys which I encountered seemed more eager to accept people, whereas girls were prone toward competition with their own sex and, consequently, more apt to foster petty jealousies and complaints. Moreover, because of their inability to inflict any serious injury other than the emotional type, many girls gained mastery over painfully judgmental tongues and appeared to relish the mental pandemonium to which one was subjected upon the most trivial misunderstanding.

To maintain a friendship, one must have unrelenting endurance, yet should never need the companionship of another so desperately as to justify the acceptance of a flagrantly inconsistent personality. If one is unwilling to firmly entrench his feelings toward another, the resulting friendship is grossly mismatched.

I quickly grew weary of "friends" who would, for no better reason than the excitement begotten of such behavior, decide to ostracize one member of the "group" for an undetermined length of time, during which the hapless individual would endure a prickly barrier of silence, piqued by icy stares and inaudible gossip. Some of the victims would beg or cry to be forgiven for the guiltless crime that evoked the group's sudden disfavor. Generally, I was completely baffled and rather amused when the disfavor fell upon me, and, knowing that nothing would hasten my reacceptance into the group, would calmly go about my business until they decided that I once again merited good treatment.

One of the most revolting instances that I remember pertaining to the above dissertation was eating at a "friend's" house for lunch. Because my mom was working, she thought it would be more to my liking if I would spend lunch hour at the house of a friend or neighbor. A fee was established for this service, yet I was rallied around the area, eventually finding myself at the house of a schoolmate. She usually was one of my school chums, so I rather looked forward to our sharing this additional time together; how wrong my assumptions proved to be!

Soon after I began eating lunch at her house, she somehow decided to hold me in ill regard. She refused to speak to me at the table, and gained the further assistance of her older brother to make my stay twice as uncomfortable. The only conversation I was able to gather was that of her amiable mother, and I was only too glad to know that she understood the hatefulness of my situation. Although I ignored their stupidity as best I could, lunch was not a thing which I looked forward to under those conditions and I once again changed my noontime regimen so as to facilitate a better appetite. No longer having to share her mother on a daily basis, she soon restored her "friendship."

If one can ignore such treatment, the wrath is more rapidly abandoned. Affairs such as these reflect badly on their initiators; it is sad that pointless wars must be waged to win friendship, but perhaps these are an intrinsic facet of early relationships for certain individuals. Personally, if I have to alienate a friend to insure that he would be loyal to me, I would rather bury my head in the sand.

Grade school was the place wherein I experienced my first taste of romance. My initial spark was in second grade; although the boy and I were so shy that we were not on speaking terms, the flame kindled for many months, during which time we would smile at each other sheepishly and flush with embarrassment when, in gym class, we were square dance partners and momentarily held hands. Our romance was sporadic through the years, but its peak was reached in fifth grade. By that time, we actually conversed and spent time in each other's company, which greatly aided our relationship. Soon it became apparent to both of us that our interest had progressed beyond the platonic level.

Jan. 10, 1973... Went to school. Made lunch for myself. Went skating with B. Had a lot of fun skating. Played "go fetch" with ice.

Feb. 15, 1973... After Valentine's Day...B. gave me a really funny valentine (A drawing of a heart).

Mar. 14, 1973... B. brought me a 5-pack (of) bubble gum from T.D. who is leaving school and going to Tenn. I'm still sick.

Mar. 30, 1973... After supper I went outside and played a kick-ball game with S. and B. B gave me a real pretty rock (quartz). Then B. and I played a game and we talked a little until 7:30. (I like B.)

April 10, 1973... School...I had practice for the style show. B. came and watched me!

The climax of our romantic fling was during a field trip to the local arsenal. Our class boarded a school bus, and side by side, B. and I rode to the site of the old artilleries, very much aware of the other and bashfully enamored. We were also somewhat nervous for it had been rumored that B. was going to give me a ring.

Upon our arrival at the Arsenal, we all piled out onto the neatly clipped government lawns and prepared for our tour. The afternoon progressed rapidly, and B. and I were continually surrounded by a mass of fellow classmates throughout our surveyance of guns, cannons, and assorted weapons. I saw no ring, and felt somewhat relieved, being a private person who disliked drawing attention to myself, especially when that attention included my boyfriend.

As the tour drew to a close, we were shown the final points of interest. One was a large tank which each student either climbed upon or gawked at disinterestedly, as per his or her general emotion toward army equipment. I remained on the ground, gazing at the tank as B. scrambled to the top with some other children. suddenly, B. drew THE RING out of a pocket, and, not knowing how to present it, threw it to me from his battle station. I caught the ring and flushed with embarrassment. The rest of the day became a blur. B. also seemed uncertain of the next course of action. I do not even know whether I rode next to my boyfriend on the return trip.

To be truthful, the rest of the school year was another blur following THE RING, and although we liked each other, we seldom spoke at school any more. Sheer embarrassment, I fear, finally killed our romance; happily we remained friends, however, and never entertained bitterness toward each other. Ours had been an innocent, uncomplicated infatuation, evolving in part from a mutually compatible sense of humor which caused our eyes to glisten. We never kissed, and only held hands during school functions in which it was necessary. Neither of us possessed lofty expectations for the other to fulfill, and therefore enjoyed each other's company when we shared activities together.

From this early point in life, I saw that friendships were more stable than romantic inclinations, and therefore worth much more. To this day, when B. and I meet, we still share a glimmer and a smile.

PAGE 24

Chapter 5

Norm / Marriage

..religion amplified the significance of marriage, entrenching the ceremony itself into the hearts and minds of society..."

CHAPTER FIVE

Norm/Marriage

As the years aged to decades, college became the educational replacement for high school. My dad attended, and graduated from high school in an era when, in some areas, relatively few accomplished that feat, and fewer still furthered their academic standing by enrolling in a college. Mom, born ten years later, was able to earn a teaching certificate after two years of college. By the time my parents married and raised their children, college had evolved into a common aspiration, and both Sharon and Todd took full advantage of their educational opportunities, each earning their Bachelor Degree and excelling in their respective fields of study.

College had almost become a given, especially with the advent of the less expensive community colleges which boasted low tuition and the option to eat and sleep at home. Unless one obtained a good job, college seemed to be the national answer for the unmarried and unemployed, as well as the aspiring professionals. It was just the thing to do, and, in certain cases, this was unfortunate; in commonality, education lost its honor and significance.

The adverse affect which seemed to encroach upon some college graduates, who, feeling educated and superior, were still unable to "adequately employ" their mighty selves (and later collapsed into a pool of confusion) did not touch Norm. Well tuned to his inner needs, he excused himself from the collegiate race hours short of attaining a two year degree. Mom was discouraged, of course, but Norm stood fast to his decision, since graduation required that he take speech. He was phobic in group situations despite his outer appearance of self-assured collectiveness, and he, with reason, feared that in such a class he would meet his demise. Moreover, he had no intention of acquiring a "career"; he wanted to find employment with relatively little tension after which he could return home and, suffering no mental fatigue or emotional anguish, settle into an easy chair and persue a philosophy book or take a carefree evening ride on his motorcycle.

Since Norm had funded his entire college education, no obligation had been left unfulfilled and he was free to seek his dreams. I knew he didn't care about owning a fabulous car; he had too much fun with the various junkers that he managed to fish out of the used car lots. I will never forget the time that he and several other guys rocked the Rambler until it stood on its side; impervious to further damage than that which its previous owners had provoked, the car was finally righted, seeming no worse for the affair.

Other than finding a job, I was not certain of the type of ambitions that Norm possessed. He had always been rather quiet, given to infrequent bursts of conversation between lapses of brooding silence, but now, his silence sometimes masked turbid emotions. Whereas Todd had openly rebelled and demonstrated his conflicting views with society and the reigning generation of "elders," Norm fumed within, concealing gaps of understanding and petty annoyances with a disconcerting unwillingness to speak. He spent more and more time alone, and if his space was disturbed, he often quit the room for other surroundings. This latter incident was most notable upon the arrival of one of our parents; I, as well as they, sensed his intolerance for their presence, and although it was unpleasant for everyone, such injury seemed to coexist with the search for freedom and independence in youth. Personally, I could do nothing but cringe, for even within such silent battles, emotional bruises were in great supply.

Because of their changes toward self-sufficiency, young adults become progressively more difficult for their parents. I say this because it is at this time in a young person's life that he tests and selects those morals by which he shall live, choosing, bending or sometimes brutalizing the ideals which his parents had feverishly sought to instill into, and hopefully command his life. It is extremely difficult for parents who witness a seeming metamorphosis in the child they helped to create; astonishingly radical modes of thought practiced by their "child" can be a devastating blow. While certain "demonstrations of individuality" will subside with age, it is important that parents not blame themselves for faults within their children. A good, solid foundation is all that parents are expected to give to their off-spring; beyond the foundation, growth must be left to the child, for although he may have been erected to maturity under the utmost guidance and love, the child remains an individual, a human with a unique mind.

When Norm began dating a woman who worked at the shop, it evoked a natural aura of curiosity. He had never before dated, and we at home were surprised and pleased that he had taken interest in someone; indeed, such was his interest that he soon was absent from the house on a daily basis. Mom made several invitations to Norm for the purpose of meeting his girl, but none were accepted, so the

suggestions fell to a minimum and subsided altogether. It was never Mom's habit to pry, thinking that such behavior would only serve as a constraining influence.

Moreover, Norm was legally an adult and had a right to his privacy. Months elapsed yet we were not introduced to the mysterious girl who had stolen Norm's penchant for solitude. "Maybe Norm's embarrassed...or embarrassed of her," I deducted. I began to wonder if she was fat, envisioning a rotund but jovial cherry who worked diligently on a drill press, her body a package of perpetual motion when she laughed or descended a flight of stairs. "That's unfair," I thought to myself, chastising both my ignorance and presuppositions.

The family's internal relations sank lower, although no outright war existed. Norm continued to see his girl, now referred to as "Tracy," while Mom and Dad continued to wonder and worry as each date seemed to end at a later hour. I merely continued to go to school and do my chores on Saturday. As I dusted Norm's room, I noticed greeting cards which he had received from Tracy, the softly romantic kind that I dreamed over at the drug store. Love, Tracy...her signature was a hurried scrawl, the letters a combination of vertical lines and rigid points. I picked up each card and dusted the dresser, carefully replacing them in their orderly march across the old piece of furniture. A spare pair of Norm's glasses rested on the vanity. I took off my glasses and placed his on my face. Pulling aside the curtain, I gazed at the woods below, blinking to counteract the strength of his glasses, I could see like an eagle! Norm's eyes were still worse than mine, but mine were going fast. With each child, eyesight grew progressively poorer in our family. I knew I was doomed. Distraught, I took off the glasses and moved to the other side of the vanity. A furry ball wearing a horned helmet and brandishing a wooden club met my eyes, and I picked up the Nordic figure with a smile. I figured that it was a gift from Tracy but I asked Norm anyway. "Yeh...," he admitted with a grin. "She likes to think of me as a Viking."

Upon the celebration of Norm's birthday he received a beautifully tailored shirt from Tracy. She was a gifted seamstress, fitting shirts to Norm's muscular frame in a way that could not be equalled. Such specialization and effort made me certain that she wanted to snare Norm.

Aside from occasional, subtle teasing, I did not burden Norm with a parcel of inquiries. If the relationship was as "serious" (or, "sincere," a word which I prefer) as it seemed, Tracy would soon have to make an appearance. So it was that one evening, when Mom happened to be gone, Norm brought Tracy to meet us. She was thin, well-proportioned and attractive, and quite unlike my mental meanderings. Her personality was pleasantly outgoing, yet not overbearing. I liked her immediately; she made a good "first impression."

Mom finally met Tracy during a family rendezvous at my sister's home. We no longer had to subsist upon fragments of unsubstantial suppositions; Tracy was a person, not a figment of one's imagination. The introduction helped to mask the tensions within our home, yet something remained amiss which corroded the trust between my parents and Norm. He battled for freedom; as is often the case, however, the conflicts were internal, waged between who he was and who he wanted to be in an uncertain world.

After months of unanswered questions, Mom went upstairs with some of Norm's clean clothes and, pulling open a drawer, found it entirely stripped of its former contents. She pulled open another...and another...they, too, were empty. Mom now faced an even greater question. Norm had moved out with no warning while the three of us were absent from the house. He was gone. But where? And why?

That evening, Norm came back to the house to reveal his intentions, and to give Mom and Dad a formal explanation regarding his sudden move. His appearance alone served to quickly escalate the conversation toward a destination which was beyond my realm of involvement, so I turned to one of the far corners of the kitchen where my gerbil cage was situated and stared unseeingly at my pet while listening intently to the scenario unfolding behind me.

Norm stated that he had moved in with Tracy. "You kids got married then!" Mom exclaimed, moving closer as if to embrace her son. A quiet, no frills wedding would have been characteristic of Norm. "No...," he replied. A silence followed his statement, as if each person was attempting to understand the conversation which was unfolding and see beyond the misconceptions that had obscured the truth.

"You mean you're just going to live with each other?" Mom asked. "Didn't our marriage and family mean anything to you?" She was aghast, tearful, frustrated.

Norm appeared awestruck by the magnanimous fervor he had evoked. He had not thought that marriage could have meant so much to my parents. "You have made a beautiful home!" Norm exclaimed, "But it just can't be for me."

Questions flurried about the room like a mid-summer blizzard; upset parents, I learned, excelled in

the art of interrogation. Mom's voice had transformed into a slightly nasal, high-pitched whine which characterized both disapproval and sickness of heart, while Dad's speech quickened into abrupt, angry darts which leapt through the air and stung their recipient. To each question, Norm bowed his head a bit lower. "If she loves you, she'd marry you."

"It just can't be for me." It was all he could say. He loved Tracy, and wanted to spend his life with her; love of the heart should require no legal document to assure its sincerity. He could not understand the importance of marriage.

Norm's was an idealistic view of human love. Society, however, having judged man's ineptitude in the areas of honesty and integrity, found that unceremonious love was not, generally speaking, taken as seriously as love proclaimed before an audience in the form of predetermined vows. In certain circles, religion amplified the significance of marriage, entrenching the ceremony itself into the hearts and minds of society...and to my parents; moreover, it was tradition. To them, love alone was not enough to justify a man and a woman living together as one unit; Norm's proposition was a revolt against their values.

An ultimatum surfaced after all of the questions had spilled from my parent's minds: Norm would no longer be welcome in the home unless he married. Tears welled up in Norm's eyes and he began to sob; Mom and Norm held each other in a long, emotional embrace. So much depended on the future; a hug was all that they had. Until then, I had been eyeing the gerbil cage feverishly as the discussion raged behind me. Norm had under-estimated mom and dad and their inflexible scale of values, but even I could not swallow such a voluminous consequence of co-habitation. How could marriage be so important that one would no longer consider his son a person because he desired to live unwed with his beloved? Did not love matter more than all else?

Apparently it did not. I could listen to no more if I had to assume that I was going to lose my brother. I choked upon a mountainous wave of hysteria, and with tears blinding my vision, went wailing out of the kitchen into the sheltering darkness of my own room. I felt like a fool, flying from the argument in such an undignified manner. "Now look what you've done," said Dad, seeing my agitated state of mind. It was not Norm's fault, however; I knew, and Norm knew; my distress was related only to the thought of losing Norm forever; it was like a planned death. I could not handle such a loss.

"I'll drive you to Tracy's apartment...you can get your things and come back here," Dad offered. It was a final plea, an attempt to make amends before the damage was done.

Norm shook his head. "I'm sorry...I can't." Not after all that had been said. He was trembling; like an injured animal, he wanted only to run and hide from further hurt. Mom knew he couldn't return that night, but as the door closed and her son disappeared into the dark abyss, she prayed that he would change his mind.

PAGE 28

Chapter 6

Norm / Reflections

..I had been transported across 2000 miles...Memories and heartaches, however, came along for the ride."

CHAPTER SIX

Norm/Reflections

It seemed impossible to think that I may never see Norm again. I thought about the kite that we bought at a grocery store and flew in the spring gusts until it was a mere speck in the blue sky. I remembered our discussion about the importance of seat belts, after which a love-smitten, one-armed Don Juan nearly forced us off the road. I thought about the many times he pitched to me, saying, "Keep your eye on the ball!" and how we rumbled up the street to K Mart on low-budget shopping sprees. I did not have Tracy's address, so letters would be a pointless effort. My mind began to create images, concocting chance encounters and elaborate dialogues. I pictured his tall form striding from a store into the sun-bathed parking lot; I would run to him despite the protests of my parents. The image would dissolve and another would take its place. This time, I saw him while I was alone; I was able to obtain his phone number and address, and planned to keep in touch. Again the fantasy would fade. I wondered fearfully whether the years would so change his facial appearance that I would fail to recognize him. Nothing and no one in life was immune to change; features, health, relationships...everything could bloom or wither in an instant.

Many thoughts flooded my mind during the next week. I considered my parents and their steadfast values, and understood their torment. Their son was about to embark on a lifestyle which they viewed as morally wrong. After 20 years of guidance, Norm's action was translated as an injustice done to them. Often I heard my dad describe an incident, remarking, "If the kid really loved his parents, he wouldn't have done (it) out of respect for them."

I had been raised under the same school of thought, and, until my views had been tested, my stance on various issues usually echoed those of my parents. Following the incident with my brother, however, I could no longer believe that cohabitation without marriage was so wrong that the act should tempt a parent to disown his son, especially if the two cohabitants loved each other. Had Norm been a promiscuous lout who flitted from one woman to the next merely for the purpose of filling his primal needs, I would have agreed that his irresponsibility demanded punitive action.

As I reflected over my silent disagreements, I wondered why Norm and Tracy couldn't get married. If their life was to be shared, why didn't they just marry to please society? Sure, the legality may only have been a grand joke to Tracy, but if it saved certain relationships, was it not worth the trouble? Moreover, Norm had always avoided involving himself in a scene which would direct undue attention. I found the current circumstances rather odd and out of character, for "shacking up" was a relatively new phenomenon to strike the midwest. I had no answers, and my questions had no ear to rest upon. It was best not to dwell on that which I could not hope to change.

After a week of emotional survival, I boarded a jet bound for California. With all my expenses paid, I was to spend several weeks at the Santa Monica home of my aunt and uncle. Never having flown, I was excited when the journey commenced and the jet tore a path into the hazy summer sky. I found flying to be a delightful affair, especially during the circulation of complimentary pop and peanuts. Silvery mounds of cloud formations glistened against the sun's blinding light. Across the blanket of white, another jet raced toward a secret destination. Corn and wheat fields made a quilted pattern of the landscape. Rectangular fields slowly gave in to circular ones as the jet scorched westward; irrigation. The Rocky Mountains pierced a jagged line through low-flying clouds that skirted each side of the airliner, and the fertile land disappeared where the soaring mountains grew from the earth. The jet flew past that which nature took centuries to create as if it was insignificant and worth little more than a fleeting glimpse. The mountains were now behind us. As I peered out of the tiny window, the land became increasingly arid and fewer roads disrupted the sea of creeping grass and sage brush.

As we began our descent, I felt my ears clog in rebellion to the slight change in air pressure. Swallowing and trying to induce yawns, I cleared my ears continuously until the jet was hanging lazily above city streets and buildings. Not until the aircraft touched down on the runway was I aware of the speed at which the jet was moving; the grass was at first a green blur against outstretched silver wings, and we rushed on as if powered by an unstoppable force. Then I perceived that the forward thrust was steadily reined until the huge jet slowly strolled along the landing strip and taxied toward the Los Angeles terminal. Within the passage of hours I had been transported across 2000 miles; it certainly

did not take a long time to leave a place. Memories and heartaches, however, came along for the ride.

This was my vacation, and I tried to avoid thinking about that which had transpired the week earlier. While my aunt and uncle showed me the sights in their part of California, my parents decided to take a vacation of their own. They, too learned that miles did not alleviate worry. Worry cannot be left at home. It is weightless baggage that one is obliged to carry.

After several days of eventful tours, relaxing on my aunt's patio swing, and tempting their aged and extremely bored cat into playing with a ball of yarn, I received a phone call from my mom. They had returned from their small trip and found a note from Norm saying that he and Tracy were married. I was ecstatic. My fears had never materialized.

I hung up the phone, feeling that I had been revitalized by a flood of happiness. It now was possible to truly enjoy the remainder of my stay in California. I determined that I would attempt to find gifts to give Norm and Tracy for the purpose of demonstrating my affection; and a "wedding gift" seemed rather inappropriate under the circumstances. After a joyous day in Disneyland, where I rode countless rides and was seemingly transported into a magical world, I finally purchased two items, a hand-carved wooden box for Tracy and a back-scratcher for my brother. My treasures were placed in a sack and I clung to them excitedly. No longer helpless and unable to express my love, I felt like a child who had just recovered a favorite belonging from the "lost and found." Disneyland shined that night, and the parade of lights glistened on Main Street with a star-like fire. No fantasy could compare with a dream that came true.

The summer had ended well. I reveled in the hours spent with Norm and his wife; it was easy to be with them, for their life appeared low-key and free of pretense. As we discovered many common interests, Tracy became the sister that Sharon was unable to be, living 80 miles distant. Toward Norm also, I developed a greater understanding, and a deep, yet unspoken bond formed between us; we discovered that we were quite alike, thinking in the same manner and sharing the same type of humor.

PAGE 31

Chapter 7

Todd / Reflections

CHAPTER SEVEN

Todd/Reflections

Todd resided in Chicago after graduating from college, and my parents and I occasionally drove up to visit him. He always planned a gala affair, often treating us to a splendid play among an array of other suggestions. Upon our arrival, hugs and kisses were widely distributed; I would run to Todd, whereupon he would grasp me under the armpits and lift me sky-high, wailing in his "Aunt Minerva" voice, "It's been so LONG since I've SEEN you!" This traditional welcome became increasingly difficult to manage as I grew in stature and, of course, gained the accompanying weight, and was thus allowed to die a dignified death.

When we were not touring the city's delights, I entertained myself by arranging Todd's personal effects. The apartment which I most clearly recall boasted a crude built-in bookcase. I loved to flit back and forth between the many compartments and lend a sense of order and style to the pandemonious wall. There were always a few things of which I had no idea concerning their use; these were generally odds and ends, factory rejects, a handful of D cell batteries, and, I must not forget several large and curious aluminum containers. I would neatly line up the small items on the shelves and place the nameless metal containers on the floor in a line. The latter objects were for experiments. Having completed my task, I would stare silently at the line of silver pots, shrug my shoulders and turn my attentions elsewhere.

The sleeping arrangement was simple. Age and respect dictated that my parents sleep on the beds. Since I was a guest, Todd determined that I should sleep on the couch. My brother was left with the remaining alternative, which was an inflatable air mattress and a sleeping bag.

The nights brought out humor which came from bizarre circumstances. Several hours after lying down, Todd's air mattress had deflated to the point of nonexistence and, bone meeting floor, he had no choice but to inflate the mattress once again. Slow expirations, sounding akin to a distant steam engine, would resound into the night. Mom, understanding what had happened, listened to the steady, "Puff...puff...puff..." and would have laughed had it not been for the fact that she pitied Todd and did not wish to waken my dad or myself.

At exactly 4:00 a.m., the church, standing directly beside Todd's apartment building, would begin a horrid serenade in chimes. Approximately every other note was sour, yet the noise continued until the tune was completed. Todd explained that the person who set the clock mistook the four o'clock a.m. setting for the afternoon setting...hence the "ungodly" serenade.

A final recollection regarding the overnight occurrences in Todd's apartment is, admittedly, rather hazy. Having a preoccupation with the shelves by day, it was no shock to find myself sleep walking to them in the middle of the night, searching for my pillow. My walk might not have been discovered by Todd or remembered by me had it not been for the row of metal canisters which flanked the base of the shelves, for in my futile search (my pillow had never strayed from the couch), I bumped my foot into one of the pots, which gonged loudly against a second and third to create a symphony of echoes. Flustered by the rude interruption, I nearly woke, and can recall my brother's sleepy, "Is there something wrong?" to which I mumbled an explanation of my hunt.

The next morning I looked suspiciously at the shelves and was haunted by a memory for which I could not account and therefore inquired of the night's events, asking if I had walked in my sleep. "Oh, yeh..., I couldn't figure out what you were doing!" Todd said.

I reflected over my strange habit and wondered whether I had walked elsewhere on different occasions, and because I encountered no one, did not remember or was not informed. It was slightly disconcerting yet immensely humorous; I only hoped that I would never take a walk which lead me out of a building, because I remembered the tale of a young man who, while sleeping, took out the garbage cans and then completed his slumber on the grass beside the curb. It was a humbling thought, for although a sleeping individual cannot be responsible for what he says or does, one's lack of consciousness will not guard the individual from accompanying embarrassment.

Certain aspects of my brother's personality had changed, while others had remained original and quite intact. When the time had come for us to leave Chicago, Todd's apartment was cleaner and his billfold was decidedly thinner. Although Todd no longer cared about the neatness of his living quarters, which plainly stated that his orderliness at home was merely a function performed to placate Mom's desires, he maintained his suicidal generosity with horrifying steadfastness. My brother had also changed from his too-trusting self to a more realistic and perhaps, cynical person. Losing a coat and bicycle at the university, followed by distributor caps and gasoline in Chicago, had a way of opening ... or, at least, readjusting ... one's vision of the world. It was not an ideal place, and idealistic views were hastily smashed to oblivion. I saw, too, that he possessed a definite need to exist on his own; more than a door to freedom. Todd's separation from family seemed to be a requirement for personal satisfaction and future happiness. He had to affirm himself by living alone, and having no one near to depend upon through the rough spots.

Despite Todd's need to acquire self-sufficiency, homesickness was difficult to avoid, and his eyes mirrored pure emotion as we drove away. The image of home was, at once, pleasant and unkind, for although memories could quiet the noise of the city, their unattainable substance created a barrier between the present and his need to build happiness from aspects thereof. Sometimes it was easier to bury the past and all which related to it. Todd seldom came home any more.

Chapter 8

Sixth Grade

"Friendships are realistic interactions of individuals rather than acts performed to satisfy the specific requirements of a group."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sixth Grade

Upon reaching sixth grade, I did not feel that I had risen to the infamous "big cheese" status that I had supposedly earned for successfully passing through the curriculum and harassment of the older kids, nor did I foster any ill regard for those who were younger than myself. I was essentially the person who I had always been, with the exception that I was a year older and somewhat wiser through my experiences and observations.

Although I had become slightly more confident, I knew that it did not pay to feel superior, for someone always had the immense enjoyment of smashing the misinformed individual down to size. Whereas superiority was a false assumption, confidence developed upon a somewhat humble realization of one's mastery over life's trials.

Rarely were there situations for which kindness was unfit. It was not my nature nor my ambition to be mean to people who were younger or less fortunate than I; moreover, I remembered the instances wherein I had been subjected to cruelty simply because I was too small to fight back. Never would I forget the nasty sixth grader whose ultimate pleasure came by way of bullying younger students; having a keen sense of hearing and disliking noise of any kind, my entire composure was shattered when he blasted in my ears at the top of his lungs. Completely unnerved, I can recall cupping my hands around my red knit hat and running toward home as the cold wind nipped and stung my tear-filled eyes. Such alarming treatment filled me with terror; I was worried that my fear alone would tempt the bully to commit further torment. The instance also made me despise the boy; his unfair treatment did not serve to heighten his image in my eyes. Abuse did not merit respect; however, it swept the disillusionment from my mind regarding the idolization of an individual for his age or his popularity, for too often an individual was placed on a pedestal, only to evoke disappointment. Smiles and genuine kindness won infinitely more respect.

Few grade school students possessed the maturity to develop and maintain a true friendship. Many were too concerned about pleasing the popular crowd to reserve definite bonds for another individual, because, if the popular crowd was mad at someone, most of the others desired the same opportunity.

I learned about the existence of false friends, individuals who virtually ignored the less popular students until three days prior to a test. This type of person would then take pains to be sweet and gush with special affections, adding to his repertoire a request for one's notes or the answers to certain homework assignments. Disliking a farce, I always refused, whereupon I would be incinerated, reduced to ashes by the fire in the individuals eyes. The flame-thrower did not burn me, however; as he'd never liked me anyway, I suffered no loss.

I discovered, also, the distastefulness of playing the "second fiddle." Having my pride, I did not accept after-thought invitations unless I felt that my time would be enjoyably spent. One girl who was particularly noted for her "use" of others would often call as a last resort; a mannerless individual, she made the mistake of rambling off the names of her refusals when asking another person to accompany her on an outing. A classic phone call ran as follows: "Laurie? This is L. I was wondering if you could go to the fireworks tonight...I already called D, J, L., etc., but none of them could go...aw, come on!..." Sometimes it was fun to say "no." Moreover, I had better things to do.

When not haunted by the need to achieve popularity among peers, many problems disappear or simply fail to exist. Friendships are realistic interactions of individuals rather than acts performed to satisfy the specific requirements of a group. Because it was more important to be myself and follow my own beliefs, "peer pressure" had no affect on me. If I was to be ostracized for refusing to go along with

another's idea, no friendship existed and I could easily walk away. Aloneness, for me, was no problem; compromising my standards, however, was a problem.

Generally, I never experienced pressure from a group or an individual to do something about which I had already expressed a negative opinion. Perhaps the knowledge that further prompting would have no effect on my stance impeded harassment of any kind. I was free, imprisoned by no ideas but my own; I bothered no one, and received the same respectful treatment.

I recall a day in which three classmates and I were shopping at a drug store when one suddenly decided to buy a pack of cigarettes, giving the cashier an assuring, "They are for my Dad," in response to the skeptical appraisal of my friend's age. Wordlessly, the woman accepted the money and bagged the cigarettes. My friend smiled heroically as the four of us ushered from the store. After obtaining a book of matches, we strode down to the woods behind my house and followed the trails until we were deeply beneath the cover of the leaves and beyond all source of detection. The pack was opened with the gleeful anticipation which only came with the breaking of a rule. Two girls eagerly lit up and puffed smoke into the clear air. The pack was presented to me. "No thanks," I shook my head. I had no desire to start a habit which not only was a risky endeavor in terms of maintaining health, but also reeked in an offensive manner. "Besides," I thought, "it doesn't even look cool." I envisioned a woman with a white stick drooping out of the corner of her mouth and an old man sucking pathetically on the smoking stub of his cigarette. "You sure?" someone asked, offering the pack again. "No thanks," I replied and started walking toward home. One of the girls joined me, and, as if we had been unexplainably spooked, ran back through the woods to my yard. Out of breath, but glad to be rid of the odor of the cigarettes, we stood silently below the house and waited for the other girls. Upon reaching the top of the hill, the two asked why we ran. Bending the truth, my friend said, "We thought we heard someone yelling for us..." Personally, I don't know why I ran. My refusal and dismissal of the scene had been sufficient, for I had felt no antagonism from my companions; yet, beneath the canopy of leaves, I felt trapped and scrutinized by unseen eyes. Flight seemed to be the natural course of action. If my tactics failed and I was repeatedly urged to do something that I had no intention of doing, I too, would use "Mom" as the rejoinder to a simple "no." Mom never worried about having a "mean old lady" reputation among her children's friends, especially if it saved them from performing undesirable actions. Packing an excuse like "Mom" was ammunition so powerful that I never felt alone when faced with a difficult situation; if I could not handle it, "we" could!

By sixth grade I had accepted the fact that, as one of the tallest students, I would always be seated at the back of the class and stand at the end of the gym line. Each year, I remember wishing that the lines and rows would, for once, be arranged alphabetically, allowing me a change of scenery from the backs of people's heads. I never had the chance. The policy remained the same and the students grew in height...but so did I.

My last year of grade school was also a year through which I spent pleasant noon hours, lunching at the home of a lady whose family attended our church. I shared lunch with Vera's youngest son, Todd, and two other boys whose names no longer exist in my memory. Vera was great. She rarely smiled, yet she had a terrific sense of humor which fell somewhere between "dry" and "sarcastic." Her laughter was a reward in itself, for it was easy and genuine. Within her sober face was more humor than most people could fathom because she had the ability to see humor in life.

Sixth grade left in me a good impression of my early school years...I remembered the good and the bad, for the two elements were inseparable. I thought of the holidays, from Halloween's dress-up parade followed by a night of trick-or-treating, to Valentine's Day parties, and Yuletide paper chains. I reflected upon the fall carnivals and ice cream socials, the frantic chaos of recess and the joy of art projects. I smiled at the science jingle which, through the attacks of several boys and myself, suffered a comical change of wording to "The sun is a mass of undigested GAS, a gigantic nuclear TOILET..." and perhaps as a sort of revenge for so dissecting the lyrics of the educational song, I encountered my first migraine headache in science class, during the middle of a test.

I thought of the teachers, and the quiet spoken janitor, Mr. Ed, who faithfully polished the halls to a sheen and silently cleaned the floor after someone threw up.

I considered the principal who was feared, yet respected, for his ability to control the school in an orderly fashion. He had the type of stern glance which turned one's lunch into a mass of lead; a rumor that he possessed a spanking machine in his office persisted in my mind until the second grade. I never sought to disturb him; thus, when I was instructed to report to his office, my throat became the victim of muscular strangulation. Once stationed before his desk, the principal reprimanded me concerning a book which had disappeared from my desk. The librarian said it was still missing; if it was not returned I would be obliged to pay for it.

I could barely speak. I had borrowed the book from the library, yet someone else had stolen it from

my desk; it was not at home, nor was it in any other desk. In vain, I questioned the boy who sat at my desk throughout English class, a renowned trouble-maker, who admitted that he had, without permission, opened my desk and "looked at the book." This was of no consequence to the principal, however, and since it was never recovered, he made me pay the entire cost of the book. I had suffered an injustice, blamed and punished for that which I had not done. I reflected grievously over the situation, and remembered the only time in my life that I had contemplated stealing. I was in an old drug store, gazing at the jewelry spread upon the counter top and spilling from bins of miscellaneous content, when I spotted a tiny cross which had fallen from its chain. It belonged to nothing, and would one day be discarded among an array of damaged goods. No price tag fluttered on the tiny shape; and it was the only one of its kind. I picked it up and placed it in the palm of my hand; the small cross would not be missed. I stared long and hard at the bright gold trinket, feeling as if I was in a vacuum. I heard nothing but the chaotic ramblings within my mind, the rationalizing manipulation versus the overpowering guilt which lashed viciously at my temptation to steal. I felt suddenly as if my thoughts were naked and replaced the cross in the bin of jewelry. As I walked from the store, I saw the irony in my stormy, inner confrontation; I was going to steal a cross, the sign of goodness, purity, and love. My internal suffering was terrific, although I resisted the compulsion; the thought would never be purged from my memory, for with it, I learned a great lesson.

I slipped back to reality. Great lessons did not shield an individual from shouldering blame that belonged to someone else. Goodness was not always rewarded in life, for despite a personal history of moral decisions and ethical choices, an individual must exist among people who, through their hurtful life styles, obliterate the rights of everyone they touch.

I paid for the book, having nothing to show for my expenditure but a hoard of futile self-pity and the knowledge that I was innocent of any wrong-doing. School came to a close as the summer ripened into its classic heat at noonday. Desks were emptied and scrubbed. Homework ceased. Anticipation flooded the classrooms. The students bid their teachers good-bye, vowing to visit in the future.

Some returned, but I never did. The present traversed the old hallways, while the past would never live again except within my mind. I had no place there among the youthful faces and shrill voices; the building belonged to the present...it belonged to them.

The Mountains

When I dream I think of them,
Majestic peak and Aspen hem;

And in climbing them,
The flowing slopes,

It brings to me
A world filled with hopes.

The rain and thunderheads up there,
With lightning they come, fast as a mare.

I love to watch all the life that they keep,
The wolf, the fox, the hawk, and wild sheep.

Filling its crannies, streams can be found,
In their tossing and turning, they're thrown to the ground.

So please, oh, please, come and see
This mountain paradise along with me.

Lauren Isaacson - 7th Grade - 1975

Chapter 9

Discovery of Tumor

"There is always too much time before an unpleasant event; too much, yet not near enough."

CHAPTER NINE

Discovery of Tumor

By the end of seventh grade, Jr. High no longer seemed an immense edifice, and my confidence, as well as my acquaintances, grew. Each day, before or after lunch, depending on one's lunch schedule, we would assemble in our respective "homerooms"; here we could talk among ourselves if we did not become noisome or in any way obnoxious. I made two acquaintances in the room, and between the three of us, idle chatter abounded. One day I remember above all others. I was involved in conversation with the two girls when I looked down at my stomach and noticed that it was definitely lop-sided in appearance. I called their attention to it so that they also could share in the humor of my distortion. We all laughed in simultaneous bursts of wonder at the spectacle, then moved on casually to other things. I figured that my stomach was bloated from gas. "No big deal." However, for the next several weeks, I maintained a vigil on my stomach, and to my perplexity, the odd "lop-sidedness" persisted. Eventually I decided that I should divulge the discovery to my parents.

It was summer vacation, and school would be in the past for three beautiful months. The annual family trip was only weeks away, and I could barely wait. When Mom said that I would have to go to the doctor, I felt an eerie certainty that something was drastically amiss, and therefore requested that we first go on our trip to Colorado; I knew that if my sensation was correct, I would never be able to see the mountains...at least not that year. The trip, I felt, could not be postponed.

A brief time later, I found myself in Colorado. The unchanged beauty was without flaw, yet to my dismay, I was unable to fully enjoy it. Even small trails, which I had previously made with ease, I could not manage without an overwhelming urge to vomit. The thought of food was not at all welcome nor appealing, and my energy waned; I felt as if I had another mild case of stomach flu. My sister who, along with her family, had accompanied us on the trip, confided to Mom, "Laurie looks so fragile..." My weight loss was more apparent to her since she saw me on fewer occasions. My appetite had slowly declined, and I had complained of stomach discomfort, prompting me to squeeze a pillow through the night. Occasional bouts of stomach flu would evoke such violent stabs of wrenching pain that I could only stand with my stomach tucked in, my back bent at a 45 degree angle to my legs. We never suspected that anything was wrong until I discovered the unusual appearance of my stomach. Even those with keen eyesight can be blind when gazing into a mirror, especially when the changes seen therein have occurred gradually, over a period of time. Moreover, I was always a rather finicky eater and found mealtime to be one of those obligatory necessities of survival. I was also quite prone toward nervousness, which wreaked havoc on my stomach as well; certainly my pangs were not abnormal, as I'd experienced them as long as I could recall, and they inevitably would render me without an appetite. A lack of interest with regard to food on my part was nothing new; for years Mom urged me to finish my food or eat my vegetables, coupled with a lesson on nutrition or a threat that would not allow me to partake in later treats, such as cookies or ice cream. Feeling that I was healthy enough, I cared little about "sound nutrition" and "balanced diet" yet Mom's "cookie clout" sometimes carried a fair impact, (depending on the vegetables I was to choke down, as well as the type of dessert which taunted my eyes and tongue). No threat however magnificent was sufficient for me to make beets or spinach disappear; that was asking too much, and I gladly relinquished my treat. My appetite posed little cause for worry and, as before, the symptoms of stomach flu soon were but a memory. The lump remained, however, glaring suspiciously from beneath knit shirts; the appointment with the doctor could no longer be delayed.

It was a sunny day when we pulled into the doctors parking lot, and I was in good spirits despite the natural qualms one encounters upon venturing into the typically noiseless waiting room. I was characteristically happy, and although I knew not what news my physical exam would unveil, I felt no need to punish the doctor for doing his job; he deserved a smile too.

Dr. Murrell was a man of few words, who wielded an aristocratic air with the unimposing quality of a true gentleman. He appeared to own a sense of innate calm which allowed him to divulge even the worst verdicts with unruffled dignity and composure; he transmitted ease to the waiting patients and relatives as if through a sort of osmosis and, I'm sure, avoided many hysterical outbursts as a result.

As he methodically inspected my stomach region I found it extremely difficult to refrain from laughter. Ticklish and quite unused to being touched, his various pokes evoked embarrassing jolts of muscle spasms as I tried, without success, to squelch my chuckles. When he had finished, he announced that he wished the opinion of his associate doctor and departed for several minutes. Arriving once again with Dr. Errico, who then took a turn applying pressure to various points on my sensitive stomach region, they asked whether any specific areas brought about pain when touched. I replied that I had experienced none, and they nodded in silence.

As the two doctors prepared to leave the room to privately confer the meaning of my symptoms, Dr. Errico extended his arm to place a fatherly pat on my shoulder. As he did so, I felt my spine turn to ice in an unexplainable sensation of pure dread; it was as if his gesture foretold doom and I recalled the persisting thought which had echoed in my mind since the moment I discovered the lump. The news was not going to be good; I knew it now.

Dr. Murrell returned to the room alone, seated himself before the desk, then turned to face us. He was unable, as yet, to draw any conclusions, but desired me to check into the hospital for tests as soon as possible, and the preparations were made. I can no longer remember how I felt when I departed that day from the office drear to the bright flood of sunlight; I cried no tear, and spoke no words of resentment or anger, for those I would have recalled. I knew only that I had to discover the truth about that mystery which lurked behind a mask of skin.

The hospital, I found, was no place to be unless one was horribly ill. I was not quite certain of my status in that regard, but knew immediately that my health declined the instant in which I donned the hospital gown. It was depressing; I blended so well with the room that I thought I would disappear in the ethereal whiteness. To my later dismay, however, I was easily distinguished and forced to submit to various manifestations of barbarism; never having stayed in a hospital, I had no idea of the rigorous torture treatments which were actually only routine and lawful tests. I write the above with an air of sarcastic jest, for obviously not all of the tests incurred techniques of bludgeoning, prodding, or other undue discomforts for the patient; an X-ray, for example, has never once evoked the slightest twinge of pain. There are tests however, which disrupt one's level of comfort substantially, and unfortunately, those which can prove fatal. For my part these latter tests always spurred the reflective statement, "There must be a better way!" coupled with the hope that one day there would be a technological breakthrough in the field of medicine, wherein one merely stepped into a box and, after manipulating several buttons, he could step out again and the doctor would know immediately whether anything was wrong with his patient. (My mind later devised a second box into which one would step, and after several minutes, step out completely cured of all the ailments discovered by Box #1. This transformation occurred without pain, of course. Although I could endure pain, usually without protest, I was always eager to avoid it whenever possible.) To my knowledge, no such boxes have ever been invented; but it would be a grand idea...or maybe only a wistful thought.

Of the tests taken while in Moline, the stomach X-ray utilizing barium was my worst. Although the "chalk milkshake" was a displeasing effect on the taste buds of even the most starved individual (for one undergoing the X-ray must have an empty stomach), the degree to which I abhorred it was augmented by the fact that my stomach had been quite prone toward nauseousness of late. When I was told to sit in a nearby waiting room until I drank the last of the abominable shake I came fearfully close to vomiting; I hung my head and began to cry, knowing that if I did drink the liquid it would be spewed onto the floor and I would have to go through the entire process again. At the sight of my tears, a nurse quickly ran in search of my mom (who was left in an altogether different part of the hospital) and returned with her, sporting the hope that a mother could persuade more of the chalky fluid down her daughter's throat. The nurse's hope was in vain, however, so the staff quickly ushered me into the X-ray room again to complete what work they had begun. First standing against the platform, the X-rays commenced; soon I found that the platform was actually a movable examination table, to which I was securely strapped, and it began to recline toward a prone position. To my surprise, it did not stop when it leveled, but crept backward until I felt I was dangling from the ceiling and the entire world was reversed. I gawked at my hapless predicament, thoroughly amazed. Had my stomach been more cordial, I might have enjoyed myself. It was not unlike taking a carnival ride after consuming a greasy hotdog and an ample dose of cotton candy.

I was joyous upon returning to my room, even though the moment I arrived another nurse popped in, bearing a fluid which its creators had tried desperately to make resemble prune juice; yet prune juice this definitely was not, for no juice could taste so horrid. Despite threats that I must drink the laxative

solution or the barium would transform into cement while yet in my intestines, I refused to drink the awful liquid. It was utterly repulsive to my stomach, and again I knew what the future would have in store if I forced it down.

With all the tests behind us, I could now relax throughout the rest of my stay at the hospital. The part I most enjoyed was filling out my daily menu cards, which arrived with each preceding meal; while munching on my morning toast, I could choose the items I preferred at lunch. It was enormously entertaining, and sparked my day with anticipation.

As usual, Mom strolled into my room and watched while I explored the contents on my breakfast tray; her appearance punctuated the beginning of another hospital day, and she made certain that I consumed a nourishing breakfast; without prompting I had done so, for I was delighted with the realization that I could have an egg and Rice Krispies and toast merely by so indicating that desire on the menu card. The array of choices seemed endless, no preference was greeted with questioning eyes or poorly concealed mirth as often can be the case in a restaurant.

Some time after the breakfast tray had been whisked away, Dr. M. entered, saying that the test results had been analyzed and therefore wished to speak with Mom candidly about the indications which they had revealed. They departed, accompanied by a nurse, and entered a room which Mom later described as being very long and narrow, containing only a table of similar description, and covered completely with an ample thickness of cushion. The doctor and nurse placed themselves on the opposite side of the table from Mom, and he began to relate the fact that the barium X-ray showed a sizable mass in the stomach region, and though he could not be certain, it held the possibility of being cancerous. It was a hideous impact for my unsuspecting mother, and she felt that her body had been engulfed in a searing, internal fire; she placed her arms on the cushioned table before her and bent her head as one reacting to a heavy burden that must be endured and said, "Life can be so long."

Dr. Murrell who knew quite well our family history and its motley assortment of dread diseases and dysfunctions, could empathize with my mom's sole comment of numb disappointment; the nurse, however, scanned Mom's face after each successive statement made by the doctor. Mom felt scrutinized under her persistent gaze, and it was now obvious that the cushions covering the room were so adhered for those who, after receiving bad news, literally bounced off the walls for a time until their energetic madness diminished to a state of mild panic.

Feeling that my health problem was one which had risen beyond the hospital's capacity to manage properly, Dr. Murrell thought that it would behoove us to travel to one of the larger clinics in the region; without a moment of indecision Mom expressed her preference for Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and the doctor gladly hastened from the room relieved by the knowledge that his subsequent phone call would at least be progress of a positive nature.

As Mom gradually regained strength, the nurse continued to remind her that it was too soon to tell whether the growth was cancerous, yet soothing words could not dispel the lecherous threat and uncertainty which she carried with her. In a further attempt to comfort, the nurse suggested that Mom first settle the hospital account at the billing office to assure that her composure was intact, and then return to my room. Mom took the nurse's advice, feeling relieved that she could delay our reunion through a valid excuse; yet as she rose and walked toward her destination, she felt as if she was under the unsteady control of a novice puppeteer who guided mockingly and without precision until she was seated once again.

By the time Mom returned to my room, my lunch tray was already poised in front of me on the portable night stand. She had somehow managed to persuade her face to don a cheerful countenance as she entered and remarked, "You can go home now." An elated smile spread across my face upon hearing those precious words, and my interest waned toward the contents of the lunch tray. I knew that I hadn't heard the entire story, however, because Mom had been absent so long; if nothing was wrong, the doctor would not have wished to discuss my health in private. Suddenly I became annoyed; I wanted to know the facts. The few facts were that I would have to go to Mayo Clinic for further tests because of an abdominal mass; though Mom said nothing about cancer, that possibility was not yet a fact, and she hadn't actually lied by withholding any related remarks. Her answers satisfied my curiosity, yet simultaneously fueled the fire of dread in my mind which had begun as a mere spark several weeks before. It seemed that my earlier fears were justified as time progressed.

With quiet resolution, I knew within myself that I must face whatever adversity would befall me head-on; I could not march backward into the darkness. Once home, my Mom led me into the living room where we seated ourselves side by side on the couch. I looked at her face, steeped with anxiety for me, yet trying desperately to feign a degree of happiness for my benefit. It was evident that she knew more details surrounding the situation than she cared to confess. "You can cry if you want to...it's all right to cry," she said. "I can't," I replied. "I've nothing yet to cry for!" She hugged me and we sat in brooding

silence. Since my health was a mystery, I felt no urge to cry; and, I thought, if I knew, what difference would tears make? The problem would still exist. Tears, I felt, demanded a tangible impetus to be worth their salt; like pain or horrendous fear. As yet, I felt neither; but perhaps I would experience both soon enough.

I knew the trip to Rochester would be no pleasure excursion, but I maintained high spirits despite the purpose behind the journey. It was a beautiful drive, and I dearly loved to travel; besides, what better reason could one have for dining in restaurants?

Because of our late evening arrival into the city and the fact that my appointments were scheduled for the latter portion of the week, nearly all of the motels posted "no vacancy" signs, and we found ourselves humbly situated in one of the older, run-down hotels in which the bathroom was located "down the hall." I was not overjoyed at the prospect of week-ending in the hotel, but I had little choice in the matter. The depressing mood of the place was over-shadowed in part, however, by the many attractions of the surrounding area; we learned of parks, shopping malls, movie houses, etc. from the local residents, and planned to do as much as I wished after and between my various tests.

Rochester was a quiet city; it was geared for the convenience of its many guests, of which the majority were patients or the family members of the former. There was an entire network of underground corridors which connected several primary clinical buildings, hotels, hospitals and various businesses. With cleanliness an obvious objective, the maintenance crews made perpetual rounds through the marble columns and artistically tiled floors. Excepting few, the employees and staff were friendly and approachable; even the doctors radiated character rather than the cold indifference sometimes prevalent in large or impersonal institutions.

My first appointments were to report to "desk C," which was located underground. The entire lobby was decorated with colorful seats and healthy plants, as well as people whose faces revealed moods of many different hues. At varying intervals, a nurse would step in front of a brightly painted door, grasp a microphone and bid those persons whose names she announced to come to the "blue section" or the "red" or "orange," as the color near which she stood indicated. When my name was called I heaved a nervous sigh, walked to the appropriate door, and was dispatched to a smaller waiting room in which those already seated appeared glum and apprehensive. The place reeked of alcohol. Again I waited until my name was called, watching as each "victim" reappeared from behind the curtain which housed the inevitable needles and syringes, sporting a bandage in the crick of his arm.

"Lauren Isaacson..." I swallowed hard and stood up. "Oh...I was expecting a boy." I smiled as pleasantly as I was able, and reminded myself that this was the person who would extract my blood, the needle wielder. "Most people just call me 'Laurie'," I replied. I was seated and told to make a fist as the nurse applied a tourniquet above my elbow. She prattled on, simultaneously producing a needle attached to the largest vial I had ever seen; it must have been five inches long and the diameter of a 25 cent piece. "Where are you from, Lauren?...You'll feel a stick..." "Moline, Illinois," eyeing the vial as it plunged into my vein. "Have you had your blood drawn before?" "Yeh...a few days ago..." The vial filled and an assistant handed her another of the same size. "Uh...how much are you gonna take, anyway?" I asked, feeling strangely self-protective... "Just a little more...you have many tests scheduled..." She popped out the second vial and handed it to her assistant, replacing it with yet another, though shorter and about the diameter of a dime. It filled more slowly, almost unwillingly, perhaps. Eventually the nurse decided that she had drawn enough and whisked the needle from my vein, binding my arm securely with the gauze. "You can go to the green door now, Lauren." I smiled and departed, happy that I had one test behind me.

The green door housed another form of blood test in which one "merely" had his finger pricked. I said "merely" because, in my opinion, the prick hurt much more than did the former blood test, because one's finger tips contain so many sensitive nerve endings. After having my finger stabbed, its bright red blood squeezed onto multiple slides and in miniscule vials, I was free to take my leave. As I returned to my parents in the lobby, I found the nearest trash receptacle and disposed of my reeking, alcohol-doused bandages; I disliked the odor for its strangely lingering overtones. It was amazing to me that the nurses could draw blood hour after hour; I would detest such a job; yet it was comforting that there were those who could aid humanity in such ways. Walking to my next appointment, I wondered casually whether they ever felt like mosquitoes!

Holding the various appointment cards I noted that, of the remaining tests, all were X-rays except a suspicious card which read "Bone Marrow." Marrow, I knew was located inside the bone, and dreadful thoughts danced nervously about my brain. When we finally reached the desk behind which lurked the mysterious and disconcerting test, we found ourselves amid stately decor, closely resembling the impeccably correct taste of an Old English library. Hues of rich burgundies and browns, accented by marble floors and columns, marched down shadowed, slightly ominous hallways and beneath closed

hardwood doors. It seemed appropriate to whisper, as even footsteps echoed through the corridors.

I was very ill at ease. My name was called and I hesitantly strode forward, accompanied by my mother, who was actually beckoned to follow.

"The doctor's real good-looking," the nurse said confidentially. I didn't really care; I was far too nervous to be impressed, for I knew the test would be painful if they wanted my mom to come; generally speaking, parents took up too much space if they became shadows. Moreover, parents can actually impede the efforts of the doctors and nurses through outright intervention, or, due to their presence, transform even an adolescent back into a child.

The nurse was correct in her analysis of the doctor's appearance. He was a young man of Irish descent who spoke with a delightful brogue. I was cordially greeted and then instructed to lay on my stomach; the section from which he would extract the marrow and a small sampling of the bone was located somewhere on my back, to one side and slightly above the buttocks. I disliked the process before it commenced since I was unable to see what the doctor was going to do; it helped if I was aware of an imminent jab, rather than being taken by surprise. In this I had no choice, however, and the process began.

Mom stationed herself near my head, over which she gazed as the doctor applied a local anesthetic to deaden the area. "You must stay very still," someone said, as the pain crept from a mild ache to a splitting level. Gritting my teeth, silent tears welled up in my eyes and fell; with muscles taut and rigid I clenched the upholstered table with a vise-like force until I was told that the brutal pain would come to an end.

The test was over. Relieved, I slid myself off the examination table to pull on and zip my pants; the wound throbbed at varying intervals above a constant, underlying ache.

"You're a very brave patient," the nurse said. I smiled knowing that I was too cowardly to undergo that type of hell again, for it was no longer a mystery what the words "Bone Marrow" on an appointment card implied.

Before exiting I asked the doctor if I had healthy bones. "Yuv' gut fine bunes, Laaren," he replied, giving me an excellent, unforgettable sample of Irish-flavored English. He seemed to be a very amiable man, and, now that I was turning to leave, I was better able to appreciate his undeniably good looks. For my part, I was sorry that he was not an X-ray technician.

Whether walking or sitting, I experienced twinges of pain, a constant reminder of my last test of the day; but that did not hinder my fascination for gift shops, and I eagerly plunged out of the confines of the clinic walls to the beautiful July morning. We were famished, as none of us had eaten due to the fact that I was instructed to have an empty stomach for many of my tests. Since the next few hours belonged exclusively to us, we decided to eat and then mill about the stores until it was time for my mid-afternoon consultation with the doctor in charge of my case.

When our afternoon of leisure had come to a close, we made our way to the Mayo building and took the elevator to the designated floor. By now we were quite used to waiting, and after registering my name at the front desk, seated ourselves in the expansive lobby.

The test results would have been scrutinized and second opinions heard. We now awaited the doctor, and, in certain respects, the future; each of us sat in silence, nurturing one's own worries, until my name was announced. The three of us rose in haphazard unison, glad to have a reason for shifting our position, and were guided down a hallway to a private room. Again we awaited the doctor's arrival, yet felt more inclined to engage in conversation now that we were removed from the stifling quiet of the lobby.

Finally I heard footsteps outside the door. The feet paused, while a faintly audible rustling of papers issued beneath the closed door. Silence again. Then suddenly, as if uncertainty had been washed away, the door knob turned and a doctor burst into the room, extending his hand to my father and offering a friendly "hello!" to us. We all stood; I smiled. I had no fear of doctors; the fear stemmed from that which they knew, and I the patient, as yet, did not.

We seated ourselves once again, and the doctor began questioning me about the way in which I felt, physically. To nearly all of the disconcerting questions, I replied in a positive fashion, which to my parents was a "good sign" and indicated that my health problem "couldn't be that serious if everything seemed so promising." Then the doctor asked the color of my bowel movements. I started to laugh. "Brown." "But what color brown?" he persisted. I laughed some more; turning my face to the floor, I noticed that the tiles ranged in color from yellow to the deepest brown, and wondered if the staff had requested that particular tile for the express purpose of color clarification. I smiled, and selected a

nice, warm brown. "That looks about right." Then he inquired whether my stools had ever been black.

My eyes flew open. "BLACK?!!" I lost control...to me this was a horrendous joke. He had his answer, and quickly scribbled "no" on his note paper.

I was having a grand time, under the circumstances. After the question and answer session ceased, I was instructed to lay on the table; he wished to take a look at my stomach region. Applying pressure to various areas, and gently tapping others, he asked if I felt any pain. I did not, so he invited other doctors into the room, creating a troupe of seven in all, who took turns prodding my stomach, and in my opinion, tickling me to death. I flinched as each new hand poked my bare flesh, and embarrassed, tried desperately to control my convulsive muscles and fits of laughter.

When they had seen, or in my case, felt enough, the doctors filed out of the room to "gossip" about me beyond earshot. Eventually the first doctor reappeared and began to divulge the conclusions rendered through the tests and consultation. It was clear that I had a large abdominal mass in the vicinity of my stomach, yet its composition was uncertain, and he would therefore offer no statement either way as to it being cancerous or benign. The bone marrow was unaffected and healthy, my blood count was good, and the chest X-ray showed no signs of abnormalcy. Aside from the mass, I had every reason to believe in my health as a matter of fact.

The mass would have to be removed; that, also, was a matter of fact. An operation was inevitable. Since it was the beginning of the weekend, however, I would not be admitted into the hospital until Sunday evening. Monday morning I would undergo an arteriogram to chart my veins in preparation for surgery, and the following day I would find myself in the operating room. Relieved that I had two days of freedom before having to exist in the confines of a hospital, I found the arrangement as agreeable as the situation allowed, and my parents and I determined to make the most of it!

The only hindrance I was obliged to endure was the weekend urine sample, which stated that the bounty of each trip to the bathroom had to be collected, rather than flushed away. I was given a large plastic canister, a small cup and a handy-dandy green tote bag in which to stow the former for reasons of discretion.

I was embarrassed at the prospect of hauling the green tote everywhere throughout the weekend, but my dear mom volunteered without a single flicker of disgust, and shouldered the responsibility just as easily as she would have taken the smallest piece of cake or the burnt piece of toast. I really need not have worried, however, for I was not alone in my strange occupation. Dotted here and there, as we traveled about the parks and shopping malls, were similar green tote bags borne by smug faced patients, or conversely, those who would recognize the kinship and smile knowingly. I soon discovered that, actually, I might have carried the tote myself, for everyone who was familiar with its purpose seemed to know that it truly belonged to me; teenage self-consciousness is alien to no one, and remembered by all.

The weekend was memorable. I tried to take in the landscape as I walked freely under the mid-summer sky. The Canadian geese were numerous on the shores of a small lake, and had grown haughty from delicacies thrown to them by passers-by; they pecked with idle disinterest at the corn we placed on the ground for their inspection. They had developed a taste for the refined; mere corn would no longer suffice. Though the geese were considered tame by most standards, they yet held a firm bond to the wild which no human bribery could erase. I was drawn to this quality, for in their willowy black necks I saw the northern wilderness and inevitable flight; they were not prisoners of the city, but came and later departed through a will of their own. Unlike the lazy human who clings fiercely to a generous hand, the geese were drawn in, but then drifted away to distant shores where life was hard, yet sweeter still than risking to the malicious child a twisted neck for scraps of bread. It had been said that nature is cruel; no, I thought, only people are cruel, for they alone can pervert that which by nature's intent was beneficial in moderation. Food, pleasure, death...man could leave nothing alone. I turned away from the geese, which were milling about and shifting their weight, first balancing on one leg, then the other, vigilant yet restful. I carried the tranquil image with me, and return to it still. Eyes focused through the glass of the car window, I stirred as Dad turned the key of the ignition and the car moved slowly forward. It was evening and the lake began to fade into an obscure haze; the hum of the engine gently brought my mind to the present and the distractions thereof. The darkness gradually melted away beneath the city lights, and I awoke to the startling realization that I was hungry. Under the glaring neon lights, one cannot long remain apart from the harshness of the city; neon lights invade one's senses and disrupt one's dreams.

Saturday morning, after breakfast, we decided to find our way to a small town nearby that was holding a summer festival; once there we saw booths and tables housing various crafts or topics of interest, as well as food and drink. Weaving our way through the smiling, jovial faces, time slipped casually by. Mom purchased a rooster made entirely of dried seeds, while I inspected the tables of

antiques. Nothing sparked my interest enough to pry into my wallet, so I quietly moved on.

We decided to await the afternoon parade, in which Dr. B. of yesterday's consultation said he would appear, playing an instrument in the band. It was he who had informed us of the small town festival, and we could not help but wonder if we would recognize him in a red jacket and cap. The band members were seated in trucks; blowing earnestly into their instruments, the musicians eyes sparkled behind puffed up cheeks. It was no use; they all looked like perfect images of each other.

Still quite early in the afternoon, we concluded that it would be nice to find a park which was in the area, and had no difficulty in its pursuit, for the road signs were plentiful and doubtlessly placed out of respect for the patient-tourist. It was a gorgeous day. The leaves were emerald green and at their foremost beauty; strong and pliant from spring's ample rain, and not yet touched by the autumnal sun... the drying kiln, the blistering gaze which ages all.

The leaves swayed in the wind, playing with the rays of sunlight which danced in countless patterns on the ground. Despite the beauty surrounding our every step, none of us could forget the reason we came to the park; we came, of course, to forget. The business of forgetting, however, meets with few actual successes; the more one attempts to forget, the less likely he is to accomplish his goal; but in trying the object of one's trial forever torments the mind. It is better to let the job of "forgetting" take care of itself.

That evening, following our meal, we decided a movie would create an exciting climax to the day, especially since our hotel room boasted no TV. The movie-house featured "Jaws" and I eagerly bounced down the aisle and selected a seat fairly close to the screen. My parents found two more agreeable seats toward the rear.

As the theater began to fill, I glanced about nervously, hoping wildly that no one with a spherical or bee-hive-shaped hair style would seat themselves directly before me. With good fortune on my side, I breathed a sigh of relief as the lights were dimmed and the curtain slid aside.

I had landed an excellent seat; the story drew me in, as my senses were unimpaired, and I slowly left Rochester, and hospitals behind to immerse myself in the image captured through my eyes. The movie was horrifying; the people in the audience screamed and jumped in unison. As the actors pursued the vicious shark, and more unsuspecting individuals fell prey to the maniacal monster, one began to feel helplessly self-protective, as if caught unaware, one might be torn limb from limb. Then, in a brutally raging climax, the shark was overthrown, and a tumultuous sigh escaped from the lips of on-lookers; everyone was safe at last.

When I rose from my seat to file out of the building, reality slapped my face. I was not in Moline, I was in Rochester. Tomorrow night I would admit myself into the hospital, and Monday would be inescapable; by Tuesday I would sleep beneath the surgeon's blade and awake to the answers of unfulfilled questions. Yet I was pleased that, for two long hours, I had, without prompting, laid my worries aside; forgetting was a business best left unto itself.

Sunday was spent musing through shops in the local mall. I delighted upon finding several pairs of pants and two knit shirts; it was a chore to fit clothes, since I was tall and, admittedly, too thin. So happy with the new purchases was I that I asked the clerk to remove the tags on two articles and reappeared from the dressing room feeling very much in style.

In another store I spied a purse that looked nice, but cost fairly little. I looked down disgustingly at the worn bag which dangled lifelessly at my hip, and felt the purse would be a worthwhile expenditure. Digging into the old one for my money, I finally extracted a disintegrating leather wallet; its appearance so shocked my mom that she immediately offered to buy me another.

Generously outfitted, I dismissed the mall with my parents for the more pleasant atmosphere of the city park. The afternoon was disappearing rapidly, and we no longer tried to rid our minds of distressing thoughts, for they were altogether too prevalent to wish away. Strolling through the grass, we did not often speak; we merely waited for evening to descend. There is always too much time before an unpleasant event; too much, yet not near enough. The afternoon stalled...it seemed never to end... and our conscious minds sustained heavy blows.

We walked near the lake, where geese stood craning their necks and bickering among themselves. I looked away; the sight offered little solace to my restless mind. I longed, almost, to fling myself upon the hospital steps if I could but in that way escape the awful waiting...waiting...waiting.

Dad glanced at his watch; five o'clock, supertime. Eating; it was something to do, so we welcomed the thought wholeheartedly. Our therapy consisted of such occupations; as long as one remained busy, the job itself mattered little. Thus, the main objective of the hour encircled the procuring of sustenance.

I knew that the meal that evening would be the last I would share with my parents for several days, yet I no longer remember what I ordered or if I ate well. I recall only that I had been told to finish eating before a certain hour, so that the following morning the test could begin early; under the strict instructions, I lamented that I would not be able to partake of the customary late-night snack.

We did not linger over our dinner plates. The tension had become too great; I wanted the hospital to be our next destination. I carried my few belongings for I needed no suitcase; my underwear I stuffed in my purse.

PAGE 49

Chapter 10 Preparation and Surgery

"If only one did not have to think during the long periods of uncertainty and ignorance, and could somehow benumb the senses until the hours of darkness had passed!"

CHAPTER TEN

Preparation and Surgery

At the admissions office, forms were completed; it was much more complicated than registering for a motel room. I sat nearby, watching the wearisome process.

There were no rooms in the pediatrics ward. I was led to a room which was quite old and depressing, and found to my disgust that my roommate smoked. "I hope this doesn't bother you," she said motioning to the hand that held her cigarette. What did it matter, I thought; she would continue smoking regardless of the way I felt about it. From experience I had learned that, although many people who fostered bad habits did not want to be overly offensive, most never possessed enough genuine concern for another individual to refrain from their habit. I waved off her question, and hoped for adequate ventilation. Is this the bittersweet price for societal living?

My few belongings were stowed in a closet, then I went back to my bed and sat on the edge of it, uncertain of what I was supposed to do; during these periods of anticipation, had I been a smoker, I might have lit up. I did not wish to spend the night there; anxiety clawed at the walls of my stomach.

Through the window across the room, city lights twinkled like hundreds of stars which had been hurled to the earth, spreading toward the horizon in a grid-work of interesting lines. Soon my parents would return to their hotel; I almost wished that they would leave, so I could adjust to my new surroundings, for I would face tomorrow's test, and the following operation; I had to find comfort within myself.

Mom and Dad kissed me goodnight, amid their internal struggle toward leaving their little girl in the hands of strangers. Once they had gone, my nervousness began to subside; anxiety breeds anxiety, and lacking two generators, I now bore only my own.

Seeing that I was quite alone, a nurse entered the room bearing the essentials of hospital life, issuing

to me a gown, and placing kleenex tissues and a thermometer and styrofoam water pitcher on my nightstand. She routinely popped the thermometer into my mouth and took my blood pressure and pulse rate; removing the thermometer from my mouth, she glanced at the reading and made notations for her file. Before bidding me goodnight, the nurse reminded me that I should eat nothing, nor should I drink water after 6 a.m. the next morning; I nodded in comprehensive agreement, and climbed beneath the sheets to stare at the ceiling.

At first it was difficult to dispel my restless thoughts, and I fought to find a comfortable position amongst the stiff sheets and unfamiliar pillow. Yet at some unknown point in time, disquietude was overruled by fatigue, and I was claimed by the obscure world where conscious and unconscious thought are united as one. I drifted into a pleasant, untormented sleep.

In the morning, quite soon after I had been awakened a nurse administered a relaxant which quickly chased away negative emotions that would have otherwise clogged my mind. I felt blissfully content and agreeable as my senses numbed and were encircled by an unearthly calm. I smiled dreamily as my parents descended upon my heavenly state of awareness, speaking and receiving words which sounded distant and muted, as those heard by one while swimming underwater, or standing behind a heavy door.

Two interns arrived, wheeling a cart intended for my transport to places unknown. They skillfully guided it past my parents with minimal conversation, and easily hoisted me from the bed onto the unquestionably hard surface. I waved goodbye to Mom and Dad, who stood dubiously watching as the men wordlessly rolled the stretcher down the hall, and finally, after a fair amount of travel, found myself in an expansive room, surrounded by gauges and meters by which a staff of doctors and nurses stood awaiting my arrival.

The room itself was rather dark, which blended fittingly with my semi-consciousness. While the staff worked about me, I remained awake although my body was as limp and motionless as one in a coma. The doctor injected a liquid dye into my vein, watching a monitor as it slowly spread from the point of entry at the union of my leg and trunk, and I began to feel weaker still. With markers, the doctor charted a map on my stomach under the beam of a spotlight; I looked on maintaining awareness through a power that no longer seemed to be my own. It was crazy that people concerned themselves about death; I felt more than half-way there; whether I drifted closer to life or to death made no difference to me, then, for in all things existed only tranquility...and that blissful unearthly calm.

Gravity tied me to the bed, and I laid like a dead thing, bound by an invisible, unyielding weight. All afternoon I slept, and into the deepest night; morning came, Tuesday morning, but I knew it not. Though numbered words to my parents I spoke, I can recall nothing. In my mind's hoard of memories, that morning never dawned before these eyes.

For my parents, Monday, the day of the arteriogram, was spent primarily in my room. They did little but watch in silence as I slept, breathing quietly as dream after dream filtered through my subconscious mind.

Aside from mealtimes and occasional strolls to exercise their legs, my parents remained near my bed until the ripe hours of the evening. Near 8 p.m. Mom was paged on the hospital intercom. Receiving the phone at the Nurses Station, she found herself conversing with Dr. T., the surgeon who would lead a team scheduled for my case the following day. The operation would be of great consequence, and he wished Mom to fully acknowledge that fact before it commenced; to all operations, a risk was involved, and regarding the seriousness of the situation was of utmost importance. Since the mass had so thoroughly encroached upon the stomach, they would have to remove most of the stomach itself, thereby reducing its overall size considerably; though the stomach would stretch with time, it would never return to its original size. The conversation came to a close. It seemed awful that a young girl, Mom's little girl, should have to endure so much, so massive an operation. She returned to the hospital room where I still breathed steadily in a tranquil repose; while Dad received the portents of the previous conversation, I was adrift on a sea bereft of anxiety or pain, and ignorant of their anticipation, I did not stir when they stood to return to their hotel.

The day of the operation had dawned amid countless hours of waiting, yet the waiting for my parents had not ended; the minutes would drag while I laid beyond their sight, and a doctor kindly advised that they leave the building, for the operation would most surely prove quite lengthy, and the hospital atmosphere had less to offer than did the beauty of the nearby sanctuary on the hospital grounds. They nodded, numbly deciding to try his remedy for over-wrought parents.

Mom and Dad found their way to the garden, their legs propelling leaden bodies through some distant, unknown source of power. Ambling through the sunlit passages like automatons, their eyes would focus, yet they did not see. Finally disposing of the useless suggestion, they checked their course

and wheeled around to return to the hospital once more.

They felt compelled to be nearby, even though there was nothing with which to occupy their senses; the operation so filled the capacity of their thoughts that no other form of diversion was required.

I was in surgery for six hours. My parents were anxious, at times pacing the hallways, and then sitting once again; despite the voluminous weight which seemed to claim their energy and tax their very soul, they were always watchful, ready to receive any news of the progress from the operating room. Staring dismally at the various activities that were going on about them, Mom suddenly noticed two nurses wheeling a cart past the lounge where my parents were seated. "Those are Laurie's things!" she exclaimed; suddenly overwhelmed by the thought that I had died, and they were removing my personal effects from the room. On rubber-like legs, she raced down the hall, adrenalin giving her energy which seconds ago she had not possessed. Rushing up to the nurses, she again cried out, "Those are Laurie's things!" displaying fully the horror of her panic-stricken assumptions. "Oh. . ." they replied "we're so sorry! We never would have moved her things without telling you first if we knew you were sitting there. You see, a room is vacant in the pediatrics ward, and we're taking her things down there." The explanation heralded unspeakable relief, and Mom returned to her seat, an older but less fearful woman.

Resuming their stationary poses, my parents waited, each fostering thoughts of dread and flickers of hope. If only one did not have to think during the long periods of uncertainty and ignorance, and could somehow benumb the senses until the hours of darkness had passed! The truth can burn the heart like a smouldering ember touched lightly to the flesh, but waiting. . .waiting is the relentless torture of unseen phantoms, made more hideous through one's blindness as the seconds slink by, without an end.

A door opened, and Dr. T. strode toward my parents, who immediately rose, brimming with questions. The doctor ushered them into a conference room, and closed the door behind him. Already present were Dr. M. and W. who had assisted him with the operation. The doctors said that I was in the Intensive Care Unit, and would remain there for several days until my condition had stabilized and I had regained some strength. It had been a long and grueling operation; Dr. T. confessed that when he first looked at the incredible mass in my stomach, he did not believe that they would be able to remove it. The growth was cancerous and severely advanced; having one baseball sized tumor and several smaller ones in the stomach, it had begun fingering into the pancreas as well. Nevertheless, they decided to work, the minutes fading into hours, until their degree of progress flooded them with hope. By the time they finished the operation the doctors felt quite confident that they had removed the growth entirely.

Understandably pleased with their efforts and apparent success, the doctors continued to further explain the cancer which had invaded my stomach. The type that I had developed was called a "leiomyosarcoma," which was considered a low-grade cancer and one quite slow to spread. Ninety-eight percent of those having that type of cancer were cured simply through an operation alone. A factor which mystified them about my case was that most leiomyosarcomas occurred in older women; why a young girl of 13 would produce such a cancer seemed baffling.

Visitation time in the ICU was strictly monitored, and limited to several minutes out of each hour. My parents were anxious to see me, however, even if they could not long remain at my side. After the conference had ended, they were guided into the dimly lit room which I shared with others demanding close attention. Their eyes were greeted by an alien spectacle, quite changed from their little girl who tromped through the woods and gleefully rode her bicycle. A tube exiting my nose was attached to a machine which suctioned out the contents (acids, fluids, etc.) of my stomach while it healed. An intravenous bottle dripped some unknown fluid through a long tube which trailed down several feet and then disappeared under an ample wrapping of cloth. The incision itself was hidden beneath my hospital gown, a full six inches in length. Also concealed beneath my gown was a tube connected to a small bag taped to my skin in which the seepage near the wound would accumulate; called a "drain." It operated through gravity alone.

Chapter 11 Diagnosis and Recovery

"It was a word which bit the tongue like the crab for which it was named. Cancer. It was not a word which rolled off the tongue, and once in the air it remained there. . .cancer maimed. . .cancer killed."

"I had far too much confidence and hope to fly to the arms of despair, for in despair, one finds no warmth or comfort."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Diagnosis and Recovery

I opened my eyes to a throbbing pain, and saw that my parents were standing nearby. Blinking at them idly, my mom inched closer and ask, "Honey, do you know us?"

Suddenly I felt as if I was an actress in some ridiculous soap opera; the elements were all there, from the tragic figure of the patient to the damp-eyed parents. Do I know them, I thought. "Of course I know you!" I spat the words at them in obvious rage. They smiled at my fighting spirit; it was a good sign. Had I been too weak, I would have been incapable of such an emotional outburst. I suffered no delirium, only intense pain. I despised pain, but more than that, I was infuriated by phrases which at the time seemed to be idiotic cliches when words do not easily yield to the tongue. Not impeding my rapidly surfacing thoughts, another jolt of pain opened my mind. "I wish I was dead!" My ill-chosen words were daggers to my parents, whose faces were wrinkled with pains of their own. "Don't say that, honey," responded Mom, hurt by my instantaneous verbal combustion. Speech is something which, once flung into the air, cannot be repealed; language is a component of memories, at times forgotten, but more often returning to the mind. So it was that the life of my last phrase during the visit has not yet reached its end, and lives still in our recollections, a youthful tongue which dared to speak of death, indeed, to welcome it, was that which emblazoned the imprint with such permanence.

I was tired, and after gratefully receiving medication to ease the pain, sank my head into the pillow. Mom and Dad had taken their leave; there was not a great desire for small talk, even if they could have produced it.

The following day found me in a much more civilized mood. All post-operative grogginess had long since disappeared; my exhaustion resulted only from my body's mad attempt to heal its scars. I was constantly under observation, and soon adjusted to the frequency of the temperature, pulse and blood pressure readings; those simple matters were not disruptions at all.

In the morning I was introduced to the bedpan, and although my ego did not merit any cruel blow, I found myself further humbled. With a deplorable lack of skill, I managed to dampen myself and the bed considerably; I was miserable. Fortunately, in that respect, it was time to be weighed, and the nurses lifted me onto a table-like scale; I remained there until my bed had been prepared anew, then was happily replaced despite the agonizing trip to and from the bed.

Any extensive movement seemed to evoke pain, and I readily understood the reason for my discomfort when I was bathed. In addition to the regular routine, the nurse also changed my bandages. Seeing the incision for the first time, I gawked in amazement, thoroughly repulsed. The seams of the long gash rose above the surrounding skin, and with the multitude of black stitches, resembled a railroad track. It seemed to me that it would leave a scar of monstrous proportions looking, at the time, so hopelessly grotesque. Then I noticed the drain located to the side of the incision, and was shocked to discover that the soft rubber tube extended to my interior regions through an open slash in my side. I'd not have thought it possible that one could entertain such an opening without risking complete loss of one's blood. I was learning new biological facts with each passing hour.

My parents visited each hour, sometimes speaking with the family members of other "unfortunates" when I was not awake. It is in the confines of a hospital that one learns he is not alone in his pain. The boy who laid in the bed next to my own would literally "poop himself out" during a bowel movement, losing his insides as well as the excrement, while a child across the room had a valve on his head which he could push when water accumulated, thereby releasing the pressure and accompanying pain. I

wondered how those children could ever lead normal lives with their present situation appearing so dismal. Although I existed in the present, I lived for the future and my return home; accepting each moment, I fostered no suspicions that I would die, having tumors removed; I knew nothing, as yet, of my tumors being cancerous, for the grave seriousness of the operation I gathered slowly, as I gained physical strength, since spirit I never lacked. The business of getting better was simply a matter of time; "whether or not" I would improve did not enter my mind. Feeling sick, followed by recuperation and health were as inseparably linked as popcorn and salt. I always "got better."

Later that evening, I announced that I had to use the bathroom. After two subsequent failures earlier in the day, I rejected the bedpan with obstinance; the contraption was immodest and impossible to operate without the patient feeling horribly unclean. Moreover, I preferred a dry bed to a wet one, and having twice illustrated my inadequacy for the nurses, who then had the extra chore of changing my bed, I found them more than agreeable toward the idea of escorting me to the bathroom.

As I was helped to a sitting position, my mom looked on in unconcealed surprise, thinking that I would certainly cry out in pain. With an inquiring glance at one of the doctors, who happened to be making his rounds, he smiled proudly and explained that, although it was more difficult, they had worked around the stomach muscles during the surgery, rather than severing them. Thus I was spared the excruciating pain which further cutting would have wrought.

The adventure across the room was a success, and from that triumphant hour, I no longer necessitated a bed pan; I had secured a far better means of relief.

Although most of my hours spent in ICU consisted solely of rest, there were those aspects of each day which I learned to abhor. The most objectionable was the routine of pounding my back, enacted by one of the hospital staff, to insure that I would not accumulate fluid in my lungs. It was an obligatory function, I realized, yet it hurt dreadfully. As I was instructed to lay on my side, the ruthless process would begin, thereby releasing my protests as well. I remember that I would beg them to stop; angry that I had to endure such hostile treatment; I feared that the incision would burst open midway through the ordeal, spilling my organs onto the bed sheets; that frightful thought never materialized.

After a week of this stomach-wrenching routine, I was given a contraption which was composed of two bottles, connected by four plastic tubes, two of which were mouthpieces. One bottle contained a blue solution, while the other was completely empty. This, I was told, would be a substitute for the back-pounding if I would promise to use it often throughout the day. The object of the device was to blow through one mouthpiece with sufficient pressure as to transfer the contents of the full bottle into the empty one. Then, once completed, one would take up the alternate mouthpiece and repeat the process to return the fluid to its original canister. Even though this procedure was rather slow from the outset, I welcomed it if it would spare my incision the pain which resulted from the blows to my back.

Among my other daily routines were shots, administered twice to my thigh, and the blood profile, in which blood was drawn in the morning. Those who drew blood were quite practiced in that area and rarely created any unpleasant moments; when the veins in my arms became uncooperative through constant use, their faces did not waver in protest at the thought of probing my feet or ankles, which were in better condition and actually quite accessible.

On Friday, the IV which had been in position since Tuesday began to infiltrate, wherein the IV solution no longer ran only into the vein, but into the surrounding tissue as well. My hand started to puff, swelling into a spectacle which was twice the size of my other; with all of the misdirected solution seeping into the tissues, I also began to feel an annoying tightness which pained me when touched. I hoped that something would be done to alleviate my discomfort, without the expense of additional anguish, for at times, a remedy invited unforeseen unpleasantnesses greater than the one with which a patient was currently battling.

Dr. W. was called in the room to start a new IV in my other hand. I hoped it would not be an ordeal, and remained silent as the probing began. Aiming for a vein, the doctor edged the needle through my skin and missing his target, attempted to strike it again and again by manipulating the direction of the needle. I looked on, wincing, trying desperately not to think at all. His method was not succeeding, and he withdrew the needle to make ready to try another vein. Shifting his position, he pierced through the flesh, striving for another site. The vein rolled about, eluding the valid efforts of the doctor, and once again, he pulled the point from my hand to ready himself for his third attempt. I was holding my breath, uncertain how long I could withstand the slow, methodical jabbing. The needle was again thrust beneath my flesh, poking back and forth as each try was foiled; in exasperation, Dr. W. pulled the needle from my hand, stating resolutely, "I'm not going to hurt you again!" and fled the ward in search of another doctor to fill his duty.

Several minutes passed, and then a bearded doctor strode toward my bed, introducing himself as Dr.

A. I greeted him politely, though quite wary, now, at the prospect of having to possibly relive the previous experience. My fears were groundless, however, for he quickly guided the needle into a vein and wrapped my hand to secure its position. I thanked him gratefully, branding his face and name into my memory. The following day I was transferred to the pediatrics ward, no longer requiring constant observation. It was a pleasing change; the rooms were light and cheerful in comparison to the ICU, and the hallways were brightly painted, having here and there, small lounges for the benefit of both the young patients and their families. The room boasted a TV, which, after four days of silence, was welcome entertainment. As an added bonus, I was now able to receive mail, as well as several lovely flower arrangements, which had not been allowed in the unit, and as a result, spent their first days at the nurse's station. The flowers and plants brought life and color to the room's overall whiteness, and reminded me of the genuine concern which, initially, I had been too alienated by pain to realize. The most important part of my day was the mail delivery; the majority of my cards and letters came from members of the church and my family. The church response was utterly amazing, and my days would have proven quite dreary had it not been for their continuous demonstration of awareness regarding my condition.

I learned the full story behind my operation after my transferral to pediatrics. "A base-ball sized tumor. . .," I marveled. "Did they keep it?" Mine was a question spurred by outright surprise and wonder. I had no real desire to see the ugly mass. I remembered how the various organs looked floating in a pool of formaldehyde on the shelves of the biology room, and shuddered, not caring to see something which was, most likely, far more grotesque to the eye. "It was a low-grade form of cancer," Mom continued, "but they feel quite sure they got it all . . ."

"Quite sure. . ." my mind echoed. Somehow that did not seem proof enough. Cancer. I had heard of it before, everyone had. It was a word which bit the tongue like the crab for which it was named. Cancer. It was not a word which rolled off the tongue, and once in the air, it remained there, like the seeds of a ghastly plague which was feared with revulsion. Cancer maimed. Cancer killed.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, I drank in the magnitude of my hospitalization and the many implications of having reared such a growth in my stomach. Although my progress appeared good and the doctors believed in their operative finesse with pride and confidence, I could not embrace the idea of my health as a steadfast quality; I possessed an elusive disquietude in the recesses of my mind which would sound an alarm and shield my heart from the brutal disappointment of having placed my dreams in an unattainable void. My voiceless apprehension would create no problem, housed as it was, in the back of my mind; remaining mute, except unto myself, it would hinder no one's happiness should the doctor's certainty and everyone's hopes materialize, least of all my own. A positive result contrary to one's innermost beliefs is a most precious one, indeed.

The days passed within the exacting boundaries of the hospital routine. Each morning I was weighed, given a shot in the thigh, and then held a thermometer firmly between my lips while the nurse took my pulse and blood pressure readings. The drain was checked and sometimes emptied, as was the canister into which my stomach contents were suctioned. Several hours later my parents would arrive after eating their breakfast. We talked a little, and then Dad would stroll casually out of the room while Mom helped me to bathe. One of the doctors made a morning visit between 8:00 and 10:00; usually Dr. W. or M. were assigned to the daily rounds, although Dr. T. did occasionally stop to examine the scar and inquire about my general health. It mattered little who stopped in; I liked them all for their various qualities.

Dr. T. was strong, yet compassionate; he understood and empathized with the concerned patients and family members, utilizing tact and well-chosen words throughout all conversation. He made the patient feel comfortable, in good hands; if he did not feel for his patients, he made a fine performance.

Dr. M. reminded me of one of my cousins, with dark hair and kind, dark eyes which were a compliment to his character. Younger than Dr. T. , he was efficient but gentle in his work, and had an easy personality which won my trust and admiration.

Dr. W. had a character quite separate from the other two, which demanded time to appreciate. W. possessed an incredible air of confidence almost akin to haughtiness, which made any failure a black eye. There was an inexplicable humor to his manner, however, which redeemed brusque behavior, for he was not too proud to, in some way, admit defeat.

A few days after my transferral to the semi-private room, I decided that it was time to remedy my poor vision and insert my contact lenses. An occasional lens wearer himself, Dr. W. proclaimed that I would never be able to wear them for the entire day after not having inserted them for over a week's time. I shrugged, saying that I was still going to try, as W. dismissed himself from the room. With an IV in one hand, and my other free, I manipulated the bottles of solution and the contacts until I succeeded in their insertion. Pleased that I had accomplished the feat, one-handed, for all practical purposes, I sat

back in my bed and delighted in my ability to "see" once again. The nurses' faces were recognizable at a distance, the TV shows gained the added impact of facial expressions and the flower arrangements stood against the wall with a new clarity. I could even peer from my window and watch the pedestrians milling about in front of the hospital steps and the fluid movement of the traffic through the streets.

At night, Dr. W. stopped again. "I'm wearing my contacts," I told him with a smile. "You wore them all day?." he asked, rather awestruck. "Yeh, I did!" He was speechless, shaking his head in disbelief as he walked out of the door. When I was alone I marveled at the beauty of the city lights, which had only yesterday seemed a hazy melding of fluorescent tubing, stretching toward an unknown obscurity; the lights became sharp points of white before my eyes, mingled now and again with the red flash of a car's tail lights or the green glow of a traffic signal. I stared out the window, picturing the night in my mind, wishing I was bound northward in one of the streaming points of light. As the traffic raced by, lost, finally in the darkness, I wondered if they knew how lucky they were, OUT THERE; I really wondered if they knew. . .

With my stomach on a slow route to recovery, I had not eaten for many days, nor would I hope to eat for many more. The pancreas needed to heal as well, and the doctors would not allow food to pass through my lips until it had shown signs of improvement. I did not have a breakfast tray to look forward to each morning, so after one of the doctors stopped by, I would roll off the bed, and, escorted by my parents, walk down the halls, leaning slightly from the tightness of the incision and grasping the pole on which my IV hung suspended, still dripping a tasteless breakfast into my vein. During these strolls, my "nose hose" was detached from the suction mechanism and clipped to my gown like a hideous corsage. At first I was embarrassed by the decidedly gruesome appearance of the hose, filled as it was, with mucous and blood, but eventually I grew accustomed to the people on the floor and discovered, also, that others wore my unusual apparatus as well. Perhaps misery does not love company as much as it loves compassion and understanding. Thus I would skirt the corridors in both directions, heading "right" toward the craft room, or "left" which lead to the canteens. Usually taking a left turn out of my room, I would amble down the hall to contemplate the vast selection of cold sandwiches, snacks and candy which could be had simply through feeding one's pocket change into the coin slots. I stood wistfully before the machines, pointing out to my parents what I would choose when I could eat food again.

Although the stomach suction prevented me from feeling hunger pangs, it was the taste of food that I so horribly missed. Moreover, mealtime broke the monotony of a bland routine; it was something pleasant to do, exercising the mouth. It disturbed me to see someone jawing his food disinterestedly or poking at a meal which, in his opinion, lacked aesthetic appeal. Meal trays would often be returned sporting a delectable piece of dessert or fruit; I would peer at the specimens, sighing that I could not save the morsel from the trash heap.

Food became my favorite mind-game as my stomach gradually healed. We pursued the canteen route quite frequently throughout the day, and each time I would gaze at the treats, yearning for a taste of something. . . anything. . .besides the mint of my toothpaste.

I was not allowed to swallow food or liquid of any kind; even water was forbidden. My throat became dry, despite its occasional rinsing, and the tube which ran from my nose to my stomach only hindered the situation. I decided to test my luck and ask for ice, reasoning that the excessive coldness might aid my throat to a degree, even though I could not actually swallow any of it. Since my saliva would become frigid through the presence of the ice, perhaps the throat would benefit from the slight trickling of cold moisture. To my amazement, they agreed to give me a glass of ice chips at various intervals through the day providing I would only chew the ice, and then spit it into a metal bowl for that specific purpose; I shook my head "yes" in vigorous excitement at the proposal. In time, I was even allowed to swallow one or two teaspoonsful of ice each time. It was a small, but significant favor, for which I was exceedingly grateful.

As I improved, I sought other forms of entertainment aside from watching television, which included the use of my hands. In my opinion, the hospital craft room was an ingenious installment. I had always loved art, and in that room, one could purchase various kits which were self-contained, having all the necessary tools and materials, for a minimal price. It took no time at all before I had selected two kits, and dispatched myself to my room to begin the projects. I also enjoyed drawing, and having remembered my sketch book from home, I made several drawings from the items in my room and the objects I saw in magazines. When I was not involved with drawing, however, I lusted at the food photographs and greedily read each mouth-watering recipe. It must have seemed a curious endeavor, for my parents would watch me in good-natured humor as I sat enthralled, a mere twig propped between numerous pillows, lingering over pictures as if I was haunted by food's memory.

Mom and Dad would eat lunch outside of the hospital, and often walked about afterward to exercise

their stiff limbs. Neither of them were idle folk, and the long, exhaustive hours spent with me were difficult for that reason, as well as many, more obvious ones. It was fortunate that I happened to be hospitalized during August, for the weather was fine and conducive to jaunts through a park or the city streets. A shopping mall was located in the area, and they would often stop there to buy a small gift, which they would present to me upon their return. As the weeks progressed I had collected a menagerie of small clay animals which I displayed on a nearby nightstand; it was affection made visible. When my parents were gone, the treasures were a reminder of their love throughout the night; staring vacantly out the window, I knew that despite the impersonal glare of the city lights below, two of the people out there cared for me.

Mail delivery was an exalted highlight of the day, arriving sometime after the lunch hour. I had always loved mail, yet this lavish assortment of cards and letters was a recipe for happiness, and helped to alleviate the disappointment of not having received a lunch tray. The opening of mail was a tremendous pastime, bringing rhyme and laughter to the afternoon. After reading the cards, I would reread them, picturing the individual or family who took the time to send the cards. The familiar names written at the bottom of a card or note conjured images of home... and of friends, which instilled my parent's day with warmth, even as it had enlightened my own.

Two weeks had passed since Dr. A. had started my IV in the ICU when it began to infiltrate. Hating to remove it, the nurses would fiddle with the needle's position, pushing or pulling, and try to ignore the fact that it, like all good things, must come to an end. I tried to bear up to its failure, but also hoped wildly that the IV would function for one. . .more. . .day. The trials I had endured before Dr. A.'s success were still fresh in my memory.

Despite repeated attempts to save my two week old ally, its rapid failure demanded attention as my hand swelled like a balloon and the vein in which the needle resided stung intensely; it could no longer remain unnoticed in my distorted hand. The needle was pulled, and the nurses went in search of a willing person to "install" another.

As a replacement for my duo-purpose IV, which dripped nourishment as well as an anti-infection drug into my system, I somehow found myself with an IV in both arms, one for each purpose, leaving my hands virtually immobile and completely useless for any sort of craft that I might have desired to undertake. This certainly was a lousy state of affairs, I thought, contemplating the television rather sullenly amid my twisted array of tubes. Dr. W. entered the room holding his clipboard and beheld the new entanglement which extended into both arms. "Well, looks like you won't be putting in your contacts tomorrow." I thought I detected a note of triumphant glee in his voice. "I don't know. . ." I answered, my voice trailing off into nothingness; the new day would reveal what I could and could not do.

With the dawn I found that many things were considerably more difficult to accomplish. After bathing, with Mom's assistance, I succeeded in the insertion of my contacts, however, even though the process required more time and effort than it had previously. Shortly thereafter Dr. W. pranced into the room. "Hi!" I said cheerfully, eyeing him with obvious mirth and unaccountably good spirits. He looked at me from behind his clipboard. "I put 'em in!" He gazed at me with dumbfounded astonishment and self-consciously adjusted his glasses. "I didn't think you could possibly do it with IV's in both arms. . ." he said, his voice shedding its tone of superiority and knowledge. I grinned at him widely from my bed.

The following day, Dr. W. wore his contacts.

After Dr. W. had departed, blinking with stolid determination due to his brave and noble undertaking, Dr. T. paid me a visit. Asking about my condition, I could not refrain from lamenting my lack of mobility; I no longer was able to draw or take up a craft, among other difficulties. He easily perceived my frustration and proclaimed, "Well then, this won't do!" and made plans for an alternate solution; I beamed with joy to think that I would be able to resume my former activities.

That afternoon, I was greeted by Dr. M. who had received instructions to replace one of my IV's to a vein located slightly below my neck, which would be a more permanent, as well as a more comfortable position. He asked my parents to leave the room; I began to panic! If the insertion of the IV was going to create a lot of pain, I wanted no part of it. I was suddenly stricken with fear, as if all of the events of the past weeks were thrust upon me at once. I could bear no more, and tears welled up in my eyes in apprehension for the relatively simple procedure; I had already withstood much worse, yet my emotional limit had been reached.

I sat, set-eyed, while Dr. M. set to work. Trying to anticipate a stab of pain, I watched him nervously as the minutes sailed by. "There," he said, leaning away from me. "You're not done, are you?" I asked, quite certain that the worst was yet to come, for I had felt no urge whatsoever to flinch or grit my teeth; I had felt no sensation at all. "I'm all finished," he said with a smile. "But it didn't hurt at all!" I

said incredulously, nearly wanting to hug him. "Like," I said, "sometimes people feel pain, and other times they don't." I looked at him in admiration.

After the episode with the IV, Dr. M. won my undiluted and devoted trust; he was the doctor who actually performed the bulk of the work load in my case, and as the weeks passed, I knew it was he who I would miss, more than anyone, when I had shed my hospital gown for street attire. Whereas Dr. T. seemed rather like a paternal figure, and Dr. W. a sibling rival, I came to look upon Dr. M. as a friend. It was a shame, I thought, that some patients never regard their doctor as a human being, seeing only the suit or white jacket and ignoring the features beyond.

As the days wore on, feeling myself to have become a permanent fixture, I developed a friendly relationship with one of my numerous roommates. She was slightly older than myself, fifteen perhaps, and had come to the clinic from a southern state. As we rattled on, I found myself unintentionally mimicking her accent, as I often would do when engaged in conversation with one boasting a heavy accent. I always tried to control my propensity, and succeeded when speaking to someone else, yet to her I would inevitably twang the words off my tongue with a hint of a southern drawl; she did not appear to notice, however, and I am sure that if she had she would not have been insulted.

Julie resided across the room for more days than anyone else, for her condition quite perplexed the physicians. She, as well as her entire family, suffered from acute fatigue; throughout the better portion of the day she felt sleepy, and could nap at any time the order was given. Eventually they released her from the hospital's care, unable to pinpoint the problem after countless tests, both mental and physical.

Julie accompanied me on my trips through the halls, and grew accustomed to standing beside me as I stared dreamily at the canteens. Her companionship helped to stave off monotony as the month of August limped along. Even after she was dismissed, Julie still came to visit, as she was staying in the city while tests on other family members were run.

Perhaps there were those who were lonely in the hospital, yet I seldom felt so myself. Having my parents throughout the majority of the day, augmented by patients that one would inevitably begin to recognize and the friendly staff of doctors and nurses, I lacked no conversation. The hospital was quite populous. At night though, when the bustle of the day had diminished and the corridors fell silent except for the rumbling of an occasional cart, and the muffled steps of the nurses performing their nightly rituals or answering a patient's light, I would often lay awake and think of my home far away or watch the people hurrying along the sidewalk below my window, disappearing into a car or stepping from beneath a street lamp into a pool of darkness. How I longed to be out there. . . to feel the breeze, cool on my face, and hear the faint scraping of my footsteps resounding on the cement sidewalk. . . All other desires were overshadowed by the wish to be free, to live as one was intended to live, unhampered by tubes and needles; once I was released I wanted never to return. Evening was often characterized by a slight melancholy, a stab of homesickness, perhaps; yet I knew that mourning for that which one does not have was a pointless, self-destructive endeavor, and I would focus my eyes on the present, resolutely determined to face each challenge as courageously as I possibly could.

I welcomed each new dawn, thinking it to be the start of one less day in the hospital. I was used to the routine now, every aspect a natural part of this temporary form of reality. One day, for amusement, I decided to count the pinprick holes on my thigh, which attested to their receiving a ritualistic shot both morning and night; I came up with a total of 32 in one leg alone, equalling 16 days. It was no great wonder that my muscles were rather stiff and inflexible for this was quite separate from acupuncture, especially on the few occasions when the needle was a trifle dull.

Every day one of the doctors would call on me, asking how I felt. "Fine" was always my automatic response; but for the tube in my nose and no breakfast tray to look forward to, I had no complaints. My incision was healing quite well, and with the new IV, I was relatively capable of anything, within reason, of course. I was becoming stronger, and oddly enough, gaining weight. This latter fact seemed to please the doctors and they would smile, saying my IV solution was like eating a steak dinner each evening. "No offense" . . . I said, "but I'd rather enjoy the traditional kind!"

All of a sudden, amid their daily pre-rehearsed set of questions, I was asked whether I experienced any gas. "A little," I said amusedly. "What about a bowel movement?" Somewhat aghast I looked at them and replied that I had not; "Why?" I asked, quite perplexed. "Well, you see, we don't want to start feeding you until we know the system is functioning properly." I raised my eyebrows and wondered where in the world they thought a bowel movement would come from; admittedly, I devoured the thought of food daily, but that would produce nothing of interest to them. "How am I supposed to go if you don't feed me first?" I asked. "Other people move regularly who are on IV's," they said. I knew I had a problem on my hands. If other people generally "went" it meant that I probably would not; in a world of rules, I was often the exception. There was no rhyme or reason to my physiology. What was "was" . . . for example, I always sneezed in threes. It was a simple fact. "I have to go before I get to eat... oh

great!" . . . I may never eat again, I thought dejectedly.

For the next few days the doctors would ask if I'd had a bowel movement. "Nope." "Any gas?" "A little." I tried to surmise how long this would have to continue, and began to use the little persuasive ability which I possessed. "How about feeding me something... you'll get what you're after!" Well, they didn't know. As the days progressed, fruitless in respect to their tall order, they began to soften. "Any B M yet?" "Nope!" "Gas?" "A little. . . how about some food?" "Well, everything seems to be healing well . . . we'll see. . ." I sat back in bed, thinking that maybe I would eat again after all.

With the new school year close at hand, Mom began to think about her kindergarten: her room at school was disheveled and barren; still wearing its stark summer time guise. She would have to restore order to the chaotic array of boxes and create an atmosphere of warmth and welcome for the children who would soon fill the room with energetic enthusiasm; Mom needed to return to Moline. A plane reservation was booked, and Dad drove her to the airport with the understanding that she would fly back to Rochester on the coming weekend. It was different with Mom gone, more quiet, understandably, yet the difference extended beyond all those of the physical nature. Perhaps there is an instinctual essence within us, as humans, which desire maternal companionship in times of emotional turbulence or physical weakness. It is unfair to fathers who love, and are loved deeply in return, but the mother, the protectress and shrine of life, shall always be the sustaining end of the cord which had bound her child to existence.

Dad, also, experienced a void in his day with Mom at home. Mom seemed to have a calming effect upon him, and coupled with her innate optimism, her presence buffered his reactive temperament. I worried about Dad; Mom seemed always to have something to divert her attention, he had only the daily newspaper, occasional stints in front of the television, and his frequent strolls through the hospital corridors. Apart from the routine of his job, and the countless repairs of a home and car, and now stripped of his wife and companion as well, I could easily understand his restlessness.

With the noon hour, Dad would take his leave of me, and lunch in a nearby cafe. He soon found a favorite restaurant, which served freshly baked pies daily; this treat was better eaten at noon, for procrastination resulted in thorough disappointment. . . often all the pie would be gone by the time the thought of supper struck a pleasing note in one's stomach.

When he had finished lunch, his next priority was a walk, which grew quite lengthy on certain days; this was an indulgence which I never thought to impede or discourage, for he needed a reprieve from anxiety much more than I. It was always a great exasperation to me when I would see a patient, whether he was a child or an adult, deny his family members of their need for space and a sense of normalcy. Simply because a patient feels caged by his hospitalization is no reason to expect a constant bedside companion, thereby imprisoning his loved one with a greater sentence than that on which he himself felt imposed; the patient is better able to withstand the hours of boredom, for he is ill, but the relative, having his usual amount of energy cannot bear the strain of worry coupled with a patient's demand for vigilance. Occasional loneliness is far easier to overcome than emotional fatigue.

I entertained myself when Dad was on his walk; it was easy to do. Often I daydreamed in the midst of a television program, or stared at the pages of a magazine, never having read them at all. I rarely read magazines, although I enjoyed them heartily; most of their appeal derived from the photos, imprinting them in my mind and drawing hours of fantasy from the images alone.

After the passage of two hours or more, Dad would return, faithfully maintaining his daily surprise. The gift would be placed among my other treasures to be enjoyed and to become part of the memory which was already forming in my brain. The mail had arrived, and he would look through the cards, reading slowly the message or poem, then flipping to the front of the card once again. "That's nice," he would say, and pick up another to read. Dear 'ol Dad, I loved him so. I wondered why it seemed more difficult to let him know; I had no need to fear him, his brusque overtones were not always the fruit of anger as much as despair. I knew that when I hugged him, his heart nearly burst, his was no cold, indifferent demeanor. . . Dad's heart possessed the hardness of an eggshell.

The remainder of the day would pass according to routine. We took walks through the halls, longer now that I was gaining endurance, and began to trod on unfamiliar ground, past dimly illuminated passages and ancient, rather ominous corridors which had never worn a bright splash of paint. It was depressing and almost scary in these foreboding extremities of the hospital, and I was glad for Dad's company. On one particularly memorable excursion we had reached the end of the lengthy, darkened corridor and stumbled upon a window, situated next to the elevator, which faced the pediatrics ward from whence we had come. As we were surveying the scene, the elevator door opened, and a woman appeared, clad in a hospital gown, whose visage shocked my young eyes; her eyes bore the sign of a failing anatomy, jaundiced to such a degree that they seemed to have the uncanny glow of a neon sign. She carried on her face an indisposition to speak; I turned away, but not with obvious haste, trying to

feign a degree of casual preoccupation toward the window as she moved into the hallway. The whites of her eyes, yellow as buttercups, were entrenched into my memory, haunting me after she disappeared around the corner. Such sights were not alien to the hospital or clinic buildings yet they could not pass one's notice without delivering a jolt of awareness, of pity for the individual whose grasp on mortality was waning beneath humanity's unsettled gaze.

Somewhat disturbed after encountering the unusual pair of eyes, I was content to return to the comparative gaiety of the children's ward. Giving up the desolate sea of green wherefrom we had emerged, we were received by a conglomeration of lights which imparted to us an aura of welcome and flooded the ward with a sense of security.

Dad remained with me until his supper hour, at which time he would again be transported into the functioning world, where normalcy, rather than malaise, reigned complete. Following supper, he again returned to the hospital; our evening was generally spent in front of the television, taking in what entertainment it had to offer, and then between the hours of 8:00 and 9:00 o'clock he kissed me good-night, and walked to his motel, located in the immediate proximity of the hospital.

On the eve of Labor Day weekend, Mom flew back to Rochester, and Dad left for the airport soon after eating his last meal of the day. He was always punctual, preferring to wait several hours at his destination rather than lounge about at the home base until the last minute lest one of a hundred mishaps occurred. Such was the scenario depicting that evening, and I felt I could look forward to a night bordering on the exact characteristics of the one before, distinguished only by the fact that my father was absent.

I had observed a fair amount of television when the nurse entered to read my vital statistics and administer the nightly shot to my thigh. Feeling also that I needed to utilize the facilities, she escorted me to the door of the bathroom, pushing the IV pole beside me. Suddenly the IV tube swung out before me, dangling crazily like a wind-blown vine; it had become detached from the "socket" which protruded from my skin. I saw no cause for alarm, yet the nurse wheeled and darted up the hall, leaving the muffled remnants of an explanatory reason for her flight, to the effect, "I'm going for a syringe. . ." I hadn't seen the tube touch the floor, although contamination was the cause of the nurse's anxiety; I decided to stand at the bathroom door and await her return.

No sooner had a minute passed when my body took on a strange weakness. My head felt heavy and my eyes were oddly rebelling toward my desire to focus clearly; I knew if I did not sit down, I would fall presently, so I leaned against the wall and slid slowly to the floor. I had gained a sitting position, yet, that too, was being drawn from my capabilities; a determined force beckoned me toward the floor and I sunk resignedly down, unafraid and rather indifferent, as a ship, torn and buffeted, would relinquish herself to the fathoms of a gaping sea. As my body was ushered to the tile, I glanced helplessly out into the hallway and caught the eye of a doctor, unknown to me, who was walking briskly past through the untouched silence of the ward. He stopped abruptly, eyeing me with marked curiosity and asked "Do you need some help?" "Uh, yeh" I said, thinking I could, indeed, use some assistance. It struck me as incredibly humorous, even though I was not fully able to exercise or convey the entirety of my comic faculty at the time. He asked what had happened and why the nurse had left me; I told him, for my mentality, though buffered, was intact. He wanted to know if the IV had touched the ground. As I did not believe that it had, he gave it a swift, cursory inspection and plugged it back into the socket. By then the nurse had returned and was instructed to round up several others; they had to carry me back to bed, as my legs were rubberized and altogether useless. I felt as if I had entertained a drunken stupor within the passage of minutes, and without having passed a glass to my lips.

The episode must have resulted from the rapid denial of the solution to my system; since the IV dripped steadily into my veins, my body reacted to the change as it would any shock. Moreover, the fact that the IV was so near to my heart, and the realization that I was standing when the incident occurred, both render the semi-faint more understandable. At any rate, the doctor and several nurses flitted about me until they felt quite satisfied that the better part of my siege had ended; I immediately reflected how fortunate it was that the stated occurrence happened during the absence of my father. "Well," I thought lazily, "miracles do happen; or, at least, my luck isn't all bad!" Dad, I knew, would not have reacted with the lack of agitation that I had portrayed toward my rendezvous with the hospital floor, and I was extremely grateful that he did not have to witness the affair. While I was musing upon the above thoughts, the telephone's harsh ring clamored to be received. I laid in bed, still awash in a sea of partial coherence, allowing the nurse to answer the call. It was my oldest brother, Todd; somewhat dazed, I grasped the phone and attempted to carry on an intelligent conversation, explaining that which had transpired directly preceding his call. Once I replaced the receiver, I collapsed again into the bed's rigidity, perceiving that my former energy, absorbed into another sphere of existence, had not been repleted. My strength was of no consequence however; it had grown late, the plane's arrival was delayed, and nothing was required of me except to wait for the appearance of my parents;

waiting was something to which I was now accustomed.

It was good to see Mom again; Dad drove her to the hospital albeit the fact that visiting hours had long since elapsed; in the pediatrics ward, such rules were often relaxed or ignored for the benefit of the family, and it was not an uncommon sight to observe a parent slumped in a corner chair, stealing what replenishment the cramped, make shift bed would afford. My parents did not tarry in my room that night, as the minutes marched heedlessly onward and the night aged before us. I reviewed for them the main excitement of the evening, briefly filling their inquiries and in return receiving a small dose of chit-chat for my own reflectance. As they bid me goodnight, I knew that tomorrow would be merrier for everyone; the main family unit had been reunited.

Parents are the foot-holds and building blocks that sustain the growing youth; while other individuals may very well flavor the insights and spice the outlooks of a maturing mind, the parents yet possess the solid, nurturing ingredient... stability... to which he can, and will, turn in trying hours. I knew that I would forever be my parents' little girl; it was of no consequence that I would age into adulthood; I would always be a fruit of their existence, and while we all had possession of our senses and general mentality, I would, as would all of my siblings, return to their sheltering arms in fear, in pain, and in turmoil. Such was the nature of the bond of father and mother to their children, creating a debt which can seldom be repaid. I hoped that, in my small way, I could give them strength and answer their needs, and prove to be an enrichment to their lives.

The weekend passed rapidly, but it was appreciated by everyone. Mom, it was clear, had to return to her children; though they were, as yet, names without faces, her obligations as a kindergarten teacher existed with more prominence than my health situation; I was out of danger, and my recovery was ripening gradually; soon I would be released from the hospital and live once more.

Three weeks had elapsed, and still I had tasted no food, nor had I swallowed a mouthful of water. My yearning for the sensory delight of harboring various flavors and textures in the mouth and intermingling them with cool draughts of liquid refreshment had not abated; indeed, if the truth must reveal itself, I exalted the characteristics of mere sustenance to magnanimous proportions, certain that I would heartily enjoy food of the most modest preparation; dishes which had formerly sobered my features and impaired my appetite I fancied inviting and delicious.

My exuberant preoccupation with food was alien to no one. I would sit in bed, cutting recipes and their corresponding pictures from women's magazines then, in turn, would glue them to recipe cards, as the tasteless weeks began and ended. One might have thought that food would have been a vexation to my mind, yet dreams never inflicted pain upon my heart, and because they were figments of imagination, mere mental sketches, their failure in existence caused no dilemma; only, perhaps, mild disappointment.

The daily visits by the doctors seemed to meld together, echoing the remarks and questions of the previous day. "Any bowel movement yet?" "No." "Gas?" "A little." The questions had taken on the pure monotony of a scratched record which played the identical phrase over and over, into oblivion. How many days, I wondered, would my ears endure the repetition before the doctors were assured of the normalcy of my stomach and pancreas? I tried to close my mind to distressing thoughts; I knew nothing of my physical condition and through the doctor's restrictions, I would return to health; I had far too much confidence and hope to fly to the arms of despair, for in despair one finds no warmth or comfort.

Having passed my third week in the confines of the hospital, the doctors finally concluded that the signs were such that they could risk the removal of the nose tube and allow me to slowly test my stomach's endurance and tolerance of a liquid diet. The prospect elated me, and I promised to abide by their cautious instructions.

Removing the tube which issued from my stomach through my nose was no major operation; before I had enough time to be scared, the tube was out and my nose, clear. Dr. M. said that the tube would have to be analyzed for bacteria in the laboratory and, at the sight of the grisly thing, I immediately pitied the individual who would be assigned to the horrid occupation. Turning my thoughts inward, I found that, other than a soreness of the throat, I had no complaints to offer; to be free of the tube improved my appearance and heralded the commencement of food into my daily routine.

The first sampling of liquid sustenance proved to be a shadow of my expectations. I was served bouillon broth and green tea, both of which hardly satisfied my stomach's desire; the broth was intolerably salty to my unused tastebuds and the tea unfamiliar. Nevertheless, I consumed a fair amount of each simply as a reminder that I was licensed to function as any other human, eating and drinking as a matter of course.

Within 24 hours after my first ingestion of liquid food, I proclaimed that I felt an urge to go to the

bathroom. The nurse excitedly told me not to flush the bowel movement until she had inspected the stool; it was to be a clearly monumental event! After having proudly enacted the endeavor of which the absence had, for weeks, instilled nervous qualms into the doctors' thoughts, I emerged from the bathroom; the nurse quickly surveyed the matter, simultaneously taking notes. It was as if I was a hen who had laid a golden egg, except for the humbling fact that my offering was soon flushed from view.

I greeted the doctor that day with an unusually wide smile, knowing that when he asked his well-rehearsed question, I would be able to answer in the affirmative; however, he had already received the news by way of the nurse's chart, and beamed with apparent happiness. "You had us worried for awhile there," he said. "Well," I countered, "I told you that you would get what you wanted if you fed me." I sat upright in bed, grinning tight-lipped and amused by the sheer commonality of the entire situation; only in a hospital would one find so many individuals whose good tidings could be realized through such unlikely aspects of life. Actually, it was rather refreshing; if the bulk of society could gather contentment from such normal functions, such simple pleasures, what an unassuming, peaceful world it would be.

With the advent of my ability to utilize my stomach, came other surprises which were beneficial to my happiness, if not also my thighs; instead of morning and evening shots, I could now receive medication orally, thus sparing my legs further abuse. Dr. W. was assigned to prescribe the medication replacing the shots; when I told him that I was unable to take pills, he studied me from behind his clipboard, and a wry smile spread slowly across his lips. "You can't swallow pills?" he asked. "No." was my firm reply. My dad, who had been observing the entire scene unfold, queried, "Laurie, after all you've been through, that would be easy!" It was of no consequence to me how "easy" swallowing a pill seemed to them. . . it was unnatural. I had no intention of trying, especially after all I had been through.

Thinking an injection of fundamental guilt or embarrassment would make more pliable my stiff-willed stance, Dr. W. raised his eyebrows and said mockingly, "My three year old can swallow pills." Surely such an assertion by a proud father of his youngster's amazing feat would be a sufficient reason to shame me into taking my medicine. I looked at him undaunted and unimpressed. "I can't swallow pills." Perhaps remembering my success at wearing contacts all day, despite his positivity that I could never insert the lenses, let alone wear them for the period of more than several hours, he nodded and selected an alternative to pills. The art of negative and positive persuasion had little effect on me if I had full reign over my senses. Eyeing each other like rivals, we broke into good-humored smiles as he turned to leave.

Sometimes one's dreams and aspirations bring more pleasure than their fulfillment in reality. Many, I am sure, have waited in gleeful anticipation for a certain event to take place, only to feel acute disappointment when its enactment failed to bring forth one's expectant jubilation; such was the case with the ambrosiac manifestations which I had bestowed upon food, and the effect which said food wrought upon my stomach. To explain further, eating brought about nauseousness; this surprise substantially daunted my adoration for food, and putting away my recipes, turned my attentions to other, less torturous joys of life. Eating was eyed with sharp suspicion; I was told that, since three quarters of my stomach was gone, I could expect nausea following meals and, because of the small capacity, should feed myself often. As a result, I would eat a small amount, become nauseous, recover, only to discover that another tray of food was being placed in front of me. I had to force myself to eat; it was a chore to maintain my existence, not a delight, as I had earlier supposed.

Another curiosity which stemmed from eating was noticed after the initial bite of jello; oddly, jello seemed to "stick" at the point of entry to the stomach, then, eventually, pass down into the stomach itself. Never having experienced this sensation before my operation, I mentioned it to the doctors. They were unconcerned, and felt that any difficulty would soon repair itself. I nodded, wondering if it would, indeed, recover on its own. I remembered the tender lump which my head had somehow sustained during my lapse of unconsciousness in the operating room. Five days later, approximately all of the hair in the scalp which grew within the sore region fell out, leaving a temporary oval bald spot on the back of my head. When asked about this curiosity the doctors were mute. Perhaps it was the result of an operating room panic; I could understand their silence amid such societal leaches as lawyers and "lawsuit" seekers. The lump would be a mystery.

Because the doctors offered no clues as to the cause of the "sticking" I managed to concoct several of my own; one possibility was that the valve between the esophagus and stomach, known as the cardiac sphincter, sustained damage in the operation or through the long-term presence of the stomach to nose tube; or, I thought, the muscles within the esophagus, which push food toward the stomach in swallowing, were not functioning properly. The actual reason was never drawn from my inquiries, and to the present, the sensation creates some difficulty; yet it, like the other questions, shall always remain a mystery.

With each day I was given more freedoms; the IV was removed, and the cumbersome pole escorted to the supply room; walks increased in number and duration as they were now unhampered by either tube or pole. My diet improved rapidly, from liquids to strained liquids, to soft foods, and finally to a regular diet, and albeit the fact that food was no longer a blissful thought, the small and frequent meals were a source of entertainment and added sparkle to my day.

Despite gastro-intestinal difficulties, I endured the final days in the hospital with a new strength; because I was eating and sustaining nourishment through my natural means, I knew the heavy burden of a long recovery was loosing itself from my shoulders; I had nearly reached the summit of self-restoration after physical toil and mental strain.

My personality was refreshed by the small delights which seemed to grow unchecked in my miniature world; I loved to sit outside on the roof-top "patio" of the hospital and feel the warm sun and summer breeze touch my face, while at night the distant lights of Rochester glittered and shed their baleful remorse before my eyes; they were tempting jewels no more, but sweet reminders that at the week's end, I could stand beneath their steady glow. I no longer felt imprisoned, an outsider to the stream of life. I was a part of humanity, an element of nature, a working vessel of creation. I was not constrained. If I so desired, I could dress in my civilian clothes and disappear through the yawning doors of the elevator, to be lost in a sea of unknown personalities, and unfamiliar faces. The idea of freedom was a comfort to my last days of hospital existence, for it was attainable; I had but to discard my gown, don my clothes, and flee. . . and it would be mine. True bondage, I found, existed only in the mind and the way in which one perceived his world; for whether restricted under lock and key or lack of health, the mind is still capable of limitless meanderings if one but remains open to himself and is aware of his dreams.

On the day of my departure, Dr. T. dropped in to remove my stitches. Perhaps because he was the primary surgeon, this finalization was reserved for himself as the ultimate service and last detail of the operation. I watched while he snipped the threads, and tugged them from their month-long residency, some willing to give up their hold, others wrestling rebelliously with my skin. Here and there, pinprick points of blood surfaced along the scar, active protests of dislodged threads, which shined conspicuously beside the ruddy incision. Though alarming in its appearance, the skin would one day recover from its trauma and time would fade the scar; already it showed signs of rapid healing, itching uncontrollably, as with a vengeance; the soreness diminished, and I could stand upright with little pain or stiffness.

Dr. T. always appeared to share in one's concerns as well as one's joys; it was evident that my departure and good progress pleased him. Other than a slight loss of weight after returning to food, which was to be expected, given the side effect of nausea, I demonstrated every sign which indicated a splendid recovery was well underway.

Later in the morning, Dr. M. arrived to remove the drain in my side. The procedure was little more than a strange tugging and the length of flexible rubber was discarded. A stitch was also removed, and the business was finished with the placement of a gauze patch.

I was quite satisfied and ready to leave. The doctors I would see the following day at the consultation in the Mayo building, but to the nurses, I gave a word of farewell. In my own way, I would miss them, for I had grown to know their various personalities; but though I was grateful for their services, I would not pine my station in the pediatrics ward. . . even the stale, smoky scent of a motel room was a better place to spend the night. Gathering my belongings, I began the walk to the elevator with my father, beaming happily at my long-awaited descent into the real world. "Come back and see us!" shouted the nurses. I smiled. "Okay!" I said mechanically; although I was not intentionally insincere, I knew that I would never return. Once I quitted an institution or a segment on life's chain of events, I never retraced my steps. I looked not so much to the future as to the present, and in the present, I wished to live.

As I stepped into the morning sun, I tried to inhale the freshness, gaze upon the beauty and listen to the sounds; life swelled about me, too immense to take in at one moment. My spirits were frothing with excitement at each successive stride along the pavement as we paced toward our motel; it was a Big Day.

I rested briefly in the motel room and then we decided to drive around Rochester so I could see for myself some of the places Dad had visited on his afternoon strolls. Many of the streets were lovely, bordered with trees which grew from scrupulously trimmed lawns. The houses behind the green lawns and sculptured shrubs loomed with magnificence and grandeur; some displayed vast entry-ways while others boasted fine masonry and stonework. I had little doubt but that these were the homes of surgeons, businessmen and prominent city personnel. The outward appearance of the homes showed nothing but orderliness and tranquility, yet for all of the pervasive greenery, the scene lacked a sense of life; no one peered through the windows, no boy clad in cut-off jeans mowed the grass, no children

played on the clean-swept-steps, nothing moved but the trees in the wind. I reflected on the sight dismally. Perhaps it was considered improper to be "seen" outdoors; I lamented the plight of some people, for whom natural beauty seemed not a thing to be enjoyed, but merely a device by which one's wealth could be measured, something tangible, something which could be had. I had once heard that through riches one might be free; yet that which I saw in these streets was bondage of the most pitiable sort, for it was entirely self-imposed. Restrictions and social codes made by and for the elite were gladly followed, and those who bent under their weight, stooped willingly. Conformity can eventually overshadow the individual, rendering his former joys meaningless, if he desires to exist amid prefabricated expectations as determined by status rather than true values. Such are the hazards of social living; personally, however, I would rather sit on my front steps and wave at passersby.

Then I remembered; it was noon, a September weekday. . . the children were in school, the parents at work, and youngsters were most likely receiving their lunch. It was I who was an alien spectacle, not the streets through which we were driving; had it not been for my hospitalization, I, too, would have been seated amongst a classroom of students, and Dad at work. Again I mused over the beautiful sights. Maybe I had simply come at the wrong time; every street can seem deserted. I hoped that these lawns were loved as I loved my own.

We roved about the city, finally stopping at an outdoor mall which extended far beyond my ability to traverse. Dad and I entered only several shops which contained the novelty items that had served as my daily surprises while residing in the hospital. I tired easily, however, so we found our way to the motel once more.

The lodging was plain, but serviceable and clean. My bed was commodious, compared to that which I had occupied for the past month; it boasted a built-in massage mechanism, which I tried immediately, and later regarded as a waste of both time and money. It was amusing, however, shaking vigorously, for about three minutes, like a belly of a rotund man engaged in hearty laughter. As I unloosed the bedspread from its clutch around the pillows, I noticed that the pillows rustled when touched; inspecting them further, I discovered they were encased protectively in plastic. My eyebrows arched quizzically at the sight, yet I said nothing; there must be a reason why the management was disposed to do this, but it mattered little to me at the moment. I wished to rest, and until it was time for supper, discarded all conscious thought and drifted into a peaceful repose.

In keeping with my redesigned stomach, I ate a small meal at supper time. Before setting back to the motel for the evening, though, I decided that it might be fun to sample one of the famous pies that my dad had been enjoying throughout the month, so we turned into the cafe, and luckily, spied several pieces that still lurked in the pie cabinet. A slice of apple pie caught my fancy, and Dad selected another. He had not bent the truth; the pie was delicious, and I unhesitatingly devoured the entire piece.

Once returned to our motel, I began to note the uneasy qualms of an upset stomach gradually gaining momentum. I decided to lay down, incubating the nauseousness until it had transformed into an unquenchable, relentless monster.

Before I was able to run, or even think to run, the beast gave a mighty heave and unloosed its hold on the contents of my stomach. Apple pie. The reason was now quite evident for the necessity of the plastic pillow covers. Apple pie in reverse was a sight most gruesome. I looked once more at my pillow, a wrong move, and bolted for the toilet as the beast ventilated its frustrations a second time by bellowing vehemently into the porcelain bowl.

I don't blame my stomach for its mammoth revolt; it had not needed to function at all for well over three weeks, and then, after a mere five days of work, it received an entire slice of rich apple pie. Not pleased, it decided to send it back. Thus my Big Day ended on a rather sour note; but perhaps sweetness, tempered, forms the groundwork of memories far stronger than those composed solely of sugar and honey.

Chapter 12 Chemotherapy

"Uncertainty wielded mighty weapons and sharp words. What IF. . . was too persuasive to warrant refusal."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Chemotherapy

With the new day, I was more cautious in my choices of food. We breakfasted, then lunched, milling about the city until it was time for our afternoon consultation.

We were to meet with a Dr. E., an oncologist who specialized in cancer treatment; the surgeons would also attend. Playing the usual waiting game, we sat first in the lobby, and after our names were called, found ourselves in a room similar to that in which the initial pre-operative consultation had taken place. Neither Dad nor I knew what this meeting would portend; yet I felt that, although my hospital stay had reached its end, my wings were clipped, unfit for flight. There would be more trials, and more obligations; uncertainty seemed to breed obligation, for to it, I was unextricably bound.

Muffled steps were heard outside the door, and I had a slight sensation of de ja vu. Then the door burst open, and a tall man entered, booming a friendly "hello" to both of us. We all shook hands and seated ourselves; soon afterward, the three surgeons, Drs. T. M. and W., entered as well as a young smiling doctor who was there simply to observe. Dad rose again to greet the new comers. As the pleasantries died away, the business of the meeting came to our attention.

Because my tumor had been cancerous, there was naturally the question of whether surgery alone had been action enough to free the entire cellular structure from my body. As far as the surgeons could recognize, they had removed all cancerous cells, but since cells cannot be seen by the naked eye, the doctor's supposition could possibly have been incorrect; for this reason the meeting was called to determine the next course of action. Since mine was a rather unusual case, they felt at a complete loss as to the route which should be taken, and having stated several options decided to privately confer the matter. The doctors filed out of the room. Dad and I looked at one another. The whole situation seemed ridiculous. The surgeons were "certain" yet the state of my health was rendered "uncertain" by the presence of cancer. One word, and yet it made such a difference; it was almost mathematical; just as surely as positive and negative numbers, multiplied, equalled a negative response, certainty coupled with uncertainty yielded uncertainty. Moreover, I began to feel like a subject, someone against whom plots were devised; there was to be no specific method, no scientific plan in my treatment. . . and while I reserved faith in the doctors, I knew that an end had been reached wherein my self-confidence was worth just as much to my well-being, if not more.

When the doctors returned, they confessed that, although a decision had been determined, their means of arriving at said decision was quite simplistic and utterly devoid of calculation. The decision was literally pulled from a hat, producing a solution which read, "Chemotherapy," and to which they would adhere unless our wishes were opposed to it. At this point, the surgeons took their leave of us, and I voiced my farewells; they disappeared into the hallway, and the door slowly drifted back, to close silently and blot their retreating footsteps. It seemed strange that I should never see these men again when, for a month, they were daily visitors and trusted allies.

We were now alone with Dr. E. and the silent, smiling observer. Dr. E. explained the situation which had formulated, defining chemotherapy as a means by which cancer was cured, sweeping any and all lingering cells from the body with a deadly blow. In my case, the treatment was viewed simply as a protective measure, a guarantee, that all cancerous cells were wiped out; given such a characteristic, especially when considering my previously mentioned uncertainty, it was already obvious to me that we would not refuse the proposal. As we sat motionless to hear the rest of the definition, I became aware of the observing doctor whose eyes were riveted to my face with an uncanny, relentless fascination, while his lips remained curled in an unwavering smile; it mattered little where I would place my eyes, his gaze feasted on my features, ingesting hungrily every emotion my countenance displayed. I listened half-heartedly to Dr. E.'s conversation; he explained that treatments would be paid through the research funding since my cancer was a rarity, and would therefore place my family under no financial

burden. It was nice that my experimental therapy would be no cancer on my parent's bank account, I thought dimly; my concentration was withering under the infernal scrutiny of the observer's beaming eyes and steadfast smile, for there was no benevolence in that plaster-cast smile, only a keen desire to devour one's expressions; and I knew that he waited for a certain look, a show of anguish, an emotional outburst.

Dr. E. continued. He was explaining the ways in which chemotherapy affected the patient. Something within me did not want to hear what would happen, yet my mind took it in; I would feel sick, nauseous, weak. I would be susceptible to infections and viruses... I would be afflicted with occasional aching... I would lose my hair... I could die. Tears, unbidden, welled up in my eyes so I tried furiously to will them away; I did not want to cry in front of those lidless eyes. It was rude, callous, to stare so unflinchingly as another's future was verbalized and deftly illustrated by a doctor who knew all of the hideous cruelties of which chemotherapy was capable.

Dr. E. passed a form to my father, instructing that both he and I read carefully, and sign if we were in agreement to its statements; our obligations, their obligations, etc., etc., etc. I was staring at my knees, fighting tears desperately. My head was bowed low to escape the face which would not leave my own, which granted no peace or meditation. Dad balanced the paper on his knees and signed his name with confident strokes; he passed it to me. "You can read it first," he said. My eyes were a haze which saw through the page. I did not need to read it, for I knew what I had to do; knowing, however, made it no easier.

I signed without thinking, without reading one word. The observer was grinning widely now, a sadistic glimmer of pleasure seemed to sparkle in his eyes; I did not have to look at him directly; his luminous frame of mind pierced my unseeing stare. Tears shone on my face. I wondered bitterly if my performance had satisfied him.

To conclude the business of the hour, a date was determined for my return to the clinic; the commencement of treatment was two short weeks from the present, and time would not slow its tempo for me. I would have to enjoy those days while I was able. Dr. E. stood, signifying that the meeting, and his time, had reached its duration; I bid him a respectful good-bye and he ushered his abominable sidekick out of the door. Dad and I gathered our belongings and departed in their wake, walking toward the lobby. Climbing in the elevator, descending to our floor, climbing out of the elevator, walking to the car... it all seemed mechanical. While our bodies glided toward our car, self-propelled, we decided to leave the town that afternoon. Somehow, the future demanded that the need to go home be satisfied. We went.

The September sun crept low, tempting winter as it reclined toward the western horizon. After we had left the city behind us, and found the route which would lead its weary travelers home, Dad broke the silence of our brooding minds. "Would you have been satisfied with just the operation? Would that have been enough?" I shook my head slowly back and forth, sitting quietly and gazing as the pavement was consumed by the miles. "No..." I said, faintly echoing my mute reply. We drove on, into the fading light. Uncertainty rode with us; it was the impetus which quailed for insurance, taunting our future-bent minds with doom and dread. Uncertainty wielded mighty weapons and sharp words. "What if..." was too persuasive to warrant refusal.

We arrived in Moline long after sunset; it was a beautiful sight, crossing the Mississippi, for the river reflected the street lights in a profusion of multi-faceted bands which sparkled like a king's hoard of precious jewels. It seemed a warm welcome, though few people were stirring, and those that stirred knew us not. That we knew the land was enough.

The streets on which we drove seemed like old friends, unchanged, and somehow dearer to the heart after the extended absence; Fourth Avenue, whose narrow confines should never have known four lanes of traffic; 53rd St., which boasted one of the few brick surfaces still in use; and 7th Ave.... the corner mail box, the parallel rows of houses, and finally, our gravel driveway.... home. As we neared the end of the avenue, the headlights caught a curious banner of white which appeared to stretch over the entire drive. We approached and stopped beneath a sign which read, "Welcome Home Laurie," professionally lettered in blue and red; it was the work of John Moore, Steve's father. Welcome home?... indeed, yes!

The following days seemed a continual welcome; my aunt made some of my favorite rice pudding, neighbors dropped in, friends visited... and to my surprise I received more cards in the mail. I busied myself writing numerous notes expressing my gratitude for all the demonstrations of concern which I had received as well as a note of appreciation which appeared in the church bulletin in reference to all the cards sent to the hospital; it was a job I viewed seriously, because no one had been obligated to do anything for me. Just as I was doused with affection, I might have been completely ignored; thus, I believe it is of the utmost importance to acknowledge another's selfless expenditures, whether their

value be measured in hours or coins. To turn one's back upon the kindness and concern of others is a silent, but effective voice which speaks of one's own innate selfishness and dearth of love, for although giving should be a pleasure unto itself, it is a human propensity to seek further pleasure from the fact of the recipient, and if the latter remains expressionless and verbally dense, he denies the giver of his utmost joy. Giving is more than simply the ability to spend money; the ungracious and ill-mannered are often unaware, or perhaps more accurately stated, heedless of this fact.

School was already in session when Dad and I returned home from Rochester and although Mom and he went to work regularly, I refrained from going to classes for several more days. I was still quite weak from my operation and related weight loss, and my stamina and endurance were a mockery to their former capabilities, but my underlying strength helped me overcome all of the obstacles which I had hurdled, as it would similarly allow me to master those which lay ahead. I was strong; cancer was my solitary barrier to a clean slate of health.

Returning to school, which was always a nerve-wracking experience for me, was further complicated that year by my late arrival; moreover, my health dictated that I use the elevator instead of the stairs, an instruction which I abhorred because I felt myself to be a spectacle. Had my personality enjoyed ladles full of attention, my reaction would have been that of pure delight, for in addition to utilizing the elevator, I was allowed to select a friend to carry my books, and together we would leave the classes early to avoid the jam of hallway traffic. I was also instructed to come to the nurse's office to eat a morning and afternoon snack, as well as to rest during the physical education period. I characteristically despised being singled out from the crowd in such a way that everyone's attention was momentarily turned on myself. This time, however, it could not be avoided, and with a plea for inner fortitude to my mind, I followed all of my directions obediently. When I was able to forget my embarrassment, I was quite grateful for the special treatment which I was given.

As it was, I attended school only three days, but in that time I reacquainted myself with my schoolmates and was readily accepted in my former circle of friends. I was unused to such attention which my late arrival and circumstances seemed to evoke, yet it was pleasant, just the same.

A memory which surfaces in connection with my few days of school was my guarded reservations toward my appointed English teacher whose innate haughtiness took on the unfriendly guise of derisive sarcasm when one of the less fortunate students directed his attention. He enjoyed the reprimand to an excess which was unprofessional and beyond reason, as he would rend his subject before the other student's eyes to gain their general humor, and camaraderie. I would sit quietly throughout the class, listening carefully to the lesson lest through inattentiveness, I be attacked by the ruthless teacher and then breathe a great sigh of relief when the clock read five minutes before the bell.

Very few memories formed during the three days of school, indeed none which dealt with curriculum or activities; those I described were pinpoints of feeling, of emotion, rather than events that were special unto themselves. Such, it seems, is the manner of my existence; thoughts and feeling compose myself; events simply form the backdrop against which, while it remains intact, memories are viewed.

It was a Friday evening when Mom, Dad and I set out to Rochester again. Because Dad had already taken many days off work, he would only drive up to the clinic with us and then catch a return flight into the Moline airport on Sunday; the shop rules had been relaxed (when I had surgery) for Dad's benefit, and as grim as the circumstances were, the boss could not abide the thought of sending Dad forms to complete to satisfy the company, especially considering his flawless work record. Nevertheless, it had been over a month, and Dad could not expect to take more days without giving a formal written explanation and statement of intent as well; with Mom's vast accumulation of sick days, there was no need for my father to remain during my treatments.

The hour of our arrival was quite late, but since we had two weeks to plan the trip, we had the foresight to make reservations at a nicely furnished motel rather than leaving our luck to chance. It was a marvelous improvement from the motel of our initial excursion, having individual bathrooms (instead of one down the hall) and kitchen facilities which we would use later.

We indulged in sightseeing and shopping throughout the weekend until Dad's departure, lending to our time the best possible sense of normalcy by pursuing the activities which I found most enjoyable. It was impossible to forget the promise of Monday's treatment, however, and it seemed to me that I was followed by a haunting shadow of unrest, while before me, ticking loudly, was ever the face of a clock. Too soon Sunday came and Mom and I watched as Dad's plane taxied down the runway, turned and scorched a misty path into the blue sky. We drove back to the city, stopping to buy groceries to outfit our kitchenette, and then arranging them in the cabinets of our temporary home before seeking a restaurant for the evening meal.

The so-called "last supper," my last meals taken before all eating had to cease to comply with the

demands of the morning blood test, were traditionally grand affairs. I ate whatever struck my taste bud's fancy, which in my case, was always a chicken dinner. I doted on fried chicken to such an extent, ordering it on every occasion in which we ate dinner at a restaurant, that Dad eventually blamed "chicken" as the culprit behind my development of cancer. Although the doctors assured him that my love affair with fried chicken had played no part in germinating my disease, he still "hated the stuff"; as with all unreasonable, unexplainable, occurrences the desire to find a reason is a fiery quest, which unfortunately is not extinguished by merely pointing one's finger of blame on a subject. Only acceptance can wash away the flames born of despair.

The morning was fine, with the exception of the knots in my stomach. We drove to the clinic buildings, finally parking in the Damon car ramp. From the garage, it was easy to get to the various buildings, as an elevator ran directly into the subway system of the clinic. When the doors of the elevator parted we no longer needed to pause to read the informative signs posted on the facing subway wall; we were acquainted with the network of intersecting lines and headed right, through glass doors and followed the aging, dimly lit corridor until, a block or so down, we met with the fastidious decor of the Mayo building. Still we maintained our course, past a fleet of elevators and its waiting patrons, a pharmacy and bookstore, and a corridor which sloped slightly upward leading to the Plummer Building; we covered more ground skirting a hallway which allowed a brief glimpse of sunshine through vertical windows in the wall, and plants began to appear, growing fiercely toward the light. They were scattered in artistically positioned containers, guarding the final corridor which led to the Hilton Building in a stately, yet beautifully satisfying manner. The Hilton Building itself had even more plants in the waiting room of Desk C; indeed some of which were better described as trees, noting the vigor with which they seemed to soar skyward. If only I had such luck with plants, I thought, seating myself on a fiery orange chair.

Blood tests weren't so bad, unless my vein didn't want to cooperate, in which case, they fell into my "tolerable" category; although I seldom uttered a word, pain did not thrill me and I suspected that, underneath the person labeled "a brave little girl" was a very yellow human being. I knew it would not alter a thing if I professed to being "lemon-yellow"; life coexisted with pain, and if you felt pain, well, that was life... but if you didn't, chances were, you were dead. Everything had its alternative, and considering the uncertainty riding piggyback on my shoulders, I felt that I had only one route to pursue, even if it included pain. I didn't consciously think about my future, despite the promise of a cure after the siege, it seemed more appropriate to dream and take each blow of reality as it was dealt, without thinking at all.

The blood test accomplished, we left the brightly painted, plant infested waiting room and retraced our steps to the Mayo building, at which point we milled about the elevators until finding one which was not already protesting its capacity. It was a busy place.

When we reached our floor, excusing ourselves around those who had packed themselves tightly in the elevator rather than opting for another "flight," we found an excess of space in the form of an immense waiting room. It had the snob appeal of a library; no one spoke, and few looked up from their magazines except when the nurse would stand by the front desk to read her list of names, after which, a slight transformation of the waiting room would take place as the selected patients strode up to her. Within seconds, the room again reflected studious tranquility and heads sank below the horizon of newspapers or books. In certain situations humans were so predictable. Here they were so reserved, so introverted, so unapproachable that smiles were left untaken simply because they were not seen; if one existed in such a location, he would believe that cordiality was dead, severed from the world. I looked around and wondered whether anyone would change his disinterested stare if a loud sneeze issued forth. I doubted it. And with that, my name was called.

Forming a troupe of several people the nurse escorted us to individual dressing compartments and we were issued hospital gowns. I had been instructed to undress to the waist only, since my test was a chest X-ray, and then wait in the claustrophobic booth until further notice. I finally unlatched the door and sat in the corner seat of the booth with the door agape, however, disliking my inability to see the nurse should she have happened by my door; I did not wish to be forgotten in the maze of hallways and felt more secure with a view. I had to know "what was going on"; blindness would be paranoia in its highest form for me.

Finally my name was called and I popped my head inquiringly out of the door, hoping that I could attach a face to the voice I'd heard. A technician in a blue jumpsuit was waiting in the intersecting hallway, and I followed him to a bench where I sat until they were ready to take my X-ray. It seemed such a dismal place; there were so many doors, and so few lights.

A door whipped open. "Lauren Isaacson?" I stood up and filed after the woman who led me into a dreary room that somehow reminded me of a bomb shelter. "Put your chin against the bar, here,

shoulders forward, and take a deep breath." at which point she ran behind a heavy wall and peered out at me, continuing, "hold it now... hold it" Click! Rumble! "Keep holding..." The machine silenced, rendering its five photographs of my lung onto the X-ray plate. "Breathe..." The woman was so businesslike; I wondered how often she repeated those words... I wondered if she said them in her sleep.

"You can go get dressed, but don't leave the dressing room." "Okay," I answered. I stepped reluctantly from the armored room, unsure which direction the room was, and throwing caution to the wind ambled to the left, and then to the right, and amazingly, I found my room. What if the door won't unlock? I thought, appraising the space beneath the door and floor; I did not have the best luck with locks, and remembered many a time when, on a vacation, I could not succeed in entering the motel room after scouting for a can of pop. Mom or Dad would always let me in from their side of the door, while I was still fumbling with the key. The door opened easily and I sighed with relief; from the inside I latched the door, still wary of the lock and key, and proceeded to dress. Several minutes passed, then a click from the loud speaker broke the silence. "Lauren Isaacson... you are free to go." In other words, it was breakfast time and I galloped from my booth like a horse from the starting gate of a race.

Hungry though I was, when I seriously began to attack my plate, nervousness uttered a complaint which I was eventually obliged to acknowledge; it was just as well; my stomach was not adjusting to the idea that it had to get back to work, and strongly repulsed a large meal. Even my small breakfast conjured rebellion and I sat on the edge of my chair, sweating and quite nauseated, while Mom finished her plate of food. I tried not to watch her eat; the sight of food, the smell of food... it was everywhere when I felt sick. Leaving the restaurant I found the fresh air to be a measurable improvement; at last, when my nausea subsided, the visions of food danced from my mind and haunted me no more.

It was beautiful outside; autumn was reaching its peak of glory in Rochester and Mom and I poked about the streets, waiting for our early afternoon appointment at the Curie Pavilion. There was a slight chill in the air, despite the ample sunshine and our light coats provided the warmth we needed as we kicked through the leaves. It was always cooler than in Moline, it seemed; fall had not quite arrived at home. I was glad; I didn't want to miss the color of the oaks, the acorns and the busy squirrels around our woods either; I wanted to take it in, to wrap its vision in my memory so that it could never be erased... autumn at home... would have to wait another five days.

Mom watched me with feigned happiness; she looked at my hair, a flowing, healthy mass of gold which cascaded about my shoulders, and felt sickened that it would soon be replaced by a wig. She knew that my hair was my foremost joy in the spectrum of physical traits and would be a difficult loss. Hair is vanity, to be sure, yet that observation counts little to the individual who must bear his bald reality with courage. Appearance does not make the person, but to say that it does not matter is a falsity.

I had remembered to take my camera, a small instamatic, which was an early summer purchase and my latest, greatest hobby. At various intervals Mom would snatch it from my hand and position me in front of a glorious tree or upon a rock, capturing the moment with a click and a smile. Later we would look at the photos and the smiles, yet remember the trauma of our thoughts; the deceptive faces in the photos did not fool our eyes, though they painted appeal in the visual world. The hair, the glow, the newly gained energy... all would be changed by the time the pictures were developed; we would be seeing the past and, I felt, by that time, the past would prove a better reality than the present.

It was time to go back to the clinic. Curie Pavilion, a cylindrical building from the perspective of an outsider, was located near the Damon parking ramp, and across the street from the Mayo building. Actually, from the street view, Curie was only a glassed in elevator. We entered the curious building and pushed the elevator button; we had no choice of destinations; the only way to go was "down." Once below ground, we emerged from the elevator and plunged through a set of heavy glass doors into a waiting room. A bust of Madame Curie was observing her flock of patients from one side of the room. We strode up to the desk, relinquished our appointment card and took a seat. The people were quiet and grim; it was sometimes difficult to discern the patient from the relative in the unhappy place; worry pervaded the atmosphere. I wondered what sort of fate I had accepted for myself; I wondered what joy could possibly exist for these people, what hardships they had endured, what expectations they possessed.

"Lauren Isaacson?..." We approached the desk; I smiled to break the tension, to soften the blow. We followed the nurse into a room and were told that the doctor would be around shortly. Everything was white or polished chrome. Sterile. Antiseptic. Professional.

I was seated on the examining table, swinging my legs, when Dr. E. strolled in the room. "Hello, Lorn" he drawled, "Mrs. Isaacson..." nodding to my mom. He spoke with us for a brief period, asking about my health and referring to his clipboard of papers to tell of my "good" blood test results.

Everything seemed to be in order. "Well... we'll get a nurse in here to get your IV started, and then I'll see you again tomorrow morning." "All right," I said.

As he had promised, a nurse came in, shutting the door behind her, and produced a syringe. "This is a shot to help keep your nausea down a bit," she said, motioning for me to unclasp my pants and bend over. What a mosquito bite, I thought, pulling up my pants.

Shortly afterward another nurse appeared bearing IV solution, tubes, syringes, needles... the works. I laid down as she strapped a tourniquet around my arm and began her search for a vein. It was a slow, meticulous search, which necessitated a smaller needle; she knew she would never probe the large one into any of my poor, tiny veins. The nurse opened a drawer, producing a needle which had plastic tabs on either side of it; "This is called a butterfly needle," she told me. "Butterfly..." I echoed, peering gratefully at the tiny needle with plastic wings. She drew the tourniquet tightly about my arm once again, this time hastily securing a usable vein and taping the needle in place; wasting no time, the IV bag of solution was hung from a pole above my head, into which a syringe was emptied and consequently diluted. Immediately I began to taste the liquid running through my vein, but I subdued my discontent, hoping that the sensation would disappear; it did not, however, until the drug had filtered into my system completely. As the bag of solution gradually coursed through my veins, slowly, due to the small size of the needle, the nurse re-entered the room to watch its progress. When it had emptied, she raised the bag from its pole, removed the tube connected to the needle in my arm and opened two syringes; hooking them, one at a time, into the butterfly unit, she squeezed the drugs from their containers. My vein which accepted the drugs felt icy, as if a frigid breeze had been directed on my hand from an internal source; an involuntary shudder passed through my body.

"Okay... you're all finished," the nurse said, smiling widely. She pulled the needle swiftly from my hand, pressing a square of alcohol saturated gauze to the arm, then wrapping more gauze tightly around the needle "wound" to prevent further bleeding. I found that pressure applied to the area helped immeasurably to ward off bruises and I would therefore often hold my hand or arm in a vice-like grip for several minutes after a needle had been removed, thereby lessening the chances of a gruesome bruise and its accompanying discomfort. Thus, I held my hand tightly with the other and slid off the table as my Mom stood to leave. "What are those?" I asked the nurse, pointing to two white canisters made of cardboard. "Those are in case you get sick... do you want to take one with you?" "No... I feel okay so far. I'll see you tomorrow," I replied, happy that one injection was over, yet realizing the fight had just begun for me.

Cancer invited numerous battlegrounds and INCALCULABLE wars. Researchers were plagued by their hope to unmask the potion which would be the cure, the precious liquid or pill which would purge cancer from our bodies and crush its memory forever. Doctors invested time and energy to diagnose the most beneficial methods of treatment, prescribing the horrifying potent drugs to their patients while promising better days to come. And the nurses were great. Many of them were quite young, beautiful girls. They didn't seem to mind their daily business of poking and jabbing, despite the occasional "wailers" which could be heard, protesting the needle prick or the mere thought of it, from somewhere down the hall. They walked about, wearing pleasant, genuine smiles, as if their appointment in life was a joyful one; dealing out poison with a steady hand, trusting unquestionably its supposed ulterior motive of killing cancer cells and saving lives.

And yet, battered lives were everywhere, scaling all age groups, races and religions, for cancer knew no barrier and bore no prejudice; cancer took the weak the strong, the indifferent, the proud, the cheerful, the embittered... it took all, greedily, in an unquenchable hunger. Some it took slowly, savoring each minute, while others it consumed rapidly, stealing life with a voracious appetite; still others, a paltry few, were ignored and allowed to linger awhile on earth, facing the question of death while embracing the essence of life, until another hand embalmed their existence.

Cancer searched for one's true friends; it could bolster some relationships and destroy or alienate others, for the word was as malignant as the disease and struck fear in the stoutest minds and the truest hearts. Its scars were inflicted on the patient, his relatives, his friends... and its wounds were deep, blackened by the apprehension of death; a will to survive could challenge the meek while the ultimate humility scoffed at another's pride until it bent into humble disquietude. Inner wars evoked change; in this area cancer posed great opportunities, for it was the pirate of both time and the quality of life, and if one neglected to acknowledge these as life's greatest assets, he was living valueless and blind; money, power, prestige... vanity... were rendered obsolete worries or gained a new perspective for those who saw the need to change and courageously sought that end, whether through insight or the forced enlightenment of unavoidable death.

Secure in my values, cancer itself could not crush or debilitate my inner self; it clarified myself, bringing forth both fortitude and frailty, defining my character; I was who I always had been,

emotionally enlarged and with a keener sense of awareness. The physical battle with cancer is enough without also having to struggle to regain or develop one's values and relationships; I was fortunate, indeed, to be packing the right ammunition to the front line of battle.

We dismissed Curie and the subway, ascending to our car's level in the parking ramp. The sun shone brightly through the ramp's open construction of cement and steel. I squinted instinctively and turned my head away.

Once in our kitchenette, I turned on the T.V. and stretched out on the couch. The drapes were drawn shut and I preferred them to remain so; natural light never seemed to enhance the appearance of a motel room and lent the furniture and other appointments a rather brash, gaudy flavor. Light brought forth defects with indisputable accuracy; as the drugs flowed through my body, I knew that the awaited irregularities of treatment would soon parade victorious and unabashed about the domicile, and out of sheer discord, I too, would shun the sun's scathing glance. My only wish was to blend into the shadows and lie completely unobserved.

The TV was, at once, a blaring disturbance and a welcome distraction. It helped pass the time, but also reminded me of the slow rate at which time was drifting away. Between soap operas and game shows, advertisements about detergent that actually conditioned one's hands, and gasoline; "Ping, ping, ping, Leonard..." filled the afternoon. Suddenly I realized that my first post-treatment symptom was beginning its onslaught. Nausea woke my deadened senses and I sat up, nervously alert, trying to decide whether I should make my painful exodus to the bathroom or stay seated on the sofa a brief while longer; sometimes the mere sight of a gaping toilet bowl was enough to prompt my nausea to overflow, and picturing the sight in my mind, I decided to put off the inevitable until I was certain I could wait no more.

As it happened, within minutes I could wait no more and ran headlong for the bathroom, emptying what little remained in my stomach from breakfast into the toilet's wide jowls; it was a small offering, yet peering at it wrenched my stomach's deepest confines and I vomited again and again, flushing the awful stuff from view.

Relaxing as best I could, I exhaled and sunk back on my haunches, then slowly shifted until my legs were crossed. Resting one elbow on my knee, I cupped my hand under my chin and listed to the right. Mom stood outside the bathroom door, worried and helpless. "Can I help you?" she asked cautiously. "No" I said into the palm of my hand, not wanting to move, knowing the surges within had just begun. She brought me a glass half-filled with 7-Up, which I accepted gratefully. The putrid taste in my mouth was masked after bathing it in soda, yet my stomach did not allow it to be digested, and I quickly relinquished my meager sampling to the stool. Water affected my stomach in the same way; nothing was accepted.

Soon I was retching violently and my stomach, long since devoid of all possible contents, began hurling its digestive acids up my throat, followed by bile, bitter and green, which burned like fire. It seemed to me that I would turn my stomach inside-out or vomit my intestines if the battle did not end. I felt poisoned, as if every living cell was fighting to live and dispose of the vicious drugs which were entrapped in my veins.

Until 9:00 p.m. my stomach raged, while I bleated and hacked loudly, uncontrollably, wracked by the seething nausea of my body's turbid rebellion. Then as if the effects of the drugs had ceased warring against me, I was able to safely withdraw from the bathroom and fall into the enveloping softness of the couch. I felt exhausted, and extremely wretched and demeaned; such futility, such utter vulnerability, I had never before experienced. To think that this abuse was welcomed seemed an incredible madness, especially with the voice echoing, "It's for your own good!" in the back of my mind.

I was able to eat a hard-boiled egg before going to bed, which Mom gladly prepared. Her face was drawn into symmetrical lines of pure sympathy which she could not conceal, and was distraught because of her inability to alleviate my misery; although she could not share the physical burden with me, I felt that she bore emotional pain beyond that which I took upon my brow. She wanted always to do "more," yet her presence alone was, for me, more than enough.

The following morning I ate no breakfast, considering it would be an imminent folly so soon before my treatment was administered. Instead I got dressed and flipped on the set to stare at it blankly while Mom crunched delicately through her bowl of corn flakes. The toaster coughed up a piece of toast. She rose to fetch it from the machine, buttering it as the scent assailed my nostrils. "I wish you could eat something, honey," Mom said, reluctantly biting into the buttered slice. "Yeh..." I dreamed idly for a second, then replied, "I better not though." I didn't want to make a public spectacle of myself should the anti-nausea shot not take effect.

Our motel had a courtesy car service which we decided to use; by notifying the main desk in advance, the service was almost always available when we needed it, free of charge. The motel had both a car and a van, although generally the van toted us to the clinic and back again; thus, hastening to the lobby, we caught the van as other passengers hoisted themselves into their seats. The van droned into motion, taking us past residential streets and avenues until the clinic buildings grew above the trees with an air of infinite superiority. Pulling in front of the Mayo building, the driver coasted slowly forward, awaiting the closest parking place, and finally plunged toward the curb as a taxi drove away; then, braking quickly, he opened his door the moment the van stopped and dashed to unclasp the sliding door. We stood, each clumsily jumping to the curb as the driver supportingly grasped our arm. The door rolled shut with a bang. "See you later," the driver remarked as he swung himself into his seat. We entered the gray marble building and wove our way through the mass of people to the elevators. After watching and waiting several minutes, we finally found an elevator which could be persuaded to take us down to the subway level; in a building with nearly 20 floors, most people, it seemed, desired to travel up from the main lobby.

The traffic dwindled as we approached Curie. A long subway tunnel connected it to the mainstream of clinic activity, yet Curie itself was singularly remote from all else, as if, being the nucleus of cancer treatment and related disorders, it was purposely kept at a safe distance. Following the dim corridor to its end we met with a set of glass doors and admitted ourselves into the waiting room. I sat down, drained of energy; the room had not changed, yet I had. I no longer wore the smile of agitated insecurity and ignorance of the previous day. My smiles were only for people whose eyes met my own in a chance union. While Madame Curie looked over her patients, the receiving body of radiation or chemotherapy, she seemed to me a menace of happiness though carved of stone, for upon her death, she bequeathed no true wealth... her offering bore a great price for its recipients. Indeed, some "beneficiaries" paid with their lives upon receipt of Curie's great gift. "But it's for your own good," the voice echoed, pushing madness aside. If I did not believe the voice, I heeded it; perhaps it formed my sole resolve to continue, and to endure.

Once inside a private room, my anti-nausea shot was administered, followed by the injection of therapeutic drugs. Dr. E. appeared only momentarily, yet Mom followed him out of the room to question him beyond earshot. I later learned that, tormented of heart, Mom had asked the oncologist if he thought she should quit her job to stay home and care for me. "By no means!" he answered directly. "Quitting your job of teaching might make Lauren think that you have given up hope. You must continue your lives as normally as possible." She nodded with renewed understanding and re-entered my room. The IV had nearly run its course, and the nurse stood by, ready to remove the needle as soon as the solution had emptied into my veins.

"Is it okay if I take one of those?" I asked, pointing to the white canisters aligned neatly on top of the counter. "Sure," the nurse replied, handing one to my Mom. My stomach was already plotting its rebellion, and I wanted some security should an impulse overthrow my will before we returned to our motel. As long as I did not involve myself in conversation, and inhaled only short breaths of air, perhaps my qualms would subside. "There... all done," the nurse proclaimed, wrapping my hand in gauze. "Bye," I said grabbing the bandaged hand tightly; "See you tomorrow."

Mom and I traced our earlier footsteps back to the Mayo building and there phoned the motel. Several minutes passed, then the courtesy van rolled up to the front doors. A doorman issued us out of the building with a friendly, "Have a nice day, now." That man was the epitome of flamboyance; he struck everyone as a neighbor rather than a stranger. He must have loved people, for people were the essential ingredient in his position at the clinic. A genuine smile, a fresh hello; he too, doled out medicine, and maybe helped to ease a few aching hearts.

I was grateful to be able to collapse upon the couch and watch the T.V. from my prone position; I took no interest in books or crafts, for they seemed too taxing and exhaustive in my condition. Rest was my comfort between nausea and weakness; I welcomed nothing more than I welcomed the thought of quiet repose.

As I laid on the couch, the afternoon peeled away, passing much as Monday had done. It suddenly occurred to me that I felt tense, especially in my jaw, and curious, sat up to work my mouth. I was not nervous, nor had I need to be, yet the jaw clamped tighter still. I placed my hand on either side of my face to gently knead the apparently cramped muscles. "This is crazy," I thought. "A Charlie horse in my face!" I rose from the sofa, searching my mind for a reasonable solution to this dilemma. "I'll brush my teeth..." I flew into the bathroom, squeezing paste on my brush, and began to scrub viciously. Nothing improved. I looked at myself in the mirror just as a transformation took place. Having no control over my jaw, the bottom row of teeth pulled to the left, straining against its natural alignment and audibly cracking as it contorted my entire face. "Mom... I think I've got a problem." She came and looked at me, her eyes widening at the spectacle before her. "I can't control my jaw"; the obvious statement I blurted

out of the side of my mouth made us envision the only possible cause we could ascertain; LOCKJAW.

Mom dialed the motel's front desk, stating firmly that her little girl had to be driven to Emergency right away, then grabbing her purse, her only essential, pushed me out of the door. We ran to the lobby where a driver was ready and waiting. "How embarrassing," I thought, looking down to shield my face from view. "A pimple on your face is nothing!"

Scrambling into the car, our transit was soon in progress. Meanwhile, my jaw had taken on a personality of its own. As it had formerly brought my bottom teeth to the left, it now forced its way to the right. Not content, it again pushed to the left. This continued all the way en route to the hospital, while I was wondering if I had come in contact with a contaminated needle and Mom calculated how soon I would die!

Once at the Emergency unit, Mom tried to give the doctors and nurses a coherent explanation of my situation as we saw it happen, as well as to alert them to my enlistment in the chemotherapy program, while they stared at me with disbelief. They nodded in response to the information, then allowed us to sit in a room by ourselves. A nurse came to the door, briefly surveying the scene, and wordlessly departed. I looked questioningly at my mom who shrugged her shoulders; "Maybe she had the wrong room..."

The time crept by while my mouth humored itself with further acrobatics. Bored with the lurch-to-the-right, lurch-to-the-left routine, it opened wide, beyond my greatest expectations, and remained thus for several minutes. I was lucky that there were no flies buzzing about; I could not have impeded their entry except with a rapid flick of the hand. A nurse looked in, then darted away.

I sat beside Mom, my mouth poised in the shape of a horrendous yawn and began to see the humor in my predicament. Open mouthed, it was impossible to smile, but my eyes began to glisten and I let go of a guttural "haw...haw...haw." I must look like "Surprise," impersonated, I thought, my amusement gaining momentum.

Another nurse stuck her head inside the room. Mom glanced at her and she too, sped away. Mom grew angry; no one helped, they just came to see the spectacle. I was a side-show and could almost hear them talking excitedly among themselves... "Boy, that hit and run was sure gruesome, wasn't it?" "Yeh, but did you get a load of that kid in 2C?" "Ha Ha Ha Ha." So far most of the "peepers" only saw my profile. "Hey, Mom," I said, throwing the words carefully, "The next time someone comes to the door to look, how'bout if I give 'em a full frontal view?" She turned to look at me as my yawn slowly relaxed to facilitate yet another position.

This time my mouth puckered to form a tight "O." I looked at Mom whose worry was finally overruled by humor, and she burst out laughing. "I'm sorry," she said, "but you look so funny..." I didn't mind, for I was laughing heartily now, issuing strange "hoo hoo hoos" into the room through my tunneled lips. "Here we are," I thought, "laughing like lunatics, when I might have Lockjaw!" The doctors, however, didn't appear to be concerned, for there was still no word or antidote, and an hour or more had elapsed. All I desired was an ounce of relief; my jaw was incredibly sore from the forced contractions, and a pain pill would have brought immense satisfaction, yet I could merely wait, and try to relax.

Finally after countless repetitions of rights, lefts, ooohs and ahhs, a doctor strolled in the room with a red liquid. I had, by then, given up my idea that I had contracted lockjaw and looked hopefully toward the man as he approached. The contractions had slowed in frequency as the hours passed, yet my mind still begged for relief.

"Well, we finally figured out that your muscle spasms were the result of the anti-nausea drug that had been administered to you; drink this and I'm sure you will not have any more problems... just don't let them give you any more of those shots!"

I took the red liquid and drank it down; it burned like fire. I thought of my stomach, hoping that my draught would not infuriate it to the point of plotting a revolt; I had been lucky through the afternoon, having experienced no symptoms of nausea during the facial contortions. Reflecting upon this favorable aspect, I realized the hours could have proven much worse, and was relieved that I had ignored my stomach's plea for breakfast.

The following morning I departed for Curie with an aching jaw; it was minutely reminiscent of the feeling I would acquire after chewing a large wad of bubble gum.

Once at Curie we promptly notified the nurses and Dr. E. of my unusual episode of the previous afternoon. Dr. E. nodded his head slowly, his mouth working nervously. "That drug will sometimes have that effect on patients, but it happens so seldom, I didn't want to mention it to you." "Gee, thanks," I mused, silently. Personally, I would have liked to know all the facts. "Oh, well," I thought, "maybe it was

no big deal, but to us it was worth a good scare and a couple of laughs."

A nurse came in and shut the door, instructing me to drop my pants. "But I'm not supposed to have shots any more," I protested. "This isn't a shot," she said. "It's a suppository...for nausea," she added. "Oh!" I swallowed my distaste for the idea, dropped my pants, bent over and took my medicine.

By the end of the week we were fairly used to the routine. We discovered that the driver of the courtesy car would let us out and pick us up in front of Curie, which saved my energy. For security, I learned to carry my white cardboard "barf bucket" to and from Curie. Unless I was lucky, I would throw up all afternoon and into the evening; we therefore devised a way to make the bathroom comfortable by spreading a towel on the floor and placing a pillow nearby on which I could lay between seiges. Near 8:00 p.m. I could usually eat an egg, toast or a potato. Mom helped me clean up and dress for bed, then I would attempt to sleep until I had to wake and repeat the process.

After the fifth treatment, Dr. E. came into the room to set up my next date for receiving chemotherapy. My particular schedule was to appear approximately every six weeks for five days of treatment; each patient had his own ritual in which the drugs and their dosage, as well as the duration they were received, were as uniquely determined as his type of cancer and its extent. Chemotherapy incurred numerous variables, and the reaction depended on the drugs administered and the condition of the patient. I was amazed to discover that some recipients did not lose their hair or become nauseous in the least. Some even gained weight and carried on relatively normal lives, working and attending social functions, and basically thrilled they were alive; they complained only of their excessive rendezvous with needles. Although my effects were far from ideal, I was relieved that I was able to receive my treatments at Curie as an out-patient; free from the hospital. One's morale is better maintained, even if the breeze is felt upon one's face only to and from the clinic.

Dr. E. and my Mom conferred over a calendar, finally agreeing upon a date lying within the six week bounds. We would receive a packet containing specific appointment times in the mail shortly before our next visit. The doctor returned to my room as the nurse was wrapping my hand. After exchanging a few pleasantries of conversation, he sobered and said, "You'll have to buy a wig as soon as you can once you are home..." Hair loss would not be a gradual affair after having such a drug and his warning was not intended to be brushed off; I nodded that I would comply. "I'll see you in six weeks then," he drawled, and allowed us to depart from the room at our leisure. I took another white canister from the counter top and we stepped from the cubicle.

Mom had already stowed our bags in the car for our departure, so upon our return to the motel, we merely inspected the room once more for articles we might have overlooked and then made our way to the car for our homeward journey. I was seated beside Mom, outfitted with two white canisters, while she packed a sack of apples as an energy booster through the seven hour drive. Knowing that we would soon be wrapped in our own blankets improved my spirits to a great degree, despite haphazard retching sprees and pervasive weakness.

Toward evening my nausea subsided. We pulled into a rest stop and Mom stretched her legs. The sun hung low in the sky, undecided as to its course, casting shadows from the nearby benches and trees. I watched my mom as she walked about, surveying the fields under the suspended ball of fire, and then strolled back to the car. She suddenly seized upon an idea and opened the trunk, removing my camera from one of the bags. "I want to take a picture of you... your hair's so shiny." She positioned me on a rock and captured on film a being ready to metamorphacize; the changes had already begun internally, for bereft of energy, no smile escaped my ashen eyes or crossed my weary face. Soon my hair, shining in the sun's slanted rays, would be gone, too. Lives change not only by days, but by minutes as well. I slid off the rock and we climbed into our car once again; by late evening the streets of Moline were beneath us. It was good to be home.

Apart from the presence of drugs, I was able to eat tremendously for the first few days. The grayness in my complexion was fanned into a spark, and the return of my smile (which seemed to parallel my homecoming) added a small glow to my features.

My stomach muscles, which had for five days, been exceedingly over-worked, gave up their tenderness, and the needle marks disappeared. For two and a half days life leaned toward normalcy. It seemed a ridiculous idea to purchase a wig; as yet, my hair appeared fully intact.

The weather had been magnificent upon my return, with autumn's splendor at its peak. The skies were flawlessly blue, the deep sapphire blue of mountain lakes, and the oak trees sent down their wealth of acorns, grown ripe in the heat of long sunny days. The leaves were yellow, golden and red... the harvest was being gathered from the fields, and gourds were pulled from the vines. I rested in a lawn chair on the carpet of grass, while the northern breezes cooled the sun's touch on my face and wafted through my hair. I ran my fingers through its length; feeling the resistance of a snarl, I applied

more pressure. It loosened and I glanced at my hand with the dull realization that I was losing my hair. Inter-woven between my fingers were countless strands of golden brown. I opened my palm to the breeze and let the winds scatter them on the ground. I gathered my hair together, draping it over one shoulder, and inadvertently harvested another golden handful. "It's happening," I thought. Rising from my chair I slowly climbed up three cement steps and entered through the front door, then threaded my way to the bathroom. My hair was detaching itself from my scalp as if embarking on a massive exodus to some other destination. I opened the medicine cabinet and extracted a comb, thinking that I would remove the loose shafts of hair to avoid snags and major entanglement.

I combed, peering into the glass before me and looked on helplessly as my scalp began to take shape between the strands of hair, and a circular bald spot formed on my crown. Setting the comb on the sink's porcelain edge, I turned from myself to find my parents, who were busy outside. They felt sickened at the horrifyingly malevolent blow which the drugs had bestowed on me, but there was little to be said, and nothing to be done. It was no surprise, yet the reality shocked the eyes and afflicted the heart with pity.

Feeling emotionally removed from the situation, I decided to save their eyes further anguish and re-entered the house, taking a seat in the kitchen. I was not particularly sad, nor was I angry or embittered; instead I was entranced, and oddly fascinated by the sudden change in my appearance. Reminded of a certain tree which, in autumn, boasts its splendor for many days and then suddenly abandons each of its leaves almost simultaneously, creating a barren mass of timber in one day; I felt certain that all of my hair would fall out by evening; I had never dreamed such a transformation could occur. It was happening so fast.

Mom came into the kitchen and studied me with shadowed eyes. Within two hours, the shine of my hair had been replaced by a deadness, a gray lifelessness, which prevailed over both the detached and sagging strands of hair as well as the healthier group whose roots as yet remained firmly implanted in their polluted ground. The invisible reaper moved stealthily through its crop, mowing random stalks with a keen-edged blade and littering the malignant, gray harvest aimlessly and chaotically above their once-healthy roots.

The sheared strands slid down my head, and converged into a heavily inter-woven mass of hair at the nape of my neck. It was matted and thatched, the dead clogged with the dead and dying. It was impossible to restore order with a comb; the only hope rested in the jaws of a pair of scissors. Mom took the clotted mass in her hands and clipped the length to my shoulders, discarding the ashen-gold into the waste basket. "Hair couldn't be dead," I thought, "but I have just witnessed it die." Why else would hair suddenly lose its shine and lapse into a gray-sheened, death-like shadow? Cut hair reflected life; my hair had been poisoned, robbed of its shine. It was different than the curl pressed between the pages of my childhood memories; no book wanted these lifeless strands, nor would any memory desire to recall them.

After supper Mom and I dashed to the shopping center to look for an appropriate wig. I wore a handkerchief about my head in an attempt to conceal my rapidly balding scalp, for baldness was not as easily accepted in a girl as in a boy; some men shaved their heads at the onslaught of summer heat; while others did likewise for sports.

When we arrived at the wig department, it was obvious that we had waited too long. I selected several styles that appealed to me, and removed my scarf, to sit self-consciously before the mirror as the customers filed past. Some glanced curiously at me, wondering about my noticeable sparsity of hair; I now had sympathetically few hairs left, and my part revealed an inch-wide swath of white skin. Donning a wig, I studied myself with amusement. The wig had so much hair. I never had that much hair. I lifted it off, replacing it quickly with another and adjusting the new one back and forth. I wanted something which was as modest and natural as possible. Why did they all have so much hair? This one stood two inches off my head; it felt like a hat. I tried another. Not bad. How about a blond one? Well, it was worth a chuckle or two.

I finally decided on a shoulder length wig which sported bangs and a slight curl. It was promptly boxed while I replaced my handkerchief around my head. I wasn't bald... yet. I'd have plenty of time to wear the wig. It was a relief to escape the peopled store. The wig would prove to be my ally and my foe in the months ahead, being both a concealment of the truth and an object of mockery and bewilderment.

The next morning I woke to find hair on my pillow, and rising to look at myself in the mirror, saw plainly that I could consider myself bald. No hair remained except for a few stubborn wisps which clung fiercely to my scalp like December leaves that refuse to fall even after winter's icy blasts. My lashes, brows... everything... had been depopulated. The mirror seemed to reflect incredible youth and fragility. Painfully thin and hairless, I resembled the gaunt and disciplined Buddhist student.

Withdrawing from the mirror, I went in search of a pair of scissors to bob my wisps to a more reasonable length of one inch, then took my wig from its styrofoam head and placed it on my own. I peered at myself with disgust; "It couldn't be much worse," I thought, and headed toward the kitchen for breakfast.

PAGE 87

Chapter 13 Year at Home and Diary

"Chemotherapy ravaged the body and tainted the mind just as the cancer against which its debilitating powers were supposedly aimed."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Year At Home And Diary

Due to my poor and unreliable health, I never re-entered junior high; it would have been both risky and impractical. I would have forever been involved with past homework because of frequent absenteeism, as well as further depleting my energy level through normal, daily activities. Individuals having good health were often taxed at the day's end; I knew I could not have kept the steady pace that school demanded of those desiring to succeed.

Standing 5 ft., 8 ins. I weighed, at times as little as 75 pounds. My eating was sporadic; on certain days I wouldn't recall having eaten at all. When I did eat, my nauseousness would span 20 minutes to several hours. Sometimes my only relief would come after vomiting, although that seemed a rather drastic and unpleasant measure, I found this voluntary vomiting to be more agreeable than sitting motionless in a chair for the entire evening to humor my stomach, when the eventual result was to be the same anyway. I was soon quite practiced at manipulating my stomach, as well as determining whether my nauseousness would irreversibly result in oral elimination or if it would finally subside without an event.

Ideally I was to eat several small meals throughout the passage of the day; this would better allow my stomach to process food, as well as give my body the sustaining energy it so desperately needed. I was not overly thrilled at this proposition, as eating seemed only an open invitation to sickness and discomfort. To facilitate my obedience to a greater degree, my dad offered a monetary reward for drinking a quart of milk each day. I accepted the offer, yet remained wary of food. Although there was nothing which did not, at one time or another, turn my stomach, I discovered that certain foods disagreed less than others. One of the "sure things" was bread... the more refined, the better. So called "health foods" were always a mistake, as were foods rich in fat or sugar, such as salads tossed with mayonnaise or pies of any concoction. Oddly enough, I seemed to be able to eat cake; I determined that this was due to its bread-like consistency. Perhaps other successes such as my aptitude for chocolate, were based more on luck than digestibility, yet chocolate was eaten quite frequently throughout the year in which chemotherapy treatments were administered.

My eating habits and general health depended on the schedule of chemotherapy. Directly following

my last treatment in the five day series, I could eat voraciously, (or so I thought in comparison to my usual appetite). Then, after three or four days, I would again return to "normal," fostering nausea after each morsel of food. Needless to say, my lust for food disintegrated upon the arrival of nausea and I had to force myself to eat, which quickly became tiresome, for I realized that only sheer luck would save me from sickness. Furthermore, I actually became weary after a meal accompanied by stomach complaints; my body, I rationalized, was trying to relax itself to dispose of nausea, or the nausea caused such inner chaos that my body wore itself out during the conflict.

Soon after the chemotherapy treatments had commenced, my sister offered her assistance with the latest family concern and expressed interest in monitoring my progress and general state of health. Through mutual agreement, a plan materialized in which, on our way home from Rochester, Mom and I should stop at Sharon's house after about five and a half hours of driving, where I would then remain for three or four days while my parents were at work. In this way, I was not alone when I felt the weakest, and could easily obtain help if I needed it. Saturday morning my parents would bring me home.

I enjoyed the post-treatment arrangement, for I had always liked spending time with my sister and, at a distance of 80 miles, few were the occasions in which this was possible, especially since she had two young children and a home of her own to maintain. Although the circumstances under which I stayed with her were not the most appealing, we still found time to shop on good days or amuse each other through the situations that life itself readily provided. Several most unforgettable hours were spent laughing hysterically in front of the bathroom mirror. Since I had lost my hair, Sharon sewed two bonnets from scratch, cutting circles of material and fitting elastic within the perimeter, to warm my head when I slept or simply did not care to wear my wig. Having no pattern from which to judge an appropriate size, however, the bonnet was large enough to conceal my entire head; trying it on evoked immediate wails of laughter from us both. Of course, I could not let the matter rest and continued with further antics, shoving it over my ears and acting like an old woman who couldn't hear for the voluminosity of the hat, and then pulling it over my entire head with the elastic about my neck and pronouncing that I was a lollipop. Amid our slap-happy howls (for the hour was late), her husband must have wondered if we had lost our minds; moreover, we were trying our best to stifle our laughter so as not to disturb her sleeping boys, which, in such a hopeless situation, only served to escalate the humor reflected in the mirror. I was able to eat ravenously for three to four days following my treatment; this meant, of course, that I ate well until I had to return home, by which time my body had restored itself to a reasonable degree and no longer tolerated food to the extent it had initially. Mom soon developed a complex about her cooking, which persisted until summer when I went directly home after receiving treatments, instead of sojourning at Sharon's, and ate my Mom's culinary offering passionately.

Upon my return to Moline I had to appear at the hospital for weekly blood tests to assure that my white count was not "low." If the test results were unfavorable, however, I had to have daily blood tests until my count was determined as normal again. A low white cell count paralleled a higher susceptibility to germs, as the immune system did not possess its usual fortitude; although, physically, I never felt any different when I had a low white count, emotionally it paralleled a fleeting cantankerousness on my part since I was not overly thrilled at the prospect of enduring more needles. I was fortunate that I never contracted any serious maladies; perhaps if I had been plagued by viruses I would not have viewed the routine blood tests with such disdainful inappreciation. As it was, my only health problem was cancer; all or nothing must have been my system's motto.

One week before the next series of injections, I would begin to feel better. My appetite improved despite the lingering after-effects, and energy was on the rise. This period of time would have been thoroughly enjoyed had it not been for the upcoming event, after which my improvements would again run foul. The pretreatment week was also the time at which I felt most able to venture out of the house, and would accompany my aunt or my sister-in-law on small shopping sprees during the day. I began to feel human and part of society, yet as I licked my wounds, I could envision the battlements to which I would willingly march to surrender my waxing health.

Despite frequent bouts of nausea and marked fatigue, the foremost reason for my absence from school was my body's severely depleted immune system. It was deemed more sensible to remain apart from the various germs circulated by the students than to place myself in possible jeopardy by direct contact. Should I have sustained a severe infection, the results could have proven fatal. The chemotherapy killed healthy cells as well as cancerous cells; it is a grave wonder that one can withstand such violent treatment.

After several series of chemotherapy, I recalled my thought which viewed cancer as the enemy against which many wars were waged, and discovered that my analogy was not complete. Chemotherapy ravaged the body and tainted the mind just as the cancer against which its debilitating powers were supposedly aimed. I felt that the war did not exist only between cancer and the body, for

there was also a constant struggle between the drugs and the body. As the body fought for life, cancer fought for death.... of this, there was little doubt. Yet as for the drugs, I became uncertain as to the side on which they actually adhered, and the voice murmuring "It's for your own good" became an indifferent noise at the base of my consciousness.

Although I was unable to return to Jr. High throughout 8th grade, I soon acquired permission to study at home under the instruction of a tutor, and in this way, maintained my level of educational curriculum as well as my status as a "student." Receiving instruction on a one-to-one basis was definitely one of the more favorable aspects of my new life-style. I fully realized the impermanence of this enjoyment; upon my recovery, I would once again be hurled amid the mob and mainstream of society.

My tutor, Mrs. Kruse, was assigned to me for the entire year. Together we covered the realms of English, math, social studies and science with the help of a collection of text books which she obtained from my "would-have-been-teachers." Several times each week she would stop to teach and collect previous lessons. Since she was amiable, highly intelligent and challenging in nature, I looked forward to her visits; the time always passed quite rapidly. In addition to prescribed lessons, Mrs. Kruse suggested reading material which she deemed of interest to me, and as a highlight to one of the social studies chapters, drove me to a local museum. The trip was a memorable occasion, if simply due to the fact that I spent the majority of the days alone and at home. She also demonstrated interest in my extra-curricular activities as well as the regular academic subjects; I would sometimes show her my various crafts and "works of art" with which I involved myself to abort any loneliness or dejection I might have otherwise encountered had I not kept occupied.

My projects included anything which was not overly monotonous, and time thus spent would often encompass more than one casual employment to assure that my interest would not shrivel up and die before an object's completion. Occasionally one of the lovely ladies from church would include me in crafts, and consequently, I turned out decoupage eggs and quilted pillows by the number. I attempted a painting of a rural scene, and on other days I would draw, sew, or macrame; at times I would pinpoint my interest in the creation of gifts and culinary delights.

A prominent aid to my artistic whims came to me by way of my father's love and craftsmanship; he spent hours of his spare time constructing a shadow box for miniature arrangements. Through the same five days, during which time Mom and I were in Rochester for my treatment, he also repainted my bedroom. I was awestruck upon my return to think of his feverish, love-wrought labors; through work he was able to ease his internal suffering which accompanied my physical trials. If nothing more, he was at least DOING SOMETHING, which seemed to allay one of his foremost grievances toward my illness in a temporary fashion.

I felt relieved to stay at home that year; it would have been difficult to feel comfortable when I was sporting a wig. At this age, so many kids allow themselves to be governed by popular opinion, whether or not that opinion has been justly founded. One may be treated kindly only to be defaced later in private discussions. When fear based on one's acceptability governs his actions, it is his convictions and conscience that sustain punishment. While many students may have attempted to understand the unpleasantness of my situation, others would have taunted malicious threats or voiced insensitive remarks; physically I was too weak to withstand such cruelty on a daily basis.

That which I most detested surrounding the aspect of baldness was the wig itself, for although I was grateful for the mask it provided, I abhorred its artificiality. Wearing a wig was unnatural, especially at my age. People failed to recognize me. Moreover, it presented inherent problems of its own. It would shift precariously in a stiff wind, and a blustery day brought visions of it cartwheeling tumbleweed-style, across a street. I began wearing headbands, though definitely not in style, simply to assure that it remained atop my head. Another dilemma was the well-meaning oldster who still enjoyed pulling a child's locks; unaware and full of only good intentions, what would he have thought if his teasing gesture unveiled the entirety of my hairless skull? The wig, therefore, was mainly a social impairment, for it was during group situations that I experienced the majority of my embarrassment.

Aspects which aided social interaction were my attitude and a light-hearted countenance. It is essentially one's appearance that opens the door to conversation and eventual relationships; and despite my different visage, I wished to remain approachable and self-secure with my health problem. I tried to nurture realistic, yet humorous outlooks toward problems, for a sickly person wearing a smile appears more inviting to others than one who shrinks within his ailment while displaying steadfast displeasure for his predicament upon his face. If one is open and jokes about his health situation, he is also less apt to evoke fear and hesitant inquiries from friends, and for that matter mockery from the ignorant; it is no fun to insult an individual who fully accepts himself and his problem, for there is no fuel to evince an emotional fire.

I felt totally secure in my baldness only with my family and select individuals who neither balked nor

poked sadistic mirth at my loss. The wig was worn on all social outings, of course, just as it was generally donned at home as well. Certain days, however, I elected to prance through the house without it; the wig was tiresome and hot, and my head needed to escape its smothering imprisonment during the day in addition to its nightly freedom. Happily, my parents did not seem to mind the sight of my head, claiming it was "kind of cute"; a more appropriate manner of expressing my parents' view of my loss of hair was to say it was a necessary evil which had been part of the "insurance plan," and therefore deemed as acceptable as it could have been under the circumstances. I was initially amazed that they could love a child having no hair, since appearances rated so incredibly high on the scale of societal importance, and my best feature had been obliterated. To think that people found me tolerable and remained a loyal friend touched deeply upon my heart.

Thus at home baldness posed no problem for me, although I would sometimes hold back tears when I discovered a long strand of hair woven inside a sweater or glanced at an old photograph. The image of myself reflected in the mirror contrasted dreadfully with the girl I viewed in the picture albums to such an extent that physically I felt myself to be an entirely different person. Unfortunately, I felt less of a person when I compared my selves, past to present; I therefore tried to limit these recollections by keeping occupied with crafts or other mental detours from reality.

By January I was completely used to my way of life. There was comfort to be had in monotony and sameness of routine, and while I would sometimes feel alienated from society, my solitary existence provided me with emotional security which would not have otherwise been possible.

Each day was very much like the next, and time melded the days together into oblique obscurity. When I was not occupied with my lessons or crafts I would sit, allow my mind to empty itself of all thought, and then drift to other places, beyond my own stunted life, and there catch a glimpse of reality as others saw it to be. Were it not for vivid daydreams, my year of chemotherapy would have doubtlessly provoked more duress, yet through fantasy, I was able to surpass my physical limitations. Moreover, while public interaction would often degrade my self-image, thought would instill confidence in my unseen strengths. I found that the mind possessed more beauty than any bodily attribute, no matter how brilliant the eye might perceive it to be.

If it were humanly possible to correct physical shortcomings, everyone would mold his face and body into perfect specimens; disease could no longer wreak havoc upon one's dimensions or features, and amputated limbs would quickly be restored. This is not life, however. No one chooses his personal characteristics or form any more than he chooses to be born or die; over one's features and time-ridden transformations, one exercises no choice.

Although I was a loner at heart, I became accustomed to feeling brief surges of loneliness when I would peer from a window and observe the activity that went on in normal lives. To be able to come and go, unhindered by any physical dysfunctions, must have been pure joy... joy which the vast majority of people took for granted. It was a shame that they did not pause for an instant with their bustle of plans and breathe in the fresh air of their greatest fortune, their health. To think people actually worried about popularity, or buying a certain brand of blue jeans, or getting their hair cut one half inch too short began to seem utterly incredulous. Those who doted on trivials I could seldom abide, but now I had to constrain fury; perhaps instead I should have pitied those individuals who, in their selfishness, dwelled only upon that which they lacked rather than their well-being. Though my life at the time was far from ideal, I still felt myself to be quite lucky; I had witnessed at Mayo Clinic various gruesome and startling examples of disease... one woman's face was riddled with large, fleshy bumps... another woman's unearthly jaundiced eyes clashed with her dark complexion to bespeak trouble within... a pretty young woman with one leg nimbly propelled herself into the elevator, smiling, conspicuously contrasting with the throngs of people who walked about, eyes downcast and dreary, searching for the location of their next test or consultation. I felt a slight pang of embarrassment regarding my appearance yet I was grateful to be spared the more obvious discomfort which would have accompanied drastic, irreversible abnormalities; my pain would end, and my hair would grow back.

For the time I had only to live with and learn from my physical restraints; fostering jealousy or bitterness punishes oneself and further mars one's countenance. When I found myself beneath the gaze of one seeing merely my features, I cringed, but then recalled who I truly was... and who no mask could dominate.

During January of 1976 I also began my first successful attempt at maintaining a diary. I wrote faithfully, daily inscribing the events of my life upon the pages of the small book which, by the years end, was battered and torn with handling, for it went on every clinic excursion or other journey which separated me from my home. In it I described the aspects which flavored my day; what I ate, interesting mail, homework, my crafts, and my general health.

Though I did not meticulously describe my emotions, I can recall the feelings which surrounded

various entries, whether they were of selfishness, anger, fear, or otherwise. Perhaps I was initially scared to vent my frustrations lest my book be read by searching eyes; written word is no longer secret, and I trusted my memory far better than my hope of privacy, and therefore rarely indulged in expressing confidences unless they were of the positive sort or so justifiable that their truth, though poignant, could not have been denied even by the subject.

Jan. 4, 1976... I got my make-up on...went to church, then to a restaurant. It's a real pretty day outside and the sun is shining through my windows. I just love my room. Today I'm going to work on my corduroy purse some more. I don't like any boys and I'm glad of that. I'm probably weird not wanting a boy to "go with" but I'm not ready yet. After all, I'm just 14 yrs. old. (2 relatives) came over and had supper. I came into my room because I felt sick. Finished my purse...I feel better now. That's good!

Throughout the diary, it became obvious that an internal struggle was present which haunted me at the time and annoys me at the present; nevertheless, it existed, as perhaps it does within all youth. That to which I allude is the battle between independence and dependence, the conflict waged by one mind against two wills; that of the adult and the child.

One of the most prevalent emotions I fostered throughout 8th grade was insecurity. It was a by-product of sickness and frequent aloneness.

Desiring to live unnoticed, I began to feel guilty about the kindnesses I received. I wondered whether I deserved such special treatment; when I voiced my feelings to my parents, they quickly pointed out that people wanted to do things for me since my life was tainted by an illness. "You don't have your health, and that's the greatest wealth on earth." I nodded at their statement, yet something still seemed amiss; I finally discovered that my guilt was fueled by jealous acquaintances that rather begrudged my attentions.

Jan. 6, 1976... I'm trying to "use up" my cologne and perfume so everybody won't keep saying "how much I have." Another acquaintance would continually quiz me, wondering where I got the money to buy things as she glanced around my bedroom. My allowance was healthy, to be certain, especially if I drank my quota of milk each day; however, the earnings I acquired were determined by my parents, not me, and I was expected to use the money wisely. I often deposited portions in the bank, saving diligently for a nice purchase. Otherwise, my funds were transformed into stamps for letters, gifts, appointments for my room, or movie tickets. I didn't feel frivolous; whereas I was given an allowance, my friends had to twist their parents arms for their desires. It didn't appear to me that they were deprived.

Jan. 30, 1976... Sharon, Brad and I are going to the florists in a bit. Gosh just 'cause I talk about things that would be neat to have, and I know I would not really want all of it, Sharon says "Boy, you really have a lot more things than I ever had and you know you have to pay me back for these things. You have more than I do considering inflation." Well, I had known I was 'gonna pay her back even if she wanted to give them to me as gifts. Sometimes I wish I was starving and poor and everything!

Coming from my sister the statement was quite a shock, evoking self-pitying sentiments from me in my last sentences, which now strike me as a literary pout of pure distress. I had always considered Sharon as a statuesque epitome of goodness, incapable of resentment of any kind; after the initial surprise had worn off, I was glad to know she was human, for maintaining such sanctity 24 hours each day was impossible.

I learned during the year that people felt obligated to be nice to me (and, indeed, they wanted to be nice) because of the trials which I endured. Since they were human, however, their jealousies and stored grievances would sometimes appear in a choice moment wherein their self-control was at a low ebb. I believe that everyone, including those having well-aligned values, possess a foremost problem which, despite even the greatest amenities of good health and even a loving home, can exist within the minds of the most fortunate individuals; indeed, some people are ashamed of their "problems" since they appear so insignificant when compared to those in other lives. Nevertheless, the problem lives within them and causes real emotional duress.

Returning to my observation, I realized that people who, within themselves, felt that my problems were essentially greater than theirs, still needed to air those complaints. Feeling hindered by me, to a certain extent, their frustrations would sometimes be directed at me while their true source of anger remained unspoken. Such was the case with my sister. Following the small episode, I was less enthusiastic about revealing my catalog reveries, yet I recovered fully, losing a goodly spirit and

gaining a fine sister.

It seems everyone likes to receive mail, especially when the mail carrier leaves a bundle composed of more interesting things than just bills. My love for mail grew into an obsession while I stayed home, and many days found me impatiently glued to the window, glaring up the avenue when a substitute carrier delayed the hour of delivery. Worse, however, than waiting for the mail carrier was when the mail arrived having nothing addressed, or of interest, to me; I was not picky... I welcomed even "junk mail"!

Jan. 31, 1976... I woke up again, which is a miracle in itself (followed by a dissertation explaining my plans for the day).

I was aware of the implications behind my sickness, yet I do not recall having believed that I would die; my pain was of the temporary kind, I thought, and having confidence in my elders and those of the medical profession, felt certain that my life was not threatened. Death itself was obscurity, and only took on the characteristics of ultimate slumber and freedom from pain; this image brought no fear and occurred mainly in times of physical discomfort. I wished neither to delude myself about my condition nor dwell upon its negative features; my statement from the diary illustrates that attitude quite well, for, although the sentence was written in light-hearted jest, its dry humor depended, as do all jokes, on either an element of truth, an attempt to mask seriousness, or sheer incredibility. As the latter was not a factor, my expression was a truthful and simultaneous outburst, defining my life in a concise and unobtrusive manner; I was not depressed that day, but rather, honest in a wry sort of way.

Humor is an asset when one is faced with serious problems, for laughter unleashes tension, like crying, which otherwise can become self-destructive. Laughter and tears are closely related, as is evident in cases of hysteria or other mental disorders wherein the mind no longer effectively controls one's emotions in the manner which society deems proper for a particular occasion. Mom once related an incident concerning Lynn, who from birth, was severely cerebral palsied; strapped in her high chair, she watched Mom cry over distressing news and in response, began to laugh, bespeaking her inability to react by shedding tears, as would a normal child. Generally, sadness evokes sadness.

There are times, however, when grim situations accompanied by humor should not be looked upon as a "sick" reaction. I truly believe that one can find humor in most occurrences, even some of the brutal realities of life and death. Ideally one should find the utmost humor within his own life... he need not search elsewhere; to laugh at one's own problems divides their weight significantly, so that it is unnecessary to scoff at another's ill fortune and place humorless weight upon his ample burden.

Laughter was not only for myself, however, for I had to maintain a degree of humor regarding both my appearance and my general situation, spanning isolation to body dysfunctions, to retain my normalcy in the eyes of those around me. Laughter makes an unpleasant event more acceptable despite its inherent distastefulness; even my wig afforded certain individuals with unbridled laughter when I would put it on backwards and, playing a mock guitar, pretend to be a member of a rock band. Had my reaction to adversity brought a shadow of gloom over my face and personality the suffering endured by my family and friends would have been greatly multiplied; as a result, my isolation would have grown. Depression is as catching as humor, yet unlike humor, it is not sought and possesses no magnetism of itself.

Feb. 1, 1976... I got sick in the night last night. I was real cold, then really super hot. I started to make little whines, hoping Mom or Dad would hear me. Finally, Mom heard me and Dad came to see what was the matter. He helped me get situated on the sofa. I slept all the rest of the (next) day. I can't remember if I even ate today at all. All I know is that I'm having super weird dreams all of the day.

When my mom began to teach, I remember my jealousy toward the faceless names which daily she brought home. Conversation I did not mind, yet her employment involved much more than that. She sometimes came home quite late, and even after working over-time at school she managed to tote further work to our house. If she asked for help, I would do so begrudgingly, knowing that the time she saved by my assistance would only spawn other ideas from her conscientiousness. When I no longer wanted a stuffed animal or toy, she quickly rushed it to school; this was a true blow, for the kindergarteners were not only benefiting from her time at school and at home, but were now receiving my old and once-beloved belongings! My displeasure voiced itself in a cantankerous fashion as I stewed my over-all annoyance for small children's propensities (irrationality, brazen and loud mouths, uncouth mannerisms, and their tendency toward the profuse utilization of tears) under her nose.

I finally discovered that, no matter how truthful my statements had been, she found a way to ricochet

them back to my behavior as a child. Dad was sympathetic, for he knew that Mom's attempts to parallel one's behavior to that which one found disfavorable in others was one of her habits. I asked him whether I was like "this" or like "that," illustrating for him the exact scenario which I had placed before Mom, and often he would say, "No, you didn't do that... or at least not that bad." I only complained about those things which I felt I had not done, for I could not condemn a road that I had once walked as if my feet had never carried its dust. Finally, in exasperation, I decided my war against the kindergarten children should no longer be verbalized.

Feb. 4, 1976... I still have the runs, but the tutor came anyway. I didn't have to go while she was here anyway! I'm glad she came though, because it helps pass the day a little better. I stopped drinking the lemonade as it seems to "go right through" me. It made my diarrhea all foamy and icky. (Not to mention that the runs aren't icky and gross and all of that anyway!)

Feb. 9, 1976... I'm sure glad I don't have the runs anymore. Tutor came today. After she left I wrote 2 poems, although I still have to do some changing and correcting. One is about food, and the other is about the bed pans.

My idea of comic appeal found its way into the creative outlet of poetry. I figured that everyone could relate to the nastiness of having to use a bed pan even if they never had the misfortune to encounter one; after all, going to the bathroom was funny, if for no other reason than the fact that it brought humanity down to the elemental functions of the smallest insect. No one was above it.

"Diarrhea keeps the world running," and as long as I was able to keep laughing it didn't seem so bad. I showed two nonsense poems I had written to my tutor; she rewarded me with a smile. Neither of us mentioned submitting them for the yearly Junior High poetry collection, however. After she departed, I turned toward my lessons.

Homework. I held the word in my mind and reflected on my life. The word was befitting of my study habits; all my work was homework this year.

When You're In The Hospital

I say this from experience
For I know it's not much fun,
When you just gotta use the facilities...
But you can't get up to run!

There's a button that you push for a nurse,
Located somewhere near your bed,
Just hope she gets there in a hurry,
Or you've really something to dread.

She'll pull out something resembling
A well bent silver can...
Now you're the center of attention
Seated on that cold bed-pan!

Different Foods For Different Likes

It's a funny thing
When you think about foods,
Some people eat different things
To suit their changing moods.
Kids usually eat

Just the things they've always liked,
While certain teens prefer
Only foods that have been spiked.
Chinese sit on the floor
Eating egg rolls and cooked rice;
But to the Spanish in their wide-brimmed hats,
Enchiladas are quite nice,
There's the cook in fancy restaurants
Making fine recipes for "Turtle Stew "
And then there's my Mom at home,
Concocting some famous "Leftover Brew."
There's that fat guy going to Bishops,
To get Ambrosia Pie just for fun,
And the other guy going to McDonalds for his
Twoallbeefpattiespecialsaucelettuse cheesepicklestonion
Onasesameseedbun!
Now there was Euell Gibbons in the forest,
Eating his "wild hickory nuts,"
But I heard he had an ulcer,
And should have stuck with Pizza Huts!
I could go on and on
About foods, drinks, sweets and such,
But I think I'd better quit now,
While I still have the "rhyming touch"!

Lauren Isaacson 8th Grade February of 1976

Feb. 10, 1976... I made my class a great big valentine out of poster board. It's an owl... Whoo's wishing you a Happy Valentine's Day? Me

Youthful love is, indeed, quite intense. I bestowed my familial love upon my sister-in-law, Norm's wife, who also became the companion that my mind so desperately demanded. In her I found a depth of friendship which had always eluded me; perhaps I needed to grow to understand what I sought. Those aspects which captured my affection were mutuality, understanding and compatibility which required no stimulus to evoke, but evolved through one's inherent, natural character as demonstrated to the other. Conversation traversed the boundaries of the menial and insignificant, while activities were relished simply because of my fondness for her and, of course, my brother.

In addition to the above characteristics, Tracy and I shared common interests in sewing, drawing, and outdoor activities; we were also both thin-limbed, and although she had gained weight by the time I knew her, she remained thin. I appreciated having a person to whom I could unabashedly express my indifference toward food; even before my operation I viewed mealtime as a hassle and a must for survival; to this she could sympathize knowingly. Tracy could also relate to my lack of womanly fat deposits which naturally accompanied a thin stature, and we swapped horror stories and lamentations about the tactless and mentally (dispatched) people we had encountered who enjoyed taunting at that which our figures still lacked. We generally wrapped up such conversations by admitting that thinness was an advantage. We were not hampered in any way by excess baggage; nothing flogged violently if we ran, nor did anything cascade over the sides of a chair as we sat. We could easily see our feet, and were confident that old age would find few sagging extremities. Such were our consolations.

I relished the time I spent in Tracy's company; she helped me through the year of chemotherapy by planning activities each week for us to pursue such as running errands and shopping. I most enjoyed the invitations to stay over night at Norm and Tracy's house, for the best entertainment was conversation. I loved the casual atmosphere that permeated their house, for it seemed to whisper "the simple pleasures are the best." They lived quietly, in a modest house, feeding their equally modest income into house payments, grocery bills and gasoline for their \$400 Belvedere. It was a life which yielded the serenity begotten of honesty and hard work; no phantoms of debt wailed in the late hours of the day, and sleep came easily. Goals were sighted, then realized, slowly, one by one; they spent no money that was not yet their own, but nothing appeared to be wanting in their lives. I admired their way of life and wanted to one day establish a home based on such simplicity and love.

When I stayed over night, the living room couch was my bed. It faced the kitchen and in the morning, I could survey the pre-dawn preparation of breakfast. If it was a week day, Norm would appreciatively stuff three or four blueberry muffins down his throat and, grabbing his lunch bucket, stride out the

door to his motorcycle. Weekends provided a more leisurely breakfast schedule, and everyone rose at generally the same time. Often Tracy fried pancakes as the plates were laid upon the table and the powdered milk, butter, and a bottle of imitation maple syrup were extracted from the refrigerator. Norm and Tracy bought the least expensive items at the grocery store, which included the substitute for milk and a cheap brand of syrup. These two aspects of the simple life were the only ones which I did not find appealing, and vowed I would always buy fresh milk and decent syrup even though my canned fruit would bear a bargain label. I guessed every way of life had its flaws.

Feb. 13, 1976... It's Friday the 13th... watch yourself today... Don't walk under a ladder; if you see a black cat, walk the other way! Only kidding! I'm over at Norm's right now. I had 1 egg and 3 bran muffins (pig). Tracy gave me 4 spoons (wooden) for my hope chest, that Norm made at (work)... I feel real good this morning. Maybe I'll take a walk! Maybe I'll even take my camera and take some pictures.

Staying at Norm and Tracy's house always put me in a good mood, for I was with my favorite companions and most important, I was understood. I felt so at ease in their company that, amid life's pain and uncertainty, living was still worthwhile. Living, in fact, was really great sometimes.

Feb. 14, 1976... M. and J. came over today and gave me some valentines from the class. Then we talked awhile. We went to see (a) movie... It was real funny...

Feb. 17, 1976... Today is Dad's birthday. I made a card out of flannel, but I didn't like it, so I threw it away. Mom dug it out when she came home (sad face). I made another card out of a box. You'd follow the arrows to each side of the box and each side had a different saying on it. I also made him some Rice Krispie Treats... never again! He liked 'em tho'... Boy, they were like bricks!

Feb. 19, 1976... I made a jumper in 5 hours today. It's brown corduroy, bib overall style and below the knees. The suspenders don't have clasps, but I have snaps instead. I made it for the dance Friday. I would have liked to make a hat to go with it, but didn't have enough material. I surprised Mom and Dad a lot by it. See, they both had gone to meetings, so I was home by myself from 7:30 to 9:00 p.m.

Feb. 20 1976... Today is the dance! I'm nervous! 11:56 p.m.—I'm home from the dance now. I got home around 10:45 or so. It was real fun. I danced with 9 boys; one boy I danced with twice. One time, it was 5 (songs) straight! Boy, my legs and feet ache. After, we went to Shakey's Pizza Parlor. I had a lettuce salad for 60 cents (one boy) asked about 5 kids for a dime and when they asked what it was for, he said, "It's going for a good cause." You know what? He gave it to me! I told 'em to take it back, but they wouldn't, and (a girl) said she'd be mad at me if I didn't. So, I'm 50 cents richer, I think the reason that I danced so much is because I've been gone.

It was obvious to me that some of the attention I had received was due to my illness, for my appearance had suffered since 7th grade and popularity had never been a concern of mine. Nevertheless, I was pleased to have been accepted by those with whom I had always maintained friendly terms. It was common knowledge that I wore a wig; I was glad that no one stared or gawked at me with unnatural interest; some even said that my short hair looked nice, to which I would reply with a word of appreciation, knowing that I could never believe the statements, despite the good intention behind them. I had explained the entire episode to M. and J. when they visited me on Valentine's Day, telling them that I wished my plight to be honestly related to those of my acquaintance, for carrying such a secret would have been like transporting a dandelion seed head on a windy day. Seeds of both truth and controversy would have flown everywhere, and deception on my behalf would only have served to germinate further curiosity.

The interaction at the dance demonstrated that I had not been completely forgotten in my absence, although it also served to amplify the unusual nature of my current way of life in my own eyes. I lived each day as it presented itself, not dwelling on dejection, pain, or my severance from the rest of the world. When I dreamed, I did not dream of the past, and was therefore a trifle shocked at the difference of my days to those of other youth. Through the months, abnormalcy became "normal" for me; and perhaps it was beneficial that I could think along those lines, for I was able to adapt to my situation without undue frustration. It is difficult to live "with" something if it is the source of continual mental torment. Aloneness did not parallel loneliness; many times I was very happy that my health allowed me to avoid social involvements, despite the fact that, after too much solitude, interaction with others became increasingly difficult.

People were very good to me during my year of chemotherapy, and I received attention which I would

not have enjoyed had it not been for my health problem. As I mentioned previously, women from church would stop by to visit, occasionally bearing a plate of cookies or other food which I found appealing, or spend their time with me making crafts. My aunt who lived next door, also dropped by, or took me on small outings, as did my sister-in-law, Tracy.

March 15, 1976... I didn't get any mail today. When that happens, it almost ruins my whole day. I'm supposed to get (a long listing of expected mail)... I hope I get something tomorrow... I love getting mail... especially packages.

March 16, 1976... My back really hurts today, kinda all around the middle. No mail came today at all. RATS! Some days I just feel like sitting down and bawling when I don't get any packages or letter or anything.

My day hit a rock-bottom low when no mail arrived, but two days in a row was nearly insufferable. I wrote to relatives, two pen pals, and a girl I had met in Rochester, Mn; it seemed incredible that no one would have written and no catalog or advertisement buffered the disappointing sight of the empty mailbox. This was depression in the life of a home-bound 14 year old.

Several months later I decided to remedy the depressing situation by sending my name and photo to a publication produced by an insurance company which we received regularly. Having myself written to two girls who had appeared in the magazine, I figured I should try to put an end to my disgusting predicament since they had reported receiving as many as 20-30 letters. I described myself, my hobbies and, including a 7th grade photograph, quickly mailed the envelope.

March 19, 1976... I wanted to go to Col. with K. in the summer and told dad. He said I'd not be able to. I never get to go anywhere with her. He told me we wouldn't go to Col. this summer if I didn't care to go with them! But I do! Man! I'm depressed! I'm going to bed without telling anyone!

Without a question of doubt, my intended action described in the final sentence had no profound effect on my parents, and if anyone lost sleep over the incident, it was me. Frustration marred my rationality and allowed the childish presence to dominate my thoughts and actions. Whereas the above incident hurt only myself, since I enjoyed bedtime hugs anger could also be directed out from myself. One is born with a certain degree of destructiveness, for until a parent guides a child toward the compassionate mode of thought which society demands, and the child is mature enough to follow that direction, he often exerts damaging blows on inanimate objects for no reason and similarly provokes live creatures over which he wields superiority of size and strength. In grade school I would capture daddy-long-legs and proceed to amputate all of their legs until the body was but a helpless dot on the sidewalk surrounded by eight spasmodically pulsating legs. My behavior was quite unnecessary, and I finally was able to see the brutality of my deadly surgery and allowed the bugs to pass unhindered. Similarly, my brothers used to follow ants with a magnifying glass, directing the reflective rays on their small bodies until they began to smoke, whereupon the ant would collapse in a miniscule puff of fire.

Many households with dogs and cats bear the brunt of the human inhabitants' emotions. Mistreatment is not uncommon regarding pets, and ranges from overt bodily punishment to the supposedly innocent teasing and frightening of animals.

March 23 1976... Gerb bit me yesterday for no reason at all, so today I got even. I filled the tub with three inches of water and put him on the edge of the tub. He fell in all by himself. He swam a little. I left him in there a half hour... He looked funny... real skinny ...it really scared him! I'll never do it again though.

How well I remember my reasoning and behavior on that day. My gerbil would never have known why I was treating him in such a mean fashion; gerbils are naturally active, and not desiring to be held, it bit my finger in agitation. Realizing this, yet still frustrated, I decided to put some water in the tub, measuring three inches at the deepest slant, and put my gerbil on the tub's edge, knowing full well that the chance of his sliding into the slippery interior was almost certain; thus, I could take advantage of a sadistic need without actually pushing him in the tub or hurting him. As I watched his progress to assure that he was in no danger, it was apparent that he disliked his situation entirely, for he found the highest spot immediately and remained there, propped on his hind legs, craning his head for a way up to more hospitable surroundings. After the time had elapsed, I lowered my hand into the tub and he gratefully climbed into it; I then raised him up and gently dried him on a towel. I knew that I liked the feeling I encountered as my pet jumped into my cupped hands... he sought my hands, and my offering

of care, whereas the previous day, he repelled my affections. It was the childish need to possess something's love; if I made certain that the quality of his atmosphere was poor, he would seek out my rescuing presence.

No matter how insignificant my action might seem in comparison to the cruel attacks waged upon some pets, I feel ashamed that I ever needed to boost my security through such unfavorable means. Any mistreatment is unfortunate, but perhaps it is most unfortunate for that which it reveals about the human who lacks the ability to resist it.

Because I spent so much time alone, I was highly aware of my opposing desires, and the fact that I was ill augmented each in its own way. During nausea I wanted no one to flutter nearby; vomiting was a degrading sort of function for which I needed no help (as it was essentially involuntary) and desired no spectators. At times I would not throw up until I was certain that everyone was beyond earshot. However, in the aftermath of a vicious siege or a miserable day, I welcomed parental affection, and on occasion, sought their nurturing touch. This latter trait proved to myself that I was not yet as self-sufficient as I would have liked to be; I needed mom and dad for more than food and lodging purposes, for part of me was still very much a little child and that fact would not disappear through false rationalization on my behalf. Although the child that I saw within myself I sometimes despised, having at least fostered selfish ideas if I had not also allowed myself to act upon the childish whims, I was glad to be able to revert to that being in times of physical weakness; perhaps, however, one never outgrows the need for a reassuring hug, and gentle words.

Most of my visitors were adults. This suited me just fine, however, for I felt more at ease with people who were older than myself. With a few exceptions, I generally found myself inhibited around youth, for acceptability was judged within narrow and often unreasonable bounds with which I did not care to grapple. Moreover, because I did not have a particular crowd with whom I closely associated, preferring to roam with one individual at a time, group situations flooded me with apprehension. One such group was church school. Although I truly enjoyed the adults who attended the services each Sunday, my March 21 entry reads: "I didn't want to go to church" (I really never like to). It was the heart-felt sentiments of a rebellious youth, perhaps, who did not wish to sit through an hour-long service, yet my foremost objection surrounded the obligatory church school and Sunday evening MYF (Methodist Youth Fellowship; I rarely attended the MYF meetings during the administration of chemotherapy, although my parents had me begin again after the treatments had ceased). I attempted to make conversation or listen to those speaking nearby, yet could never include myself to an even modest degree. As I approached a circular gathering of kids, the circle would never break or widen to allow me to "join in." For awhile I stood behind the circle of heads, smiling stupidly at their jokes and listening to the flood of chatter surrounding people I'd never known, until the bell announced it was time to file to the classroom. Eventually, I tired of the hopeless battle and spoke with my parents' friends or else made an early debut in the empty church classroom and waited for the clock to herald the beginning of the hour in a less humiliating fashion.

That I did not share common friends with the church youth was complicated further by the fact that my "shyness" grew when ignored. When I found myself in an awkward situation, I lost my ability to speak quite as effectively as if my voice box had been stolen. Thus, if I spoke a word or two and was left unanswered, verbalization became increasingly more difficult until I could not speak if I wanted to do so. I recall an outing (or retreat) on which Mom insisted I go, wherein, during a meeting to plan activities, my suggestion to go on a bike excursion was virtually eye-balled off the list as if it was an incredibly ridiculous thing to have mentioned. I swallowed hard, and wished I could melt into the wood of my bench. Later in the meeting other questions were tossed about and, having considered a likely answer to one, I opened my mouth, fully intending to speak, but nothing would pass through my lips. I shut my mouth again, rather shocked, yet happy that no one had seen my strange gesture.

Sunday school was not as bad as MYF, because of the teacher's presence and the short length of class. I felt sorry for the teachers, poor volunteers who offered their services each Sunday morning, only to receive inattentive abuse. I often wished that the minister would have cancelled church school for junior and senior high, and instead allowed them to talk the hour away, since that is what happened anyway. When an attempt at discipline was made to silence the noise, the discussion planned by the teacher would all but collapse and students, or at least, many of them, would sit despondently in their seats, with plaster-cast pouts on their faces, and refuse to answer questions unless directly asked. Then the answer was generally a curt, "I don't know" followed by steamy silence. I wished that I had the clout and the following to right these proceedings, yet a plea on my behalf would have been unheard or ignored; unless my barrier would permit me to enter into the instructor's discussion and help in that meager way, I could do nothing to reinforce the teacher's strength except, through silence, keep the bedlam at its current level. Our church, I found, shared its problem with other denominations.

March 24, 1976... wrote another poem about spring... really nice out today!

I remember the day and was inspired to write about that which I saw around me. I carried a note pad and pen to the wood pile behind my house, and taking a seat, allowed my pen to drift along with my mood. As the sun pelted its warm rays on my back, the world seemed so beautiful and my heart so full of the world, that I had to capture the feeling forever. I possessed no poet's eloquence at age 14, though I did seek to express honesty and beauty in the written word; I wished that everyone could see and feel the life which permeated every puff of breeze through the tight-budded trees.

I felt rather guilty that I fostered such ill fervor toward going to church and, as a gesture of good will, sent a copy of my poem to the minister. Perhaps I wished to ease my own mind against the suspicion that I was on a collision course with atheism; for although I did not feel like a heathen, I was terribly aware of a rift between my ideas and those preached in church; some of the statements actually filled me with wrath; I searched my mind for the cause of my annoying fury and, years later, I was finally able to define my religious belief and be at peace with myself.

To return to my story, I mailed my poem and settled back to pursue the daily routine. One and a half weeks passed, finding me at church and longing for an alternative. It seemed miraculous, for my wish came true.

Apr. 4, 1976... I didn't go to church because I got hungry, so I went with Les and Mrs. K. to the Modernistic Restaurant. I had 2 1/2 pieces of French toast, 1 sausage, hot tea. I wish I'd gone to church tho' 'cause Rev. Jones read my poem "Spring"! A lady told Mom that I should try to publish it! Seven others commented on it! WOW!

Ironic, life. Besides the honor of having my poem read in church, it was published in the weekly church bulletin since a number of individuals had asked for a copy of it; in the following weeks I was sent two thank you notes in the mail for sharing my writing with the church. It felt good to know that my efforts were appreciated; more importantly, it prompted people to take a second look at nature's splendor.

Spring

It's the beginning of Spring,
And God's in the air,
Not just in my woods,
But everywhere.

I can feel him like the breeze
As it blows on me,
And so can the robin, the eagle, the bee.

And as the sun's rays
Beat down on the earth
The world suddenly awakes
And is filled with new birth.

Under the leaves so dead and brown,
Sprouts a Spring Beauty, and life is found.

Spring is life...
Of this I've no doubt,
I feel I'm alive, and I want to shout!

Lauren Isaacson 8th Grade

I used to sit on my front steps and watch the storms approach. The sky would turn gray, then dark, inky blue as thunderheads bearing rain scouted a path above the tall oaks surrounding our house. Lightning seared the murky, restless skies as I peered into the dark abyss above me, and when the storm drew hauntingly near, I would relinquish my seat for one inside the house.

My love of storms was not blind love; I respected the power of nature and maintained my distance, continuing my vigilance protected by four walls. I once witnessed the mauling destruction of a seemingly healthy oak as the wind cracked its trunk at 20 feet above the ground and sent its entire

upper portion sprawling to the woodland floor. I gawked in astonishment and breathed a sigh of relief that the tree had not fallen in the direction of my aunt's home. Wide-eyed, I realized that my hands were shaking; I left the doorway and took a seat in the living room.

A Storm In The Offing

Storm clouds are coming,
The wind is in wrath;
Soon raindrops will penetrate
Everything in their path.

The sun is still shining,
The birds, still in chorus...
But this will not last,
For a storm is before us.

The wind is now lashing
The trees without care,
And their sap is now flowing
With each breath of air.

The sun's face is veiled
With a blanket of gray;
The heavens break open,
And rain fills the day.

Lauren Isaacson 8th Grade

Apr. 7, 1976... I kinda' got sick after I ate the cream of rice so I just read more of my Science. Then G.E. came over and we did crafts. I made a wishing well with clothespin halves glued on to a Gerber food jar. It's neat. She even brought an African violet from Mrs. O. I also made Easter egg decorations from real blown out eggs covered with napkins. At 2:00 Tracy and her sister picked me up. We went to (the mall) for a beauty show... wasn't much fun... didn't even get made up!... I got to sign up for free samples though. I'll get some!

I had few actual contacts with my classmates of 7th grade, for I shared little in common with their faster-paced lifestyles and the saying, "out of sight, out of mind" carried a thick slice of truthfulness. To pass the time I often wrote nonsensical poems. The old west was the brunt of one of my endeavors...

Revenge Doesn't Alus Pay!

(AS told by an old Mountain Man)

This is the story 'bout a woman named Sue;
Her man wuz kilt by Injuns... her fam-Iy, too!
Now Sue bore a grudge worse than most could tell,
She'd get revenge on them redskins if she had ta go
through hell !

'Ol Sue used a lang-gwadge that stung just like a bee,
And she could draw a pistol faster'n you could knock
your knee!
One day while she wuz lookin' fer somethin' good ta eat,
She spied a group of footprints, made by moccasined feet!

Sue tracked 'em 'til she found 'em near the river bank,
And roped the neck of one, then gave it a yank.
The minute that the others heard the terble cry,
They gathered up their weapons and saw her by and by.

Well Sue was pretty crafty, but not as much as they,
For soon she turned and fled... her being the prey.

In an instant they were on her... that poor, devilish Sue,
She did not win the battle, for she herself was slew!

This is the way Sue ended, it may seem sort of cold,

But she still lives in stories that many folks have told.

Lauren Isaacson 8th Grade

Apr. 30, 1976... Dr. Murrell's office called and said I had to get another blood test because my white cells are down. I've gotta' have one Sat., too. For awhile I was saying some unwriteable things. I was so upset.

I could never quite understand why they wanted to take more blood when my count was down. To me, that made little sense; I would have thought I should keep all of the blood cells I could.

I saw enough of hospitals to please a hypochondriac; further contact, after leaving Rochester, seemed beyond reason. I wanted only to be left alone; sometimes life seemed so unfair. I was quite familiar with needles by April, after having received countless jabs and nearly as many bruises without complaint, yet orders for additional blood tests effectively hindered my level of tolerance. Telling myself that, "blood test were no big deal after all I'd been through," would sometimes suffice to relieve my gripping tension; other instances, I could say, "By now you should be used to them," and then go merrily on my way. There were other days when no rationalization would console me.

May 4, 1976... Looked through my catalogs and dreamed...

I loved to dream over catalogs and fill out order blanks, as it took my mind from nausea and helped pass the time. Often, I would actually fill out an order blank yet never send it; catalogs were far more entertaining than magazines, for they were composed almost solely of pictures.

I was amazed that I should be the subject of jealous resentment; while I was home vomiting, or sitting hairless in front of the TV, they could run about, full of energy, eat a double-scoop ice cream cone without heaving the rest of the night away, and let their hair dry in front of the TV. I was not resentful of their life; why would they resent "how much I had"? I continued to send for things, loving to receive mail. Clippings and advertisements for free samples were hoarded and quickly posted. I sent my name to a beauty club, thinking that the make-up would be of benefit to my sallow complexion and also something to which I could look forward each month; to my dismay, I received a letter rejecting my application and refunding my money, with an explanation that I was too young to belong. My mom promptly returned the check, accompanied by a letter explaining why I wished to belong to the club. I hoped they would understand, yet their response was beyond my greatest expectations, for they made me a V.I.P. member wherein I would receive all cosmetics free of charge. I was ecstatic that I was allowed to join; their additional favor was a true gift indeed, and I quickly mailed a letter of gratitude for their uncommon generosity.

Aside from my family, I told no one of my monthly benefactor, for I feared the partially concealed jealousy which I had already seen too often. I disliked having to be secretive, yet my paranoia ran deep and I did not wish to stir further coals of bitterness within others.

May 6, 1976... I wish the magazine would come soon! I hope to get tons of pen pals.

By the middle of June letters began to arrive from all parts of the country. I was ecstatic, and diligently wrote correspondence in return. After a passage of a month or more, the letters from new pen pals dwindled in number, and I was able to establish firm postal relationships with many individuals. In all, I had received over 50 letters; and to my agitation, one phone call from a nitwit who claimed that he wanted to be a "phone pal." (NO thanks). Although I responded to all letters except one, which was from a guy desiring a full-length photo of me in a bathing suit or shorts, some never wrote again or so infrequently that I was uncertain who actually lost interest first. However, these partings did not bother me since I still wrote regularly to over 20 people and that number alone kept me running to the post office for stamps and buying paper on a grand scale.

The business of writing letters became an outlet for creativity and self-expression which, at that point in my life, I needed very much. While one's circle of friends changed with one's interests and values, pen pals were sufficiently detached from the prejudices of the immediate atmosphere and therefore became friends at a safe distance to whom feelings could be written without the usual fear of confidentiality. Actually there were only two or three pen pals with whom I shared any depth, for many desired only to speak about their boyfriends and favorite things to eat, and refused to rise above the superficial acquaintance afforded by one page letters and a 15 cent stamp. Expectations and needs varied with these individuals, just as they did within local relationships. Some needed only a

correspondent and others, a confidant; the duration of mutual interaction via post depended on the compatibility of these aspects.

I wrote "Definitions" on May 10, 1976; it captured a bit more introspection than some of my writing.

Definitions

Dreams are like the eagle
When it is in flight,
Plummeting down a mountainside
Or soaring out of sight.

Success is like the sky
When clouds roll away
And beckon to the sun
To brighten up your day.

Failure is a shooting star
Which hurls itself around
And makes a crater in your heart,
Crushing spirits to the ground.

Birth is like a flower
As its' leaves unfurl,
Rendering its' love for God
To city, country, world.

Death is like an endless night
To those who don't believe,
Cloaking them in darkness,
The old to the naive.

Lauren Isaacson 9th Grade 1976

May 16, 1976... I went to church with K... just Sunday School, tho'... Man, I thought our class didn't pay to much attention and those guys threw stuff, wrecked Bibles and everything. K. dropped me home around noon. I was real depressed for some unknown reason.

Thus, Sunday School was a scene I loved to avoid, even in other churches. I felt incredibly guilty that I did not have the fortitude or spirit to deride the callousness enacted by some of the kids; since I was already miles from their friendship, I should not have worried, yet I wished to draw no attention to myself, especially that of the negative sort in their eyes. My internal suffering would then have been much worse; I opted for alienation over derision. My idea of a "religious lift" was a sojourn of solitude among the woodlands.

For my mom and dad, though, my sickness created tension in itself. Its presence, and the nausea, hairlessness, and so forth that reminded them of its presence dined voraciously on their happiness. During the day they both immersed their energies into their jobs; exertion was only a temporary relief, however, and years later I learned that my mom had sometimes let out an involuntary sob after the dismissal of the kindergarteners when her thoughts encompassed my loss of hair. I rarely saw their anguish, for it seemed that they concealed it very well. Occasionally, when it ran over, I did not know how to react; their pain caused pain for me.

May 22, 1976... Didn't do much today. I dusted and then cleaned my room (and) listened to records. (I was sorta depressed and I guess I made Mom depressed too, because I asked if it was OK to use the record player and she said "sure, that's what it's for. I always told Norm that but he'd never use it. I guess I just raised the whole bunch of you kids wrong." And then she started to cry).

"No, Mom," I thought, standing silently in the doorway. Depression weighed heavily on one's self-confidence. Luckily such feelings within Mom were transitory and soon replaced by her characteristically positive attitude; aside from her good nature she did not have time to be depressed, for she rarely had time to sit. Maybe it was just as well, since there was hardly a shortage of worries.

The time and energy she could expend in worry was more productively spent mixing and baking a batch of chocolate chip cookies (and it certainly left a better taste in one's mouth).

Generally my visits to the clinic were clearly punctuated within my diary; in effect, five pages were barren of script except for a quickly scribbled sad face, each accompanied by a concise four letter word, "BLAH." The text would resume on the day following my last treatment.

Toward the end of May we drove up to Mayo Clinic for my third to last series of treatments.

May 26, 1976... Woke up (DAAAA!) had X-ray and blood test. They took so much blood that I got sick to my stomach and dizzy. When I got to the "finger prick place," I was sobbing and crouching over, so they took me in a room to lay down. I cried in my little room they put me in for awhile. Then I was all right... They pricked me in that same room! Service!

I remember that day very well. It seemed that I did not feel quite right as I walked toward the waiting room for the blood test that morning, and once I was forced to talk, I realized how displaced my senses were, for I could not even answer their routine inquiries of cordiality.

"Take a seat, please; make a fist." The nurse tied a rubber strap tightly about my arm and began to search for a vein.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"Lauren Isaac..." I stopped abruptly, looking up at her as embarrassment painted my face a brilliant hue of red.

Thinking she'll try another question, perhaps an easier one, she asked, "What's your name, huh?" To which I replied, "Moline, Illinois." My head began to spin in confusion and I wondered if I was going mad. "I'm sorry... I don't know what's wrong with me today..." I said, my voice trailing off as the dizziness intensified. Nothing of this sort had ever happened to me. I was extremely relieved to exit the vicinity of the blood test, for I despised losing control of myself in front of others. Feeling like an idiotic fool, I wondered if the nurses thought I was new to the procedure, or scared, or squeamish...

The remaining portion of the day went smoothly after eating breakfast.

Mom and I went shopping after taking Dad to the airport. I got a new wig, a brush, and wig shampoo.

A new wig. It took some persuading on the part of my mom, but I finally agreed to try on some new hairpieces. My wig was beginning to show signs of wear after constant daily use and, admittedly, it was looking rather tacky. Despite these facts I was reluctant to go through the nerve-racking process again, especially since I was now completely hairless and found the idea of publicly displaying that trait in a department store utterly repulsive. We browsed through the maze of styrofoam heads and many-hued tresses until a sales lady approached us. I studied the floor intently while my mom explained the color and styles I wished to try. Immediately the lady produced several boxes housing clumps of curled hair which resembled dead animals, and motioned to the mirror. "Uh..." I stammered, trying to muster up my courage. "Could...I...try them on in a dressing room or... something? I take chemotherapy and I... don't have any hair..." The woman hardly flinched. "Sure, go right over to woman's apparel..."

What a relief! Behind the curtained partition I shed my relic and, standing before the mirror, tried one wig after the other. "I swear, nobody has this much hair!" I exclaimed, frustrated. "Think of the milk you'd have to drink to grow hair like this!"

I selected a wig which closely matched my old one in its younger days and vowed I would somehow smash it down to the proportion of real hair. Would you like to wear it?" Mom asked, referring to the new clump of hair slumped inanimately over the edge of the box. "No way," I plastered my tried and true wig on my head and it unhesitatingly fell into place, conforming to my head like an old felt hat.

The following afternoon my treatments began. However, we received a pleasant surprise by learning that we could transport the last two days worth of drugs home with us and allow the hospital to administer them to me. Thus, after the third treatment, we were given the expensive vials of yellow, clear and ruby red liquid, along with instructions for the doctor, and placed the potent ammunition in a cooler.

May 29, 1976... Took Chemotherapy and headed for home. Got home around 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. (TWO relatives) were already here. (one) gave me a book on beauty... maybe she's trying to tell me something! HA! HA!

May 30, 1976... Had chemotherapy at home. It took a long time to get all of the things situated. It was injected, I threw up, etc., and then we went home.

May 31, 1976... Had Chemo. It took an awful long time today. Home. Watched T.V.

Chemotherapy, administered at home in Moline was an improvement which boosted my morale. For the first time my diary entries did not consist merely of sad faces and hurriedly scrawled "BLAH'S." I didn't feel "good," but I seemed to feel "better." I could breathe fresh air instead of the motel's stale stagnancy of bygone cigarette ashes. I could even throw up in my own toilet. Home treatment was indeed a delight.

June 2, 1976... I got sick tonite. I guess it's just the chemotherapy doing its duty! I made myself barf at 10:00 p.m. I should have barfed sooner.

PAGE 111

Chapter 14 Summer 1976

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Summer 1976

Summer was always a time of change, and many transformations touched my life with the coming of the month of June. School was out of session, and consequently, my tutor's last day was the 3rd; I now shared more in common with the other students in that a three month recess from education had just begun, and the fall semester would find me, like them, returning to junior high.

Mom, too, closed the door of her Kindergarten classroom for the summer, although she still persisted in pursuing various projects which related to her employment during her free time. She was home, however, and that was the most important thing. It seemed to me that life was returning to normal and I felt less alienated from society since there was more activity surrounding my home. Despite other changes I still looked forward to mail, especially with the advent of my subscription for pen pals; however, I also found my other mailings to be of great interest, and appreciated each envelope with my name on it. An advertisement for the sale of Christmas cards found its way into my hands one morning, and after reading all of the information, I wondered if I should try to sell the cards door to door for added Christmas income. As I mulled over the idea, Mom noticed the pile of literature scattered upon the kitchen table, and briefing herself slightly, proclaimed that it would be a wonderful way to "present myself to people" through my own initiative and heartily applauded the idea.

Several days of thought ensued before I decided to sell the cards; the profit eventually cinched the matter, overshadowing my fear of knocking on doors and being rejected by potential customers. It was fun to see my neighbors, and I felt comfortable standing outside their doors even if my visit was basically business related. I walked up and down my block, collecting orders and trying to gain courage through the sales which I had already enlisted, for I would soon scout further territory wherein I knew

few names and equally few faces.

As I had suspected, my sales declined rapidly once I ventured outside of the neighborhood, and my bravery and spirit departed "en masse." I had detested trying to sell Girl Scout cookies, and I strained to find a reason why I felt that selling cards would prove to be any different. It was different, however, because it was worse; no one recognized the company whose cards I was attempting to sell, and furthermore, I had to collect the money and make the necessary change (which horrified me) at the time of the order, rather than the delivery of the cards. I soon had more than enough refusals to warrant my dismissal of any idea of making further sales.

June 25, 1976... Got dressed and went out on 53rd St. selling (or trying to sell) my cards. No one bought a thing. A lot of 'em gave excuses like, "I just got home from the hospital" and "I buy from a girl down the block and don't want to hurt her feelings" ETC. !! What do they think they're doing to me?

July 1, 1976... This week has seemed endless. I wake up and Mom says, "You'd better start selling your cards, hadn't you?" and so I do and I come back half zonked and then I do some chores around the house and then write letters. I feel real depressed... I didn't sell any cards today. . . didn't feel like it. After some persuading I went to (the mall) with Mom. Ate supper. Did dishes, piano, wrote letters... the same old grind! I'm taking a bath and I wish someone would buy me some bath oil... I think I deserve it after this week!

July 3, 1976... Counted my money for Xmas cards and I came out \$17.00 short. After all that work! I cried for at least a half hour. I was really broke up. I did a lot of change making wrong.

Salesmanship was definitely not my station in life, and not understanding how to make change supported that belief. If, for each sale of a \$4.95 box of cards, I was given a five dollar bill, my notion of making change concluded that, since it was under five dollars, the person should receive one dollar, plus five cents to bring the 95 cents to a dollar. My only salvation came by way of checks or a patron telling me the amount of change he was due; otherwise, my blunders rampaged unnoticed, or at least, unrevealed.

Had I been of stout health, my disappointment would not have settled so deeply on my heart, but the embarrassment and mental fatigue doubled with the recollection of the energy I had expended... I felt used and humiliated "after all that work!..." and the tears flowed unrestrained.

Unasked, Mom and Dad made up the difference in the end, thus rescuing me from the depths of self-wrought despair. My work had not been in vain after all.

July 29th was my dad's last day of work as a tool and die maker at John Deere Industrial Equipment after 17 years of service. The following day, a Friday, he appeared at the shop for a final farewell.

Retirement for my dad was a rather melancholy affair; it was the end to an age, and the commencement of a new and different lifestyle. He had worked since he was 18 years old with the idea that work... productiveness... paralleled one's self-worth, which, in a society that is inter-dependent upon each other's conscientiousness, is quite useful... until a good worker retires and considers himself to be of no more importance than a bald tire. A full life of integrity on the job is all that society requires of anyone; retirement viewed in this scope is justly earned.

Dad's party was an acknowledgement of his worth to us, which grew only greater with the passing of one year to the next. His labors around the house amplified his presence, and it seemed that all he did for us were reflections of his love. Dad most certainly did not waste away in front of the television or newspaper in his retirement; work was more than ethical... it was a welcomed pastime.

We departed for Colorado the day following Dad's retirement celebration, and for awhile, it seemed as if nothing of such consequence had occurred in the family. Vacations were a summer-time tradition which, that year, meant a ten day absence from home while we skirted the southern Rocky Mountains and climbed about ancient Indian villages, nestled under precipitous overhangs in cliffs. I eagerly tested my new camera, a purchase of several weeks earlier and harvest of many months of saving, as each new scene presented itself. Initially battling with the aperture and speed controls amid haphazard focusing, I eventually began to understand the mechanics of my machine and concentrated on the actual making of photographs. Scenic vistas and close-ups became my favorite subjects, since people often cringed at the sight of a camera and I did not desire to fight derision with obstinance; flowers were far more cooperative, especially on a calm day.

A trip from home always made me appreciate the routine which was temporarily discarded. As we

began to find eastbound routes, my excitement rose almost to the point it had reached upon our departure; and while I was happy that we had gone west, I delighted in the knowledge that my own bed was hours away.

Shortly after we arrived home, Mom and I had to leave for Mayo Clinic. We had planned our vacation according to Dad's retirement date and the latter portion of time between my treatments; the close proximity of the dates made our adrenalin race, yet all appointments were easily kept.

We had reached a turning point, for the series was to be my last set of injections and miraculously, I did not feel as nauseous as in the past. After the second day of treatment, we headed home with the costly drugs. With the final three days of chemotherapy administered at home, I had a better selection of appealing foods from which to choose my infrequent snacks, and found popsicles to be a boon to my situation; each afternoon I returned from the doctor's office and raided the refrigerator.

My final treatment was administered on the 20th of August, and happened to be a memorable affair. The drug infiltrated into my arm. It hurt like crazy. The scarlet-hued drug seeped onto the flesh of my hand as well. Once the feat had been accomplished and the needle withdrawn, I did not stop to wash the red drug from my hand, but exited gratefully from the doctor's office to the summer day outside. The treatments were over! It was hard to believe! Now "the end" was reality rather than a fantastic dream beyond my ability to reach! Once home, I tried to wash the red stain from my hand. Curiously, it eluded the soap and water; I stared at the spot quizzically, wondering when it would disappear. It never did.

PAGE 114

Chapter 15 Return to School

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Return To School

August 21, 1976... got sick. It was around 11:30 p.m. Dad got up and helped me. I barfed and then my throat burned. I never had that before. Dad held me awhile... He's the best dad in the world.

The end of the treatment did not mean that I would no longer become sick or weak, and as I prepared myself to return to school, I knew it would not, at first, be an easy adjustment. The calendar did not pause for me to gain strength, however, and five days following my final injection, I went to register for fall classes. The administrators were quite understanding and tried their best to ease my nervousness, making it clear that I should come to the nurse's office for a daily afternoon snack and at any time I felt ill. I would be excused from physical education classes through a note from my doctor, and spend that hour in the library. I felt encouraged to know that I could escape the horrors of P.E., especially since I had to wear a wig and my energy level was quite below normal. Perhaps the reinitiation into junior high would not measure up to my fears, I thought, and went home relieved. Five days passed and the schools opened throughout the city.

August 30, 1976... Got up at 6:30 a.m. and got dressed. I ate some Cream-of-Rice, but not much since this is the first day of school. Left and picked up Kristi...I saw some of the kids I knew and some didn't recognize me at first. Went to my homeroom and stayed there an hour. We filled out our schedules and that's about it.

August 31, 1976... Couldn't eat breakfast very well. I was so nervous... saw Kristi after Dad dropped me off and we talked awhile before we had to go in the classes... Some kids said stuff about my wig. A girl just stared at my head and a guy behind me suggested to another kid to pull it off. He didn't, and thank God! I was pooped when I got home. I was upset, too.

It was difficult to maintain my courage after hearing such threats, but I knew that if I allowed myself to cower in fear before the aggressive words, the likelihood of my avoiding further taunts would have been reduced. That day, without saying a word, I turned a searing, humorless gaze upon my potential attackers, whose faces were forever branded in my memory. They never followed through with their suggestion, but if they had, it is my belief that they would have sustained more astonishment at my hairlessness than was their intention; word of mouth transactions possess little accuracy, and some individuals, perhaps, thought I wore a wig over my own hair for the fun of it.

I had few problems surrounding the wig after the first weeks of school, and the kids realized that I was not among the gregarious crowd, who would adorn themselves for amusement and attention, but rather sported the hairpiece through necessity. Although the "necessity" for my wig remained vague for certain individuals, other people were blatant in their curiosity; one such individual was the girl described as having "stared at my head," who wasted little time before quizzing me whether or not "that" was "a wig." I was almost relieved that she was bold enough to ask, for I hoped that, once her inquiry had been satisfied, she would cast her annoying gaze elsewhere. Masking any embarrassment I might have felt, I looked at her directly and admitted that, yes, I did wear a wig, and that I had to do so because I'd taken chemotherapy treatments for cancerous tumors in my stomach; the treatment made me lose my hair, but it would eventually return. Her gaze softened, and after assuring herself once again that my hair would grow back, turned around to face the front of the room. I heaved a sigh of relief and applauded the usefulness of honesty.

As I reflected upon the various traumas associated with my lack of hair, I was amazed at the power which people wield over the moods of others whose lives are touched by their kind or abusive words or actions. My cousin Gary, who lives next door, came over one morning before I'd donned my wig, yet due to his natural and inoffensive attitude toward my appearance, I remarked in my diary that "He saw me while I didn't have my wig on, but it didn't bother me too much tho." How different was his reaction than that of another relative who lives across the country; this relative derived immense pleasure from forcible, obnoxious treatment of children, over whom he reigned absolute bodily control albeit their distaste for his repulsive presence. I attracted his sadistic attention in his later visits since I was the youngest of our family, and so it was that on one occasion he grabbed me in an attempt to make me sit on his lap, and I, struggling to free myself from his vise-like grip, found myself wrestled to the floor, pinned beneath the stench of his armpits and unwholesome breath. The more I writhed to flee from his ugly imprisonment, the more he seemed to enjoy his power. I looked around at the group of family members who encircled the living room, but no one found anything amiss in his actions, perhaps considering the scene of no more consequence than innocent horseplay. But I knew better; this was a man whose fixation for children passed beyond benign teasing and friendly adoration; something in his touch spoke of an urge to seize and capture, to hurt and control... his touch was wrong.

I was able to feel that which the attending adults could not possibly have seen, and every ounce of my strength resisted his force. Since it was late in the evening, I wore pajamas and a bonnet, and I strained desperately to assure that the latter remained atop my head; I could not escape his paws, perhaps, but I had resolved that he should not see my baldness, pulling the bonnet closer about my head when the chance presented itself.

It seemed that the struggle was without an end. Then he suddenly plucked the shielding bonnet from my head. His action drained the fighting spirit from my mind and replaced it with humiliation. I felt as if my dignity had been raped, and sunk to the carpet in exhaustion. A heavy silence draped the conversation in the room as all eyes focused on the scene before them. My sister's eyes narrowed sympathetically, and the light-heartedness drained from her voice as she uttered a long, descending "Ohhhh!"... and fell silent. Considering the fun was over, he released my captive arms, wearing a wide and sickening grin on his face. I immediately rolled over without a word, ran from the room to the basement, where I hid behind the sectional couch.

Clasping my bent knees in a tight hug, I cried silent tears of rage and degradation, and stayed hunched in the corner for at least ten minutes. I hoped wildly that he would not pursue me, and when I

heard heavy foot-falls on the upstairs landing, I held my breath. "Bye, Laurie." His words assailed my ears like fingernails grating across a chalkboard. I hated to reply, but feared that silence on my behalf would stir a need in him to "seek and find," as if involved in some childish game; I gathered my faculties together and forced a faint "Bye" from my lips. I did not sound enthused, but it produced the desired effect. The back door closed abruptly and silence followed.

As I adjusted to school, I became more outgoing, reacquainting myself with former classmates and introducing myself to "new" students. A teacher allowed me to join the year book committee, and I was selected as one of three "Art Editors." School was actually beginning to be fun for me, and my inhibitions were swallowed by enthusiasm. My wig, though a constant awareness, was not a source of fear and nausea, though an inconvenience, was something with which I had learned to live.

While I was not "popular" at school, I was accepted and had several good friends; it was all that I had ever desired from social groups, and was as comfortable as my self-consciousness allowed. Because I had begun a new year, my parents compelled me to go to church and its related functions as well. I hoped for the best, and for a brief time I felt somewhat attuned to the group and attempted to involve myself in conversation. As the year progressed, however, the tightly woven friendships no longer peered outside of their circle, and I once again felt shunned; there were several individuals who were always friendly to everyone, yet without their support, my alienation from the group seemed as concrete as the church's foundation.

Oct. 10, 1976... Church and Sunday School. Felt really out of things.
I almost cried.

Oct. 28, 1976... Share Group tonite. Only one person said hi to me when I came in. Cried at home.

That which I found most distressing was the fact that I had to be among people who did not care for my company and simultaneously engender religious and meaningful growth through this association and interaction. I was being asked to fulfill an impossible dream. Religion was intended to be an uplifting experience; I felt only emptiness. It would be a long and solitary road, perhaps, but fulfillment would come. I would side-step the busy highway and seek my peace alone.

The changes at home were now quite visible, for Dad had transformed into an all-day phenomenon, righting wrongs, remodeling and redecorating with such diligence that, to watch him, one might well have thought his employment was for pay. Throughout the week, he retrieved me from school, and often we would stop for a snack, browsing in shops afterwards; I enjoyed these outings, especially after a wearing day. Dad was now the one who received news while it was still fresh, gaining first hand knowledge which often a child would neglect to pass on a second time to a working father; with his retirement, it was especially important that he did not feel cast out of the mainstream.

Another visible change in the household was the reappearance of my brother Todd, who, following the collapse of certain jobs and aspirations in Chicago, decided to come home to more hospitable surroundings and search for employment opportunities. Although his eyes were blackened in the figurative sense, nothing slowed him down. Each day his feet scoured the cement; no door was left unopened. If there was a job to be had in the area, he would find it.

It did not take very long for Todd's search to reach an end, and he gladly left the "street sweeping" to someone else. Working for an elevator company, as it turned out, did not have its ups and down, and my brother found himself adequately employed in a stable firm. I too reaped the benefits of his new position when he took me to the company's annual dinner. "You wouldn't believe the size of the roast and potato!" I raved in my diary; I was duly impressed. Meanwhile...

Nov. 17, 1976... Norm and Tracy went on a vacation. They may be gone a month. I guess they quit their jobs!

At the time, jobs were scarce, and most individuals were taking precautions to assure that they held secure positions and did not create any inconveniences within their company. The sudden flight on Norm and Tracy's behalf was a surprise and concern to us, yet nothing appeared to be wrong. "Maybe they are taking a honeymoon that is three years overdue," I thought, and wiped the cobwebs of apprehension from my mind; "It will sure seem strange without them on Thanksgiving, though," I reflected drearily.

My consultations at Mayo Clinic were scheduled every three months for the first year following chemotherapy, with the first check-up falling one week before Thanksgiving. The blood tests and X-ray

were the only tests I was given, which did not seem at all rigorous to me. Although blood was increasingly more difficult to extract due to the scar-tissue present in my veins from the many needles they had endured, the blood tests were not a threat to my well-being; X-rays also, were painless. In the afternoon we met with Dr. E. for the consultation and found that my health was perfectly sound. The only concern was for my lungs, which housed a small "spot" of unknown character; this would be monitored through X-rays the doctor explained, and should cause no worry. All signs were favorable; the lungs would be watched as a precaution, since those having recurrences of my type of cancer were affected in the lungs.

I was pleased with the outcome of my tests, but did not allow myself to overflow with enthusiasm. "Everything's O.K.," I wrote in my diary, followed by a happy face; beyond that, I preferred not to think about health, for exuberance seemed premature and inappropriate.

Norm and Tracy returned in time for Thanksgiving which delighted me no end. They had been absent less than a week, yet I spent little time pondering over their formerly stated intention of taking a month's vacation; practicality was probably the reason for their hasty reappearance, since smiles were in ample supply. Tracy even called to ask what to bring for the dinner, and on the day of the feast, presented a loaf of homemade pumpkin bread to my mom.

Everything seemed terrific and consequently, depression on Thanksgiving Day made no sense.

Nov. 25, 1976... Thanksgiving. I really didn't eat too much, I couldn't. I didn't feel too great. I was really depressed. Went outside to shoot some arrows. Tracy came out and we had a big talk about things...

I was becoming more susceptible to mood fluctuation as the year wore away, and knew that my depression was part of reaching adulthood. Every textbook revolving around the subject of health made such statements, underlining the fact that one's teenage years were often the most difficult to bear. Instability appeared to be the rule rather than the exception as my body and mind secured various realms of adulthood yet failed to grasp the elusive wholeness of maturity. Moments of bliss could be attacked by the shadow of torment and indecision. I wished to be the self-sufficient master of my life, yet I first needed to define my beliefs and pinpoint my destination. I wanted to make headway, to abandon the circular path of dependence and strike my own course through shaded lairs of uncertainty.

One area in which I had little uncertainty about my inevitable goal was the desire for my own home. Whenever I visited the homes of my sister or brother, I could seldom resist a long draught of intoxicating enthusiasm from the stream of ideas rampaging wildly through my head. When I was back in my room again, I surveyed the purchases which I had made through the years and happily applauded my preference for mature objects (aside from the stuffed animals) and considered myself to be well on my way toward furnishing a place of my own. Cogwheels carrying new and magnificent ideas continually worked within my consciousness and refused to slow their relentless pace. When my zest was aired to my parents, their reactions sometimes grated with the ceaseless amblings of my dreams. Trying to illustrate the fine proportions of an idea to them was like attempting to open a rusty lock; I would surrender in frustration and prepare an alternative route.

Dec. 27, 1976... Went to (the mall) with Mom. Looked at china. Saw one (pattern) I liked and wanted to start a hope chest. Told Dad and of course he didn't approve. By the time I am allowed to get a set, that design will be obsolete.

At fifteen, my likes and dislikes were well established, and I did not fear that I would one day regret the rustic pattern which caught my eye. Never before had I seen china dishes that meshed with my idea of perfection, and I revolted internally when my proposition was dashed. My dad stood firm, however, saying that it was pointless to store dishes, especially at my age; and he added, that I may change my mind about the pattern and what a shame that would be after investing in an entire set of china. I knew the situation was hopeless.

I had been through a great deal of pain and discomfort during my year of chemotherapy, and quietly resolved that I would never be subjected to such treatment again; now, in the transformation to adulthood, I felt pain and discomfort of a different incomparable variety, yet its pangs were just as valid as those which were purely physical in nature. While "growing pains" were literally a headache, I came to believe that the term more readily applied to emotional stress and frustration; growing up certainly did not boast a red carpet welcome.

Dec. 31, 1976... New Year's Eve. I spent most of it having a migraine headache, sweating and throwing up. FUN!..The Isaacsons and Nelsons were here. I guess everyone had a pretty good time. I sure didn't.

PAGE 119

Chapter 16 Divorce

"No one forgets a past hurt; after a wound heals, scar tissue remains as a subtle reminder and effectively warns the individual against potential threats of a similar nature."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Divorce

A new year had begun. And on January 15, 1977 we heard that Norm and Tracy's marriage had culminated in divorce.

It was in the paper, but Mom and Dad rarely read the divorce column; everyone else knew about the event several days before us, and we only found out through a Saturday morning call from my aunt who was naturally surprised to read the startling news. When Mom answered the phone as if nothing had happened, and continued to act likewise after Margaret's inquiry, my aunt knew that Mom was ignorant of the entire episode. "Oh, Muriel, you don't know. . ." she gasped over the telephone line, and proceeded to explain that which had prompted her call. "I'll call them," Mom said, and promised to return with an explanation as she hung up the phone. It had to be a mistake. Mom flew into the living room to scan through the Tuesday evening paper, and adjusting her eyes to the fine print, discovered their names were indeed listed among the many divorces; even the address was correct. Common decency should have allowed my parents to be alerted before the rest of the world; their pain was needless, because it could have been avoided. Mom stood, headed toward the telephone, and dialed mechanically.

The phone rang several times and Tracy answered with a cheerfulness that seemed to mock the magnitude of the situation which had just unfolded. Recovering, Mom asked, "What happened?... the newspaper... "Oh that!" Tracy returned, "we just did that for income tax purposes." Her voice echoed through a void across which no bridge would ever span, hideously jovial and self-satisfied with her own indifference toward the institution of marriage. Mom held the receiver to her ear in disbelief, momentarily transfixed by the flood of emotions which seethed violently within her; this was no time for chatter. "I'm sorry," her voice broke, "but I just can't talk now," and hung up to restore her self-control.

Marriage was one of the most significant and meaningful vows in Mom's life, pledging steadfast love to one's mate until life's end. Love and marriage were inseparable; apathy toward one would place the other element in a similar light. Marriage also stood for a wholesome sense of permanence which based itself on a firm trust in mutual, everlasting love. Divorce did not coincide with the presence of love, despite the haughty assertion by Tracy that their's was simply a means of tax evasion; truth was insensitive to one's emotions just as divorce was apathetic toward love.

An ocean of speculation washed over our house after the above knowledge had been gained, and flooded our minds with unanswered questions. It was not a general practice of the family to mistrust that which another individual proclaimed to be true; deceit often wound its fingers around the neck of one given to the preaching of lies, and while strangulation was never the outcome, the liar rarely escaped the scene unscathed. Lying had a nasty way of accumulating, and once it appeared its mark was difficult to scour away. We spoke candidly, and expected similar treatment; telling the truth seemed logical, if not easier as well, and deception as a form of entertainment was neither among our habits nor pleasures. Our family was gullible, yet this susceptibility was reigned to a certain degree by common sense; if something seemed too incredible, it was generally shelved in the back of our minds with overt skepticism, yet outwardly, our heads would bob up and down at the statement in apparent belief. Thus, a liar might have often perceived that his tall tale was accepted when, in truth, the whopper's falsity merely was not confronted. Such occurrences afforded us with hours of quiet laughter or thoughtful dissent once separated from the story teller, which spared him the embarrassment of what could have resulted from uproarious howls of laughter or fiery discord.

Divorce for income tax purposes? Mom translated Tracy's statement as a distressing, cruel fact; Dad, however, upon hearing the supposed reason, turned abruptly and stampeded out of the house with a throaty, "Bull!" as the door slammed in protest. His strong disbelief modified her belief in a fleeting instant, and Mom's eyes darkened with the remembrance of shelved glances and curt remarks which now took on an entirely different perspective. There had been warning signs, but since they lacked the customary flashing lights, escaped notice.

The thought of Norm and Tracy's divorce stunned me. Although I disagreed with the idea of procuring a divorce as a method of paying lesser taxes, I hoped for its validity. I had no grievance against Tracy or Norm, for personally, they brought only joy into my life, and if, through the divorce, I could expect to lose the companionship of one or both, I would feel a great sense of loss. I tried to avoid the negative images which clouded my eyes, and with naive and hopeful rationalization, banished divorce from my thoughts through the fact that I had never witnessed arguments or any other signs of marital instability in their presence.

Of course I saw less of Norm and Tracy with the beginning of ninth grade. Time was no longer a surplus commodity, for the homework was more difficult and life seemed to demand more of my energy. Growing up was hard; I could not hide at home in a bay of isolation, and pray that the world would pass by without casting its shadow on my life. I could not cower among shadows; I had to seek the sun... even though it was often obscured by clouds.

It wasn't always easy to seek the sun, especially in the middle of winter, and after a week of the flu... and a week of silence following the divorce. Nevertheless, I prepared myself emotionally for my return to school. My recuperation was nearly complete.

Jan 19, 1977... Will go to school tomorrow. Hopefully without my wig.
I washed my hair and styled it, and it looks good.

It was true. Everything did always happen at once.

Actually my timing could not have been better, since a new semester had begun and a new array of faces would meet my eyes in the various classes upon my entry; furthermore, it was a blessing that I had caught a nasty virus, for my reappearance would be buffered by time and the impairment of facial recollection which accompanies one's absence.

I studied myself relentlessly in the mirror. My hair was pixie-short, yet its feathered, naturally layered style would be a less disagreeable look for one my age. A gray and lifeless cast, though dominated by brown, was still visible in the persistent outcrop, attesting to the cruelties it had known before it was allowed to pursue life.

The next morning I once again surveyed my reflection. It would have been so easy to allow cowardice to overpower my intention; the wig, poised on its styrofoam head, could either be part of the present or part of the past. I looked at myself in the mirror and ran a comb through my hair; it wasn't much, but it was mine. I lowered the comb and placed it on top of the vanity. Taking a deep breath to ease my churning stomach, I turned from my reflection and permitted the wig to become a remnant of history.

Jan. 20, 1977... Break through!! First day in a year and four months that I didn't wear a wig to school or anywhere. I was so nervous when I went to school. I felt like I was bald. But I got a lot of compliments which gave me confidence. Dad got me a set of four perfumes to celebrate.

It was quite a day. When I said "hello" to my friends in the hallway, many did not recognize me; then after a brief delay, sudden recognition would cause their eyes to open wide, exploding like recoiling window shades. "Laurie. . . your own hair!" Others who had somehow missed aligning the fact that I had been the girl-with-the-wig, were astonished by the improvement and looked at me in a new light. Most surprising to me, however, were the teachers who remained unaware of my health problem, for I had assumed all of my instructors had been thus enlightened. My civics teacher soon proved that my assumption was incorrect, however, as he looked at me and proclaimed, "Your hair cut is quite an improvement." I looked at several of the nearby students, in whose eyes I caught a shared glimmer of humor. "Thank you," I replied. Still immersed in self-consciousness, an explanation seemed rather pointless, yet I marveled at his apparent belief that I had actually chosen to wear my hair in such an unflattering manner. Some people must have thought I had a putrid sense of style. The past, however, no longer seemed to matter, for it was kindled in the fires of the present, and I felt incredibly free... and irrepressibly human.

It was unreal that I had been dubious about the decision to put my wig to eternal rest, especially after the frightening reception to which I had been treated on that first agonizing day of school in August. My wig caused pain, to be certain, but without it I would have suffered more; part of me shrunk behind its netted structure of synthetic hair, and even when my own hair was ready to debut in public, the impending change suddenly seemed drastic and was accompanied by fear. I felt unprotected and vulnerable without the wig's weight upon my head. It was as if I had to relinquish my shield and stand alone and unmasked before the world's judgmental gaze.

My fear, once overcome, was replaced with ecstasy. I had undergone a transformation—a metamorphosis—which was amazing. My courage had not failed me, it had buoyed me up; now I possessed the self-confidence to reflect formerly concealed attributes because I no longer detested my appearance, nor did I have to deal with the menacing blows which it had previously evoked. I had initially planned to dispose of my two wigs in a stately burning ceremony behind the house, but after my hair returned, I no longer bore any ill will toward the inanimate hair pieces, and ended their stay at our house by giving them to the Thrift Shop. In retrospect, I knew that the wigs were great allies and had served faithfully for many grueling months. Their malignancy had expired in my eyes, for my eyes had expanded their vision.

Through the years I came to acknowledge that people generally have a foremost problem over which they grieve remorsefully; if that problem disappears, their lives do not long remain blissful ere another problem arises to disturb and provoke their happy state of mind. Often one can determine an individual's quality of life, or the quality of his values, through the problem to which he gives priority. Some people, I believe, have little more than what I label "illegitimate beefs" (or insignificant and unfounded troubles); other people dabble midway between problems and trivials, or have a flair for creating headaches through flaws in the decisive factors of life.

Personally, I felt my problems would no longer include "real" problems, for my health was returning. Nausea after meals was more of an inconvenience than a problem, and it was the only existing reminder, aside from operative scars, that attested to my harrowing experiences of the past year. If boyfriends and clothes and hairstyles were to be my only future problems, I figured that I could go through life with few ill-spent tears. I had no idea that a major bomb would drop so soon on my newly acquired happiness.

Jan 31, 1977... Norm called and said Tracy left. I was (and still am) hurt. She was a great person to know and it hurts to think I'll never see her again. I feel sorry for Norm, too. I guess Tracy was seeing a guy since summer. It's just hard to take it in. Norm came over and watched T.V.

Feb. 1, 1977... Norm's coming for supper every day this week. I'm glad. I think it will help him a little.

I was in the kitchen when Norm called, and after hearing his message from Mom, curled up in one of the chairs and cried. It was inevitable, perhaps, but I, like Norm, had attempted to impede the unstoppable through positive thought. Positive thought, however, carries no clout with respect to the alteration of another's ideas, which consequently, had already been set as solidly as if in cement.

Gradually I learned the tale behind the divorce as Norm opened up and shared his emotional burden of the past months. Because he was not a demonstrative person and enjoyed having time to himself, he was rather glad when Tracy stopped asking to accompany him on all of his walks and motorcycle rides, and through constant togetherness, needing to assure herself of his love. The marriage was more comfortable and appeared to be evolving toward his ideal; stability which came from the knowledge and acceptance of each other.

Just as Norm began to think of their union as a terrific success, Tracy lost interest. The marriage, for her, was no longer exciting, and when the blood failed to rush to her face upon Norm's appearance in a room, she felt that her love had expired. Simplicity was not enough to keep a constant fire burning, nor was a man whose love for her was steadfast and true. She had a fascination for pursuing slightly shady aspects of life, and unfortunately, an extra-marital romance filled her requirements for excitement.

In her own way I believe Tracy really loved Norm at first. Hers was a semi-possessive, urgent sort of love which stemmed from an undeniable inferiority complex. Never having felt herself to be good enough for Norm, the apparent loss of love (romance) on her behalf seemed to echo that feeling and guilt settled in to further subtract her self image. If Norm had been abusive, unfaithful, or otherwise intolerable, her failing love would have been met with sympathy, however, this was not the case. Because dying love reflected badly on her, it was necessary to procure a reason for her affair and she sought to find fault with Norm. As a result, Tracy's guilt was vented toward Norm with an argumentative guise, for if she could tempt him into a heated disagreement, perhaps her actions could be better justified.

Norm, however, detested petty grievances and refused to take the bait. This only served to further infuriate Tracy, whose ammunition had been dampened substantially. It was evident that her strategic moves had collapsed. Eventually Tracy informed my brother of her affair and said she wanted a divorce.

Norm had made a lifetime commitment which, until then, he thought was shared. The news was more than a slap in the face, it seared the heart and scorched the emotions, for trust and love were suddenly, unexplainably returned as if they were mere misfits, insubstantial and bereft of meaning. He loved her; he wanted no divorce. He wanted only to forgive and start anew, and refused to file any complaint against her. If she wanted a divorce, he told her, she would have to complete the legal paperwork; he wished no part of it.

A final attempt to save the marriage was made in November, which explained the haphazard flight that had earlier baffled us. It was a miserable mistake, yet one which was often enacted by desperate mates who, as they, thought that a honeymoon would revive faltering love. They returned soon after their departure and Tracy called my mom to ask if they would be welcome at the family Thanksgiving dinner. Norm, however, was the one who had made the pumpkin bread.

Norm was not the image of perfection; no one could be flawless in every sense of the word and remain a human being. It was unjust, however, that he had to sign his name to a divorce statement which was composed of falsehoods; at that time, no-fault divorces could not be obtained in Illinois, and it was simply assumed that the individual who sought the divorce was the one who had undergone mental or physical injury.

As if the court proceedings alone were not humiliating enough, Tracy continued to weave a network of deception around their entire relationship which touched family members, co-workers and friends. A happy charade was displayed for our benefit, complete with a story that she had decided to take classes at a local college. There were no classes, of course, although Dad once shuttled her to one, thereby using his ignorance and trust to transform himself and others into fools.

After the divorce had been finalized, she remained living in the same house with Norm for several weeks. The magnanimous proportions of marital collapse had reached our ears, but the full story was as yet untold; we never knew of the unpleasant facets which must have pervaded their last days in residence. The one shred which bears repeating was that on the final day, Tracy said she had a sore throat and would stay home from work, only to thread another deceptive claim into a tapestry of lies when she, with her lover's aid, moved out during Norm's absence. Upon his return he found the house stripped of all her possessions, including those stipulated in the divorce document, and the best of the two cars. It was easier to deceive than to confront; Tracy was never seen again, although a lone belonging mistaken for her own would occasionally find its way into Norm's mailbox. Things would similarly disappear without a word; the dog, whose purchase was Tracy's request, had not been taken in her exodus from the house. One evening, Norm drove home to find the dog missing. After a rigorous search, he returned home empty handed and without a clue as to its state or location, only to receive an explanation from a neighbor that Tracy had fetched the dog earlier in the day, leaving no note of her action.

Norm had never spoken to anyone during the trying months because, in his words, "it was such a mess" and he didn't wish to involve the family. However, the amount of information that had been gained afterward served to thoroughly enrage my parents and soon all of Tracy's good traits seemed to vanish from her character slate. Through her lies, many people had been wronged; moreover, the institution of marriage had been mocked and defiled before my parents, which further demeaned her image in their eyes. To have said that Mom and Dad were angry would have been a drastic understatement.

I, too, was deeply hurt, and watched the various pangs within Norm as the realities of the matter seeped into the crevasses of his mind. I ached for Norm and for myself; I hurt even for my parents. I hurt, but was not angry; at first it was difficult for me to understand my parents' rage, because I had never seen in Tracy the venomous, fork-tongued creature to which she had changed in my parents' minds. I disagreed with her actions, to be certain, yet I knew she still possessed redeeming and benevolent qualities which had made her so likeable from the beginning. It was to her goodness that I clung, defending her before my parents with a vengeance.

Tracy was a sister and a best friend to me; I could not simply stop loving her. My attachment to her was deeply rooted, not merely because of who she was to me; she was the first person with whom I shared my feelings, thereby creating for me a closeness which I had never before encountered. For several months I fantasized about her, hoping she would call or write; I wondered if we could secretly meet and be able to talk, or go places together. Gifts which she had given to me became treasures, breathing life into her memory. My parents began to think that I had embellished her memory with an aura of idolatry.

While I did not feel I had placed Tracy on a pedestal, I did believe that I had an obligation to uphold her good traits and hope something would happen which could reverse the damage already done. I scoured my daily mail with cautious hope, thinking "Maybe today I'll hear from her"; yet nothing came of that hope. My brother, Todd, was the only person to whom Tracy corresponded after the divorce, which perhaps reflected her inability to face those of us who had known her quite well. She had seen comparatively little of Todd throughout her years of married life, and it was therefore rather curious that she should choose him as the recipient of a note of explanation and regret. At any rate, she stated in her letter that she could no longer live with Norm, though he had been nothing but a good, kind, and loving man; further, she hoped that "Norm's parents" would be open-minded and welcome him back into the family.

Norm was welcomed into the family; indeed, his welcome had never worn thin, despite our dearth of information and surplus of astonishment to hear of the divorce. Time and conversation opened our lidded eyes.

Finally, I accepted the fact that she was never going to write, that she would never see my real hair, that she was as gone for me as if blown from the surface of the earth. I accepted, also, that simplicity and love did not fulfill her needs and that supposedly shared goals, including frugality right down to the cheap brand of syrup, were a farce. I perceived Norm to be the ideal man, or the closest man thereto, and felt that Tracy would later regret her hateful actions as she had regretted other misguided words in her youth; she knew that Norm was a loner and possessed agoraphobic tendencies... she knew he was willing to work hard for comparatively small rewards; he had no hidden vices or abusive characteristics... and though he was well built and strong, the similarity to his ancestral Vikings ended where their violence began. I realized that while the kettle on the home hearth boiled feverishly, her love was secure and untouchable, but when the fire was reduced to coals and the kettle could be taken from the hearth without scorching her hands, love was polluted by commonality. The need to search for her lost flame seized her mind, yet, because she knew not what she truly sought, her search would continue forever, leaving behind her an insubstantial and endless heap of charred ashes.

I had vastly overemphasized my importance in Tracy's eyes. It was incredibly humbling to be rejected so completely; I thought of Norm and how much worse it must have been for him. Death and divorce were indeed similar, yet in some ways, the latter was more painful. Divorce, while lacking the ultimate permanence of death, is based on the heart-rending fact that one's love is no longer enough, and that he has been left by his mate's choice rather than nature's will and circumstances. Though her love for Norm had vanished with the disappearance of heart palpitations and romantic excitement, I thought I deserved at least a letter of farewell for all of the good times we had shared. I wondered if she had merely upheld a charade of good humor and enjoyment through our excursions; yet, I thought, she would not have invited me to share her free time if she resented my presence.

It takes many hours to develop a friendship, and even so, one's knowledge of the other can never be complete. While compatibility opens friendship's door, love and its by-products, understanding and honesty, must co-exist as its sustaining force; lacking love, growth stagnates and generally heralds a hurtful parting of the two individuals. If love truly exists in one's mind, however, the love itself cannot cease abruptly even though the other's actions or beliefs are radically contrary to his own; the beloved part of the individual still remains, residing side by side with his formerly concealed, unsavory propensities.

My acceptance of Tracy's entire personality paralleled extreme disappointment. With no prompting from my parents, I looked upon her new lifestyle and final interaction with the family and Norm as disagreeable and despaired that the circumstances would not have been different. Her image, though

tainted, never shattered in my mind, and for a time, I kept loving... and mourning... the person who I had believed her to be. Disappointment alone could not eradicate the lovely memories spanning three years.

After suffering a substantial loss, it sometimes seems impossible that a replacement of equal or greater value could ever be found, and attempts to compare the incomparable often end in frustration. If emotional pain is not allowed to stagnate within the inner being and clog the mind, a person can be open to others without radiating vulnerability. No one forgets a past hurt; after a wound heals, scar tissue remains as a subtle reminder and effectively warns the individual against potential threats of similar nature. Only a person lacking the will to overcome and grow beyond past anguish is truly mortally wounded, for his wound is not only self-inflicted, but also infested with litter long decayed.

I had to direct my thoughts and energy toward positive elements in life, accepting the past and adapting to the present. The future was no longer the shining star it had been in my childhood, for it was uncertain and impenetrable. Short-term goals were more easily realized. The future had a nasty habit of rearranging one's plans; life changed so fast that it left one groping for stability as if spun furiously on the head of a top. Disliking such emotional turbulence, I tried to buffer life's hurtful potential by dealing with each day as the unique parcel of hours and events it proved to be. Adaptability was definitely one of my more useful characteristics.

With Tracy's departure, I had not consciously determined to find a replacement for my severed emotional attachment. I knew such behavior on my behalf would not only have been uncharacteristic of me but futile as well; people were not like spark plugs. However, as the months progressed, the hole wherein Tracy's memory resided slowly filled and was replenished, just as a mined crater will be reclaimed by nature and gradually become a thing of beauty rather than an eternally gaping hole of waste. I was filled with strength and confidence from budding health and vitality; I was filled with the undying love of my family, but more than all else, I discovered that, with Norm, I had in reality, lost virtually nothing.

Mar. 15, 1977... I went to Norm's house and we made blueberry pancakes for supper. We talked about a lot of things.

It was a joy to be invited to Norm's house. We did not chafe each other's nerves; conversation came effortlessly, yet silence was no menace. I took pleasure in his neatly arranged house and applauded his various purchases which adorned the walls or were placed about the rooms. With his mind bent on improvement, the house mirrored a flare for design and decoration as well as Norm's character. The living room was a retreat of perpetual autumn, of golden, rust and wood, of tranquility and restiveness. To be at my brother's house was to be at ease, and I readily welcomed his invitations to visit as they became more frequent.

As my life took on the complications which seemed interwoven with the stage of adolescence, I became increasingly aware of the necessity for peace in existence, and felt myself to be extremely fortunate to have Norm as a valued companion. My frustrations needed verbal release and an understanding listener who was sufficiently detached from my daily routine (home, school, etc.) to reply in an entirely objective fashion. It became evident that Norm and I shared a bond which reached deeper than an ordinary brother/sister relationship, for understanding and compatibility was the foundation from which our relationship grew.

"It was a note scribbled on an intentionally crumpled piece of paper. No purchased card could have captured the essence of that note, or of the crumpled course my life must take."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ninth Grade

Through the years I began to observe the mannerisms and personalities around me with fascination, watching conflicts with casual objectivity as rivals floundered in their own short-sightedness. I watched also, as people mocked the less fortunate, who unknowingly attracted such treatment like a magnet through their own erring behavior or ungainly actions. Some people were simply difficult to abide; often those individuals did not even realize their high "avoidance factor" despite continual, and sometimes abrasive, repulsion. I observed the tensions between parents and children as the latter reached the restless age of rebellion and need for individual freedom. I could understand both sides of many arguments or confrontations, and often empathized with each opinion.

Through surveying the world from a distance, I learned invaluable lessons. I hoarded reactions to various personalities and situations and studied them intently in retrospect. In gathering such information as human responses, I began to realize why I disliked certain people and ways of life, whereas previously, I had merely felt inexplicable disgust or anger. More than anything, I learned that people generally did what they wished to do, barring few exceptions, and true kindness was a rare commodity. That which I saw was real; it was not an impressionistic ideal of life, for personal interaction could bring dejection as well as elation. Far from being cynical, I came to believe one was his own best friend. I remember that I began to feel sorry for Todd. He seemed lonely, separated by a societal barrier which was invisible to him. Unaware of the reason for this unseen yet impenetrable wall, Todd sought to find suitable ways around it, which consequently resulted in forming my most pungent memory of my oldest brother through its emotional impact on me. Although I was yet in grade school, the incident was unforgettable, and forever marked my heart.

It was a blustery winter evening when Norm and his friend were preparing to depart for his house. With an air of determination, Todd informed them, "You're not getting away from me this time," and set about dressing himself to meet the harsh winter chill. Meanwhile, tired of waiting, the two dismissed the scene for their destination as Todd continued to dress.

Once fitted for the elements, clad in his orange snow-suit and boots, he trudged up the silent, snow-blanketed avenue as I watched through the kitchen window. Before reaching the house, he stopped and resolutely turned toward home, not desiring to undergo further pursuit. I felt my heart break for him as my eyes welled up with tears. How lonely the world could be! I decided in an instant to meet him at the door, clothed in my winter coat.

Together we took a long walk in the snow, heading down a wooded path to the quiet street below. We spoke of many things, gently laying the foundation for a night that I would never forget. I believe our stroll, although spurred through loneliness, was the most relaxing interlude I have ever shared with Todd.

As time progressed, the gap between our personalities widened. When engaged in a serious conversation, I found the time thus spent to be exhilarating, for Todd's intelligence was of great merit; it was increasingly difficult, however, for me to accompany him to various functions as I failed to understand the reasoning which prompted some of his actions and behavior. Desiring to blend with the crowd rather than direct its attention, I was flushed with embarrassment at any mannerism which was apart from the ordinary spectrum of social conduct as I saw it to be.

Everyone views life through his own eyes, and although the ideas of individuals coincide at various points, it is virtually impossible to assume that which is "right" for someone else at a given point in time. This was another area in which Todd and I differed considerably, yet here I was able to comprehend the motive behind his good intentions. Because Todd declined invitations to attend outings early in life, he later found he was no longer asked to join in a group's activities. As a result, he eventually forced himself to become involved in multiple organizations thereby making up for those he had missed; he evidently enjoyed the bustle of activity which the groups provided, and was soon absent from the house nearly every night.

When Todd saw I was declining offers to attend parties or dances, he thought I was following similar actions which had introduced alienation into his life, and I would one day discover that I was not only alone, but lonely.

Mar. 23, 1977... (A boy) called and asked if I could go to the dance at his school. When I called him back, he was really discouraged and mad that I didn't want to go. But, man, he's so gross! Never ever combs his hair. How sick. Todd really lectured me on how I should go 'cuz he didn't when he was my age, but I can't relive his life! He makes me mad sometimes.

He pressured me to accept these invitations despite my reasons for desiring to stay at home. Consequently, it made me become leary to divulge any plans to him for fear I would find myself in a situation that I detested; his arguments were fierce and unyielding, and I sought to avoid them whenever I could. Moreover, I wanted to form my own decisions and began to resent such stubborn, relentless interference. I believe it is better to "let be" than to stray beyond one's bounds into the gray and scarred battle ground where individual decisions are waged and won; it is prudent to counsel, but never so to force.

Todd was unbelievably innovative. He could construct posters and cards having multiple moving parts without losing any degree of his meticulous patience. The quality of perseverance was a further boon to his imaginative efforts, and he created countless fascinating objects dating back to my earliest memories. I received a greeting from Todd during my long stay at Mayo. It was a note scribbled on an intentionally crumpled piece of paper. No purchased card could have captured the essence of that note, or of the crumpled course my life must take. Todd always had time to take a walk or to play a game. He never forgot a birthday... with gifts he was equally creative. One birthday I received a huge balloon (a factory reject) which was a source of awe and amazement for us all. We filled it with the exhaust end of the vacuum cleaner since no one had lungs with the capacity for inflating that monstrous thing. Another year, short of funds but long on loving thoughts, he collected a wide sampling of floral and tree seed pods. For me, that meant endless possibilities in creating.

Toward the end of 9th grade, I had gained a fair amount of confidence. I was amazed to note the way in which the improvements in my health and appearance affected my self-worth; I no longer felt like a helpless child clinging to my mother's skirt or father's pants leg for protective solace. I was less reserved, feeling that my opinions were just as valuable as those of others, and decisions, though sometimes tempered by my parents, belonged to me. Life was not merely passing by; I possessed both the ability and the will to actively pursue the means toward a hopeful end. The variables along the way would affect the resulting success or failure, but that, I knew, was simply a part of life's uncertainty.

Academically I improved as my physical strength increased. In reflection, it was obvious that my tutor had not over-taxed my capabilities during the previous year; I was grateful that she had not, for the nature of my illness was such that I was forever unsure of the state of my health. Upon my reappearance at school the extra effort required for 9th grade curriculum initially demanded more of my time and mental exertion; when I finally redeveloped my listening, comprehension and study techniques, however, I felt less hampered by the work load.

In addition to the basics, I was able to take a course in woodworking. Happily, I was not the only girl to have fostered such a "sexually uncharacteristic" whim, and the two of us felt less ridiculous seated among our masculine counterparts, knowing our endeavor was not entirely foreign to the minds of other females. My apprehension was unfounded, I discovered, for in time I saw that my work exceeded that of many of my classmates; I was more particular, concerned with the appearance of the finished product and willing to direct effort toward the perfect, rather than haphazard, completion of a project. Moreover, I had a natural love of wood and wished to acquire certain skills therewith, reasoning that one day I would rebuild or at least refinish antique pieces for my own home. I was no advocate of women's liberation; I simply found interest in many activities and subjects. I had to prove nothing to anyone but myself.

After finishing a class project to my satisfaction, I began earnestly on a project of my own design. That which I determined to make was a cedar chest, and looked on excitedly as the instructor pulled a stack of cedar boards from the storage closet and placed them on one of the work tables. The first course of action, he said, was to glue the smaller boards together, after which the uneven width would be surgically altered in the planer. I noticed several imperfections (worm-eaten tunnels) in certain boards, but the teacher was unmoved. "Those can be filled with wood filler," he replied, walking off. I gazed after him doubtfully wondering how I could trust a man who, in one hour, had to coach his 25 students through their 25 different projects. Nevertheless, I started my work, trying to envision a lidded box in the stack of wood which had probably been intended for a bonfire.

Meanwhile, other school-related activities gathered momentum as the academic year drew ever closer to its end. As one of the art editors for the yearbook, I was instructed to design several covers for possible use. My effort resulted in developing four options ranging, in my opinion, from "nearly philosophical" to "cute"; I placed my endeavors on the desk of the teacher whose spare time was choked with yearbook duties. My designs would not necessarily appear on the yearbook cover, but I was satisfied that I had succeeded in creating original ideas.

Mar. 31, 1977... We had a band concert in the aud. and during the middle, Mr. C. got up and read off the nominee for HALL OF FAME and I was one of 'em! (A friend of mine) wasn't tho, and she didn't even congratulate me.

April 20, 1977... I was nominated for American Legion! I didn't really know 'til homeroom, when we were to vote on it!! (I voted for me!!) There were 5 boys and 5 girls altogether.

Mr. Cox took a photograph of me for the special American Legion section of the yearbook so that my grotesque photo, taken when I still had no hair, would not, at least, appear in the separate section. I was relieved and quite thankful to my understanding instructor.

April 21, 1977... Mr. C. said my design would be used for the cover of the yearbook!!

Perhaps all of the previous events were too much for me; I was suddenly ill with migraine headaches in a manner which I had never before encountered.

April 26, 1977... Got a migraine headache at 5th period. Didn't go home though. Called Dad when school let out, but there was no answer, so I had to walk home. It was hard, but I made it.

April 27, 1977... At 2nd period I got another migraine. It took a half hour to get Dad 'cuz he was outside. Finally I got home. I felt bad!!

April 28, 1977... You won't believe this! I didn't! Well, I got another migraine today right after lunch. Dad got me again. Slept most all day.

After three days of head-wrenching, I decided to play it safe and recuperate at home. I found I became paranoid concerning the multiple headaches, and feared that my worry would result in more pain.

A week later.

May 5, 1977... Got a migraine AGAIN!!!!!!... Dad got a prescription for me and it said to take two capsules, so I did and a half hour later, I got all numb...

How well I recall that incident. I was seated at my place at the dinner table after having swallowed (miraculously) the pills, when I suddenly was immersed in a bath of incredible, yet unfounded hilarity. I began to snicker, then burst into a cascade of inexplicable laughter. My family looked up from their plates and, because of humor's rather contagious nature, broke into bewildered smiles and tried to detect the source of my behavior. "Really..." I replied, "I don't know why I'm laughing..." Then, just as rapidly as it had begun, the laughter ceased and I was convulsed in a fit of tears. It was embarrassing to me for I had no control over my emotions, and agitated, I fled from the room. At length I was able to quench my strange and unbidden tears while Dad sat beside me with a worried look on his face.

Afterward I marveled at a drug's ability to produce such startling effects, yet I was equally startled by the fact that some people knowingly swallowed pills to acquire mind-altered states of being. Such was not my goal in life; self-control meant too much to my inner presence to eradicate reality.

A week and a half later I had another migraine. It was full-blown; I even had to vomit. I didn't, however, take another pill. Lack of control was much worse than the presence of pain.

May 18, 1977... School. I got a trophy for doing the Vision cover and also a certificate for (submitting) "A Friend" in "Accent on Ink." Great!!

June 1, 1977... The 9th graders got yearbooks today. Everyone liked 'em... Dad got me and helped me take my cedar chest home.

June 2, 1977... Last full day!! We signed yearbooks all day.

The last day of school was always fun. It was a time for reflection and reliving past events, and while in the midst of such activity, one classmate turned to me and casually asked, "Laurie, you had cancer, didn't you?" "Yes," I replied, and briefly related that which had occurred to me, including my loss of hair. At one point in the conversation, I noticed the teacher staring widely at me, as if in disbelief. "You look healthy now," his face seemed to say. After the conversation turned to a different subject, the teacher sat down on my desk and asked more details of my experience. Suddenly, he began lamenting his marital difficulties and personal problems. It was my turn to listen in disbelief; it seemed odd to be selected as a teacher's confidant. Although aside from teacher and student we were both human beings, I did not feel comfortable with the conversation. I tried to react as an unsurprised, objective listener; perhaps having been subjected to pain, he felt comfortable and rather compelled to tell me of his own. It was something I never forgot, nor did I encounter such circumstances again.

The end had come of what, at first, had been an emotionally draining year. I had experienced much kindness and cruelty, pleasure and pain, yet I persevered through all the trials and returned all of the smiles... and at last, the positive outweighed the negative.

As I left the hallways of the junior high school which had, only three years before, appeared a massive array of corridors, I welcomed summer with customary gladness and reveled in the freedom that greeted my steps. My exit was not saluted with lengthy accomplishments or popular admiration, and that did not mar my happiness; I cared neither for applause nor popularity. I knew, however, that I had done my best and touched several lives; making an indelible impression on someone's mind was indeed the highest of compliments that I could have merited.

Directions

Directions are disturbing,
At least they are to me,
How anyone ever follows them
Is more than I can see.

They say to take notch "B"
And slide it into "F"
Or else to take the "right" side
And fold it to the "left."

Then in opening a band-aid
They say to pull a string,
Well I could pull and pull and pull all day
And never reach the thing.

And say you want some Pringles,
Preferably for Brunch,
But you couldn't get them open
Until it's time for lunch!

Directions are a problem,
(I think to everyone),
And it's comforting to know
I'm not the only one!

Lauren Isaacson 9th Grade

"I felt as if my heart would burst, for never had I experienced such profound closeness with nature. . . My sense of reality had heightened and every inch of my body was alive with incomparable sensations."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Summer 1977

The middle of June was slated as the beginning of our summer vacation, and on the 15th, we departed for Colorado. It was a grand trip, for Dad had promised an extensive vacation following the debilitating chemotherapy treatments, and told me that we would go anywhere I wished. My choice was not a difficult one; I had always loved the west and desired to see both "old sights" and new. The resulting journey made its first stop in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, but since we had been to the area numerous times, we did not tarry long; the day after hiking up a small hill and splashing barefoot in an icy mountain stream, we drove along Trail Ridge Road and headed north to the Tetons and Yellowstone National Park.

Yellowstone was a source of much fascination, yet prior to our arrival at the park itself, a short ramble in the roadside brush (for the purpose of taking a better scenic photograph) led to the discovery of an entire moose carcass. I quickly hoisted the head into the air, and positioned it before my own, whereupon my mom excitedly captured my lack of respect for the dead on film. Unable to relinquish my antlered scull, my parents agreed to stow it in the trunk. The weathered skull had been callously separated from its body without last rites or a solitary tear, but, driving from the area, I did not really think the moose would mind.

The next day, after scouting past numerous bubbling geysers, I bought a moose charm in a souvenir shop. I wished to commemorate my find of the previous day (and perhaps, subconsciously placate the moose's spirit if it had suffered any ill-will toward my action). We also decided to eat lunch at that time since the restaurant was in close proximity to the renowned "Old Faithful," and being so close, had ample time to finish our food before it again blew its steam skyward. Lunch arrived soon following our order, yet time began to drift away as Mom delved into her mountainous chef's salad. It was obvious that we would miss the eruption of Old Faithful if direct action was not taken; Dad and I said "good-bye" to Mom and dashed on to the extensive patio where other visitors were gathering. Eyes were riveted on the strangely steaming mound; a few men checked their wrist-watches, as if doubtful of the geyser's punctuality. No one was disappointed. Exactly one hour after its last appearance, a mad bubbling issued from the previously silent pit and multiplied its violent surges until frothing liquid shot into the sky. People oohed and ahed and pointed fingers. Cameras clicked furiously.

When the show was over, the crowd disbursed and Dad and I returned to the restaurant to fetch Mom. Fifteen minutes had elapsed; she would probably be waiting at an empty table, nursing her glass of water to alleviate boredom and nervousness. We turned into the restaurant and couldn't believe our eyes. There was Mom, still poised over a fair amount of salad, eating diligently; "the salad wouldn't leave," I thought. At least she wasn't bored during our absence.

Mom eventually finished her salad and we resumed our sightseeing. Yellowstone Park was an intermingling of beauty and oddity, and as a result I used a fair amount of film. The animals, though wild, were close at hand and I was able to see buffalo and elk to my fulfillment. After two days we left the park and headed into Montana and Washington, stopping to see the Grand Coulee Dam for my dad's benefit. I was not impressed and did not care to linger over the massive system of water retention, yet the trip was not entirely my own and I therefore tried to suppress my disinterest.

The following day proved more to my liking as we once again headed into a park. I had never before seen Mt. Rainier and was truly awed to view the spectacle created by the superior snow-capped mountain. Though surrounded by other mountains and lushly forested valleys, Mt. Rainier dominated one's attention like a bejeweled lady among serfs.

June 23, 1977... Went into Rainier. At this one place this jay would come down and take a peanut out

of Dad's hand (in mid-air). Went to Paradise (visitor center) and hiked up near Mt. Rainier. I never felt so good in my life. Had to walk through snow in around 3-5 places. It was real neat.

The day was the highlight of the entire vacation. Separating myself from my parents, I sped up the trail, spurred onward through a boundless source of energy and excitement. I felt as if my heart would burst, for never had I experienced such a profound closeness with nature. I enjoyed the beauty, but basked in the ecstasy which swelled from within. My sense of reality had heightened and every inch of my body was alive with incomparable sensations. I listened to the world, to the breeze tossing the fragrant pine; I absorbed every detail and mourned the journey's end, whereupon the noise and clutter of civilization would scour away the feeling which I so desired to prolong. Seldom was I entranced by emotion; I slowed my pace and then stopped to breathe a final breath of tranquility before surrendering my blissful state of mind to the realm of the ordinary.

Retracing my steps, I eventually met Mom and Dad ascending toward the direction I had climbed. "There's quite a bit of snow up there," I told them. Sporting only tennis shoes and sweaters, they quickly re-routed their steps and chose a down-hill trek; they had exercised enough for one day anyway. The three of us ambled down the mountain-side, stopping once for a snowball fight which could not be resisted. It was amazing how rapidly one's mental state changed with the introduction of various sensations or the presence of other people. My previous feeling was now only a memory, firmly implanted, yet miles from my grasp. It was a gem, secure in my mind, and I knew that I was somehow wealthier than I had been.

Two days after Mt. Rainier, we were driving down the Oregon coastline. At several intervals we stopped so I could test the breakwater beneath my bare feet. The shore was beautiful, despite the gray clouds and ocean mist that eventually obscured the farthest cliffs from view. I seemed to be walking in a colorless world where all things grew only darker or lighter shades of silver gray. The water was icy and forbade me enter; even the foam which rushed up the sand to enrobe my toes was too frigid to withstand, and sent me sprinting from the constant waves to higher ground.

The following day we continued through Oregon to Crater Lake, a magnificent sapphire body of water which left my eyes agape; then, between destinations, we met a trucker who took us on one of his lumber runs. As we mosied down the long state of California, we toured a lumber company and then were awed by the magnificent stands of Sequoia Redwood trees which soared above all else with an aura of statuesque grandeur. The giants were some of the oldest living things on earth, and it seemed incredible and obscene that anyone should desire to cut them down for timber. Compared to the trees, my life seemed a mockery, a dwarfed and highly insignificant thing. All did not depreciate with age.

Our stay in Santa Monica encompassed eight nights and as many days, as we enjoyed a variety of sights. We stayed with relatives who knew the area quite well and therefore provided a guided tour through some of the attractions, including Universal Studios, Huntington Gardens, Will Roger's Ranch, and shopping mall, and of course, Disneyland. No trip to the west coast would be complete without a jaunt to the latter amusement park and we made ours an all-day affair. On our own we traveled to another amusement park, Magic Mountain, which boasted a vast array of rides better suited to my suicidal whims. At the day's end, my dad and I had been whipped, jolted, plunged, riveted and lost as many stomachs as cats have lives to have satisfied my boldest cravings for at least a month. Mom, as usual, was most content to sit and watch. Had she indulged in some of the wilder rides, I fear she would have at best, suffered from acute hoarseness and at worst, been carried from the park on a stretcher.

Leaving California, we stopped at one of their famous "Date Farms" and to my utter disappointment, saw no date trees. At least the place did not charge admission or try to plaster a revolting bumper sticker on the car while shopping within the "supermarket."

Skirting the southern route through Arizona on our way home, I discovered the meaning of "hot" when referring to weather. At 112 degrees I was extremely pleased that we had an air-conditioned car; ventures into the sunshine were like tiptoeing through a blast furnace. Sweat dried on the face, forming a sticky glaze with the dust floating on the hot air currents. I would not have been surprised to see spit dry before hitting the ground.

Two days into the blistering heat we stopped at White Sands National Monument. The sand was so blindingly white that attempts to gaze at the drifts without sun-glasses were hopeless endeavors. On that particular day I was unable to walk bare-foot on the fine sand due to its scorching heat, and we finally decided to duck into the visitor center before shriveling into sun-ripened prunes.

The trip was nearing its end, and I looked forward to sleeping in my own bed and investigating my mail. Even restaurant food lacked its excitement as the days progressed, which was a definite sign that I had turned my thoughts toward home. There was one notable exception, however.

July 11, 1977... Stayed at a real neat motel... and ate at its restaurant. Swam for an hour and half. After awhile, I started talking to a guy in the pool with me. After awhile we saw a drunk guy! It was funny. Then he asked if I wanted something cold to drink (an RC COLA). We talked awhile after and Mom made me come up finally. (a sad face) He was from Dallas, TX.

The evening was memorable for my mom also, who, for a short time observed our conversation at a pleasant distance. Since I had removed my contacts for fear of losing them in the swimming pool, my vision was rendered useless with regard to recognizing faces and perceiving detail at distances greater than one foot. Therefore, when my "friend" excused himself from the area, I sought my mom's visual acuteness and asked cautiously, "Mom. . . what's he look like?" I was relieved to discover that she found the guy attractive, and settled into a pool-side chair as Mom retired to the room, noticeably humored by my inquiry.

Such brief encounters augment confidence, for therein one is able to discover his attractiveness to the opposite sex. Ours was the type of interaction which was fleetingly romantic, yet bereft of expectations; each of us knew the conversation would last no more than several hours and end with a smile and a reluctant farewell. I believe the intrinsic briefness created the comfortable atmosphere, for when one knows he shall never see someone again, he leaves behind the fear of peer groups and personality changes which often accompany a better knowledge of the other.

The next morning when I recalled the previous evening, I realized with horror that if I saw the boy, I would not recognize him and hoped for a clean escape from the motel. To my relief, I saw no one who remotely resembled a male teenager, and dismissed myself having only faceless memories of a pool-side conversation and a cool RC Cola.

The family vacation was over after four weeks, and we were all glad to be home. The trip was fun, yet it served to strengthen the heart strings attached to our oak trees and modest house, and though familiarity of itself was not love, it certainly did not subtract from love's essence.

The remainder of the summer was spent in an easy, enjoyable manner. I whiled away the hours on my bicycle or indulged in one of my crafts; I met with friends from school, and stayed at my sister's house for one week. Junior High School was a memory, pasted between the pages of a scrapbook. Even my unfinished cedar chest had, by summer's end, found its way into the garage attic.

The last days of freedom melted under the hot August sun, and I began to wonder how three months could have escaped so soon. I once again traveled to Mayo Clinic and returned with good spirits. The latter part of the same week Todd moved to a distant Illinois town to accept a position as a woodworking teacher for ninth grade students. The wheel of change had begun to turn, and "home" meant three people instead of four.

PAGE 137

Chapter 19 Tenth Grade

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tenth Grade

There were no miraculous suggestions, books, pills or other devices which could have properly prepared me for the onset of growing pains. My High School years, more than any other time in my life, proved to be the toughest emotional battleground. As I grew physically, mentally and socially, my emotions were constantly fluctuating, eventually creating a finely-honed, razor-sharp edge on which all interaction was carved into a deep and memorable impression in my mind.

Tenth grade came as somewhat of a shock. It reminded me of the terrors of seventh grade, for I had a different locker, an entirely foreign building and a new and larger mass of faces to which I was supposed to become accustomed. The lunch room appeared enormous to my nervous stomach, and among the flood of students pressed before the snack counter, I considered myself lucky to have made it to the front to order. Once I had my lunch, usually a long john and orange drink, in my possession, I turned reluctantly to search in desperation for a familiar face with whom I could sit and more pleasantly pass the time. If I saw no one, I would find a seat apart from the various congregations and open a book as if trying to read. While I ingested my donuts the words danced meaninglessly across the page beneath my unseeing eyes; insecurity prevented me from attempting to seek my acquaintances just as pride demanded that my attention be riveted to a book.

The classes were not as distressing as lunch time, with the possible exception of physical education, since they were governed by one's teachers rather than oneself and generally did not reflect complete anarchy. I was much more relaxed in a routine setting wherein nothing was left to chance; I had no anxiety toward finding a seat, since one's initial choice usually lasted the entire semester, nor was conversation a worry because it was not permitted after the beginning of class anyway, and if I failed to unearth rare gems of humor, silence did not endure so far as to become embarrassing.

I disliked negative attention and therefore often neglected to raise my hand during class discussions. Of course, if the truth shall be made known, I so despised directing another's gaze, that virtually any attention was, from my point of view, "negative." Therefore, if I raised my hand, I wished to be certain my statement was correct and sometimes went as far as writing my answer on paper so that I would not stumble on my own tongue, as was my habit in a stressful situation. Another habit, however, sometimes impeded my valiant intentions. That, by name, was day-dreaming. Having an innate stubbornness within me, I would foster ill-will toward subjects which, despite my greatest effort, I failed to grasp; enter, day-dreaming. Such was the case with an "Honors English" class which I made the mistake of accepting. The class was basically the duplicate of "regular" tenth grade English but wielded a decidedly tougher grading scale and a faster pace. Only one of the three teachers who taught the over-sized class had sensible expectations of the students and a personality which reflected no favoritism among her subjects; unfortunately, I was lucky enough to study under her guidance only the last semester. The first semester I fell under the instruction of one of the other women; she was single, opinionated and sharp-tongued, and had the habit of dissecting the least complicated story into shreds of symbolism and hidden meaning which would have amused the authors to no end had they been alive to contest her brave statements. The teacher had no room for differing opinions; the only way to succeed on tests was to regurgitate that which she had proclaimed as having relevancy or truth. Reflecting on her marital status, I quickly understood.

Seated in English class one day, I found myself lured from the discussion momentarily to exercise some uninvited thought. When I returned my awareness to the classroom the teacher was looking around the room for a volunteer to answer her last question. I decided to raise my arm to reply, and she nodded that I should speak. After giving my answer, the teacher studied me indifferently and remarked, "That answer has already been given." I shifted uneasily in my chair, deciding to follow the lesson more closely. Several questions later, another multiple-answer question was presented to the class. Hands went up around the room and answers rushed into the teacher's ears. A favorite student raised her hand to offer a reply, and when bidden to speak, her answer was a virtual carbon copy of the previous speaker's. The instructor smiled at her pleasantly. "That answer has already been mentioned, however, since it is of such consequence, I'm glad you repeated it." I stared in disbelief and knew that I had no hope of winning under conditions as deplorable as those I had just witnessed.

With the initiation into high school, I decided to attempt a routine as near to normal as my system would allow. The last thing I desired was a complication which would separate me from other students, so I elected to store cookies in my locker to provide the extra energy I sometimes required to alleviate an infuriated stomach or an aching head between meals. I tried to forego my snacks entirely, but decided my action was unwise after repeated and quite audible rumblings of ignored hunger pangs during class. Because the consumption of my snack would occasionally swallow an extra minute of my time, I procured a note from the school administrator that officially excused a late entry into class. I rarely needed the note, and the teachers knew I was not the type to abuse such a privilege; the system worked very well.

I felt more "normal" physically than I had for many months, and decided that I should try to negotiate

a hated physical education class even though I would not have had to do so given my health history. Although it was tempting to avoid the issue altogether by procuring a medical excuse from my doctor, I did not wish to invite failure through cowardice on my behalf. Too often I watched people use health problems to buffer a difficult situation or create an unwarranted advantage when in actuality, their only lameness was the excuse which formed on their lips.

My progress in physical education depended to a large extent on the progress made by my stomach to digest its food. If it decided to cooperate, my activity was in no way impeded. However, because of its irregularity, such cooperation was markedly infrequent and I would often find myself uncomfortably nauseous; as the sports grew more demanding, I knew that the class was not going to be acceptable. I was of no value to the team if staving off the urge to vomit, and the teachers disbelieved my need to sit quietly on the side lines. "You look fine to me," their appraisal seemed to say. I almost wished my stomach would yield to its sickness and give the doubting teachers an eyeful to cure them of their disbelief. Eventually I asked my doctor to write a medical excuse for me which served to place me in the library for "study hall"; this arrangement pleased me for I was then free to study, read, or dream as dictated by my mood. Physical activity was pursued at home during periods of good health; this was no awkward adjustment since I desired to maintain my fitness, and when I felt well, I did not spend time slumped sluggishly in a chair. Seated in the library, I reflected gratefully that I had not taken any drastic measures before securing the written excuse; I also knew that, since I was no tyrant, I probably could not have given such a gruesome display even if it had been a foremost desire.

PAGE 140

Chapter 20 Eleventh Grade

"I was always reminded of a tea kettle filled with boiling water which had to let off steam or explode; had I been unable to "blow-it-out," my emotions would have strained violently against my being, and while a shattered teapot could be replaced, sanity was less easily restored."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Eleventh Grade

Adolescence is an explosive age wherein change is an intrinsic factor. One begins to weigh the significance of specific values in an attempt to discover which values shall be given foremost importance in life. There are numerous trials and errors, and many lessons are learned through failure or fear. An elder's words of wisdom are not always sufficient to curb the pangs of rebellion; the youth wishes to use his own mind to dictate that which he shall experience rather than to live through the vision of greater knowledge.

With the onset of 11th grade, I had gained enough confidence to pursue my version of parental rebellion which, compared to my characteristic desire to please and meld, baffled and then concerned my mom and dad. Disputes generally centered on minor details such as curfew, yet progressed to include whose company I could keep and which events I could attend. For the first time in my life, I was trying to make my conflicting views heard. This measure only created misery on all fronts, however,

because my father did not welcome variances of opinion. I never yelled in my efforts to illustrate my views, for that would have proven disastrous; but despite my steady-voiced assertions, conversation became more difficult and rendered the family bliss into a sort of haphazard time-bomb. As a result, I began to foster unwanted feelings of intolerance toward little quirks and mannerisms, as often will accompany deeper grievances and unsettled disputes. Instead of accepting the gap of understanding that had evolved, I projected the frustration which came from the impasse upon petty outlets. The little things ate at my mind and aggravated me beyond all reason; I despised myself for allowing such inconsequential details to taint my father's image or turn me from his love.

With my mom, it was different. She allowed me to voice my opinions although they differed from her own. Despite my plea for "freedom " I was choked by the ambivalence of my emotions. I longed for choice yet craved intervention. For example, certain days found me in an unexplainably aggressive state of mind and my anger begged to be given reign over rationality. So perturbed was I with my inner turmoil that sometimes I wished to argue for its own sake, creating an issue to banter back and forth like a volley ball; other times I wanted mom to say "no" and thereby settle a dispute which raged internally, for parental objections were often weightier and less subject to contestation than were personal decisions to forego a particular event. Of course, there were also those things which I desired to discuss, yet felt compelled to remain hidden from my mom; I knew that to share certain instances would have jeopardized my ability to see many "friends," and although many of those individuals I later decided to avoid, I needed to make the decision on my own.

One person who understood was Norm. It was not so long ago that he had undergone the need for independence, and sympathized with my sometimes over-blown grievances. When I spoke to Norm it seemed that my "problems" dissipated into the wind or became so insignificant that I could easily bear their weight. The changes in my outlook and disposition seemed only fleeting steps to adulthood, rather than imprisoning hours.

In my eyes, Norm's life was a reflection of perfect balance, self-sufficiency and peace of mind. I longed for the day when I too would be able to own a house and make all the choices that were his. I dreamed of such a life, and it seemed incredible that he would ever seek an alternative. Paradise, however, as well as prison, is in the eye of the beholder.

It no longer seemed of much importance. He could do it, and the knowledge of his initial success was of more worth than continued success. Norm decided to move home.

The divorce had left my brother with half of a house and, in certain respects, half of a life. It was necessary at the time to prove to himself that he could live alone. Therefore, Norm paid for a house and refurbished its interior; he performed all domestic functions while working a 40 hour week; he found mental stimulation through books and occasional personal interaction with friends. Such accomplishments provided a sense of satisfaction; the gradual rebuilding of Norm's physical world complimented the restoration taking place within himself.

Once Norm had finalized his basic dreams in the material sense, however, it grew obvious that the inner rebuilding which still clamored for completion could not be done alone. He was the sole spark of life in a house from which the cobwebs of deceit could never be wiped. But for an attic full of worn out memories, his was an empty house. Houses, of themselves, do not indenture the heart; thus, without regret or apology, Norm came home.

January was the coldest it had been in years, or so it seemed. To brighten the blustery evening, Norm had invited me to share a pizza with him at his house. I gladly accepted the invitation and spent several pleasant hours staring at a lively fire and talking. I departed feeling very content, never suspecting his oppressive loneliness. Norm had concealed it from everyone, and it came as somewhat of a surprise to see him standing at the door so soon after saying good-night; loneliness pooled in his eyes and I realized it had filtered deeper than any cursory glance could have perceived.

Personally, I was elated at the prospect of sharing the upstairs with my brother, especially if living at home was what he truly wished. Several years earlier the arrangement would not have succeeded; then he sought to free himself from the constraints of youth through establishing his own credibility as a functioning part of society. Now he had tasted life's offerings, the sweet and the bitter, and knew that he could alter his happiness through certain changes on his part. Loneliness was one pain which he had the power to alleviate; his return was a matter of choice, not defeat, and with a clear conscience regarding his desire, pursued his intent. After assuring his welcome, he and I drove to his house so he could secure a parcel of clothing and other necessities for the night.

As one household began to dissolve, the family home eagerly digested the other's former occupant and his belongings. It took several months for Norm's house and major furnishings to be sold, but those objects that he wished to retain were loaded unceremoniously into sacks and stashed in the attic or

placed hastily about various parts of the house. A microwave found its station on the basement counter, and shelving provided a haven for his stereo equipment. A handsome recliner stole a living room corner and became known as NORM'S CHAIR; if he entered the room to find HIS CHAIR occupied, he didn't quite know where to sit. It became evident that this home was his home and, with an ample dose of personal interaction and companionship, the emotional wounds had begun to heal.

School was actually fun for me after my tongue lost some of its shy inhibitions and I was able to joke and carry on conversations before classes. I joined no extra-curricular activities, however, since I valued free time and generally wished to go home or to a friend's house directly following school. Moreover, I entertained the idea of finding a part-time job, and did not wish to spread myself so thinly over those undertakings which I had deemed to be worthy of my time; I was still a perfectionist, and that ruled even the most rebellious of my whims.

That autumn I obtained employment at a fashionable store in a local shopping mall. I was notably excited since the job promised to be better aligned to my interests than either of my other jobs... babysitting and a two week stint at a fabric store. The former, I decided, demanded too much of my tolerance and felt I should quit before I was jailed for child abuse. Actually I, the sitter, was the abused party; I would return home after an evening of utter turmoil clenching three dollars in my hand.

On the worst occasion, I was to sit for two children at the end of the avenue. Soon after my arrival I discovered I was sitting for only one child; the other a monster. Inside of three hours he managed to reduce my state of mind to that of a murderess. He disobeyed every request, every order, every threat. He ignored his mother's dictate that specified he could eat no more than two candy bars. After consuming five, the bag of candy went on top of the refrigerator, the sole place in the house which he was unable to reach. The monster, outraged, then proceeded to unshelf every toy he owned and move it into the living room. Afterward, he decided to hide in the closet.

For a brief moment, I was relieved. Seeing this action had an adverse effect on me, in his opinion, he came out, wielding the vacuum cleaner, and tore about the house like a wild thing. His next move, unfortunately, was to raid another closet, from which he carefully selected a bag of rubber bands. These he pinged across the room, firing joyously, until I impeded his efforts. The rubber bands found themselves on the refrigerator.

I looked up. Ten o'clock. Unbelievable. The parents said they'd be home "around twelve." I took a deep breath and noticed the monster was cackling from some unseen location. Deciding that I should pursue the source of my discontent, I finally found him grinning widely at the door of his bedroom. "I let the gerbils out of their cage," he announced proudly. I rolled my eyes. "Terrific," I replied, lacking any enthusiasm. As I had a gerbil, I was not frightened at the prospect of catching the rodents, but was concerned they might become lost in a couch or any of the thousand other places a gerbil could hide. I immediately dropped to my hands and knees, knowing they generally fled beneath the furniture, and searched the carpet for the tiny animals. Sure enough, they were nervously enjoying their freedom under the bed's protective cover. I succeeded in flushing them into the open, whereupon they were promptly stripped of their liberty and lifted, by way of their tails, into the cage.

I turned out the light and marched into the living room where boy monster and his sister plotted against me behind suspicious smiles. I sat down and he left the room; not desiring to be surprised, I followed, entering his room just as he was about to unleash one of his gerbils again. "No!" I yelled. He disappeared, leaving the business of finding the gerbil to me; it took a bit longer this time because the mite had escaped to the master bedroom before I could detain it. Once I had the animal by the tail, I returned to the bedroom in time to intercept the monster's second attempt to free his other gerbil. Determined that no more searches would take place that evening, the gerbil cage also decorated the refrigerator top.

Of course, bedtime was a chore in itself, but one battle which I was determined to win. Through a stroke of luck or a dream realized, the two finally went to sleep, leaving me to blink at the T.V. in a fatigued stupor until I collapsed on the couch.

The parents returned well after two o'clock in the morning to find me slumped where I had fallen several hours earlier; I had earned the sleep, especially under the circumstances that I endured. Having baby-sat for over seven hours, on which I had not counted, I felt that my brush with insanity would be buffered by a "substantial" payment. The husband handed me some tightly folded bills and two quarters as I stepped into the night air, and by the feel of the wad, I trusted his integrity and believed that my effort might have been worthwhile, indeed. The "going rate" was at least 75 cents per hour, with the rate increasing to \$1.00 or \$1.50 for every hour past midnight. I calculated in my mind as I paced toward my house, knowing that I had been gone seven and a half hours, and turned the bills over in my hand with anticipation. "A five and maybe a couple of ones. . ." a thought echoed. I opened the door and entered, removed my shoes, and went into the kitchen to see what the light would reveal.

Unrolling the bills reverently, I straightened them one by one and put them on the table. One, two, three, four dollars. . . and fifty cents. I stared silently at the bills, recalling that my minimum payment should have been \$5.75. I felt used and cheated, and frankly, quite insulted. My mom, too, was angry and said I should protest my under-payment, but I was afraid to call "grown-ups" and let the matter drop.

The following week I received a phone call from the mother, requesting that I baby-sit some night that week. I had not honestly let the matter drop, for it had festered in my mind since its occurrence, and bid me forego further assignments with that family. "No," I replied. A hush ensued, urging me to explain. "I won't... I can't handle your kids." In a diminutive tone, the woman acknowledged my statement and said good-bye; by her response I somehow felt she had just experienced *de ja vu*. In certain respects, I pitied her, and in others, I pitied the children. The latter would one day rise to discover the world was greater than mother's protective and generous arms could encompass. Perhaps the former would one day wonder why she had treated "no" like a word from a foreign language.

Deep inside I believe that humans desire a sense of discipline from youth; guidance assures a child that his guardians care about his life enough to intervene in areas of possible danger or misdirection. Discipline commands respect toward oneself and others because it brings order to chaos and reality to life. As I grew and observed my classmates, I saw those whose parents were not restrictive often led sordid lives. They lied excessively or vulgarly splashed the truth before their parents to openly wound them. I cringed to see such cruel treatment of good people, for these parents had never lived lives similar to their child. At first I was baffled by my classmates' apparent hate for their parents, so I compared their lives to my own and discovered that, as children, tantrums and tears produced their desires. I used neither, for neither would have proven effective; "no" always meant "no" whether referring to a request or given as a disciplinary expression. I respected my mom and dad's authority, which consequently augmented my love for them. This was essentially the differing factor which separated my childhood from that of my friends. I concluded that their "hate" evolved from a lack of respect combined with the bitterness of leading empty, selfish lives; instead of searching themselves, they blamed their parents for their frustration. The parents cannot bear the entire burden, however, for each normal human possesses a mind which is quite capable of inviting either positive or negative change into his life.

Discipline is essential for the attainment of maturity, and the sooner one encounters it, or becomes aware of its necessity, the sooner growth can begin. I reflected over my current wish for freedom, and was silently glad that my parents had always voiced appropriate objections toward my sometimes doubtful intentions. No one had ever labeled me a "brat," I mused with satisfaction, so why should I babysit for other people's nightmares?

My first "real" job, for which I filled out an application, was as a clerk in a fabric store. Since my ex-sister-in-law had worked there and because I sewed occasionally and purchased goods at the store, I viewed the place as somewhat of an old friend. That fact did not abate my initial nervousness, however, nor did it serve to reverse my ultimate opinion of the place once its image had steeped in a boiling pot of reality. I liked people, but when people became "customers" certain nasty transformations often took place. This I quickly learned when, without ample training, I was hurled amid a mob of angry women who had stampeded into the store for the weekly bargains and expected rapid service. Once my nerves were ruffled, I tottered precariously on the edge of tears; I wished to please, but my conscientious attitude could not tolerate overt customer hostility when I was doing my best.

After the cyclone dissipated, I would return bolts of fabric to their various locations; if I did not know where a certain type should be placed, I asked for direction. Inquiry, I reasoned, was better than making rash mistakes. This part of the job, combined with cleaning and general upkeep, became my favorite as I needed not worry about customer interaction or managerial displeasure.

After two weeks, the manager called the three night employees to the counter after closing out the cash register in order to voice some complaints. Because I was the newest employee, he directed many explicit implications toward me, essentially blaming me for numerous misplaced bolts of material which he had gathered throughout the store and brought to the counter. He reported, also, that the money in the register and the amount dictated by the receipts did not coincide; "someone," he said, "has been short changing customers." He looked at me. "Laurie, you've got to be more accurate and speed up." When the speech was over and the misplaced cloth returned, we all fled from the store; company morale, I previously learned, had suffered under this manager. I reached my car and, once inside, let go of the frustrations and hurt that had multiplied since the job began, letting myself cry freely, without restraint. The blame, I felt, was unwarranted. The assistant manager had told me earlier that week that I was doing fine. I had not been responsible for the misplaced bolts of cloth, for I'd not seen those particular patterns that day; a customer could easily have decided against the material and stashed it in the nearest rack. As I thought about the excess cash, I recalled that, in past experiences of making

change, I classically over-paid, not under-paid the customer, which would have resulted in a loss for the store. While I may have been responsible for some error, I believed that all complaints could not lead to me.

For the sake of my nerves, I decided to quit the job. I dried my tears, drove out of the parking lot and headed home, where I then called the store and told the manager I was through. I felt better than I had felt in two weeks.

My job at the shopping mall was a vast improvement. Not only did I work for an amiable manager, but I did not have to ring up sales at all. A cashier was in charge of that responsibility. Moreover, when I eventually learned to act as a replacement cashier, I had no qualms toward making change since the machine instructed me "how much" was owed or received; I had only to count the currency.

Again, my favorite part of the job dealt with the stock itself, rather than the customers. I enjoyed helping people when they desired assistance, yet revolted internally against the thought of administering high key sales pitches to the public. This was the only objectionable aspect of my employment at the store, for occasionally the manager would encourage me to be more aggressive toward customers and try to sell merchandise to those who had no intention of buying anything. Admittedly, I would have preferred to hide behind racks of sweaters, sizing and straightening, than to approach a stranger and ask, "Could I interest you in a dress today?" followed by a persuasive cascade of sweetness and sales talk. Such tactics never worked for me and I found I sold more through helpful suggestions than flamboyant appeals. Nevertheless, when sales dropped after Christmas at an alarming rate, reflecting the fact that everyone's closets were full and their wallets empty, only the best sales people were given enough hours to add up to a worthwhile pay check. During this decline, I spent most of my working hours in the storeroom, unloading and hanging new merchandise. This suited me perfectly, despite the few hours and accompanying meager pay; if only I could have found a part-time job dealing exclusively with stock work, I would have been in a state of bliss, able to simultaneously work and think. . . and be paid for my time.

As the working hours decreased and I found that I had spare time beyond that which was required to accomplish my homework, I sought excuses to obtain one of the cars and escape my self-imposed prison at home. With friends or alone, I would shop, run errands, or simply drive around the city streets. The car became a symbol of freedom and attainable destinations, an inanimate capsule devoid of judgemental constraints. In the car I could whoop and holler, cry or laugh; I could vent my exasperation to the music on the radio, or wallow in a pool of depression without spreading the effect upon anyone else.

I was essentially adrift on a sea of emotions, constantly hurled from happiness to depression and back again. As contradictory as it may sound, I believe the instability of my emotions was the element which permitted me to maintain overall sanity; instability was one thing on which I could depend, for no emotion seethed within me long enough to create duress of itself.

I asked myself, "Why am I depressed?" I had no right to be depressed, in my opinion, yet I felt I had no control over my radical ups and downs. "I'm healthy for the most part, my hair has returned, thicker than it was previously, I'm doing well in school and have a few people to call 'friends' . . . so what is wrong?" Through that year the question remained hidden in the back of my mind, unanswered yet unshakeable. I continued to pursue happiness through a confused sense of individualism and an uncharacteristic flurry of activity. I was befuddled by my own ambivalence and, to further harass my state of being, allowed the fluctuating emotions of others to work upon my mind, thereby creating disturbances beyond all reason.

To this end, I fancied myself to be in love with a young guy with whom I had become acquainted through "in-the-hall" pleasantries and smiles. After two "dates" we discovered we could converse remarkably; I was delighted by the apparent honesty that we shared and became confident that our's would prove to be the romantic friendship of the decade. Having been subjected to hurtful and unreasonable endings of relationships, however, I had no intention of placing my pride in jeopardy through a display of groveling affection or stifling promises. I told myself to subdue my feelings and expect nothing, yet hoped desperately that the dominoes I had erected would fall in the orderly fashion that my forethought deserved.

As it happened, my "dominoes" fell in a manner which had no sense of order. I learned quickly that "good deserts" had nothing to do with the final outcome of a situation, and even one's offering of platonic friendship could be dealt a cruel blow or be considered unacceptable. Despite these unwarranted actions against my cautious and understated affection, I could not entirely cancel the heartfelt wishes my mind contained because he continued, at very sporadic intervals, to encourage a romance. In no time at all I was thoroughly confused as to the part I played and my significance in his life. On certain days he spoke to me at school, and other days I was ignored or avoided. The same was

true pertaining to encounters outside of school, which often resulted through chance rather than a specific plan. Whether he would assume a romantic stance or pursue a totally platonic guise became a valid mystery. This infernal uncertainty did nothing to promote self-confidence, for within me I continually questioned the purpose of his unpredictable snubs; was I too tall? Did I embarrass him? Was I not in the "right" crowd? Questions, unanswered, riddled my mind and shook my heart. As the school year coasted along, I began to realize I couldn't necessarily take all of his cold shouldered greetings or lack of acknowledgement as personal digs against my presence. He had problems of his own and moods of his own; this revelation on my behalf only gave me more reasons to worry and dwell on him, however. No longer did I cope only with my own burdens, but attempted to share the pronounced emotions displayed by my "flame." When he looked melancholic, I too, soon adopted the feeling for myself; if he was happy, I could be happy. I quickly became aware of the fact that my technique was indeed a lousy one and the potential for happiness was quite slim. With my friends having only mouths, their ears plugged with their own concerns, I resorted to the written expression of my personal pressures. Though the paper could not respond, it similarly could neither judge or reveal my emotional sieges of ink, for the hurried scrawls were carefully concealed. In this fashion, many troubles were rationally resolved; my thoughts were considerably less hideous when viewed as written words, set apart from the mental clutter composed of both reasonable and emotional meanderings. I could objectively scan the bold sweeps crossing page after page and discern the real from the imagined... My deep felt depression carried through to today. . . as well as my bad luck! I saw D as I was coming and wasn't extremely thrilled, which is a shocker in itself; and to top it off, he barely squeaked out a "Hi" to me. That wasn't too much of a surprise, because he has been known to ignore a person. . . me, for example. I must admit I'm really not all here today. I just don't understand what is going on with him. One day he is my friend and the next, he is a stranger. . . Oh, well, I can get so depressed sometimes, it's not even funny! The weird thing is that I'm not especially depressed today, I'm just in a weird mood. . . When I got home, Dad got mad because I forgot to tell them about the PSAT test. He asked about five different times why I didn't let them know. I was so shocked that I went outside and climbed the big pine tree. I'm upset when I do that... especially when there are no branches on the lower half of the tree, and I had to jump to the lowest branch! I got in a better mood after awhile, but it took a bit of psyching on my part!

Spring 1979

Walking down the wide highway of life....
Happy, but confused.
I've noticed you walking that highway too,
And I've often wondered if you felt the same way I do...
And then one day you came to me,
Smiling, and holding out your hand in friendship.
Was it two weeks? Four?
The time seemed to fly past
Whenever I was by your side.
With you, I had no fear to reveal myself...
I felt comfortable and secure
When you were near,
And thought of you constantly
Whenever you were away.

In addition to hurried prose and diary entries, I also began pinning down my feelings in the form of poetry. Within the poems I could lament my confusion and aloneness, and the self-dependency which had become threatened by my offering of friendship and its subsequent futility.

Love Rollercoaster

Days robed in silence...depressed for awhile,
Then turn around with a flash of a smile.
Happy, contented, with work and with play,
Don't get excited, it's only one day!
Tapping my shoulder, "HI, there!" he said,
One hour later, I wish I was dead!
So much confusion, so little I know,
Oh! To run and hide...to get up and go!

Age seventeen and still the same goal.
Filling my mind, my body, my soul.
My love is something I just can't ignore,
But I'm so tired...Can I take any more?
Depression sets in like a cold, dark stare,
And spurs my asking "Why do I care?"
That question comes again and again...
Face it kid...this is the battle that you'll never win!

Lauren Isaacson
Spring of 1979

Love's Confusion

Words...
Interpreted, exaggerated...
Glances...
Real and imagined...
Actions performed to hurt,
To confuse, to make happier
Some stranger's day.
I am that stranger,
Jack of many trades.
A translator,
Psychologist,
Handyman, all in one.
Like a stranger,
I am trying to know you.
Like a translator,
I am trying to understand.

Lauren Isaacson
Spring of 1979

A Heart Untaken

I gave my heart away,
That's not easy,
No, not at all.
I am...dependent...
On none other than myself.
So why then, am I
Still falling head-first
Into a bottomless cavern?
Yes, I gave my heart away.
But it was left untaken,
Blowing in the wind.
How can I describe
The way I feel?
There are no words
To relate the emptiness
And darkness
Which has prevailed
Upon my soul...
My entire being.
I need to be reconstructed,
Rejuvenated...accepted
By those I love.

Is that asking too much?
How is one expected to live
If no one will accept his love?
He cannot live...
Merely exist.

Lauren Isaacson
Spring 1979

Love Is

Love is,
It has no time,
No place.
When there is love,
One knows;
It can be felt in the air
Like a cool breeze
From calm seas.
Love can penetrate
The heart
Like a sword;
it can be painful,
And tear one apart
Piece by piece
Until one is only half
Of what he was.
And yet,
One hangs on to the feeling,
Scared to go on
But unwilling to let go.
Love is an emotion
When in its truest sense
Is stronger than steel
It will not die
Even after life.
Love is beautiful,
A feeling
Which cannot be matched
Or copied.
Love is.

Lauren Isaacson 1979

Searching

My life...
Sometimes like a lovesong;
Contented with the little things,
But forever striving for the love
I feel I missed somewhere along the way.
It's all so confusing, this.
Life... so real, so complex.
It's everchanging, and sometimes
I lose my way and stumble...
Always able to get up once more.
Maybe one day I'll not get up...
Just wait until someone picks up the pieces.
But my wait will last 'til eternity,
For no one travels my path.
Alone? ... no.
Merely unique... one of a kind.

Finding a true friend is a search
Not easily fulfilled...
But then love is not a song easily sung.

Love is serene and peaceful.
Love can make you go bananas!
Christmas...love with a special kind of warmth.
Love is a joy ride!
Love... the natural high.

Lauren Isaacson
April 17, 1979

As I reflected on the words I had written, I perceived I had turned my back on my greatest ally, myself. I needed to depend on myself for strength and happiness, for a burden is essentially one's own to bear. No amount of sharing and communication will take the place of one's personal acceptance of a problem; a candle cannot illuminate the darkness for one whose eyes remain closed.

I reviewed, also, my diary entries of the months passed.

Feb. 9, 1979... Friday the ninth... what a fantastic day! I felt terrific. I talked to (him)...he came up to me at my locker! I was the one to say "I've gotta go now." Wheeee!

Feb. 14, 1979... (He) and I talked. He said he was going to buy a Valentine's Day card (for me) but forgot!

Mar. 8, 1979... (He) and I may go to a movie this week-end for his birthday (on me). I was a little surprised he brought it up! I was in a great mood... had a great day!!

Mar. 14, 1979... (He's) making it a point to avoid me...nothing new though, right?

Mar. 29, 1979... I talked to (him) at least five minutes straight!

Apr. 19, 1979... I'm so down. I sure wish I could get out of it!
This is a real drag.

Apr. 23, 1979... I was in such a great mood today. Nothing really happened though. Ha! Oh, well. Maybe you're happier that way.

May 2, 1979... Cry! It would feel better...Bad day. I was depressed most of the time...

May 3, 1979... Talked to Dumbo quite a bit, considering I usually can never talk to him! I don't know why that makes me so happy.

May 21, 1979... Pretty good day. I talked a TON to (him). Yippee! He said he saw me Friday night on 23rd Avenue. He kept looking at me!! He said his weekend wasn't that great. I guess that makes two of us.

June 1, 1979... Last month I saw (him) once. It was 10 days between then and the time before. I hope its never that long again, although I can handle it better this time...if it works out to be that way.

June 16, 1979... At 6:30 D. got me and we went to Peterson Park (because he forgot to take money out of the bank) and played frisbee and talked while (his friend) filled up the tires with air... it was fun. (He then took me home and went to a party.) I guess Norm and Mom and Dad were talking about him... he didn't go to the bank and get some money even though he knew we were going out that night. Norm told them, "If I knew I was taking a girl out, I'd make DAMN sure I had some money!" He was a little mad. Mom told me that.

I saw my infatuation was rather pathetic. Ours was an empty relationship, devoid of stability in its most meager sense. I recalled how often his intentions were rejoined with apologetic excuses when those intentions were waived to pursue other activities in which I had no part. Such treatment consumed trust and debilitated affection, causing me to turn gradually from my romantic ideal and grasp reality, despite the pain that the action entailed; self-deceit would only delay the inevitable hurt that naturally accompanied unfulfilled dreams.

With summer nearly sunning itself on the doorstep, I fostered no conscious inclination to fret over my flickering flame; too well I remembered the previous summer, through which I mourned the loss of a different guy's attentions (whose attentions, I might add, were the first I had ever received, as he was my first actual date). I finally realized, after ruining my entire summer, it was the attention, not the guy, over which I lamented. I liked knowing that I was, to an extent, desirable and attractive for my feminine qualities, a knowledge which had to come from sources other than my mom and dad to seem valid. As I no longer required a male admirer to uphold or applaud various aspects of myself to assure my adequacy as a person, I looked forward to the upcoming months with reminiscent anticipation.

Among the various events of the summer which followed 11th grade was the renewal of friendship between Steve, my next-door neighbor, and me. Throughout junior high our meetings had been markedly sparse, the result of differing circles of friends rather than personal quarrels.

After several brief conversations, we discovered we shared common interests which could provide the foundation for a friendship. Our "fellowship" introduced me to people who eventually became friends of my own, and those from school with whom I had previously associated but drifted slowly toward other interests and destinations.

The new introductions included Jon, whose companionship colored many days of the summer and would later evolve into an extended relationship. Looking at the pages of my diary, the carefree days described therein now seem to possess a dream-like quality; the days were bundles of minutes in which only the present mattered. I did my chores and went out with friends; I threw the frisbee and played miniature golf; there were picnics and movies and light conversation. The whirlwind had stabilized, but it hadn't slowed... and I did not give myself time to think.

Norm, however, provided me with such time. When we spent several hours together, canoeing, hiking through wooded trails, or lunching near a winding river, I was unconscious of time. An hour was not a hoard of 60 minutes crammed sardine-style into the face of a clock. Conversation was a matter of choice rather than obligation and an aura of humor pervaded the atmosphere in which jokes need not be vocalized to be shared and understood. With Norm, I was able to find the peace which seemed so elusive in other company, and to revel in the silence that, through my lack of assertiveness, I was otherwise unable to attain. I felt whole in my brother's presence rather than a torn and fragmented person who cringed under hostility, watched silently the destruction which acquaintances wrought upon themselves, and melted beneath the persuasive tactics used to rob me of time I did not wish to give. Norm spoke "to" me and "with" me, but never "at" me, an aspect of togetherness in which other relationships often failed; thus, as my segmented self fell into entirety, it did not take long before I realized his presence was prized beyond all others. At a time in my life when emotional stability was a rare commodity, I felt lucky to have discovered the mutual compatibility which grew rapidly between my brother and me; indeed, I believe we were both lucky. Not often does one encounter an unassuming yet caring relationship in which no conditions or specific roles exist to induce friction and jeopardize love itself; it was a gift that I appreciated more as time passed, yet without hesitation took for granted, feeling confident that, as I for him, my brother would always "be there" for me, a listener, friend and companion. If only my other friendships were half as dependable, half as refreshing!

Although most of our plans were slated for the weekend, we occasionally took several hours of a week day evening to go for a motorcycle ride or take a long walk. Walks were especially enjoyable because they often included what we labeled "blow-it-out conversations," which were comprised of disturbing thoughts or events that generally remained inaudible plagues. Grievances, observations and complexes tumbled forth to be dissected in a rational means by two brains rather than one, which would hopefully render a more concise view of the idea or problem, or dissolve it completely. We also delved in areas of questions for which there were no answers, posing inquiries for discussion rather than for the solution thereof. After such vigorous conversations, we both felt somewhat exhausted, yet relieved just the same. I was always reminded of a tea kettle filled with boiling water which had to let off steam or explode; had I been unable to "blow-it-out," my emotions would have strained violently against my being, and while a shattered tea-pot could be replaced, sanity was less easily restored.

Norm, too, expressed his gratitude for the ability to release emotional tension through discussion. Living alone had provided ample time for solitude and the perusal of philosophical writings, but that aloneness needed to be buffered by personal interaction. Norm was an individual who required more

time alone than did most people, yet he was not an island, entirely self dependent and devoid of the need for others, and though his employment allowed a degree of social interaction, it was only the light-hearted, surface variety in which "closeness" had no part. Our outings were at once social and personal, depending upon the present need; that is, each meeting was not wholly devoted to serious conversation, for that, too, would have become wearisome if depth and meaning were relentlessly sought. Life truthfully has its burdens, but conversation need not be added to the list; all things, I believe, must be tempered, and lacking carefree banter and easy laughter, life gains nothing.

With a full two months of my summer vacation behind me, I was looking forward to a three-week vacation in Syracuse, New York when August arrived. I would be spending time with Sherry, a pen-pal who had evolved into a good friend through the exchange of letters. The previous year she had accepted our invitation to visit Illinois and accompanied us on a week-long trip to the Colorado Rockies. I was now repaying the visit.

Ours was a unique relationship, but one that was understandably comfortable. Beginning as pen-pals, we quickly noted the potential in each other for the development of a lasting closeness and a willingness to listen; these factors, augmented further by our great need to be understood and accepted as we were, provided a sturdy foundation for friendship. Each letter became a prize, something regarded with zest and anticipation, for in it would be heartfelt troubles or elation, and possible advice or consolation in reference to previous correspondence. Thus, after two years of personal disclosure, we felt compelled to meet each other.

In retrospect, it was amazing that her parents had given her permission to accept our invitation. Having no clear picture of who I was aside from a grocery sack full of my letters, which I might add, they were not allowed to read, Sherry's trip was prefaced by a great deal of anticipation; her parents coached her, and a long-necked neighbor preached doom and despair, while friends queried about the need to visit "some hick girl in the corn fields." She carried the anticipation with her as she approached our airport terminal; it was inscribed on her face next to the wary smile and suspicious eyes. I, too, had been nervous, but by the end of the day, our misgivings had been washed away by a flood of chatter. When we once again stood in the airport terminal, tears welled up in our eyes; we were parting not as pen-pals, but as friends. The days ahead seemed a little more empty because we could share no more time together. As I prepared to fly to New York, I fostered nervous qualms, yet my anxiety did not reflect upon Sherry or her home; I was hoping wildly that we would still "get along." Letters did not fill the gap that had appeared after meeting Sherry; before we had been pen friends, but now we were friends who wrote to each other. It was somehow quite different, and it was I who felt in need of a shield.

Conversation was slow at first, with each of us uncertain as to which topics would spark the most interest. I began to wonder if I had made a mistake in coming. Her excitable nature sometimes startled me, and when she told of incidents wherein she had screamed her rage at local friends, I cringed in silence, hoping that I never would evoke such fervor.

As the evening crept away, our tongues relaxed and I felt somewhat relieved. I could be no one but myself, and I seemed to feel I was being accepted; within I experienced a mental sigh of relief. Looking at the clock, we discovered the hour was near 4:00 a.m. and thought it would be best to go to sleep. "Before we can do anything tomorrow," Sherry said, "I have to pick up the kitchen and pick up the living room. . ." I snickered and exclaimed, "Gee. . . you must be strong!" Any remaining tension broke under our laughter; humor worked miracles.

The following three weeks passed in a flurry of activity, talk and laughter. I fell into the role of second daughter and was pleased that my temporary home proved so hospitable. Whether joking over evening popcorn or sudsy dishwasher, it was obvious that I was no guest, but a welcome member of the tribe.

With Sherry and her parents I captured a lush glimpse of the Niagara Falls; I also accompanied them on a company picnic and a family reunion. Most of the time, however, Sherry and I ran our own agenda, comprised of shopping sprees, hikes, drives in the country, movies, and everything else imaginable. We frequented one particular pizza parlor with such predictability that our arrival was greeted with quizzical stares. We also learned the horror of leaving one's car locked in a parking garage after midnight, when, upon returning via bus from the state fair, we discovered we had been misinformed as to the supposed 24 hour status of the garage; though vandals seldom work in another's favor, a sawed-off portion of a railing allowed freedom from an otherwise assured overnight imprisonment, which, in turn, would have left us few options but to search for a phone in some unlikely business establishment.

Leaving Syracuse was a melancholic affair which generated an inner sense of solitude and reminded me that I had no close friends of my own age and gender at home. Curious though it may sound, I also realized it was largely my fault, having a high intolerance for mind games, play-acting, and senseless chatter. Moreover, there seemed to be no median between the judgmental and the valueless. I could

never tolerate the former group, for no one is perfect, and I was slowly drawing away from the undaunted latter group. I had the ideas about life which I would not allow to be tainted through carelessness or indiscretion; certain forms of filth were, I knew, impossible to wash away. I began to wonder if one's character could be defiled by mere association. . . and I drifted further still from former friends.

I became markedly outraged at schoolmates who acted irresponsibly and then decided that my ear was the one upon which they could hurl their misadventurous rot. Initially I listened in silence, disagreeing with promiscuity and the like, yet maintaining a wall of mute disapproval so I would not dampen the various relationships. One's sexuality, I reasoned, was only a portion of the individual and need not pollute the entire character. Little by little, however, my intolerance toward certain propensities grew and eventually led to mutual partings rather than outright broken friendships. Some differences create gaps, and others gulfs.

This change of friends produced a mellowing effect on my lifestyle which I not only needed, but desired, and although I indulged in fewer social activities, I found this new aspect acceptable, and indeed, preferable over my past. After I realized my nervous energy was my mind's plea for help and change, and continual activity for its own sake led only to emptiness, it did not take long for my "rowdiness" to wane. I discovered without parental interference that "the wild side" of life did not conform to my concept of what life should be; I cared too much for honesty in friendships to enjoy parties wherein play-acting was a primary focus. The mere idea of taking drugs seemed incredibly idiotic and was complicated further by its exorbitant price-tag and illegality; the first element staved my urge to experiment with drugs, while the last two set that feeling in cement. Toward alcohol I fostered a friendly regard although I despised immoderation; liquor could be enjoyed without partaking to excess. I held little respect for those who required intoxication to have fun and also disliked seeing an individual's personality change under its influence, for in my opinion, such revelations demonstrated a lack of genuineness of character when sober. Although I enjoyed certain alcoholic beverages, it did not matter whether or not I drank; I was crazy enough to enjoy life and have fun without liquor, and it certainly was less expensive.

For the most part, I felt that my emotions had stabilized. I no longer was living "on the edge," squinting at brilliant sunlight and then plunging into gray storm clouds; nor was I tough or immune to pain. Of course, I did not wish to become a robot, devoid of emotional concern, yet in certain instances, a lack of feeling would have been welcome.

Establishing a relationship is, at best, difficult and at worst, impossible. Because relationships are generally of primary significance regarding one's happiness or lack thereof, they are elemental to life. Unfortunately, there is no prescribed formula pertaining to flawless success in relationships, and one is left to mimic the designs wrought by others or resort to one's own intuition. Without a doubt, life is hard. . . barring any drastic handicaps with which one is born.

There are those who yearn for youth and pine forgotten tatters of memory, yet I would not choose to relive the pangs of childhood and relearn the expectations of society. I recall too well the ill-chosen words which sprang from my tongue, the unintended regrets which stemmed from an unimpeded glance or action, and the troublesome problems whose solutions, though somehow problems in themselves, would have been solved likewise had the identical factors been presented a second time. With regret I remember instances which haunt my recollections, though long passed; there was a boy in church who nervously asked if I would be "his girl"...and through my pitiful degree of shyness, never gave a reply; and the homecoming dance, my first and only formal function, in which I was so utterly nerve-stricken that I was unable to pin the boutonniere on my date, to eat my dinner, to speak cordially on even the most trivial and insignificant subjects. I remember the disappointment which accompanied my first attempt to secure a "date."

Oct. 27, 1977... I want to ask Scott to go on the hayrack ride.
Everyone is really pressuring me.

Oct. 28, 1977... I asked Scott today...I followed him to his locker and asked. He said that he was having one on the same night and he'd let me know. Oh, I sure hope he comes.

Oct. 30, 1977... Hayrack was tonight, but I didn't go. Scott never even called.

Filtering through my memories are also the times in which I was asked on a date and for reasons of my own, chose to refuse the invitation. I tried to say "no" without hurting, for I knew how difficult it was to pose such questions, and the way in which a reply was given could either demean, depress, or

simply disappoint. Being asked on a date is a compliment, no matter how distastefully one might view his "suitor."

My dating career was short-lived, as I began to view romance in a highly cynical manner, having found little in the way of true happiness while "playing the field." I had difficulty enough when I dated one person at a time. Moreover, I was unable to bear the pretense which accompanied romance; I had little of the "romantic" in my personality, and if I played a farce, I knew it would reveal itself in time. It would be more appropriate, I resolved, to always be myself and thereby avoid a later explanation of my mistaken identity.

With my indifference toward romance came an amplified emphasis on friendship, for it alone seemed real. Platonic relationships had no intrinsic pressures or expectations such as the obligatory kiss after a "date"; a touch, if given at all, was supportive, not demanding.

I loved talking with people and tried to treat everyone in a like manner. Most of my friends were of the male gender. As always, I was better understood and enjoyed for my humor by guys and felt more comfortable in such company. Generally this was no problem, however, I found certain people so delightful that occasionally one of them would mistake my enthusiasm as being more than simply platonic in nature, and not desiring my supposedly romantic inclinations, would begin avoiding me. Eventually I would realize I had indulged in one too many smiles or had been too energetically involved in the conversation, and to solve the misunderstanding without damaging an ego, I would ignore the individual completely for several days. When my staccatoed lack of interest toward him finally obliterated his illusion of my deep feelings, he would resume friendly interaction. It was a rather humorous chain of events, but one that yielded favorable results. As long as misunderstandings are possible, I find it comforting to know that at least some have the potential to be corrected with relative ease.

Since stability was one of my higher prerogatives, I continued dating one guy rather exclusively, especially toward the latter portion of my senior year. However as he bested my age by a year, he was away at college, coming home only once each month. Having to reacquaint ourselves every visit, the resulting relationship was hard to maintain and wrought havoc on my emotions far more than I had ever expected. I see-sawed between that which I desired the relationship to be and what it was. I battled between saving the enjoyable friendship at the expense of an uncertain romance. Although I cared for him, it was not the type or degree of caring which should have been associated with our relationship. Therefore, I often asked myself the validity of the entire affair. At times the gulf between us was so great that distance was welcomed because it secured our friendship. I did not have the fortitude to put an end to our psychedelic relationship, for I was easily cornered by his overt persuasiveness and flow of rhetoric, which smothered my ability to think or listen to myself. Moreover, for better or worse, the relationship provided me with a sense of protection and an excuse to refuse other dates. Thus, the relationship continued, despite its flaws, interwoven with other memories and dreams.

Holder Of The Key

Although I love being at your side,
There's still that part that has to hide
For I'm shielding myself
From a feared remorse
Which would erupt
If your love lost its course...
Shipwrecked and broken
On the craggy shore,
"Look... accept...
I love you no more!"
Friendship is the only key
To loose the me that isn't free!
I hold fast to that sheer control
Which forbids emotion to take its toll
And tear me to shreds...
Leaving naught but remnants,
Nothing but threads
To blow in the wind

Until one day
My spirit would lead me
Ever away...
Far from the lair
Of self-wrought despair.
I'll build me a fence!
I'll build me a wall!...
A windowless room
That's eleven feet tall!
And there shall I dwell,
A vacant shell...
The only escape
From life's loving hell.
An existence blind to reality
Is merely my mind's chosen fantasy
Of what I would become
If I should come undone.
Yet, in a sense,
It is real and very true...
In my love for the world...
In my love for you...
Sometimes I wish
I loved you more...
But still clench the key
To my heart's door.

Lauren Isaacson
January 1980

Nonsense

It was only yesterday,
And hours before when I,
Without a thought of calories,
Had baked a chocolate pie.

In reflecting culinary action,
Its value I must assess
For in the act of doing so,
I created quite a mess!

Buying property is like peanut butter on bread...
The more peanuts you've got, the better the spread.

Chapter 21 Twelfth Grade

"One must like himself; self-love is the core from which all else grows, including the ability to give and to accept."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Twelfth Grade

At the onset of 12th grade, I had found employment at a large department store where I worked in ladies fashions, hanging merchandise or ringing up sales on a computerized register. I worked hard, thinking of myself as having just one of many thankless jobs in which the "reward" came only via Friday paychecks. Yet hard work did pay off, and my boss had, indeed, noticed.

A comment I had written in February of 1980 read: Pete came up to me at work and said, "Laurie, I just want to say that you are a super gal and a fine employee."

The next line, written as a matter of fact, stated: I had a hernia.

Compliments can come as a shock when they are not freely given, but perhaps that is when they mean the most.

Three days later I found he really meant the words he had said when he changed the work schedule for me so I could go to Mexico over the week of spring break.

Feb. 29, 1980... I started crying! He said, "I'll break my back for someone who's willing to break their's for me."

It was almost more praise than I could ingest in three days. Almost, but not quite.

Mexico was a sweet memory, although I would never choose to travel there again. A gift from my parents after having studied Spanish for four years, the trip was educational as well as recreational, and also proved to be the most enjoyable group experience I had ever known.

The tour led by two high school language teachers, skirted the less wholesome neighborhoods of Mexico City for our eye-opening benefit. We saw rampant filth encircling the street vendors and gutters which ran foul with the discarded carvings of meat markets. In such areas a rotten stench ruled over the otherwise pervasive fumes of car exhausts, creating what seemed a playground for the generation of a killing plague. No one looked surprised as a man ran half-clothed through the crowd, his hair a matted mass which could not conceal the madness evident in his wild eyes and hideous grin.

After such sights, a taxi would slash its way into the traffic and whisk us away on a perilous drive to more hospitable places. Busses would carry us to major sights where we viewed the country-side, the pyramids, and museum artifacts. We marveled at the splendor of Catholic churches, caressed by the many offerings of peasants whose coins beautified the altars and columns with gold. No where else had I witnessed such awesome wealth amidst such utter poverty.

One sight which seared my memory was a church wherein a funeral was taking place. Undaunted by the mourners, a Mexican tour guide led us through the church as if death and grief were impersonal matters, unworthy of respect. I hesitated at the doorway, not wishing to enter, then realized that I knew nothing about the city and might find myself lost if I did not follow. I narrowed my eyes in disgust for the awkward situation and, head lowered in a token of sympathy, filed quietly past the aisles of darkly clothed mourners. No wonder people hated tourists; the incident could have been avoided altogether with a sensitive guide.

Taxco was the most enchanting of the tour's three cities, for it facilitated a preserved glimpse of old Mexico. Here the streets remained narrow corridors of brick, twined up and down the hillside between stucco buildings like wildly frolicking vines. Palms soared toward untainted, blue skies, and red tiled roofs basked in the warmth of the sun. Evening was an enchantment, a brief step into the past. The

stars crept slowly from behind their sapphire blanket as the sun's last rays set on fire the gleaming dome of a church. As the night deepened, many of us made our way down to the main street where an Easter procession was to be held. There we witnessed a reverent celebration of faith, silently watching a line of worshippers as each guarded a candle, sheltering its life as their savior sheltered their lives. In a world of uncertainty, these lovely people were content in their faith; it was beautiful, but it was not for everyone.

The final stop of the tour was Acapulco which most resembled a city of the United States. No one scoffed or gestured comically in our direction at our "different" types of apparel as they had done in Mexico City; there, slacks were not considered proper attire for women, nor were shorts for either gender. One episode in the zoo made all of us smile when a little Mexican child, curious to see blond hair on a pair of man's legs, walked up to one in our party, felt his legs to determine their validity, and then gazed up at him wonderously.

In Acapulco white skin and blond hair was still the exception, yet it was no spectacle. Moreover, shorts and "American" attire seemed to be the rule, which made everyone more comfortable. Personally, I wanted to make a good impression or leave none at all, for when traveling in a foreign country, one may offend without the slightest intention; custom and language differences can create barriers and eventually, prejudice. Having encountered one "bad egg" in a dozen, it is far less involved to condemn the entire batch rather than to survey them as individuals; certain people are more prone to this attitude than others. This apparently was the type of philosophy which ruled an unforgettable ice cream parlor patriarch, for when five of us respectably waited to be served at his busy establishment, we finally realized that we were not being overlooked but ignored. The man sat motionless behind the counter with his legs splayed widely and arms folded on his rotund belly, intently watching the progress made by his employees until one waitress looked at us and inquired with her eyes. "Maria!" The patriarch spat the name with agitation. "No!" The girl looked down and sought another customer.

This was a new experience; so deep was his hatred that it overruled the typical lust for profit. We turned from the counter, smiling at each other. Once outside we all shared a hearty laugh. The stupidity of the situation was incredible to me, for not only had the patriarch's attempt to belittle and demean fail, but he had also lost money. I pondered the scenario, asking myself why it did not bother me, and concluded that it was because self-satisfaction was of more importance to me than the manner in which I was viewed by others. One must like himself; self-love is the core from which all else grows, including the ability to give and to accept. And, in an ice cream parlor in Acapulco, I found that self-love is also the best defense.

Acapulco was the grand finale of an exciting week; white sand beaches above a frothy surf, cool draughts beneath rustling palms, tempting meals and flea market sprees, and a special evening roving the quiet shoreline after sunset. It all seemed an incredible fantasy, especially in retrospect, having spent a week apart from familiarity. Only one aspect of the days in Acapulco could have been channeled into a category other than fantasy; after days of careful food consumption, the inevitable curse of Montezuma fell upon me. Luckily, I was not so horribly afflicted that it made any appreciable difference in my plans; perhaps after so many years, Montezuma's need for revenge had become less poignant. Or it could have been the Kaopectate. Of course, I do not support superstitious curses as being the cause. . . but when the affect is of such magnitude, I bear arms to combat the siege.

On Easter Sunday we boarded a jet and headed for Chicago. Between shifting positions, stretching, peeps out of the porthole windows and in-flight snacks, the hours drifted past. Somehow, the holiday itself was lost. I simply was not accustomed to spending spring break away from home, let alone Easter in mid-air. It reminded me of the Christmas my family spent in Florida; I felt cheated even though I had fun. My mild depression left with the landing in Chicago, where we deplaned and motored the remaining distance.

Norm met me in his old Belvedere. He and his fish car were a welcome sight as I stepped into the frigid air. It had even snowed since I was last home. This was reality, I thought with a smile. The trip ended as suddenly as it had begun, taken in the wintry gusts and buried beneath the joy of homecoming. I watched the others as they turned and whirled, anxiously seeking their families and securing their luggage in a wild flurry of activity. This was the world I knew; Mexico was far away, and soon its memory would be a distant, clouded image, destined to share only the past.

For the present I shared the glowing impressions in my mind, relating the vast differences amid basic human cohesiveness. Despite various cultures, people remained relatively the same; I thought of the curiosity of the child and the calculating hatred of the patriarch, knowing that such people existed in every city. Well into the night I rambled excitedly of my experiences abroad, content that I was home. I might fit in many places, but home was where I belonged.

I was never much of a romantic. There were inside of me, however, pieces of idealistic images which, due to their inconsistency with reality, provoked great surges of duress. These mental pictures, depicting that which "should be," stuck in my mind and festered there. Whether they were derived of societal suggestions or secret aspirations of my own concoction, I could not tell, yet they were infuriating, whatever their origin might have been, because of their unattainable quality. The latter part of 12th grade was infiltrated by such lofty ideals, and I had to watch myself closely to make certain I did not begin to play a role other than me. "One's senior year," stated the ideal, "should be a celebration of the past and the future; one's days should be filled with blissful fun and one's company should include the steadfast friends made through the course of the years." I observed classmates and for some, my ideal seemed their reality. Deep inside of me, however, I knew that, in reference to my life, my ideal was a sinking ship. I possessed perfectionistic qualities but lacked the ambition and the need to acquire awards. For myself I wanted to succeed. I did not, however, have to be the best; depending on so many variables, who could determine what was "best"?

Idly I reflected on my achievements: two year member of the National Honor Society, member of the Spanish Honor Society, and placed second in the school (after a native speaker) for a National Spanish Exam, for which I received a Spanish Dictionary. It was not a lengthy or conspicuous list, but I was satisfied. I could never live up to my ideal because I disliked public display; I felt that accepting recognition would direct undue attention and I would be placed on trial. Within the realm of intelligence, I felt myself to be quite small; knowledge is infinitous, and to claim praise for assimilating such a minute portion as was encased in my mind seemed unfit.

My reactions, or lack thereof, regarding academic achievement were greeted by my mom and dad with a degree of chagrin and disappointment. A child's success is a good reflection on the parents; thus, when I failed to pose for the yearbook photos which honored Society members as a group, she despaired that the anonymity of my accomplishments would hurl me into oblivion. Had I seen through her eyes the importance of recognition, perhaps I would have remained after school and posed for posterity. . . and for my parents.

"Blissful fun" was yet another part of my ideal which had no parallel to reality. Fun was not a given property of one's senior year, a mindless embellishment punctuating the culmination of twelve years of public education. Instead, fun was a state of mind, quite dependent upon one's capacity for having fun. It was imperative to possess creativity, openness and fearlessness toward work; bored people were often simply lazy.

Fun, a highly personal noun, too often was used generically, which led to overrating certain pastimes and berating others. The result, of course, was either harrowing disappointment, or pleasant surprise, depending on one's particular luck. There was also the possibility that one could fake the role of having fun merely because it was the appropriate response; this, more than any other aspect of my ideal, ensnared my sense of reality. I found the power of suggestion, combined with my mind's ideal, would let me take part in an activity, pronounce that I had enjoyed myself, and continue to believe such even after the experience was over; then, in later reflection, I would realize my pretense and wonder why I had allowed myself to adopt another's definition of fun rather than pursuing my own intuition.

Such departures from rationality disturbed me, particularly because they were uncharacteristic; while I often sat steeped in thought or immersed in dreams, I rarely played out those reflections in the physical sense. Furthermore, play-acting was a nuisance because when such activity resulted in emptiness, it was a sore waste of time. Free time was one commodity with which I was rather stingy; therefore I tried to be selective regarding how the precious moments were spent. Even so, mistakes were made, and less favorable outcomes became a source of bitter resentment if I allowed myself to stew in their memory.

Finally, the ideal called for "steadfast friends," created through mutual interests and communication. In reality, I had acquaintances, and I had what I called "friends" for lack of a more appropriate word. With these classmates, I often felt like a mother, a psychiatrist, or an impartial listener, entirely detached from the situation at hand. As the "impartial listener" I lapsed into a role such as I described earlier; if I faced unpalatable situations or discussions while on "automatic," I could then tolerate them without feeling undue frustration. I voiced no unsolicited opinions, utilizing silence as a manner of maintaining peace in my world. Thereby I lost nothing... nor did I gain.

As high school drew to a close, I no longer felt obliged to analyze each moment. Soon all would be different. The hallways would echo no sound and store no memory of those who had passed. Friends would be lost to each other and acquaintances would fade like early morning dreams. Achievements would pave the way toward further education, jobs, or merely attract dust on a chest of drawers, remembering that which no longer existed.

I had enjoyed my time in high school as best I could considering the topsy-turvy state of my emotions.

I had met some fine people and experienced some genuine "fun." My achievements were satisfactory and I felt content that graduation was near. I did not wish to relive or prolong high school. Maybe my ideal demanded too much of life, or perhaps I was more fully accepting that one's ideal vision of life had little in common with reality. I knew only that I wished to pursue a life unfettered by those wistful images. It was time for me to begin closing one door.

After final exams, school was recreational rather than educational. The yearbooks were distributed and I made a point to sign the annuals of those with whom I had shared memorable occasions or developed worthwhile relationships. For many, the message in the yearbook was a last farewell. Some I would truly miss and remember always, even though they were not persons who had spent time with me outside of class.

Impressions were a curious phenomena. I wondered why certain moments captured my attention. . . the carnation I received on "flower day" from a junior who had taken notice of me. . . the penny retrieved from the hallway which my Spanish teacher handed to me. . . an inside joke which survived two years. . . smiles and humor and craziness. These were the ingredients of my foremost impressions, and the forerunners of memories; these fragmented images would survive outside the confines of the yearbook, and generate fleeting smiles for years to come.

Graduation was no longer the solemn promenade of grace and grandeur it had once been. The classes were large and impersonal, and it seemed that everyone graduated whether they earned the honor or not; a classic example testifying that, where there is plenty, there is often little gratitude. We wore disposable gowns and caps, with the latter being so cheaply constructed that all four corners hung down about our heads in a mockery of pomp and circumstance, creating a group which looked like berobed court jesters.

Due to the behavior of the previous graduating class, teachers patrolled the group to assure no items such as frizbees, squirt guns and bubble blowers made it into the field house. I was relieved; while graduation had lost its magnificence, I still did not desire to take part in a circus. Aside from our appearance, the ceremony was fairly respectable. The various speakers neither rushed nor belabored their material.

Row by row we stood to file toward the stage. I felt my stomach pinch. It was an orderly system; a name was called, the diploma was presented, then a hand-shake completed the scenario. My name was called. I accepted my diploma, smiling, and proceeded to the principal to receive a handshake. It was my moment. Then another name was called as I paced down the center aisle to my seat. For me, all was done. Another name echoed through the field house. . . a moment belonging to someone else.

In the din and confusion following the ceremony, I found none of my closer acquaintances. The swarming mob whooped joyously, rallying about and shouting their intended destinations. I suddenly felt the aloneness I had anticipated, crashing down and separating me from the flock. What, for others, would come more gradually but perhaps more painfully as well, I experienced in an instant. Such a large crowd, and yet I knew no one! Indeed a door had closed.

I gazed at the crowd, dejected and disappointed, then resignedly found Jon. We had planned to go out for pizza and "hit a party," but since I had learned of no parties, the latter would have to be replaced by a different option.

"So you've grage-ee-ated, kid," he smiled over at me from the driver's seat.

"Yeh. . ." I replied, trying to hide my depression. "You are supposed to be having fun," the remnants of my ideal intoned. I smiled and spoke light-heartedly, almost in a reflex action, deriving solace from the fact that the night was still young.

We drove to the shopping center which housed the pizza parlor, noting that a traveling carnival shared the parking lot with the cars. My eyes brightened; I loved those things.

Jon looked at me. "Let's go on a few rides before eating," he suggested.

"Well . . . are you sure?" I asked.

"Yeh!! Come on... it's your big night."

I looked at the vast array of neon lights which blinked invitingly, trying to decide what to ride first. None of the rides were particularly ferocious in my opinion, but I settled for the tilt-a-whirl, a ride which afforded a small thrill. We seated ourselves inside the semi-circular capsule and the fun began, flailing us clockwise, then counter-clockwise, as the capsule raged up and down on its track. It was no generous ride; such carnivals rarely endow its patrons with their money's worth. The machine grated

and clanked to a halt.

After exiting I glanced at Jon, who appeared rather stricken by the glassy gaze in his eyes. He also burped repeatedly, suggesting his stomach had protested to the ride.

I almost hated to ask, "You OK?"

"I'll be all right. . . let's just sit down for awhile."

We walked to his car and leaned on the hatchback. Several minutes passed and Jon returned to normal.

"Let's go and eat..." I urged, having no desire to witness a repeat of nausea.

"No, no... it's your night. I want you to have fun. I'm OK, really."

"I don't know... let's just eat," I replied.

More persuasion. It was inevitable.

We went on another ride.

It was similar to the first, throwing us up and down in unison with the squall of hydraulics and blaring loony tunes. I ventured a look at Jon and swallowed hard. His greenish appearance had little to do with the neon lights. He began to burp once again as we made our final madcap spins and slowed to a stop. "This is not good," my thoughts roared; I felt rather frantic; I honestly did not wish to think at all, but my mind would not oblige.

While thoughts such as "Oh, please, no!" raced through my mind, Jon's stomach began venting its frustration on the parking lot. Not about to just stand and watch, I walked a few paces behind him as he made his way toward the pizza parlor restroom where he could finish the job.

He disappeared into the restaurant and I remained outside, leaning against the building while various emotions seared my thoughts. Embarrassment, guilt due to my embarrassment, pity... perhaps a swig of self-pity... and anger.

"It's your big night, kid." Yeh. Sure.

PAGE 167

Chapter 22 Summer 1980

"The Colorado Rocky Mountains were my vision of paradise. . .I felt no spiritual rift with the universe and no emotional rift with myself. "

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Summer 1980

Summertime was no longer the carefree season of my childhood years. In addition to employment, I broke a once-solemn vow, taken in early youth, that forbade me to enlist in summer school. Since I planned to attend the local junior college in the fall and Speech 101 was one of its graduation requirements, I rationalized that I should take the class before all else lest I died of fright during a presentation; I then would not have taken all of the other college courses in vain. Breaking my oath for the sake of my life did not seem to be a frivolous decision and, in my mind, undeniably justified the class.

A second reason I wished to take speech through the summer was my anticipation of smaller classes. When my friend Steve learned of my plan, he too decided to follow my lead. Unfortunately, many others had prescribed to my line of thought, and Steve and I found our class brimming with students.

Actually the class was rather fun, especially having Steve as my comrade. Together we endured the awkward moments and embarrassment and, with sparkling eyes, shared the humor begotten of nervousness. We looked on as the anxious quirks of our classmates became personal trademarks which would either be overcome in time or rage without end. Through the class, whether it was my bombed impromptu on "television," or Steve's short but memorable sales pitch for "Billy Beer," we afforded each other an ample dose of moral support, not only surviving but succeeding.

Again this year summer was a bit of a whirlwind. A date-book was the only record of my daily accomplishments, for I seemingly had no time to write lengthy descriptions of the day's events...or more accurately, I lacked the fortitude to make time for quiet pursuits. One might have said I was too busy to be unhappy, but it would not have been quite true.

Nevertheless, my date-book overflowed.

June 8... Norm and I went sailing; motorcycled to Loud Thunder. We had pizza and beer at the river. It was nice.

20... Went to Jon's after work. We ate at Frank's Pizza and then to (a store) Party at Jon's.

23... 40 hours (of work) this week. Think of the bucks...

26... I did my first speech... got an A! Steve and I went out and ate ice cream afterwards.

30... After speech, Norm and I took the BMW to Galena. It was a terrific day. I loved it.

July 3... Speech. Work. Mom and I went (shopping) Steve and I went to West Lake.

4... Work. Jon and I went to (a) nature trail and picnicked, then to the fireworks.

July 6... Norm and I went sailing on the Mississippi. He lost my straw hat. After supper, we took off with the "kicker" (Motor for the canoe).

9... (My boss) thought I was lying when I called in sick.

21... Worked on final speech. Topic: Stress.

29... Steve wished me well for Mayo trip. Norm and I took a long walk in Davenport.

30... Packed suitcase; spent 45 minutes in the bathroom... left for Rochester, MN

31... Took tests... shopped... Mom bought me a pair of jeans. Swam for 1-1/2 hours.

Aug. 1... Saw Dr. E. and left.

One might have thought I would have elaborated further on the results of my examination. After all, it had been five years since my stomach operation, and this was my last check-up, the famous "five years

and cured" judgment used by cancer experts. However, the trips had almost elevated themselves to vacation status due to the scenic drive and the chance to swim, dine out and shop, for the tests were familiar and no worse than uncomfortable. Of more consequence, though, was the fact that I did not feel the joyous relief that should have come with E.'s clean bill of health; I happily acknowledged his statement, "You would be more apt to die on the highway driving up here than to get cancer again," but refused to revel in the news. It was too good, and accepting it as the irrefutable truth was too risky.

Mom was delighted to hear of the test results, but she too, held elation in reserve. It did not seem credible that I was entirely healthy. I still grew nauseous after eating and experienced other stomach-related disorders such as food "Sticking" above my stomach and gastrointestinal disturbances. The doctor had no concern over these symptoms. My stomach was not what one could label as "normal"; it was reasonable to assume I would always encounter some problem with it. Shrugging off the nauseousness was convenient and logical.

I wondered if skepticism was my excuse to undermine happiness; I hated to think it was an emotion of my own invention, a manufactured impediment used because I did not desire to be happy. No, that could not be! Emotional reservation was self-preservation at work. . . it was security, and the rejection of the thought that health and happiness were inseparable components of living.

Summer relaxation generally came at irregular intervals, disguised as hikes, canoe trips and motorcycle rides with Norm. I did not find total disengagement from my daily cares until two thirds of the season had elapsed. A week's time was not enough by my way of thinking, but it was all I had been given; it was better to be satisfied with what I had than to waste time bemoaning that which I did not have.

This summer Norm and I decided to vacation together. Having discovered that our day trips went smoothly, we had few qualms about spending a full week exclusively in each other's company, and with high spirits, set out at 4:00 on a Sunday morning, bound for Colorado.

We were so psyched about seeing the mountains that we drove through the entire day and into the evening. When we finally decided, about 7:30, to find a motel, the choices were "limited" to "nonexistent," so we forked out \$20.00 for a ram-shakle room. Thinking our chance of finding a decent restaurant would be slightly better than our luck with motels, we tried to locate the town's business loop. After discovering the two traffic signals and skirting the streets in both directions, we gave in to our hunger and raided a 7-Eleven, which would have been closed in fifteen minutes. Securing some lunch meat, milk, and a can of pork and beans, we drove back to our humble room, intending to heat the beans on a portable gas stove.

The gas stove would not light. "It had performed famously at home," Norm insisted, feeling somehow betrayed by the inanimate object sprawling before him. At least our choice of food could be eaten cold.

Norm picked up the can of beans and retrieved a can opener from a sack of utensils, clamping it on the can like a pro. The can galloped 'round and 'round, but failed to open. Outraged, Norm flew at the can with a metal punch, flailing and prying with a vengeance until a jagged opening would accommodate a spoon.

It was not what we had in mind, but it was a Sunday evening in a small town. We stayed up for awhile, blinking at a show on television. I felt reasonably content, but Norm stole glances at the traitorous stove ranging from malice to disbelief. "Man!" he kept repeating, "It worked at home." I couldn't help but smile to myself; he demanded so little of life, but on that night, even the smallest favors had been denied. "Poor Norm," I thought. He was more discouraged than I!

Aug. 4, 1980... Got a great little kitchenette.

We were enthusiastic. \$20 per day or \$120 per week bought a basement level, two room, paneled unit, complete with garage-sale dishes and pans. The toilet was elevated on a step to assure that it would flush. It also boasted a relic radio and a T.V. with poor reception. The best things about the place, though, were the river which rushed several yards from our door and the ability to procure frozen pizzas from the friendly owner, Marion. After a day of rigorous hiking, I would ask Marion to heat a pizza and she and I would talk until the pizza was ready.

I felt sorry for Marion. She was a widow who tried to keep the motel intact for her guests despite rising costs and the continual threat of delapidation. The place was in disrepair, but having little help, change was more of a dream than a possibility. She had endured hardship in life; she looked poor, but with dignity, not despair. Marion accepted things in a manner which encouraged trust, making herself welcome company and her motel a homey place to stay. On one visit, I happened to mention that Norm

was my brother. She accepted my statement with unparalleled grace, although it was obvious by the glimmer in her eyes that she did not believe a word; she had seen too much to swallow that story. Having nothing to hide or defend, I let her believe what she would. With or without proof, one believes what he wants to believe.

"That's it!" Relieved of our luggage, the trunk appeared to have been disemboweled. I slammed the lid and turned around to see one of the other guests intercept Norm as he strode toward the car. "Hi, there," the man bellowed. "See you've got a Dodge Dart, too. Got two of 'em at home. Darn things just won't wear out..." Within the passage of five minutes we knew more about him than either of us cared to know. And we hadn't even asked.

"Come here every year," he stated. We also learned the man delivered mail for his bread and butter; he was married and had kids. There was something very unpleasant about the man, apart from his obnoxious flow of conversation. He was the type of person who was oblivious to his own abhorrant characteristics, a man who would drown his victim unwittingly and not realize that he had died.

When I thought the conversation could grow no worse, his eyes took on an eerie glow and he related to Norm the events of one of his past vacations, wherein he and several relatives traveled to Montana. From a previous trip, I knew Montana was a state resplendent with ground squirrels, and had enjoyed feeding them on one memorable occasion. The man, however, found the animals satisfying for quite a different reason; he, his son and another man spent an afternoon gunning down approximately 400 squirrels. It was a lavish affair which had afforded him pure delight; his excitement over the reckless slaughter was complete and shameless. He had done some ranchers a great service, he raved. As he blasted away, I am sure that service was the last thing on his mind.

I gritted my teeth, glad that none of the conversation had been directed to me, while Norm, visibly unimpressed and equally disgusted by the man, inched toward the car. Fortunately, the man's wife appeared from the darkness of a motel room and we were spared further discussion of the ground squirrel Armageddon.

"Be seein' ya'," he offered.

"Yeh," Norm's tight-lipped response almost had to be cranked from his throat.

Pulling from the motel lot was a relief. "Now there is a guy who likes to kill," I said.

"Yeh," Norm replied. "A good ol' boy. . . nothing like blowing up a few rodents on a weekend..."

The sheer number of his kill was enough to astonish, yet more disturbing was his unrestrainable enjoyment of the event. There was no nobility whatsoever in his action, for no one had asked for his assistance or solicited a need for a specific harvest of the animals. Certainly the grazing cattle injured themselves in rodent holes, but killing aside, the man took no interest in filling the holes in the line of duty. Thus, amid hundreds of bodies, the real menace remained.

In context of need, hunting was natural, but when utilized as an outlet, a fulfillment of the need to kill for its own sake, hunting terrified me. I voiced my sentiments to Norm and we wondered aloud about the possible outcome if no such outlet was available. How would the killing need be vented?

We drove into the park and experienced the reminiscent awe of the mountains. It was unparalleled beauty.

After twisting through the pines we pulled off the road at a scenic turn off and roosted atop a pile of boulders for the rest of the afternoon. Occasionally a timid chipmunk would appear, nervously twitching its tail until our presence caused it to scoot behind a rock or bush. Once again, the sadistic mailman crossed my mind, and I wondered how the Colorado rodent population would fare. With luck, he had left his arsenal at home.

The Colorado Rocky Mountains were my vision of paradise. Their immense proportion, viewed against the surrounding pines, deluged my senses with an all-encompassing wholeness and an aura of well-being. No other place produced such an effect within me; I felt no spiritual rift with the universe and no emotional rift with myself.

I could not understand the stop-and-start tourists who drove through the park simply to justify their bumper stickers; or those who, at a scenic turn off would jump out, peer over the railing and pronounce, "Nothing special here" if there were no chipmunks to feed. They wanted artificial, invented forms of entertainment. If there were no buttons or knobs to pull, no tour guide, nothing that spoke to them through a speaker or took them on a ride, the place had no significance.

Whirlwind tourists rarely ventured onto any of the trails, or if they did, seldom walked further than one mile. Since all social amenities had to be packed in, few sight-seers prepared themselves for adversity of even the kindest temperament. They generally had no poncho, wore heeled shoes or sandals, carried no energy food, and of course, no water. Once their mistakes were evident, they wasted no time retracing their steps, trundling down the trail with parched mouths agape and pouting loudly for the lifestyle they had momentarily misplaced. Norm and I generally encountered these people on our return from a long hike; since our trek had begun early in the morning, we avoided the afternoon rain and completed our hike long before the sun dipped behind the mountains, washing the surrounding land in darkness. When I saw a "typical" tourist attempting a hike while toting a radio or blandly surveying the scenery, I realized how different I was... and how thankful I was concerning the former statement. I knew also, that if it were not for the differences in people, I could not revel in the solitude that was mine to enjoy.

Our days in the mountains were excellent. The rain never lingered, leaving the nights clear and cold. We often returned to the park after supper to drink in the darkness and listen to the wind dance in the pines. Apart from society, but for an occasional passing automobile, we felt delivered, not deprived. Cool winds swept through the silhouetted trees and curled between tight crevasses, producing a melodious rhythm which conjured the impression of silence. The noise of society was stilled in tranquility.

By daylight we roamed the trails, packing our essentials and my camera. I never hoped to confine the actual beauty of nature on film, but toted my camera as a pictorial diary.

Photographs had become my favorite souvenir for their dimensional forms recalled statements attesting to one's destination... they were almost like eyes into the past.

Aug. 8, 1980... Sandbeach Lake (a 4 mile hike). It was gorgeous. Got sunburned. Felt great...not tired at all.

Our last hike was to Sandbeach Lake, which was nestled in the high country at the end of a rigorous trail. I label the trail in such terms because it did not simply travel upward; it repeatedly involved many declines as well, thereby creating a hike which was as difficult upon returning as it was at the outset. However, despite the evils of the trail, the lake was a reward more than adequate; it was a rippling sapphire wonder clenched in the palm of the mountains. Its white shore-line was hemmed by gnarled, yet dignified pines, while the cold and bloodless splendor of Long's Peak presided over all things, living and inanimate.

After reaching the lake, our day was spent lolling about its perimeter as a cool breeze modified the naked heat of the sun. The place seemed a virtually untouched remnant of land; we assumed the lake's crystal water was no less than pure and wholesome, and without hesitation, drank our fill. As the numbingly cold liquid ran into my cupped hands, it brought back memories of mountain streams and the unspoiled lakes of Minnesota. Such draughts were ambrosiac delights.

When the sun began its westward descent, we regretfully pulled ourselves from beside the lake and shouldered our packs. Both Norm and I had come to view my legs as unstoppable, but my energy level after such a trek was a surprise. As he prepared to rest his legs following supper, I suppressed a grin and asked if he would like to take another walk.

"Noooo. . ." Norm moaned in obvious protest "We've done enough, you dummy," he asserted, one eyebrow cocked above the other.

"OK," I smiled, having received the expected reaction. We often bounced our known foibles off each other for the purpose of mutual amusement. He was not mad at my suggestion, nor did he think me dumb; consequently I never expected an affirmative response and would not have pursued the issue because of its illogical quality. Besides. . . he was bigger than me.

Aug 8, 1980... Both of us are feeling sorta' sick. Probably from drinking lake water yesterday.

It was a bitter pill, but it had to be swallowed. The lake must have been the culprit. We knew that pools of water were more questionable drinking sources, but Sandbeach appeared pure beyond question. It would have been easy to say "Things just aren't what they used to be," but more likely than not, a passing animal had polluted the water previous to our consumption and we were victims of chance.

By evening we felt much better and prepared the car for our early morning departure. Before trying

to indulge in some restless sleep, however, we drove to the park and made a final circuit of our favorite scenic views. I branded the magnificence into my mind so I could later return to the mountains in envisioned thoughts.

At 4:00 in the morning we were off, drifting down the black road which wound silently through the mountain pass. Above, rocky sentinels observed our progress, their formidable figures etched against the dark mat of the sky. As we coasted deeper into the rocky crevasse, the stars receded into the morning light, bowing to the far greater sun which sought dominion over the earth and sky.

With the coming of dawn, the spell of silence was broken. and we gained relatively flat land.

"You know," Norm said, "Once I leave, I can't remember what the mountains look like; I just can't see them in my mind."

I was glad that I could; I possessed a hoard of images for reflections. Unfortunately, though, mental pictures could not be shared.

Aug. 9, 1980... Drove straight back. Norm didn't feel good. I helped him get downstairs and all.

It was a long shot, to be sure, but by the time we hit Des Moines, it seemed ridiculous to check into a motel when home was a mere four hours away. We kept driving.

We rolled up to an empty house since Mom and Dad were still on vacation. Opening the door a certain stagnancy assailed our nostrils, proof that no one had disrupted the air for days. It was home, nevertheless, and a few brisk passes and several gusts of wind sucked through the screen windows dissipated the stillness within minutes, transforming the house into a breathing creature once again. I was happy to be home.

Upstairs I found Norm seated on his bed, his eyes unfocused and restless. I stopped and he looked up at me.

"I feel strange. . . it's hard to describe. Nervous and out of touch." His appearance made me wish I could hold him, shelter him from some undefinable evil. When I asked if there was anything I could do, he wanted me to stay and talk; far more than all else, he did not want to be alone. I sat down on the twin bed opposite Norm's; later he decided to watch television, so I brought his pillows downstairs and made certain he was comfortable. After awhile, he announced that he felt better, and I rose to go upstairs.

"Thanks," he said "I'll stay up a little longer."

"Are you sure you're OK?" I asked.

"Yeh. . ." The fear and bewilderment had gone, leaving a rather placid figure to stare at the television. Despite his stature, there was something about Norm. . . an innocence... a vulnerability... that gave him a child-like quality; and within myself, something instinctual made me alert and watchful of his needs. Involuntarily, I always kept an ear peeled for Norm; I never asked myself "why " and it never seemed to matter.

Aug 15, 1980... Went to (the mall) with Mom. Got china.

Before summer's end, I was able to realize a dream I had maintained since I was 13 years old; Dad submitted to my desire to purchase a set of china, regardless of the fact that it would be in the attic for at least several years. I was elated, after five years. I still liked the same pattern, and I simply wanted to buy the pieces while the pattern was readily available. The rich, coffee hued plates bordered with muted gold vines would one day bring further enjoyment to my dinner table. I wondered when I would first use them. . . in an apartment, to mark the beginning of a new job?. . . or in a house, the first meal prepared for a husband. . .

Mom and I carefully packed the dishes in their boxes and I watched as Dad pushed them, one by one, into the depths of the attic. How could such a plan be a mistake?.

Aug. 22, 1980... Rehearsal dinner with Steve.

Mary, one of my first playmates, was about to be married. It was no shock, she had dated the same young man for eight years. The only comment that seemed to abound concerning the event was, "It's

about time!" I had no qualms toward the success of the marriage, for if they had not seen the myriad facets of each other's personalities by now, they were either blind, deaf and stupid, or extremely keen actors. Personally, I believed in them entirely.

I asked Steve to accompany me to the rehearsal dinner, and to my delight, he accepted the invitation without hesitation. He was my first choice and, in my opinion, best suited for the occasion. Not only was he personable and well-dressed but he knew the bride as well as I did and would have no difficulty engaging in conversation with the other guests.

Aug. 23, 1980... Mary's wedding reception 'til 12:00.

It was a lovely summer evening, and as one of three bridesmaids, I felt elegant strolling down the aisle in my peach gown and picture hat. The wedding progressed smoothly, with no disruptive children or sideshows, thus ending a veritable storybook romance in the typical style.

Once the ceremony was over, several neighbors and friends remarked that, dressed as I was, I looked like a bride; indeed, after such processions, I could not deny that I heard my own imaginary wedding bells. Situations like these were a jaunt from the ordinary, and indulging in a bit of personal fantasy seemed a natural benefit.

At the reception Steve and I enjoyed ourselves on a grand scale. The food and drink and dancing were merriment of the finest proportion, and we hovered at each other's side throughout the night. Those who did not know us thought we were married, and although I over-step the bounds of modesty, I do believe we made a fine pair.

After the celebration, I held more memories to carefully tuck away. Mary would not be living on 7th Avenue any more. I suddenly felt a million miles from trikes and trinkets and Barbie dolls.

PAGE 175

Chapter 23 Black Hawk College

"Change. It seemed too simple to be the cure for depression; nevertheless, a cure it was. "

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Black Hawk College

When fall classes began at college and I found myself on the inside looking out, time was once again a rare gem. Balancing a full load of study in one hand and what had evolved into a hateful job in the other, I soon found myself nervous beyond all levels of acceptability.

Some people thrived on activity, and the more deadlines they had to meet the better they performed. I did not. For me, school in itself expended plenty of effort, and with the added pressure of my job, wherein I now had to work at a newly installed, central cashier island, I watched helplessly as my

sanity wore away. The new system was chaotic and inefficient; two cashiers had to meet the demands of patrons who congregated on all four sides of the island. There were no numbers or lines to assure that customers were served at their proper time, and special sales from the surrounding departments were never clarified to any reasonable extent, leaving us to distinguish "bargains" through catalogued stock numbers and tips from the customer.

Under such slow procedures, anger and pandemonium were the routine terrors of employment. My desire to please was a virtual impossibility. To the public, "I was the store" and any disagreeable feature of the store or its policies were doused on me while the upper echelon stood beaming at a safe distance. "You'll get used to it," one particularly brash fellow would comment as I propped myself up on the counter after a long and grueling siege. Then he would spin around and walk leisurely to the escalator while I gritted my teeth in silence. I am sure he was responsible for many "bitten" tongues through the years.

When I was relieved of cashier duty my nerves were as taut as a bow-string, and to dissipate my energy, I would zing about the department like an arrow to its target. I hung clothes and arranged the stock with such speed that an onlooker might have thought I was competing in a marathon.

Once home, I still could not relax. Homework, if any, demanded my thorough attention after work, so I would routinely plug in the coffee maker and brew twelve cups of caffeine. With a warm mug in one hand, I was able to perceive with intelligence the content of books and write themes which otherwise might have dissolved altogether through the debilitating numbness of fatigue. When I had completed my studies to my satisfaction I allowed myself the liberty to prepare for sleep.

"Going to get your four hours?" Norm would tease. Actually, it was more like six hours. I am sure my body would have preferred eight. However, the caffeine had the ability to bluff my body's requirements and I happened to need all of the waking hours I could reasonably obtain. Thus, six hours of sleep plus twelve cups of coffee equaled one day of maximum level performance.

Unfortunately I failed to acknowledge the existence of hidden parts of the equation which, in reality, were the most important regarding its successful outcome. One could not give 100 percent of himself toward all areas of demand; there would be nothing left. Before realizing this concept, I fell into the hole that I had been so intent upon digging; having depleted myself, I stood alone at the bottom of the pit. My confidence was no longer a staff, for it had crumbled on my way down.

Thereafter, little I did was worth any merit; it should have been better. Self-satisfaction was almost an impossibility, so I tried not to direct notice. Even when I appraised myself in the mirror, I saw only pounds that needed not thrive on my body.

Sept. 14, 1980... Work 12-4. Not a bad day. Pizza for supper. I gotta lose more weight.

I was very depressed, yet so busy that my depression had taken on emotional nuances of its own before I took the time to utilize objectivity and see my problem. Meanwhile I had erected many of the building blocks of an anorexic; though I wished no attention, I felt emotionally "small" and naturally turned to dieting as a means of attaining physical smallness.

What had begun with scrutinizing my body before a mirror and weighing myself at least twice a day blossomed into an obsession. I became an expert on the subject of calories, reading every article and scanning every chart to ascertain that my daily intake of food never exceeded my minimum requirement. If I ate too much, I turned to exercise as a partner to dieting. Indulging in a late night snack would make it necessary to burn the calories before bedtime, and I would do 45 minutes of leg-kicks and lifts to alleviate the guilt of eating. I even encouraged a nervous state within myself to burn more calories at work. I began to view diet pop and coffee as alternatives to eating without feeling physically deprived. The caffeine helped me to retain energy without having ingested a bulk of calories. I also lied to avoid eating. If Mom told me to take some meat, I would say I was not hungry and would eat it later. Later, of course, never came. I stopped accompanying my parents to restaurants to better adhere to my diet plan, not trusting myself when faced with a tempting menu; my supper would then consist of a bowl of lettuce and one half of a glass of milk.

When the subject of dieting became my favorite topic of discussion, I realized I was not simply trying to lose weight; my compulsive behavior did not originate from the thought that I was over-weight, but rather something far greater that I had chosen to ignore. I studied my obsession and grew fascinated by it. Never before had I given such power to an emotionally derived fixation (except perhaps picking my nails into virtual oblivion; that, however, was a habit, not an obsession, and had no authority over my common sense).

After its discovery, I looked upon my fanatic dieting as a "willful distortion of reality," for I knew what I was doing. As if toying with or testing myself, I allowed my emotions to "feel fat"; since I was aware of the irrational view of myself, I perceived that it would not rule me and I was in no danger. Something within me made it impossible to lose control. I was fortunate; I was able to understand, indeed, feel the terror of an addiction without personally submitting to its reign.

I was curious to find the strength of this radical self-perception and how long my rationality would tolerate its existence, as it certainly affected my life on a daily basis. It happened that I allowed my diet to carry on until I weighed 115 pounds, at which point my parents, Norm and several friends were truly worried about my thinness. Crazy though it was, I continued, emotionally speaking, to view myself as overweight; rationally, however, I knew I was too thin, and not desiring to be a source of concern for my loved ones, decided the diet had proceeded long enough.

Yes, the diet would come to a halt. However, there would need to be additional changes in my lifestyle to combat the underlying problem. Because I had allotted ample time for self-observation, I pin-pointed my problem as having stemmed from physical and mental exhaustion. Also to blame, but initially less apparent, was an evasive need for freedom and personal time. . . which had always eluded my control. I was trapped between asserting a nasty declaration of independence and submitting entirely to those who would rule my time; total conqueror or total prisoner seemed my only alternatives, and disliking both, ignored the issue.

Returning to the more obvious realm of change as dictated by exhaustion, my first act of healing was to quit my job.

The results were marvelous. Even before I was actually through working at the store, I found the strain had been lifted from my mind. I was flooded with relief and realized that, for months, I had not emanated such happiness. Previously, I reflected, happiness only came in the form of doing something for someone else. Thinking about myself brought a sense of disgust and the need to deny myself of life's pleasures. The greatest compliment I could have been given at that time was, "You're so skinny!" If I heard comments in just suggesting that I was in any way overweight, I would still take them seriously; Norm caught on to my twisted thinking and quickly began calling me "Hair-on-a-stick." It was a name I loved. . . and one that aged with me, although I never again turned to such destructive means of abating depression.

Ode To The Furnace

A groan,
A rumble,
Click!
Sputter!...
Then...pop!
The furnace turned on,
But my heart nearly stopped!

Lauren Isaacson
January 1981

Prey

The flight
Of the owl...
Vise-like talons
Stifle life...
The ceasing
of breath.

Lauren Isaacson
January 1981

The Endless Vigil

Step carefully, now,
For a house never sleeps;
Beware of the hallway...
The second plank creaks!
The stairs to the basement
Will yawn in dismay
At the touch of a stranger
Tiptoeing away.
Hush!...not a word
Near the southern most vent...
(On revealing one's presence
This house is bent!)
For an echoing message
Will rumble and shout;
"Someone is here,
Of this there's no doubt!"
Step carefully, now,
For a house never sleeps...
Quietly whispering,
A vigil it keeps.

Lauren Isaacson
January 27, 1981

Change. It seemed too simple to be the cure for depression; nevertheless, a cure it was. Not all changes would be as easy as quitting a job or dropping a class; I would not allow myself to be fooled by my relative success regarding the cessation of dieting. Some changes, I realized, would hurt myself and others, and these were the ones that would deal with my freedom. . . my time; they would be the most important changes of my life, and to forever avoid these would lock me in an unhappy state of being. One day I knew they would be faced, for to deprive myself of happiness would be a deprivation of growth, and life without growth would be worse than death. Thus, before growth's stagnation, change.

Mar. 15, 1981... I can live, love and laugh because I have known my emotions; I have experienced ecstasy as well as depression. Serenity, though, lies midway between the high and the low.

I was staring thoughtfully through the windshield. "I think maybe the reason I can't make decisions is because I lack confidence, I guess."

Norm glanced over at me from the driver's seat, his eyebrows punctuating a look of disbelief. "Man," he said, "That's great!" enjoying the moment to its fullest.

My statement had rolled from my lips with unflinching honesty. It was a gut analysis, a spontaneous reaction that could not be retracted once spun into words. I shook my head. "It's pretty pathetic, isn't it?" I laughed. It became the joke of the month between us, made more humorous by the fact that it was true.

For the most part I was able to enjoy life after quitting my job. My anorexic tendencies slowly disappeared and I turned my attention away from food. School was my only real obligation, and though I applied more pressure to various assignments than perhaps was necessary, I was satisfied with the final results because I knew I had done my best. I found that certain subjects made me come alive with interest, and while self-confidence remained low, confidence in my school work increased rapidly. Occasionally I dueled with guilty qualms when I was indulging in recreational activities because I wondered if I had studied enough. Rhetorically speaking, however, by what measure and under whose authority is "enough" determined? Norm, more than anyone, helped me to see the necessity of "letting go". . . of saying, "enough!" and turning my back. He felt little obligation which allowed him to do as he wished; when his emotional well-being was at stake, few people could alter his stance. He spent time as, and with whom, he desired. If he chose to be alone, he made sure no one interfered with his intention. At times Norm's reactions unintentionally hurt the feelings of others, yet his sanity remained intact; he knew his limits, and made certain they were never reached.

I, on the other hand, would plow headlong into a doubtful situation at the expense of my emotional well-being, to avoid hurting another individual's feelings. I would endure intolerable people and ready myself for the asylum, while the person rattled on and thought well of me. After his or her departure, Norm would be responsible for finding a putty knife and scraping me off the ceiling.

It was no secret between me and myself that I despised a fight. I controlled anger with a fervor, frightened that I could not defend my position if the recipient of my vehemence chose to see red. Quite removed from anger, though, I could not even wage a modest war against the persuasive tactics of those who would pirate my wish for solitude or guarantee myself "equal" time in a conversation; if I was not blessed with a fair companion, my desire to spend time alone was rarely respected and my views were seldom heard. How was it possible to say "no" without being hounded until my response was "yes"? . . .or claim my share of the conversation without rudely interrupting with, "shut up!"?...

I hated to hurt people; I once had a hard time hanging up on a prank phone call. Nevertheless, I knew I was still slightly depressed, and until I was able to defeat my lack of aggression, I would continue to be haunted by the weakness and resent those who dexterously wielded the power of persuasion over my head.

During a sociology course based on the family, students were given various choices for extended study beyond those areas covered in the classroom discussions and book reading. Because I loved to write, I decided to keep a journal of my personal views on relationships. As I had previously discovered, writing helped me to clarify my emotions in a logical and systematic fashion; knowing this, I looked upon the assignment quite favorably. It had been some time since I had last spilled the contents of my mind onto paper, and an assignment dictating that I do so granted me the time I needed to pursue my beliefs in depth and reflect on personal experiences and observations. This assignment would be no waste of time.

I rarely ventured anywhere without a note pad and pen. When I was enlightened by relevant thoughts or glimpsed feelings that pertained to my journal entries, the note pad would suddenly appear and I would scrawl viciously until I had captured the idea in permanent ink. Soon I possessed a hoard of ideas and encapsulated thoughts which would serve to fuel the concepts expressed in the journal itself.

PAGE 181

Essay:
Views on Choice

". . . one's self can be either his best friend or in selfishness, his worst enemy."

VIEWS ON CHOICE

The normal human mind is to be used; primarily it allows man to survive. It then allows an immense capacity for growth, and a definition of values toward compatible co-existence. A child grows to adulthood, and similarly, his brain and thoughts are able to mature; he can choose between instinctual selfishness or attempt to view life with a broader scope, thereby improving the world he touches by improving himself. The more the mind grows, the more humble its "master" becomes, for he realizes that knowledge is infinity and infinity cannot be encapsulated in the human brain.

It is not enough to say simply "we are what we are," for although there are certain aspects of one's personality which, I feel, are unchangeable, I must also believe that man has a certain amount of liberty over his actions; yet possessing that mental freedom, man also is capable of perverting both instinctual

behavior and societal standards of conduct.

The ideas of right and wrong are generally clarified for each person by his elders when he is yet quite young. Even those with learning disabilities and those who are not severely mentally retarded have the ability to distinguish between socially defined "good" and "bad" behavior. When children grow into adulthood, it is difficult to view wrongdoing as simply "bad behavior," much less "acceptable"; one has been taught to think, and then to act.

Even when the environmental aspects through one's youth are considered, certainly the expectations of behavior and conduct are taught in the school; the child cannot say he was not aware of the societal rules, despite any lack of respect for those rules in the home. Each individual possesses a mind of his own; he is free to act upon or disregard negative pressure.

Saying evil occurred due to environmental pressures is, perhaps, today's way of avoiding the issue of bad and good behavior, blaming life's circumstances for immorality, instead of facing the fact that the person made a wrong decision of his own accord. Those who continually blame other people and circumstances for their personality disturbances gain little respect, for one can choose with whom and in what manner he desires to spend his time. Exceptions shall always exist, yet often a grand problem can be reduced by making select changes in one's life; changes such as a transferal from a tough job situation, or the decision to stop interactions with a "friend" who truly is not a friend. People must be responsible for their own actions, although it is always easier to blame, to utilize a scapegoat. It is virtual music to the ears to hear someone in this age admit that he has made a mistake or has done a grave disservice to humankind.

The environment argument robs each person of his individuality, for if one cannot be punished for wrongdoing then he cannot be applauded for decent behavior. It would be as if one was a robot, devoid of character, and stripped of choice. Furthermore, the fact that two children from the same environment, indeed, the same home, can grow to be complete opposites in character, subtracts environmental importance regarding one's disposition and life choices. It is not so much the environment as the manner in which one reacts to it that forms one's personality.

There are countless choices in life; whether to lie, or tell the truth, to cheat or be fair; whether to be unresponsive or kind, to give or, like a child, demand constant nurturing. Then, of course, there are degrees of tolerance regarding the enactment of distasteful traits and illegal practices. While a minor may snatch a bottle of liquor and proceed to intoxicate himself in the woods behind his house, an adult can legally indulge, yet will then climb into his car and drive haphazardly to his next destination; an under-aged drinker, and a drunk driver...both are illegal, but for me there is no contest as to which is the worse offender since the "adult" drunk is jeopardizing lives with each block he passes.

When other crimes are committed, such as mass slayings and violent attacks upon innocent victims, insanity is often utilized as a way to avoid severe punishment. While certain individuals may well be apart from reality, surely not all of those who claim insanity are, for they knew exactly what they did, as well as the implications and seriousness of the crime.

When an apparently mentally intact adult commits such a brutal violation of the societal code of conduct, it is difficult to rationalize his behavior as acceptable by way of insanity; certainly he exercised a choice, worsened by the fact that he was an adult. He did not use self-control; though he felt murderous, he did not have to act upon his impulse.

If an individual was bound inextricably to a fore-fated disposition by (God) then his actions would prove nothing as to the man's character... that is, his inherent ability to choose right over wrong. If God undertook the creation of a perfectly "good man," in so much that he, the man, was incapable of doing evil, the man could not receive applause for his acts of good will because he essentially had no other choice.

In conversations with my father, he often offered an inquiry for discussion as to which man is essentially the "better" of the following: a non-drinker who, without the slightest twinge of anxiety, refuses a drink, or the alcoholic who, fighting desperately, also refuses a drink as sweat forms upon his brow. My father could always come to the conclusion that the non-drinker was, in essence, the weaker of the two described since he felt no temptation in the first place and could not be congratulated for a decision which created no mental turmoil.

The above analogy could be substituted in many arenas of human weakness. Though the degree of temptation toward wrong-doing varies among its subjects, I believe the most courage and fortitude of character is demonstrated by those who are able to rule their impulses and seek the road of a clear conscience. A battle won with oneself against injustice will always remain a noble endeavor; one's self can be either his best friend or in selfishness, his worst enemy. There are times in everyone's life when

two or more choices present themselves for inspection; and it is not always easy to choose the ethical course of action, yet for those who are mentally aware of themselves and the people who share their world, there should ideally exist only one choice, the benevolent choice.

It will never be possible for one human to completely judge another's character, and likewise carry out justice on earth. Even if the committers of crimes are punished, justice will not come to the victim who suffered the loss or trauma. The victim's pain can recede, but it cannot be washed away. My mother told me once that when she was a little girl, she thought God would strike down evil people, and they would one day fall over, dead and benign. It did not take long for her young eyes to see that life was not that way. However, one can, perhaps, derive a small amount of satisfaction from hope vested in "ultimate justice" and the idea that a being far greater than the greatest human is able to detect one's truthfulness and the depth of his knowledge of right and wrong.

PAGE 183

Essay:

Views on Awareness

"An individual who is not one with his inner core cannot hope to give of himself fully, for his mind encompasses only his life, and not life itself. "

VIEWS ON AWARENESS

The inevitable passage of time, varying levels of maturity, and our life experiences are all elements which, in part, have the power to change our outlook on life and alter our personality; it is yet the mind, however, which fully determines our reaction. To illustrate this point, allow me to create the following scenario; two women, both of whom enjoy a life of queenly leisure, are one day forced to face their husbands' untimely death, thereby obliterating a prime factor in their story book existence. One woman, quite distressed, solemnly prepares for her husband's funeral arrangements. After the initial shock of his sudden departure from the earth, she is able to settle into her daily routine once again.

The other woman, however, is completely unable to accept the solid truth that her husband is dead. She pines remorsefully through each day and wearies her friends with her incessant lamentations. So obsessed with the mourning of her late husband is she, that she eventually falls into deep depression and seeks the aid of a psychiatrist.

Thus we have seen two instances which have had numerous circumstances in common, yet the manner in which the women reacted to their misfortune was markedly different. This leads me to believe that an individual is essentially who he will ever be at birth, excluding, of course, those accidental occurrences which mar and sometimes obliterate certain abilities of both mind and body.

Despite my belief that a person will be essentially unchanged from his mental and behavioral patterns as determined at birth, there is within each individual a certain ability to change; however, the potential must be there. One cannot become someone or something for which he lacks all foundation.

That which allows an individual to overcome the reins of selfishness and base behavior, and to grow toward the best image of himself is awareness. It is the key to change and self-improvement, and

through these qualities I believe it also sets one free.

Awareness is not easily given to definition, having so many variables which shroud its very essence in obscurity. It is more than one's perception of the world; it is also the ability of an individual to view himself with objectivity and in turn, understand the way in which he is visualized by others; it is seeing the world through an eagle's eyes, and conducting oneself in such a manner as to avoid injuring humankind; it is demonstrating respect to one's neighbors and associates in a way which is conducive to nature's intent and societal congeniality. It is the ability to know when the time is right to voice one's opinions and when, also, to remain silent; it is restraining habits in the presence of others which are discourteous or distracting; it is conducting oneself in a manner respectful of himself and the whole of society, for without the benefit of the unselfish, the world could not exist.

Unlike other aspects of ability, awareness is not a factor which is easily determined. This is so because there is no scale by which to calculate awareness as there is in dealing with educational acuteness. Moreover, awareness does not necessarily reflect intelligence; one can be extremely intelligent yet possess no sensitivity regarding his conduct. To further add to the confusion, everyone feels himself to be aware of his actions; while some undoubtedly control every aspect of their personality in public situations, others feel as if they are perceptive, but conduct themselves rather distastefully in the midst of others. Once alerted to their actions, they are able to alter their behavior. Still others continue to demonstrate highly irregular behavioral patterns even after candid instruction, for they feel their actions are in no way peculiar, and are not hesitant to say there is no reason for them to change. Then, of course, the true victims of insanity are not responsible for their actions, for reality has become distorted and vague; the same is true of mentally retarded individuals.

Just as every human being has mental and physical potentials, so, I believe, do we have an "awareness potential." In all things there are degrees of performance and capabilities which are instilled within us long before birth; these seeds can sometimes lay dormant until, perhaps, the need arises for their use or they are, in effect, stumbled upon by their master. Though we may well attain our potential in a certain area, whether it be consciousness toward societal behavior or an inexplicable hatred for the mathematical language, there are other mental and physical arenas which are seemingly boundless in regard to one's capabilities; I tend to think of these as one's "natural gifts" which apparently grow with little effort on the part of the individual thus endowed. We are not created equal in the mental, emotional, or physical sense; we do, however, excel in various facets of each. Thus, while its presence alone determines if one can change, the amount of one's awareness is the controlling factor of how much one can change.

Through observation and extensive thought, I have reached the conclusion that any obsessive self-indulgence or selfishness is merely a hollow attempt by the individual thus incensed to fill an emotional void. Self-love is quite separate from self-infatuation, with the latter lacking all objectivity in thinking because all thought is mirrored toward oneself. Selfishness is an insatiable hunger which consumes far too many individuals; as with all obsessive emotions, it feeds upon the imprisoned mind, destroying the love and replacing it with malignant desire, resulting in no less than hatred.

No one can read the mind of another, or delve therein for the truthfulness of his statements or actions. Only the individual knows whether he is giving his best or if selfishness is the controlling power behind all deeds. I do feel, however, that one who displays a knowledge of all restrictions and codes of conduct regarding another's rightful behavior toward himself is also capable of returning respect and cordiality, for obviously he is aware of societal expectations.

When a person is aware of his faults but makes no effort to change, he is a leech upon society which drains others of their rightly earned freedoms, whether as simple as desiring a yard bereft of dog litter or the wish for tranquillity, or as significant as the right to security and peace within the home. He who takes from society without returning something of himself gains the regard of no one. One determines the way in which he shall be treated by his self-conduct; respect begets respect.

The person who indulges in selfishness is a most distressing companion; he demands rather than asks, and will not take "no" for an answer; he is opinionated and short-sighted, seeing only the effects a certain measure will have upon his own welfare; he feels he knows everything, and will be pleased to fill one in; if he listens, he will misconstrue the information or turn it around to suit himself. One unwilling to change himself looks only to his own needs; he is unable to release his child-like mentality for fear that he shall not receive "his share"; riding abreast of laziness, rebellion, resentment, or another usually child-like mode of behavior, he locks himself in a prison which he himself built. Indeed, he would be pitied if he was not so abhorred; yet it is unfair to expect a share of the harvest if one has not also planted seed in the field. Thus instead of attempting to discover the true problem behind his emptiness, the self-centered individual often ignores his mind's plea for help and tries to fulfill himself through that which others will give, creating a most devastating hindrance toward personal growth.

One must develop his mind to the point that he can love and accept himself, and regard his flaws not as hopeless, but rather, attributes which, with growth, will be overcome. Only through undiluted awareness can one develop wholeness of character. An individual who is not one with his inner core cannot hope to give of himself fully, for his mind encompasses only his life, and not life itself.

While awareness allows one to discover his faults, honesty clarifies them. Looking into one's own character can be unpleasant and even distressing, for there is no one who does not wish to erase certain mindless inclinations and base emotions from his personality slate. However, without the initial realization and acceptance of such faults, no reversal shall take place. It is through these confessions to oneself that one is able to grow and eventually change into a being more worthy of his own existence in the realm of nature. I view honesty as a product of love. Therefore, honesty toward oneself must be of utmost importance in the development of self-love and the creation of inner wholeness. In this scope, perhaps it could be said that irrationality is an attempt to "mask" selfishness, for few who act toward the benefit of humanity will inflict upon it needless pain. For the most part, only thoughtlessness proves injurious to the masses. Just as it is important to nurture one's character, so is it imperative to see the whole character and weed from it that which desires to choke and plague its life and surrounding lives.

I believe that each individual desires to be liked by his fellow man and have a sense of "belonging" . . . (although certain individuals so desire companionship that they succumb to the notions of others and rob themselves of a personality). They want to possess a feeling of individuality, and be accepted for who they are and wish to become.

Far from perfect, I realize that I could use an infinite amount of improvement within my character, and despite the menacing flaws which I must face, I feel quite fortunate to be able to acknowledge them, for without detection, they could not be overcome. I hope that I will grow in strength and love until I no longer live, for when inner growth stagnates, one essentially dies.

Soul's Voyage

Alone, I observe
In the eerie glow
The earth-bound voyage
Of falling snow.
The trees are all clad
In angelic white...
Such calm I find
On this midwinter's night!
Framed by the door,
'Twas the picture of peace
And earnestly beckoned
My soul to release
That I might lose myself
In night's deepest confines,
Ne'er to return
To life's dismal design.
My heart would not yearn,
Nor would it pine
For a life that was lost
To one more divine.
Ah, but alas!
And how the night flies
From dawn's icy fingers
And wind's bitter cries!
'Twas naught but a dream:
The night gone by
When moonbeam rays
Kissed snow-drenched skies!
Ah, cruel memory!
Disparaging blow!
For my hopes are consumed
'Neath the deepening snow.

Lauren Isaacson
January 1981

Chapter 24 Interlude

"Owning a healthy sense of self-worth was not immodesty but protection against vulnerability. "

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Interlude

Jan.—Feb. 1981... I am a loner, used to spending time alone ...
I dislike a lot of contact...

....I am a listener, although not always by choice...

....I think a lot... contemplate life (and) death. Is there such a thing as thinking too much?

. . .I know myself through observations and experiences and my writing.

Writing is sometimes the only means through which I can express myself, for I found that, being a listener, I usually help people more than they do me. I perhaps begin, but more often than not, I fail to say what I set out to say. I wonder if this makes good relationships...all ear and no mouth. (But) I feel better giving than receiving.

...One must be receptive, or the relationship cannot last.

...The amount one discloses about (him) self is oftentimes parallel to the amount of attention given (to him) by the partner. If one listens with the intensity of a brick wall, it naturally follows that the other will be less likely to express feelings in other situations...he feels shut out.

...He is the chief voice in the relationship. (He) says he will listen to me, but unless I talk in an unending flow until I'm finished, he breaks in with a response and continues to elaborate upon it until I have virtually forgotten my thoughts. I have found short, powerful phrases the only means to convey my beliefs at times...or reading my personal essays and poems to him. Sometimes I feel small . . . I am unable to make myself heard.

Feb. 1981... Although a relationship is composed of a great deal of sharing and companionship, the need for privacy must be respected. Each individual needs to maintain a firmly established sense of identity to fully give of that self. Grow side by side and learn from each other...two vines cannot grow on one tree lest they strangle their support and eventually, each other.

...I find it most exciting to discover someone and watch him grow in his understanding of life. I could not live with myself if I felt I was purposely attempting to mold another individual to fit my perception of the "ideal mate." I once told (my boyfriend) that I would rather break up with him than change him, for propensities which I found disturbing would be virtually non-existent to someone else. He has as much of a right to live and love in his own way as I have.

...The friendship which (he) and I share is invaluable and irreplaceable. Perhaps it is because I place no supreme importance on romanticism that our friendship is my deepest gratification.

In another composition, I wrote these words:

I look not for the ideal because idealistic individuals are often quite disappointed when their "key" is ultimately bigger than the "lock." Instead I give my best and accept life as it comes. My concept of happiness consists of satisfying the mind to achieve emotional stability. I try to look to each day as another chance to grow in knowing myself and my world. My "ideal" would include a total acceptance of life and a perfection of love.

During that period of time, I also expressed with morbid cynicism my inability to dissuade a friend from his use of marijuana. The poem, although somewhat disturbing, projects my hostility toward a habit which claimed sufficient importance that it continued despite my open concern.

Is life (for you)
 So dull and meaningless....
 Is it so necessary to escape,
 To drift from reality,
 To pull away
 From summer's soft and fragrant breeze,
 And mold into a being
 Which is not yourself
 But rather,
 Some distorted orb of existence...
 If you so desire
 To kill yourself,
 Draw your plans...
 Burn the grass...
 Blow your charred breath
 Into the baggy...
 And pop it.
 Be daring.
 Your loss of life
 Seems so indifferent.
 Why not go out with a roar,
 Like the coming of March,
 Instead of this infernal,
 Everlasting,
 Torture.
 The suspense is killing me,
 And I'm ready for a good show.
 I'll applaud...
 I'm a good and experienced audience.
 I'll be intent (as you)
 On your motive.
 Can't you get it over
 So I can go home,
 As usual,
 And take off my clothes
 And my make-up
 And roll my hair...
 So I can play Bozo
 Tomorrow
 Tomorrow
 In the great show
 Called Life
 That never ends
 Except for you, my friend.

It was evident in my writing that I harbored discontent. Perhaps this was because I had recognized the elements and images of good relationships. In my written kaleidoscope, I contrasted generalizations with personal experiences; I was aware of what I wanted in a relationship of romantic nature and knew that my current relationship did not have the capacity to fulfill those characteristics. I had been trying to forcibly extract romantic inclinations from within myself and adhere them to primarily platonic feelings. I was not blind; in the brilliant sunlight, I had seen reality, but rather than facing the light or turning my back, I had simply chosen to wear sun-glasses to cut down the glare. For a time it had been the easiest solution; now, with a certain degree of fear, I knew I could no longer deflect the truth.

For several months I continued to drift along, contemplating life's moments and my reactions to them. I had been letting life "happen" without becoming involved in the decisions that were at least partially mine; self-confidence had withered, robbing me of my voice and my ability to decide how my time would be spent.

Toward the end of spring, my personal analysis bloomed; although the flowers, my conclusions, were not delicate things of beauty. I found I had transformed into someone who I disliked, feeding on a tremendous wall of resentment. Since I was not strong enough to simply discontinue the romance, I

began to create areas of conflict, tempting him to argue or basting him with his faults. Knowing that he generally avoided disagreements at all costs, I tactfully asked questions for the purpose of testing his genuineness of character and individualism. I tried to induce friction to see when and if he would take a stand, yet he never would. I began to wonder if he possessed any opinions of his own.

Needless to say, the time we spent together was not joyous for either of us. I grew irritated at little eccentricities and habits, sometimes with good reason, and on other occasions, without. Even simple companionship, which I had once valued, became a victim of the blighted romance; as he sought to do everything in his power to maintain the romance, stressing that our problems would pass, I strained violently against his intentions with the hope that our relationship could deflate to the status of friendship. It was a battle that neither wished to lose and blazed ever more intensely through the days because nothing was lost or gained. I was unable to walk away and he refused to shake my hand. There was no room for compromise.

May 30, 1981... West Lake. Doubtful...thought (he) and I might break up. We just sat on the blanket in silence, and then I went over and picked a wild rose and brought it back. I showed it to him. "It has thorns," he said. "Some of the prettiest things have thorns," I replied. "I know." He squeezed my hand.

When summer came I felt the relief of having no obligations. Time was my own, logically, but I had to laugh at the thought. "Who are you fooling?" a voice cackled from somewhere. I mused for a second and then became annoyed. "You don't refuse him calls and dates, because you are afraid of hurting him, yet, when you are together, you display few loving qualities!"

By harboring such hostility, I was hurting both of us. I began to realize more damage was done through seeing him than if I would collect myself and entirely pull away from the relationship.

He did not want to let go, that was a given. I needed more time; that too was a given. In one last attempt to stress my needs, I asked him to grant me three days of complete solitude, during which time he would not call or visit; after some argument, he agreed.

Time was a gift, and the first and second days were marvelous. I was alone and it felt wonderful. The third day, however, brought duress via the mail; unable to let go, he sent me a letter. I was decidedly angry, considering the letter a breach of promise. After all I had not asked for much. Three days. It had not seemed an unfair request.

Disappointed, I folded the letter and returned it to its envelope. Some things in life seemed so impossible. It was ironic that, through various ways of caring, people could hurt each other so badly.

The following events changed my outlook on life toward the positive, which at the time meant an improved self-image. My parents had noted my lack of confidence and perceived it was a marked impediment. Without an agreeable opinion of oneself a person cannot hope to lead a full life; fear of failure precedes and echoes every step, eventually leading to emotional immobilization.

Out of exasperation for my warped self-image, Mom took matters into her hands and enrolled me in a charm class, acting upon the theory that a woman's confidence was directly related to her appearance. I objected, but Mom insisted that I go. Thus, with reluctant steps and an uneasy stomach, I drove to my first class.

Students were challenged to enhance unique features with which they were born. Rather than criticizing oneself, the emphasis was on improvement. This involved a thorough evaluation wherein one's traits were honestly viewed, after which a commentary was meticulously written for the instructor. Every student was given an individual make-up consultation, and as a weekly assignment, we were to come to class wearing make-up and proper attire. We learned the correct way to walk, sit and gesture, and were instructed concerning hair care, manicures, diets and exercise.

The most beneficial aspect of the class from my point of view was learning. . .or perhaps simply remembering. . . that no one was perfect. Moreover, vanity in carefully measured doses was not frivolous; beauty dealt more with the ability to project one's inner self than painting and displaying the surface characteristics. Though it may sound shallow, the compliments which I received in class by my instructor were the stimuli I needed to reinforce the image reflected in my mirror. For the first time in months, I felt good about who I was on the inside, even though I had to begin my "renovation" on the outside.

Toward the middle of July I was able to escape in every sense of the word when Norm and I took our second vacation together. I knew the week would grant me time and distance required to objectively view my troubled "romance." The trip meant a chance for both fun and reflection.

We stayed, once again, in the basement level unit of last year's motel. Upon entering, we quickly noted that no changes had been made. The same relic radio still graced the dresser, and the same avocado crushed velvet bedspread sagged drearily to meet the worn carpets covering the floor. It was somehow a pleasant sight, albeit the fact that the place desperately needed attention; I guess it was like a worn out pair of tennis shoes, ugly yet be-loved for the sake of the mileage and memories which they represented.

The following morning, as we strode toward the car, we truly felt at home when we noticed the sadistic mailman of the previous year busily engaged with Marion. We looked on with amazement. The one undesirable factor of last year's vacation had reappeared!

Hoping to escape recognition, we quietly loaded the car while he jawed away, absorbed in his story of the hour. We might have slipped from the parking lot had it not been for Marion's eyes flicking repeatedly from him to us. We both had one leg in the car when a huge bellow resounded from his direction.

"Hey! Weren't you the folks with the Dart?"

We felt as if responding with a "yes" would be an admission of guilt for some heinous crime. "We were the ones!" Norm replied, pulling himself into the protection of the car and starting the engine. My brother was artfully combining politeness with perpetual motion. A brief exchange ensued as the car rolled slowly backward from its parking space, then a shift into low gear signaled that the conversation had ended.

"Catch ya later," the man yelled after us. He never did.

Five days dissolved, one into the next, until the week's peaceful interlude came to an end. The time had allowed my emotions to rest and my mind to clear. Questions which I feared to answer now appeared to have lost their malignancy, and I had gathered the courage to enact the unsavory business of breaking up. Nothing would dissuade me; my decision had been made and its certainty felt like the cool breezes in which it had been developed.

I came home feeling revitalized and cleansed. Nature's splendor, Norm's companionship and time to enjoy for its own sake; these were the aspects of life which, for me, made it uncomplicated and full.

With my decision firmly planted I was a changed individual, and it was obvious to my boyfriend that the summer would not bring us closer together. Confidence helped me to overcome his heartiest attempts to reroute my intentions or confuse my thoughts and within days after returning from Colorado, I did what we both knew was inevitable. As we parted, I was drowned in sorrow. . . for myself and for him. . . and although confidence helped to dispatch a prompt conclusion to a floundering relationship, it did nothing to absorb the pain which accompanied such an end.

Breaking up hurt. It had to hurt. I knew I had done the right thing; like a canker, my resentment festered when in his company. I finally cared enough to let go.

I remember that night so well. We had stopped at a playground to rest on the swings after a bike ride. I was feeling quite detached and spoke very little. When the summer sun drifted from view, I stood to mount my bike, and he rose to receive the customary good-night kiss. I offered my hand as he approached, leaving no doubt that the romance was over, but he would not accept a platonic relationship. He was not ready for that; I could understand, but I would still miss him.

"Well, I guess you'll never see my black pants," he stated, reminding me that he and his mother had gone shopping earlier that day. Why did he have to say that? "Never" was so permanent. I felt tears well up in my eyes and cloud my vision, and pushing off into the gathering darkness, I realized that I may never see him again. For years he had demanded much of my time; now he was rejecting all of it. No, there was no compromise.

I pedaled home, half-blinded by tears, then rushed upstairs to my room to hurl my frustrations onto paper. Writing was the release that I needed; I had to ask myself whether or not I had done the right thing. Three pages later I was satisfied that I had, concluding my written rampage with, "I think I'll make some bran muffins."

The rest of the summer was spent as I wished, and admittedly took a degree of adjustment on my behalf. Such a wealth of time was alien to me.

As always, freedom had its price. Mine was lost companionship, and I did experience lonely moments, for he had been my principal friend as well as my boy-friend. Generally, however, I remained content with my decision. Not only had my ability to follow through with an important decision multiplied my

confidence, but I was no longer haunted by the knowledge that I was hurting another individual or trying to ply him into something he was not. Moreover, as a loner, free time was most often a luxury; the rare occasions of actual loneliness were remedied through the former, positive facets of my ultimate decision.

I excitedly enrolled in the charm school's other class, which taught the skills necessary for one to become a model. Regardless of my eventual aspirations, I assumed that the class would prove enjoyable and fulfill the educational side of a glamorous dream. My intuition was accurate and I loved every minute, from performing turns and poses to working with a photographer for my own photo session.

When the class came to an end, the proprietor invited me to her office and offered me a cup of coffee. Saying that I showed promising qualities, she bid me sign a contract with her firm for local modeling opportunities. I was stunned. My portfolio had turned out quite well and I had fostered little anxiety in the class, yet such a display of high regard was a powerful and pleasant shock. Her offer bridged my loftiest hopes and without hesitation, I accepted the contract.

If humans could fly, I surely would have soared home that day. I felt so good, so whole. There was nothing that could impede my sense of freedom; no one would make my decisions or steal my time.

Owning a healthy sense of self-worth was not immodesty, but protection against vulnerability. I knew I could bestow kindness and still be shunned, or honestly state my opinion and draw hateful criticism. The difference was confidence. In many ways, life seemed too good to be true... too good, at least, for me. I could not stop suspicion from seeping into my mind; even Norm and Mom professed to be rather leary toward harboring too much optimism. Unadulterated happiness and good luck appeared in fleeting glimpses for our family, and to feel differently now was too risky. I therefore enjoyed my newly acquired good fortune with humility and wary disbelief.

All good things come to an end, and summer's end paralleled the beginning of my second year of college. I felt different that year, quite ready to welcome new opportunities. Looking back, last year's memories recalled a vision of myself trying to breathe through a plastic bag while striving to function like a normal human being. Now, constrained neither by the depression spawned of unfaced problems or subdued emotions, the world appeared as it should; I had drawn out all of the hob-goblins that my mind repressed, and scourged them.

Several weeks into the fall semester I received a letter from my ex-boyfriend. Briefly informative and somewhat impersonal, I considered it a peace offering and a suggestion that mild relations could resume between us. I was pleased. We knew each other's likes and dislikes, and had spent many recreational hours together; his casual friendship would be a pleasant addition to my good luck.

Deciding that enough time had elapsed since the rending of our emotional ties, I wrote back to him, honestly defining the hurt I had experienced and how hopeful I had been that we could one day be friends. After posting my letter, I heard from him again, almost immediately; his exuberance toward restoring a relationship was overwhelming, and it was plain that the direction he wished to take was unlike that which I had mapped. A definite knot swelled in my stomach; I did not want to relive that which had transpired between us when we were last together, and I nervously asked myself, "what have I done?"

In typical style, I suffered for awhile, drenching myself with worry until I sought my notebook to disentangle the hoard of thoughts that had just constricted my rationality.

Aug. 5, 1981... Is it wrong to have a friendship wherein one of the involved parties is highly romantically bound to the other, who is not? . . . Is it wrong to relish each other's company, ruled by the standards set by the individual who is not involved whole-heartedly? All of a sudden I feel I have greatly wronged him by writing back... Is it right to call someone to be your friend, and date him, but constantly keep him at bay? I somehow feel that I am the bait and the holder of the pole, while my "friend" is kept running in pursuit.

It always helped to see my problems in the black and white form of ink strokes on paper. Perhaps I was unrealistic to believe that two people having such different intentions could maintain a healthy relationship. I would not fret about it, I decided with determination, nor would I tolerate a reenactment of last year's folly. As long as I remembered that days were made up of individual minutes, I had no reason to burden myself with worry over that which had not yet come to pass. If I controlled the minutes, the hours, days and months would surely take care of themselves and cause no pain, for as I had written in a journal, "I can't stand to hurt anyone any more."

Beginnings and endings, life changed continually under their influence. Autumn 1981 seemed rich

and alluring, a virtual invitation to walk in the sun. In a diary entry dated over one year later, my memories of that time were sweet.

Nov. 3, 1982... My life was beginning to come alive... From an experience with cancer five years before, I was given a sharp taste of the harsh brutality which is an innate, but sometimes overlooked, characteristic of life. I viewed life as highly impermanent, and believed that it was too short to spend one's precious time playing games of popularity and prestige. What mattered was feeling... experiencing... life to its fullest without marring in any way the rest of society. Modeling I saw as a potentially exhilarating encounter, which, like all facets of one's life, would inevitably come to an end. Carrying this baggage of values upon my shoulders, I felt entirely prepared for success or failure, and intended to propel myself toward modeling at full throttle. I had no idea that the end would so soon be upon me...

PAGE 195

Chapter 25 Return of Cancer

"To reverse the feeling that I was the query in an unfair hunt, I had to establish for myself that I had complete control over the situation."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Return of Cancer

It was October and my classes were well under way. Seated at my favorite table with books and papers sprawled casually about, I was studying for an exam between frequent sips of coffee and sight-saving glances around the room. I looked down at myself and tried not to think; the striped sweater I wore readily acknowledged my asymmetrical stomach, even if I did not. Whatever it was had not gone away.

Several days earlier I had noticed a certain lopsidedness to my stomach region, but not desiring to worry, assured myself that it was "indigestion complicated by gas" and would, therefore, "pass." The odd part was that it did not pass, and staring down at my stomach it was still readily apparent. "Maybe I've always been like that," I told myself. "After all I did lose three-fourths of my stomach."

I must not have convinced myself, however, because when Norm and Dad rumbled down the stairs, I asked them for their opinions. As each took his turn interpreting the portents revealed by my striped sweater, the other would say, "Call the doctor if you're so worried."

I had to agree that it was better than speculation, so I picked up the phone and dialed the doctor's office. His nurse, a brusque, dominant figure, answered. I had always been rather overwhelmed by her, and in my currently agitated frame of mind, sputtered out my name and request as would an army private to his platoon drill sergeant.

"Dr. is on vacation," she stated.

"Uh, could I see the other doctor?" I asked as my emotional ball of string unraveled a bit further. I only wanted to see a doctor; it did not matter who I saw. I just had to know that I had no physical problem.

"Lauren, Mayo Clinic is where you should go."

"But I just wanted someone to take a look. . ."

"If you have a problem, you should go to Mayo..."

"But... can't you?..."

She would not even schedule an appointment.

I had been mildly concerned about myself; now I was in a state of mental pandemonium. I hung up the phone as tears singed my eyes and the lump in my throat multiplied to twice its original size. The nurse's staunch refusal to see me was like receiving an impromptu death sentence, and implied that mine was most certainly a problem too great for a family doctor to handle.

I had not prepared for such resistance and blunt pessimism, but perhaps tact and sympathy were only smoke screens when one's prospects were assumed to be dim. The two emotionally soothing elements surely did nothing to right a physical wrong; maybe she honestly felt that she was doing me a favor.

My thoughts, nevertheless, went on the rampage after the startling conversation, and in no shape to make further calls, I gladly accepted my Dad's offer to call Mayo Clinic for me. He immediately phoned to schedule some tests and a consultation with my former oncologist; only then did my frustration wane. Unconfirmed suspicions were bad enough without the additional terror of being denied a chance to search for the truth.

My new plans for the coming weekend made various cancellations a necessity. Apart from school, I had accepted an in-store promotional for cosmetics through the modeling agency and also intended to visit a friend at college, where Halloween festivities were reportedly quite arresting. Re-routing my plans was a disappointment, but I had to ease my tormented mind; excitement seemed to be raining down on me in buckets, and added a different aspect to the expression "when it rains, it pours."

The sense of urgency which had initially wrought such havoc upon me was squelched by the upcoming clinic appointments, and the week progressed without further turmoil on my behalf. When Thursday arrived Dad and I packed ourselves into my car and rolled out of the driveway toward the unknown answers that we sought to find.

For the first time, Dad and I were traveling to Rochester on our own. Because I was having a routine set of tests for a symptom that, as yet, possessed no form or definition, Mom was going to remain at home and teach her kindergarten classes. I had no objection to this, since the entire trip was based solely on the paranoia which sprouted after my questionable discovery, and frankly I was beginning to feel rather foolish for even mentioning it, let alone pursuing my suspicions. It could be anything. . . or nothing at all.

"It's not stupid if it puts your mind at ease," Dad consoled. I felt better when he said that. The last thing I wanted to be was a hypochondriac.

The envelope of appointment cards held nothing that sounded catastrophic. There were cards labeled "blood tests" and "chest X-ray" as usual, and one card that read "cat scan," I stared at the last card with latent skepticism. The name itself held no malice; with luck, the test would prove to be painless as well.

The cat scan, I later discovered, was another means of taking an X-ray, and with this knowledge, felt sure that I would live to tell about it. As it was my final test, however, I could not help but wonder if it was worse than the rest; I had noticed from previous experience that the more detestable prodding, poking and outright sampling of one's body was reserved for last, which was appropriate, perhaps, since a main event was always the biggest fight.

I sat in my dressing room, musing over the test's infinite possibilities until I was retrieved by one of the generically-attired clinicians and led through radiation wonderland to a room housing a huge device. A circular opening in the machine appeared to devour the examination table on which I was instructed to lay. This was, indeed, something new.

Once inside the room, the door closed and the technicians scattered. I watched from my spot on the rigid table as some people milled about the machine and others remained attentive from behind what resembled a sportscaster's window. One young woman began to prepare my arm for an injection, so I smiled and seized the opportunity to talk. I always felt sorry for the staff at clinics; daily they received

undeserved abuse from bitter or frightened patients, as well as a significant amount of mute apathy. I wanted to disprove the possible thought that all patients had the personality of cold oatmeal. . .and I wanted to know just what the test would entail.

"Does that hurt?" I motioned my eyes at the machine's jowl, which stood agape slightly above my body. The woman shook her head and told me to remain very still as the final adjustments were made.

"Is this all there is to it?" I asked, referring this time to the injection.

"Sometimes a patient has to have two types of injections, but you probably won't..." she said. Her pleasant tone eased my mind and instilled trust, much like a friend would have done.

Suddenly everyone disappeared to the observation window and the lights dimmed. A series of instructions were broadcast from the window and then the machine came to life, clicking off pictures of my insides as I held my breath for dictated intervals.

When the lights flashed on, the woman came to my side again. She told me it would take a few minutes to know whether or not my X-rays were satisfactory, so we ventured into a trivial conversation until the results were determined. Activity resumed shortly, signaling that a verdict was at hand, so the nurse departed, only to return with an apologetic look on her face and equipment for an IV in her hand.

"I'm afraid you're going to need more X-rays," she said. "The doctor needs more contrast."

Bad news is a strange concept. It is something one considers but seldom prepares for; even life's most inevitable pain and indignities are not taken personally if they remain hidden from view. Everyone knows that he will age, but until the strand of gray or sun-kissed wrinkle appears, aging itself can be ignored.

"The doctor needs more contrast." The statement entered my mind and closed a door. Up to that moment I did not know if anything was wrong. Now I knew, and like a 30-year-old who found his first gray hair, was not surprised. I did not live in fear of losing my health and happiness; when one deals with each day, he needs not prepare. . . he needs only adjust.

I returned my attention to the needle that was about to be inserted into my arm. "Does that stuff have any effects?" I asked. She smiled at me and hesitantly said, "Well, we're told not to mention this, but sometimes patients say they can taste it and those who have had chemotherapy are psychologically affected by it and want to vomit." I knew what that meant, and holding back a grimace of displeasure, said that I had experienced the effect she described.

"Thanks for telling me," I continued. "I hate not knowing what to expect." If I was anticipating the worst, the test's actual pain and discomfort did not seem so bad. With the needle in place, the nurse turned to me and said, "I hate to have to stick needles into nice patients like you."

When the solution began to drip into my system, I felt my stomach perform an involuntary flip-flop. The hateful taste and sensation had not changed and I had to wage an intensely conscious battle against a powerful urge to gag and rid myself of the distasteful invader. After receiving a compliment such as the one just given to me, however, vomiting was unthinkable.

Once again I found myself beneath the scanning X-rays, wondering if the second search would uncover any answers. If so, I would be enlightened when we met with Dr. E.

The only information I was able to extract from the consultation was that I had an enlarged liver.

"An enlarged liver?" I spoke the words with a hint of amusement. For me this was a great curiosity. Liver was something most people refused to eat; beyond that, it was of little importance.

Apparently there was much I did not know about the body's dire necessity of the liver, but the doctor said nothing and accepted my light-hearted reaction without comment since he was unable to provide further information anyway. Testing had proven inadequate; beyond the enlargement, he remained mute regarding the possible interpretations of the X-rays. Perhaps he did not wish to instill premature fear by offering stab-in-the-dark diagnoses.

It was clear to me that I had no option but pursuit; a liver biopsy, scheduled after the consultation, would hopefully solve the mystery.

I was nervous. My anxiety could not be shaken, for the thought of a biopsy engendered memories of the bone marrow test, a test which I vowed never to take again. What terror had I willfully agreed to undergo this time?

It was a relief to hear my name called on the loud speaker; the time I'd spent in the waiting room was of no benefit to my peace of mind. I could think of nothing else but unbridled pain, and mulling over such thoughts tended to have few positive effects.

After disrobing and donning a hospital gown, I was led into a waiting room used by other patients and soon began a conversation with an older woman who also had an enlarged liver. Over the fact that she was enlarged I did not argue, however, I could not resist asking myself how much of her enlargement actually had to do with her liver. Whether her mistake was due to self-deceit or a lack of awareness did not matter; concern and uncertainty were two elements we shared, and we wished each other luck as a nurse ushered her from the room.

I spent a brief while surveying the floor before I was called. A nurse directed me to a room and instructed me to lay down on a hard examining table, whereupon I was left in darkness for two hours before a doctor arrived. Meanwhile my state of mind deteriorated rapidly as I listened to the sounds emanating from the surrounding rooms. Most were only voices trailing off into the maze of corridors and finally disappearing behind various doors of anonymity. However, with my mind housing its unarrested and nameless fears of the forth-coming biopsy, other sounds were transformed into horrendous tortures, the likes of which I would surely undergo. One such fanciful flight of imagination was set off by the unimpeded verbalizations of an old man whose room was across the hall from my own. Since my door was propped open, I had noticed him sitting in his wheelchair and muttering complaints or idly sucking his gums. Eventually the door closed and his tests began, leaving me to interpret the activity behind the door through his vocalizations. There were garbled grumblings, which I had expected, but then groans replaced words and I began to worry. They were awful. They were the cries of horror shows and nightmares, scaling a full octave and attaining a tonal quality which rivaled professional sound effects. I was impressed; so much, in fact, that my stomach had managed to tie itself into a perfect knot by the time the doctor arrived. I appraised the old man's throaty outbursts as the sound track to a liver biopsy.

Luckily I was wrong. Whatever were his trials, whether real or imagined, they prepared me for optimum punishment, to which I was never exposed. Although I was horrified in my solitude and misinformation, perhaps my final opinion of the test's severity was buffered by the old man's wailings.

After my long wait, the nurse who had initially shown me to my room entered, and finding me lying in the darkness, flicked on the lights with a round of apologies. She explained the unreasonable delay was due to an inability to obtain the CAT SCAN X-rays. Generally Mayo's system worked quite effectively. Considering the large scale of the facility, I was amazed that things ran smoothly at all.

The X-rays and doctor arrived in unison and the test commenced after a brief series of questions on my part. Naturally, I desired to know if it would be painful and was informed that it "could be." I was then given a local anesthetic and braced myself, recalling that the pain killer did little during the bone marrow test.

"Did that hurt?" the doctor asked.

"What do you mean?" I countered.

"I've taken the biopsy," he returned.

"What?" I was astounded. "I didn't feel anything!" The doctor instantaneously became my best friend.

I remained on the table to await the results of the biopsy which had been whisked away to the laboratory. Since the doctor had to judge his targeted area through the X-rays, there was no guarantee that he would hit an affected portion of the liver; if the lab reported finding normal tissues, the doctor would have to try his luck once more.

As my luck would have it, another biopsy had to be taken. If that one failed to produce answers, my condition would have to be determined through alternate means; cutting into the liver, as in a biopsy, created the risk of hemorrhage, and therefore limited the number that could be performed at one time to two biopsies.

The doctor posted my X-rays on the light box and studied them intently. I wondered what information he drew from the strange transparencies; the X-rays told me nothing at all. If I had not known it was my liver, the mottled shape would have been no more than a nameless abstraction.

"Are livers supposed to have spots?" I queried.

The doctor shuffled his feet for a few seconds, then admitted they did not. I guess it was a stupid

question, especially since the elusive spots were the intended targets in the test, but I had to know all of the available facts. The truth was my comfort and my ally; it was the cure for fear born of ignorance.

The second biopsy was also determined normal. After the long day my knowledge was still limited to the fact that my liver was enlarged and spotted; it was information, but it did not satisfy. To Dad the normal tissues found in the biopsies were good news; i.e., if biopsies in two different areas were clear, I could not be seriously afflicted. To me, however, the findings punctuated the necessity for more tests and promised to prolong the unhappy state of emotions which accompanied a dearth of solid facts. Thus, as I laid on a hospital bed waiting as instructed for four hours to protect myself from internal bleeding, and having worried excessively and learned relatively little from the former expenditure, I could not look upon the day without thinking of the expression "much ado about nothing."

Relatively little testing was done at Mayo over the weekend, so my dad and I planned to go home for Halloween and two days of normalcy. Because of my biopsies, however, the doctor recommended we remain in the city over night to avoid excessive movement and possible complications. Homebound Saturday morning we planned to return to Rochester on Sunday evening, at which time I would be expected to check into the hospital; Monday's agenda would include surgery. Having exhausted all the other less radical options, an exploratory operation was the only manner available to determine the mystery concealed beneath my flesh.

I was glad to be home. Holidays were made to be spent at home, in my opinion, and Halloween was no exception. That weekend, though, was especially important to me. Like my trip to Colorado before the operation for cancer, coming home was quite possibly my last taste of the life which I had lately enjoyed; I needed not kid myself that the operation's results could change my life in such ways that it would never be the same again. The present was all that was mine, and nothing was certain but the few hours of autumn sunshine and jack-o-lanterns which graced the days. Those were the elements which I embraced with all of my enthusiasm until it came time to leave for Rochester.

The drive was memorable for many reasons. Dad and I were, once again, traveling alone to the clinic; the three of us would have gone, but since Mom had employment obligations in the form of parent/teacher conferences, she decided, for the parents benefit, to remain at home. It was the year's first conference and no one could have substituted. With my car's heater useless, it was also the first time we drove the truck. Because the truck had a manual transmission, steering and brakes, and Mom's blood pressure rose at the mere thought of having to drive it, we presumed it would nullify her nightmares if she retained use of the family car. Finally, it was the first time we had ever driven to the clinic by way of the prolific back roads that skirted the northern farmland; though we stopped at various intervals to assure our progress, only once did we find ourselves on the right highway traveling the wrong direction.

All things considered, it made an interesting drive, and between eating lunch in a small town and buying M and M's at a gas station and watching Iowa's flat land slowly transform into the more hilly dairyland of Wisconsin, I did not burden myself with the essence of our trip; I found more importance in enjoying the seven hours than stewing in the ignorance of my health situation.

When we reached the outskirts of Rochester, Dad pulled into a gas station to fill up the tank and I jumped out of the truck for a stretch. It had been a beautiful autumn day. The buildings now etched long shadows upon the sunny landscape; soon shadow would meet shadow until all was covered by darkness. I turned slowly to face Rochester and my eyes locked on the two familiar buildings which towered above the city. The clinic buildings, old and new, represented an integrity in medicine which commanded respect; they could bear the happiest or the most solemn news, and remain untouched, for in those two buildings illness and death were more commonplace than health. Brothers of the same mind and purpose, the buildings formed an entity of themselves, daily inhaling and exhaling patients irregardless of whether the patients actually survived.

I took a deep breath to still the sudden, wrenching nervousness which clenched the pit of my stomach. The two buildings defined the reason I was there even if they, as yet, gave me no real answers. It was then that my joy ride ended and the unhappy reality of retiring for the evening in a hospital room created waves in my mental calm. Even my so-called "last supper" was clouded by anxiety.

One's natural reaction is to run from a threat, and to postpone less palatable situations as long as possible. For me, however, there was always a point at which flight and postponement no longer satisfied my emotional needs, but instead created agony in their own right. When I reached that summit, I grew intensely nervous and within minutes made a 180 degree turn which boosted me into an entirely different mode of thought. That which I had fled, I sought, and if I was denied the pursuit of my goal, I would experience an inner explosion of panic. To reverse the feeling that I was the quarry in an unfair hunt, I had to establish for myself that I had complete control over the situation. In effect I did

not "give in" or surrender to a stronger authority; my flight came to an end through a deliberate, conscious decision on my behalf.

And so it was that I finally decided to check in to the hospital and surrender my body to a world of white. Once I was clad in the gown, my identity became synonymous with scribbles on a chart, and color, the brilliance of life on the outside, drained away. Hospitals robbed me of something; I could be happy and possess a positive outlook, but the energy and vitality of life was inaccessible. Perhaps this blandness in my soul was a way of coping with adversity, for if I had little passion from the outset, no ill tidings could evoke a particularly heated or irrational reaction.

Dad left relatively early for his motel, or maybe my feeling of isolation only made it seem that way. Had I been able, I would have left also; sterile atmospheres are rather nerve-wracking, and I knew Dad was nervous enough without the added pressure of whiling away the twilight hours in a cramped four-bed hospital ward.

The room had no T.V. so I turned my attention toward the window. Tiny dots marked streetlights and houses, but the vast darkness prevailed over most of the scene, creating a solitude which mirrored my own. During hours such as those in the hospital, I realized how terribly insignificant I was as compared to the entire world. A person could lose himself in this world.

The morning held no delights. I would not even receive a breakfast tray. I looked forward only to a day of anticipation in which I was fourth in line to leave for the operating room. I could do little but stare at the walls and wait for the morning to ripen into afternoon.

By mid-afternoon I began to wonder if the operation would be cancelled due to the lack of time, but finally several people retrieved me, whereupon I was taken through the hospital corridors on a gurney and given a different perspective of the building than I was accustomed to seeing. (Unlike some public buildings, I was pleased to note there were no spit-balls on the ceiling.)

Riding along the hallway, I also perceived a difference in myself. I was in the spot-light, the main attraction in a frightening event. . . and yet I was not worried. A relaxant had siphoned off my excess nervousness and the remaining anxiety drained away because my waiting was over.

In a partial dream-state, I watched as blue frocked workers rushed about, preparing for my operation until I was wheeled into surgery. There, bright round lights shone overhead and doctors and nurses craned their necks to see their next patient.

"You're going to feel a stick," the nurse warned.

I watched as the doctor placed the needle in my vein. For the first time I was aware of my surroundings up to the moment I received anesthesia, and it was truly an enjoyable experience. The relaxant had full control of me, and a loaded gun would not have evoked duress. I looked at the kind and gentle nurse and began to drift away, little by little, until reality faded and then plunged into a sea of darkness.

I woke up in a ward which housed three elderly women. My bed was crammed in a corner of the room with a curtain serving as the only form of privacy; from my vantage point, I was able to view an extensive portion of the hospital roof through the window.

The first person I saw was my father who appeared to be stricken with concern for my condition. Immediately I asked, "what is it?" to which I was given a sober reply of "It's cancer again." I was quiet for a moment, and then thought dryly, "It figures."

Reactions to drastic news are manifold and multicolored. To say there is a specific process through which each grief-stricken individual shall pass parallels the statement that all people look alike. I cannot regard emotional turbulence with simplicity, for each individual possesses different levels of consciousness, or awareness, which likewise renders his ability to cope with a given situation as singular as his character itself. Though one individual's coping strategies may closely resemble those of another, they still are unique.

To avoid categorizing I will remark upon some of the various reactions I have encountered, including those in myself, family, and friends as "possible reactions" rather than referring to them as "steps" and thereby applying on them a more definitive and absolute quality. While it is possible for people to experience each "possible reaction," not everyone shall.

If I was asked to name a frame of mind in which one can best cope with adversity, I would unhesitatingly say, "acceptance," for it is the most pleasant manner of greeting and harboring a potentially grim reality.

Attaining acceptance gives one the ability to objectively view the hardship and cope, in a very real sense, with the final outcome; this means there is no longer a fight for life, but an enjoyment of it. There are no more bouts of pervasive anger, fear, or depression; when these emotions do occur, they rapidly pass as do the tides of emotion in the healthiest of people. The problem is seen and understood in realistic terms, rather than as a boogy-man in the night contesting for one's life. There are no more superstitious pleas for help, and while hope is maintained, no more does one cling to blind hope.

Acceptance does not imply that the individual is happy with his health disorder; however, it does allow him to live in peace and embrace those facets of life which he holds meaningful. Once enabled to accept reality, the individual is secure within himself and can similarly project that ease upon those who are close to him.

Unfortunately there is no prescribed method of gaining acceptance; while some individuals can grasp their difficulty outright and begin to redefine their lives, others require time to work through the various stumbling blocks which often accompany trauma. Still others are never able to attain acceptance and die in turmoil.

Two factors which I feel can greatly serve toward the goal of acceptance are awareness and communication. One's reactions cannot be altered unless he is aware of them; once able to note irrational behavior (such as anger directed toward a wife rather than at cancer) he can with time change his actions. Communication's effect on adversity is that of purification, for conversation purges minds of fear and loneliness and gradually filters irrationality from one's thoughts into non-existence. In the following pages I hope to illustrate the importance of communication and ironically, perhaps, the few instances wherein communication should be squelched.

"It's cancer again!" A mere three words, and yet the impact is great, and the repercussions greater still. It is strange, somehow, to think so few words could alter the course of a life, and profoundly affect countless others; yet once imparted, dreams give way to reality, and agony can filter deep. Plans once one's own must be fulfilled by another, and the future in which one had pictured himself, shall be clipped short and uncertain. Losing all that one holds dear is rarely a kind image, for despite religion or a lack thereof, death is life's greatest mystery, as it ever shall be.

The initial reaction to a terminal illness is often that of undiluted shock, especially cases wherein the patient had demonstrated no drastic changes in health or felt no persistent pain. Perhaps the dismal news was revealed after a slight, but disconcerting health symptom; the doctor was visited with hesitant anticipation, with the hope that the abdominal protrusion was only persistent gas, or the cough was merely the stubborn remnants of last winter's cold. Although some poor souls cannot release themselves from the notion that it is "only a mistake," or "a dream," most individual's stupification will subside, allowing them to face up to the situation and deal with it as a factual absolute.

Because I had sought an appointment with the doctors at Mayo Clinic of my own accord, I was prepared for any diagnosis which the test results would uncover. Noting that my stomach region appeared lop-sided I knew there was something amiss despite my seemingly good health; thus the result of the exploratory surgery was disappointing, but I cannot say it was a shock.

I felt no need to question the test results or wildly seek second and third opinions. Viewing the pictures taken by the CAT Scan of my liver, I had nonchalantly asked, "Are there supposed to be spots on it like that?" Before the doctor had given an answer, something within my mind yelled, "Of course not, you idiot!" The doctor responded likewise, although considerably less profound.

That which helped me deal with my verdict, coupled with my suspicion that life, for me, had been sailing along a bit too smoothly and the fact that I had cancer previously, was an unusual strength to adapt to adverse situations. From early in my childhood I was able to have the objectiveness to realize that things don't always happen to "the other guy"; actually, if something could go wrong, it probably would. If there was a log poised between two opposing banks of the creek, the odds were that I would fall off of it in crossing. In a world of "other guys" I was just one, yet that in itself proved I was immune to no adversity. Thus, instead of "why me?" my question was generally, "why not me?" I happened to be one of the cancer statistics, and I was far from alone in my plight.

Mine was no easy burden, yet it was mine to deal with as best I could; wallowing in a murky pool of self-pity would accomplish nothing. When I felt a wave of pity tempting me with its utter worthlessness, I would accommodate it for a brief period and then cast it away to pause and reflect upon those whose health involved more horrid complications than my own.

In keeping with some individual's idea that everything happens to the other guy, often the same people will feel that they are alone in their suffering. The person who cannot empty his mind of envious jealousies toward the healthy only further torments himself, and subtracts from his capacity for

peacefulness. Although those who yet possess their health should appreciate it, they should not be made to feel guilty for their fortune. Every mortal being will one day find himself confronted by life's ultimate reality, death.

My dad, characteristically pessimistic, was not overly surprised by the news that my cancer had returned. After all, he was quite used to bad news. It was just one more undeserved bombshell to fall upon our family. One might assume that time and past anguish would have provided a natural immunization to further emotional rending. Still, somehow he felt the pain; I saw it in his eyes. For Mom, the news was emotional heartburn and swept like a roaring fire through her chest. After Dad phoned her she caught her breath, walked to my old bedroom and stood in the doorway for a long while. Then a feeling of anger added fuel to the fire; she had remained at home for conferences, giving her time and effort for the children of other parents, yet some never bothered to attend their scheduled conferences. It had been a slap in the face; coupled with my poor health report, however, Mom felt victimized, as if by traitors. She stayed home. . . she "should" have been there.

Mom stared at the lime green walls through a transparent screen of tears and remembered me as a little girl, long-limbed and skinny. It was happening again; the impossible had returned to deal its final blow.

The pain of reality is not solely one's own. If an individual's relationships with family members and friends are of foremost importance in his life, the news of his illness will have a profound effect on everyone. Their reactions play a significant role in determining the patient's sense of emotional stability and well-being; he must witness the emotional pain felt by his loved ones, evident through tearful outbursts, inappropriate anger, or pervasive gloom, as each person thinks of the future and the way in which the loss will affect his own happiness. I feel it is crucial to share the internal suffering openly and honestly between family and friends, for a health difficulty, although borne by one, is a burden felt by everyone personally involved.

Though I had prepared myself for whatever the outcome might have been, I had not been certain that the enlargement necessarily predicted the presence of cancer. There were, after all, many other disorders that could cause the liver to enlarge. My haunting emotion that I had not overcome cancer was now parallel with reality; my "balloon of health" was beginning its descent. I focused my eyes on three flower arrangements which were blooming profusely on my nightstand appearing, it seemed, out of nowhere. They formed an odd contrast to the bleak and antiseptic atmosphere, as if to say that life can continue even in such places as hospitals where dim hopes and faltering heartbeats evoke a sense of gloom which permeates entire corridors.

I began to barrage my father with questions, many of which he was unable to answer since he had not yet conversed with the doctors to any great degree. He could only tell me that the surgeon opened my mid-section and took a biopsy. Seeing that the cancer was widely distributed throughout my liver, he was not able to operate and therefore sewed up the incision with best wishes.

Because the cancer was the same type as I'd previously contracted, the doctors believed that it had never actually disappeared in the first place, and spread without their knowledge to the liver. This might have occurred at an early age, lying dormant, or more probably, spreading slowly until it had touched numerous sites. Leiomyosarcomas, presumably, are considered primarily "older women's cancers" which may spread to the lung; this baffled the doctors to such a degree that they placed me on research after the initial bout, at age thirteen. To find that it had again defied their previous knowledge as to the behavior of the average leiomyosarcoma, recurring in the liver without so much as a trace in the lungs, was considered absolutely mystifying and unique.

Despite the uniqueness of the cancer, the fact remained that I was a young woman with a dreaded disease. . . one that had supposedly been "cured" by the lengthy operation and chemotherapy treatment. I reflected how my oncologist (cancer specialist) had reassured the permanence of my cure by saying, "There is more of a chance of your being killed on your drive to the clinic than of having a recurrence of cancer." He was that sure.

I do not envy the doctors. Daily they encounter sickness and health, yet are limited in their ability to heal and assure their patients of continual well-being. They are accused of being incompetent when they cannot act as God. They are assumed to be uncaring and detached, when in all actuality they would lose their sanity if they were subject to emotionally react to each individual sadness. When they deliver the truth to a waiting patient, they are often called tactless. They are blamed for finding a health problem and thus disrupting their patient's happy-go-lucky lifestyle. Personally, I'm content with doctors and feel a need to demonstrate that gratefulness. When the surgeon visited my room after the operation, I greeted him with a smile and attempted to make him comfortable. I knew it wasn't easy to face me; we looked at each other like old friends and he took my hand in his own. What could have been said that had not already expressed itself in his eyes?

I questioned Dr. Telander about the various specifics of the operation, and casually inquired as to the reason they did not "simply rip the sucker (my liver) out?" He then informed me that one cannot live without the organ. Slightly embarrassed, I said that I had never been much of a biology student and continued with other questions. I truly was not aware that the liver was an organ of such consequence.

Although I never encountered Telander again, I was assigned to a doctor who made one or two rounds daily to note my progress. I bombarded him with any questions which happened to cross my mind, no matter how stupid they seemed.

Earnest conversation between a patient and those with whom he interacts, whether doctors or family members, is a necessity. Although the truth is often painful and frightening, I am a faithful advocate of knowledge over ignorance, and feel it is to one's benefit if he can receive the news of his illness in a manner which is, at once, tactful and concise.

Rather frequently I have heard accounts of close relatives of a terminally ill patient begging the doctor not to divulge the full implications of the patient's health. The plea, usually something to the effect, "Oh no, Doctor, you can't tell him. . . the truth would kill him!" is somewhat curious in the context it is used, for doubtlessly the patient will die whether he knows all of the facts or not. For those who doubt the beneficiality of telling the truth, let me further illustrate my assertion. After receiving a clean bill of health, a person who has, unknowingly, contracted leukemia continues with increasing difficulty to do the activities which he formerly accomplished with ease. This individual is not ignorant; despite any clever lies that initially might have given comfort, it will be evident that something is wrong as symptoms gain momentum. Withholding information depletes the individual's right to spend his time as he wished and, I might add, to work through the possible stress that is associated with such devastating blows.

The most terrifying part of a horror story is when the killer is yet at large, faceless and unknown. This general prefix applies to any fear, I feel, because once the unknown is brought into the light and understood, it can no longer evoke the terror it had when it rampaged through the mind as a veiled monster. A person is not afraid of the dark, but rather, what lies concealed within it. Similarly, illness can evoke feelings of terror as the body degenerates before an unseen attacker. If a person is educated about his illness, I believe a great deal of trauma could be avoided. Instead of presuppositions, one had facts, and as in the horror story, once the killer is recognized, the audience is given the hope that the victim will see and overcome the horrid pursuer. With regard to the patient, this could mean hope instead of futility; when described symptoms do not appear, the patient assures himself of more time to enjoy his redefined life.

If a patient is led to believe his life is far from ended, he may put off preparations for those who shall survive him. When, through misguidance, he discovers that he no longer has the time which he was "allotted," he may feel frustrated and foster deep regrets. Preparations cannot be made without a previous knowledge of one's illness and should one fall rapidly into his demise, there shall be no time for the assumption of his rightful choices.

Many people have confessed their more precious moments were spent after the knowledge of their forthcoming death. Life was lived to its fullest, since unimportant worries fell venomless before meaningful concerns. There can be rediscovery of those aspects of life which are so easily taken for granted; one can relearn to see the world other than through the tunnel vision of self-preoccupation. Look up and drink in the sight of a star-filled night; peruse the ground for the tiniest flowers, and catch and return a stranger's smile. Savor the smell of an orange and feel the cool rain pelt upon bare arms. Often the most elemental of things bring the utmost pleasure.

I had only two objectives to accomplish while in the hospital; education and recuperation. With regard to the latter objective, I pressured the doctor, to a certain degree, to note my rapid rate of recovery so that I might be able to sample hospital food. I wanted to make certain that I ate solid food in days, not weeks, as had been the case on my initial stay at St. Mary's. My body cooperated with my scheme, and I was soon eating voraciously. I didn't care what everyone else said... I thought the food was delicious.... even though my first meals were made up of liquids or soft food. It was a joy to be able to eat again, and my body was in dire need of replenishment; I was never nauseous following a meal... perhaps my stomach was too starved to concern itself with the extra energy it would have consumed in making me sick.

The ward in which I was recuperating was rather small for the four of us who slept there, and I was more than exuberant upon receiving the information that I would soon be moved to a semi-private room. The ward was buzzing constantly with activity, as the elderly women were given various medications, mental awareness quizzes, and frequent visits by the physicians. Visits by nurses would occur throughout the night and therefore afforded little true relaxation. Privacy was also a difficult

matter, since curtains were the only form of separation from the crowd; I often wished to speak with my father, but felt undeniably hindered to do so, as I did not wish to evoke an atmosphere of secrecy nor did I want to impart to the general public one of my personal concerns of fear. Another observation of my surroundings, which I might add, I found more humorous than disturbing, was the fact that my roommates doubtlessly felt quite at ease due to their obvious lack of consideration for the more lady-like behavior customary in other social situations; they freely gave full reign to any of numerous gastrointestinal noises which plagued their comfort, creating a laughable facet of hospital living that perhaps few would appreciate. True to character, I tried my best to squelch any roars of hilarity and enjoyed the entire affair silently in the confines of my corner. My move to a semi-private room was a remarkable improvement, and I found my roommate to be amiable and very sensible. A middle-aged woman, she was hooked up to at least two machines to drain impurities from her system. Her unpleasant state was further increased by her husband's bland concern; she was alone at the hospital, which was made even more apparent when her call to home spurred less attention than did the football game her husband was viewing on the T.V. Although she chuckled about the brief episode, I am sure the apathy on the other end of the line must have hurt.

Shortly after my placement in the room I was allowed to eat "regular" food. To be quite candid, I was elated upon hearing the news and asked when I would be receiving the first sampling of solid fare. Surprisingly, I was able to procure a snack that very evening and feasted royally. My nurse cautioned me, not wanting me to have difficulties later with indigestion, yet no such ill consequences occurred and I contentedly slept the entire night.

Having been placed on solid food, I rapidly gained strength and proceeded to exercise my body to further aid in its full recovery. I still tired easily, however, and found myself obliged to nap on a regular basis; in this I have always been fortunate. . . I have an ability to sleep despite adversity. Sleep is the only drugless manner in which to temporarily release oneself from a troubled mind, providing of course, that the subconscious does not wreak its own havoc through the presence of nightmares.

The day came that I had been working toward with such intensity and fortitude of spirit. . . that being the day of my release from the hospital. When the doctor made his morning visit he informed me that I would be able to depart early the next morning. I asked whether I would again see Dr. E. before leaving, and learned that a visit was in his plans. As it happened, he arrived shortly, and before my father had eaten breakfast; this allowed a one to one confrontation which I truly preferred.

Whether through avoidance or mere circumstance, the doctors never paid any visits when my father was present. They would make their daily rounds early in the morning, long before he had arrived, or at night when he left for his motel. This seeming "avoidance" could have been due to the fact that I was no longer of child status, and the doctors felt that decisions should lie heavily on my behalf rather than confusing matters by including the emotionally wrought inclinations of my relatives.

Personally, I was relieved that I was able to confront the doctors alone, thereby allowing a fluid question and answer session, uncomplicated by concerned family members who might have misunderstood information, or in their excitement, failed to hear other facts and necessitate repetition; these group encounters are seldom low-key when they do occur, and thus I found myself ill-prepared to deal with such intense conversation while still drained from the operation itself.

When Dr. E. entered the room I had prepared myself for ingesting a fair amount of information and sat upright in my bed with a pad of paper and a pen to capture all that he was about to tell me. Moreover, the days which I had just spent in the hospital were not simply taken up in leisure time activities such as watching television or browsing through magazines; I had devoted a great deal of time to serious thought.

I feel that everyone has a limit as to how much he will endure, both in the physical and emotional sense. Since physical well-being reflects one's emotional health and vice-versa, the body will set its own limitations if one is but aware of them, and of course, heeds them.

It is not living, but the quality thereof, which for me determines my capacity to endure physical or mental pain. Life with excessive pain is merely existence, and it is precisely that mode of existence which I shall always wish to avoid. Life for the sake of life is merely the fearful abhorrence of death, the final cycle in earthly existence.

Undergoing a full year of chemotherapy was sufficient time for me to grasp a clear idea of the drugs and their side effects. I knew at 14 years of age that I would never again be placed under such physical duress; I knew that my emotional health would be in turmoil. To once again attempt to prolong life through such dreadful means would be a price too high to justify.

If one cannot say "Enough!," he is reduced to a mere shell of his former self through treatments

which cannot cure; the illness itself is not so cruel. Moreover, one who accepts treatment without a hope for a cure dies in pain multiplied by the lack of peace which reflectance would have brought.

When cancer was once again found to be the culprit behind my distended stomach region, the decision whether or not to accept treatment was virtually incontestable. My only objective was to leave the hospital and return to my redefined life; I desired to regain my strength before it waned as a result of the cancer itself, and this was possible only if I had no treatment. I felt that this was the beginning of the end of my life, and I did not wish to relinquish any of that time toward the pursuit of impossibilities; treatment is a poor word to bestow upon an ineffective poison which would deplete life's quality.

The doctor wore a distinctly business-like air as he proceeded to explain the details concerning my general state of health. I methodically wrote his words on paper so that I would not forget any relevant details in my later discussions with my family and friends.

The available treatment was chemotherapy, and although there were different drugs in addition to the former lot, he professed that none would actually cure my type of cancer. The result of undergoing treatment would be the temporary shrinkage of the tumor, with the hope perhaps, that a new and promising drug would be discovered in the near future; the side effects would echo those which had so delighted me on the previous encounter. I could not help but wonder if the time lost during the administration of treatment is subtracted from the days which one supposedly gains from having it.

Seeing that I was not reacting to the option of treatment with feelings of great joy and anticipation, he then turned to the more sober issues of death via liver encroachment. Listening attentively, I made certain that all of my questions were adequately answered before he fled from the room.

Liver cancer, he said, was usually painless; if pain was a factor, my doctor could prescribe a remedy which would lessen the discomfort. As the liver dysfunctioned, it would lose its ability to metabolize body chemicals; unable to rid the body of poisons, lassitude would set in while the appetite decreased. Finally, sleepiness would overcome any effort to remain awake and eventually result in a coma until death.

I felt sorry for Dr. E. as he told me these facts. I could tell that this visit was extremely difficult for him since his eyes did not often meet with my own and he seemed eager to sprint from the room. I had been a "five years and cured" case; the fifth year after my first operation he dismissed me with a clean bill of health. We had given each other cordial good-byes, never thinking the next year would bring such disappointment.

Before he exited the room, the doctor restated that the chemotherapy treatments should commence within a month if they were desired, perhaps his way of punctuating the option which he knew I did not wish to take. I nodded in acknowledgement. It must be difficult for a doctor, one whose profession is that of helping people live, to find he is unable to offer a cure; it brings to the surface the fact that medicine, although miraculous in many ways, is not omnipotent. Once again we said good-bye, yet this time, I knew it would be our final farewell.

One of the more difficult tasks I had to perform was expressing to my family my wish to forego treatment. They needed to cling to the hope that there was something to be done for my malady, and were not pleased upon hearing my steadfast rejection of chemotherapy. Since I had foreseen, somewhat, their probable reaction, I was prepared for a lengthy duel and had therefore decided to write on paper the key directions that I wished the conversations to follow.

The two discourses which ensued were emotional, yet controlled. I knew I had a weighty task to perform if I was to gently but thoroughly bespeak my desires to my worried father, and later my mother and sister, and further persuade them to accept those decisions. I candidly explained my repugnance toward chemotherapy, punctuated by the facts that it had not worked previously and the doctor had related that although there were new drugs, none could cure my type of cancer. With all sincerity, I said I did not know how long my life would prove to be, yet I wanted to maintain a life of quality, for that best equated my idea of what life should hold for each individual; I desired to own a sense of peace which could never be attained if I continually chased the spectrum of miracle cures so prevalent in a world whose main objective, for many, is the procuring of wealth. Time itself meant little if it did not also have the amenity of joy, and in my 19 years I had experienced more quality than some individuals realize in a lifetime of 80 years; I stressed that my family was an important part, indeed, and inherent part of that quality.

I hoped that my family would be satisfied with my judgment, although their disapproval would not have altered my stance; I feared they would attempt to force treatment upon me through relentless conversation and in so doing, make life at home unbearable. This, happily, was not the case.

After receiving my dissertation, my father needed time to think and sort out the information he had just heard, and decided to take a lengthy walk into town for the dual purpose of eating lunch and trying to digest the disturbing truth which cancer brought to the surface; mortality does not concern itself only with the aged. While he was gone, I replenished myself with both food and rest. My mother was to arrive in the afternoon, and I fully realized I would have to repeat my performance for her and Sharon, my older sister. I wished to appear as normal as possible. I had curled my hair and applied my usual dose of eye make-up to improve any pallor which might have been visible due to the operation; I did not want my appearance to evoke unnecessary amounts of gloom or despair. Satisfied that I had done my best to improve upon myself, I settled back in the bed, clad in the glorious hospital garb which resembled pillow ticking and decided that I coordinated rather nicely with the rest of the decor.

When the entire group arrived it was already late in the afternoon. My father accompanied Sharon's family on a tour of the area, leaving only my mother and Sharon to visit with me directly. I noticed that my mother had lost weight, underlining the worry that was inscribed on her face; Sharon's face echoed that emotion, and I knew I must speak with care. It can be difficult to avoid mechanical speech when one is trying to maintain control of his emotions, yet to do so can prove to be less injurious to the listeners if they share one's feelings on the topic being discussed. Cold facts divulged without the benefit of a warm heart will only multiply the pain; there is no sense in hurting loved ones through callous explanations.

It was with painful resignation that my family members then present at the hospital accepted the future which I so desperately needed to control. More than my resistance to treatment, (for they too had witnessed the drastic effects which are inherent characteristics of chemotherapy) the family was besieged by the inevitability of my death. There was now the real possibility that I would die long before my parents, and in this they felt little capacity for contentment. At the close of our discussions, I believe everyone derived a handful of solace through the hope that "miracles DO happen"; there were reports of complete remission and cases in which the cancer inexplicably vanished, leaving no trace of its former habitation in the individual's body. Continuing research in the realm of cancer treatment was also a source of emotional sunshine to my family, and allowed everyone to look toward the homeward journey with anticipation.

I felt exhausted. Though I truly enjoyed seeing my mother and was grateful that my sister's family had made the time-consuming trip, I was happy to grant their leave to partake of supper. As they departed, I sunk back into the bed with a sigh of relief. It had been quite a day... and it was not over yet. I attacked my dinner tray as if it was the only food I had seen in days; it is amazing how an emotional strain can deplete one's energy as thoroughly as participating in a rigorous activity.

While I was alone with my roommate, we opened the curtain which separated the two halves of the room so we could talk and feel more in tune with the world. I felt extremely lucky to have been placed with such a personable lady, as television is a poor excuse for companionship (unless one is sharing a room with an unpleasant and irrational whiner!) After my family had departed, she expressed that she had been rather awed by my duo performances. She said she "admired" my strength and ability to verbalize my feelings, and although I graciously accepted her compliments, I told her it had been a topic about which I felt quite strongly. When one's decision is incontestable, and is fueled by past experience and anguish, the future can quite easily be foreseen.

I believe that one has made the correct choice if, after his decision has been voiced, he feels an overall contentment and freedom from excessive amounts of mental duress. Everyone must live with a patient's choices, but only he dies with them; this is why it is crucial for a patient to voice, and the family to heed, his personal opinions regarding his future.

Later that evening the troop returned from their meal and converged on the room. Since it was rather small to comfortably house six visitors on one side, we made our way into the hospital corridors to see those sights which happenstance would reveal. We eventually found ourselves in a quiet waiting room which boasted several comfortable and very accommodating couches, as well as a few tables upon which the numerous fragments of jigsaw puzzles were scattered. At this point, any form of diversion was welcome, especially for Sharon's kids who doubtlessly felt a trifle suffocated in an atmosphere where everything squeaked with cleanliness and relentless order; I'm sure they were not the only ones who felt intimidated as they passed through the marble hallways.

We entertained ourselves as best we could, electing to remain in the vicinity of the carpet and couches until it was time for them to leave. Engaging in small talk and battling with the jigsaw puzzles until totally infuriated at our lack of progress, the night fell away. When the visiting hours had reached their end, my parents and company bid me good-night and left memories of the day which had just elapsed, as well as renewed excitement for my release from the hospital. I reviewed the day's events as I lay tucked between crisp sheets and a mound of pillows; it had been an exhilarating experience, yet

one that brought little actual joy except the knowledge that one has been understood and has found peace with himself.

I greeted the morning with exuberance, and the physician in a likewise manner; it was as if I radiated undiluted joy. I watched as he methodically checked my lengthy incision, and then assured him that I felt fine when he quizzed me about various details concerning my general recovery. Well aware of my excitement, he cleared my passage for dismissal and had me sign any necessary papers bearing witness that I had indeed left the ward on that day. As I rattled off my happiness for going home, he smiled, knowing the elation was no personal reflection on him, and said, "Home's always the best place to be."

When breakfast arrived, I attacked it with customary glee and then turned my attention to packing. I also took great pleasure in making myself presentable through the application of some eye make-up and donning civilian clothes; it seemed that my release from the hospital was not final until I had my shoes, instead of bedroom slippers, on my feet. I am sure that it is quite psychological, but I think that white smocks make an individual feel worse than his physical health should dictate!

I did not wait long before the family arrived and the time had come to be escorted from the building. Amid the rousing excitement, I wished my roommate a speedy recovery and presented her with one of my floral arrangements; it filled the space where her husband's bouquet should have stood. Looking back, I hope it brought more happiness than sorrowful longing for those unforgettable considerations which were never hers to enjoy.

My dismissal was something akin to a landmark affair for me. Although I was in the hospital for only a week, the freedom to walk in the cold November wind embellished my spirit with a feeling of vitality. Standing amid the elements of nature, it was not difficult for me to accept the cycle which bonded my existence to all living things. To be consciously aware of life's complexities was living in its truest sense; in life is both urgency and tranquility, yet when viewing life as a whole, there is little difference between the two. Thus the cycle is congruent; though it changes, it remains the same.

It was in this state of mind that I left Rochester, Minnesota. Later that day I was welcomed by my brother, Norm, who then received the "news" with the added support of my parents. We were generally in good spirits, which evoked a rather frustrated, "I don't see what you're all so happy about!" assertion from him; that we should be pleased when no remedy was available was disconcerting. . . with time, however, he was able to understand the importance of quality in life. He also was one who did not do those things which would bring turmoil to his life. If one continually succumbs to the notions and desires of others, his own thoughts are rendered meaningless, and likewise, is his existence.

PAGE 212

Essay:
Suffering

SUFFERING

Cancer, or any debilitating injury or illness cannot be viewed as an act of God which is bestowed upon an unsuspecting public as randomly as winning tickets in a perverted lottery. I reject the thought that any supreme diety would choose certain individuals to suffer and allow others to live peaceful and fulfilled lives, or through their own choice, aimless, meaningless lives; I do not feel that a God would

thus inflict an individual either to punish him for wrong-doing or through suffering, make him into a stronger human. Though it may be a consolation to believe that suffering has a purpose, I believe that an individual's pain has no more divine purpose than if he'd stubbed his toe. While the mastery and acceptance of ill fortune will make a person stronger, it would then seem that everyone could benefit from grief, and God would therefore assure each person of his parcel... but it doesn't happen that way. Grief is part of existence, and while certain people may have more than "their share" as far as statistical averages follow, nature does not operate through calculated averages. I believe cancer befalls individuals just as blight will infest a perfectly healthy tree and cut short its life expectancy. It is interesting to me that many individuals will always attempt to justify their illness in such manners in order to keep their faith intact; as far as they are concerned, a loving God must have a reason for doing such a thing to them. People have forgotten that illness is a part of life, and perhaps more prominent is the fact that many refuse to acknowledge their own mortality. Just as illness is an inherent factor in nature's infinitely complex cycle, death also belongs to the natural order of things.

"God will not give us any more than we can bear" is also a disagreeable reason (to my way of thinking) for explaining why suffering is God's gift to us. Far too often, the burden is too hard to bear and the person is unable to cope, leaving him bitter, enraged or even insane. This cannot be pigeonholed neatly as suffering which was to the benefit of the individual... or that which was "no more than he could bear." Moreover, why would a deity wish to dole out pain to some simply because they could "handle it" while allowing others to go their merry way through life because they would have "cracked" under the grief? The latter group may empathize with the former lot, yet they cannot "enlarge their spiritual horizons" through observation alone. Thus, while the former group grows in insight and reflection, the latter enjoys life's surface values and are bereft of the "enjoyment" which true suffering would bring. Who, then, is the better off?

PAGE 213

Essay:
Quality in Life

QUALITY IN LIFE

Another aspect concerning religion and death which never ceases to amaze me is the devout Christian who believes that one should strive for every possible breath 'til the end, as if life for life's sake is of foremost importance. To me, this is saying that heaven is not as great as proclaimed; if their faith, indeed, is so steadfast and secure, would not the proposition of the imminence of heaven produce more smiles than that of another painful breath of life?

I feel that life must contain an element of quality to be worth the actual existence. To me this would mean wrapping myself in thought, and perhaps, subsequently unleashing my hoard of mind-words onto paper, where they would then remain for later perusal. My thoughts and sense of self are more precious than any physical activity I might pursue, or monetary affluence I might acquire. This fact may be the reason why I am content despite physical limitations and inconveniences and my deformity in stature. Though if it were my choice, I would most definitely elect to be of stout health, I feel that I am yet rich in the far greater facets of character; for it is one's mind which makes the person, not the body.

When I see one who is healthy, I don't envy that person, nor do I feel I "deserve" health more than "so and so" who lives a wild life but remains healthy. In fact I would never trade my life for that of someone

else. I would still want my mind, body and soul. While I may detest my body's waning functions, I would not care to live in another's body a life which had no meaning. Moreover, it is not possible to know the sorrow which he might have borne, or the gripping habits which have tortured his mind. If I've ever envied a person, it was only my former, healthier self.

Moreover, quality of life reigns over the quantity of one's days. If one has attained a level of consciousness with which he is content despite ill tidings, he has reached a sense of quality in existence, no amount of time will better that which only the mind can attain; after all, what is ordinary existence but the pursuit of aspirations which shall place shelter over our heads and feed our hungry bodies? For one fostering a higher ideal of life, every day matters are not a bore or resentment; they are inherent facets of life which easily yield to accomplishment when it has been acknowledged by that individual that there are unseen elements far greater than a comfortable lifestyle which renders life meaningful.

PAGE 214

Essay:
Bargaining and Prayer

BARGAINING AND PRAYER

The idea of "bargaining" for more time never really occurred to me, although I was quite aware that this type of reaction was often enacted by an individual whose life was to be lessened through physical incapacitation. I shall always smile to remember the movie "The End," wherein a terminally ill man determines that suicide is his only hope to retain dignity in death; he tries countless measures to kill himself, all of which fail due to their haphazard nature. Finally he swims out to sea in the hope that he will tire and drown, but at the last moment, decides he actually wants to live and calls upon God to give him the strength to swim ashore, tempting God with a 50% pledge and regular attendance in church. The movie was a humorous comparison to the way in which some people truly bargain for more time; I feel that this type of reasoning can only injure the individual, especially if God should "reject" his proposal through a worsening of his condition.

A healthier alternative, which also allows for the patient to maintain his religious stance.... if indeed religion is important in his life... is to instead "hope" for a longer life. Hope does not as easily fall into the realm of religion and therefore remains a separate source of emotional comfort; there is no dependency upon God, doctors or other people to cure him.

Given the fact that man was blessed with a mind of his own, which is essentially too complex for him to understand, it amazes me that he continues to speak of the mind of God as if bestowed with acknowledgeable characteristics, abilities, and functions. Often people will say, "God gives one the strength to bear loss... pain... hardship... etc." as if one bereft of inner fortitude can expect to be given that gift through prayer.

I have always believed it to be more fruitful to pray for strength rather than a cure when faced with terminal ailments. I do not believe that one can "lean on" God and await replenishment, since I cannot view the essence of God as a crutch or in any other way which would place Him outside of one's self. If God resides within an individual, He cannot be a crutch.

Perhaps it is better to say that one's belief in God gives him strength; for if God sent strength as an answer to prayer desiring strength, why do not all people receive the feeling of renewal? Why are some left to insanity, psychosomatic disorders or neurotic behavior? To credit God for one's strength would only serve to discredit His "unanswered" prayers, as is the case with physical disorders. I do not believe God would endow one with the fortitude to deliver himself from anguish and neglect the emotional appeals of others. Housing such thoughts can be devastating.

It is one's unrealistic expectations of God that can sometimes create turmoil for an individual, which again may result from the attempt to personify God. This attempt on the part of an individual to personify his deity often results from his need to feel guarded and loved; without family or friends he can still have a heavenly father and thus is not alone. My strength comes from within, and is augmented by loving family members. I tend to think, rather than to pray, for I feel the unity of all creation is within me and encompasses all things; thus even my most quiet thoughts are not spoken in emptiness.

When people said they prayed for me, I looked at their statement as one of thoughtful kindness because it demonstrated that they cared for me and my family. Yet within, a voice would scream that praying for health misused the idea behind prayer. Although prayer means vastly different things to each individual, I like to think of prayer as a way of communing with God; while there are many who ask God for favors in prayer, to me this cheapens it. I feel it should be used for the attempt of attaining oneness with the eternal spirit and nothing more, unless it is to unify one with himself and allow him to dismiss his selfishness to think of and unite with others. This well-known quote echoes my sentiments: "God, grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, courage to change those I can, and wisdom to know the difference."

To further elaborate on the subject, I would assume that an individual who divulged in prayer such a "bargain" would eventually feel the shame brought about by the realization that he would never have sought this plea or offered his humble services had he not first been stricken by physical illness. Most likely the thought would have never crossed his mind. One would think that the person would have waved God's flag in times of health and prosperity. But, as with the vast majority of people, thoughts of one's own death rarely occur to those caught up in the robust living of life. Thus guilt can both evoke, and be the product of, promises too great to keep.

PAGE 216

Chapter 26 Categories of Acceptance

"Even the smallest pleasures seem more meaningful when they are shared, while the tragic moments are buffered by love. "

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Categories Of Acceptance

I was home once again, and my greatest wish had been realized. Somehow I thought my life would now be simplified, and that I could wield complete control over the ways in which I desired to spend my time and conduct my remaining life.

With something akin to fascination, I looked at myself in the mirror and focused my eyes on my protruding stomach region which would one day be the cause of my death. The subjects of death and other intense, wrenching emotions possessed a magnetism which had always held me spellbound. I was drawn to the startling views of human tragedy in both literature and art forms; a life tottering precariously on the edge of sanity or mortality could offer a glimpse of the more painful aspects of reality which many often neglect to acknowledge. Images which accurately depicted the horror of war or the anguish of a mother of a stricken child were those which captured my attention; though beautiful works would please my eye, only the gripping views of life held the capacity to stir my senses.

The thought that I now shared a common bond with those gripping views of existence similarly held my fascination. I wondered what my family would undergo during the harsh period following my death; I pondered whether I would see earthly lives when I no longer was part of the world. I spent lovely afternoons in peaceful reflection, drinking in the earth's beauty to somehow retain the days as if they were my last. Time itself lost its importance as I embraced the cycles of nature and my own life as one, rather than separate entities. I marveled at the pitiable lack of control we, as humans, have over our lives; after attempting to rule the world, we are at last brought to the level of all things through the element of mortality. I shared a kinship with autumn following the rediscovery of cancer. Like a tree divested of its leaves, its only proof that life yet flourished deep within; I questioned when my color, too, would fade, rendering me helpless against winter's icy grasp (death). Death was no romantic notion which smuggled lives on moonlit nights; it was merely an endless cycle.

Nov. 1981... I quieted my thoughts and listened as a distinctly familiar echo of sadness resounded in the autumn air. It seemed as if the old tree above me was attempting a futile last stand in the face of the impending desolation of winter. A blast of northerly winds scattered the furiously spinning leaves to form a semi-circle about my feet.

I picked up the leaf, noting its fragility as it crumbled under my touch. I realized that I was observing a change of seasons in which only brittle remnants of spring remained to display that life had actually existed. A gust sent the fragmented leaf to be buried unceremoniously in the midst of thousands of other leaves, which were rustling their distaste for their hapless plight.

I watched several more leaves rattle a loud protest as the wind determined their fate. Another leaf, one which could easily be labeled as a spectacular tribute to nature itself, was swaying gently in the crisp breeze. It was different from the other leaves, seemingly unafraid of its destiny. I continued to watch until it was slowly delivered to the ground to rest in silence at my feet.

That is the way death was intended to be, I thought; stealing quickly over its prepared and quietly waiting subject, death overcomes life with no struggle and no outcry. I sighed and wondered when I, too, would be beneath the dried and decaying vestiges of many summers passed.

I culminated my restful sojourn amongst the colorful show of leaves with thoughts that have frequently entered my consciousness during reflective intervals; one must first accept death if he is ever to understand life.

I will never forget an incident which occurred shortly after my release from the hospital. Seated in the middle of the shopping mall, I was engaged in observing people hurry in and out of stores, and while my face did not radiate feelings of great joy and elation, I did not wear a mask of sorrow either. Just then, a man happened by and remarked, "smile, you're not going to die!" I remember how idiotic that phrase sounded to me, and it left me speechless. "Yes," I thought, "I shall die. . . and sooner than you might suspect." Everyone dies.

Quite apart from denying my illness, I found myself quite preoccupied with it, and initially it was difficult to carry on in a "normal" fashion in the sense that I could not detach my mind from the fact that I had cancer again. After learning of my recurrence I immediately began thinking thoughts such as, "if I subscribe to this magazine, I wonder whether I'll receive all of the copies. . .," and while driving down the road, "I wonder if I'll ever get a speeding ticket," or when in a pet shop, "if I got a parrot, it would outlive me."

I remembered my china dishes and realized that my dad had been right; I should never have purchased something which represented the future. The future did not belong to me. . . it was dissolving before my eyes. My dreams were changing out of necessity, since most dreams depended on time for their fulfillment... and time was one amenity that I could not hope to claim.

Nov. 1981... I dismissed modeling altogether after appearing in a luncheon (style show), which I enjoyed entirely. I somehow felt unable to accept the demands of the career when I felt my health situation was so uncertain and unreliable. Admittedly, I could have modeled for a short time. Somehow, though, it didn't seem important any more. I was tired...

I thought of the teenager who had a car, yet lacked the fuel to drive it.

I speculated as to whether or not I would witness the spring-time again, and could not help but question absently if my 20th birthday would prove to be my last. I was unable to release myself from the thought of my impending death; I wasn't simply Lauren Isaacson. I was "Lauren Isaacson, victim of cancer." I identified myself with the disease and found my thoughts encompassing various subjects with cancer continually in the back of my mind. I never denied the presence of the disease, nor did I wish it on someone else, and perhaps this is what allowed me to bridge a period of gray disillusionment so common in the acceptance of solemn news; I would much rather face a heart-rending truth than to live amid a cloud of fantasy derived of the mind. Tumors have no conscience, and no amount of wishing, cursing, or bribery will cause the disease to disappear. These mind-games will one day come to an abrupt, emotionally wrenching halt or lead to personality disturbances if not corrected; such reactions only injure the individual or those with whom he must associate.

In coping with a weighty truth of such magnitude, the family as well as the patient, will experience various and ever-changing emotions, and I believe it is quite important that these feelings are ventilated. Simply because the family is not afflicted with the illness does not mean that the individuals are immune to its emotional nuances. In fact, the family is sometimes the worse off; they essentially feel helpless, unable to ease physical pain or shield their loved one from his frightful pursuer.

When the family is able to openly converse on the topic of the patient's illness and imminent death, the entire affair seems less formidable, rather like a beam which is directed upon the unlit recesses of a room, thereby dispelling the uncertainties which lay dormant in the darkness. Because there are manifold reactions to adversity, related conversation will evolve at varying rates. While some people would be ready to speak candidly after a brief time, others need to ingest the situation gradually and should not be pressed into heavy conversation directly following a shock. Moreover, there exists in most humans the great need to face life's circumstances with dignity and composure and would not, therefore, relish a serious discussion until they could do so without losing control of their emotions and causing a tearful scene.

Although it is unhealthy to continually dwell on the plight of the family, silence is debilitating. . . especially if it evolves through avoidance of the problem, rather than simply the inability to verbalize one's thoughts. True coping deals with self-expression, not the clever avoidance thereof. One should never attempt to stifle grief, for to do so will create unendurable stress; and what, I might add, is so terrible about venting one's sorrow in the form of tears, when the situation certainly merits that behavior?

Anger is an understandable reaction to the discovery that one harbors a debilitating disease, for since everyone must eventually die, surely there are more pleasant routes toward that destination if given the right to choose. Moreover, anger is thought to be a less degrading form of expressing depression. No one wants to suffer or restrict himself in a manner unnatural to his lifestyle, nor lose his sense of control, no matter how much or little he actually has.

If anger is a prevalent emotion, its release is necessary; yet projecting that anger on undeserving family members or hospital personnel is unfair. Anger is counter-productive when wrongly displaced; fanatical rage and irate demands are increasingly ignored and replaced by the unfortunate avoidance of the enraged individual. No one can benefit from this chain reaction.

An alternative which could be used by the patient having the objectivity to discover his outward rage is anger expressed through writing or intelligent conversations rather than transforming the anger into unfounded complaints. The problem is not the unsmiling intern, or the wife who arrived ten minutes later than planned. The problem is health, and if not dealt with, attitude as well.

A reasonable exception is when the patient's anger is derived of pain; it is virtually impossible to be civil if each breath heralds another moment of severe physical anguish. This belligerence should not be taken personally by either relatives or hospital staff, nor should the unfounded anger described above be ingested as relating to their presence or prescribed duties.

If it is attention the patient needs, it is more likely to be given if he behaves in a manner deserving of amenity. It is a pleasure to be near a person who, despite his personal problems, can retain humor and conduct himself in a respectable manner. If my experience is any indication of the quality of the residency in hospitals, I found the staff to be most personable if treated likewise. On the rare occasion

that a patient is forced to abide a hostile nurse, or one who refuses to believe that he is suffering to the degree that he claims, a complaint is well within reason. One case in particular concerned an incontinent elderly woman who, after an accident over which she had no control, was chastised by a hostile nurse, resulting in tears which should never have been provoked. A patient is not paying for abuse; moreover, a hospital without patients is just a stone building, and its personnel is up for hire. Inflicting emotional anguish has no place in the medical profession.

When I felt frustrated by the constraints which resulted from my cancer, I encountered no pervasive or continual anger. Furthermore, the anger was targeted at the source of my inability to function properly, rather than projecting it toward an innocent companion. Mine was the self-contained anger similar to that which I would feel after entertaining influenza for nearly a week; weary of its limiting effect on my mobility and general well-being, I would hurl devastating thoughts inward, then later proceed to calm my cantankerous spirit and await the arrival of health.

My father held a rather negative view of the possibility that good could prevail over evil; he always expected the worst, and often was quite right in his assumptions. Even so, expectation does not cancel one's disappointment at having supposed correctly, and his broken heart was obvious. A touching moment in a movie, a poignant verse of song or the reading of one of my poems was enough to send a tremor through his voice in a later attempt to speak. Often depressed or angry, he was tormented by the many adversities which had befallen our family. It just didn't seem quite right that he should have such difficult burdens after he had lived a morally conscious life; others, lacking all sense of moral responsibility, seemed to live long and healthy lives, or died simply because of their own ignorance and gluttonous indulgences. Hounded by such sources of resentment, acceptance was gained, then lost once again at varying intervals when he viewed the healthy, but empty lives whose health, he thought, should have been my own.

Aside from the family, my dad had no confidant or close friend. He, like many members of the family, was quite self-sufficient. Unfortunately, one's self-sufficiency, displayed in grave situations, can discourage closeness, whether consciously or not. Thus, when such an individual truly desires someone to hear his concerns, no one is near enough to care. Even persons with whom one had worked on a daily basis can prove to be unenthused listeners; often their association clearly ends within the confines of the job description.

Though not always apparent, my dad was a highly sensitive individual. An injustice or injury persisted, inflicting pain and stress. More than anything I believe my father needed unsolicited affection and demonstrations of sympathy; lacking these, especially from his co-workers, Dad felt himself betrayed by the one group with whom he had spent so much of his time. He could easily have drowned in self-pity, for no one wished to help with the bailing out of his broken heart; sorrow was like a hat which only he could wear.

My father would, on occasion, mention that if he had not married, or had children, he would not have had to experience the pain of losing dear children or seeing them riddled with health disorders. Life without emotional grief would be "easier" and more stable, yet to shelter ones self from close relationships would also be an enormous deprivation; love is the foremost joy of living, and it cannot grow through alienation from society. Even the smallest pleasures seem more meaningful when they are shared, while the tragic moments are buffered by love. To separate ones self from affection for others denies a virtuous human potential to develop, as it simultaneously creates more emptiness than that which occurs upon the death of a loved one; the grief-stricken survivor has memories, but the emotional hermit has only stability. There was indeed, a sacrifice for love. It was one that my dad was willing to take.

In one of our conversations, I once asked my father if he thought he had basically accepted my health disorder. He replied, "I don't think I will ever accept it, because it's not acceptable." For his part, maybe he just lives with it. What other choice does one have, excluding madness or suicide, but to live with it? (It just doesn't mean that he has to like it!)

Guilt very often accompanies the illness or death of a loved one, and can be released through conversation. The unfounded sort, stemming from regrets such as a patient's unfulfilled dream which the relative felt he impeded, or a mother's inability to detect subtle changes in her child's health, is a counterproductive, if not debilitating, manner of reacting to the problem. These emotions are quite corrosive to the individual, and it is important that they are quickly corrected; this can be done through attentive listening and positive reinforcement.

After discovering the malignancy in my stomach, my mother effectively chastised herself by asserting that she "should have noticed that I was eating less and getting thinner." She held on to her belief while I tried to assure her that the extent to which the cancer had spread was not her fault. I reminded her that many children are rather lanky and thin when they are growing too rapidly for any food which

they eat to transform into fat; the body needs the nourishment to sustain itself, and has no excess for insulating purposes. With time and reassurance, she finally dismissed her guilt; I listened to her statements, returning not with, "You shouldn't feel that way," but with reasons which effectively reinforced the pointlessness of her guilt. As with any invitation to change one's outlook, a person fostering guilt must be shown why his view is unreasonable and needs to be altered. Statements such as "Don't feel guilty" define the desired destination, but offer no direction as to the means of attaining that goal. I have sometimes wondered whether this type of guilt is not merely a subconscious means of inflicting punishment upon ones self in order to more deeply share the pain felt by the ill person. Guilt which is evoked through hateful thoughts or malicious wishes toward the ill person is sometimes more difficult to manage, due to the fervor with which the mental darts were hurled at the patient before the onset of illness. Abreast a wave of superstition, the guilty party quietly blames himself, feeling responsible for the evil which befell his victim. It is important for the guilt-stricken individual to realize he does not control the hands of fate. To further complicate matters, often the dying or deceased individual is surrounded by an aura of purity, and it is deemed unfit to denounce his character despite the validity of the statements. Though loss makes memories all the more dear to the heart, I feel that one should not forget that these people, sick though they are, are human; they possess irksome habits and have made foolish mistakes as does all humanity. To elevate an individual beyond his former limitations is an open invitation toward the housing of personal guilt, since any negative emotions concerning the patient will be thought of as hostile and unfounded; one is not only denying the disturbing propensities of the patient, but also, and more important, he is denying his true feelings, thereby trapping himself.

In this scope, I might add that elevating a person who has not yet died can create an undesirable situation for him, in that he may feel threatened by this new and unrealistic public opinion of himself which, consequently, is greater than he is able to uphold.

Another sort of guilt, planted by the patient, is somewhat related to the above. Although conversation is generally thought to be a healthy exchange between concerned individuals, there are those who, unfortunately, take the business of sharing their health problem wholeheartedly. Applying no restrictions on themselves, they continually voice their complaints until a situation is created wherein the complaints are more of a burden to the family than is the illness. I feel that reactions such as these on the part of the afflicted are unfair and completely selfish. Forcing constant awareness of an illness upon a loved one is cruel and emotionally debilitating.

When a situation such as the one described occurs, I wonder whether the patient truly loves his "subjects"; a caring individual would still want his family to derive joy from living despite his inability to actively take part. Jealousy has no place in love, especially when a loving relationship is placed in jeopardy by the imminence of death. A patient's jealousy can often promote guilt; ultimately, however, it begets only resentment, not true love and devotion.

My father was acquainted with a man whose wife was a constant source of worry. She was what I would call "the delicate type," in need of constant attention and sympathy whether she truly needed it or not. The day finally came when she found herself bedridden, demonstrating the symptoms of an actual health disorder, and her personality took on the shrieking demeanor of an angry bird. She expected constant nurturing care from her husband, yet nothing he did would please her. After hounding him relentlessly to pick up an item at the store, she would be enraged because of his "lengthy" absence.

Eventually the poor man agreed to place his wife in a rest home in her home town. However, through her injection of guilt, he still felt obliged to maintain a daily vigil by her side. The man became emotionally and physically exhausted, and suffered to such an extent that his sanity was nearly obliterated; in tearful, emotional outbursts he would relate the "sad" condition of his wife, and elaborate in detail their conversations and prayers, never thinking that her's was a very disturbed mind. Bereft of any other communicational outlet or friendships, he accepted the blame for his wife's unhappiness. In effect, he was starving for conversation and emotional support, causing an irrational view of reality.

Although, toward the last portion of her life, the wife was mentally incompetent concerning her nasty behavior, she would have been capable of changing her actions earlier in life, yet, through a jealous and self-centered need, she obtained a constant awareness of her presence by lamenting any flaw in her well being. The husband may have enjoyed the initial pampering as a means of elevating his feeling of self-worth; here was a woman who needed him. However, as any excess can be overwhelming, her preoccupation for comfort was his final undoing. Had she thought less of herself and allowed him the freedom to breathe, the obsessive guilt she strove to plant would never have taken root in his mind.

It is essential that the patient allows his family to continue in a "normal" fashion, for it must be

accepted that there will be a time when life must carry on without the sick individual. This is not to say that a husband should start to seek another mate before his wife meets her demise; behavior of this nature is cruel and, I believe, says that his wife was not loved but only needed for the beneficial comforts she could provide. However, continuing attendance in a church, or meeting with friends should in no way be thought of as frivolous or forgetful of the sick, but rather as a form of therapy for the living.

I wanted my family to continue its current lifestyle, and for the most part, that was no problem. However, Mom continued to feel guilty about her health and ability to do anything she desired while her young daughter was forced to stay home.

As my cancer progressed and I did less in the social realm, spending week-end nights at home, my mother became concerned about leaving me alone when they went on a small excursion or nighttime gatherings; she worried that I might be lonesome or scared, or need help of some kind. It was somewhat of a chore to assure her that I would be fine; should I be scared or lonesome, it would pass, and with regard to my health, she would be powerless to aid in my comfort even if she was at home. As a final effort I confessed that I truly enjoyed being alone sometimes. I too needed room to breathe, to feel that, even with my severe limitations, I was yet in control of my life. It was important that I knew I could take care of myself if the need would arise.

Guilt may derive from actual wrong-doing on the part of the guilt-ridden as well as the causes described above. Whether spurred from emotional neglect, mental abuse, infidelity, or another source, this guilt is the only type which I feel is worthy of its keeper. When an individual knowingly hurts another, yet makes no attempt to correct himself, the former deserves to feel the grasp of pain. No apology, no matter how magnificent, can take the place of past injustice. Therefore, while the past is history, perhaps these regrets can best be handled by a silent oath to behave differently on future occasions.

The refusal of friends to face my health situation always brought about a keen sense of frustration on my behalf, modified to a certain extent by pity. It is impossible to attain any depth in such relationships, since continual avoidance of reality cannot be upheld.

One such relationship, in which a friend would not acknowledge the presence of my illness, was eventually transformed into a virtual charade. Conversations revolved solely around trivial matters or reminiscent revelries. Discussions of the present surrounded her doings only, for the least hint of my illness would leave the conversation stunted. Because I never cared to dwell on my ill health, any remark was of the passing sort, yet even these seemed too much for her to abide. It was as if the pre-cancerous person was the only "me" which existed for her; my entire self was no longer acceptable. As no change occurred, our rendezvous became less and less frequent, and eventually subsided altogether. I felt uncomfortable having to hide behind a mask of my former health for my company to be tolerable; it was better to be alone. Friendship must be built upon honesty if its true potential is to be realized.

Frustrating to a lesser degree were those who could withstand a cursory mentioning of my illness, but would then perform a mental backflip and begin discussing another topic as if I had no problem at all. It seemed that their understanding of my health condition was not congruent with the activities which they considered me capable of negotiating. Stifling an open-mouthed, incredulous stare, I would then attempt to explain that I was unfit for that particular suggestion, but perhaps we could find a mutually agreeable alternative. I always tried to coax one's realization of my health situation, rather than attempting to "cram" the truth down uncooperative throats.

It is so difficult for society to abide the thought of terminal illness and death, especially in those we love, and therefore it is often ignored in a conscious effort to prove its nonexistence. Though it is natural to attempt to flee that which seeks to invade one's happiness, running, unfortunately, shall not make the menace disappear; the young are not the only group of people who, when faced with the illness of a loved-one or friend, search desperately for their "running shoes."

While the voicing of feelings is very difficult, it can bring peace of immeasurable degree to yield to their expression; after a loved one dies, one can no longer deny that he was terminally ill, and is left to cope not only with the disease, but with its ultimate effect. Where there might have been memories of a loving farewell, there is emptiness. Just as spoken words cannot be recalled, words which are left unsaid are merely lifeless fragments of conversations which might have been, and forever plague the happiness of the individual who elected silence instead of self-expression.

The utilization of excessive denial toward the fact that a disease is incurable can jeopardize one's time and quality of life. Denial alienates its victims from family and friends. While the patient, or conversely, his relative, continually galavants across the country in search of a miracle drug or

pretends the truth shall not come to pass, lost days can never again be regained. The feeling of hope afforded by such futile excursions and mental conjurings is, I believe, less beneficial than are the quiet and intimate interludes which might have taken their place. The longer one avoids the unfaltering truthfulness of such a situation, the less time he has to enjoy his remaining days in a "normal" fashion.

Unlike certain studies on illness and death, I cannot feel that denial is parallel to hope, nor can I think of the need for hope as a lack of acceptance. As I soon discovered, self-absorption in a traumatic illness eventually becomes monotonous, and one will naturally turn his mind to encompass other interests. This is perhaps more prominent with extended illness, as the patient and his family pursue routine activities while a "lack" of symptoms permits. Although cancer is definitely part of my life, it is not my whole life. While I have never thought a cure was likely to be discovered, I know there are many involved in cancer research; thus, as I live day to day, a ray of hope shines through a door which is not completely closed. Hope injects an element of pleasure in lives which would otherwise be stagnant reflections of death itself. While there is yet a chance to survive, and discomfort is not the primary essence of each day, one tends to think of life; it is all we, as humans, truly know.

Luckily my family and better friends did not avoid my problem. There were times when we felt pressed to talk, and let go of the tears which were usually held at bay throughout the day. Disappointment and faded dreams stabbed my father through the heart, and he lamented the many sadnesses with an angry vengeance. Mom's aching for that which could not be often liquified into tears. Norm, on one of our walks, would blandly state, "No luck at all . . ." The need to speak, and the responsibility to listen, alternated between us, and strengthened our relationships; the patient is not the only one in need of a tireless ear.

I had to be able to be free to talk and joke of my illness, not hide its existence in the corner of my mind. It was part of my life, becoming as natural as eating and sleeping. Had I been forced to conceal my feelings my life would have been one of loneliness and despair; I would only have been what people wanted to see... an image, not a real person.

I was alive, housing an alien growth, indeed nurturing it, so that it may fulfill its purpose. To try to impede its fixed intent seemed futile; cancer desired to squeeze life from my body many years ago... and now it truly appeared that it would succeed. Thus, almost pleased with the belief that my life had found its rut, from which it could not be removed, I wanted to live in a manner conducive to good spirits. No one, I thought, would interfere with my peace.

PAGE 225

Chapter 27 Frustrations

". . . I did not want to exist on a roller coaster, constantly grasping an inflated balloon of hope for each successive "cure" . . ."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Frustrations

Returning to college was difficult, as it prompted numerous explanations as to the cause of my absence. I was honest, relating my situation as gently as the English vocabulary allowed. I wished no pity, simply the same cordiality which before had greeted my entry into the room, and happily this I did receive. Yet more than this, I found within many eyes a deep incredulousness, as if they were simultaneously amazed and frightened that such a horrid disorder had pounced so near to their own lives. Their faces proclaimed "it cannot be!" while they tried desperately to transform my words into a statement which they found reasonable and within their capacity to understand. How could such a thing happen to someone "so young."

One particularly agreeable friend wasted no time in asserting that I would follow a plan consisting of health food and soon find myself "detoxified" and on my way to full recovery. Dubious, and rather self-protective, I hesitantly agreed to accompany her to the local natural food store to see if the owner knew of any promising, no-fail treatments for cancer. Once there I was shown a variety of self-cures, ranging from herbal diets, to drinking carrot juice and exorbitantly priced tea. I failed to see how such measures could possibly help, for if they did, would not everyone with cancer be flooding into the store, rather than laying bedridden in a hospital ward? I looked around at the people. They appeared to be ill. Carrot juice drinkers, I presumed! At any rate, water infused with plain tea sounded more appealing to me, and my friend and I sat down at one of their tables to peruse several books on the subject of cancer.

Because I had so thoroughly resigned myself to my inevitable death, I did not relish the thought of inquiring into cures; it was as if these "cures" threatened my happiness and sense of emotional security, for once acceptance has been attained it is not easy to smile upon that which may destroy one's inner peace. When I would try to explain this feeling, people often thought I housed a "death wish" or that I had no zest for life. It was a chore to explain this was not true, but rather, that I did not want to exist on a roller coaster, constantly grasping an inflated balloon of hope for each successive "cure" and then falling into the despair of disillusionment when it failed to enact its promise. I hoped my attitude did not injure my friend's good intentions; ironically we were each looking out for my well-being... she wished for my health and I for my sanity.

Scrawling several book titles and clinics on a piece of note paper I dismissed myself from the store into the fresh autumn breeze. I determined to check out a book on vitamin C therapy at the library before going home, although I honestly hoped that the information therein would prove doubtful and not merit further investigation. Maybe I was some sort of an odd-ball, I thought, toting the book under my arm. . .everyone wants to see me cured but me; I wanted that also, but without the lies and shams that treatment often entailed.

After thoroughly scouring the book for details, I found my previous assumptions to be correct. It was not proven that vitamin C increased one's life expectancy and, as I had also surmised, the ingestion of large amounts could render some ill effects, ranging from mild discomforts to more serious complications. I was relieved to read this, as I disliked the idea of taking massive doses of anything; I respected moderation.

The toxic effects of vitamin C were excessive gas, nausea and diarrhea (of which I felt I already had enough), urinary burning, irritations of the mouth, and injury to the tooth enamel, dehydration, a depletion of minerals in the body, and finally, a temporary increase in pain for terminal patients and possible risk of hemorrhaging for those with advanced cancers. Additionally, I found it interesting that vitamin C in massive doses could speed one's demise if he was near to death, while bestowing more energy upon those who were not; as I had no way of discovering in which stage I was classified, should I have been near my death, I felt no urge to roll out the red carpet of welcome by taking vitamin C.

So it was that one option of treatment had been thankfully discarded, and my friend reluctantly nodded in appreciation of my rejection of vitamin C. I shared an affinity with normalcy and serenity in life, yet in time I began to see the many trials which lay before me and my goal; even simplicity is difficult to attain when love and concern are one's barriers.

Another reaction to a dreaded diagnosis is what I would call "a feeling of desperation" by the relatives. Flooded by the reality that a family member may soon die, a relative may override his usual rationality by playing doctor and assuming what is best for the patient. This type of behavior is understandable; often a person who loves another will attempt to do all that is within his capabilities to comfort the sick. Through fulfilling his own emotional needs, the relative is then better able to cope with the illness, for he feels he has not simply watched his loved one fade away.

The relative's source of emotional comfort may lie in the steady pursuit of all hopeful treatment, reading any related publications on the disease spanning diet strategies to mega-dosages of vitamins as a potential cure, or perhaps arranging prayer sessions to pray the disease away. When one boasts an array of caring friends and relatives, the suggestions fly; it is quite a compliment and should be viewed

as such. The patient, however, should not feel pressed by these informative offerings, and always remember that he has the right to decline their pursuit.

In dealing with an over-zealous relative, it is imperative that a patient communicates his desires to the relative in a manner that will accommodate and acknowledge the concern, yet enable him to follow his own needs. Everyone has a right to decide that which is best for his emotional well-being, and to assume that an individual's needs are identical to one's own is, indeed, a great folly and disservice to the other.

When a person makes choices for another without first consulting him, it is a direct violation of personal freedom; reactions to this type of treatment vary. A generally meek person may feel obliged to abide by his captor's urgings, either through fear of opposition or an indisposition to openly hurt, an act derived, supposedly, of pure concern. This type of person is quite vulnerable unless his relatives are protective of his wishes and do not extend their boundaries when decisions must be made through making personal demands. When a plan is devised, fully knowing both the quiet disposition of the patient and the fact that the plan in question would prove to have a disagreeable impact on him, the enactment of such a plan would be nothing short of overt maliciousness.

Another reaction to this decision-making effort may be fury, with the patient recklessly attacking the relative's "good intentions." Although anger is justifiable in such situations wherein the patient's desires were completely overlooked, I feel that wrath is punishment more harsh than the over-wrought relative merits. One might argue that if the relative truly had the patient's well-being in mind, he would have inquired into his wishes before enacting his own. Though basically true the argument cannot stand alone without also expressing the necessity for the patient to accept the chaotic mental states possessed by his relatives as a natural reaction to their own sorrow. Anger demeans its subject's need to retain hope, whereas a thoughtful explanation will yield a greater understanding of the entire situation as faced by all those concerned.

Because I value the ability to choose the routes which I wish my life to follow, I have similarly felt it is only fair to allow others that freedom as well; while I may have voiced an opinion toward a subject concerning someone other than myself, I would never feel it was acceptable behavior for me to take any action toward the fulfillment of that opinion. My oldest brother was different from myself in this regard, as the following story will demonstrate.

Often Todd would take issues into his own hands, apparently feeling that his way was undoubtedly THE way. It was virtually impossible to illustrate another viewpoint. Consequently when I received the diagnosis that I had cancer once again, the dark cloud which fell over the family receded somewhat after my resolution to forgo chemotherapy, yet Todd, who lived some distance away from the immediate family, was unfortunately less informed as to my generally good state of health at the present time and proceeded to think only of my rapid demise. Telephones, unhappily, cannot relate the entire picture of one's health; had he been able to actually see for himself that I was not fading away with each passing moment, I'm sure the turn of events would have been different. As it was, however, he decided we were not preparing ourselves for the onslaught of my disease, and unbeknownst to us, made an appointment for us to speak with the director of the "family hospice" service at the local hospital.

On Thanksgiving weekend everyone came home. I was in immensely good spirits, as I felt so very fortunate to be out of the hospital and with those I loved. Moreover, I was happy with my decisions and glad to feel physically well so soon after the exploratory surgery; I knew my health would not decline before the holidays, and in this I found contentment.

In the afternoon I dismissed myself from the festivities so that I could rest. Shortly after my disappearance, Todd and his wife found their way upstairs to my room and asked if they could talk to me. They entered and we discussed my health; I was glad to answer any questions which might have been forgotten, or otherwise left unanswered. They then gave me several books, two of which concerned the topic of death, namely, "On Death and Dying," and "On Dying With Dignity." Todd quickly made the statement that I didn't have to read them if I didn't want to, slightly embarrassed by the whole affair. I wasn't offended by the gifts, but thought them to be rather humorous. I thanked Todd nevertheless, acknowledging that many people have benefited from reading those books. I further said that although I felt in no need of assistance with regard to my handling the disease and eventual death, I would perhaps read the books simply to see what the doctors had to say about their keen observances of the dying.

Before our discussion had come to a close my mother came upstairs to join the group. Todd tried to conceal the books he'd given to me. I wondered about his effort of secrecy; did he have second thoughts as to the appropriateness of the gift, or was he concerned about Mom's reaction? I once again squelched a smile, noting how death is a characteristically dismal and uncomfortable subject; we all

made our way to the main floor.

The following day everyone was gathering up their belongings for their journey homeward. As the day progressed and Todd had made no effort to pack, I became suspicious. He finally voiced the plan that he had in store for us, that being to talk with the director at the hospice service. We immediately rejected the idea, saying we had no intention of utilizing the service at the present time. It was then that he told us he had actually made an appointment for us, and the director would be expecting us in a few hours. Since we had first thought the idea was a mere suggestion, the negative feelings of anger did not surface until now.

Norm, sensing as I, the trouble which was bound to occur, excused himself before making a scene. He decided to take a walk to displace his rage. I firmly told everyone that I was not going; I didn't want to start digging my grave before my demise, not to mention the fact that I did not wish to die in the hospital if it could be avoided. But above all else, it was the principle of the whole affair that set off my self-protective behavior; I would not have my decisions made for me. My parents were also angered at the thought of their being entirely left out of the decision to see this man, multiplied by their lack of preparation for the discussion which was about to take place. At last, understanding Todd's concern, they agreed to accompany him. As I watched them file into the car, I wasn't quite sure if a battle had been lost or won; perhaps in the forgetting of principle, followed by the acceptance of the former, no one truly wins.

Letting one be free is sometimes the hardest gift to bestow upon another person, yet it can be the one of greatest value. Without personal choice, freedom is but a laughable reality.

Another case which was marked by what I would consider faulty and injurious judgment involved a couple who had been married for 52 years. This couple was a classic example of opposing personalities living together under one roof; she was a rational, mild-mannered lady, while he was obnoxious in every possible sense of the word, needing to be the constant attraction and principal authority presiding over any group or function. He had to have his way or he would make life truly miserable for the unfortunate individual who attempted to voice an opinion, carrying out his revenge with cruel indignance.

After suffering what appeared to have been a stroke, the woman was hospitalized only to discover that a tumor had formed in her brain. It was evident she would not have long to live, so she decided to forgo the torture which would accompany chemotherapy, the sole option of treatment, and explicitly informed her husband of her wishes. As time passed and her condition grew worse, she eventually lost all ability to verbally communicate; it was at this point that her husband bid the doctors to administer chemotherapy, with the supposed hope that she would regain some of her lost functions. Consciously aware of the decision which had been made by her husband on her behalf, yet incapable of voicing her opposition as to its commencement, she was forced to submit, for the last time, to her husband's self-centered dominance. He saw in her eyes that she begged to be released from the treatment, but he played the ignorant fool and watched as she quietly faded into the obscure limbo of unconsciousness.

All through their life together, until her quiet end, the man thought only of securing enjoyment for himself. When he felt his well-being was in danger, he sought only to maintain his happiness, which had little to do with the welfare of his dying wife. This was apparent in his total lack of empathy regarding her wishes, and the merciless ignorance of her speechless plea.

It is difficult for me to believe that such selfish persons exist, for I hope the vast majority of people will conquer their selfish tendencies in order to facilitate the desires of their loved one, even if it shall mean a more rapid decline in health. It is important to realize that only the patient suffers bodily pain; it is ultimately he who must undergo the treatment, which could in fact, significantly alter his overall comfort.

For these combined reasons, I feel it is fair to allow a mentally intact individual to decide how his remaining days shall be spent; this is why open conversation among family members is of such great consequence. When the illness prevents further decisions on the part of the patient, it is then up to the family to respect his previously stated wishes and, should further decisions need to be made beyond those which had been specified, strive to make new options benefit the patient's comfort. Above all else, kindness should prevail and guide in the solutions to any questions which might occur concerning the patient's death. A patient should not be made to suffer through a lack of acceptance on the part of the family; behavior of this sort not only uses the dying, it overtly abuses them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Christmas 1981

I had always loved Christmas, but it was special that year. Like all else in my life Christmas had not actually changed; the lights were no brighter, and the first snow was just as brilliant. However, I realized that the holiday could easily be my last, and I wanted my final memories to be vivid.

To make the most of the day, preparations were always begun directly after Thanksgiving. The Indian corn was packed away and the Christmas decorations took their place, transforming the house into an inescapable reminder of love and happiness. Each ornament, given to me by Mom for my own future tree, I unwrapped with care, wooden men, mice with glasses, corn husk dolls... they added life to a sapless tree.

Cookie baking commenced following Thanksgiving also, and continued sporadically up to the 23rd of December. Because Mom was engaged with her kindergarteners, I often baked the bulk of the cookies during the season. Dad and Norm also appreciated my endeavor, but for reasons unrelated to Mom's.

The most fun I had was shopping for gifts. Norm did not share my enthusiasm in this area. His miserly side sometimes bloated to monstrous proportions, and since he seldom indulged in frivolous expenditures, he saw no reason to do so for anyone else. However, more than having a penchant for saving money or a distaste toward giving unneeded gifts, his aggravation could have been a result of his agoraphobic nature; Christmas meant shopping and shopping meant stores, and stores meant people, and all four elements meant chaos and incredible stress for Norm. Occasionally we would stop and browse in a shop if he was not nervous, especially when we were on one of our drives that skirted small towns; otherwise we avoided heavily crowded public areas.

After Thanksgiving my brother and I drove to the Amana Colonies in Iowa, a tourist attraction in themselves. We wandered into several shops. At one, a shop selling woolens, we happened upon a shearing coat of rugged beauty and timeless appeal.

"What a coat..." Norm inspected the workmanship and overall appearance with something akin to awe.

"I wonder if I should try it on..."

"Go ahead!"

I had never witnessed Norm so utterly engrossed by something of material significance. He slid the coat off its hanger and, shouldering the bulky hide, stepped before the mirror. Few people could have pulled off a look like that; he resembled a veteran mountaineer.

"It really looks good," I said.

"Yeh, not bad, huh?" It wasn't immodest; it was true. He replaced the coat and, giving it a long look in parting, strolled out of the store.

"That was some coat," he raved. Norm talked about it all the way home.

Half-way home I knew what I was going to buy him for Christmas.

The following afternoon found my dad and me on the highway, heading for the colony so I could buy the sheepskin coat. Clenching my purse, I couldn't wait to relinquish the folded bills in my wallet.

"This is going to be the best Christmas!" I exclaimed.

Dad looked at me as if I had slipped into lunacy. I hadn't expected him to understand; he was too bitter about my recurrence of cancer.

I thought of the previous Christmas when Norm had given me the gold watch necklace. I had been flabbergasted, not only because of the great expense, but because of the love expressed through its

purchase.

The coat was a similar expression, plus a great deal of gratitude. I needed to say thanks in a way that would last. I never stopped to calculate the length of a lifetime, but believed the coat would survive that long.

On Christmas Eve the gifts were opened.

"Norm, what do you think of mine?" I baited him.

"Didn't you get my gift yet?" I continued.

He looked about his feet for unopened packages, but found nothing. I knew he would not; the coat was still in my closet.

"Oh! I guess it's still upstairs!" I raced up the steps to retrieve the coat, then decided to put it on and wear it downstairs.

Unable to rid my voice of its smile, I presented him with the coat hanger.

"It's all yours," I said.

Norm looked at the hanger, the coat, at me, at the coat again.

"You're kidding..."

"No!"

Tears welled up in his eyes as the truth sunk in. Perhaps Norm best described the way he was feeling when he said. . . "what a load!"

It was almost more than a person could handle.

We took a nighttime stroll after our celebration ended. The air was crisp and clear and stars blinked like thousands of tree lights. Apart from our conversation all was silent, befitting the midnight hush. This was, indeed, the best Christmas.

PAGE 232

Chapter 29 Self Imposed Barriers

"I am nature, and like all aspects of nature I, too, must respect the passing of seasons within my life."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Self Imposed Barriers

I too, was capable of erecting quite formidable barriers to my health, happiness and general desire

for peace. The initial days of my last semester at Black Hawk College had me floundering desperately for sanity; I had talked myself into attempting 17 hours of credit so I would receive a degree rather than merely transferring my hours to the next college if, indeed, there would be a "next college." Had I not so enjoyed sanity, I might have allowed myself to entertain this wretched state of turmoil; as it was, reason soon came to my rescue and I was able to fling one enormous subject back into the sea of college courses. Having discarded the excess weight, I was perfectly capable of continuing my other subjects with ease and enjoyment, and accommodate my tendency toward perfectionistic behavior through my attainment of an A average.

Perfectionism is a behavioral pattern which is not easily discarded, yet when one fostering this destructive mode of thought is able to control it, and reach the irrevocable conclusion that perfectionism is a desperately counterproductive personality, he is able to substantially reduce his mental anxiety. One ruled by perfectionism finds no happiness, and must also face the future in a similarly uncompromising light. Since no one is perfect an endless struggle continues throughout one's existence.

One course which deserves mention if only for its intrinsic quality of humor was called "biofeedback." Of many options, a student was required to choose a course under a certain category despite its utter worthlessness regarding his degree. These were often regarded with contempt, as students felt them to be a sheer waste of time; nevertheless the courses were an easy "A" for those who applied a modest degree of interest and effort.

My elected class centered on controlling and tempering one's emotions through the relaxation of individual body parts, and eventually slowing one's involuntary functions such as heart rate and breathing. These various forms of relaxation were monitored by electric devices attached to pulse points on the head and arms.

More interesting than the machine, however, was the teacher who lectured to us. Apparently her method of relaxation worked incredibly well, for she would stand in front of the class and speak so calmly, so slowly, that she nearly fell asleep mid-sentence. As the class wore on, those seated about the room would either begin to fidget uncontrollably or gradually transcend earthly consciousness into a vast ocean of dreams. I often found my mind wandering aimlessly, far from the room in which my body was confined, yet I fostered a benevolent sympathy for the dreamy instructor and tried to concentrate upon the content of her messages, though like a flower in tight bud, they took forever to unfold. When it was finally time to depart, and we all dashed toward our cars, I could not help but wonder whether it was safe for her to drive thus relaxed.

In addition to discovering new methods of relaxation, I desired to hear other opinions which dealt with emotions and the control thereof; I fought a battle with depression a year earlier, and won; thus my interest stemmed from former conflicts which, resolved, inhabited my memory only, yet stood as steadfast reminders to listen to my mind's plea for rest.

The assignments in the class were not in the least rigorous and usually consisted of merely reading books of the "self-help" variety. With the exception of one book, those which I read were generally "compatible" with readers, meaning that they took all stands in general but none in particular. The book with which I had extreme difficulty was based upon the premise "If it feels good, do it," for which I have little regard.

1982: "I have decided that, although Dr. D's speech within the book denies it, he is also an insecure person; or perhaps he is simply vain. My reason for so stating this was due to my observance that Dr. D's cover photo is purposely cut in such a manner that his unquestionably bald head is concealed from the general public. Baldness is certainly not uncommon in our society, nor is it something which should be looked upon in shame. After all, you are what you are... body and mind are a unit!

Moreover, if his photo was so ingeniously cut for the purpose of vanity, he needed not "grace" us with his countenance on both the front and back covers of his book.

I further noted that his title and choice of attire coincide in such a manner that one is led to believe the book is of a different content. To more clearly explain myself, "erroneous" is much too easily confused with "erogenous" especially when teamed with D's low-cut knit shirt revealing a sparsity of chest hairs!

An individual seeking guidance toward finding his own beliefs and personality is quite vulnerable; suggestions made by self-assured, confident people will create a vivid color in his mind. Therefore, it is important that one who is easily persuaded guards against such flagrant and opinionated views of personal conduct, lest he be drawn into a mode of behavior which is worth less than he merits.

I do not believe that a person housing a low self-image should be told to feel free to exercise his wishes as long as they please only him; while no one respects a person who compromises all of his beliefs to please or "be liked" by others, one who succumbs to his every whim despite the ill consequences toward others also gains nothing. It is beneficial for the uncertain individual to ingest each successive suggestion, and choose which is his desired path toward improvement.

Reading self-improvement books was often a disappointment as I found the content to be disagreeable in ethical terms or some startling and conclusive evidence which I had already concluded on my own. I also pitied the individual who needed to read such books before realizing that he fostered depression or another debilitating emotion; yet hoped that once his repressed emotions were brought to the fore, he would find the altruistic guidance needed to become an emotionally balanced individual, rather than a monster begotten of the misguided advocates of selfishness. If everyone abided by the "philosophies" stated in the latter books, the world could not be a tolerable place to exist; lacking concern for one's fellow man, society would fall into disarray and collapse altogether.

Mon. Mar. 15 1982... On this 15th night of March, the heavens once again proclaim that spring indeed will come. Beneath the shroud of haze one is able to catch fleeting glimpses of lightning, followed by the inevitable and distant roar of thunder. Each day possesses a unique beauty; I am happy that I did not miss this event. Perhaps the steady beat of rain upon the roof-top will lull me to sleep a sound, contented sleep. . . the thunder again claps the listening ear while lightning sears the gray sky to the realization that a new season is close at hand. I sleep... with peace of mind and body... and rejoice in nature's splendor and complexity which man cannot begin to understand. Is not mystery the food which keeps one alive?

It is spring once again. Here I sit feeling at once happy and sad toward the coming of another season. A balmy and gentle breeze now whispers through the budding trees, taking the place of winter's harsh, relentless chill. With each rain, with every ray of sunlight, the grass hurries to be lush and green. Nothing can hold back the passage of time. . . of the seasons.

I am flooded with an almost uncontrollable urge to cry. . . to loosen all my burdens upon this strong and vital earth. Yet one cannot unleash from himself that which is his part in nature's unceasing life cycle. I am as essential, or nonessential, as every living organism; it must follow then, that I make no demands which cannot possibly be fulfilled. I am nature, and like all aspects of nature I, too, must respect the passing of seasons within my life.

Things change rapidly; still others remain relatively the same; across the ravine, the graveyard stands as a solid marker of the past, and a constant reminder that no one leaves the earth alive.

Forget it. I cannot write. It seems that one's inner thoughts happen to be the most difficult to express. Writing used to be easier. But then, perhaps, the more one (experiences) the harder it is to write it down. The nearer one is to death, the less words can express one's true feelings. Words would not do justice to my feelings. Perhaps I am only passing off my inability to write... but I think not. However, I shall try again... Am I at the end of the road? Have I nothing left to say?

Spring soon descended on the earth, and though I tried to envelope myself in its many splendors, I felt them spinning dizzily away, with summer following close behind like a shadow which remains hidden due to the dimness of the sun. The forthcoming season was recognized as one of rest and relaxation, but viewing the month which lay before me brought no inner comfort, for my time had already been reserved by the desires of others, gazing apprehensively at the calendar, months were swallowed by demands which I felt I could not impede, so concerned were those who wished to "see me," the rarity which would soon disappear from the face of the earth. "How shall I withstand the whirlwind?" I asked myself. "When am I to live?"

For one who is essentially a loner, not only wanting, but needing, time alone, enjoyment of life decreases as social activities increase. Initially, I plunged bravely into summer, hoping that if I met its demands head-on, I could more easily manipulate my necessity for quiet interludes; I further supposed that significant hints would prove sufficient impetus under which to situate free time. Alas, I was wrong, and to my dismay, found myself on the edge of thorough emotional duress. Rather than risking a relationship due to a brash, beseeching plea for peace on my behalf, I allowed myself to rend internally, leaving a tattered remnant of myself at the summer's end. There is only one respite to that assertion, that was time spent with Norm on the week-ends or on the trip to Colorado...

It is a rather strange sensation one encounters when he fosters dreams and desires and yet, simultaneously, knows that those dreams are that which, in all probability, will never materialize; and while one deeply feels the disappointment of this unattainable goal, he also accepts the situation

blandly as a matter of course.

Toward the mountains I felt just this emotion. . . desire and inability mottled with the acceptance that had already developed within my mind. Coupled with the internal disappointment of the "now" was the realization of that which I was capable of mastering the former year.

Despite these physical limitations, however, I am still able to thoroughly enjoy the mere sensations of the mountains by way of my eyes, ears, and touch. Here I can still derive a satisfaction... a feeling of solitude... which no other type of atmosphere can fulfill.

It is my opinion that only a brash fool could not love this atmosphere. ...this is no place for hate... it is for life, emotion, and death and for the celebration thereof.

Sept. 2, 1982:

Here I sit, casually observing the transformation of summer into the cloak of early fall. It is slightly unbelievable that summer is now slipping away as smoothly as the wind shuffles my hair. I enjoyed the summer, but the time has elapsed from one day to the next until the days themselves are lost in a hazy dream. Had I only the chance, I would rearrange time to include the serenity which I now possess. I feel that my early summer was washed away in a blur of nervous, albeit necessary, activities; I remained uncharacteristically surrounded by petty occupations to retain a shred of sanity. . . so reved up was my emotional stability that I neglected, unconsciously, to step out of the race. I felt cheated. . . having so little time and yet so much I desired to accomplish.

PAGE 236

Chapter 30 Autumn at Augustana

"School was not a "given" in my life. . . I had no other alternative but to uphold a charade of normalcy. . .that gave my parents the right to hope. . . "

CHAPTER THIRTY

Autumn At Augustana

With summer drawing to a close, my friends slowly drifted their separate ways as the fall semester of 1982 beckoned and bid them to cast away the carefree mood of days gone by. I, too, readied myself for the new semester with apprehension; the purpose of continuing school in my state of health eluded me, yet I felt too weak to contest the arrangement. Drained from months of activity which depleted my energy and abused my emotional stability, I knew also that I had developed further symptoms of liver malfunction during the summer. Even the mildest days, with temperatures reaching no higher than 70 degrees, would cause my body to overheat; if I did not remedy the situation by chewing ice or removing myself from the location, I would sweat profusely, and eventually obtain a relentless headache and nausea. This symptom was altogether annoying and seemed to me a huge inconvenience, as I could not sit comfortably in an atmosphere which most people heartily enjoyed. In addition, I would tire easily

and found it increasingly more difficult to perform the least taxing of functions such as rapidly ascending multiple flights of steps, without reaching my destination quite breathless, my heart pounding at an alarming rate.

Knowing these effects would not subside, I dreaded the coming months. September and school seemed to fit together like pieces in a jigsaw. I could not help but wonder where, in the world, I would possibly find a niche.

I initially enrolled in four classes at Augustana, feeling obliged to retain full-time status if I intended to obtain an education within a reasonable period of time. From the outset, I elected to study German as well as two other "staples," those being a Geography course and a course in English literature. I still entertained the romantic notion of traveling to Germany one day, utilizing with fluency and grace my haphazard rendezvous with the native language. After two weeks in the class, however, I deemed it too much of an emotional strain to attempt a new tongue under the pressure of the teacher who radiated the likeness and temperament of Adolph Hitler. Quickly moved to a decision, I dropped the course to add another in English which tackled the various plays of Shakespeare. This, I thought, would be more apt to lie within my realm of understanding.

The first class of the day was Early English Literature, which was taught on the lower floor of "Old Main," a stately edifice which, to me, seemed to possess the ability to gather and retain heat within its confines. Each morning I would mount the cement steps which led to Old Main, hoping that "this time" some windows would be open to allow cool air to cleanse the room of its persistent stuffiness. Sometimes before class, one window would be breathing fresh air into the room, exhaling through the open doorway the stale air which otherwise choked the room. Upon the teacher's arrival, however, the door would automatically close to "keep noise to a minimum," and I cringed with dismay as the circulating air stopped dead in its tracks.

As the instructor spoke of the early legends of the Norsemen and the icy gales in which men battled, even my wistful images of the frozen climate could not impede my body's growing internal heat. I would begin to feel as if an oven had been opened in front of my face, followed by an unrestrained flow of sweat. I fought to retain my sense of humor and enjoy the class, but as my hair began to plaster itself closely to my scalp from the heat, concentration gradually lessened until I could think of nothing else but fleeing from the classroom to the fresh air outside. At the end of the hour, I dashed through the door to the nearest restroom in an attempt to restore, to a reasonable degree, my appearance. On many days, I actually looked as if I'd just been swimming and had not allowed my hair to dry.

Depending on the amount of time I had to spend between classes, I was sometimes able to sit outside and let the breeze dry my hair and cool my body. A shortage of time or inclement weather forced me to simply walk to my following class, where the cooler room eventually afforded a more comfortable situation for me, allowing me to slowly dry off.

Throughout the hours between my second and third classes, I would purchase and eat lunch and then situate myself in the least obtrusive spot I could find to study or write. On several occasions, I was able to visit with an old friend, with whom I'd initially become acquainted at church, and who, I might add, was virtually the only person I felt comfortable addressing. When she appeared, time passed rapidly and easily. She also dispelled some of my fears about the campus (among these, the library) by ushering me through the quiet corridors of the rather intimidating building.

To my friend I also expressed my feeling that the school had a more impenetrable barrier than any other I had experienced, giving one the impression that the circles of friends which existed could not afford any new members. Repeatedly, I had offered triflings of conversation to classmates, only to be answered with blunted replies or silence. Since the bulk of the students were not daily commuters, she had experienced the same treatment her first semester and therefore concluded that the best way to feel a part of Augie was to reside in one of the dormitories until she had developed several friends and acquaintances, and then return home to live.

I knew, of course, that the next best way to meet people was to join organizations, and as the old saying goes, "get involved!" My mom used to suggest that I sit down with a group at lunch, introduce myself, and start talking. I suppose there are those who would have success with this type of salesmanship, yet I could never barge through closed doors into a conversation of which I had no knowledge. This would seem more an invasion of privacy than an extension of friendship. My general health was also an inhibitive factor; apart from my appearance, I was tired and weak, and did not desire to explain my situation to others for fear of adverse reactions. Fatigued from attending school and studying my lessons, I felt I could ask no more of myself; I extended my friendship and smile to those who would accept them, but attended no extracurricular functions, desiring instead to use up any reserve energy in doing those things at home which I most enjoyed. It helped to understand the general

flavor of Augie as being intrinsically different from my former school; I did not react to its indifference as a personal affliction, nor did I seek out various social groups to forge a place for myself in the hearts of others.

Through my weary and knowing eyes, I observed the turmoil of which I was not a part, feeling worlds away from the carefree and jubilant frolic which bespoke the presence of health. I felt suspended in time, as if all else moved about me, each following his desired route, while I stood rooted before a dead end. Never before had I encountered such desolate helplessness, yet I did not wish to change places with anyone ... even with cancer quietly closing in. Though health could have endured some improvement, with my mind, my values, I was content. While certain individuals under my gaze possessed what seemed to be genuine character, I saw also those who chatted constantly about petty concerns and displayed no depth or true emotion; their lives were a farce. If this was the trade-off for being part of the social whirlwind, I was content, as always, to watch unobserved from my stationary corner...

The Observer

I am the satellite,
The worldly observer
Of a spinning mass of confusion.
I am equidistant
Between humanity
And the heavens,
Between star-strewn galaxies
And streets besmeared
With innovations....
I see and compute
And attempt to make sense
Of this confused world....
Though the heavens
Are complex,
I believe they are not
Half so much as are
The roads of human life.

September 10, 1982
Lauren Isaacson

Negative Aspects

In my world
Time passes slowly,
Allowing moments to reflect upon the aspects of life
I coldly rejected:

I see meaningless lives,
Bereft of all worry,
Flaunt worthless smiles,
And empty laughter.
Pessimists carry frowns
Behind trudging feet
Upon leashes.....
Forever dragging their burden
Of discontent to the world.
Souls haunted by loneliness
Hang their heads in despair,
Their eyes searching desperately
For the shred of compassion

Which will never come,
Until loneliness surrounds
And follows their every step,
Heralding irreversible regression:
Chronically depressed
Cling to sadness
As their sole purpose in life,
While their troubled minds
Create wistful images of suicide.

September 12-15, 1982

Lauren Isaacson

Masks

One may choose
Countless masks
To portray his image
Unto the world,
And yet it seems
That ultimately
Masks are shattered;
Revealing that which
Resides within.
It is wise to discern
Between one's mask
And self
Before life exposes
Untainted features to humanity,
The one body
Which is utterly ruthless
In its judgment.

September 15, 1982

Lauren Isaacson

Perhaps my most enjoyable hours were spent outside on a hill overlooking the campus. On the hill, I felt serene; every other place on campus I felt my life slipping away, as if I was carrying death within me. Here I would sit in idle reflection and muse on the autumn leaves falling lazily to the ground. The squirrels, with their crazy antics, were desperately hoarding all the acorns they found, burying and reburying until I'm sure even they didn't know where the acorns were. And I mustn't forget the restless breeze, ever blowing and hinting of winter. I shared a bond with autumn that was, at once, beautiful and sad. In life nothing truly ends, although there are countless births and as many deaths. With or without my own existence, life itself would go on, virtually heedless of one heartbeat lost to forever. In this reflective and tranquil mood I would transfer my thoughts to paper to better clarify for myself and for others the way in which I viewed my existence.

The War Within

Daily, it seems, I feel the alien
Presence that resides within,
Slowly pressing life from my

Faculties in a bland attempt
To reign in full over my ravaged body.
Neither do I madly oppose nor readily
Submit to my ruthless attack,
But attempt to retain a shred
Of normalcy in my existence.
Life takes what it will, and
Being a product of two lives,
I am subject to be called
To nonexistence, as is all creation.
Nature permits no flattery...
No favoritism...hence the
Ultimate equality of mammals,
Whether man or beast, in death.

September 27, 1982
Lauren Isaacson

The third and last class of the day was geography, dealing with the conflicts of urban life and the planning of cities. It was what I would call a "crash course," as it was a full quarter of work condensed into a mere four weeks' time. The first test, being somewhat of a midterm exam and covering a great deal of the text and lecture material, was given after about two weeks; I need not say, perhaps, that I found the class to be quite exhilarating. Indeed, it kept me on my toes, if I may borrow a well used phrase, and taxed my eyes as well. My efforts proved worthwhile, however, and I scored highly on the initial exam. A final exam and a project were the only remaining obligations of the class, leaving two English courses as my sole exertions for the rest of the quarter. It wasn't a bargain, but then nothing could be had without making an allowance of some consequence.

After attending my class, I would gratefully return home, exhausted, and lie down for several hours. I generally did no homework on days I went to school, saving my energy for days off and weekends. School coincided with drudgery, for I was no longer deriving any pleasure from life. If I was not in school or studying diligently, I was thoroughly fatigued and unable to pursue diversions of my liking. It seemed to me that I was nearly committing suicide through the over-exertion of my failing body, playing the role of a normal person when I was unfit for the rigorous portrayal.

As the days passed, I began to see the utter ridiculousness of my situation. I felt lifeless after school, and began to wonder why I maintained the effort; I had no foreseeable future in which I could utilize the knowledge obtained in college, and my time and energy thus spent gradually took on the guise of futility. It was after two occasions of pathetically wetting my nightgown (due to the fact that my exhausted body did not heed the brain's warning of distress) that I decided to accept defeat. The demeaning situation described above occurred only during sleep after school days, which, consequently, were the days that caused the bulk of my exhaustion.

School was not a "given" in my life; it was a factor over which I had control. Initially, I felt I had no other alternative but to uphold a charade of normalcy, for that gave my parents the right to hope and feel, perhaps, that life for our family was somewhat akin to the societal norm. Although I had experienced deep tremors of anxiety toward the thought of attending school during the summer months, I too, deemed it best to carry on; I could not abide the image of myself as an unproductive, and therefore, devalued member of the family. Also within me was the question of whether I could manage the demanding pressures of school, and the need to somehow prove to myself that I could, both mentally and physically, pass the test. Though my assignments were well accepted, my physical performance was far below average; my will was strong, but my body could not keep up. The decision to drop all of my classes spelled defeat, for I disliked to quit, but even more it meant relief and the freedom to entertain my desires in a comfortable atmosphere without overly taxing myself.

My parents looked upon my action with more regret and pain, for it brought the issue of my ill health to the forefront. Now it could no longer be concealed behind a wall of books or hours spent out of the house, for I was home all day, every day. My mom persisted in her assertion that "if only you'd taken just one class. . ." it could have added excitement and social interaction to my life. Had I enjoyed school as do habitual students, I might have followed her suggestion, yet I found my free time to be an immense improvement and would forgo none of it to sit in a stuffy classroom. One need not attend a college to expand his intellectual horizons, and I had no intention of falling into illiteracy; I merely wanted to do what I wanted, when I wanted.

Having scored highly on my first geography exam and completed the English assignments

successfully gave me the confidence that I so needed, and further led me to believe that I would have otherwise been a capable student; while I suffered a physical defeat, I had not failed.

With no obligations to fulfill, my life was rejuvenated with a simplicity which could best be described as wonderful. I truly reveled in the autumn splendor and my spirit possessed a vitality which had nearly been smothered by a mere four weeks' toil and stress. My general health improved markedly as I was no longer plunging all of my energies into school's demands. I now could heed my body's warning to rest as needed, and thereby enjoy more fully the other areas in which my interest thrived. The thought that time was rapidly slipping by gave way, once again, to the essence of quality which had, for a while, escaped my grasp.

PAGE 243

Chapter 31 Depression

"It is essential to realize that no matter what type of adversity one may have to face, the ultimate self is the inner self."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Depression

When a person is told he has a terminal illness, depression is a very natural reaction. Not only does the individual have to face a disease which shall bring about weakness and failure of one's bodily functions, but also he is obliged to acknowledge that the culmination of his life waits on his very doorstep.

For myself, it was not the fear of death which brought about various intervals of depression, but rather the realization that my dreams for the future and the reality thereof would not coincide. Occasionally, as time passed, I would also become disheartened by the way in which the cancer was transforming my body in a visual sense. I had always taken pride in maintaining my figure for my health and appearance, and now I was helpless against the shape I was quickly becoming as the cancer grew. I was also aware of its effect internally, and exercise gradually tapered off into nonexistence. I found my lungs unable to fully inflate, and my heart beat would hover around 100 beats per minute with only mild exercise; fear would soar when I would, without warning, desperately need a bathroom.

I did not hate my life, yet when I was afflicted with nausea for hours in a day or forced to miss an anticipated outing because of diarrhea and the need of a bathroom in close vicinity, my spirits could plummet and make me wish that death was close at hand. While those things I most valued I still possessed, the magnitude of my physical condition would surface when I would once again be harshly reminded that "normalcy" was no longer credible, as if that state of being was a rug which was being swept out from under my feet.

In addition to feeling inconvenienced by cancer, I also experienced a sense of worthlessness, although of a different sense than that which I felt upon my initial bout at age 13. When I was younger,

I placed a great deal of importance upon physical attributes; consequently the post-treatment loss of all my hair, necessitating the purchase of a wig, resulted in the questioning of my parents affection. I could not understand how anyone could possibly care about a bald, rather skeletal, daughter.

My later loss of self-worth centered more on my inability to perform certain household chores, attend school or maintain employment. I was incapable of strenuous tasks and the fluctuations in my health were such that a steady job would be unthinkable. Since I no longer felt that I acted the part of a "good citizen," guilt quickly crept into my mind. I was living under the wing of my parents as I watched friends initiate themselves into the mainstream of societal expectations; theirs were blooming lives, while I seemed stranded in a murky, stagnant pool, simply taking up space. I was eventually able to resolve this self-inadequacy through interaction with my family and friends who, I observed, did not think less of me as a person simply because I did not conform to the standard ideal of accomplishment; those with whom I had close association knew and accepted my weaknesses, and sought my companionship despite any inconveniences they might have had to endure because of my presence. Moreover, and possibly of foremost importance, was the fact that I finally accepted my limitations and no longer attempted to prove to myself that I could still do something for which my body was unfit; I admitted that self-restriction, or at least careful government of my activities, would allow me greater flexibility and opportunity in the long run of affairs.

It would be a lie to say that, having aged six years, I no longer felt subject to self-devaluation through a loss of physical attributes. As my waistline disappeared and my stomach began to protrude (for lack of anywhere else to go), I grew increasingly more self-conscious of my figure. Even at the outset, I considered my midsection enormous, and purchased oversized shirts to conceal what I believed to be a horrible deformity. As the liver continued to expand, for which I had been mentally prepared, I began outgrowing clothes, especially pants (due to the waistline) shortly after they were purchased. Soon I was giving pants to my mother who wore a size 12; winter coats which did not button were also handed to Mom who accepted the gifts as graciously as the occasion permitted. The waist which had measured 24 inches grew to 32; the stomach protruded far beyond my bosom, a ghastly 37 inches in diameter. People began to ask innocently, "when is it due?" I could not deny it, it followed me everywhere. . . glaring at me through each piece of clothing. It bid me "good morning" and packed me to bed at night.

Perhaps one of my most distressing fears was the idea of encountering a school mate who was not aware of my health situation, and either be labeled as "pregnant" or "stout." Pregnancy out of wedlock was completely unacceptable to me; while the lack of control which would accompany mere weight gain was also a speck in my eye; I revolted against both assumptions with similar distaste and simply hoped to avoid familiar faces. If such a meeting did occur, I would generally explain my current state of affairs, although I also disliked blackening one's day with news which was generally categorized as traumatic and distressing. When a person inquired into how I'd been spending my time, I would have to subdue my urge to devalue myself due to the impressive answers I failed to relate. As a whole, reunions were rather a blemish in my day.

As I came to identify myself not with my "deformity" or my accomplishments, but instead with my personal character, I felt more at ease in group situations.

It is essential to realize that no matter what type of adversity one may have to face, the ultimate self is the inner self. Deformities mar the surface, but they need not devastate the interior; one's personality needs to be projected beyond the body or the face, just as it has to be expressed by the "normal" individual. A pretty face does not assure the observer of an equally beautiful personality. There will be those who will be uncomfortable in the presence of a stricken individual, but those people should be given patience and understanding; reactions are frequently simultaneous and the result of shock or immeasurable pity, not incivility or rudeness. Those few individuals who are cruel and insensitive are not worth the anger they provoke, for they are the children of ignorance and have not lived through pain and strife; for some, empathy is not inherent, it must be learned.

I also found it to my benefit if I would candidly mention my health instead of trying to conceal it like an illegal drug; I discovered that although it was difficult to hear of my misfortune, it was easier than if the burden had actually been their own.

The pervasive sadness which can strike when one grasps the reality of illness does not endure forever, unless in self-pity, one allows himself to be drawn into such an utterly oppressive mental state. Sadness is a part of life which makes joyous moments all the more valued; man is an animal, and in so being, it is characteristic of his make-up that he feel pain and pleasure. To deny one's feelings, or so dwell on one aspect, is to deny one's humanness and natural traits.

Chapter 32 Basic Day

"Autumn. . .the world was filled with sound, a veritable grand finale before the penetrating hush of winter."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A Basic Day

I loved autumn, a season both riotous and melancholy, and it was best shared with those I loved. Thus I spent a great amount of time with Norm. We shared a mutuality which spanned the insignificant to the more complex modes of thought in such a way that neither of us felt compelled, nor hindered, to speak. As comfortable in each other's company as we were alone, our relationship did not possess the usual tensions and expectations so prevalent in most friendships. That we enjoyed each other was enough.

Through the week, Norm worked second shift as a custodian at a local junior high school. Since he didn't depart for work until 3:00 p.m., his daily routine at home usually consisted of leisurely activities, lest he become too tired to properly do his work.

We shared the upstairs, which was divided into two separate rooms with an accoridian door, providing privacy that was sufficient, yet far from sound proof. Generally we would wake around the hour of 9:00 a.m. Either the static notes of his clock radio or a rustling which attested to his hastily making the bed would usher through the door, and harken the beginning of another day, or I would rise first and find Norm staring at the ceiling among an entangled mass of sheets.

The person who made it downstairs first was the one who, if Mom had made some for herself and Dad, divided the morning "gruel." Since the family had recently acquired a microwave oven, the machine allowed a quick and thorough heating of the cereal if one simply transferred the contents of the pan into stoneware bowls.

Because several hours had passed between Mom's preparation of the cereal and our reheating of the same, it usually molded itself into a solid bulk shaped exactly to the pan's dimensions. This made dividing easier but deftness was needed to assure that each half found its way into the bowl. On one particular occasion Norm, spatula poised in hand, was directing each slimy mass into its bowl when one half escaped his control and proceeded to flop onto the counter, splat on the floor and go skidding across the waxed tile. I found this affair to be thoroughly amusing as it was in the same scenario which I had starred only a week before. Perhaps it would not have been so humorous if the cereal did not have such a nasty appearance, which in itself would seem to ward off any potential consumer. Moreover, hot cereal had quite a lengthy history between Norm and me.

When I was in fifth grade, Norm was to see that I ate a decent breakfast before setting off to school, since Mom had once again decided to renew her teaching certificate and was employed as a kindergarten teacher. At the time I fairly detested the appearance and taste of cereal, yet managed to choke down a moderate amount before my taste buds rebelled, after which no promptings, no bribery, would make me swallow another spoonful. Norm, feeling it was his duty to inflict some sort of punitive action upon my finicky tongue, would then lead me into the bathroom, and make me watch as he poured the remaining oatmeal into the toilet and flushed it away. Although some people might have found this treatment cruel and definitely unusual in nature, I was struck by intense hilarity upon viewing the mottled gray food hitting the water, looking and sounding like an enactment of the flu season.

A few years later I retaliated in kind by saying that the cornmeal mush he was then eating looked like an exact replica of what I'd seen about the floor of the cage in which the bears resided at Brookfield Zoo. "You had to say it, didn't you?" he scowled as he looked at the yellow meal still staring him in the face. Although hot cereal had a personality all its own, sporting a slightly different appearance each day, certain mornings, it just didn't have the eye appeal to start the taste buds rolling.

Eventually our bantering jokes collided with such frequency that they lost all of their effect and we

would continue eating, undaunted by the grotesque conjurings which were sailing about the kitchen. Though by now a standard joke, oatmeal suffered no lack of humor; to us it was inherently funny. We did not tire of the commonplace and routine; where there is love even the most insignificant of things has a spark.

Having eaten breakfast, whether hot cereal or an alternative, we would often fall upon the task of washing and drying the morning dishes. Neither of us minded chores. I have often witnessed people who so rebelled against performing a simple task that in the time they wasted voicing their complaints the chore could have been accomplished completely. When one's mind is filled with happy thoughts, work takes on an entirely different perspective, and mindless tasks give one time to think. I am not attempting to say that, with the proper attitude, work is always entertaining and fun, yet protests only serve to multiply the weight of a potentially simple task.

Helping with the chores at home also gave me a sense of usefulness and made me glad that I was able to be productive in certain respects. I have no regard for those who will, in the name of ill health, sit idly by and observe others do all the work, when they in fact are yet quite capable of doing it themselves. Laziness as a result of illness is in itself a severe malady. It is also an enormous character flaw which speaks loudly of the one thus afflicted. . . more so, perhaps, than the person realizes; slovenliness wins no friends. I have also discovered that laziness begets more laziness; it is a weed with far reaching roots that thrives on itself and holds one imprisoned. It is wise to guard against this behavior, lest one be transformed into a useless heap of flesh and blood, for its seeds lurk within even the most industrious of people, and cheat them of life. Thus, whether in unison or alone, the dishes were done, thereby lessening Dad's workload to a degree. Dad's retirement moved him to exercise the household chores on the main floor (although this did not include the preparation of meals), while I maintained the upper. Group cooperation helped everyone, even though Mom could still be seen flitting about the house on weekends, pushing this and poking that; her activity was compulsive. Even her work as a teacher was better described as "full-time and a half."

Our mailman had the accuracy of a Swiss watch. Each day, whether glorious or gloomy, the telltale moan of the mailbox lid would resound at exactly 9:30. Then, if one was quick, he could be seen striding away at a brisk pace, already two houses up the avenue.

Having developed a keen interest in stocks and futures, Norm generally received the majority of the day's hoard, and the brokers barraged him with a large round of literature and calculations proving that their firm was where money could be made. Unceremoniously sorting through his various letters, he then would bound upstairs to read the Wall Street Journal, disappearing, for all practical purposes, at least an hour.

I also looked forward to the coming of the mail, although I didn't receive much of interest aside from an occasional letter. The remainder of my mail, like that addressed to Norm, were attempts to direct my money into the hands of others; while his letters requested money for investment, mine were in the form of catalogs and most of which could not be classified as an investment, but rather, an accumulation of commodities to be purchased. Junk mail, however, was better than none.

The noon hour sent Norm downstairs again, and the three of us visited for a while before again pursuing our own interests. Afternoon would find Dad bustling around the house, fixing one of the numerous household maladies, peering under the hood of a car, or during outdoor months, maintaining the yard. Norm could usually be seen dozing in a lawn chair, strategically positioned for the best view and the most sunshine. Even frigid temperatures would not keep him indoors if the sun was poking its face out of the clouds, for he would don boots and a snowsuit (or "Pepto-Bismol suit" in his opinion, since such attire appeared to bloat the individual thus clad) and, lawn chair in tow, trudge faithfully to his choice location in the snow. He also managed to take a daily stroll in the woods behind our house. No season would keep him away, whether the woodland carpet consisted of spring flowers or newly shed leaves. The contentment on his face was obvious; the simple, honest life yielded remarkable returns.

I spent my newly acquired free time in much the same manner as did Norm. Although I never frequented the snow-covered landscape even in a sedentary fashion, I did make the most of the other seasons, with autumn topping the list. I loved to watch the leaves cascade to the ground, and listen to the eerie rustling of wind through the trees. It was as if the world was filled with sound, a veritable grand finale before the penetrating hush of winter.

When the weather did not lend itself to lounging amongst the trees, I entertained myself by scanning through photography or nature books. Having parted only recently with the demanding curricular schedule of college, I shunned literature for a time, electing instead subjects which could easily be laid aside without risking an interruption of a thinly-woven plot.

During the hours before Norm set off to work, I always made myself accessible for conversation without being an imposition on his space or freedom. Anything I was doing could be finished later if he desired to talk, and consequently, we often sat over a cup of tea and pursued various topics of interest. The subject itself never mattered, for the companionship was the delight. The atmosphere we shared was unlike all others. Receptive to the same mode of thought, the flow of conversation was easy and unhindered.

Near 3:00 p.m. Norm would rise from his chair with an accompanying, "Well, better shove off. . ." and grasping his lunch bucket, paced out the door to his car. After he had gone I did those things which our conversation had delayed. Chores and other functions always waited to be done; dust is very patient, and can easily be put off for an hour or two!

Despite Dad's flurry of activity around the yard and home, he always found time to take me to lunch. We ate at restaurants once or twice a week, which pleased me to no end, as I had enjoyed dining out since I was quite young. Even though my lunch and stomach seldom tolerated each other, it was worth the effort. The food, at any rate, tasted good on the way down.

Mom returned home from work usually between 4:00 and 4:30, although 5:00 p.m. stints became increasingly familiar as the years passed. The age-old thought that one's work is easier as the years unfold did not seem to hold any truth with respect to Mom's career. Her day never came to an end, even after she dismissed the classroom. Armed with at least one tote bag, she would continue her work after supper and into the evening, often falling asleep to attest to her fatigue. She was the only person I knew who could fall asleep and continue writing a sentence, although admittedly the content of a sentence produced through these means lacked all human sensibility and she would be obliged to begin anew.

Depending largely on the state of my health, I would help with the preparation of supper in varying degrees, sometimes fixing a large portion of the meal and other times doing little more than setting the table or peeling vegetables for the salad. Apart from helping Mom, meal preparation allowed us to catch up on the day's events, ranging from my occasional outings to Mom's cantankerous and incorrigible youth, of which there was always at least one per class.

When the dishes once again found their way into the cupboards, the day had slowed to a quiet pace. Dad would prop himself up in his recliner behind a wall of newspaper and give an onlooker the impression that he was avidly perusing the articles. Only a steady puffing or an occasional snort would indicate that the downcast eyes saw no more words on that page than would the gaze of a blind man. Mom remained awake as long as she puttered about the house, but once seated, soon acquired the visage of a woman drugged, weighted eyelids transforming her eyes to slits. At this point, I could leave the room entirely unnoticed. It was grand that we found each other so relaxing. Perhaps the moral of this paragraph is that no one falls asleep in the presence of someone he does not trust.

My parents probably considered they had struggled enough to remain awake, and by 10:30 settled into bed; I did not do likewise until after midnight. Often I was still rustling about when Norm returned home, and stationing myself on a kitchen chair, would oversee his hasty reheating of the evening fare. Observing Norm eat was no lengthy ordeal, for an entire plate-full of food could vanish in minutes. A food's aesthetic appeal held little importance as long as the flavor was agreeable.

Despite the fact that I had no school or work to punctuate weekends, they remained quite different from the rest of the week if only because both Mom and Norm were home all day. Saturday and Sunday were the only days when they saw each other since their work schedules did not coincide, and would therefore catch up on the latest tidbits of information while Mom did the laundry. Mom couldn't just sit and talk; she had to be mending a sock, or sorting clothes or folding towels. Her industriousness was not an exaggerated view of the work ethic driven into her as a child. . . merely her nervous energy seeking an outlet.

Invariably weekends would bring at least one outing for Norm and me, whether this consisted of a motorcycle ride, a drive in the car, a walk, or a combination of many alternatives; a picnic was almost always on our agenda. With my decreasing tolerance for heat, fall was especially wonderful. The air once again attained a seasonal crispness which beckoned us to bask in the sun or amble amongst the woodland's profusion of color. A feeling of serenity pervaded the entire landscape, a scene transformed after the chaotic months of summer. No children's cries pierced the tranquility. . . no dirt bikes invaded one's thoughts.

Toting KFC and a six-pack of beer, we would situate ourselves alongside of the Mississippi or travel to a park and eat beneath the trees. Lingering for hours in the cool breeze of autumn and then, perhaps, hiking on a trail or country road for a stretch, was leisure at its best, and life was most worthwhile. These were the days I loved, yet of more importance than the day was the person with

whom I shared it, for it is not the experience but rather the presence (or absence) of an individual that truly raises life's moments above the mundane. Never had I encountered such utter compatibility; we thought in the same way. Norm often said, "We might as well not talk at all," because certain occasions would find us simultaneously blurting out identical thoughts and then stopping our tongues in midair. "Oh, well." The end result was obvious to both of us, so there was no purpose in voicing our viewpoint or observation.

Norm seldom aired his feelings toward a person, for he was able to demonstrate his tolerance and love for an individual through actions and, not unlike many people, found it extremely difficult to verbalize that which resided on tender ground. When someone's love for another is clear, words, though pleasant to the ear, merely add warmth to the heart. Rarity bestowed Norm's statements with more value; since the words need not have been spoken to be understood, the words themselves only clarified his feelings.

More than once, however, Norm asserted that he was not sure how he could handle my death, for aside from our great companionship he thought of me as his touchstone with the female sex. There was not a large array of women associated with his line of work, except for the teachers who were yet in their rooms when he arrived, and he did not wish conversation to become difficult simply through a lack of social contact. How well I understood his statement; a steadfast advocate of personal "self-sufficiency," I feared dependence of any kind upon habits or people. That I so enjoyed Norm's company was, in itself, a trifle unnerving because a loss of such magnitude would prove devastating, yet Norm and death were two words which, in my eyes, spanned the distance of one star to another. It was unthinkable that Norm would die before me.

Though Norm's words left me feeling worthwhile, nothing would alter the course of their sincerity and eventual pain which he would feel simply due to their actual existence in his mind. "I just wish you'd start to get better." I just wished I could oblige.

PAGE 251

Chapter 33 Treatments / Hoax

"What if...?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Treatments / Hoax

Amid the rising flood of new treatments and landmark cures which lapped temptingly at our doorstep, I began to wonder if any supposed cure really honored its name. I was tired of the restrictions which cancer had placed on me, and my interest toward alternative methods of treatment grew as rapidly as the size of my liver. I even questioned whether a liver transplant was a possibility, but was forever wary of the suffering involved; though I desired health, I would endure no drastic measures toward that end, and knew also, that most "possibilities" could never, for me, turn into a

reality.

Though not actively pursuing articles, I would read or hear about the progress of various treatments as discovered by my parents; I was never surprised to learn that the drug or method in question was ineffective with my type of cancer; characteristically a slow grower, a leiomyosarcoma was also remarkably tough and resilient to the most terrifying of chemicals.

Not easily persuaded into the acceptance of hopelessness, however, Mom and Dad continued to inquire into the success of publicized drugs at their source. The more controversial forms of treatment were also investigated, and naturally their administrators claimed to have realized at least a modicum of success. Admittedly, the thought of undergoing treatment about which little was known seemed disconcerting, and a mere description of certain treatments nearly made my gums recede. One such method which sounded horrifyingly barbaric called for the boiling of one's blood; after it had been "purified," it would be routed back into the system once more. "If he lived..." I thought. However, I had been on the research file while undergoing chemotherapy, and it had been no delight either; no one of faltering strength could long tolerate its effects, although some individuals have been known to have received an injection on the day of their death. When man realigns his values, perhaps one day chemotherapy also will be thought of as barbaric and indeed, inhumane.

After countless suggestions and subsequent dead ends, we were given a new lead from a woman who worked at the church; a lead which, in her opinion, sounded quite promising. Quizzing her for every detail, my father immediately fell to gathering phone numbers, including past patients of the doctor and the number through which an appointment with the doctor could be made. A travel agency in California would set up the time of departure and also take care of every detail of the stay, from hotel accommodations to the treatment itself. Incidentally, the treatment was administered only in Greece.

Excitement pervaded the atmosphere at home as more information was procured. The treatment boasted rave reviews, stemming from renewed vitality to complete cures, yet side effects and discomforts as a result of the injections were few and insignificant; indeed, the method used sounded the least objectionable and the most productive of all those that my parents had pursued.

Once all readily available information about the treatment had come into our possession, we phoned several former patients who lived in our vicinity to interview them, so to speak, and obtain any additional thoughts concerning the trip as a whole that might otherwise have escaped our knowledge had we only read the pamphlet prepared by the agency. We wished to receive no surprises of the negative kind through ignorance, especially in a foreign country. Real or imagined, however, the patients all expressed a degree of faith in their progress after having undergone the series of intravenous shots; if nothing more, perhaps this "doctor" administered high-priced hope.

We discussed the option of a trip to Greece as thoroughly as possible, not only among ourselves but with friends. Nearly everyone thought our idea was quite splendid, and were happy that we were planning to try it; they offered strength and support to our decision. Only two individuals, my brother and his wife, voiced overt objections to our plan; they questioned the authenticity of the treatment, not wanting to see us be taken by quackery and false claims. We too were frightened of that aspect, yet amid our uncertainty we thought that such a chance, however questionable, should not be relinquished through skepticism alone. "What if. . .?" was also a question too great to overlook when the decision involved life and death.

Housing slight reluctance, I agreed this new option was one that I should try. Quite conscious of the amount of money which the trip and treatment would ingest, I felt the affair was an extravagance of which I was not worthy, but my father insisted that he would spend his life's savings if it would restore my health. The money spent on the trip would be an investment in happiness should it prove worthwhile, and the risk incurred was an integral part of it... for we were dealing in "futures." The return we sought was not of the tangible sort; it existed as yet only in our dreams.

Although I remained skeptical toward the validity of the treatment, I could not suppress a glimmer of hope despite the hoard of fears that took refuge in my restless mind. When the word "treatment" was denoted as a "cure," an involuntary spark of anger was kindled in my chest, spurred from present doubt and past disappointment; I wished to shield myself from the gloom of overridden hope due to an empty cure, and therefore attempted to foster little actual hope for any development related to the disappearance of current symptoms and health disorders. I could not, however, deny my family their renewed hope by objecting to travel to Greece; I envisioned an image of boundless joy which my health would generate among the family and circulate through the homes of friends.

A beam of hope infiltrated the confines of doubt in my mind also, and I felt ready and rather anxious to accept this treatment as a means toward the rebirth of health; this was one chance I could not pass by, and perhaps there would no longer be a need for groping in the obscurity of medical scams and

hypocrisy if truly it was a cure. I hoped the doctor was worthy of the trust which he had apparently secured, for I was about to bestow upon him some of my own; if he begrudged my lack of complete and unadulterated trust, so then it must be, for such was the limit which my heart could withstand.

Although the journey would be no pleasure excursion, traveling to a strange and distant continent with uncertain health, I understood the expectancy and purpose behind the trip, and vowed to follow the instructions given by the doctor carefully. If the treatment demonstrated no result, it would be through no fault of my own.

PAGE 254

Chapter 34 Journey to Greece

"Perhaps the sky is the sole glimpse of home that I have here in Athens
. . . the sky is always a constant factor."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Journey To Greece

The day of our departure arrived amid a tidal wave of apprehension. My excitement was not of the healthy, gleeful breed, but rather the stomach-clenching variety that I would "wish away" if it was possible. It was, once again, fear of the unknown that assailed my thoughts when I should have been looking forward to new and interesting sights. Making the diagnosis was simple; believing in it enough to admit the silliness of my fear was not as easy. . . and nothing but confrontation would smother that fear.

I stood in the airport lobby wishing I had already gone and returned. As the gate opened, I decided to take one large jump and move through the metal detector and on to the official waiting room, where I proceeded to stare a hole through the floor. Shortly before the plane was to be boarded, a group of friends appeared to bid me farewell. We were separated by a railing, but their warmth passed over the barrier and embraced me. While the hugs and fair greetings did not dispell my fear, I realized the amount of love which would be packed in my suitcase for the month. Norm, my Uncle Les and a couple from our church had also seen us off; love would sustain and lend buoyancy during the hard times.

I felt my stomach surge as the plane taxied near the gate and people in the waiting room spilled out of their seats toward the doorway. It was time to go. Sharon was traveling with us to Greece, inspired to go through curiosity and concern about my health and the Greek doctor's proclaimed cure. She had always wanted to visit Greece, and when such an opportunity presented itself, it seemed ridiculous to simply let it pass.

I definitely was not traveling alone; the four of us formed our own support group en route, exchanging conversation and smiles through the dubious hours in which we flew over land and sea. Despite my family's presence, however, homesickness began to set in shortly after lift-off and graduated as we progressed. While the American top hits buzzed happily through the headphones

oblivious to the foreign space below, I thought of home; when the snow capped Alps crossed our path, I thought of Norm. Home. . . Norm. . . I knew they would be missed. Frankly, they already were.

Diary:

Jan. 12 1983... Last night there was a party, as anticipated, for the Americans; it consisted of numerous Grecian delights, such as bhaklava, and various other pastries. . . many of which were laden with honey. There were also filberts and almonds, as well as beautiful steaks for those desiring to partake. As for myself, I committed the irretractable message that I was a "liver patient," and thereby was denied the joy of a potentially ambrosiac steak. Such is life, (no luck at all).

Today I woke up at 6:30, as well as every hour on the hour throughout the night! I went to the clinic... with Mom, this time... I received my shot. The moment he administered the shot, the reaction began. I felt as if my entire body had been assaulted by a blow torch! Several minutes later, my face turned a lovely shade of red. Also simultaneous with the shot was a distinct flavor of salt. I returned to the Akrion and rested 'til 11:30, at which time I ate a breakfast of oatmeal with honey and two pieces of toast (the latter of which I learned were forbidden until after the 19th treatment. Oh well, hopefully that will be the least of my follies). After drinking nearly an entire carafe of water, I returned to the room and slept until 6:00 p.m. Following my lengthy siesta, I ate a meager supper of greens, cucumbers and carrots (salad) and a baked apple with honey and walnuts.

A terrific addition... I got diarrhea... (pew). Must be because I'm screwed up (times, meals, etc.). Sorry to say, impinged on Sharon's right to fresh air while she was showering...

The people, both patients and families and Greeks... all nice.

Jan 13, 14, 15, 16... Never have I felt so utterly depressed in a place as I do here in Athens. Perhaps it is due to the fact that I am here for the purpose of cancer treatment, not merely diversion. I have not the energy nor the desire to do much sight-seeing. My meals are routine and boring, not to mention that they do not provide sufficient energy. Indeed, they are a hindrance to activity. Breakfast is oatmeal with honey and a baked apple. Lunch is a salad and baked apple, and dinner consists of a salad, apple and rice (if they have the latter). I was so worn down after the bus tour Saturday that I nearly cried when the waiter said there was no rice to be had. Nuts provide energy, but too many of those can be a sickening experience.

The first two nights I nearly went without sleep. Sharon snores excessively while I, on the other hand, am quite a light sleeper (hear all). In addition, a hi-way passes close to the hotel with motorists ravaging the noise level at all times of the day and night. I began to wonder if I'd sleep at all, so Mom and Sharon changed rooms. I guess I needed Mom's support much more than I knew. She is quite mellow. . . and I need all the relaxation I can possibly have. Somehow, I couldn't handle Sharon's intensity, and I became more and more on edge.

Yesterday I got too tired on the tour and broke down in the afternoon. Once again I was glad Mom shared the room with me. Never before have I been so easily shattered as here. I cannot seem to handle anything... usually I never cry or get too terribly upset. Traveling is usually a blast.

I slept well last night... I didn't have a nap because by the time I got hold of myself it was time for supper. I got down to the restaurant quite ready to eat, but when the food came I couldn't eat much and nearly lost control of myself again. We went back to the rooms and I had another attack (with several more to follow) of diarrhea. Glorious!

We tried calling Norm but the line was either busy or kept ringing. I called Jon but he wasn't there (at school) so I talked to both of his parents. Slept very well.

Jan. 18, 1983... Things are gradually becoming easier to handle, although my desire to return home as soon as possible is yet a prominent thought in my mind. Today I had my 5th treatment; I didn't seem as hot or as red as I had yesterday, although the taste of salt still remained as usual. My right arm is bruised due to some seepage during the injection; it is a small price to pay to allow my left arm free for both the 6th injection and blood test. I learned today that if the blood count failed to drop at least two points, the doctor dismissed you as a lost cause. Diarrhea has accompanied each bowel movement, which makes defecation less than a delight. However, this symptom often occurs among those being treated, so I settled into accepting that my upcoming weeks would prove likewise. I wonder if the injection is made up at least partially of Vitamin C; large dosages cause a red face and diarrhea... Time passes much more quickly than I anticipated it would. Hopefully the remaining weeks will be similar.

This afternoon I began to feel rather dizzy. The room would swim when my eyes were open, while I would be in a half-nightmare when my eyes were closed. I was tired, but didn't wish to sleep; closing my eyes brought on imagery too strange to describe... I merely saw the other hotel guests coming toward me, then falling away. Open or closed eyes, I remained rather dizzy. When I got ready to go to the Tuesday night party, my hands and forearms would get sporadic surges of numbness each time I would grasp a certain way. Scary. I went down for a short while but was soon escorted by Dad to my room due to dizziness... and I had begun to cry! Freaking out again. I guess the shots work on the nervous system. What a fiasco this is.

Dad brought a tray of food to me. Slept great... Mom had to turn off the bathroom light and cover me!

Jan. 21, 1983... I have never seen such a day as this wherein the wind whistled through the halls and rattled the windows yet ceased not once throughout the day. If storms be the wrath of God, winds surely must be a prominent accomplice in the tumultuous siege.

I had my 8th treatment today and the final one of the week. The doctor had to stick me with the needle 2 times before striking a rich stream of blood into which he could inject his serum. I thanked good fortune for the smaller needle as he delved into my wrist.

The afternoon brought on a dull ache in my I liver which gradually subsided and disappeared after numerous excursions to the bathroom. The diarrhea was still raging in full force.

Jan. 22, 1983... I spent most of the day employed in writing letters which will be taken to the states and mailed via "Sharon express." Norm called around 7:30. We were all still in the restaurant finishing our supper when Ulysses summoned me to the phone. I was so happy to hear from him... it was great that he called.

Jan. 23, 1983... Sharon left for home this morning around 7:30. I was unable to see her off due to a lack of cooperation from my bowels. After several attacks, I made my way down to meet civilization. Breakfast was the customary oatmeal with a side dish of peaches. Feeling rather peaked, I ascended once more to my hermitage on the 2nd floor.

More than slightly depressed, I had to escape to the bathroom for a silent cry when Dad persisted to rattle the change in his pockets. Somehow my nerves wouldn't take the incessant jingle, combined with the knowledge that he was doing same out of sheer boredom and nervousness. It would break his heart if he should know how nervous his action and loud speech make me. There is not one thing in this room to cushion noise. Dad would do anything for me if it would make my disease go away. Some things, as always, are better left unsaid.

Lunch brought a rather nice change and lifted my spirits considerably. I was able to have fish, and although it is not customary for me, I relished each morsel, along with a salad and peaches.

Weekends are more difficult to withstand than week days, often times. I seem to fall into a depression and am susceptible to numerous emotional tides. Homesickness is a heavy load when one doesn't feel well. I love to watch the clouds from my bed through the room window. One lazily floats along while another totally overtakes its careless rival. Perhaps the sky is the sole glimpse of home that I have here in Athens... the sky is always a constant factor.

Jan. 25, 1983... Monday and today found me in quite good health and happily high spirited as well. Sunday was a bleak day for me... it seems that homesickness hits the hardest on weekends. There is definitely a lot to be said for a routine, especially in a situation such as this.

Monday I spent much of the day in the lobby. My desire to be sociable and mingle with the others returns when I feel good. The morning dawned with rain, although the afternoon heat soon shooed the clouds away to other parts. I received the questions I had asked of Helen, fully answered.

Breakfast was transformed into a veritable form of euphoria for me, as I was able to add to my morning fare a delicious "bear claw" donut. After a brief rest I descended upon humanity in good health and spirits. Aiding my good mood was the fact that we were able to change our return flight date to the 9th of February and sign up for our seats.

Jan. 26, 1983... Hump day! After my shot I feasted on 4 left-over Greek donuts before ordering my regular breakfast. I again ordered oatmeal and a bear claw, but was forced to take half of the donut to

my room to eat later. Lunch was much more than I was prepared for... had fish, green beans, and a cabbage/carrot salad. Needless to say, I found myself happily full (altho' I wasn't nearly as full as last nite at the party when I consumed salad, rice, nuts and 6 donuts)!

After lunch, I retired to my four walls to wash my hair. That in itself is an experience to behold. One has two options, the first being to utilize the sink, whose drain is in dire need of dran-o. In this case, one remains dry but runs the risk of accidentally flipping one's locks down into the stench of the drain and thereby defeating the initial purpose of washing the hair. The second option is to bend over the contraption which is in Greece, labeled "a shower." This consists of a porcelain base and a faucet with a hose and hand-held shower head. One selecting this means of shampooing the hair must lean over the base of the shower and manipulate the shower head in such a fashion that will allow the entire bathroom to remain as dry as possible. Leg cramps, of course, are an acute possibility in this prime position. Another hazard could be the wet floor, for it is always wet after having used the shower. To keep dry is a laughable impossibility with this device; any articles of clothing should be placed in another room. I proceeded with the latter method and became quite damp.

My next operation to perform was the washing and drying of my nuts. It may sound crazy, this nut-washing ritual of mine, but I look at it this way; the last thing I need during my stay is to get sick from eating filthy nuts! So, I wash them, because one never knows whose dirty hands may have processed these nuts!

Another report I must make.! I have had a firm bowel movement! Joy of joys! It is the first since my arrival and the beginning of my injections.

Mom suffered a hair-raising scare when she feared that her passport was lost. While madly searching through desk drawers and coat pockets, Dad calmly assured her that if she did not find it, she would simply spend the remainder of her days in Greece. It was found, incidentally, in a zippered compartment of her enormous purse from where, of course, it had never strayed.

On their daily excursion, Mom and Dad disposed of the 3 cans of green beans (purchased for my use) which were suspected to have an acute case of botulism; the top of the can was bowed. I took very kindly to their effort and was careful to stay on their good side until the beans were scattered on the hillside.

Jan. 28, 1983... Today wasn't as glorious as Friday's are built up to be. My blood test didn't drop into the 2's like I'd rather hoped it would. I was 3.I from 4.I, which was considered "good." One must realize, of course, that anything that happened around here is "good," whether it be a painful or uncomfortable reaction, a drastic blood count drop, or feeling terrific.

There has been a considerable amount of conversation on the subject of "how many shots" are enough. Some people would take as many as the doctor would willingly inject. I cannot live from one shot to the next. I feel that if this stupendous serum is doing the job, I'll know... the tumor will diminish in size. If after 3 months, there seems to be no "progress," why send blood. I don't take much stock in the blood tests anyway. Moreover, one cannot even conduct his life normally if he waits for test results. I have to be able to just say "enough" and live my life. I can't always be waiting... life is too uncertain to not give and take joy from each day. Simply "being" in existence is not, for me, what "living" is all about. I'll have been here a month when all is done and paid for, and 20 shots will have been administered. That's what I have figured upon, and what I am prepared to have, but it's all I'll have. You have to stop somewhere, and who's to say that will be it. One has to be able to let go... I let go a year ago, and I can't hang on to shreds of hope. That doesn't bring happiness.

Yesterday was a wonderful day aside from the shot. The doctor had a hard time finding my vein, and he doesn't seem to wait for it to surface anymore without first probing for it. After the shot, I couldn't sit because too many non-patients were there. Finally I dove for an empty seat, almost on the verge of crying.

After breakfast, Tasos took Mom and me to downtown Athens to shop for my fur coat. It was rather strange, because Christos also drove his rover with Donna and Margaret. We'd asked for 1 driver; we looked at 2 furriers, the first of which was owned by one of Chris' friends. He had a motley selection of furs which were over-priced but poorly constructed. I was distressed after that shop, but we continued on, stopping at a nice furrier who had well made coats but sold for more than we could afford. Our last stop was a furrier called Toronto Furs where Mom had wanted to go all along because she knew they had decent prices and furs. That's where I got my coat... a dark mink tail, finger-tip coat. It's very pretty and cost \$337.00! I was pleased with it, and it's something I'll have for many years (bought with money I'd been given from friends).

We went to an oceanside restaurant (Donna, Tasos, Mom and me) afterwards. It was a beautiful day, and the food was good. It was the first day I could have bread, and their's was great. I felt as if it didn't happen, it was so nice. Mom offered to pay the bill, which was a lot more than we'd anticipated for the size of the meal... (around \$26.00). Then Mom paid Tasos 1000 drachma for taking us. . . it ended up being a rather expensive day. We didn't say anything about paying Chris... why should we... we'd only asked for one driver.

I got a letter from Jon when I came back... it was really nice.

Jan. 29, 1983... We all got up early and went on the 1 day cruise on the Aegean Sea. I was tired, but I had a good time. We didn't have very long to look around each island, but it still was a good tour. On the Island Aegina, we took a bus tour on the winding roads and country-side to a site of ruins. I took many pictures, and it was quite a view from the top of the mountain. The next island, Poros, we had only a glimpse of because of the half hour time limit. The last island, Hydra, was nice and we were able to look at some shops. I bought earrings and Mom a crocheted dress. I finally got rid of a rather pesty Tunisian who was following me around. I'd met him on the boat. I wanted to look at the island, not him. Norm and Jon called.

Jan. 30, 1983 (Sunday)... I woke up sick and had a temp of 101... it's going around here, as everyone seems to be ailing. Even in Athens. Mom and Dad's church class called at 6:15 and a lot of them talked... were so surprised and pleased. It helped to have such support.

Feb. 3, 1983 (Thursday)... Dad was unfortunate enough to have caught the malady that has seemed to have stricken our hotel. Rumor has it the whole of Athens has had the germ. I also heard today that a new group of Americans are to arrive this coming Sun. but that they will be refused treatment. The Travel Agency supposedly sends people over to Greece despite warnings from Alivizatos to stop, because of the nice profit they reap from each booking. Alivizatos wants to work in his labs for a time and to do so, he needs to have a break from patients. He's now treating some 90 Americans, plus an unknown number of Greeks. (He should be quite well-off.)

One of the white patients was talking to a black man in our group and she remarked that it was in God's plan that white and black get along well together. Conversation then turned to the possibility of rejection of the new patients coming and she stated, "Well, we were just part of the plan and they're not part of God's plan." The reasoning, to me, was incredulous.

Many of the guests are leaving Friday. . . tomorrow. . . for the U. S. I'll really miss Connie and Ron. At supper many pictures were taken.

Feb 4, 1983 (Friday)... It was a real zoo today. Those leaving had their shots first and then the remaining people were taxied rapidly to and from the doctors. At 9:00 they took the people to the airports, all nearly having hernias, because the plane departs at 10:00 and it takes 40 min. to get to the airport. I'm glad we'll be taking a taxi.

Blood test today. . . he barely coaxed enough out to use. It bubbled and spurted so slowly, I was wondering if I'd get another stick.

I thought it might be appropriate if, at this time, I attempt to describe our hotel room. That which one first encounters is, of course, the door. It is equipped with a skeleton key lock which usually tends to deny rapid entry or exits; if one persists, the door will eventually open. However, if one is besieged by a severe case of diarrhea, it is advisable to think twice about locking the door.

Once unlocked, the door opens with a loud squeak, followed by a short moan (a protest for having succeeded with the lock). Shutting the door quietly is a virtual impossibility, while a door left ajar is a prime target for a thundering slam.

Once inside room 20, and upon inspection of the floor, one immediately notices 2 very suspicious yellow splotches. Ignore them; they'll be there 20 years hence. To the right are 3 doors, 2 of which open into a closet housing a clothes rack and hanger. The other boasts 2 drawers and a shelf. The drawers are where one hides the dishes from the restaurant. They are used for mid-day snacks; any empty dishes in the room will promptly be swiped by the maid and returned to the kitchen.

To the right is the bathroom, having the obligatory sink and toilet, as well as a showerhead. There is no shower curtain. The sink has been on the verge of a clog for 2 weeks, while the toilet insists upon running until extra attention is given to it. The shower remains a true experience which no coward would dare to operate. Mom has used it only once in the entire time we've been here, preferring the

tried and true sponge bath method. The floor, which is of green marble, is quite interesting, as one is able to imagine pictures in it's design while contemplating upon the plastic toilet seat.

The main room is comfortably small (Dad's is uncomfortably small) and contains 2 single beds complete with iron-hard pillows, sheets, 1 gray blanket, and 1 two-tone brown blanket that Jon would surely approve of. Bedside is a night stand supporting a dial-less telephone with a nerve-shattering ring. On the opposite wall stands a rickety desk, a luggage stand, and a chair. The third wall has 2 chairs and a set of double doors which open onto a small balcony. Outside shutters and faced drapes provide the necessary shelter and privacy.

The floors, tiled in green, have 2 rugs, 1 beside each bed. Both the former and the latter are typically dust ridden, despite the maid's honest attempt to maintain a degree of cleanliness; the hotel has no vacuum cleaner, and no plugs if it did.

The walls are a shiny mint green; upon one wall is a picture of a typical Greek village, and above the desk is a mirror and light. There are also lights over each bed and a swag dangles precariously over the foot of my bed.

The view of Athens is spectacular, especially at night when the smog is not evident. Licensed drivers may only drive on alternate days to help in the control of smog. The sunsets are marvelous. On a clear day one may catch a glimpse of the Aegean Sea sparkling in the distance below the many various mountain peaks.

Throughout the night one can hear the Greeks as they drive late (customarily), cars, trucks, and motorcycles, battling the mountain roads, and dogs barking..... between 12 - 3 A.M. The roosters begin to chime in early morning. Noisy? Yes, but one gets used to it, and if tired enough, sleep cannot be kept away.

Feb. 5, 1983 (Saturday)... The trip to the heart of the Flea Mkt. was cancelled unanimously by Mom and me. The weather, in the morning being lead gray skies shedding a sleet-like mist, became gradually more severe as the day progressed. By mid-morning, the sleet had transformed into jumbo snowflakes and rapidly proceeded to blanket the entire area in an unexpected cloud of white. The Grecians were quite delighted with the entire affair, as snow is rare in these parts; the last blizzard condition was 15 years ago and caused Athens to close down. The people are ill prepared to drive in such conditions and find themselves at a loss in this type of weather; cars were strewn on all sides of the road.

As for myself, I was also happy with the snow; my only protest would be if it would hinder my departure on Wed. Otherwise I reveled in the beauty I was shown today. I was on the verge of sinking down into the bed to rest when Norm called... that was a nice addition to my day! I went down and ate a small portion of green beans, rice and bread.

We had a party in which Mom and I had a part... at 7:30. It consisted of our Artist Game, Becky Pate's rhythm game and Donna's auction, the proceeds of which went to the dishwasher at the hotel restaurant. Refreshments ended up the fiesta. . . it was a nice break for a Saturday nite.

Feb. 6, 1983 (Sunday)... I began my day by snapping several pictures from my balcony. Subject: snow-covered mtns. I figured that I had better record them on film before the sun's heat chased all of the snow away. I went to breakfast promptly at 9:00, ordering my usual morning fare, oatmeal, honey, 2 toasts, and "red" Nescafe (the decaffeinated kind). Following breakfast Max invited Mom and me to a game of Scrabble. I nearly won point-wise, but Max cleared his slate of letters first, thereby adding the total remaining letters from all of our slates to his score.

Lunch was very good today. . . my fish was cooked to crispness, the way I like it to be fixed. Following that meal, I hastily made my way to the Greek-English Dictionary to look up "crispy"; perhaps hereafter my fish dinner can always be crispy!

My blood test results were favorable, as far as it counts. I dropped to 2.5. The shot went well today, and I returned to have breakfast before venturing to the Flea Market in downtown Athens.

We caught a cab on the road above the hotel. It's a lot easier and less tiring for me than if I'd have to ride the bus all the way to Athens.

The Flea Mkt. can be described very simply as a low-brow, motley array of shops, most of which carried a wide selection of goods which repeated itself over and over through the area. It was actually a pitiable sight to see. Few of the people had heaters in their shops, and many appeared quite destitute.

The junk was over-priced; however, the merchants seemed unprepared for much bartering. I

moseyed in and out of many shops without having been offered one price reduction. I ended up with 2 belts, one reduced from 120 drachmas to 110, and the other to 100.

After browsing awhile, Mom and I stopped and I got a pita bread to munch on for energy. Mom ate the sausage that came with it (38 drachma).

I found my way into a shoe store on the edge of the market and bought 2 prs. of boots. . . one is a smooth red leather short boot, and the other is a gold suede knee boot (1200 and 1800 dr.).

Lunch was at a corner restaurant. I had cabbage/cucumber salad, rice, and bread.

Cab... strange guy...

August, 1983... After last Diary Entry...

My last journal entry about Greece dwindled into nonexistence as home became part of the foreseeable future, with broken phrases and words serving as the one reminder of my excursion to the Flea Market and a strange encounter with a Greek who had repeatedly asked, "You American? You marry me?"

The following morning the three of us were packed on a jumbo jet amid a screaming mob destined for New York, and thoughts of Greece had made way for other, more prominent images. The red pointed shoes from Athens which were peaking out of my pant legs, the in-flight snacks, the certainty that our plane would crash on the way home. . . I desired to be home to such a great degree that paranoia became a plague, and I fancied my emotions were similar to those who are threatened in a war zone; in effect, if I was not killed in Greece, I would die on the way home. It was as if Fate was not an idea; it had taken shape and lived, exuding a force that controlled relentlessly and completely.

Upon reaching New York, and transferring to a different and considerably less crowded plane, my fear dissolved. We had traveled all day with the sun, and now it had overtaken us. The lights of New York twinkled like a brilliant network of gold on black velvet, covering the city's filth with delicate grace. I watched the points of light stretching endlessly into the darkness, and knew I was home; no foreign words rolled off the tongues surrounding me, yet a balanced variety of creeds and colorings spread about the plane.

Chicago possessed the essence of the midwest; when we reached the city, I was overcome with happiness and bought a bold red tee-shirt that read "Chicago." Mom noticed my purchase and questioned me; after all, I was probably the only patient of the Greek doctor who had not acquired a GREECE tee-shirt. The way I saw it, tee-shirts made statements. Some people wanted to express how they felt, others wanted everyone to know where they had been. I merely wanted to emphasize my gratitude for being home, and red carried the message with adequate force.

One flight later, the three of us stumbled wearily off of the small plane that had delivered us to Moline. I had not slept in over 24 hours, but I still recognized familiar faces, and many greeted us as we walked into the terminal. Besides my aunt and uncle, a group from the Circle C Class (Circle in Christ from our church) milled about, holding a "WELCOME" poster and wearing great smiles. It was a royal welcome to be received by one such as I, and it assured Mom and Dad of the support which rallied in their time of need.

"Friends were beginning their exodus to distant places . . . it meant appraising my own life and facing, time after time, the stagnation which it represented."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

In Limbo

April 1, 1983... There is something left to be desired about living in a state which can be described as "limbo." I am neither happy nor unhappy. I cannot plan, because planning would only dig my sense of "loss" to a deeper level. I am unable to live my life in the ways in which I like for fear of ruining the Alivizatos miracle cure and because of my general lack of energy. I think I can do something but when I actually try, it fizzles into dust; I haven't the energy. I sometimes feel a world apart from all else... in Greece I lost my zest... or what zest I ever had... for living (in my sense of the word). Perhaps I can look forward to normalcy only after the six months period has come to an end. At least then I'll know my verdict. . . as I had before I went to Greece.

June 26, 1983... Today the bomb blew up that was ticking in my brain. I guess one might say that emotional explosions are a rarity in my case, however, I am lucky enough to realize when I've reached the point of mental saturation. It seemed of late, that all I heard were complaints and conversations necessitating an obligatory response of heartfelt sympathy.

I should never expect less than the truth when I ask "How are you?" There is then a symphony of habitual ailments; I receive quite an ear-full and the health report is consistently poor.

The next uplifting conversation was with Max, the master of personality, and a virtual ball of fire, (I jest, of course). His lamentations include numerous health difficulties, among them his artificial limb. Undoubtedly he is far worse off, in my opinion, than I.

However, I don't relish conversations riddled with bits and pieces of Greek reminiscences; I prefer to forget the entire affair. Moreover, I battle to maintain somewhat of a conversation. . . silence can only last so long before I become unsettled and feel nervous tremors pacing through my stomach. I am thoroughly exhausted once I am home. I am so tired of sob stories; they are no longer any good with me. I wonder if I lack tolerance for people who eternally lament their personal plights. Others also have problems, but muffle them to a far greater degree. Life's too short to taint other's lives with one's own depressions and sorrows; talk but do not burden! Perhaps, also, I have no sympathy for people who completely deny death and cannot accept it as a normal part of the life cycle itself. I hope my mind can now relax... I have twice today relieved it's pressure. I can now, with luck, bid my senses goodnight.

August, 1983... Is there really any sense to my life anymore? Sometimes I hate my life. I seem to be going nowhere... my pendulum has come to a slow stand-still. It seems that all the progress I had made 2 years ago has left me empty-handed and stripped once more. Selfworth is altogether laughable in context with my life. What, after all, is my purpose for being here? I do no more than spend other's money, take up space and burden my family with my lack of physical attributes. I feel that I could hold no job. . . I sometimes spend hours in one day running to the toilet. After eating, I always run the risk of feeling enormously nauseous for the duration of several hours. And stamina? Sometimes I have it, sometimes I don't.

Marriage? Who and how? At times I can barely take care of myself. Kids would be unthinkable, for reasons of conception as well as taking good care of them. What would you do while you were afflicted by runny bowels? And as far as a husband goes, he wouldn't exactly be getting "prime stuff." I'm a sight to look at... the type of body that deserves a full wardrobe at all times.

I don't understand why my cancer has to grow so slowly. Life can be such a burden. Some days I feel as if I've done nothing except eat, sleep and feel sick. And yet I feel guilty for not "pulling my weight." I don't want to be a chronic complainer and ailing 'til death bids me depart. I feel like a pussyfoot. . . I need ice or I'll overheat or sweat; I have my personal air-conditioner so I can survive the summer headache free. Sometimes I can't do much in the physical sense, and I feel as if my body is going to the dump. I have a whole sack or two in the cubbyhole filled with slacks and jeans that my ego will not

allow me to throw away. False hopes still contemplate "recovery" in a bland sort of way. I suppose with all sincerity, however, that such luck is not to be mine. In all likelihood, I'll live to a ripe old age carrying an overgrown watermelon in my stomach, only to die by some freak car accident. Dream on, Laurie, for dreams carry no malignancy; dreams can be kept alive or brought to nonexistence as the individual mind sees fit. They can nurture or destroy the dreamer simply by his own desires.

Wisdom comes to an abrupt halt when one's ego considers himself to be entirely wise. The casual admittance of one's own ignorance, however, carries the implications of true wisdom and intelligence.

Nor do the wise mock the ignorant, for wisdom is a learned state, forever questioning and forever growing. The wisest of all human beings initially possessed a child's mind.

How happy I am that I do not feel compelled to uphold an image of a person I desire to be. Life, already appreciably complicated, need not also pressure one to act out the role of a personage whose standards are determined by a certain group in society. I find utter humor in watching the "necessary" actions of certain people, such as businessmen in suited attire and professors with their obligatory beards and pipes. I sometimes wonder if they would continue their hopeless charade if they knew how comical they appeared to an impartial onlooker.

Even as a child I found it horribly ridiculous to do things solely to please others. The "others," as it is, could care less for you as an individual anyway. I felt as if I was not only cheating myself, but my true friends also, if I was any less than my true self. I remember observing in agitated silence as fellow students would deliberately trod on the less popular children to somehow augment their low sense of esteem. Though I was seldom bothered by their childish mockery, I pitied the hapless recipients of their relentless derision and marveled at the insensitive cruelty of their incessant gestures and remarks. This, I suppose, led me to believe that man is not intrinsically good, and that goodness is learned only as the result of the societal necessity to survive. If not for this stark realization, I truly wonder what would become of man as a whole. Would he be reduced to canine barbarism or would there still be certain bands of people who would break from this sheerly animalistic behavior to nurture a livable form of existence, complete with an intricate set of moral ethics?

As seen in my entries following the Grecian trip, I became depressed and frustrated as a rejoinder to the special diet. I felt constrained by hope, not freed by it, and was deeply relieved when six months had passed, for then I was able to return to what I had come to know as "normal." It was obvious that the Greek doctor had done nothing to cure my ailment, for the cancer continued its growth, manifested in my shrinking wardrobe vs. an increasing waistline. Because the waiting was over, there was no need to spend more of my precious time engaged in obligatory hope. I would forge onward. . . and forget the cures.

If nothing else, the Greek diet developed an interest in food and its preparation. Indeed, I was so obsessed with food that I was plagued by it; if a diet is so rigorous that it demands constant awareness to succeed, I believe that success is far more difficult to attain. Throughout the weeks of the diet, I baked with incomparable zest and learned a wealth of information about cooking. Bread baking was edible chemistry; it became easy to respect chefs and their tempting creations as I paged through cookbooks. In no time at all, I had a hobby which extended beyond the need to make natural food as specified by the doctor.

One slightly irregular recipe came to me through a book by Euell Gibbons; Violet Jelly. Yes, flower preserves. I'll never forget the day Norm and I went to the park and I picked a quart of violet blossoms. To be honest, I tried it to see for myself whether the jelly was as exquisite as he claimed. It was a lovely lavender flavored ever so delicately. . . and not objectionable to the palate.

Baking was not my sole enjoyment, of course. I loved to photograph wildlife and create still-life compositions. . . I enjoyed dining out and traveling to places both foreign and familiar. . . shopping was always a pleasure, with or without money... and the library, with its hint of musty volumes and quiet dignity, was also a favorite haunt. It was easy to be interested in many things, despite the fact that my plans often failed to cooperate with my bodily functions.

August 29, 1983... I have spent a good deal of time tonight feeling sick. For a while there I was really beginning to wonder if my Nutregrain would make a debut appearance in my clean toilet bowl (it didn't) so I will leave further writing for tomorrow. It is now 1:00 A.M.

I was used to feeling sick. Actually, I had forgotten what it was like to experience true health; stomach and intestinal difficulties had become a way of life. As time passed, however, I could not deny the damage that cancer progressively wrought upon my strength and general capabilities. Daily walks ceased after bowel complications (i.e., the immediate need for a bathroom) over-shadowed the

enjoyment of the walk itself. Stress due to heat was also a great enemy that followed and preceded every outing or event, and between the two impairments, I grew increasingly more reluctant to pursue activities; I had to weigh the importance of the activity against the possible complications that might arise and thus spoil the engagement altogether. No longer could I say "yes" without mental hesitation; simple activities were not simple any more.

The summer of 1983 was hot beyond belief; with record high temperatures throughout, it was determined that life would be much more livable if I could have an air conditioner in my room. Shortly thereafter, another was procured for use in the basement's T.V. room, which afforded me a higher level of mobility. My family enjoyed the cool air so much that a third air conditioner was installed. Even my dad found a place in his heart for the electrical marvels and, I believe, appreciated them more than he would have cared to admit. A diary entry read:

August 29, 1983... I think Dad held out on buying A/C so long because he liked the idea he could take it.

Under the same principle, perhaps, was his derision toward mosquito repellent. Dad withstood bugs with an air of stoicism that bordered hard core.

Despite the heat, I managed to take several excursions through the summer. The first and longest was to California, where I helped a friend settle into an apartment before embarking upon a career. Many friends were beginning their exodus to distant places and it was fun to see where they would be located. . . even when it meant appraising my own life and facing, time after time, the stagnation which it represented.

Norm and I took our fourth annual trip to the Rockies during the tourist season's heaviest crowds, yet we were lucky enough to stumble upon and catch a cabin that had been dumped by previous patrons. We determined that Marion's establishment had certain irregularities which, despite its underlying personality, we desired to forego; after all, a basement unit with no scenic views or T.V. reception was rather dreary on a rainy day.

As my health had begun to fail, I was obliged to remain near the more populous areas of the park while Norm hiked to his satisfaction. It was not the same as the former trips for that reason, but I loved the mountains, nevertheless, and loved the fact that I still had the ability to see beauty in life when my own was not ideal. I focused myself on thought and photography, instead of those aspects of living which no longer remained within my physical grasp.

For years we had spoken of renting mopeds to scour an area of the mountains; so it was that we decided to break down and seek out the adventure. What fun it was! At a maximum speed of 45 mph I felt as if I was traveling at a tremendous pace. More humorous than thrilling, however, was the way I passed Norm on the hills; he appeared to be standing still, his bulky coat billowing in the brisk morning air. The trek had been a product of procrastination for three years; when we removed ourselves from the seats and turned in the mopeds, we were glad that we had finally put forth the effort and money to try something new. It was an indelible memory; it was also a memory that would never repeat itself except in dreams. Later I realized how fortunate I had been to capture the moment and make the memory; certain experiences are given only one chance.

"I don't care for rainbow chasing. . . it's a long drive down the alley of blind hope. I prefer not living in the shadows."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Reflections

AUGUST 25, 1983... I have decided to, once again, embark upon the habit of keeping a diary. Just having finished reading the entries in my previously written diaries, I rediscovered many memories and consequently, remembered how important it can be to retain a shred of ones self... no matter how brief... for the sake of future reference. Words tend to bridge gaps of time, and help to bring to rest troubled minds. I hope my words herein shall prove worthwhile. . . both to myself, and to whosoever may one day be the keeper of these journals.

Today I began, also, to write the story of my life... in it I hope to touch on experiences, trials, thoughts, both from past years and present. I wrote three pages concerning my earliest years thus far.

Nearly three years have passed since I wrote that diary entry, and much in my life has changed. Indeed, life is waning rapidly and there shall be no clever cure or miracle. For this reason, I shall simply use journal entries to describe my life in many instances; writing, in itself taxes my stamina.

What became of my relationship with my former boy friend? Time changes relationships as it does all things; so does circumstance. My recurrence of cancer exhumed a need for closeness, and what should have been better than dating to answer such a need? Because I knew I would not establish a relationship given the constraints of my irreversible disease, dating was not the threat it had been, and I was able to maintain a relationship without becoming terrified of romance. Romance would never be part of my life.

Sept. 8, 1983... I really had a hard night. I was in the john for 3 hrs. with the feeling my intestines were infested with worms. It is almost worse than throwing up. By 11:00 I could finally go to bed. Mom undid my covers for me. . . she's such a good mom.

Sept. 16, 1983... Dad got the reply letter about a new experimental treatment for "Big C." It was on 20/20... they only give it to a select group at Johns Hopkins in Maryland. It's funny. I'm scared to get better. . . I might let everyone down if I'm not the superperson (achiever). That's stupid... I could always take the civil service exam to try to be a postman... I would've liked doing that...

Knowing I had a bit of a melancholic streak in my blood, Norm used to wonder if I simply did not wish to live. "You take all of this so well... I don't know if I could handle it like that." "You just live with it," I told him. (I had often been depressed in high school and at Sears). After having cancer for three years, I woke up one sunny morning and glanced about the upstairs. "I don't want to die" crossed my mind like a flashing neon sign. I was slightly stunned. Though I was prepared for death, that in itself will not stifle one's zest for life as long as there is something to live for... one day at a time. Perhaps in my battle for a normal life, bereft of hair-raising treatments, I had merely thought, "I don't want to live if I can't do so with quality." Because life on any terms was not palatable did not mean that I desired to die. Never before had I truly contemplated that idea!

Sept 21, 1983... I talked with Alene (Greece patient). She is doing well. Max is going back for more treatments. Jenny is taking chemo in New York and Connie died. Mom and Dad didn't tell me. It doesn't make me depressed... it is just the truth... death happens to people... even patients of the revered Dr. Alivizatos. It didn't help me... my waist measures 31 1/2.

Sept 25, 1983... I called Jon utilizing the teleconnect service and we had a nice 1/2 hour conversation. He once again urged me to come out before Christmas, saying he was unsure of his stay at his current apt. and the rainy season begins in Nov.-March. I seem to grapple with the idea of flying there; I somehow hate to retain a relationship which seemingly has no future. I couldn't see myself living in Ca.

with my current situation. It's always been difficult for me to visit Jon when I haven't seen him in awhile. Something always holds me back.

Sept 26, 1983... Dad called the Metabolic Treatment Cntr. in Chicago. A foreign accented woman referred Dad to an affiliated cntr in Cicero, IL. From there he called the Cancer Society in Davenport only to be referred to an 800 number in New York. He dialed this number explaining the situation at Johns Hopkins. (They called Fri. A.M. I have the wrong type of cancer for their treatment). The Metabolic people are not doctors and their claims cannot be substantiated. She combined Alivizatos in the same category. Mayo was right in their answers. Chemo... a treatment... not a cure. Dad called the Clinic in Cicero. They had moved! The main office didn't know that! What a fake! They use a tape with a man's soothing voice to sell an empty cure. A discussion broke out between the 3 of us at home. It endured for the better part of 2 hours. What scared me was the fact that Norm was pushing the chemo option. I guess my desire to live or to just grasp each day isn't that desperate.

The Dark Pool

I am
That stagnant pool
Of life
Around which
A vibrant world
Revolves.
I watch
As friends
Are initiated
Into the expanse
Of change
Termed reality.
I stay
Imprisoned by webs
That do not break
Shaded by leaves
That never fall.
I wait
Aware of the options;
To grasp madly
A tattered shred
Of existence,
Or preserve all dignity for
The final breath.

Lauren Isaacson
September of 1983

Sept 28, 1983... Made reservations to go and see Jon. . . rates are unbeatable at \$329 round-trip fare from Moline to Frisco... regularly \$600

Sept 29, 1983... Drove to Dubuque in my parent's Citation...got sick after lunch at the Ryan House. . . nausea endured a better part of the afternoon. Didn't go with Sharon and Galen to the church potluck. ...ate an English muffin and 2 eggs... nausea again... normal around 9 P.M.

Oct. 2, 1983... Made waffles for Norm and me... did dishes... cancelled KFC plans as the day became too warm for me. Jon called; I was bummed out for some reason. I felt like crying. I was thinking about the years (a couple years ago) and how one takes feeling good for granted. Then when Jon called, I remembered how soon I would be going to Frisco. I wasn't emotionally prepared to go so soon. I was flooded by seemingly small fears, yet to me, the fears are so real they become monsters. I was scared about sweating for 3 hrs. on the plane, having to go to the bathroom, getting tired, sick, etc. I want to make my trip as easy as possible, so I'm not taking a suitcase... just a couple of flight bags. It bothers me that I'll be waiting a maximum of 7 hrs. for Jon in the Frisco airport. I don't particularly relish that idea. I'll probably be fine, however, I'm haunted by all of these fears beforehand.

Oct. 4, 1983... I've been nervous for about 3 days now. I keep thinking the plane's going to crash or something will happen so I'll never be home again. I guess that says where I'm most comfortable. Everything I eat sits in my stomach like so much lead.

I hemmed my black Lee jeans and my \$15 Gitano jeans, packed one flight bag with clothes and one more with my camera, magazine, book and such... to take on board with me. Mom and Dad took me to Bishops for dinner... a so-long affair... washed my hair. I wish I felt better about going. Les sent me a card. I thought it was a so-long and have a good trip one, but it was a regular card with \$50. I was shocked! I called him and thanked him. Well, it's goodnite for now. I hope my bad feelings are unfounded! I don't exactly want to die in a plane crash. What a long way down. (ugh)

Oct. 5, 1983... The day began for me at 4:45 A.M. I figured I'd allow ample time for my face to emerge and get a quick bite to eat, but I figured wrong. I departed in a flurry at 5:45 without having eaten. Dad drove unusually slow, or so it seemed. We got to the airport with sufficient time for me to go to the bathroom and then some. We weren't rushed in the least. Les came too, but I was too nervous to really talk and feel "civil."

On board at 6:30 I was seated by the window in an MVA plane. I spoke with a man with a complete beard and moustache en route. He asked for my phone number. I hesitatingly replied that I had no pen or paper but that my parents were in the phone book. "I really hope he won't call... what would I need with a date?!"

Panic stricken, once again, when I reached O'Hare, I rushed excitedly to my next gate of departure, and there spent 45 minutes of anticipation. After boarding, I endured 15 or more minutes of sheer panic due to the stuffy atmosphere of the DC 8. After take-off it cooled down quickly. . . I was quite relieved.

Breakfast proved to be good; I rested a bit. . . I was fortunately situated on the window seat, the middle seat was empty and the aisle seat occupied by a slightly corpulent and very silent businessman. (He, by the way, finished his breakfast entirely.)

Upon landing I put both my bags in a locker... the wait proved to be 6 hours. Jon came. . . he looked "real good." It was a super and balmy night. . . we walked to the Seasons restaurant. Jon treated.

Oct. 6, 1983... Things got pretty emotional for a while as we tried to sum up the situation between us. Situations change and they will never be the same again. I love Jon, but neither of us are ready for a relationship. Marriage makes all things so dreadfully black and white. My health is the foremost difficulty, as well as the miles that separate us. I sometimes don't feel capable of being a good wife, nor do I feel that I'd be able to live so far away from my family... I need the support. I felt better, nevertheless, after our discussion... at another time I had written down my thoughts concerning our relationship. (Just as one's mind cannot long remain inactive, so also will our love (for each other) change as the years progress toward eternity. If love indeed be true, change can only enhance its fullness, and this need never be feared, and must never be ignored.) This kind of love, for us, could never be.

Oct. 8, 1983... A hazy day. . . headed for Yosemite. . . had enjoyed Saratoga and a drive into the mountains the night before. . . had dinner at a place with a Scottish atmosphere. After taking pictures, hazy or no, we started back. . . bought 2 pumpkins. . . during the week days I spent my time reading... Jon did home work in the evenings... we had dinner "in," at Wendy's, at a Chinese restaurant, at Marie Calendars... I showed him how to hem his trousers. . . we carved our pumpkins. . . mine looked like Foo Man Choo. . . his looked like a mask. . . they are both neat. I took pictures of them. . .

Oct. 12, 1983... Today's the day to go home... Jon came for me at noon... we ate at McDonald's. I read a bit of this diary to him en route to the airport. As usual, it was difficult to say goodbye. I have a 2 hour wait before boarding my plane... Dad picked me up and we had a late snack at Perkin's. . . when Norm came home from his night-shift we talked til 2:00 A.M.

Oct. 22, 1983... Was amazed to realize that some of my friends feel I'm a prisoner in my own home! It is definitely not the case...

Oct. 31, 1983... Happy Halloween! After chores I went for a walk in the woods with my camera equipment. . . wish I didn't get so out of puff when I climb hills or just walk... took a nap... this is the 3rd pumpkin I've carved this year!

Nov. 2, 1983... Got ready to go to the library But No!... my bowels did not cooperate. Norm has the laughable habit of setting the gummy caps of toothpaste tubes on the sink, thereby leaving a characteristic green ring. After several days, the green rings gradually but steadily accumulate and I break down and rinse away their interesting circular design. One day, while preparing to brush my teeth, I called Norm in to observe my progressive "cap off, squeeze on brush, cap on" movement, which allowed me to replace the cap without marring the sink top. I laughed, he smiled, and the day passed with no further green rings appearing upon the sink. The following day I found 3 rings, made doubtlessly, in quick succession and accompanied by a note saying, "Old habits are difficult to overcome." I thought that was great!

Nov. 4, 1983... Upsetting is the relationship between Jon and me, for I know it will go nowhere. I feel more at ease here where I know I'll be listened to and understood. I feel as if the better part of myself simply blows past Jon in my attempt to speak or read my thoughts. He misses my meaning completely. I couldn't take living in an atmosphere where talking proved only to be a one-way message, never to be received and merely bouncing off the walls until it eventually buried itself in its own silence.

I found a postcard that read. . . "If you love something... set it free. If it comes back... it is yours. If it doesn't... it never was." I never sent the card.

Nov. 7, 1983... I had an odd sensation while drying the supper dishes. Perhaps "disturbing" would better describe my fleeting emotion, for I experienced a strongly chaotic urge to impale myself with a steak knife while drying it. The feeling was so brief, yet so very intense, that I almost wonder why reflex action alone did not carry through with the brain's message. Self-preservation reigns first and foremost, perhaps, even within the most morbid thoughts.

Nov. 9, 1983... The folks went to bed half-cocked at me this evening. Mom started up the endless preaching on the irrevocable horrors of alcohol and drugs, leaving one to stand alone in a flurry of statistics and evil stories. This led to the adolescent eccentricities and peer pressure and curfew and all the topics on which they hold themselves as authorities. "I never had to break away when I was a kid. . . never." Well, he (Dad) was given slack and choices and he chose abstinence and church. OK. So What? But he still can't, nor can she... understand the grip they held, and always will hold; that "I told you so" dangling over your head when the party didn't live up to your expectations. . . the solid 12:00 curfew, at which time the pumpkin would explode if one wasn't home, let alone the knowledge that you weren't doing anything BAD anyway, nor would you if you stayed out 'til 4:00 A.M. Lack of trust or what? The inability to make one's own decisions can be a painful blow to one who knows he's capable of making competent decisions. A little less questioning, a little more room to breathe, that's all. Perhaps I became so tense tonight because I sometimes feel the walls closing in on me now... the way it had during those painful times in high school. I feel no longer I'm in control... I've somehow relapsed into mommy's and daddy's little Laurie Annie. Sometimes I need backing... when I freak out or feel sick... but I'm supposed to be a woman. I can vote. I can drink in my own state. Very Big Deal. And a lot of good it does me now. Rationalization: Good thing I had the ability to have fun with and around liquor before the bomb broke. It was fun, but I liked life fine without it, too. It's no integral part of existence, but it has it's place. I only wish they would understand that. At least I can write without being reproached. When this is read, I won't be around to counter attack.

Nov. 16, 1983... A guy called asking about Greece. His sister has cancer. . . much of her face was removed, as well as other lymph nodes near the neck; also one breast was removed. She "eats" through a tube in her nose. Boy, have I ever got it good. I'd kill myself before resorting to that sort of butchery. I told the guy straight truths as I knew them; I didn't feel the treatment worked for me, but others would bet money it helped them. I advised to really consider before going, as it was a difficult trip for even those of hearty stock.

Nov 17, 1983... I ate breakfast and shoved off around 8:30 for Dubuque. It was a beautiful drive due to the mist-shrouded lowlands and the frost which lay over all things, both alive and inanimate. I saw a particularly picturesque scene, complete with grazing horses amongst the white grass, so I determined to pull off the highway and retrace the road to the best point. I had snapped two photos when a highway patrol pulled over across the road from me. I felt certain that I would defy my potty-training for a moment. "Is that your red car parked up there?" to which I answered "Yes" and a hasty, "Is it OK to be here?" He had thought perhaps I had engine trouble and he was going to help. I thanked him and he replied that I could take as many pictures as I wanted. I have a deep fear of cops which has no real basis, especially of late; I don't break the law by speeding. Rest-at Sharon's. . . attended a weaving open-house.

Nov. 18, 1983... Sharon and I drove to Mt. Horeb after breakfasting at "Spikas." Again there was heavy fog and Sharon pulled on the headlights; I made a mental note of her action to avoid leaving the lights on for the length of our spree. Unfortunately, I misplaced the mental note, and the lights were grinning at us upon our return an hour or so later. The engine was "deader" than a frozen road apple; luckily we'd parked along side of a gas station and the attendant promptly "jumped" us (or rather, the engine). It cost 2 bucks. Big deal. Sharon drove back after our rather short spree... I'd hastily gotten sick after drinking some tea. I left for home around 3:00. . . experienced fair amount of diarrhea once home... oh well ... we ate at Bishops for supper... it's Friday, after all.

Dec. 21, 1983... I talked with Mom for a good amount of time. . . I asked if she believed that I wished cancer on myself. . . I was past my depression when I once again found out the bad news; moreover, my depression subsided after some changes were made in my life. . . quitting Sears and dropping a class I didn't like... anorexic tendencies had dwindled as I made those changes.

Then I asked if she believed that one could cure ones self through the desire to beat the disease. Question 1: Why would a person who didn't want a disease, contract one? Question 2: Why wouldn't it work for every one? Or would one have to believe. . ."know." . . that he would be cured if he simply believed in such a thing? It helps to talk of such issues, for at times I do become confused. I feel instead that I have resigned myself to my problem realistically... I don't care for rainbow chasing. . . it's a long drive down the alley of blind hope. I prefer not living in the shadows.

Dec. 26, 1983... Although it was not easy to attain, I remember feeling once that I had my life by the reins. I could do anything, because I felt I had control of myself. If I failed at one thing, no matter. . . I could do something else and succeed. Now I feel trampled beneath that stallion of life whose reins I so confidently held; I have no control. Even my emotions, which before I prided myself in keeping so carefully concealed, crash from my grip. Jon, too, is no longer in my grasp. He has grown more confident and self-assured, and I like what I see... but I feel as if he's no longer in my league... as if I'm trying to love a diamond when I know full well that I can afford only glass. It's never easy to lose status. I've lost so much that only a miracle of nature could allow me to recover my low self-worth. Jon deserves so much, and he has "the right stuff."

I feel so much better seeing him at home. I look as good as I can hope to look because I am able to get the rest I need. I felt like a shadow of myself in San Jose. . . a wound-up toy that kept walking even after the tension wore down.

Dec. 29, 1983... It's funny... Jon and I shared so much, yet somehow, nothing ever came of it. Perhaps the sorrow I feel is partially due to the knowledge that nothing can possibly come of it given the current situations. It's difficult to let go of the only lengthy and worthwhile relationship I've ever had, knowing full well that it's the last. I will never be in the situation to date... it's an added tension that I probably do not need, nor would I have the opportunity to experience. It would be like buying bald tires for your new car... I'm "spent."

I feel that all I can do is to enjoy the time I can spend with Jon taking one day at a time in the same way I live each day as it presents itself. I can expect nothing, for to do so only makes shattered expectations all the more trying.

Jan. 4, 1984... It's rather entertaining business, this autobiography; it's fun to be able to sit back and remember the ways in which you saw the world as a child. Truthfully, my mind still thinks the way it did then. I've merely learned more, gained objectivity... but I'm essentially the same. Perhaps one changes more than he thinks, however, it could be that, so gradual is the widening of that perception, one is not really aware of the changes amassed in his brain. Nevertheless, I'm enjoying my writing, trying to include all material which is of marked consequence.

Jan. 5, 1984... Today was rather a wasted day in that I was unable to venture downtown due to the frequently repeated trips to the bathroom. However, I did listen to the subliminal tape which Norm gave me for Xmas. It is composed of seashore sounds and is relaxing. My tape is entitled "Phsyconeuroimmunology...Beneficial Influence of the Mind on Health," which was described as being helpful with regard to the immune system. Maybe it'll get rid of my "Big C"! That's a long shot but one can't just roll up the carpets and close shop. At any rate, it's cheaper than Greece and couldn't hurt. I'll just have to be wary of any cravings... if I suddenly get the indispensable urge to drink only coke, perhaps the input is an advertisement Ha!

I can never quite go along with the idea that one gives oneself diseases. At 13, I didn't know what

cancer was, death via a serious illness was the farthest thing from my mind, much less my desire. I believe the reason I can... at times... accept my plight now is that 1. I've had it before. 2. I never really quite accepted the diagnosis that I was "cured." 3. I've been sick to my stomach for years following my first operation. . . I was never leading a "normal" life. 4. I've always felt "doomed" to a degree. 5. I've tried chemo and it didn't work; since I hold American doctors in high esteem, I am not as readily accepting of other country's "cures," especially if there are no facts to back up their claims. 6. I cannot live from one "cure" hope to the next. Disappointments become unbearable if that is all one ever encounters.

I can't believe that I would want what I have, given all of the suffering that I've endured. Sometimes I wish it could all end, either by my recovery or my death. Living half-way becomes difficult when one's prospects are bleak. If only I could be healthy... feel healthy... the things I'd want to do!!!

Jan. 12, 1984... I stopped at "Rags to Riches" and inquired whether they bought clothes which were second-hand, since it was a second-hand clothing shop. (So intelligent a question, no?!) She informed me they work on consignment. I have 16 prs. of pants that I intend to bring in. It is rather difficult to let go of those pants. I guess somewhere in my head, I hoped that I'd be cured and be able to fit them again. But the chances of that are slim. My body doesn't seem to be able to "get on" the road to recovery. I'd be exceptionally healthy if I wasn't such a physical wreck.

Jan. 15, 1984... I made breakfast for Norm and me... then we went to Wild Cat Den... we took a good hike back into the park... it was snowy so wore Mom's high boots. I really did well, I thought; I felt good. Going up the steep grades presented a bit of a problem, but otherwise it went better than I had thought. (Maybe the tape's working.)

My slides are good! For my first attempt at still-life, I'd say I really did well.

Jan. 22, 1984... I made breakfast for Norm and me, then after doing dishes together, I got my camera equipment and we took off for Loud Thunder, around to Muscatine, and back to Credit Island. I used my sunset and graduated filters. We had lunch at Hardee's. Les came for supper. Mom had a roast. After everyone was in bed, Norm decided to cook up that brown macaroni that I'd bought last year while on the Alivizatos diet. I'd never gotten up the nerve to cook it before. . . curiosity got the best of Norm. He put cheese in it to help the flavor, but actually the stuff wasn't too bad. It was more grainy because it was never processed. We watched "Funny Girl" on the late show but gave it up. It wouldn't end 'til 2:00 A.M.

PAGE 276

Chapter 37 Zenith of Grief

"I didn't associate God with loneliness; the two were separate, and to bond them would have been inconceivable. God did not forsake me. I am part of Nature. . .this is natural, as is my grief."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

I am beginning this new journal several pages before the old one expired! Perhaps this is because it is rather a new beginning for me. One must bridge countless mountains throughout his existence, and some of those mountains are much more difficult to climb than others. It has not yet hit me fully that Norm is dead, and this will be the hardest truth I will ever bear. It is through the selfish nature of human beings that we suffer and mourn over a drastic loss, for the deceased is no longer subjected to the routine pangs of life itself. I derive comfort from the knowledge that Norm led the type of life he desired, for so many individuals spend time involved in relationships they despise, or in jobs they abhor. Norm didn't worry about attaining what so many casually label "success," that being a career that "looks" right. Success is having established a set of values and living by them; realizing time is precious and therefore shouldn't be wasted on petty grievances and concerns. Moreover, a life having quality is a life which is peaceful. Norm led a quiet life, spending many waking hours doing that which pleased him. He was not selfish; one must please himself before he can expect to treat others civilly. He was easy to be with, and would let you be... he wasn't out to force his opinions and desires on others.

I feel terrible now, but I know that my life was touched by a very special person. For that I shall always feel grateful. It is better to have had a beautiful relationship and have it end, than to never have experienced it at all. Norm was my mainstay in life. When things felt as if they were falling apart, it was always to him that I would turn. He was my companion and my best friend. We could share so much because we shared the same thought process. Seldom does a person feel completely at ease with another, and yet with Norm I was. Conversation wasn't necessary, but it was one of the finer parts of our relationship because we so well understood each other.

My life will never be the same without Norm; of all people, I feel it will be the hardest to be without him. My thoughts are so displaced. I feel dead. He is at peace now, or at least I choose to think so. One never knows of the after life until he himself has expired. Superstition and blind hope forced me to pray that he would live and be normal. To be comatose or paralyzed would be worse than death. It's funny; he felt so strongly that his purpose in living had not yet been fulfilled, and he had a zest for life to one day find that which would (in his mind) fill that commitment to life. I once again found that my beliefs were true; prayer does not help those things over which we have no control. It is a formal way of hoping.

Strange as it may sound to individuals who cling so desperately to life that they will torture themselves for one more breath, I wish I could have died before anyone else in my family. That, you see, is a coward's way out of mental duress. This is by far the worst blow ever driven into me; if one was to sum up the worst possible occurrence to give to me, fate couldn't have picked a riper apple. It's not that I don't care for others. . . but Norm was special to me.

I also hate to see Mom and Dad so terribly wracked with pain. Not one child has been left unscathed by bad luck, while some families live a storybook life or screw up their lives out of their own stupidity. There is no such thing as justice in life. There is no equality or fairness. It is a fragile world, and so many seem bent on self-destruction while Norm simply wanted to live in harmony.

Only yesterday I was lamenting my inability to do things alone. I'm scared to go on walks, etc. . . especially now that I feel at a rather low ebb physically. Now I must do things on my own or not do them at all. And it's not the doing, but the mutuality of sharing a joke, a glance, or idle conversation. He won't be there, and he will be so horribly missed. I hope you have found your ultimate peace, Norm.

I woke up this morning to the sound of harsh, uneven gasps of breath. I thought Norm was having a bad dream, so I hurried to his room, only to find him on the floor; his chest and waist were along his bed and his legs were tangled in the bedsheets. I shook him and yelled his name, but no response was made. After several sputtered expirations of air, he seemed to attain an unearthly calm. I suddenly thought, "this may not be just a bad dream." . . he wouldn't wake up. I ran downstairs at 6:20 A.M. and told Mom... she woke Dad and they went upstairs. He still was the same and I dashed for the phone and dialed 911 . . . they were here in five minutes. I kept flicking the yard light as they approached our house. . . a crew of two paramedics and later two policemen. All the while before they arrived, Mom and Dad were administering CPR... they took him out on a stretcher, still in the same state. I believe that I witnessed his last breath. I lost my touchstone.

Dad kept saying, "can you believe this?" I was shaking violently, still in my nightgown. I felt as if my bowels wouldn't hold. Mom was so worried about covering him up as they left the house; he wore only his bottom half of his sweats. His arms were dangling over the side of the stretcher as he was carried through the doorway... the paramedic told Mom not to worry, that the main thing was to get him to the

hospital.

As I was dressing I felt disgust within myself at my concern to put on my make-up. Why should I care what I look like? We were taken to a small room to wait, it was cooler. I had to use the bathroom. A woman was there with us most of the time. . . to console us or help in case we "went off the deep end."

I still hoped that with the technically high developments, they would revive him. They worked and worked; Dr. Murrell said it was very bad. Later he came in again and said that he was gone. I was thinking that I'd be asking him how it felt to be gone and then revived. What passed through his mind? I never got the chance. I wonder if Norm knew I was trying to wake him. Perhaps that which comes after earthly existence was so sweet that he chose not living. Maybe it's that good. I hope so. For Norm.

I felt as if I had been reduced to a pulp after a calamitous beating, yet I could walk, talk and seemed to answer in a relatively normal fashion. My insides felt like so much lead; I felt dead, bereft of all poignant senses. Weak-kneed, we headed toward the parking lot, leaving Norm's body on the operating table. There would be an autopsy. . . none of us wished to see him again before they removed his corneas. I didn't want a blue-lipped memory of Norm, color had drained from his lips while he was at home.

Mom and Dad had to begin making arrangements for his cremation and his memorial service. I chose to remain at home and alone in the house. I promptly sat down and wrote page after page of my feelings, needing to express myself with a certain degree of permanence afforded by written words. It was as if I felt panic stricken that I might forget a facet of Norm if I didn't capture everything now. Finally, exhausted, I decided to go upstairs. Hesitant to relive the mornings events, I climbed the stairs and looked about. It seemed so empty, so utterly lifeless. . . the sun was obscured by gray clouds which multiplied the lonely effect. Had Norm been alive, the place would have simply been a room. Now it took on a character of its own, as if a bloodless ghost sought to haunt my mind with idiotic schemes. Reality hits hardest when loneliness sets in. I didn't associate God with loneliness; the two were separate, and to bond them would have been inconceivable. God did not forsake me. I am part of Nature... this is natural, as is my grief.

I began to straighten the furniture which had been hurriedly displaced to facilitate a wider exit with the stretcher. Looking at the tangled mass of bedsheets sprawling about the floor, I determined to change the bedding, and thus save Mom some of the stress. I felt like a mechanical man, functioning precisely as I'd done countless times before; doing menial tasks brought no comfort. . . it only helped to pass the day.

My thoughts raced... I began to fantasize... would they think I was guilty... would I be suspect as in a murder case... when they said he was gone, I had felt relief, for I knew he had been without oxygen far too long. I thought about his corneas given to Iowa City... how would he see... how ridiculous to think that...I thought about how safe I had always been with Norm as my "guard" . . . now he was gone . . . the daily excursions, the trips to Amana, Wild Cat Den, Loud Thunder, Davenport, Credit Island, the boat races, sailing on the Mississippi, even the winter picnics... all over now.

Norm was an ultra-sensitive person, not only self-sensitive, but caring for others. He had an acute awareness with regard to feelings, and seemed to know when to simply let be. It was a quality that few possess. . . a quality that few understand. It was this quality that made Norm so easy to be around. He didn't demand the full capacity of one's attention; he was personable and low-key; he allowed one to relax.

Every facet of his life mirrored his goal of inner serenity. He often spent time alone, walking for miles to attain physical and mental calm. Meditation was also becoming a valued discipline in his daily routine.

I am glad that I was given the opportunity to develop such a close relationship with Norm through the passage of time in which I was growing into the person I am now. He played an integral part in my life, and I feel somehow linked to him in an undefinable bond. Our sharing and understanding for one another spanned the seemingly trivial nature of a common joke to the mind-searching questions for which there are no answers. To say that he could be replaced is mere folly. Only once in a lifetime can one share so much. I am fortunate to possess the memories; I only regret having to end the making of memories so soon. We were two loners with a common bond. Now I am one loner, alone.

Jan. 24, 1984... I am fatigued... it took two hours to fall asleep. I was thinking, and I was scared that I'd have awful nightmares. I kept seeing him lying on the floor, and I was at first so certain that he was only having a nightmare. We could've had a stroke of luck like that...I woke at 6:20 A.M., the time that yesterday morning I awoke so lightening fast to the sound of uneven breathing. I went to the bathroom,

then lay in bed until 8:00. I didn't seem to have much use for sleep.

So many people have come today with food and the plants are also numerable. Janet sent me a red rose, shortly afterward she appeared in person. Kristi even called from Cedar Rapids. So many care.

Todd, Debbie and Sharon arrived near noon, before that time, I'd tried on Norm's shirts and discovered they looked better than many of my own. I will be keeping the newer or nicer ones. It's a comfort to have his things near me. I changed the sheets on my bed because Sharon will be in my room throughout the duration of the week.

The radio-tape player that Norm ordered arrived today (UPS). I felt so sorry for the delivery man. He knew Norm. Todd called the doctor who performed the autopsy on Norm. He said death was caused by a left coronary occlusion, which is a heart attack via a blood clot. Because of the location. . . the upper left side of the heart. . . death occurs suddenly. Even if he had had a check-up it was not felt that the problem would have been readily identifiable. It was also something that would have been fatal if he'd been in the hospital at the time it occurred. Death is final within one or two minutes of the initial attack. This was most likely a gradual situation which would not be apparent to the afflicted individual. Every indication is masked, so gradual is the effect. Norm's organs were said to be over the normal weight due to amassed blood; the heart was not pumping efficiently enough to flush out the blood and therefore it clung to the tissues of the various organs.

I felt so relieved that an actual cause was found. I kept thinking rather accusingly of the Agoraphobia tapes. I also wondered if he'd had a dream in which he died, and then as a reaction to subconscious thought, the body began the death process. It's always been horrid for me to remain without the facts. I derive a sense of satisfaction from knowing the truth, or at least the truth as best one knows it to be.

I feel, at last, that I have attained a certain degree of peacefulness. Norm was and always will be a part of me, so great was our degree of sharing and mutuality. His companionship is gone forever, and yet the feeling of oneness shall endure through time and into the furthest reaches of eternity. Our being of opposing sexes enhanced the relationship. I lived for Norm and to be with him. In myself, I see him. My actions. . . my thoughts. . . are not manifestations of togetherness, but rather a singular uniqueness shared by us/we two.

Jan. 25, 1984... I carried the inner peace with me for the entirety of the day. After breakfast I fed the bird, and then shut myself up in my old bedroom to write Norm's eulogy. I had written approximately half of it when Rev. Hess came. He's a good guy, and easy to talk to. He's the first minister I've ever encountered who admitted that religion is a personal thing with some people, and that one can accept other's viewpoints without compromising his own beliefs or criticizing conflicting views. I read aloud the parts of my writing which I had completed. He will read my final copy on Saturday. I elected not to do so for dual reasons: I am nervous in front of crowds, under the circumstances, the nervousness would be worse.

After lunch, Steve and I went to Wild Cat Den. There was a fresh cool breeze blowing. I missed Norm, yet memories were sweet. It was good to get out of the house and into the wind. We dropped off my film and mailed my photo entry.

Jan. 26, 1984... I think that too little time spent alone is taking its toll. I went upstairs and I listened to my tape and another album; then I dug out the note which Norm wrote me when I was in Greece.

Jan. 27, 1984... So well do I recall the day in which we rode in black limousines to the cemetery. It seemed to me a ghastly promenade in the midst of such grand January weather; I felt myself to be an actor in some morbid sideshow in which I was to don my most lamentable countenance so as to better give casual onlookers the expected performance. Instead, I chose to focus my eyes upon my knees, where they remained riveted until we motored into the graveyard in our stately, yet somber vehicle.

Everything within me screamed and rebelled when we once again were instructed to issue into our allotted seat for the return trip. The entire essence of the black limousines seemed to me a gruesome ritual of bygone ages. My sorrow was not an emotion which I desired to splash among the city streets with an air of pomp and circumstance; it was grief as personal and private as those thoughts I shared exclusively with Norm and my ever-true notebook. To ride thus seemed to make a mockery of that which was actually taking place, becoming an event rather than the tribute to a deceased and beloved individual.

"God needed Norm in heaven with him," was a phrase spoken to attempt to comfort us. Some try to

see a purpose in all things. . . a way to make them less hurtful. Others view death as the ultimate "bad thing" yet need to justify God's love by saying that "it was all for the best." Then there are those who say, "God gives you pain because He knows you will grow stronger." Boy, that makes me want to run to a church and shout "Praise the Lord!"

It is difficult to know what to say to someone who has suffered a loss. It is painful enough to visit, to witness the anguish. It is more difficult to bring comforting and meaningful words to the grief-stricken. Can one praise God for His kindness and love when the situation is nothing but grim and senseless? Statements must also be chosen that do not somehow suggest the mourner is to blame, that had he done something differently, the outcome would have been altogether reversed. Awareness of ones self and others helps immeasurably during a confrontation with adversity, for among the numerous reactions to a given situation, mutual respect is of foremost importance. Everyone reacts differently.

I hope Norm has found peace. He certainly deserves a sojourn of tranquility. His tapes of Meditation and ESP came today in the mail. Mom and Dad have received 120 cards so far! It's unbelievable how many are concerned and respond.

Jan. 28, 1984... It was rather a madhouse today, as a carload of relatives popped in unexpectedly near lunch time. I escaped to my upstairs room before it was time to go to the Memorial Service. I couldn't bear the commotion on the main floor. The limousine once again brought us to the church. It was hard to remain composed as I walked into the church and found my way to the parlor. I brushed my hair in a nearby restroom and then returned to wait for the service to begin. I was scared for what the service might be, my only knowledge of memorials being the bleak hopelessness so common to funerals.

Rev. Hess delivered the formalities in a manner far from depressing. He read several scriptures including the congregation in one; there were three hymns also sung with the congregation. He read, also, the poem "Birches" by Robert Frost, and then my contribution to the service. After the service we filed out, utilizing the center aisle just as we had entered the sanctuary.

We formed a receiving line to greet those who were at the service. It was unbelievable to see the multitude of people who came to pay their respects to Norm and the family. It seemed as if the line would never end. Mrs. Griffin (Kathy) brought me two glasses of water during the reception to keep me fairly cool. Nevertheless, I sweated profusely; by the end of the line, my hairline was soaked and I was thoroughly fatigued. It seemed that many found my writings meaningful; moreover, doing so was quite beneficial to me. Many desired a copy of it, so Rev. Hess said he would make some copies and put them in the office. I hope no one will use any part of the homily for another service; I wrote that for Norm.

Steve was good to return to the church after taking Kim Segura home. I rode to his house after the service, electing to forego the trip home in the black limousine. Once home, I went to my "old" bedroom to lay down. I couldn't actually sleep, but the rest itself did some good.

The house was crawling with relatives until after supper. Little by little the crowd gradually dispersed, leaving the comparatively small group of the Johnson's, Todd, Debbie, and Mom and Dad. I once again stayed up rather late. We needed to talk.

Jan. 29, 1984... Today in the afternoon the Waterloo threesome (Todd, Debbie and Bonnie, Debbie's mother, plus the canine, Bandit) were the first to depart. Todd drove my little red Swinger; I hope he will keep it looking nice. I must simply let go and guard my sanity; it is not worth tearing yourself into emotional rages and tatters, however, I've never been able to rationalize having nice things if one doesn't care for them. Sharon seemed to need to stay a while longer. She was upset over so many concerns accompanying a loss of such consequence. I hope she will be able to find peace within herself. Perhaps it is easier to do so in her own home.

Nights always bring out the spooks which I conjure up inside my brain. I decided to lightly illuminate Norm's room to allow the shadows to disappear. We also decided to leave the door to the upstairs open; I'm frightened of noises sounding like gasps or snorts of air, as they remind me of the way in which I was alerted to Norm's predicament. I'm not afraid of his spirit, but rather of the nightmares which might evolve from the trauma of finding Norm and the inability to help.

Jan. 30, 1984... In the afternoon I ventured outside and mailed a few thank you letters. It had snowed about 6 inches last night and I woke up to a beautiful landscape. I walked down below the house a ways, not going into the woods because I have difficulty climbing back up even in the summer. The new snow left a track which could easily be followed, leading me to think that an individual could never truly be alone when traversing a snow laden landscape; he could easily be detected even if solitude was

what he sought. Once inside, I attempted to write a poem about my thoughts, beginning with this.

A solitary foot path...

Solitary Footprints

A solitary foot path
Upon the fallen snow
Betrays the quiet secret
Of whither I might go.
Through spring's bouquet
His footsteps passed,
And summer's veil of green.
He watched the autumn leaves
Sail down
And winter skies
Shed cloaks of white.
His path, each day,
The snow betrayed
While strolling through
The woodland brush,
A hoard of prints
Which marked a man
Whose spirit melded
With the land.
Taken in the grasp of night,
The man no more
Will trod the snow.
I searched by day
To find his path,
So quickly did he steal away.
But nature masked
His many tracks,
As winter oft will do,
And I remain
To softly ponder
Whither he has gone.
The steadfast essence of the man
I carry in my soul,
But mine shall be the only prints
Upon the winter snow.

Lauren Isaacson
January 30, 1984

"Why was it so necessary to nail down as truths those aspects of life which had no answers?"

". . . I did not even touch the vastness of Being and even less the essence of nonexistence."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

My Personal Belief

If through the very mysteriousness of life one is able to grasp a sustaining faith, perhaps this alone is proof of an undeniable presence in the heavens. I am humbled by knowledge, and simply through that which I shall not understand, I have developed the belief that existence on earth is only a mere wisp of that existence which shall follow one's death. That I do not know what will occur after death does not worry me; at best, I hope for a unity with an all-encompassing entity, yet I would not reject the thought of eternal rest. What peace I have comes through hope and limitless possibilities; it does not rest in an established faith. If there was ever a working force to sway my personal beliefs toward a more assured stance with respect to an eternal life, it was after the death of my brother. I was the only one present at the moment of his death, and his long expiration was followed only by peacefulness. His face was that of a young man at rest. There was nothing to fear in that silent face, and my grief was only for myself.

Two days passed, filled with anguish, when a quiet peace settled in my chest and I realized that he never really left my inner being. In me he lived on.

Following weeks and months brought dreams of Norm, some of which were given the quality of messages rather than mere conjurings of my own mind. Thoughts never before conceived in my conscious mind appeared in my dreams concerning after life; also within my dreams were those subjects about which Norm had dreamed. It was as if he was living through me; in my actions, I saw through his eyes.

Many people think of death as the worst occurrence which they shall have to bear, especially when their lives have been relatively without pain. Death is no menace to me in itself; the unpleasantness of ill health or the grief of losing a loved one is that which, for me, evokes the wary anticipation associated with death.

Given the basis of Christianity, it seems amazing to me that some of its followers so desperately fight death. They believe in a life everlasting, where in heaven they shall reside, cleansed of sin, forever with God. Yet despite this promising array of unearthly splendor, they seek to prolong life with vigor rather than celebrate their nearing death. If indeed, they are so certain of heavenly bliss, there should be no need for fear and death should be more valued than life.

I do not truly consider myself to be of one established faith for I detest labels, as it immediately implies their inherent limitations. Moreover, my religion is a very personal thing, not bound to a certain mode of thought; labeling would only provoke attention... some of which is difficult to manage.

I recall several conversations centering on religion in which each of my questions was countered with a quote from the Bible. I soon felt as if I was talking with a programmed robot rather than an intelligent, capable human being. They all seemed bereft of opinion. "But what do YOU think?" I'd ask, agitated. "It says in the Bible that..." I knew it was futile to continue. They had been robbed by their own church denomination; it seemed to me a terrible injustice.

I am unable to accept the Bible as the whole truth, for I feel existence and its counterpart cannot so easily be explained. While there are those who profess to believe wholly and completely, I think certain individuals find it easier to accept their religion's creeds as truths to avoid the unanswerable questions brooding deep within their minds. This one problem of life is solved. Perhaps, also, some individuals are fearful of fostering doubt toward God and salvation, lest they be turned away on judgment day. To these people, thought is sinful; yet I believe one is given an exquisite mind with which to reason and evaluate stimuli; it is a natural function to be inquisitive.

It always bothered me when people would state as a fact that which was only faith. Why was it so necessary for them to nail down as truths those aspects of life which had no answers? Despite my thirst for knowledge, I reveled in the endless possibilities, knowing that I did not even touch the vastness of Being, and even less the essence of nonexistence. Since either belief or disbelief toward a given thought could be one day proven entirely wrong, I found no malignancy in uncertainty.

I do not feel that living a "good life" should call for a reward in after life; an indestructive and morally objective existence should be a reward in itself and should not need the impetus of a reward to live righteously, for that implies one would live in a lesser degree of goodliness if he was certain no reward would come in a later form of being.

The thought of reincarnation into another earthly being after one's death is, for me, an unpleasant thought. I look upon each being as an individual which is part of an ultimate whole, and in that belief, reincarnation has no part. The only indication which could be attributed to reincarnation are those instances when a person speaks in a foreign tongue and laments an historic occurrence; the spirit of another speaking through a living person. To a lesser degree, there is the inexplicable, yet common feeling of de ja vu. If a person has never been in a place before, how could he feel that he has seen it in another point in time? As mysterious as these happenings are, I would rather think of them as earthly contacts made by uneasy or tormented spirits, rather than any sign of reincarnation. Then I would hope that there is nothing but rest after death, although the reality of this wish certainly is not augmented by tales told of those who have, so to speak, departed and then have later been revived. I would be quite annoyed if, after lapsing into a serene dreamland, I wake, only to find myself deposited on earth in the form of an infant, destined to bridge the tide of humanity once again...

PAGE 286

Chapter 39 Reminiscence

"What man thinks of as solid "truths" could be obliterated once one has passed from worldly existence . . . "

"one's beliefs, once established, remain a cane to lean upon throughout those times of uncertainty and change."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Reminiscence

I was reflecting how some people lump together instances which, personally, I feel are complete opposites. Case in point; the dissimilarity, in my opinion between telling a person he has a piece of cake on his chin and telling someone he has a pimple on his forehead. I would be grateful to the person who would say, with discretion, that food had somehow missed my mouth and had adhered to the skin surrounding my mouth. There is nothing more degrading than to have had a lovely luncheon, followed

by a shopping spree, only to discover upon looking in the mirror at 5:30 p.m. that you'd been carrying a splotch of cake on your face for the better part of the day. In the event that someone announces that you have a blemish on your face, however, I feel nothing short of mild revulsion toward that individual for augmenting an embarrassment which you've already acknowledged to yourself upon awakening. Chances are that you are fully aware of the exact longitude and latitude of the facial offender which so hatefully appeared on your face. I simply feel that comments of that nature are unnecessary because there is absolutely nothing you can do except to hope it exits as rapidly as it made its debut. Unlike the piece of cake which can be whisked away after its detection, the blemish remains until full maturity and disappears only when it is quite prepared to do so! Thus ends my dissertation on facial concerns.

Much of the fear that I now perceive deals with the question of where I would go should I outlive Mom and Dad. I feel so utterly dependant upon them, especially given the condition of my health and my inability to earn a living of my own. I had depended on Norm in the event I should have more years of life than my parents; we had said we could live together, and my worries were somewhat allayed. I hope I will die before them, although I realize this would hurt them deeply. Hidden inside me is, perhaps, a coward which seeks the road of least resistance. Given my past degree of luck, however, I'm sure that my wishes will not come true. One must take those things in life which are difficult to endure and attempt to grow with each new development. Life seems unable to be a "no load" experience; perhaps it is impossible to think that the sunshine and the rain maintain equal balance.

Feb. 2, 1984... It was good to drive Norm's Chevette today. It seemed the barrier was broken and I was comforted; also to know that I could get out, that I could drive the car with competence and at the same time, I could feel close to Norm. It's easier to shift than Dad's Chevy truck.

Feb.7, 1984... Some of the reason I felt so bad that awful Monday and Tuesday was the feeling that it should've been me. It was as if an angel came to retrieve a soul at 5440 and got the wrong room. Everyone was expecting me to die, and it would have been a lot easier...

Feb. 11, 1984... It began to storm around 12:30 while I was still down-stairs. I've never experienced such a loud and brilliant display of nature's fireworks at such an unlikely time of the year. Upon hearing the noise, I elected to turn off the T.V.in favor of listening to and observing the lightning. It was quite intense for a brief period of ten minutes or thereabouts. I wish it would continue to storm throughout the passage of the night. . . it would effectively break the monotony of sleep.

Feb. 12, 1984... Sunday's just aren't the same... it was a gray and misty day, temperature of 52. I guess the committee at Church went to the Bishop to obtain a replacement for Rev. Hess. I'll miss him...he was the only minister with whom I felt at ease to express my true feelings. With others, I was backed up against a wall. I must believe as they did. . .if God knowingly created man as imperfect beings which had to attain greater knowledge through experience, how could He simultaneously punish them for eternity simply because they doubted His existence or some of His principles? It would, in my opinion, be folly for Him to place such a temptation as Knowledge (the apple) within man's perception and then command him to shun it at all costs; an all-knowing Being, God would have already been aware that man, yet a child in mentality, couldn't resist such a command, just as a child is unable to keep his hands in his pockets in a souvenir shop.

Man has a mind for a purpose; to think, to inquire into the unknown, to rationalize the meaning of this complex universe. If God had not wanted man to think, he would have created man as an imbecile, and would never have placed an apple tree in Eden. I feel that through questioning, one grows. No man knows of that which comes after life on earth. One can only hope for serenity; the certainty of heaven is yet a dream, to claim otherwise violates all sense of rationality. What man thinks of as solid "truths" could be obliterated once one has passed from worldly existence; perhaps "truths" could just as rapidly change through higher vision on earth. The longer I live, the more I realize that nothing is certain and binding. One can simply hold beliefs with the hope that they are at least true in part. Knowledge can undergo change as quickly as a new discovery is made which breaks a former "law" of nature; one's beliefs, once established, remain a cane to lean upon throughout those times of uncertainty and change. If those personal beliefs accommodate room for such change, one's growth is not stunted; rather, one is able to rise above the poison and find fresh air once again.

"God is my inner sense of wholeness and peace, melding me with all creation."

"God could be no less than infinitum."

CHAPTER FORTY

GOD, My View

The wealth of unanswerable mysteries which Life presents has led me to create a hoard of personal speculations as to their possible solutions. Following are those insights which I maintain as "possibilities" and those with which I heartily disagree. Included also are the possibilities with which my mind has struggled yet cannot truly "claim" as my own beliefs because of their sheer incredibility. Attempting to rationalize that which is not an "absolute" has always been one of man's delights and obsessions; my speculations have brought peace to my mind in a chaotic world. They are my own, with which I can live in harmony through all of life's crises.

When I was young, I would listen to the Bible stories and sermons and soon began conjuring an image of God in my mind; in essence, He was an old, white-haired man, seated in the clouds in a brilliant robe at a magnificent desk, holding in his large hands a mighty scroll of the names of his earthly subjects. As I learned more, and was given his personality as if it was truly a simple, well-known fact, I began to foster deep feelings of rebellion, yet I knew not the reason for my disgust.

Only years later did I realize I was not the pagan I had thought myself to be. I believed in an infinite creator, yet the problem I had with established religion and church was my antipathy toward the restrictive quality which language itself bestowed on God. To give attributes to God placed him within fathomable bounds and he could not be Everything, as I so needed to believe if I was to believe in a creator.

I think of God not as a person, or a being to whom one communicates as if to a friend, but rather as a core and ultimate unity of all creation. God is all things tangible and intangible...he is Everything. I do not worry over the question of whether God is the sender of morality among humans, for the creation itself is enough of a reason for me to justify a power which is to be awed. Injecting within an animal the capacity to love beyond himself, and mourn for more than the loss of his own life further supports my heartfelt admiration. I have never thought to blame God for wrongs and injustices because in nature all is not fair; we, as all creation, are part of a life cycle, an endless wave of being and nonexistence. God is my inner sense of wholeness and peace, melding me with all creation.

If one can accept the biblical statement, "God created man in his image," as true, then perhaps there can be other speculations drawn from that source. Since man is generally capable of growing beyond self-love, and, through life's observation and experiences, gaining wisdom; it is possible that God, also, is growing, reaching ever outward just as the universe itself is said to be expanding. As humanly inconceivable as forever seems to be, I feel God could be no less than infinitum. There is not a wall but that something exists on the other side; even within emptiness is the presence of nothing, which in itself is something!!

No one will ever know the mind of God while trapped in the vessel of human flesh... No one will know how much he controls, indeed, how much he is able to control. Perhaps he can control suffering but does not, or would control the pain but cannot. We must live with the knowledge that pain exists in the world for both the good and the heartless.

We are taught as children that if we behave we shall be amply rewarded. Eat your vegetables and you'll get a cookie. If one is an honest, diligent worker, he will gain success and honor. Religious teaching also states that the righteous will prosper. Attentively listening, many ingest these tales of fortune and assume that their earthly reward is forthcoming. However, the world cannot live up to the story-tellers "idealistic view" and we see with distress that our childhood tales had severely bent realism. A member of my church cheated on a test, unobserved, and later received an A while another

student who also neglected to study received an F. The former was not punished, nor did the latter student, who honestly failed the exam, receive acknowledgement for his honesty.

A drunken man slammed into an unsuspecting car housing a mother and two children. The drunk barely felt the impact, but the mother and one of her children simultaneously cracked the windshield. It was the third offense, and again he merely paid a fine and the damages. No one was seriously injured, yet the man was not fairly punished for inflicting undeserved wounds and mental anguish on innocent victims.

While instances like those illustrated above are numerous and quite prominent in daily life, usually destroying the bulk of one's childhood idealism, certain individuals cling to the "reward ethic" until evil befalls their lives; it's difficult to completely shirk childhood teaching, so firmly rooted in the recesses of the brain. This is why, I believe, there is a possibility for tension between ones self and his religious stance upon facing unpleasant or shattering news. "God was supposed to be my shield from evil!" followed either by the conclusion, "God is unjust," or "I must have done some great disservice to the Lord."

If I needed a reason for the existence of "evil" in life, this is the most agreeable one that I could surmise. For there to be freedom in life, there must also be choice. Choice necessitates at least two possibilities, and perhaps it is here that good and evil come into view. If God is the ultimate creator of all things, He then knew that existence would bring nonexistence, and all things would have its natural counterpart. Good without evil would allow no choice for individuality and we would be reduced into mentally-bonded puppets. Being the creator of all things would not necessitate his intervening in all life, for within his framework, nature balances itself. The most calamitous effect on the natural world is when it becomes off-balance; thus to control suffering would also place limits and restrictions on humanity's freedom. Mental freedom is better than bondage, yet for freedom one must sometimes pay a great price. God can be everything without standing above humanity as a punitive figure; though he may embrace life he does not necessarily have to control it.

When viewing "bad" occurrences in a more practical light, perhaps it could be maintained that "badness" can only be so labeled by the one who is placed under an immediate threat. Surely a mouse dangling precariously in an owl's vice-like talons would call his predicament "bad," yet the owl would find only good in the circumstances at hand, for through the mouse, he is able to sustain himself. Consequently, I feel there must be illness and old age, and ultimately death. The earth could not support its population of animal and human life if there was not the presence of death. Indeed, those of us who live today would not have lived if there was not death; birth into a flooded planet would be impossible. Thus, nature controls itself; though imperfect, it is an infinite miracle, ever growing and continuous.

Perhaps it is because I never believed in the story-book image of God often presented to me from the outset, that I did not have to grapple with the seeming contradictions which life gradually brought to my view contesting either God's undying love or a person's goodness due to the presence of suffering in the world. When God is viewed as nature itself, or at least the core of the natural world, injustice becomes less of an issue regarding the distribution of pain among societal members. Each day in the wild, countless deaths make way for new births and sustain those beings which, for the time, live on. Life is agonizing for the victim and sweet for the victor; yet the one who survives may fall prey to the hunger of a greater beast. . . and life continues.

"I have walked in the mountains and seen the beauty surrounding me.
I have heard the babble of a stream and the eerie hoot of an owl."

"I can see and hear. . . I've known what it is to feel physically normal. Some people never do."

". . . the core is intact despite the withering exterior. . . . that undefinable part of oneself that lives beyond earthly existence."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Continuum

Feb. 13, 1984... I have often thought, "If only I could make time stand still.".. when I am involved in an enjoyable day. I know that wish could not possibly occur, but if it could, it would most certainly be a selfish desire. In that same instant, perhaps another individual is struggling with overwhelming sorrow, and an extension of that sorrow would cause the individual many times more difficulty. No, it is much better that time continues. The inconsistency of life necessitates the seconds, minutes and hours which make up a day. Life is, at times, difficult to bear, and time passes, allowing one to rest and derive solace from the bits of serenity found here and there along the way. I would not elect to make a change (even if I could) in the system of time unless I was able to better that particular moment for all concerned.

After Dr. Freeman stilled my paranoia and filled my cavity, I'm conscious that my own worth (in silver) has escalated! I sat outside on the "stoop" (what a name). . . suddenly I was inspired to compose a poem. . . I rushed inside for a piece of paper upon which I could unleash my inspiration. It was a beautiful day, complete with sunshine and snowy clouds sailing rapidly by overhead.

The Truest Friend

The air is fresh
With the promise of Spring...
Sap flows to the treetops,
The chickadees sing
The insects respond
To the warmth of the sun
And the grass will stand tall
E'er the day is done.
Myriad clouds reign
A flawless blue sky...
Short-lived is their kingdom
Through which they fly
For springtime delivers
Their wealth to the earth
To nurture the land
With the newness of birth.
The time so quickly
Hastens by. . .
Soon spring is gone
And summer, nigh
(As after dawn,
The pearly morn)
Upon warm wings
The summer is borne.
Time goes on

Like an endless maze,
Melding seconds to hours
And hours to days.
The seasons reel onward,
Ever the same,
While humanity strains
Against winds of change.
It is well that time
Is beyond man's control
For to meddle therewith
Would but injure the soul.
Time, alone, is willing to share
Grief too great for one to bear,
For time will come
One misty dawn
When the mind has grown
And sorrow is gone.
Perhaps time
Is one's truest friend...
One's sole companion
'Til the very end.

Lauren Isaacson
February 13, 1984

Feb. 20, 1984... I had a brief cry in my room while holding my green parakeet. It seems to know Norm is gone. I can just hear Norm saying, "Even bird misses me!"... he used to get a rise out of me by saying how good he was... "Even bird LOVES me!"... or looking in the mirror at his reflection he'd say "Damn! I'm handsome!" he would never get his hair styled so he'd ask me if I liked his hair and when I'd just smile he'd say, "Dummy!"... it was a standing joke... I made Dad's birthday cake, then sat outside for a time and wrote another poem about emptiness.

The Cure

It was not food I hungered for
Nor did I seek material gains...
I thirsted not for toxic drinks
Or pills to mask life's heartfelt pains...
I did not look for merry crowds
To fill my days with mirth;
I only sought totality
And peacefulness on earth.
Into this world, I came alone
And so, I must depart;
My life-long cure for emptiness
Was loving from the heart.

February 20, 1984
Lauren Isaacson

Mar. 19, 1984... I realize some people who keep diaries do not include those things which would detract from their personalty. However, I feel that a journal cannot be complete without those embarrassments, for they are a part of me and help me to improve myself. I speak of negligence and selfishness tonight. . . I came across 3 toggle buttons in my sewing things which Norm had purchased months and months ago. They were intended for his big sweater, and I'd volunteered to to sew them on; I never did, and eventually. . . until now. . . forgot about the job completely. Now I regret my laziness with regard to follow-through on projects. It just seems so stupid of me, and I wonder why I put it off. It was not a big hassle... I just never got to it.

Another thing of which I am ashamed is that since I can't eat everything, I tend to be rather protective or hoggish over those certain foods which seldom make me sick. One such food is cake. At the steak supper the other night, they were selling baked goods. We bought some things, among them 6 creme-filled cupcakes. They were delicious, similar to Ding Dongs. Anyway, I ate 3 of the 6, and then

tonight, Dad was going to have another. . . the last. . . and I was silently upset. Later Dad said I could have it, that he didn't really want it. I felt bad even though I hadn't mentioned anything aloud to him about my wanting it. . . perhaps we foster a bit of selfishness whether we will admit it or not. I am disgusted with my own selfish quirks which occasionally spill out, but at the same time I feel fortunate that I am able to be aware of them. Awareness leads to overcoming faults. Later I took pictures of a hibiscus and of birds near the feeder using my 2 x extender. I again embarked upon my quilt project, sewing together more squares. It seems that I have sad spells whenever I sit down and reflect upon Norm, recalling our times together. Whenever I'm alone, I tend to break down. I'm glad I can release my emotions. It seems incredible to me that Norm and I won't be sharing Canada together. I have no desire to go with any other person, for it wouldn't be the same at all. I hope it will work out with Mom and Dad. (I will have to remember my ear plugs, for both snore!) I'm sure I can enjoy the trip...I'll take books and my journal to tide me over in the car.

Mar. 23, 1984... It seems, as yet, an impossibility that Norm and I will no more share the lovely transformation of winter to spring, and all those seasons to follow. Perhaps my time is now best spent alone, for in this way I shall be able to be with him in my mind and feel within myself those qualities which we shared.

Perpetuation

Skeletal remnants of autumns bygone
Habitat the woodland floor
As if, in silence, to assure
That through each death
New life will come.

And so it is that spring explodes,
A vibrant mass of color,
Flaunting the essence of life itself;
Thinking not of life long past
But only life forthcoming.

In the wake of smold'ring heat
Emerald cloaks a naked branch
And guards the fruit
Which bear the hope
That blossoms will not cease to bloom.

When golden overtakes the green
And shadows yawn 'fore noonday sun,
A message, though unspoken, blows
'cross weary field and aged grove
To beckon, as to timeless friends,
A sojourn shared 'neath winter snow.

And thus, a pod from which all life has flown
Must bid its earthly stance farewell
And harken to a chillwinds' call
To rest unto eternity.

Lauren Isaacson
March 28, 1984

April 1, 1984... April Fool's Day came and went without incident... it was great to feel better! The afternoon was well spent in a lawn chair outdoors. I thought of many things, and it was nice to be alone... read some old poems and writings and then wrote a new poem about hatred. I really like it...

Fatal Emotion

A mind which houses
Naught but hate
Kindles eager flame

Which lick the doors
Of happiness
Until the one
Who lives within
Becomes engulfed
And is consumed.
A fire which feasts
Upon itself
Is not a means...
It is an end.

Lauren Isaacson
April 2, 1984

April 4, 1984... It's almost as if Norm never lived here now. I've always been very adaptable to my environment. . . I guess I've had to be. I've seen so much change, and if I didn't roll along, I could never be able to stand everything. I think a lot of Norm when I'm alone, but when I'm busy I can let go of my problems. I wouldn't be writing so much if all was "quiet within." I also realize that some of this "buying binge" which I have been experiencing of late has to do with my sense of loss. I'm trying to restore that which has been taken from me through material finds. I seem to need to keep my mind occupied. . . two things which satisfy me most are my photography and my room. . . aside from my writing and being outside. Hence, my purchases for both of these "passions" of mine. I would get the things eventually, however, the need is here now. . . I am fortunate enough to possess the "means" through the use of money I would have used for my college education. . . I have not waited; after considerable thought, I have made these purchases, and have found all to be very much to my enjoyment. Mom said, "It's good. . . there's so little you can do now!" I guess she's right. I'm limited physically...

April 5, 1984... Decided to simply relish the beautiful day! I sat outside in a lawn chair, photographed more flowers and then wrote a poem. I really enjoyed the afternoon! Sherry (Syracuse, N.Y. pen pal) called and we talked for quite a long while. She's a good kid; be coming around July 1st.

Reflections

Though each day comes
But once each year
Nay, only once forever
I cannot block
My mind's dispute
That this day's twin
Has dawned before.
It seems as if
The time has lapsed
In naught but
Backward motion,
Encompassing
That long-lost day
E'er before the changes passed.
Perhaps through these
Reflective days,
The mirror
Of more carefree times,
One may rekindle
Tender sparks
Which in the darkness
Burst to flame
To guide and warm
The dismal heart.

Lauren Isaacson
April 5, 1984

April 14, 1984... Started our trip to the Smokies...had a good day.

April 16-19, 1984... Took pictures of forsythia, redbud and rhododendron; the mountains are gorgeous! It has been cold enough for light snowfall in the higher elevation, adding to the beauty of the deciduous trees as well as the pine. Each day I'm having trouble with my bowels... I had to go to a gas station... nearly had a nervous breakdown... it was locked... when I finally got the key, I could hardly get it open in time. I was beside myself with anguish and terror. Shortly before, I had a similar experience with another bathroom. While in a park area, I was afflicted with the dire necessity to "go"... it is difficult to make a nonchalant brisk stride convincing as one hastens to the "john." In Gatlinburg I had yet another siege, but luckily we were at the motel. I drove only two times on the trip. . . sometimes we would have to stop within a very short time... I was so scared! I feel like a Class A Slob!

May 27, 1984... I'm off on another rampage concerning feelings and other people's dogs! I get so infuriated by careless dog owners who believe that everybody ought to love dogs too, (as well as the distasteful traits that go along with them). Mom said that it is just natural for a dog to mark its territory, that it must be an unchangeable characteristic. I said it could be unlearned. . . did you ever see a seeing-eye dog that paused to mark each tree? The poor blind person would not be able to make it down the street! So much for that subject!

Mom and Dad thought it in my best interest to re-furnish the up-stairs room that had been Norm's. I'll make it into a living room.

May 29, 1984... Death is the end of life on earth as the living perceive it to be, however, man will forever derive solace from the hope that death does not also herald the end of awareness.

Sometimes I wonder why an individual chooses to write at all, for I'm quite certain that there is no thought written today which has not been written previously. It is astonishing to read the words of Plato and his associates, for one discovers again how alike man's thoughts have been throughout the ages. Taken in this scope, it is truly egotistic of someone to claim his ideas as unique at all. We are born and develop at varying rates, but even the highest of minds have no doubt had their equal at some point in time. Despite similarities, I write for necessity rather than immodesty; I have little doubt that my sanity would be thus intact if it were not for the scratches which I frequently mark on a page.

May 30, 1984... I watched the partial eclipse of the sun through a paper-punched hole! Gary and I left for Wild Cat Den at noon. I drove... since Rt. 22 is "under destruction" I had to go on 61 through Blue Grass. We hiked on the trail and I snapped a few pictures. Once the moon passed away from the sun it was hot again; I became rather overheated as we walked back on the road.

After I got back, I started feeling pretty rank. I over-did and overheated too. It took me the rest of the day to get back to normal. I always "hammer" myself out in the sun or when I do something. It makes me mad because it's an inconvenience. I guess I'm always testing myself or trying to prove I can still do some things.

May 31, 1984... I struggled with a poem about memories and how they fade (but that's not all bad)!... photographed a yellow iris, spiderwort, a daisy-like weed, and some chickadees. . . I again grappled with the main elements of the poem, finally setting the whole package aside to retain my sanity. (It wasn't really that bad!)

Faded Memories

The mind records pictures
And fleeting sensations
Of life's precious moments
And futile concerns;
Images as random
As pieces of film,
Developed with care,
Preserved with love.

Yet, in time
One's pungent impressions
Of years gone by
Are obscured
By a fathomless haze;

The imprint
Of a radiant smile
And laughter,
Tender as the dew...
The image from a mountain top
And autumn's coral moon...
But also dark imaginings
And mornings
Bleak and gray
Are strewn among
The misty hoard
Which time
Has struggled to displace
And bury
'Neath a tranquil sea.

The unhealed wound
Evokes more pain
Than does the faded scar...
So should it be
With memories...
Fragments scattered
On life's path
To mingle with nostalgic dust
Should not besiege
The growing mind
With sorrow or despair...
For once dismissed,
The inner self
Can, with the whole,
Be joined as One.

Lauren Isaacson
May 31/June 1, 1984

First Impressions

There is a friendly countenance
That still my mind holds dear...
A face of striking character,
An aura sure and strong...
He seemed to own that innate spice
Which tender few possess...
Without trite conversation
I knew him as a friend.

Perhaps the passage of an hour
Would prove my image wrong...
Yet could it be that feelings
Speak more truthfully than words?

Lauren Isaacson
June 2, 1984

June 4, 1984... Sometimes it seems to me as if those afflicted with long-term or chronic illnesses, whether physical or mental in nature are often able to find and retain meaning in life. It is rather discouraging that many cannot shape their lives without such catastrophic events, for all around there are reasons for contentment and understanding if one is but openly aware, and perhaps, willing to spend time alone, immersed in thought.

June 11, 1984... Mom came up because she knew I was upset. . . we began talking and finally the

hatch on my emotions gave way... then I rampaged about how there was the notion that Mom and Dad were to blame for all of our family's strange and various ailments. "It had to be something to do with their combination to make all their kids have such odd disorders." Well, I don't believe it. Some people always have to point a finger of blame for their own misfortunes. Mom and Dad didn't give me Big C. I just will not buy that. And to blame parents for being screwed up in the head is not intelligent either, because it not only is the parent but the way in which the kid deals with what his parent says, that make or break problems. People do the same thing at work... it never has anything to do with their own personality... that people have a hard time being around them... well, I got it out and cried a bit and it really helped. Mom was up here 'til 12:00!

June 12, 1984... Looked at a few slides in the morning... upstairs a better part of the day. . . so tired. . . slept most of the afternoon. Dad sold Norm's motor for the canoe. . . we sure had fun with that... once a year was enough, but boy, what a riot. I always think of our late fall ride when we had KFC along and we bought some Grolsch beer because I needed a bottle of it to draw for art class. It was so brisk, we needed to wear our "Pepto-Bismol Suits" (snowmobile suits). It was also great in the summer to lean over the bow and let it bounce over the waves. I have so much time to sit and think, yet less control over my emotions... weakness causes me to be upset concerning things which I would otherwise forget about. Now, all I can do is talk it out or write it out!

June 14, 1984... I look into the star-filled sky and feel that there must be a Creator; the galaxies continue beyond the farthest reaches of man's telescopes, and so they must continue forever, for if there should be an end... a wall ... then surely something must lie on the other side; and thus, I am overwhelmed.

If only people would not be blind unto themselves! If only they would hear and understand. . . but then there would be no need to talk.

Life Song

A cool breeze filters
Through summer's last green,
The raiment grown weary of bygone heat,
Weaving with the insects' drone
An eerie, melancholic spell;
Forever crickets seem to chant
Amid their restless, aging cloak,
Singing through both day and night
As if their ever present trill
Will mask their own mortality.
So vigilant these singers are
Yet they are not aware
That those who never cease to sing
Their daily melody
Simply mirror common thoughts
(And mirrors but reflect the song
That Life is wont to sing.)
Beware the cricket and his song
Lest you, as he, be singing still
When autumn shadows yawn,
For never can one live again
the hours of singsong mindlessness
When one sought not that higher note
Which would embrace eternity;
The change which robs each creature's breath
Is deaf unto Life's steady chant
For what is Life
But numbered days
That march from countless decades passed
Unto the land beyond?

Lauren Isaacson

June 15, 1984

Sensory Dreams

My eyes yearn to see those things
Which I have never seen...
To scale the highest mountain peaks
That rule the evergreen...
My legs desire to trace the way
'Cross meadows, fields, and streams
And to traverse that narrow path
Where few footsteps have been.
I would love to feel the wind
Upon my flowing hair...
To hear the birds and smell the flow'res
And breathe the unspoiled air.
If stars were made for wishing,
And dreams made to come true
I'd conquer all my frailties
So these dreams I might pursue.

Lauren Isaacson
June 16, 1984

Captive
(Milkweed Pod/Man)

Borne through the air on silken shafts,
The product of a waning life
Is hastened on its windward course;
Imprisoned in its silver craft,
It journeys toward that fateful end
Where it shall rival life and death.

Man thrives upon the tender thought
That he is master of his life,
Remembering not the autumn seed
Whose dormancy is blessed with life
Through nature's will and circumstance;
Yet is not man as surely bound
Unto his birthright's soul and mind,
Entrapped upon the winds of time
And captive of the senses?

Lauren Isaacson
June 17, 1984

Beyond

How I long
For a place beyond
Where land and sky are one
Where the beam
That will shine
Upon fruit and vine
Is a true, benevolent sun...

Where age and time
Are not maligned
Like sun obscured by cloud
And battle fields
To peace shall yield;
Old scars it will enshroud...

The unseen frights

Of moonless nights
Nowhere shall be found
And love will fall
On each and all
As rain upon the ground...

Here joy shall wind
Throughout the mind
As streams toward a pond
And I, to One,
As all, to One,
Eternally shall bond.

Lauren Isaacson
June 10, 1984 (1st and 2nd)
June 21, 1984 (finished)

Time spent immersed in thought is time best spent. One can cleanse his mind and clarify his beliefs, as well as open himself to the objective definition of new ideas. Some thoughts: Marriage can be self-inflicted punishment. The habitual liar will bury himself alive.

Mom finished typing all of my poems dated from my time at Augie to the present... they look nice.

July 1, 1984... I think my spending spree is quite similar to Norm's after Tracy took off. It's like you are trying to fill a void by masking the same old place. It keeps the mind occupied, too. . . but no matter how occupied the mind becomes, trivial concerns never quite do the job. After all the money is gone, the emptiness still persists. At least I can enjoy the mutuality of our relationship, and look forward to great things in the future. . . long after I am released from this "earthly bondage"... it must be worth any trials one need endure previous to the journey into "the beyond." I believe I shall see Norm again, as I do now in my dreams.

July 3, 1984... I woke up and speedily dressed. Hyman's was going to deliver the furniture. Les and Dad took my antiques upstairs before they arrived. Everything fits and I think it looks great. It was rather amusing... one of the topics we hit upon while the movers were upstairs was the raft of old bottles (whiskey) I have displayed on the console... (from the Thrift Shop). One of the fellows said, "Women shouldn't drink when they're pregnant." I wasn't completely sure, but I thought he was referring to me. When I went down to get the check for him, he said, "So when is it due?" I said, "Don't feel bad, but I'm not pregnant. I have a liver problem... my liver's enlarged." I felt sorry for him; how could he know? He was just trying to be friendly... maybe he had a family of his own. I guess the episode did make me realize that I don't exactly look like a "stick" anymore. . . but it was rather funny.

July 7, 1984... haven't done much today... didn't feel too great... did take Steve to The Dock for a late birthday celebration. He likes that place the best. I could just eat the salad, bread and Won-Tons. We saw a guy with a hole the size of Texas in the seat of his pants; he was taking a woman to eat at The Dock! I wonder how he'll feel when he finally discovers why everyone is smiling at him?!!

We sat at the Moline Riverside Parkway for awhile, 'til the bugs drove us out. . .there were millions of those "cheap bugs". . . what a waste! They're built so cheap... all they can do is incubate, breed, shed their skins all over people's cars, and then die!

July 10, 1984... This is the first day in, well, I'll bet a year or so, that I didn't apply a speck of make-up on my eyes or elsewhere! It was another HOT day. Mom and I worked on the rag rugs. She cut the warp thread to size and I strung three strands through a needle and proceeded to tie the fringe on the rug. Yesterday she unpacked all my china from the storage boxes in the cubby holes; we put it in my antique buffet. It looks great! It's fun to see it all again.

The Day

I watched from my bench
On the sun-dappled lawn
As the cool glow of morning
Aged to radiant noon.

From youth to prime
In naught but hours
With n'er so much
As a backward glance,
Disdainful of its hapless plight.
Scarcely had the Day begun
When shadows bent from earthly things,
Yet steadfast to its mission bound,
It envied not the youthful light
That shall tomorrow take its place,
But with unselfish wisdom
Shed its golden beam upon the earth;
And when the distant western sky
Let go the aged, fiery disk,
Whence, for hours, it reigned complete,
Precious little time remained
To cast upon the glistening haze
A brief reflection of the Day
Whose life had touched eternity.

Lauren Isaacson
August 23, 1984

"Of Butterflies"

In a shaft of yellow light
A monarch captures on her wings
An ambered, opalescent glow
While sailing on the Breeze of Life.
A seeming drunken path she weaves,
As if bereft of aim or goal,
For fields of flowers compose her world
And nectar sweet sustains her breath.
So high she flies
Yet sees no more
Than that which self-indulgence brings;
How glad am I
That through these eyes
I see more than the butterfly.

Lauren Isaacson
August 24, 1984

Aug 27, 1984... I had a tension headache tonight. It finally went away after talking with Mom. Sometimes I wonder if I'll die the same way Norm did... I have a bump on my thigh... who knows what it is! Then I was thinking how every time someone sleeps in the other room or near me on trips, I wonder if they're "gonna die on me." What a drag it was to find Norm. Strange how I always kept an ear peeled for Norm; sometimes I wonder if we have a 6th sense that tells us things apart from the conscious world.

Sept. 1, 1984... I'm such a turd sometimes; I hate myself. I always balk when someone starts to sing, no matter who it is; Mom loves to sing, and with her it's also an emotional outlet. Whenever she sings though, I cringe and she stops. Today she was going to sing a song (that told a story). I uttered a small protest. She stopped, apparently quite hurt. After I did that, I felt like nothing, but there was no way to recall my "ugh" once breathed into the air. She said, "I have feelings too," in answer to my, "I'm sorry, Mom!" and went downstairs. When I'm writing I'm an intolerable creep to be around. I don't know why I didn't think first and be considerate. She always listens to my writings, no matter how trivial; why can't I abide a few notes of song? I wish I knew why song grates so heavily upon my ears... it always has. I most certainly have a terrible voice and use it only on the rare "happy birthdays" and so forth. I'm kind to society in that regard, at least. For now, I wish I could find a .45.

Mom came up and we talked. I feel better now. She felt sorry for being too sensitive and what she called "uppity," and I expressed my regrets too. After a cry, we both felt better. I guess we both felt

rather stupid!

Sept 6, 1984... Mayo Clinic sends out a form letter for its Statistic Unit. I wrote... "It has been nearly 3 years since my re-diagnosis of cancer and I'm still alive to tell about it. As the afflicted area is my liver, I experience the symptoms generally associated with liver diseases (so I am told), such as overheating and water retention. My liver has expanded to such a degree that casual onlookers sometimes mistake my appearance for that of a pregnant woman. I was once asked when I was "due"! Perhaps I should've said, "I don't know... so far I'm 36 months along."

So much for my reply to Mayo Clinic... I sometimes find it hard to believe I've lasted so long; liver cancer is seldom smiled upon as a long-time acquaintance. If it weren't for Big C, I'd be real healthy! I also stated that should some breakthrough be discovered for the curing of leiomyosarcoma I'd appreciate notification. . . until then, it is best to create one's happiness each day. I worked more on my story... it's fun to do actually.

The Miracle Of Chance

The spider spins her silver threads
Into a silken sheen
Deftly pouring forth her self
Unto the net which is her life.
Though possessed of marked skill
This artisan shall reap no wealth
Begotton of her grand design,
And yet the misty hand of dawn
Transforms her modest web of silk
Into a diamond-scattered orb,
Sparkling as a precious crown
Before the rising sun;
Thus wrapped in lace
She mans her snare,
Entrusting nature with her life.
The spider dangles weightless
From her wispy spinnerette,
As does all existence hang suspended
In the grasp of chance.
For each successive heartbeat
Froms the web which heralds every breath
And leases yet another moment
From the miracle called Life.

Lauren Isaacson
September 19, 1984

QUALITY:

All things considered, I feel that I have had a beautiful life. I have loved, and been loved in return by a warm family, and developed a once-in-a-lifetime closeness with one of my brothers. I have been blessed with a certain degree of intelligence, common sense, and awareness. My countenance is agreeable and unobtrusive, and I have a pleasant, though realistic outlook on life. I am adaptable to change and strive for growth, not stagnancy of character. I have walked in the mountains, and seen the beauty surrounding me. I have heard the babble of a stream and the eerie hoot of an owl.

Though I am no longer able to actively pursue many of those diversions which have so colored my memories, I yet possess their image in my mind. I once felt the pleasure of vitality and physical endurance marked by an unblemished body, and though my body is no longer beautiful to behold, nor functions as it once had, yet it sustains me.

I am fortunate to live in a comfortable style among furnishings and sentimentalities I love, and have

the option to be alone should that be my need and desire.

I am thankful for my many blessings, for I have a good life. Quality cannot be marked by time, but rather, by the smiles along the way.

10/1984

Oct. 5, 1984... When I dropped the film off yesterday, I was mentioning that I wish I knew some practical use for the film canisters. The clerk said, "Now that you're pregnant, maybe you can use them as rattles if you fill them." It always is a cold blow and it strikes me speechless. I wonder what people think; I wear no rings... oh well, I know I'm straight! That's what counts. I'm enjoying the sheepskin rug I bought in Estes Park. It's gorgeous!

Traces Of Autumn

Autumn plays no timid song
And wears no modest vestment,
Flourishing its last hurrah
Before a restful interlude.
Dying leaves fall to the ground,
Whispering in the gentle breeze
To haunt the heels of passers-by
And gossip to the cold north winds.
The sweetly reminiscent smell
Born of leaves now laid to rest
Permeates the autumn air
And bids the traveler raise his head
To breathe the singular perfume
Before the icy gales of winter
Rob all traces of this heady scent,
Left to linger only in the mind
With autumns passed and indistinct.

Lauren Isaacson
October 14, 1984

Oct. 19, 1984... I took a drive but was fearful of stopping to take pictures while alone... what a chicken. My Beauty Book order came. Everything is nice; items will make perfect gifts.

Destiny

Though autumn weaves its image
With an all-pervasive air,
Encompassing one's senses
in its splash of brilliant color
and the rustling of the leaves...
in the scent of drying foliage
blowing freely through the trees...
and the taste of ruby apples
and the crispness of the wind,
The barren months which lie ahead
Touch upon one's very soul;
The slanting sun sets trees aglow,
Their leaves a restless fire
Kept alive by northern winds until,
As embers blackened by the flames of yesterday,
They tumble to the ground...
Carpeting the well-clipped lawns
And waiting for the icy hand

That shall transform their shape to dust.
Like the child who aged beyond
A once-beloved bear,
Leaves—uniform as paper dolls
Cut by fingers deft and sure—
Casually are flung aside
As if their purpose has expired.
Quietly a funeral dirge
Mourns balefully amid the breeze,
Heard by all and yet ignored
As if death denied may not unfold.
So silently the coldness seeps
Into the autumn breeze
And birds fall mute before its touch
So one might think the very chill
Had robbed their throaty cries.
No more leaves cling to the trees,
Making idle chatter,
For winter siezed their quiet voice
And hid it deep, 'neath frosty snow.
Silence reigns ov'r one and all
While clouds converge in murky skies;
Death obscures ones vision
To a darkly shade of gray,
And yet in time, the clouds recede,
Rendering warm the gloom-filled heart
And purging sorrow from the mind.

Lauren Isaacson
October 21, 1984

Oct. 22, 1984... It was a great day, until after lunch. I got sick...it was extra discouraging when I realized the beautiful day was passing me by. I finally settled my stomach and Mom and I drove on some rural roads. Later, while in the safety of my home, I had the runs. ... Sometimes when I feel so sick, so lousy, I cry... but this time I feel too sick to make the effort... so I just sit.

Oct. 24, 1984... Mom and I took a drive to Loud Thunder. I took some pictures... it was beautiful out. There was a stick bug on me... they're strange little creatures. Later we drove to Petersen Park. Mom suggested I write a poem about the man who was using one of those metal detectors. He was the inspiration; I did so, once home...I like the poem.

Copper Pennies, Golden Leaves

An old man strolled through autumn leaves
Waving slowly 'fore his path
A wand to guide his watchful steps.
Were it not for earphones
Clapped upon his graying head
And a tiny garden spade
Warming in his gnarled hand,
I'd have thought the man was blind;
Yet blind this man might well have been
For all that he refused to see;
With eyes feasted on the ground,
He looked for copper, bronze, and gold.
A rusted bauble on a chain,
And perhaps, some pocket change
Lying 'neath the colored leaves
Was an afternoon's hoard...
And a splendid reward...
For several hours spent

With his back bent to the sun.
'Twas a shame he could not see
The wealth amid the shining trees...
The leaves turned golden by the sun
Falling near his outstretched wand
Yet of no value in his eyes.
After all his sightless quests
Are only shreds of memory,
This man shall have no hoard of wealth...
Only pennies in his hand.
The golden fragments in my mind
Are wealth beyond an earthly price;
For ten million copper pennies
I'd not trade a single thought.

Lauren Isaacson
October 24, 1984

Oct. 25, 1984... I made Mom and Dad's bed, but neither seemed to take note. That's OK, each probably thought the other did it!

Oct. 31, 1984... I love Halloween... I carved two pumpkins after Dad cleaned out the internals for me. Sick, sick, sick after supper; I get so depressed. I decided to write a poem; I wanted to cry, but it would've taken too much effort. Time is better spent writing.

Yesterday's Dreams

My heart is filled with salty tears
My eyes shall never shed
And my mind reflects the many roads
These feet will never tread...
Forgotten and exhausted dreams
And those that cannot come to life
Are buried like the husband
Of a newly widowed wife;
So while the dreams of yesterday
Shall never be exhumed
Perhaps those of tomorrow
Shall defeat the moldering tomb.

Lauren Isaacson
October 31, 1984

I've been thinking about Halloween as I knew it. I loved it so, even though I didn't care much for the candy. It wasn't such a worry then. Now everyone's scared; afraid some weirdo will put a pin or poison in the candy. They even X-ray the treats. Dear Abby feels "trick or treat" is a threat! Most kids wouldn't know how to trick someone. . . when Dad was a kid they put entire hay wagons on top of barns or tipped over the out-house. . . soaped windows and often were dunked by the inhabitants of the house as they stood under an upstairs window pulling their rat-a-tat-tats! They deserved the cold soaking.

Nov. 1, 1984... My stand on immigration, abortion, and criminal justice would probably classify me as nothing short of an inhumane and prejudiced killer. I have my reasons, however. I believe there must be quality in life or life is simply existence. Population growth hinders peace within humanity, and chaos results, not happiness. Abortion saves children from neglect, inherited negative patterns of behavior such as moral outlook and personality traits that would be given from the mother and the erstwhile father. Finally, one who violates or murders another person does not deserve life, for he gave his subject no choice; in innocence the victim lost his life.

Nov. 5, 1984... Mom and I enjoyed an amusing situation today while running some errands. Moline's 23rd Ave. is under construction, and a truck hauling tar pulled in front of us. A red light stopped us behind the truck, it's exhaust chokingly black. A workman was standing along the curb, engaged in conversation; when the truck started up again, it blew black smoke directly into his face. He noted our sympathetic amazement concerning his predicament and immediately stuck out his tongue in the direction of the truck, thus portraying his disgust of the entire affair! Some of those little shared moments can "make the day"!

Nov. 13, 1984... Sometimes I wonder if at least a good third of my life has been spent sick. . . whether from Big C or other junk!

The Wings Of Time

Bourne upon the wings of time
Memories cloud my eyes today,
Masking o'er the tempting sights
Which seek dominion of my mind...
Childhood years that mocked
The very passing of the days,
Wishing time would hurry on
Quickly, as the setting sun.
I smile upon those early years,
Fueled by futuristic dreams,
For long I did not have to wait
'Ere time clipped short the youthful flame.
One need not beckon unto time,
Master of the endless hours
Both passed and yet to come...
When life is gone, time remains,
Ancient, yet forever young.
Passed moments and tomorrows
I live only in my dreams.
Today is all I truly have,
Bourne upon the wings of time.

Lauren Isaacson
November 24, 1984

I've thought so much about the "givers" and "takers" in a society. It is amazing to me that there are actually those who feel no obligation whatsoever to help or to give to others. Unbelievable! Most people at least feel a twinge of guilt about being so selfish. If everyone was a taker, the world would be nothing but "existens." Nothing would be accomplished or invented. Why is it that a taker must always be asked to perform a duty? Perhaps selfishness breeds laziness... let George do it!

A child cannot give except with the knowledge that he will at a later time be amply rewarded. Maybe this trait cannot be overcome if the awareness factor is not there to aid in "overcoming."

When one gives freely and without expectation, it is beneficial to both self and others. Givers do not hinder.

Why do takers think they are so special that they don't have to offer conversation, aid, or show gratitude? What contributes to their lack of obligation? A lack of conscience, or is it a lack of conscience awareness???

The lazy and the selfish will not put themselves under any strain... neither will the inherently low-esteemed. Perhaps a low self-image combined with an inability to face that image leads to ingratitude... gratitude would compliment the other, thereby raising his (the "others") status. . . and lowering one's own. No matter how old this kind of person grows, he will never mature. It inspired another poem...

Aged Child

Possessed of apathetic eyes

Which mirror only childish wants,
He kindles flames of disbelief
When thoughts bereft of rationale
Are thrown amid the unspoiled breeze.
The unrivaled child of woe
Amongst the realm of thinking man
Exerts naught but vehemence
Toward duty and concern.
Ill mannered and unkempt,
An animal regards itself
More frequently, indeed.
Demands spill forth,
Yet aid will never be returned.
The mind, developed, yet constrained
By ropes he will not cast away,
Displays a blatant haughty show
And retreats behind a stagnant pool...
A silent product of neglect.

Lauren Isaacson
November 25, 1984

Nov. 26, 1984... I put the lights and decorations on the Xmas tree. It's nice to have the house look like Christmas. Mom and I went to Dr. M. She had some growths burned off and I had some questions. I feel so stupid. Nothing can be done. My heart races, I have that bump on my leg, swelling, nausea, the runs, heat problems, low lung capacity, emotional weakness, tire easily, appetite fluctuates as does food appeal, thirst, and water retention. All that can be said is that my case is very unique. . . questions really have no answers.

Nov. 30, 1984... I have another dissertation to expound upon. . . to those needing to "find themselves," let me say this: It cannot be done by cheating on your spouse, or hitting the honky-tonk bars; rather, go away in a remote wilderness or park, and all alone, spend time getting to know who you are and what you believe in. There is no turning yourself away when you are alone. . . you must face who you are.

Should you find that you do not like who you see, trust your judgment. Don't go running to a "shrink" to have him tell you "you're OK." Chances are, your own opinion is right; take the traits you dislike and try to improve your disposition. Find the love you buried under trivial matters. Trying to improve is better than hiding behind a mask you loathe and despise.

Dec. 18, 1984... Thoughts on my extensive reading: Strive to attain harmony with your beliefs, for the price of discord is bled from the heart. Attempting to rationalize that which cannot be rationalized is a cruel and purposeless task that shall not be mastered; it is like digging a foundation through unyielding stone with a paper shovel. It cannot be done.

Feb. 25, 1985... I wrote again today; if I can keep a decent momentum, I'll make progress. After supper and a bout with diarrhea, I decided to try to venture washing my hair in the shower. Even a simple task becomes a worry. The shower is in the basement, the toilets are on first and second floor; what if I should encounter another siege?

Feb. 27, 1985... I wrote more today, although it was rough going, words weren't flowing. I wish summer was not coming up again. February flew past, and my story is not half-way. I get so tired, or sick, interrupted or otherwise side-tracked. When I can write, there's no guarantee that I'll be able to get my brain jump-started. I need a new battery; perhaps I have "Writer's Retardation." . . . writer's cramps aren't sufficient!

Feb. 28, 1985... Sharon came around noon. I had one of those really sick days. Later in the afternoon I could sit outside; I wrote a poem

Do not forsake the present
Holding fast to yesterday;
Do not search for treasures
Buried deep and long decayed...
A moment lost cannot be won
For memories fade as the setting sun
And n'er will be regained.
'Tis best to think of what you are
And one day shall become.

Lauren Isaacson
February 28, 1985

Feb. 28, 1985... I got sick at night. I hate it, but I just have to sit it out.

Mar. 2, 1985... Afternoon sunshine brought me outdoors. I was in a sad and reflective mood; the poem follows...

Life's Dusty Road

On life's dusty road I tread
Alone, save for that inner peace
Which bears me 'long when spirits fall
From that which is and cannot be;
For sorrow is a grain of sand
Which festers in the open heart
And preys upon the tender mind
Which seeks the sun
Beneath the clouds.
I cannot claim a smoother trail;
Though faltering steps impede my way,
I travel on through misty glade
Past crossroads of a different hue
And onward, though deep shadows loom.
Footsteps mingle with my own
Yet on my path, I walk alone;
The dust I bear upon my feet
Attests that my road is unique.

Lauren Isaacson
March 2, 1985

Mar. 4, 1985... Mom gave me a permanent today. I feel like Goldilocks! It's fuzzy and appears to have been braided... but it's an improvement over my limp hair. The liver must have taken it's toll on my "extremities."... hair, nails; I hope my teeth don't go! It seems to be better for me to eat throughout the day whenever I feel hungry. It is truly March; the wind's a regular terror!

Mar. 7, 1985... Tomorrow Norm would have been 34. It seems rather strange. I wrote a profound thought yesterday; "Does not the sunrise from out of the Darkness?"

I finished re-reading the 2nd of the Tolkien trilogies and began the 3rd. I love those books.

My room and "living room" are so neat. I just love having my "apt." ...it wouldn't be this way if it weren't for my Big C. I'd be making money somewhere and probably still live here, but as far as furniture goes. . . well, who knows? Maybe I'd have done this. I know I'd also have wanted to save and scrimp for a down payment on a house. Strange how a person's life can be so altered from that which one had desired. Health means so much, yet few are thankful for it. I remember how great it was to climb in the mountains. . . now that is all I have... memories of health long passed. I suppose I didn't truly have health since late grade school years. Cancer had been with me for a long time to have grown so large in my stomach. But of course, cancer isn't my foremost pain. . . that comes only from the death

of Norm. I used to laugh far more often, for we were always joking around. It was such fun. I'm lucky to have had such a relationship at all, for few do in a lifetime.

Mar. 12, 1985... Needed to sort through my clothes. So many I can no longer wear.

Mar. 13, 1985... I wrote a letter to Jon. One of the patients who journeyed to Greece called. Max (another patient) died yesterday. I tried to calligraph a card for his mother, but couldn't seem to control the pen well today. Whenever another of the group who went to Greece dies, I wonder when I'll go, too. Almost all of the ones I knew are now dead. Some cure! It had, at the time, seemed rather promising. Some have said they didn't see why we went; if they had a loved one, they'd probably be on the first plane!

Mar. 27, 1985... It was just 65 degrees; I sat outside in shorts and a light top. A balmy spring breeze is filtering through the still-barren branches of the oak trees, and despite a slight chill in the air, the sun obliterates any shiver which might otherwise have broken upon my skin.

Mom persists in weeding, nurturing her plants, not heeding the complaints of her aching back, while Dad rakes and resets the ground- mole trap. . . "What could be more disturbing than a mole-infested lawn?" And I sit... and observe... and listen. Across the hill, a child chants a rhyme unperfected, to the hap-hazard beat of a jump rope. The adjacent hill delivers the sound of a tree-trimming crew ripping the remnants of a tree to shreds. The birds surround me with a joyful chorus, assured that soon spring shall arrive, while a fly attempts to sun itself on my knee and is foiled in its attempt. A new and unfamiliar bird joins in the chorus, while a rake scrapes the lawn in a rhythmic pattern. An incoming plane drones toward the distant airport and is gone seconds later, only a minor disruption to the day's overall serenity.

A can drops and hits the cement; the wind chimes attest to the steady flow of the soft breeze. A child hollers a rhyme. I wish she would shut up. Ah, she has! Or so the moment portends.

April 1, 1985... (April Fool's Day) I "got" Mom by telling her that I flubbed on one of the posters I was making for the Salad Luncheon publicity. I finally finished reading "The Rosary" a candy-sweet idealistic-love romance.

Mom has begun to clean my upstairs; it's so good of her to do it. I get so tired; I guess I have to give in, sometimes.

April 2, 1985... A good day! Wow! I wrote a lot!

April 3, 1985... Mom is doing all the typing for me; I'm so weak, I really don't feel like doing much.

April 7, 1985... I am having a good day! What a change of pace. I'm re-reading Jon's old letters. They bring back memories. Mom and Dad had a good day with the rest of the clan. She brought back a lovely lacey and beribboned egg to be used for a centerpiece. Sharon sent a tiny basket with pink flowers and a miniature rabbit for me. She is always lavishing me with demonstrations of love and affection. Scott and Brad appeared to enjoy the books.

April 11, 1985... Problems again, but not so I couldn't enjoy the day. It was in the 60's. I wrote a poem about spring.

Spring

All that which
I cannot be
Is part of its
Vitality...
The hov'ring bee,
The blossom fair...
The youthful bird
Upon the air...

A burning sun
That buries snow
In shallow graves
From whence life grows;
Embracing both new seed
And breath
And shielding each
From thought of death.

Lauren Isaacson
April 11, 1985

April 21, 1985... I've been reading Sherry's old letters when I tire of writing. It's difficult to write about my first cancer experience; reliving it is not easy.

April 22, 1985... I reminisced high school days; I remember a period when I went through a swearing stage. Crazy. It doesn't exactly build one's character, but for the time, it got one's point across. This was only between close friends, of course. I never cared for public vulgarity in any fashion. It's crazy, too, how one word is considered "vulgar" and another, meaning the same thing, is not. Who decides these things, I wonder? The one that really cracked me up was that the proper British had to come up with a past tense of the word "shit"... in their speech, it is "shat."

May 6, 1985... I tried to write outside, but it was impossible. Gnats kept insisting on flying into my eyes. Mosquitoes were buzzing around my legs, although none seemed inclined to feast; perhaps they were still too young to know what to do with a human. When I used to be able to do things outside, it was no problem; indoors bugs don't bite, nothing seems an annoyance. Once inside and in the comfort of air-conditioning, I wrote a poem.

Seasons Of Life

One mirrors many seasons within his very life;
The lush bouquet of springtime, hoarding life, vitality.
From the verdant, yielding mind sparks, like tree sap,
Bubble through one's firm, yet supple limbs.
Unleashing youthful hopes and dreams for growth unhindered,
Unrestrained by roiling clouds and murky skies.

As the spring to summer fades, so also, does the life mature,
Observing as the inky clouds derived of haughty restlessness
Recede into one's memory, to live subdued and quiet lives
'Til time denies their former flame.
The waxing moon of summer skies illuminates high-flying clouds;
The vessels of one's dreams attained, and hopes of liquid silver.

As summer dies, glamour wanes, and silver dreams to gold transform;
Shade not the sun from aging hearts, but bask therein and mark the glow
Which glimmers deep on ancient joys and even where dark shadows fall.
Despair not in autumnal gold!
In holding fast to summer's hue, beauty passes by, unseen,
And spoils itself 'fore winter's grasp.

Crushing life with frigid hands, winter heeds no stricken gaze
Which kindles in the youthful eye whose untouched life is yet benign
Unto the last, eternal chill; yet fear, alone, cannot impair
The misty sight of spring's new hope;
And though one life the snow enshrouds, in other lives,
Breath rallies still depicting seasons, fair and strong,
And promising life shall go on.

Lauren Isaacson
May 6, 1985

May 9, 1985... Mom asked if I'd like to give Sharon my bike because hers is so difficult to pedal.. I don't know...I hate to let go of it just yet. Some days I feel normal. Stupid, I know; guess it's part of my way of maintaining hope. Another idiotic drama! Yesterday I asked Mom to get some angel donuts. They were tarring the road, so she brought two twists from Jewel. I nearly began to cry. I felt like such a jerk; I have so few pleasures in food to look forward to; it just hit me!

May 10, 1985... I calligraphed a Mother's Day card, put a \$20 bill in it along with a box of pretty soap for the big day.

May 11, 1985... I've read Jane Eyre, The Crucible, the four of Tolkien's, Catch 22, The Stand, All Quiet on the Western Front; most of them show human emotions in the raw.

May 12, 1985... We had a picnic; it was a beautiful today. Les brought me a dozen roses; they're beautiful, too! Jon called, but I couldn't talk long... problems, again.

May 16 1985... I wonder how much time, if any, I gained by having Chemo the first time around. I had no other choice, especially since it was thought to be a cure. I never would have it again. . . even if it did slow the growth. Living without sickness, caused by the treatment, is best.

May 17 1985... I get "down" in the mornings; physically, I'm at my lowest ebb; it affects my emotional stability, too.

It's strange, but nice weather almost always makes me mad because I feel obligated to get out in it. But, I can't write on my book if I'm outside; there are too many distractions, mostly in the form of bugs in my eyes. If I'm inside, I'm letting life pass me by, and yet, I'm not neglecting my writing. It gets to me that I can't actually do much anymore except sit around outside. No walks, bike rides, or walking down in the woods. Oh, well.

I decided to get my camera and did get some shots of a great yellow butterfly in the Beauty bush. Hope it turns out well.

UPS delivered another of my Lillian Vernon orders. I'll have a choice as I give gifts. I calligraphed a poem inside of a blank card for Steve's graduation. Then I took it and the Indian rug I bought him over to Moore's. We had a nice visit.

My legs are like lead stumps. I've tried to cut out salt; why I'm so plump way up to my knees, I don't know.

May 27, 1985... I just noticed the whistle hanging from my towel rack. I put it there a few months ago in case I needed help. I was having diarrhea so badly. I wondered how long I'd last. It's weird, but having my death forecast is strangely comforting. So many things I won't and don't need to worry about. I know and accept I'm going to die. What is hard is that I still enjoy certain things; I don't really want to die.

Everyone is frightened of dependence. Loneliness is not a fear... helplessness is another matter.

June 16, 1985... My legs look like Lincoln Logs. Oh well, I'll create a Father's Day card.

Black? ... White.
Wrong? ... Right.
Up? ... Down.
Smile? ... Frown.
In? ... Out.
Whisper? ... Shout.
Good? ... Bad.
IRREPLACEABLE? . . . DAD.

June 22, 1985... Mom has been bringing up my meals. It's so warm for me to come downstairs. The folks bought an insulated drapery to close off my living room. The bathroom and my room will remain cool. Mom also brought me three maternity tops. She told me it was very difficult for her to buy them. I don't know whether I'll keep them or not. Vanity is a funny thing. I keep hoping I can look good in something, but it never ends up that way. My clothes are dwindling in number, and some are not too

hot. Mom also got me a purple nightie; it's really pretty.

June 25, 1985... I'm glad I didn't have to go out and try on clothes. I'll keep the things Mom brought me. It would be hard to shop... physically and emotionally.

July 9 thru 13... another bout with the "runs." I was so down for a time. I get depressed from reliving the past. Some things are difficult to recall in such detail as I illustrate a part of my life with the feelings I experienced at the time. It's draining; topping it all off is the fact that I don't have much I can do to alter my life now. I get sick of feeling sick, nausea, diarrhea, and weakness; the daily scheme of events some days. I get weak; I cry. Well, I hope its over for a time. At least I'm not down for this entire day!

July 22, 1985... the day started out great. . . good mood. . . even sat outside for a time. After supper my heart started racing, palpitating like a tick. My normal beat is 110-120 which is rather high. We tried the breathing in a sack, holding the breath. Nothing helped. Mom called the doctor and he prescribed valium. The druggist said they would call when it was ready. They never did. Finally Dad just went over; there it was, just sitting on the shelf.

Man, my chest hurt so, I thought I was having a heart attack. The valium didn't help much. That was 3 hours after the episode had begun. Mom slept upstairs on the couch; it was a bad night. . . sweating, aching, and of course, that rapid heart beat! By 9:00 the next morning it finally slowed to my normal fast rate. What relief. That was a 15 hour trauma! I don't see how my heart can withstand it!

July 24, 1985... There isn't much that can be done for me, but it is nice to be so relaxed. I'll take the valium for awhile, especially while I'm so weak. Mom and Dad are a genuine godsend to me. I don't know what I'd do without them in times like this. I look bad; white face, dark eyes, I had best avoid mirrors! I got a catalog of basket kits. I might send for some things. Mom talked with the doctor about the heart episode. He said I should take the valium as soon as an attack begins; if it persists after a 45 minute period I should go to the hospital and be put on a heart monitor to see what is wrong. I hate not being able to take the valium. I liked being "zoned out" for awhile and so completely relaxed. I can understand why people allow themselves to get hooked on a tranquilizer; they afford a great deal of peace and mental relaxation.

Another thing that spurred my agitation was the fact that I enjoyed being pampered by Mom. She'd wake me up, help me get cleaned up for bed, and bring me trays for each meal. It was so comforting, like the feeling of well-being which is so prominent in one's youth, when parents are the primary source of protection and the sustaining power of life.

Well, I got over it. I guess I just didn't feel like facing reality or my life's idea of "normalcy" yet.

July 29, 1985... I had a great surprise... Jon sent 6 long stemmed roses to me saying, "I hope you get better soon." It was so nice and so unexpected, especially since I've been feeling rather isolated lately. I wrote him a thank you letter.

Aug. 1, 1985... I got a letter from Jon; another nice surprise. A letter can be held and read over and over again; a phone call is soon just a memory. I have the "runs" again. Mom brought tea and warm bagels all day. It helps a lot.

Aug. 11, 1985... I've decided to sell the Chevette and my Viscount (bike); it's so stupid... they just sit there and I'm not going to get any better. I'm 39 inches around the middle. The bike was \$156 new and it's in good condition. I'm asking \$75 for it.

Mom did a raft of typing this past week. I sat on the front steps with Mom and Dad in the afternoon. It was 75 degrees and so beautiful.

Aug. 25, 1985... It's strange, but when Mom and Dad are gone all day, like yesterday, I feel half mad when they return. The truth is that I'm not mad, I'm only in need of some conversation. I need to tell someone about my concerns, or at least have someone around. I do want them to go out; they need to get away. I had the runs; I'm rather amazed also, by my ever-growing shape. . . it's hideous! And I have tons of water retention. Oh, well! It wasn't my best day; I wrote all day, anyway.

Sept. 11, 1985... The Chevette has been sold. I should get a refund on my insurance, too. The girl came with her boyfriend to pick up "her" car last night. Dad took a personal check for it; I wish he would have said "NO" to it, but they are probably OK. If not, I just sold my car for \$100. (Great)

I couldn't sleep for a while, because I was worried about the check. So... I got up and clipped my toe nails! (What therapy.) (And it didn't cost a cent.)

Today it is 70 degrees, sunny, a slight breeze, ah! I also have the check in my account. Dad phoned to see how much of a refund I'd receive on my insurance. . . it's just \$50. Not exactly half of what I paid for the 6 months, but they're not giving up anything!

I found the 4th and 5th grade postcards I sent to Mom and Dad from my camp. They will go in my book.

Yesterday Margaret and I went to lunch. At the cash register the guy said, "Looks like it'll be in the winter." I couldn't figure out what he meant for a second, but then I realized that he thought I was pregnant. I said I had a "liver ailment" and that many made the same assumption. It never floors me at the time, but later I have to admit that it bothers me. I start thinking about it; I get mad at myself because there's no way for me to look stylish. I used to try to belt big tops and "blouse" them over pants. Now, it looks ridiculous. I never thought I could get this big; having to wear maternity clothes and such. . . but then, I never thought a lot of things. Swelling legs, going from a 31-1/2 inch span (in my middle) in the fall of '83 to a 39 inch middle now. (Normally I had a 24 inch waist... I thought I was enormous then!) It's funny, but it just keeps on going, and you have to accept it. At least my face is OK and I can enjoy some things. I can see and hear and am reasonably mobile. . .and I've known what it is to feel physically normal. Some people never do.

Sept. 13 through 15... Weather has been gorgeous! I've been able to sit outside. It always inspires me to write poetry. One is about how life never really changes.

Continuity

The tenth morn of December
I was severed from my mother's life,
Forced into a hostile world
And with a cry, drew my breath.
Christmas came, then New Year's Eve,
Yet nothing really changed.
Days passed by, and soon, years too.
My eyes focused on the world
Which offered more than it received.
I found love, and later, fear...
Then grief, and peace of mind;
I witnessed death and mourned for life. . .
Yet nothing really changed.
The world revolved and buried sorrow
In a mask of time.
Now I am weak,
The refuge of malignant death,
But still the seasons flicker on.
Leaves adrift, float to the ground,
While acorns burrow in the earth;
Remnants of life
And the hope thereof
Together meld as one.
When I depart,
Life slows not...
And nothing will really change.

Lauren Isaacson
September 15, 1985

In the trees, cool breezes sing,
Directing leaves with steady gusts
And urging forth pure harmony
From swaying, fully laden limbs.
No sweeter sound could ride the wind
Than gently rustling woodland brush;
I drink the soothing music
Playing lightly on the wind,
And instantly I feel refreshed,
For whispering leaves wipe cares away
And liberate imprisoned minds.

Lauren Isaacson
September 16, 1985

Sept. 29, 1985... I have been so swollen lately. My middle hurts when I lay too long; getting up helps. I have the runs; couldn't go to Dubuque for Mom's Sept. birthday; couldn't go to Margaret's to celebrate her mother's birthday. I finally spent 2 hours of the afternoon just sleeping. I finished a poem I was writing about Norm. It follows...

Eternal Bond

Captured on a dismal morn
When winter's cloak
Concealed the sun,
My brother journeyed
From the earth,
Perhaps to grasp another time,
Or rest beneath the heaven's stars.
Perfect sorrow filtered deep
Within my mournful soul;
With sightless eyes
I scanned my mind,
Rendering memories whole. . .
And images, like broken shards,
I struggled to restore
Lest any trait be left behind
And thus, in death, forever die.
Crippling grief and grim despair
Withdrew its shadow from my heart,
For in myself, his life went on;
The steadfast and eternal bond
Which formed in life
Failed not in death.
We laughed, we smiled,
We understood,
And though I now must walk alone,
To loneliness I'll not succumb.

Lauren Isaacson
September 29, 1985

Oct. 17, 1985... It's great this time of year, although melancholic. I sat outside most of the day. Then, as I watched this "mite" of a squirrel, he struggled furiously to retain his grasp on a branch. He frantically succeeded in attaining a safer location; he was noticeably upset. It inspired a poem. I wrote one the day before; I'm not overly thrilled about it, but that's life.

Autumnal Essence

Splendor, bold and riotous,
Bespeaks the grand autumnal mood.
Blackbirds cackle unrestrained
Among the trembling golden wood
While agitated squirrels bury nutmeats
'Neath the fragrant turf.
Fruit trees, heavy-laden, bend
Their branches toward the earth,
Spilling wealth from fertile lands
Into eager, out-stretched hands.

Lauren Isaacson
October 16, 1985

Ascent To Reality

From beneath the autumn leaves
I watched a youthful, auburn squirrel
Leap cautionless from limb to limb.
With no rival but himself
To test his acrobatic feats,
He bethought he'd mastered all
And, bathing in a pool of pride,
Washed apprehension from his mind.
The tiny sprite performed his dance
From tree to wind-tossed tree,
Alive with joy and pure delight...
He knew no pain, no discontent,
And thus immersed, called life a dream.
But noonday warmth soon disappeared
And golden rays slashed through the trees.
The sun cast spotlights on the lawn
And made the trees let go their crown.
Darkness stole the crimson glow
And, as through his domain he flew,
The squirrel ran before the night,
Thinking he could out-wit time.
On agile feet, both swift and sure,
He sailed into the shadowed trees,
Yet missed his mark in failing light,
Betrayed by faulty, youthful pride.
Catapulting toward the earth,
The wind reached out and caught his pride
And blew a limb within his grasp
To buffer his naivete'.
Life was not a blissful dream;
He panted in unsteady breaths,
Drawing strength from wisdom gained
Through time and circumstance.
Ascending toward the lofty heights,
His vision was renewed. . .
The world became Reality
Both beautiful and cruel,
While he transformed to earthly size,
A minute parcel of himself
Yet elemental to the whole.

Lauren Isaacson
October 17, 1985

Daydreams

Today I reserve for dreaming,
For dismissing the hectic world,
For unleashing my burdens unto the wind
Where, no longer imprisoned,
They'll haunt me no more.
If only today, how high I shall fly!
Soaring amid the fragrant breeze,
Adrift with the blackbirds
And fluttering leaves,
My freedom will beckon me
Rise higher still
And my spirit, unshackled,
Will lounge on the clouds
To create wistful visions
Of heaven above.
But daydreams must end
With the red setting sun
And, like autumn leaves,
Succumb to decay.
For today, dreams exist, not for 'ever,
Sustaining when all else runs foul.
Dreams, alone, are the soul food of God. . .
The ambrosia of heaven on earth.

Lauren Isaacson
October 24, 1985

Oct. 27, 1985... Todd and Debbie came yesterday. We had a wiener roast for lunch; it was quite appropriate as the day was crisp and clear.

Today, after lunch, I asked Mom how long they would be staying; she thought I was complaining and said, "sometimes I wish it was all over for me so I wouldn't have to listen to all of this; everyone thinks only of themselves, yes, everyone is so selfish." When I recovered slightly I said that I hadn't meant it that way, but that I was scared about getting too tired... I didn't want to say that, it sounded selfish, too.

Too often I have experienced hurtful things when there is a visit; while one can forgive and try to start anew with each visit, I find it impossible to forget. When hurtful statements are made, that person is still the same; there is still that part lurking behind the individual and it becomes difficult to know how "genuine" is their countenance.

Mom apologized for her earlier statement; she was tired and rather depressed. She said she "hurt" for so many people, she felt she was falling apart. I had been so afraid of hurting her with my confidences, afraid I wouldn't have anyone to confide in; I felt incredibly alone. I was so happy she came up; I don't think I could have handled such desperate loneliness. It was great to have a hug.

Nov. 5, 1985... I've neglected this journal; Dad made a frame for my pointalism of the Grand Canyon. I have it behind the sofa on the south wall; I really like it. Other events: Mom and Dad replaced Lynn's stone at the cemetery with a large stone for our entire family; Lynn, Norm, Mom, Dad, and me. They had not told me before, but I've been wondering; when they talk with me about death it is so different for it is spoken with love and deep caring.

We made up a memorial service for me from my writings; I have to select the poems I would like and then it will be complete.

Nov. 7, 1985... The "runs" again, but I was able to sit outside by afternoon. I wore the "Tahoe" sweatshirt Jon had sent some time ago plus my corduroy coat. It was about right. I wrote a poem while sitting there.

I wonder if I'll accomplish all that I truly wish to before I die. . . My book is progressing; I keep writing poetry too, so I have a lot done; a little at a time, and one day at a time! I'd love to finish the quilt and also calligraph some of my poems.

Whispering Pines

I heard the pine trees gossip
To the passing northern winds,
Disclosing facts quite true, yet low,
In hurried gusts and whispered blows.
"The hardwoods lost their haughty glow. . .
Amazing how fast glamour goes!
Now they're merely sapless sticks
Bereft of life, 'twould seem...
They look so gnarled, so thin and sick
Beside our evergreen!"

Lauren Isaacson
November 7, 1985

Nov. 22, 1985... The 17th I began to run a temp; it continued and by Mon. eve was 103 degrees. Mom tried giving me a cool bath. It was a "real thrill" trying to get down in the tub. (I fell in, and barely made it getting out... I have no strength in my arms or legs). Mom has been sleeping upstairs since I got sick. Food "sticks" so that I would welcome losing it. Mom has been serving me gingerale; it helps. I've lost weight. Noodles are the only food that appeals to me; it's at least a start.

I've not worked on my book since Nov. 7th. Many changes have taken place; even with my weight loss I can no longer wear my beloved mink coat; it's 2 and more like 3 inches from even touching right to left! And to think I was once but 24 inches around the waist! Sharon looks good with her disciplined weight loss. What emotional problems there are to be reckoned with in this life!

Dec. 17, 1985... I didn't elaborate on my 24th birthday; I should fill in the days. There were 30 birthday cards in all. I hadn't expected it, since 24 is a rather "blah" age, and also, I keep thinking the cancer situation will become old hat. I guess I was very wrong. Thursday I walked with Mom to Bev's Xmas Coffee; just 4 houses away. I got tired, then so hot; I could hardly walk home. Mom had wanted to take the car, but I would have felt like a fool for such a short trip. She was right; it was very tiring.

Saturday Mom had a special dinner planned so all could see the new addition to the Isaacson clan. It didn't work out so well; the guest of honor left!

Dec. 23, 1985... We enjoyed a lovely dinner at Chet and Margaret's. The nausea almost spoiled my evening, but it finally passed (whew!). There were just the 3 of them, the 3 of us, and Les. It's better without all the weird things that happen when too many are invited!

Dec. 24, 1985... CHRISTMAS EVE DAY. . . I felt good today. Jon came over around 2:00 and stayed until 4:00. We stayed downstairs by the Christmas tree. He wrapped up a 6-pack of orange-flavored mineral water for me. I had ordered a boomerang for him; and so ended our Christmas.

The family Christmas was great, as usual. Les came, too. We had Cornish Hens, potatoes, stuffing, bread and waldorf salad; excellent!

Afterwards, we read the Xmas story and a few other readings; then we had our exchange.

Dec. 25, 1985... Todd and Debra came for today. Our big meal was at noon. Mom fixed a turkey breast with all the trimmings. We had our gift exchange in the afternoon. Todd got a kick out of his "reality mug" and a Far Side daily calendar.

Dec. 27, 1985... I'm getting sick again, temp of 101... arhythmia heart action lasted 12 hours. This was an illness of long duration. I stayed upstairs. . . I had to waken Mom, (she has been sleeping upstairs). We tried the deep breathing, plus a few other things. I finally took a valium and tried to relax. Mom called the doctor as early as she dared; he called in a prescription for a heart regulator.

Jan. 1, 1986... Mom made Cornish Hens again for just the 3 of us. I enjoyed the dinner so. We watched the Vienna concert at night.

Jan. 11, 1986... I stay upstairs now, coming down only to have Mom wash my hair using the spray on the kitchen sink. The steps are such a drag, and I like being near all the things I need. I'm so glad I have the upstairs apartment.

I decided to get a color T.V.; Dad picked a 13 in. Sylvania with remote control. I love it. Dad installed an aerial today.

I ordered a lambswool mattress cover; it will cushion these bones of mine. I also ordered a book on decorating, 2 pillows, and a seat for my toilet that will raise me up about 5 inches. (I'm aging fast!)

Margaret came over with a lovely bouquet of 5 red roses interlaced with baby's breath. I gave her 2 covered mugs for her birthday. It's fun to order all these gifts for others. Scott wrote me a thank you letter for his Far Side T-shirt. I was so glad to get the mail.

I talked with Mom at night and blew out some more frustration. I get so angry when I think about people who try to restrict me through their high pressure persuasiveness. Just remembering past grievances evokes terrific anger. I feel so vulnerable and have such a lack of control anymore that anyone's pressure is a direct violation of my inner self. I don't have the strength to fight; I get bent out of shape because if I did what they did, it wouldn't be so easily forgiven. Why is it that people feel sorry for those who continually screw up their lives. "It just ain't fittin'!"

Jan. 24, 1986... I ordered a mini wash stand for outside of the bathroom, a neat basket and also Mom and Dad are going to see what is available in chairs and recliners as I'm having trouble getting out of my old green velvet rocker. We have ordered an egg-crate mattress for me; I hope it works.

Jan. 25, 1986... Mom and Dad went out and looked for a recliner; they found a great one at Banworth and Udelhoven for about \$400. They brought home a photo and swatch to show me. I decided it would be fine and they went back in the Chevy truck to pick it up. It looks great in my room and is "Oh, so comfortable." It's a wall-away and won't need to be "out" so far in the room.

I wrote to Todd explaining why I have such a distaste for phones, and do not wish to have one in my room, my desire to be alone more, and my hope that he will not be so troubled over these things. Sharon does come, I know, but we have been close now for many years; Todd did not come home but once or twice a year after finding work in other areas. He gets so upset about my illness (its incurable nature); he calls doctors all over the country to inquire concerning various treatments. I hope this will help him to accept my situation.

Jan. 26, 1986... I had another dream about Norm; I recall I sat in his lap and was worried I'd be too heavy. I was so happy to see him.

I went to sleep with the T.V. on; I wakened at 4:00 a.m. and turned it off. I was down today; so tired and weak. This contributes to depression. After crying a bit and talking to Mom I felt better. More and more I need to be free of visitors. Dad came up later and we talked, which was real nice.

Jan. 27, 1986...The egg-crate mattress and the high toilet seat came today.

Feb. 4, 1986... I'm feeling pretty good these past few days. It's a welcome change. My dreams are so horrible, though. I almost wondered if I'd screamed aloud. One was about rodents that were attacking me and biting my fingers.

I sent for an oak T.V. swivel; it works great. I've chosen more of my slides so Dad can take them in for more prints.

Mar. 5, 1986... I've written through my high school years and now I'm in the anorexic stage and Black Hawk College. It's so hard to work. I'm either too tired or so uncomfortable. My mid-section is huge. It hangs below my bikini underwear. When I sit I must be so straight or it's uncomfortable. Sleeping has become more difficult, also. I get up twice or more most nights. . . sometimes to go the bathroom, other times my hips hurt (I'm so thin), or my ears pound until I sit up and swallow. Sometimes I can't breathe and have to get up and position my pillows on an incline so I can breathe easier.

Mom permed my hair again. It gives it body. I can use the curling iron in the morning if it's needed. I feel better about my looks when it's this way.

I haven't written in my journal for so long. Valentines were abundant.

The wall behind the sofa is complete; I've 4 photos ready to hang when Dad gets the 9" x 12" photo of the shack in the Smokies. I have finished putting my other photos in an album; at least they are no longer loose.

Mar 29, 1986... Dad and Mom installed the air conditioner in my room. (It got up to 78 degrees!) They're putting the other one in my living room window. For awhile, I was afraid Dad was against the idea and it sort of choked me up because I began to think I'd be enclosed in one room for the next five months. It wasn't a great thought. Last year I could get outside and roam around. Now, it's being upstairs and that's about all. I felt stupid; I cry about the least thing anymore. I'm so weak, I lose control easily.

I'm going to work on my quilt, so Mom set up the portable Singer on Dad's high machine shop stool; I'll sit on the bed when I sew.

I've been taking Lasix 4 times a day; it seems to work better that way. I take the Aldactone in between. It's difficult to walk. When I sit, the water drains into the current position; when I get up, it feels like my skin will rip.

I had problems sleeping until we put pillows under the egg-crate mattress so I was propped up on a steep incline. I couldn't breathe before.

Mar. 31, 1986... A great day, (AMAZINGLY). I worked on my quilt for a little while.

May 5, 1986... It's been a long while since I last wrote herein. I guess I didn't find the energy and the will to do it before now. Days are often so much the same.

I had a few physical set-backs through the months; one "flu" episode nearly had us digging my grave. I really wondered if that would be it for me and this world. I had to get the elevated (frame-style) commode from Bev Verstraete. They had purchased it for her father.

It was awful. I was so weak; I couldn't get up from the toilet; even with my raised seat. I tried and tried, but Mom had to help before I made it. Even with her help, getting up was nearly impossible. I was so scared. It had been getting progressively more difficult; I guess I saw it coming, but it's still a blow when it finally happens to you. It's so demeaning. I kept wondering what would've happened if I couldn't get up and was alone; but then, of course, I'm not left alone anymore.

I lost a lot of weight; my face is just skeletal now. Every time I get a "bug" I lose more strength and can never fully regain it. The thought of total incapacitation is rather horrifying. It's bad enough now.

I have accidents in my undies, because sometimes I can't walk fast enough to get there, and have no butt to pinch the rectum closed and hold it back. It's never major; just a spot, but I hate it just the same. I wear a pad for security now.

The 4 Lasix and 2 Aldacton daily don't really do the job. By evening I can hardly breathe, so I can no longer recline in my chair. Dad has made a high platform and secured it with screws so I can just turn from my bed and sit down. The porta-potty is across from it. My world is slowly closing in. The water presses both my heart and lungs causing my heart to flutter from the pressure. Sleep has been difficult of late, I have to sit up on the edge of my bed for a time; then I lay down again. It's better by morning.

At least my foot is better; it was hurting like crazy... I must have hurt it due to water retention (?).

Every time I lose more health it's like some big milestone has been crossed. First it was the overheating, then going to the bathroom restricted the daily walks and other outings; then I had to remain upstairs... then the toilet... and on and on. Each time was such a defeat. I cried about having to stay upstairs because I wondered if I was just "throwing in the towel." Then I cried about not being able to get up from the toilet because it scared me so!

May 19, 1986... Last night Mom and Dad brought pizza upstairs. It was nice. Sharon came for a Saturday bus excursion to a shopping area near Chicago. Mom, Sharon and Rosalind all went. Mom brought me a towel for my wash stand and a nifty wall basket with a lid.

Sharon's going to be coming more often; I'm glad. In some respects, she's like a second mother, yet different too. We share ideas and interests and can talk well.

I've been awfully fatigued lately. All day I can barely keep my eyes open, and writing is an incredible chore. I find myself nodding in the middle of thoughts; it's very distressing when I consider the time limit imposed on my effort drawing closer as the days fold away... naturally, my life has a hesitant grasp on time; I do wish to finish my literary endeavor.

Sleep at night is difficult, which does not sound logical after the fact that I fight to stay awake during the day, but so be it. It's not mine to ask "why."...

June 24, 1986... Such indignities. Dependency shouldn't have to be one, yet it is. And the strange thing is that I feel I am losing myself... slowly... as life trickles from my body, but still, with all that has been and will be lost, every so often I catch a glimmer of myself... in a gesture, a smile, and realize that the core is intact despite the withering exterior. Perhaps the core is that undefinable part of oneself that lives beyond earthly existence.

June 27, 1986... I'm beginning to understand the meaning of intolerable. Sometimes, any more, I feel like a person tottering on sanity's limits. As my weakness increases, my capabilities decrease; I now not only have confined myself to my room, but to one small quadrant thereof, in which I am surrounded by my bed, my chair, my T.V. and (of course), my toilet. At least my mind is still free. Perhaps it will remain so as long as I allow myself to cry and feel. Last night was the first time I ever felt scared of life.

June 29, 1986... Tonight is loud with thunder... the deep, sharp rumbling that shakes the house as if to remind the world that it is alive. It is not subtle, but in it's brazen clap, I can find a reason to rejoice; I live in the shadows of a wondrous and beautiful world, yet thunder is one element of nature from which I have not been excluded, for it penetrates walls.

July 9, 1986... It seems that I cry every day now. Overall, my life is a discouraging mess. I'm just too tired to write. . . and scared to try to sleep. Blast.

July 11, 1986... (Fri.) Yesterday Sharon sent me a carnation flower arrangement. . . 2 pink carnations, greens and baby's breath. Real pretty.

It's been getting more and more difficult at home. Last night Mom and Dad had to lift my legs into bed; Mom is sleeping in my queen-size bed right with me so that she can help me get back in after using the toilet. It's tough to sleep, and I'm afraid I won't be able to get out of bed... my arms and legs are virtually useless. They're like sticks. We had some tough conversation.

(Mother's note). . . Laurie wanted me to call Hospice and arrange for someone to come to the home and explain the various programs available. I did so. Laurel Anderson was willing to come on Saturday morning, but I felt this was not within her scheduled working hours and deferred the appointment to Monday morning at 11:00 A.M.

Laurel Anderson came promptly on July 14 and we climbed the stairs to Laurie's hide-a-way. There were many questions; if a contract was signed, could the patient refuse food. . . would the "Concern for the Dying" contract be respected in that no artificial means would be used to keep the patient alive... would medication for pain be of the type that would not sustain life. . . all of these must be answered before Laurie would want to consider signing a contract with Hospice. In the conversation, answers were given, but always with one addition; it would be hoped that the patient could return to her home. HOPE was no longer a part of Laurie's vocabulary. Just a few short weeks ago, it had been there. She had not been wearing earrings for some time, and noticed that one of the openings had begun to close. She had asked for my assistance in piercing it again. Now she wanted an end to her existence. There was not one position in which she could be comfortable; her desire was to find comfort in the hospital bed's maneuverability.

Satisfied that her wishes could be fulfilled, Laurie signed the contract. Her remaining fear was that Laurel Anderson and the hospital staff would think her a wimp!

July 14, 1986... (her last entry)... I made the decision today... I am going into Hospice. No more fun... no more nuthin'

The ambulance service came at two o'clock. Through all of this ordeal it was a comfort to have Sharon, Laurie's older sister, with us. The two young men who brought Laurie downstairs were

cheerful and so very careful. The stretcher had been fashioned into a chair position because of the limited space going down the steps. Upon arriving outside, they positioned her so that she could remain seated, but with legs extended. Not having been outside since December, and not being able to walk the distance to a window for many weeks, Laurie was fascinated by the beauty of the warm summer day.

As I rode in the front with the driver he noted an unusual odor and both men were quite concerned. It was decided they not turn on the siren and proceed at a faster pace because Sharon and Dad were following in the family car; they didn't want to cause further trauma! The ambulance made it to the hospital; it was found to be in need of a "mechanical doctor," but it had fulfilled its mission.

The room was done in vivid color, not of the old vintage beige. As Laurie was helped into bed, she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror; she had not visibly known how she looked for some time. It caused both disbelief and pain. Now came the true test. She was manipulated into several positions; none seemed to help. As the nurse left the room, Laurie finally gave vent to tears. During all of this, she had been a true soldier. It was too much! She now felt she had made a big mistake! Could we bring her back home? It was so little to ask, and yet we knew we could not immediately ask to have her returned. The hospital staff was in transition; the next shift was coming in. This alone added to the confusion, but it also brought help. A veteran of Hospice entered; with a multitude of pillows, plus more manipulating, she was able to bring the comfort Laurie had longed for!

Later in the evening, that same veteran came in to talk and to advise Laurie that it would be best to accept liquids rather than no nourishment at all. We asked concerning the Lazy Boy and the porta-pot from home. Both would add to her comfort. Sharon had left for Dubuque before knowing that "bed comfort" had come to her sister, so I called her as soon as I knew she was in her home. It was very difficult to leave the hospital that night, but I had grown so tired over the past weeks; I selfishly did go home.

Les and Dad placed the Lazy Boy in close proximity to Laurie's bed. It was a welcome change. The staff informed me that Laurie had talked most of the night. She had been given a bath in a portable tub; quite a contraption! I had brought several photo albums as well as photo files and a lovely volunteer was seated by Laurie as I left for my 11:00 appointment with the dentist.

After lunch, Laurie remarked that a tray had been brought with eggs and bacon, a roll and fruit, but she had refused it. It had looked so tempting, but she was determined to follow her own plan. The day passed uneventfully. That evening her cousin, Gary, stopped by for a visit. Upon his leaving, she kidded with him. Later, I went to another section of the hospital to fulfill her desire for frozen bar-type fruit juice. Dad and I left around 11:30.

July 16. . . Laurie was seated in the Lazy Boy when we arrived. Her breakfast tray had her requested liquid diet, untouched. I wanted to help her but she felt too nauseous. She wanted to sit on the edge of the bed. We sat together for over twelve minutes; I, with my arm around her back to brace her, she with her head leaning against mine. She asked if I would help with just a sponge bath this time. We had agreed. The nurse entered and wanted to begin preparing for her bath. Laurie just shook her head and said that she felt too sick. She asked to be seated in her chair; the nurse declined that wish. She wanted to have Laurie lie down. We used the draw sheet and Dad and I lifted her as far to the head of the bed as was possible. She asked to be raised to a sitting position. Each time we pushed the controls she indicated she wanted it higher. As she reached the highest level she looked at Dad and me and said, "Hey, you guys, I'm going!" Seconds later she was gone. It was what she wanted! It was finally over!

EPILOGUE

written by Todd Alan Isaacson

As a once beautiful young lady saw the torture of her own body, and witnessed the relentless expansion of a cruel weed that demanded to claim her life; a new beauty could be seen through her determined spirit:

Soft, gentle eyes fully accepted the losing battle of life on earth, and glowed a tired eternal sweetness that transcended time itself.

The timeless beauty of Lauren, a spirit set free to soar in the love of God forever; this is the joyous gift that will bless us forever.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THROUGH THESE EYES ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™’s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by

the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.