

1COURAGE COMES TO YOU

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Author's Note

Memoir is inescapably egotistical, but my initial motivation in embarking on mine was to preserve memories of people who gave me immeasurable support during a four-month hospital stay when I was thirteen. The retina in my right eye had detached, which, because I'd never seen with my left, put my vision at risk. This episode, "Courage Comes to You," describes that time. It is an excerpt from my unpublished memoir, *Spiral to Edinburgh*, that takes me through my first twenty years. It's fortunate that I wrote a rough draft in 1978 to store memories that would be long gone had I begun today.

"Courage Comes to You" is introduced by a few paragraphs from the memoir's preceding episode that I here call "Prelude." A few more notes will help. At the time, my family and I had been living in the northern English city of Sheffield for three years. I'd spent my first year or so in Sheffield pining away for London, where we'd lived before, but I was at long last feeling settled. Shortly before these events, my father had accepted a position at his employer's New York headquarters.

I was five when partial sight was diagnosed and I started wearing glasses. Before, things I thought I'd seen in the distance, such as a blue railway bridge, could only have been vague images, often reconstructed from pictures in books that I could see close-up.

All through childhood, I'd had to avoid violent movements of my head to safeguard my eyesight, a habit of caution that I came to believe made me fearful. As this excerpt opens, I'm desperate to prove myself. It wasn't just about cautiousness. When I was seven, I'd spent five months in Tadworth, the country branch of a London hospital, for leg surgery. Every time my parents visited, I begged them to take me home as they got up to leave. Hospitalized again at the age of ten, I'd fought hospital staff as they were giving me anesthetic. I also had a history of running away, most recently from a boarding school named Exhall Grange, two years before this excerpt begins.

Elsewhere on this website, I make a case for fiction by blind authors while noting the relative abundance of memoirs by blind people. Still, memoir has a place. Even here, I employ fiction-writing techniques, especially when reconstructing conversations.

The one real name I have retained is Mr. Hudson, the Moorfields surgeon, who died in 2003. Otherwise, I've changed names and biographical details. Even so, I like to think the character of the people appearing here comes through. After all this time, hardly any of them will remember me, and some have died. But with a few obvious exceptions, they helped ease me through a transition. This piece is dedicated to them.

PRELUDE

In the school playground, I looked around as if for the first time at the rain-sodden grass, white-gray concrete and sepia tree trunks. Mum and Dad had given me a 35-millimeter color camera for my thirteenth birthday, and I spent a lot of time studying the photographs I took. They were training me to observe details not just in my prints, but also in the world around me.

Clarity was no doubt heightened by my awareness that these weeks would be my last in England. The gravity of the move was sinking in. At the very moment of leaving, I finally had a sense of belonging in school.

Acceptance begat ribbing and ribbing begat pushing and shoving. My entire life I'd been warned to avoid knocks to the head, but I'd come to associate my habit of caution when crossing streets, walking through buses, even getting in and out of chairs, with running away and my fusses in the hospital. All caution had done was make me fearful.

Now, during the hour-long lunch breaks, I'd join in brawls with my new friends on the lawn beyond the playground. As with my brother Tim, I couldn't run fast, but I was strong. Unlike with Tim, this was for fun. Once I pushed a boy, or one pushed me, I'd grapple him. No matter how the fight went, I held on to prevent him from escaping and hurling taunts from a distance. It was hard work, but the hardest part was knowing when to stop. An exhausted grunt often sufficed. Otherwise, a few words of capitulation were required: "All right, I've had enough" or "Okay, stop." No one ever said "Please," and it would have been terrible to take a fight that far.

In the midst of a brawl I was clouted on the right temple by something hard. My opponent freed his grip and asked, "Are you all right?" I looked around. The boys playing cricket nearby stared. One was running toward me, and I spied a hard red cricket ball lying nearby in the grass.

"Yes," I said, kneeling with my hand on my head to absorb the shock. The running boy reached down to retrieve the ball and circled around back to the pitch. Their game resumed.

Reading in bed that night, I noticed a curving edge of shadow in the bottom right corner of my eye. I closed the book and turned off the light. In the dark, what had been shadow glowed yellow. I figured it would go away by morning.

But it stayed with me, in the corner of my vision, all next day. I went on as usual, except I avoided the area where brawling was tolerated. It was Friday. The shadow had a whole weekend to get rid of itself.

After dinner that night, I got on my Raleigh and rode off along Ringinglow Road to the countryside. The sky had the look of a leisurely northern summer evening, but the days were getting shorter. Tomorrow would be the first day of autumn.

Cycling on and on wasn't driving away the curving shadow. I turned back, impatient now to be home.

When I closed my book and switched off the light that night, the crescent in the corner of my vision again glowed yellow. It wasn't going the way of other ailments.

At breakfast, insisting it was nothing, I told Mum and Dad.

COURAGE COMES TO YOU

1

I sat in an examination chair, one of several facing an equal number of ophthalmological charts across the room. I knew the room well. On weekdays, the usual time for appointments, a crowd of patients would be waiting their turn, sitting on benches between the examination chairs and the charts. This Saturday morning, I was the only patient.

A white-coated doctor probed my eye with a piercing light. I strained as he instructed me to look up and down, left and right. He called over another doctor, who probed some more. Then they stood and discussed their findings with my parents.

The noises of adults speaking softly came from above, but I was intent on the diagonals of oblong tiles in the floor. I'd long been intrigued by how the right-pointing tiles stayed parallel as they slotted against the left-pointing tiles, which maintained their own parallelism. I'd never checked how this pattern resolved itself against the walls. One day I must find out before beating the hasty exits my mother and I made after hospital appointments.

“We’re going to need to admit him.”

I took in the muffled discussion overhead. I gleaned that something had gone wrong with the retina.

“How soon?” my father said.

“Immediately.”

In my mind I rehearsed what was about to happen. Mum and Dad would take me upstairs. I'd walk into the ward and be shown my bed. Portable curtains would be wheeled around and I'd change into pajamas. I told myself to go through each step mechanically, one by one. Nothing must upset me, not even the strangeness of going to bed at noon.

“Are you ready?” Mum said. Dad hovered beside her. From my chair I looked up, eyes brimming with tears I was determined not to shed.

After my parents and a flurry of nurses left, I lay in bed and looked around the eye ward I'd been in three years before. Two rows of beds faced each other, their uniform flat green bedspreads and gleaming, turned-back sheets instilling serenity. The heads of the seven other

patients lay still on their pillows. Past the bed on my left was the opening to the corridor. To my right, beyond two more beds, the windows looked out to passing clouds.

The bed across and to the left had been mine three years ago. I visualized the ten-year-old me, a patch on his left eye, sitting over there on the chair at the side. I felt separate from him, then so connected I couldn't stand it. Since that time, I'd tried to convince myself that fighting the anesthetic had made sense. But Tadworth, Exhall Grange and so many other failures always got in the way. At least, knowing staff turnover, no one else from that era was likely to be here to remember.

A nurse, wearing a mauve dress under the universal white smock, headed through the entrance for my bed. "My name is Nurse Reynolds. I have a patch I'm going to put over your right eye."

With no vision in my left eye, it meant I wouldn't be able to see. How matter-of-fact she was.

I removed my glasses, and she taped on a patch of cotton wool and gauze.

"I'll put your glasses in their case and leave them in your night table here."

I listened to her movements as she retrieved the glasses case from the table top and put it inside the drawer.

"All set," she said.

Light still got through the patch, turning the white cotton wool green. It was pleasant, even exotic, a haze I fancied was the color of an Amazonian jungle.

I recalled that on Saturday afternoons, hospital patients received radio broadcasts of home football matches that were not broadcast to the general public. My team, Sheffield United, was playing at home today. I hunted for the remembered thick wire and found the pillow speaker

draped over the bed railing. Pressing it against my ear, I selected the music station because it regularly reported the time. At three o'clock I sank back into the green haze and waited for the announcer to pull me into the game.

Next day my parents drove me to the home of Miss Watkins, a surgeon, and so not addressed as Doctor. For the trip, I was told to remove the eye patch, put on my glasses, change into street clothes and get into a wheelchair. Dad steered me onto the lift and through a maze of corridors to our car. The roads were Sunday quiet.

Even at her home, Miss Watkins had optical instruments. I placed my chin on the usual cold metal rest, which she raised to her level, and peered into my eye from behind a bright light.

She paused in her examination and her face moved away. "Any idea what might have happened? Any bumps? Any violent motion?"

"I got hit on the head by a cricket ball on Thursday."

I hoped she didn't inquire further. If she found out I'd been brawling, she'd surely blame me for whatever had gone wrong with my eye.

"One never knows," she said. "It could be anything or nothing."

She ushered me to another room, where I sat by myself so she could talk to Mum and Dad.

As my parents and I were putting on our coats, Miss Watkins said, "We're going to give you lots of pillows and sit you up in bed. You'll stay like that all the time." She spoke with a posh accent that, another time, would have made me giggle.

"Except when I'm sleeping." I didn't know why I felt the need to clarify; it was obvious.

"Including when you're sleeping."

I stared at her.

“Your lower retina has detached. That calls for your head to be held up. You must also keep it absolutely still.”

I stopped buttoning my coat and tried to take it in. To stay motionless in one position, a sitting position, for twenty-four hours a day was unthinkable. But Miss Watkins was looking steadily at me. I latched onto her failure to mention my original concern. “But I can stop wearing the patch, right?”

“No. The nurses will put it back on when you return to the ward.”

We drove off, but Dad stopped the car down the road. Though they’d seemed composed at Miss Watkins’, Mum and Dad looked grave as they turned to me in the back seat. “We have bad news,” Dad said. “Miss Watkins thinks you’re likely to lose your sight.”

There’d be an operation. It probably wouldn’t succeed. Even if it did, I’d lose color perception. I looked away at mansions half concealed by foliage. The sky was violet.

Dad put the car in gear and drove on. At the hospital there was no wheelchair at the entrance, which freed me to walk through the corridors. When Mum and Dad left and I was back in bed, memory of their anguished faces was a knot in my stomach.

2

Miss Watkins postponed the operation until my eye was “ready,” whatever that meant.

By the middle of the first week, I realized how much I’d become immersed in ward life when I thought of school exercise books, the novels and biographies I’d been reading and the model planes I’d made and scattered around my bedroom. It all felt so long ago. In the morning, I was no longer getting up, getting dressed, rushing through breakfast, going to school, racing from class to class. Instead there were unhurried breakfasts on a tray and passive washes in bed.

There was no walking, turning on my side or face-down, no lying straight. I perched high on pillows piled behind and under me. There were no trips to the toilet. Nurses brought urine bottles and bedpans whose embarrassment had to be shrugged off as they were handed back. My only responsibilities were to answer questions and to shift this way and that as the nurses pulled sheets beneath me.

When I talked to people from behind the patch, I listened for reactions I'd previously detected in faces. The nearest I'd come before to these disembodied conversations was speaking on the hallway telephone at home. But the telephone had been for relaying messages to Mum or Dad, not chatting. Even then my gaze had wandered to the cars passing outside the windows or our cat, Monty, slinking downstairs.

Sometimes, if no one was near, I'd lift the corner of my patch. Curiosity was only natural, wasn't it? Activity around the dinner trolley, reaction to a patient's joke and, above all, a nurse's arrival: all had to be witnessed, however dimly. Though I couldn't put on my glasses, my imagination transformed blurs of color into recognizable shapes, just as I'd looked at the blue railway bridge of my early childhood.

3

In the bed to my left was Philip, a genial lad from Derbyshire. Before changing and getting into bed that first Saturday, I'd reached down to shake hands.

"How old are you?" he'd asked.

"Thirteen."

"I'm glad there's going to be someone here my age."

Philip, also confined to bed, engaged in a steady banter with the nurses.

“Nurse, I need orangeade, please.”

“But I just gave you some, Philip.”

“I need more.”

“I’ll get you more when I’ve finished changing the beds,” she said, on the verge of laughter.

“Thank you, nurse.”

The soda would arrive in minutes.

He was at it again. “Nurse, would you please wipe my forehead with a damp cloth?” The nurse, who adored him, soon returned with a cloth to mop his brow.

“What about mine?” I called, with plaintive jealousy.

“I’ll do yours next, love,” she said from the other side of Philip’s bed. She kept her promise, but though it was nice to have her hand and the moist cloth on me, I felt her true affection had gone into Philip’s care.

In time, I got Philip’s methods down. My favorite nurse was Kathy Pathan, a woman with an exquisite, cheerful face from somewhere on the Indian subcontinent who wore the pale blue dress of the trainees.

“Nurse Pathan,” I called when she showed up in the ward, “would you please fix my pillows? I can’t get them straight.”

She reached behind me as I eased forward, and her chest came near to my shoulder. Whatever my motive, it was not to exploit this closeness. When she’d finished fixing the pillows, I leaned back and sighed.

“Better?” she said.

“Almost.”

“What does that mean, ‘almost’?”

“It means you could do even better, I bet.”

“Ah,” she said, and I sensed her looking appraisingly, “you look comfortable to me. I’m thinking you just want more attention.”

“I want that, too.”

“And how am I supposed to get my work done with you wanting all this attention?”

“You’re the best nurse on the ward. You can do it.”

She rapped my shoulder with her knuckles. “Settle down and listen to your radio.”

“And Nurse Pathan ...”

“What now?”

I thought fast. “Can I have more water, please?”

“But you have a lot left.”

“It’s warm.”

“All right, but I can’t do it right away.”

As with Philip’s orangeade, I didn’t have to wait long.

The nurses called it “flirting,” another word I’d never understood before. I enjoyed it, even though the nurses, who were eighteen and older, got in digs that Philip and I were mere boys.

4

Dad came one morning after the nurses had finished washing and changing the patients and beds. “We’re having an office meeting just around the corner,” he explained. I could tell he had something on his mind.

“Remember the doctors saying you wouldn’t have been able to walk but for the physiotherapy and surgical techniques they developed during the War? There’ve been other tremendous advances in medicine. They’re talking about transplanting a heart. Incredible, isn’t it? We’re going to ask Miss Watkins if it’s feasible for your mother and me each to donate an eye to you.”

The words registered on my stomach. I kept my face impassive and said nothing, applying my new determination to harness reactions until I was by myself.

Dad said, “We’ll let you know what she has to say.”

When he left, I found the foam pillow radio and listened to a music program. I forgot myself in Traffic’s “Hole in my Shoe,” yet again trying to figure out the meaning of, “All I could feel / was the hole in my shoe / Which was letting in water.” The song ended and I found myself mumbling, “I can’t let them do that.”

Into the ward came the sound of a heavy object on wheels and quiet words exchanged. I lifted the bottom left corner of my patch and confirmed the presence of the shiny metal oblong that was the lunch trolley. I lowered my knees, reached for the table and pulled it toward me. A man put my tray on the table. “Need any help?”

“Would you tell me what it is, please?”

Soup, sandwich, tea. The usual fare, but welcome.

When he left to serve another patient, I lifted the patch’s corner and located the bowl, plate and cup. I lowered the patch and took hold of the spoon, which I dipped into the soup and kept level as I brought it to my lips. Eating without looking was manageable. Well, so long as I had an advance look and everything was only inches away.

Mum with one eye gone. Dad with one eye gone.

I laid down the spoon. To distract myself from the constriction in my throat, I picked up the napkin and wiped my mouth. Tension that presaged tears pushed against my eye. Calm down, I told myself. I couldn't afford to allow emotion to put pressure on it. In case anyone was watching, I took another spoonful of soup.

Dad and Mum wouldn't give me a choice. I'd learned that at seven when, left to myself, I'd have refused the ankle operations. I had to concede my parents had done the right thing. Three years ago I'd fought the idea that the left eye could affect the right. Bad logic: both eyes had been in the same skull.

But this time I wasn't thinking of myself, was I? My only hope was Miss Watkins, the surgeon. When she'd answered my questions in her foyer, even though she'd said what I didn't want to hear, her tone suggested understanding.

I'd talk to her on her morning rounds and remind her how loss of one eye put sight at risk. It was logical. What if something went wrong with the remaining eye?

But then the conversation in my imagination got complicated. She was saying, "What about you? You're more at risk for losing your sight, and soon."

"If it comes to Mum and Dad, I don't care."

"You want to take it all on yourself? You have a lifetime ahead of you."

"Better one of us than all three."

"Your Mum and Dad are determined to do what's best for you."

How could I get her, or anyone, to take me seriously?

It was the quiet time after lunch. Nothing much was on the radio. I found myself consumed by the fundamental problem: a whole life without sight. Was it possible?

When the nurses were back to flitting in and out of the ward and the patients resumed chatting, anxiety eased. Mum arrived with a flask of tomato soup, whose sharp heat diffused my remaining tension. We chatted away, saying nothing about transplants.

When I tried to tackle the transplant problem again, with the ward lights dimmed to orange, I discovered it was even more complicated. Suppose Miss Watkins took me seriously. “Tell me what you want and I’ll try to convince your mum and dad.” How would I reply? I didn’t always feel as concerned about other people as I should. If she faced me with the choice, would I insist on no transplants or back down?

Dad brought up the subject three evenings later. “By the way, we spoke to Miss Watkins.”

He waited for my reply, so I said, “Oh?”

“Yes. She says the technology isn’t there to do eye transplants.”

“Ah.”

“She explained the retina is made up of millions of nerves all winding around each other and going back deep into the brain. To transplant an eye, they’d have to do a brain transplant. So the thinking is they’ll never be able to do eye transplants.”

“Oh.”

“Funny, isn’t it? It looks certain they’ll soon be able to transplant a human heart—the center of life. But never an eye.”

“Ah.”

The time for the operation came nine days after my admission, a Monday. That morning the other patients ate breakfast and the nurses went through their morning routine. Forbidden to eat or drink, I waited. When no one was near, I lifted the patch to take in my last moments of color, possibly of looking outside myself.

Finality of that magnitude was too much to absorb. My mind led me, instead, through the initial stages of an operation. A nurse would wheel in a curtained partition and unfold it around my bed, then she'd rub the awful-smelling solution on my arm and inject me.

Maybe all this was a trick performed by my brain. True, it had to be more than a dream because it had gone on longer than a week. It was a journey, therefore, into some quirky place where all they did was play nasty practical jokes. Big things didn't happen in ordinary lives, and mine was a very ordinary life.

Monday morning, start of a week. I should be dressed already. I should be on my way to school. I should be arriving ...

The wheels of the portable curtains turned in an audible arc toward my bed. They came close up to my pillow on the left. I listened to the wheels and energetic footsteps. The curtains rolled and squeaked as they opened out down to the foot of my bed and around to my other side. A tremor took over my lips and threatened to spread. I pinched my forearm in an effort to short-circuit it.

"Right," a nurse said. She gave me the injection, clouding the air with the disturbing pre-anesthetic odor, and left me behind the curtains with Miss Watkins' dire predictions. Long after weariness had taken over, sharp footsteps came and the curtains were yanked away from the bed. The inevitable two men got me onto a trolley. I was wheeled feet-first to the ward's opening, pushed left, swept down the corridor to the lift, bumped over the lift's threshold, raised to the

floor above, pulled back over the threshold, rolled along another corridor and left to wait some more. Then I was wheeled into the operating theater's anteroom, where a man spoke soothingly and took my wrist. I hardly felt the prick. All that remained was the futile but reflexive resistance to unconsciousness.

I woke up leaden, with no saliva. Hearing a voice, I rasped, "Can I have some water, please?"

"Not now."

"When can I?"

"In a couple of hours."

"A couple of hours?"

Time passed. No, not time. There was no time in this state. There was an event: my return downstairs to my bed on the ward.

There was a second event. Someone gave me a small cup of water. It was difficult to swallow. Contact with another substance was repellent. But I was still thirsty.

"More, please," I croaked.

"Not yet. You'll be sick."

"I don't care about being sick."

"It will be bad for your eye."

Eventually, there was more water, and still later, enough water.

Dad came at the 7:30 visiting hour. "You were in there for five and a half hours." I croaked a monosyllabic reply.

Soon it was too difficult to respond, even to listen. Weighed down by exhaustion, I had to ask, “Dad, I’m sorry, but can we stop talking for a while?” How was it possible? I loved listening to him talk.

“I’ll just sit here then, if that’s all right.”

Even Dad’s presence was a pressure. But when the end of the hour approached, I became afraid. What if I needed him during the night?

He said, “Goodnight.” He waited before standing up and leaving the ward. I pictured his tall back diminishing toward the exit. I wished I had the option of lifting the patch to look. No longer. I couldn’t even call out to him.

6

The word was not blindness; blindness was for other people I’d never met. One day in the street Mum had said, “There’s a blind man,” and told me not to look. I’d obeyed. But what had I already noticed? A man, upright, walking. Dark glasses? Cane? Dog? None of those things. Maybe I’d seen a different man who happened to be in the vicinity.

But my imagination had gone to work. This man I might or might not have seen could not himself see. There was a vagueness in his look. It had made me aware that light both came into and shone out of the eyes. Without vision, the eyes were a non-reflecting surface, like the black on the underside of my model night bombers. Those planes were sinister. Would I go through life with this dark place where there should be radiance? I couldn’t bear to be seen by the world as blank and lusterless.

The absence of images coming in was even more unthinkable. If light had gone, with it had also gone faces, motion, the changing times of day: all the clues that made sense of

everything that happened around me. I'd entered a world where only I and my imagination existed.

When night came I imagined getting out of bed and tiptoeing to the ward's windows.

In one sequence, unable to see my way around the ward, I got ignominiously lost. I was discovered and forced to explain.

In another, I reached a window and pushed it open. I climbed onto the windowsill and ...

And stayed there, sometimes sitting, sometimes hanging by my fingertips, in greater fear of jumping than living blind. Each time this scenario came around, I lay rigid. My imagined self stayed poised, unable to jump.

Then I did jump. The moment of the fall lasted ages, my heart slamming around against the hopeless loss of control in the autumn air. I changed my mind, but hit the ground, hands and knees pressed down to cushion my head and torso against the collision. First my fingers broke, then my wrists, my arms, my knees. Soon all my bones crunched in all-encompassing agony.

Then I was damned, laboring in endless fire. Huge and sinister shadows on the cave walls and ceilings warned that the devil was on the way with instruments of torture. I'd seen images of hell in films I couldn't bear to watch but watched anyway. Even these terrifying films had refused to show the devil's face, leaving it to my imagination.

During the day, aware of distant voices and movement on the ward, I thought around and around "eternity." I'd always been skeptical of religious notions like heaven, hell and forever, let alone Satan. Desolate nights on the ward were playing tricks with my certainty. I knew that when you died, you just died. There was nothing.

The word I'd recently discovered for this nothing was "oblivion." It seemed the only plausible projection of what came after death. I tried "oblivion" now. No. I'd misunderstood.

Self-awareness could never cease. Oblivion, therefore, wasn't self-forgetfulness. It was being forgotten by the universe. Awareness would remain, but there'd be no one to explain to, no one to say, "Give it time. You've done nothing wrong." If I died, that would be my everlasting condition, the divine judgment at which prayers and hymns each morning at school assembly rejoiced. Except no God need render this judgment. In oblivion, you needed only yourself.

Even worse than eternity was "lifetime." Denied the option of lifting my patch to glimpse the world outside myself for days, for weeks, months—could it be a whole lifetime?—was inconceivable. It would be a life too painful to live.

But I mustn't die. I couldn't do that to Mum and Dad. I pictured their faces from the back seat of the car after we'd left Miss Watkins'. I must never again cause them such suffering.

And if I were dead, they'd be unable to save me. They'd think of me as in a permanent sleep, whereas I'd be in this oblivion I'd just discovered, fully conscious, unable to communicate my never-ending, wrenching regret over what I'd done to them. I'd have no means of expressing it or anything else. I'd just be, unable to win sympathy, to laugh, build model planes, ride my bike. I'd be incapable of distraction. I'd just go on being and being, with my self-accusation.

"Do you think you'll be able to eat something for dinner tonight?"

I recognized Nurse Reynolds' voice, or something about her manner. Her mauve dress, the uniform of a staff nurse with seniority, came into my mind. Now she sounded concerned.

"No," I rasped, wanting to shake my head but keeping it still.

"You need to start eating. It's Wednesday."

"Not yet."

"You know where your buzzer is if you need us?" She closed my hand around it.

"Thank you." I attempted a smile.

With her brief kindness, I was a little less alone. That would be the difference in oblivion. There would be no Nurse Reynolds, no Mum or Dad.

I must think my way past hell and oblivion and eternity. That I existed had to have something good about it, even if I didn't know what that was. Otherwise, I'd be truly alone, up against a universe of implacable indifference.

But when eternity, oblivion and aloneness weren't filling my brain, there remained the event that had brought me to this brink. At one moment I told myself I'd never see again, then think tantalizingly that I might see, see even color. But hope was a hoax. I had to banish it.

I'd become content to lie quiet. Achieving oblivion might not require an act so stark as diving out a window. If I stayed like this, taking nothing in from outside, I could slide into it. If I did nothing to rush it along, something like my original notion of oblivion might come about. The universe and I would forget about each other, and so I wouldn't know I'd been abandoned. Living in my thoughts and freed from sustenance, I could withstand oblivion.

"I have soup here. You must try." The nurse took my hand and had me touch the bowl and the piece of bread on the side. "Can you manage, or shall I help you?"

Kathy Pathan. I knew her voice and remembered her absolutely beautiful face.

"Thank you, really, but I don't feel like it."

Amazing how I lacked appetite. Eating was something people did in my former world. It was so comfortable here, not having to deal with people or the future or the present, where movement and sensation weren't needed or even desirable. There was no effort, no responsibility, no need for hope. There was neither crying nor laughter.

"You must try."

Kathy was so gentle, too gentle. She made it hard to resist. She was saying what? Yes, that I needed to eat. And she was offering assistance. No, I didn't want to be fed. Humiliating. It would also bring another person too close, breaking this cocoon the anesthetic had woven around me. It had become pleasant in here.

“What day is it?”

“Thursday.”

Thursday. That meant I was in—what?—the third day after the operation. I knew it was evening because earlier I'd been vaguely aware of daytime activities.

“It's very important that you eat now. Will you, for my sake?”

For her sake. I wished I could refrain from answering, but she sounded ready to stand there as long as it took to make me reply.

“All right.” Even in this remote place where I wanted to stay, I'd do anything for Kathy. She couldn't know what a huge sacrifice it was.

“I'll come back in a few minutes and see how you're doing. Promise me you'll start.”

“I promise.”

“Thank you.” She touched the back of my hand with infinitely tactful fingers.

I picked up the spoon. Its feel was strange and disconcerting. How to pick up soup and balance it? I remembered trying before the operation. Cheating wasn't an option now. I dipped the spoon in the bowl and dropped it. I ran my finger around the rim to find the handle and pulled it out. Yes, that was how you held a spoon. Now weigh it down with soup and lift.

The first taste was my undoing. With it returned appetite. In the end I couldn't manage more than a bite of the bread and had trouble finishing the soup. But appetite, desire and the future were back. With them would come responsibility, doubt, fear, the past.

Dad sat beside me during evening visiting hour. The strain of company was easing. I listened when he talked and enjoyed his nearness when he ran out of things to say.

By the weekend I was chatting with Mum and Dad and my neighbor, Philip. Such a relief to be over the after-effects of anesthetic.

7

On Tuesday Miss Watkins examined my eye. Strands of her hair grazed my face and there was the scent of spearmint. The yellowish light from her instrument wasn't as painfully piercing as in the past, due to the state of my eye, not improvements in the instruments. Light scattered across my retina like a harbor lamp on the rippling night sea.

She pulled away and said, "Tell me."

"I saw your light."

"Yes?"

I moved my eye around, luxuriating in the space that had opened up before me. "And you—I can make out your head against the light coming in from the windows." Jagged shapes stirred around, even vaguer than without glasses before the operation, but shapes nonetheless.

I looked down. "And the sheet and the bedspread."

"You can tell where the sheet ends and the bedspread begins?"

"The sheet ends at the green bedspread."

She made one more search of my eye with her light, then put the patch back in place.

"This is more than one had expected."

She said that during the operation, she'd called all over the hospital for medical supplies, including devices used in heart surgery. A silicon band was holding the retina in place. I must stay motionless with the patch over my eye. I didn't argue and asked no questions.

On my own I examined what I could behind the patch. The color inside was Amazonian green again. I searched for the shadow in the bottom right corner. Not there.

I lay back against the pillows in relief and triumph. So that was what the Valley of the Shadow of Death in Psalm 23 and *Pilgrim's Progress* were about. I'd just passed through.

8

I didn't intend to flirt when a new nurse named Meg Woolcott gave me a bed bath. "Do you want to wash your bottom?"

Her question rattled me. I'd have to lever myself from a sitting position and reach under. It would strain my eye. While recovering from the anesthetic, I'd been aware of nurses doing the job. They'd understood the risk. This inexperienced nurse did not.

"I don't see how I can."

She didn't answer at first. Then she said, "I'll be back." She returned with Nurse Reynolds. They stood on either side of my bed, and I imagined Meg, in student nurse pale blue, looking across me to the nurse in mauve.

"He wants me to wash his bottom."

After another pause, Nurse Reynolds yanked back the towel covering my lower half and swiftly washed my front. I grasped that "bottom" had been a euphemism. Not a word was said the rest of the bed bath.

Philip's stream of love-struck comments made me want to know what all these pretty women around me all day long looked like. Behind my patch I'd concluded that pretty women conveyed they were in their voices. Kathy Pathan was beautiful, as I already knew, but I could also hear it in her voice. Based on these sources of information, it was apparent there was not one bad-looking woman within a mile of the Royal Hospital's third floor.

"Philip keeps talking about how nice you look." It was a chance moment of bravado, not the particular nurse, that made me say it.

"He's just a randy little boy, that Philip."

The nurse's reply may or may not have been meant for Philip to hear. Whatever, it got the conversation going.

A nurse's aide named Helen came on duty.

"Show me your hair," I said.

"Here." She leaned toward me.

Touching it, I said, "Nice. What else?"

"What else do you want to know?"

"How about the color of your eyes?"

"Brown, dark brown."

"How about your cheekbones?"

"My cheekbones! Are you looking for high-cheekboned models?"

"Just curious." My words were contradicted by my face, which I could tell was blushing.

Helen bailed me out. "They're sort of in the middle. I'm English, not Russian."

So Russian women had high cheekbones. I tucked that detail away for future reference.

“Let me check,” I said. She turned her head slightly and my thumb grazed her cheek.

“Nice.”

“What else?” she said.

“Oh, nothing else.”

“Sure?”

Weeks passed. Life was going on beyond the patch. Surely I could afford to lift it long enough to glimpse the women who hovered daily around my bed.

“Let me take a quick look at you,” I said to Helen, the nurse’s aide.

“Is that wise?”

“Come closer. I can’t see far without my glasses.”

She brought her face up to my eye. “Go ahead,” she said, her breath on my upper lip.

I lifted the corner of the patch and squinted out. She was much older than I’d thought, in her forties, more than twice the age of the qualified nurses. How strange, both because she counted less on the nursing totem pole and because she’d sounded no older than them. She had severe glasses. Her hair was severe. All in all she had a severe, puckered look. She was ugly.

I pushed back into the pillows and lowered my patch.

“So how about all those compliments you gave me?” she said.

“Very nice.”

“Well, well. Are we done?”

“Yes, thanks so much.”

“My pleasure.”

My second attempt at visual confirmation was with Meg Woolcott, though the bed bath fiasco made me burn with shame. When she posed in front of my raised patch, I could have

gazed all day into her intelligent, hazel eyes. The hair pinned under her white cap was chestnut brown.

“So you approve?” she said.

I knew my expression had given me away. “More than approve.”

“That’s good. Now put that patch back over your eye.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“I won’t be far away.”

I felt sure she knew what I’d meant.

I envied Philip’s gift for making people laugh. I was serious, forever asking questions.

But it turned out the nurses liked that, too.

One morning Nurse Reynolds gave me a bed bath on her own. This time I did the honors under the towel she laid across my middle.

“Have you heard about Alice?” she said.

“Who’s that?”

“A blind patient on the women’s ward. She’s been in and out for years.” Nurse Reynolds ran the lukewarm cloth along the outside of my left leg. “Guess how many children she has.”

“I don’t know.” Now the cloth was running along the inside of my leg.

“Three. And all blind.” Nurse Reynolds ran the cloth over and under my toes. I wished she’d pull it between them, but the nurses never got into the body’s interstices. She started on my right foot. “Fancy bringing three blind children into this world.”

“Sounds heartless.”

She moved the cloth along my right leg. “There ought to be a law if a woman can’t restrain herself from having babies.”

“Yes,” I said, though I had no idea what stopping the woman from having babies involved. I asked, “Have you told her what you think?”

“What good would that do?”

“I suppose it would make her angry.”

“She’s already angry. Now, let’s get your pajamas on.”

We performed the maneuver deftly, all the while Nurse Reynolds arranging the towel across my middle.

“Are you aware the ward has a talking book player?” she said.

“A book that talks?”

“Instead of looking at a book of print, you listen to it on records.”

The ward’s talking book library consisted of four volumes. The one that hooked me was Jerome K. Jerome’s *Three Men in a Boat*. I rationed the records to installments of one, at most two, sides a day to extend my sublime sojourn on the nineteenth century Thames with the three friends and their dog, Montmorency. Jerome poked fun at how people hammered nails into walls, gabbed about the weather, peeled potatoes and vainly boasted that they could guide lost souls out of the Hampton Court Maze. His tolerant comedy made everything I’d ever done or failed to do forgivable. It had been the voice missing from the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

9

Each weekday Mum visited in the afternoons and Dad mostly after work. During past hospital stays, Mum had brought dominos. When I was ten, we’d added cribbage. But with the patch over my eye, we couldn’t think of any games to play.

She'd pour some tomato soup from a flask into a plastic cup and hand it to me before arranging herself in the visitor's armchair at the side of my bed. Then she'd report on her progress reupholstering a chair. Turning to the *Daily Express*, she'd read aloud the tiny articles I liked at the bottom of the front-page where they reported obscure murders, statistics on foreign countries and items about animals. As visiting hour was ending, she'd tell me she hoped the rain didn't come before she got home and had taken down the clothesline.

When Dad came for the 7:30 visiting hour, he brought the energy of his job, news of Sheffield United, summaries of war films on television and allusions to C.S. Forester novels, which I'd lately been devouring.

On weekends Mum and Dad visited together. That meant I got less than undivided attention. It was still more divided the day they brought Tim.

"Hello, Tim," I said, when Mum told me he'd come along.

"Hello."

Dad jumped in before this exchange could dry up completely. "Traffic was murder coming in."

"Isn't everyone parked on top of Coles'?" I said.

They probably didn't realize I was being sarcastic. On Saturdays Mum and Dad made Tim and me get into the car for a weekly trip to Sheffield's main department store, Coles'. They'd take the lift down inside the store and leave us in the rooftop parking area. Although I wondered why Tim and I couldn't have stayed home, I was glad to be spared from traipsing through clothes racks, furniture rooms and rows of garden implements. Tim and I fended off boredom by holding open the lift doors for minutes on end and then running for cover before someone came to investigate. If no one appeared, we summoned the lift and held it again.

As visiting hour continued, Tim stayed quiet. Feeling bad about how bored he must be, I came up with the dismally banal question, “Tim, how’s cycling?”

“Tim’s gone off. He’s down the corridor somewhere.” Dad’s tone suggested he’d given up on civilizing his younger son.

“Here he comes,” Mum said, her voice to the ward entrance. “Tim!”

Tim mumbled, “What’s up?”

Dad spared us his usual, “The sky.”

“Your brother wants to ask you a question,” Mum said.

“What?” Tim said, either shyly or sullenly. Under the patch, I couldn’t tell.

My question had been stupid, and I was mortified at having to repeat it. “I was just wondering how you’re doing on your bike.”

“Great.” The trajectory of his voice was toward the windows.

“Been anywhere interesting?”

“Not really.”

If he had, he wouldn’t have said so in front of Mum and Dad. They’d have forbidden him to go there again, for what that was worth.

“How’s Ron?”

“He’s all right.”

I found myself remembering Ron’s attempt to introduce me to cigarettes. My mind was wandering all over the place, everywhere leading to trouble for Tim and me.

Mum said, “I heard he’s seeing a trick cyclist.” I must have looked vague because she elaborated, “You know, rhyming slang—a psychologist. He must be suffering a lot.”

Mum's show of understanding was at odds with comments she'd made in the past. No one else we knew would do something so shameful as see a head doctor.

"What else?" Tim demanded, his voice this time directed at me.

"Nothing else."

"I'll be around the corner," he told Mum and Dad, but for my benefit. He fled before his gormless brother could blurt out another dangerous question.

10

Eric Stone, a patient admitted the week after my operation, had been blinded in a chemistry lab accident at university. His sight was beyond restoration, so I assumed he was back in hospital to have a procedure akin to the stitches I'd had when I was ten. He had a private room down the corridor, where his wife Sandra assisted him with his work. She was the one person exempted from the otherwise strictly enforced visiting hour limits. He would come to the main ward after she left, around 4 in the afternoon. At the entrance he'd say, "Afternoon, gentlemen." Murmurs of "Afternoon, Eric" would welcome him from the beds. He'd walk from the entrance directly to the dining table in the room's center. Standing at the head of the table, he'd exchange pleasantries with each patient.

I'd listen to the genteel routine as I waited for him to turn to greet me. When he did, I'd say, "Hello, Eric." He'd walk over and take a seat in the chair at my side.

He was employed by a chemical company. "The work's a lot more mundane than I'd planned when I was at university. Personnel and that sort of thing."

"What's it like?" I said.

"To work?"

“Silly question, sorry.”

“You feel productive, your mind’s engaged. But there are frustrations.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like getting there.”

“You mean getting to the office from home?”

“From the bus-stop, but it amounts to the same thing. To get to the office from the bus-stop, you have to walk through a huge car park. It’s a jumble of cars at odd angles and with no clear path. Hard to navigate when you can’t see your way.”

“So how do you do it?”

“I’m afraid I don’t. At my previous job, the bus stopped at the front door of the office. I miss that, doing it on my own. Now Sandra has to drop me off and pick me up.”

Just like me. I’d been dropped off and picked up every school day of my life.

“Does she mind?”

“I think it’s more me who minds. Well …” He paused. “Of course, you’re right. It can be a burden, I’m sure. It’s a funny position to be in.”

I was honoring the eye patch at the time, but I was certain Eric went through life with a quiet smile. Right now it had to be rueful.

“On that note,” he said, “don’t take for granted your mother visiting you every day.”

“I don’t.” If Mum was late, I shifted and fidgeted, even as I kept my head still. Proof enough, wasn’t it?

I said, “But I can’t talk to Mum the way I do to you.”

If Mum asked how I was doing and I complained about something, she’d say, “Hum,” and change the subject. At least Dad said he wished he could do something.

Eric said, “That’s not a knock on your mum. Your Mum’s someone whose actions speak louder than words. She does everything she can. There’s a lot going on in your life that’s outside her control. It has to be very difficult for her.”

I didn’t reply.

“I should talk,” he conceded. “If anyone gives too much credit to words, it’s me. People express themselves in lots of different ways, you know. You and I express ourselves through words, but lots of people don’t.”

Here was a whole new conundrum. When people didn’t express themselves in words, how did Eric communicate with them?

He went on. “She’s always so cheerful. Are you aware how she brightens up the place?”

I pictured Mum’s laughing brown eyes and the vivid red coat she’d recently bought. Then I heard her whistling jazz standards as she washed dishes at the kitchen window.

“Yes,” I said.

Another afternoon Eric admitted he’d refused for years to travel abroad. “What was the point, I asked myself.”

“Because you wouldn’t be able to see anything?”

“That’s right.” It was a soft, Sheffield-accented reasonable reply. “But last year Sandra persuaded me to go to Italy.”

“What was it like?”

“Different atmosphere, different people. Roman statues in public squares, not just museums. Mussels and real pasta—none of this English stuff on toast. It doesn’t take sight to figure out it’s a different country.”

“And you had a good time?”

“In spite of myself.”

I got up the nerve to ask how Sandra had reacted to his accident. I knew they’d been going out when he was at university. Because she never came into the main ward, I’d never met her.

“Well. She left.”

“Really?”

“Watching someone lose his sight was hard. I made it harder.”

“How could she desert you at such a time?” My parents would never leave me in the lurch like that. Wasn’t that one of the things girlfriends and wives were for when you grew up?

Eric didn’t reply. Still, his smile wouldn’t have disappeared. This is all I’m prepared to say, it would suggest.

My unspoken question about people who didn’t express themselves in words was answered. I was interpreting silence.

I said, “But she came back.”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“I got better about it and she got more used to the idea.”

“Does that mean she loved you?”

“Yes, it does.”

“And then you got married?”

“A year after we got back together.”

“And now she comes every day to the hospital and reads to you.”

Eric was a gardener. Apart from some mandatory, half-hearted digging at school, my only experience of gardening was watching Dad trek around the back of the house, pour water, weed and shovel. I couldn't understand why anyone would willingly take on all that labor, except it must have something to do with middle age. Eric was only twenty-eight.

He'd devised a system of guide ropes. One identified his present position, another the path he'd just taken, a third the way back to the house. That was about as much as I took in, but it sounded clever.

I was much more interested in his university stories. My favorite was the one about getting drunk at a party and vomiting all the way home out the back window of a car. My knowledge of university had been limited to scraggly students on television holding up home-made signs advocating nuclear disarmament and disrupting traffic. Eric didn't mention things like that, but stories of drunken revelry made me feel grown-up and think for the first time of university as a place I wanted to go.

"Tell me that story again about being sick out the back of the car," I said weeks later.

Eric obliged, but ended, "Don't tell your mother."

"Why not?"

"She might not think well of me."

I already had, the day before. At least I'd tried to, but realized I didn't have the details down. That was why I'd asked to hear it again.

Once, after Eric had negotiated his way out of the ward, an elderly patient said from his bed, "He does that so well."

From my bed I said, "It can't be all that difficult."

The room fell into a silence that only gradually disintegrated into pockets of conversation. No one spoke to me, and I realized how harsh my words had sounded. For Eric to walk the five yards from the entrance to the dining table, then angle over to the side of a patient, then do it all in reverse might well take skill.

By now I'd cheated and looked from under the patch. Hazily, I'd observed the erect carriage and the forthright way Eric held his head. He kept his hands down and slightly out in front. His entire demeanor conveyed dignity. No wonder the patients were impressed. And when he sat in the chair by my bed, I saw the unassuming smile I'd imagined.

I decided I'd downplayed his ability because I, too, might one day need to acquire the same skill. At any rate, Miss Watkins and he apparently thought so. He confided that she'd asked him to hold our afternoon chats. Of course Miss Watkins was only playing it safe. She'd called my operation's outcome "a miracle." If a miracle had occurred, that must mean my sight was back to stay. Still, Eric's and her attention to me made me feel I'd been admitted to a tiny circle where you rose above everyday things, like sight.

11

Saturday, after breakfast, Philip's voice projected with ominous reasonableness from the next bed. "So you like United's chances this season?" He was a fan of the city's other team, Sheffield Wednesday.

Dragging myself out of a daydream, I said, "United are good this year." An image came into my mind of a ball crossing the field from the wing and a striped-shirted Sheffield United player leaping forward to head it into the goal.

“How can you go on supporting United when they keep selling off their best players?”
United’s owners had just given away their two top players for cash.

“We’ll miss Mick Jones at center forward, but Birchenall? I don’t know, Chelsea might rue the day they paid a hundred thousand for him.” Jones’ transfer had been a stab in the heart and Birchenall’s a gratuitous blow to the kidneys. With a fellow United supporter, I’d have blasted United’s owners.

“I don’t know,” Philip said. “I see demotion to Division 2 coming for your United.”

“At least United’s got players other teams want.”

“Only two, and they’re both gone.”

Okay, I thought. I reached across my night table for an empty orangeade bottle, brandished it at Philip and glared balefully, if it was possible to glare balefully through a patch. “How could any club name themselves Wednesday? They don’t even play on Wednesdays.”

A nurse announced her arrival with a “Hey!”

I had the presence of mind to return the bottle to the shelf, rest back against the pillows and look sheepish.

“I can’t believe what I just saw! Were you fighting with Philip?”

Nurse Reynolds. This was bad. “We were just talking about today’s game.”

“Talking? You looked like you were about to smash a bottle on his head.”

“That’s how you talk when you talk about football.”

As she launched into a tirade, I remembered Miss Watkins, in that toffee-nosed accent I’d grown to cherish, saying, “We call you the model patient.” No more, I felt sure.

Philip left next Saturday, the end of my fifth week, according to the calendar I turned week by week in my mind's eye, just as my mother turned the calendar month by month on the kitchen wall at home. His mother came around to my side. "Philip's sister had a baby."

"He told me. He's right chuffed at being an uncle."

"Did he tell you what she's going to call him?" She said my name. Then she touched my wrist and left with, "We'll be praying for you." Next Philip stood at my side, reversing our positions when we'd met. Our goodbyes were shy and formal.

12

Next day the shadow returned. This time it was at the top of my field of vision. On Monday Miss Watkins determined the retina had detached again. I saw not just the dark rim of before, but also partial balloons transposed on each other.

"Folds in the retina," she remarked, peering with her light into my eye. The retina had detached in a different spot, and she told me I now had to lie flat.

Nurse Reynolds and Meg removed my bulky pillows and substituted a barely filled pillowcase. "Easy," Nurse Reynolds said, crooking her arm under my back. She left, but Meg stayed and lifted my hand to the pillow earphone. It hadn't moved from its usual place, tied to a bed rail, but she'd rightly guessed I'd feel disoriented. She touched my arm and said, "I'll be back."

Unaccustomed to a straight back, I wanted to shift from side to side to ease the knots. I picked up the pillow speaker and tried to distract myself with the radio.

"How are you managing?" It was Meg, back as promised.

I did a horizontal twitch, a snake having a serpentine dream. "I'm uncomfortable."

It was more than just physical discomfort. Eyes were extensions of the brain, right? That was why they couldn't be transplanted. Propped up on pillows, I'd faced the person I was talking to. Lying down, I had only the ceiling to project to. My voice drifted straight up, while Meg's came down from the side. I feared our words would stray like smoke signals and never meet.

"You'll soon get used to it," she said.

Her voice told me she wasn't speaking idly. She'd thought about it, perhaps imagined herself in my place.

"Yes," I said.

But by agreeing, I was asking her to leave me for now. I needed to absorb the setback. Would Miss Watkins try another silicon band? Would my eye accept another invasion? Would there ever be an end to operations and waiting? If only I could get on my bicycle and ride away, the way I'd done when the first shadow appeared.

Meg returned when the lunch cart was wheeled in. She pushed the bed table across my middle. "I think you're going to need some help."

She cut off a piece of meat and put the fork in my hand.

"I'll need to lift my head."

"As little as possible."

I got the fork to my mouth, lowered my head to the pillow and chewed. It would be a new trick to swallow while lying flat. I gulped and hoped I didn't choke.

"Ready for more?"

Mr. Hudson, at London's Moorfields Hospital, reputedly the country's foremost eye surgeon, agreed to take my case. I was to be transported by ambulance the coming Saturday. Mum would accompany me, but come back to Sheffield to help my father pack for the move to America. It was November. In a week Dad and Tim were to fly to New York. Mum would then return to London and stay with relatives in a suburb.

Saturday arrived. As I was thinking I'd be missing that afternoon's Sheffield United game and all United games to follow, Helen, the nurse's aide, appeared at my side. I felt horrible for thinking her ugly and worse for hiding it so poorly. She fidgeted with something on the night table and whispered. I strained to hear.

"It's your own fault."

I strained harder.

"You know it's your own fault. Admit it."

"Helen!"

"Admit you undid the good work Miss Watkins and the nurses did for you."

A memory came to me of Nurse Reynolds talking about the blind patient in the women's ward and her three blind children. Armed with my miracle, I'd shared her disgust. My miracle now in jeopardy, I wondered if she'd meant blindness was always the blind person's fault, even if no one knew or even cared what the transgression had been.

"Admit it," Helen persisted.

Maybe she was going on about my waving the soda bottle at Philip. I called to mind Miss Watkins' calling me "the model patient," which she'd repeated even after the orangeade incident. I concentrated on her words to block out Helen's savage whisper.

Purposeful nurse's steps approached, and Helen's breath left my ear. I pushed thoughts of her to the back of my mind in time to hear Mum's and Dad's voices growing louder in the hall.

Two men lifted me onto a trolley. I'd left my school without a word or handshake and abandoned my old home and the roads and paths of my cycling days without knowing it. Now I was parting from the ward after six long weeks. I wanted to do it right. Gliding feet-first to the ward exit, even though the patients I'd been closest to were gone and only a skeleton staff was on duty, I called out goodbyes.

Outside, in the limitless world beyond the hospital ward, it was cold. I inhaled fresh air. I'd forgotten what it was like.

"Well," Dad said, "I won't be seeing you for a while."

Up there on my left, Dad was crying. My lips trembled.

One ambulance man shouted something to the other. Mum said, "Come on, you two. They want to get going."

"Bye, tiger." Dad ruffled my hair.

Someone grabbed the handles at my head and pushed the stretcher in a half circle. The wheels grated on compacted stones and pebbles, a sensation harsher than any I'd known on my bike. Instead of rising from the base of my spine, it began at my head and worked down.

"Bye, Dad," I called out. "I'll think of you in America."

14

"Ready, governor?" a man said at the ambulance's open back doors. His words and accent took me back to Mr. Pearce, the school taxi driver I remembered so fondly from London.

"Ready when you are," I called.

The voices went on debating how to pull me and my stretcher out. After the jolts I'd feared as we'd raced along the motorway and the streets of London had come to nothing, this caution at the end of the journey seemed excessive.

"Right. Here goes." The man's voice muffled with exertion. The stretcher lumbered across the platform it had rested on. Almost out of the door, it slipped and my head bounced.

Sister, the head nurse, greeted me as I was wheeled into her ward and supervised my conveyance from the trolley to a bed. Two nurses spread a sheet and blankets over me. I pulled out my arms and rested my hands on the cover. This was familiar territory, the slope of cloth from rib cage to mattress. I stretched my neck and back.

Mum turned to me and said, "You won't believe this. Sister's telling me she comes from Ilkeston." It was a Derbyshire village near Sheffield. They'd been chatting at the foot of the bed.

Sister said, "I expect you'd like to know how the ward is laid out."

I realized this was my first time in a room I'd never seen. Was it small? No. Voices came from distances, but they were not curling around corners or funneling up from corridors. Compared to the ward in Sheffield, the room felt enormous. I knew there was an entrance immediately to my left; I'd just come through it. But these impressions left many gaps.

"Would you like me to tell you?"

"Sorry, Sister. Yes, please."

"The first thing to know is that there are twenty-two beds on the ward. Your bed's right by the entrance."

"I knew that."

"Ah. Well, you're at the halfway point of one of the long walls. There are beds all along your wall and all along the wall opposite you."

“How far away are the beds opposite?”

“Let’s see. Down to your right we have a dining table in the middle of the floor. It’s five or six feet wide and there’s ample room between it and the beds. So I’d say fourteen or fifteen feet. All the windows are along that opposite wall. One more thing. The desk I sit at is right in the middle. If you were to walk diagonally from the left front corner of your bed, you’d hit it. It’s close by. If you need something, there’s a buzzer here.” She pressed my hand against the end of a wire looped around the metalwork of my headboard. “And if necessary, you can call out.”

Projecting to the windows ahead of me, I conjured up an image of twilight blue over St. Paul’s dome and the other rag-tag buildings of London’s skyline.

15

I held out my hand as if cradling an invisible spoon and Nurse Kate Larkin slotted the real spoon between my fingers. She asked how I liked the ward.

“In Sheffield we had only eight beds.”

“Too big for you here, is it?”

“I think it’s easier. Wouldn’t it be easier on you, too?” As I contrived to get the cereal into my mouth, I asked myself why I was going on about Sheffield.

“They’d still give us twenty-two patients to look after, and we wouldn’t be able to see you all at once if you were in different rooms.”

“I suppose not.”

“I think you miss them in Sheffield,” she said, as I held out the end of the spoon to her. “Here,” she said, returning the spoon. “Don’t worry. You’ll get used to us.”

It was about time I got used to Moorfields. Today was Wednesday, my fourth morning.

Later I was taking a break from the pillow radio when a woman said, “Hello. I’m Pamela Crooks.” I extended my hand. Her handshake, like her voice, was professional. She said, “I’m the ward secretary. I sit at a desk just ahead of you to your left.” Her voice told me she was gesturing to Sister’s desk, a place of urgent whispered consultations.

“Sister told me about it.”

“So you already have the ward down.”

“Sort of.”

“One of my jobs is to read patients their correspondence, if they want me to. Your mother’s written a letter. Shall I read it to you?” Pamela sat down in the bedside armchair. “Let’s see. There’s her address. It’s dated Monday.”

“She went back up to Sheffield on Sunday.”

“A dedicated letter-writer.”

The letter was short. I had to adjust to my mother’s northern-inflected words read with Pamela’s southern accent. Her train ride back to Sheffield had been uneventful. Now they were all busy packing and making last-minute arrangements.

“So she’s coming back to London when your dad and brother leave?” Pamela said, when she’d finished the letter.

“Next week.”

“Oh dear, I think Sister’s eyeing me.”

As in Sheffield, the ward became quiet in the early afternoon. From the inactivity at the desk, I surmised it was the hour when Sister and Pamela took their lunch break.

Someone pressed my toes through the covers.

“Yes?” I said, projecting my voice the length of the bed.

“Who is it?”

A woman’s voice. I could think of no one who would be visiting me. “I give up.”

The hand squeezed again. “Who do you think it is?”

“Look, really.”

The hand released my foot. In my ear, the voice said, “Kate Larkin.”

I tried to erase the frown from my face. “Hello, Kate.”

“Couldn’t recognize me? Well, how’s the star patient? Still teaching us about Sheffield?”

“Sorry about that.”

“I’m sure we have things to learn.”

“I’m used to everything now, except their waking us up at 5:30.”

“What time did they get you up in Sheffield. Ten-thirty, for coffee and biscuits?”

I heard her smile, but kept to the subject. “Six. Half an hour makes all the difference.”

“When I’m on the seven o’clock shift, I also get up at five-thirty.”

“I hadn’t thought about that.”

“See how dedicated we nurses are to you patients?”

16

It was another five-hour operation. The anesthetic held the old terror, and I awoke to the same thirst. I asked for water, was refused and waited. The demons from the previous operation threatened to take over, but I knew now this was a stage to get through.

I ate my first breakfast only two days after the operation. Later that morning Mr. Hudson examined the results. When he moved aside to talk in hushed tones to a colleague, fuzzy beams

of light came into my eye. Mr. Hudson put the patch back on. He answered my questions with succinct indefiniteness, then took his entourage of students and colleagues to the next bed.

Lifting the patch the next day, he asked, "What do you see?"

I was struck by his assumption that I had vision. The fuzzy lights formed shapes that had to be windows. He took me through various tests, and I tried to give accurate descriptions, though seeing with none of the precision I associated with accuracy. One by one the doctors in training followed and peered with their lights into my eye.

Mr. Hudson handed me my glasses and instructed me to put them on. "Sit up and look around. Here." He made as if to lift me into a sitting position and a nurse named Cindy Denton came forward to assist.

Details came into focus. Across from me, as Mum and Sister had described, was a line of beds, blue-covered, stretching left and right. The windows were three or four times taller than wide. Mr. Hudson restored the patch to my eye and helped Cindy support me as I lay back down. "It will get better as the effects of the operation wear off," he said.

On Saturday he said, "Take that thing off for two or three hours a day. Sit up and look around."

"What about my glasses?"

"No harm. Put them on." He led the trainee doctors to the next patient. Glimpsing the winding-tailed retinue, I thought of a crocodile.

I looked around through my glasses. What clarity. From my bed at the room's halfway point, the opposite wall had the elongated feel of a Cinerama screen. Though the windows were large, the ceiling was low. The effect was to constrict the light at the windows.

Over in the right corner, three lines converged. There was the vertical line where the walls met, and two more lines between the walls and the ceiling ran toward it. I knew they were all perpendicular, but they looked angled toward each other. The word “perspective” came back from technical drawing class at Brook. Dad, too, had tried to teach me perspective so that the people in my drawings would stop growing out of and on top of each other. Staring at the corner, I was riveted by proportion, symmetry and scale; by the way things fit.

Ten days after the operation, Mr. Hudson said, “You can start sitting in your armchair.”

“You mean I can get out of bed?”

Ignoring this question, which he must have thought frivolous, he said, “Just take care to keep your head up. Under no circumstances let it fall forward.”

Cindy Denton came over. I’d already pegged her as Moorfields’ Nurse Reynolds. She was also a staff nurse, though in Moorfields her uniform was pale blue rather than mauve.

“Congratulations,” she said. “Let me look through your night table for a dressing gown.”

“You mean one of those things you wear over pajamas?”

“What else?”

“I don’t have one.”

“How can you not have a dressing gown?”

“For one thing, I haven’t been out of bed for nine weeks.”

“Ask your mother to bring it in the next time she visits you.”

“The other thing is I never had one in the first place.”

“How can that be?”

I shrugged, resenting a question that implied criticism of my mother.

“She can buy one for you, can’t she?”

Again, I didn't answer.

"Well then, let's see what we can find in the cupboard."

I knew about the cupboard. It contained objects gladly abandoned by long-gone patients. She dredged out a beat-up red thing that I eyed narrowly through my glasses.

"It's several sizes too big, but it will do until your mum brings you one. Now, let's get you out of bed." She pulled the covers aside and pressed her hand behind my shoulder as I rose and turned. "Careful," she said, unnecessarily. I eased my legs over the side. I'd been bordered by pillows and a mattress for so long that the space around me felt vast.

"How do you feel?" she said.

"Funny."

"You'll get over it soon. Do you think you can make it to the armchair?"

For answer, I placed my hands palm-down on the bed and lowered my feet to the floor. As soon as I tried to stand, the muscles in my legs and back gave way. I'd have fallen if my hands hadn't been planted on the bed and Cindy hadn't gripped my arm.

"Are you all right? Let's get this dressing gown on you."

Leaning on my left hand, I stuck out my other arm so she could pull the sleeve over it. She brought the gown around my back and I switched hands on the bed.

"Steady," she said, as she pulled the other sleeve over my arm and fitted the gown across my shoulders. She reached around to tie a knot in the belt. "There. Ready for the chair?"

I took a step and transferred my hands one by one from the bed to the chair's back and arm. Then I clumped around the chair and eased myself into it, all the while elevating my chin. I lapsed back, exhausted.

"You'll be right as rain in no time."

I grinned up at her. I wanted to say I hoped it never rained in the ward, but couldn't figure out how to make it as funny as it sounded in my head.

A while later she returned to help me back into bed. This time she leaned so close that I could see her fair hair, delicate features, her look of concentration that was all about getting things done. She made sure I was comfortable before taping the patch back over my eye.

Next day I got up on my own, shuffling sideways from the chair to the foot of the bed. My legs and back remained heavy and stiff. Fists dug into the bed, I lifted my right foot and planted it back down further to the right, then followed with my left foot. I felt as if I'd fall over. Like a character in a slapstick film, I shook each leg out to the side, but my muscles were inflexible as suits of armor before chain mail.

Peering around the ward from the armchair, I was content to examine the folds in the bedspreads, the contrast of their pastel colors and the dark floor, the glint of daylight on the metal bedposts.

"Know who I am now?"

I looked up. "Kate?"

"Good." She sat down on the bed. "When you're able to get around, you must meet Mr. Kaminsky. He's across and down to your right a few beds. I'll introduce you."

"Who is he?"

"A man from Poland. He's the most brilliant man anyone's ever met. He hasn't seen for a long time. They're going to try a new surgical procedure on him."

I didn't want to meet a man of such brilliance and, as she seemed to be saying, courage. He would be intimidating. I looked away.

"What can you see?"

“I can see across the ward.”

“Really? See this?”

“Your hand.” I broke into a grin at her silly gesture of raising a hand in the air.

“How many fingers?”

“Oh, Kate.”

“How many fingers?”

“Hm. Three?”

“Anyway, you’re making progress. Can you see my hair?”

“I can make out the color of your uniform.” The pink sleeves of a trainee nurse led down to her hands, folded on her white-aproned lap.

“What else?”

“Come closer.”

She left the bed and sat on her haunches, inches away from me. I angled my gaze downward while keeping my head straight. I found myself saying, “You’re beautiful.”

“But can you tell the color of my hair? That’s what I was asking.”

“Blonde.” I knew from television that “blonde” was another way of saying “beautiful,” although it had been the dark-haired Paula I’d fallen for at school.

“So you like the way I look.”

Her smile was making fun of me, but I was too taken aback to respond with the same lightness as hers. Was my imagination filling in gaps? But I was sure she had petal lips and steady, penetrating eyes. Her thick blonde hair was restrained under her nurse’s cap. She’d be still lovelier without the cap.

“Yes,” I answered at last. In the intensity of the moment, though I kept staring, I took in nothing more.

“Tell me when you’ve had enough,” she said, showing no sign of turning away.

17

On Monday morning I watched a tall woman in a white coat walk toward me. She greeted me. Yes, Pamela. I’d timed my daily ration without the patch for this moment but stayed in bed to leave the armchair free for her.

She sat down and said, “I have a letter from your mum.”

As she read, I studied her hair’s shoulder-length wave. From what I could see, she had a narrow face, a strong nose and high cheekbones. So, despite what Helen had said in Sheffield about Russian women, some English women had high cheekbones, too. As my 35-millimeter camera had done, the comments by the new people in my life were making me more observant.

Her unbuttoned white coat parted to reveal a jersey and skirt made of some kind of lush wool in warm colors. She rested my mother’s letter on her crossed knees. A long, black-stockinged calf curved out from under the letter toward a high-heeled shoe.

She folded the letter. “Amazing how your mum finds something to say every day.”

The shoe on Pamela’s foot dipped and rose. I studied her looking down at it. She glanced up at me.

“How old are you, Pamela?”

“Twenty-three.”

Older than most of the nurses. I thought how young twenty-three was and so how much younger Kate and Cindy were. Meg and Kathy had also been younger, and I doubted even Nurse Reynolds was yet twenty-three. Sister was older, probably in her forties.

“You don’t wear a uniform,” I said.

“Just this white coat.” She fingered a sleeve then looked again down the short space of her skirt and the long reach of her leg. It was a leg I wished I could climb up and up and up.

“Tell me what you’re seeing with your glasses,” she said.

I looked away. “There are the beds lined up across over there. I can see the windows, but nothing outside.”

“From this angle it’s mostly sky,” she said.

“Ah. And I can’t see your desk very well, but I see where it is. When two shadows are there, I assume they’re you and Sister.”

“It’s dark over there. We have to keep the light on all day. Can you see me now?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And?” I considered. My appraisal of Kate, though truthful and even objective, had felt silly. “You’re nice.”

“Thank you.” She jiggled her shoe. “What’s next? Has Mr. Hudson told you?”

“No.”

“It doesn’t matter, does it, as long as you keep getting better. I suppose I should get back to work before Sister gives me the evil eye.”

But she stayed at my side, and we talked about this and that.

At last she uncrossed her legs, leaned her hands on the chair's arms and pushed up. "Back to work." Her abdomen, wrapped in beige wool and that short dark skirt, filled my vision.

I shifted my gaze to her face. "Thank you, Pamela."

"Part of the job. I'll put this away, shall I?" She slipped my mother's letter into the drawer of my night table.

18

Mr. Hudson gave me *carte blanche* to take off the patch, wear my glasses all day and walk about the ward. On my first foray, I ventured three beds down to the right. Still frail, I held myself up by scraping a small metal chair over the tiles before me. My dressing gown, its red the color of aged sofa fabric, trailed behind on the floor. But for my eagerness to move around, I wouldn't have been seen dead in it.

"I see you're having a rough time walking," Cindy said. "Do you think you might be exaggerating a little?"

I thought back to the hospital in Tadworth, when I'd been seven. After I'd been confined to bed for three months, the day came when the doctor instructed me to walk toward her. I remembered her sitting across the room, a gray afternoon at the window behind her. Despite her coldness, she'd at least understood my problem was physical, not imaginary.

Cindy wasn't finished. "You ought to have meals with the other patients at the dining table. Time you met them, don't you think?"

"I know." But after taking meals in bed for so long, the idea of eating in company was unsettling. It must have been in my voice.

"You don't want to?"

“It’s just that ...”

She walked by my side as I pushed the metal chair to the dining area. At the table’s near corner, I turned the chair around and sat down. I started to pull closer to the table, but felt the effort in my eye and stopped. I was close enough.

“There’s a plate of beef, potatoes and carrots in front of you,” Cindy said. “Can you manage? Keep your head up.” Then, as if second-guessing herself, she said, “Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“I’m sure.”

For two months, I’d been eating at a bed trolley, with plates just inches from my chin. Now the plate was too far down for me to see without inclining my head. I identified the beef with my knife and fork and cut off what I hoped was a bite-size piece. Lifting the fork, I estimated when it was at the level of my mouth, correctly as it turned out.

My studied care made me think of Eric negotiating the ward in Sheffield, except unlike Eric, I was concentrating too hard to respond with more than monosyllables when the men at the table tried to draw me out.

The main course was followed by rice pudding, which didn’t require cutting. Then I wondered how I’d avoid spilling when I raised the tea cup. Wouldn’t I need to look to keep it balanced all the way from the table to my lips? But through my hand I sensed the adjustments needed to keep it level.

As the plates were cleared away, a patient introduced himself as Ian. “Mind if I accompany you back to your bed?”

Suspecting Cindy had put him up to it, I pushed ahead with Ian at my side.

“I’m surprised Sister doesn’t complain about your wrecking her floor with that chair.”

“I hadn’t thought about that.” I had thought, however, about the vibration traveling through the chair from the floor to my eye. Shouldn’t Sister say something about that? I resolved to give up the metal chair and, instead, use bedposts for support.

I sat on my bed and gestured at my armchair. “Have a moment?”

“I have an afternoon,” Ian said. “In fact, I have a day, if not a week.”

“What are you in for?” I asked.

“A corneal transplant. Second time around. It didn’t take the first time.”

“So you’ve been in before.”

“Twice. I could take up residence here. Not a bad idea, either. The rent’s cheap, courtesy of the National Health.” He told me he was a professional photographer.

“What kinds of pictures do you take?”

“Buildings and interiors. Advertising work. Sometimes I do people—whatever someone wants to pay me for.”

“Sounds fantastic.”

“It is when I’m in demand.”

To be in demand. I played with the phrase in my mind.

I felt weary, and it must have shown. He said, “I’ll leave you for now. Stop by any time.”

“Where’s your bed?”

He pointed. “Across and down to the left.”

“I haven’t been to the left half of the ward yet.”

“A whole new region to explore. It’ll help kill an hour or two.”

I got into bed and dozed. Now I understood why the ambulatory patients went quiet after lunch. Being up was such an effort. How had I made it through the afternoon at school?

Next day the shadow from a fold in the retina appeared in the bottom right corner of my eye. Mr. Hudson showed neither surprise nor disappointment.

19

Replaying in my mind Cindy's "Do you think you might be exaggerating a little?"

I set myself the challenge of crossing from my bed to the windows opposite: fourteen or fifteen feet, according to Sister's estimate, plus the length of the bed across from mine. Until I reached that bed, there'd be no support to hang on to.

I started out in the quiet early afternoon. I felt as if about to step into nothing. With my second step, I felt just as precarious. I swung my left leg around again. I was bending forward with the effort, though still managing to keep my head up and my focus on the windows ahead. I drew myself up as straight as my stiff back would allow. No one came over. No one seemed to notice.

My fourth step took me to the halfway point. I fastened my attention on a bedpost ahead. My fifth step had me bending forward again, and the dizziness of my first day out of bed came back. I was frightened. Straightening, I shook the tension out of my shoulders. I made the sixth standing.

I paused, then took a seventh and longer stride. I'd thought the bedpost was in reach, but it eluded my hand and the miss threatened to topple me. Steady on, I told myself.

Half a step got me to the bedpost. Clinging to it, I said to the patient in the bed, "Sorry."

"Are you all right?"

"I will be in a moment."

I worked my way to the window opposite the ward entrance and, leaning on the sill, studied the skyline. Snuggled among less imposing buildings was the pale green dome of St. Paul's. I'd been right to imagine it there. Off to the left was the spindly Post Office Tower. To the right, on the other side of High Holborn, was a tan ten-story office building, so close I could make out window ledges in the bright sunlight.

"Nice view, isn't it?"

I glanced to the side and recognized the ginger hair and bulldog stature of Ian.

"Funny that an eye hospital has one of the best vantage points on London," he said.

"I think I've stood long enough," I said.

"Want to get back to your bed? I'll walk over with you."

"How about introducing me to the left half of the ward?"

"I'm only four beds down. Step this way, my man."

We sat together at Ian's bedside, and he told me about his previous stints in Moorfields. "So there was this nurse, see, named Cranston. I think she fancied me. I fancied her, too, but there were limits. She was on night duty that week. There were two nurses on duty. Usually there's only one—"

"Sitting at Sister and Pamela's desk," I said.

"Does that light bother you at night? It's right by your bed."

"Sometimes it makes me feel lonely."

When that lamp was the only light in the ward, my mind returned to the street lamp outside the window of my Exhall Grange dorm. I'd think up ploys to get the night nurse to come over, but never acted on them. She'd realize I was in a state, and both of us would know there was nothing she could do.

Ian said, "The nights get long here. Anyway, I was fed up and feeling rambunctious."

"This will help me the next time I do," I said.

"Wait till you hear the end. I keep buzzing for the nurse. First I want a bottle. Then I want some aspirin, even though I know they can't dispense it. Then I need more water. Each time it's the other nurse who comes, which is fine. As I said, I liked Nurse Cranston, but she has an odd way of expressing affection, if you know what I mean."

"Not really."

"You'll see. I buzz for the water, and the other nurse gets it for me. When she returns, Cranston is right behind her. 'What's going on with you tonight, Mr. MacAlister?' 'Nothing, Nurse.' 'What's going on?' she repeats. 'Just all these things have come up tonight. I had too much tea after supper, I've got a bit of a headache, and I think the fish was too salty.'"

"You made all that up on the spot?"

"I did. So she does the 'What's going on?' routine again. By now she's come all the way up to this night table here. Without warning, she grabs all the covers and flings them off me. For all she knew, I wasn't wearing pajama bottoms."

"Were you?"

"Yes, but I don't always."

"What happened next?"

"She and the other nurse left."

"With the covers around your feet?"

"All the covers are down there, and I'm supposed to keep my head still as a brick wall, like you when you arrived. Luckily there was a corner of sheet and bedspread just in reach and I

pulled it up with my toes and fingers. Hard to do when you have to lie completely still, as you know. If I hadn't, I'd have frozen to death because neither she nor her sidekick came back."

"I see what you mean about an odd way of showing affection." I thought about Kate squeezing my feet, but kept it to myself.

He said, "I have a question for you. A test. There's this train leaving from Kings Cross. It has 119 passengers on board when it sets off. Got it?"

"Got it."

"The next station is Finsbury Park. Twelve people get off and fifteen get on." Ian paused and I did the addition and subtraction in my head. "The next stop is Potters Bar, where four people get off and three get on." Again, Ian paused. "Then there's Hatfield."

I said, "How many got off and how many got on?"

"Well, fourteen people got off and nine got on."

The question was becoming as long as the shaggy dog stories Ian told at lunch. I calculated. "Then what?"

"Then there's Welwyn Garden City. You're getting away from London now. Nineteen people get off and only three get on."

Ian took me through the train's run: Welwyn North, Knebworth, Hertford North, Stevenage, Hitchin, Letchworth, Garden City, Baldock, Ashwell & Morden, Royston, Meldreth, Shepreth, Foxton. Finally, the train pulled into the terminus at Cambridge.

"So here's the question," Ian said.

"Ready?"

"Yes." I was bursting with the answer.

"How many stations did the train stop at?"

20

My toes were being tweaked. I looked down the bed. The figure was dark against the windows, but I took a not so wild guess. “Hello, Kate.”

“So you can see me from there.”

“No.”

She came around to my pillow. “You mean no one else plays with your toes? I saw you walking around the ward.”

“Staggering around.”

“You were confined to bed a long time – how long was it?”

“Nine weeks.”

“It takes time. So, are you ready to meet Joseph?”

“Joseph?”

“Mr. Kaminsky.”

Since her first mention of his name, I’d picked up on patients and nurses talking about the Polish patient. I said, “Not today. All that staggering around took it out of me.”

“Tomorrow, then?”

Next afternoon she said, “Come,” taking my hand to encourage me out of my armchair. We crossed the ward.

“Joseph, I’ve brought someone to meet you.”

“Who?”

“Your young neighbor across the way.”

“Ah, I keep hearing about you. Come here and shake hands.”

I made my way from the foot of the bed until I discerned the face and dark glasses of the man lying flat on his back. As we carefully shook hands, his gaze didn't falter from the ceiling.

"Have a pew," he commanded. I lowered myself into the armchair.

"I'll speak to you later, gentlemen," Kate said.

"Don't leave without saying goodnight," Mr. Kaminsky said. He turned his attention to me. "So, Sister tells me you're emigrating to the United States."

"As soon as I leave here."

"When will that be? Has Mr. Hudson told you?"

"No."

Mr. Kaminsky kept his face directed at the ceiling but succeeded in projecting his voice to me. I wondered if I'd done as well while under orders to lie flat.

"Did you know Sister married a former patient?"

"No, I didn't."

"An older gentleman who lost his sight."

I returned to opening courtesies. "How long are you in for, Mr. Kaminsky?"

"No idea. It's been two months, and I won't have the operation for at least a week."

I already knew his condition was the result of a radiation accident. Both Mr. Kaminsky and Eric had lost their sight in scientific experiments. They were close in age. Mr. Kaminsky was twenty-seven, a year younger than Eric. But there the resemblance seemed to end. Eric had been light-hearted. Mr. Kaminsky was austere. Eric had a familiar Sheffield accent, while Mr. Kaminsky spoke with a trace of his Polish origin. Also, the tables had turned. Eric had visited me, while I was visiting Mr. Kaminsky. I could look at Mr. Kaminsky.

I didn't look hard or long. He had a pallor unlike anything I'd seen before. It was ghostly, as if you could peer beneath the colorless membrane of his skin.

He asked about my condition. "And Mr. Hudson has given you no prognosis." He went quiet, either thinking it over or keeping his conclusions to himself. "Come to see me tomorrow," he said at last.

I stood. "I'm glad to meet you."

"Glad"? Choose words with care. Will you be all right going back?"

The afternoons that followed with this "most brilliant" man made me anxious about my education. I accused myself of squandering time. True, I had little to work with. Moorfields didn't have a single talking book. In my mind I'd try to summon up the lists of French words I used to enjoy making when I should have been doing French homework. Or I'd call up the maps of America Dad had brought home from business trips. But I easily got discouraged. I needed to see those books, lists and maps to learn from them.

When at last an opportunity came my way, I lacked motivation. Sister gave me a wheel-shaped card with the braille alphabet on the rim. I tried to memorize a few of the symbols and identify them by touch, but it was impossible. The dots didn't seem to stay in one place when my index finger hovered over them. So I studied them with my eye. Braille turned out to be twenty-six symbols shaped as differently from the Latin alphabet as Cyrillic letters were. Braille, then, was just a matter of practice by touch. That solved the mystery. With the mystery solved, I lost interest and stopped memorizing. Only the letter "P" stayed with me because it happened to resemble a print "P." Now, instead of studying, I spun the circle of braille symbols inside its holder for minutes on end.

"Have you memorized all the letters?"

Before me stood Sister, in her severe navy blue uniform. Not realizing she'd been there, I jumped in my chair and stopped spinning the braille wheel.

She'd become cool toward me. I wondered if she'd heard about my comparisons between Moorfields and Sheffield, though I'd stopped making them weeks ago. Or maybe Pamela's morning visits annoyed her. Even though Mum was visiting every day and no longer writing letters, Pamela still came by to chat each morning. Or perhaps I'd damaged the floor with that horrible metal chair.

I'd been remiss. I'd meant to ask her about Ilkeston, whose stone cottages I'd seen from our car. Yet it was hard to imagine her there. She didn't have the accent. It wasn't a London accent, either. It was impersonal.

"Not yet," I answered.

"I'd like it back to give to a patient on the women's ward."

She must have worried I'd ruin it with so much spinning. I handed it over.

21

"What do you know about the Allies' invasion of Europe at the end of the War?" Mr. Kaminsky said.

Sitting on the pew, I anticipated another of the riveting stories he called monologues. "I know the British and Americans entered through France and Italy and the Russians came in from the east."

"What do you know about Poland in the war?"

"I know Germany invaded your country on September 1st, 1939 and that a lot of Poles fought in the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain."

“What else?”

“I can’t think of anything else.”

“Who do you think liberated Poland?”

“It must have been the Russians.”

“You’re right. Do you know about that campaign? It sounds as though you don’t.”

“I don’t.” I felt ashamed at my ignorance.

“Ever heard of the Vistula?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“It’s a river. You’ve heard of Warsaw, of course.”

“The capital of Poland.”

“The Vistula is the river that bisects Warsaw.”

“Like the Thames does London.”

“As the Russians advanced through Poland, the Resistance rose up and attacked the Germans in Warsaw. They were called the Polish Home Guard.”

“How brave!”

“They were brave. Next to the Germans, they had hardly any arms. They had no tanks, no heavy guns, no planes – although the Germans were also low on planes and they make little difference in urban fighting.”

“When was this?”

“The uprising began on August 1st, 1944 and lasted into September.”

“Did they win?”

“You’re getting ahead of me.”

“Sorry.”

“The plan was to make it easier for the Russians when they arrived and keep the Germans busy so they wouldn’t blow up the city or conduct reprisals.”

“That’s like the Resistance in Paris when the Allied armies were getting close.”

“The question was whether the Home Guard had allowed too much time. If the Russians took longer than expected, the Germans would crush them.”

“Are you saying the Russians took too long?”

“I’m not saying anything yet. But in fact, the Russians got there on time.”

“They did? Wonderful!”

“Not so wonderful. They got to the east bank of the Vistula and stopped.”

“What do you mean, they ‘stopped’?”

“When the Russians reached the Vistula, they camped for several days.”

“Didn’t they know the Polish Resistance was taking all those risks to help them?”

“They knew.”

“They knew but were too exhausted?”

“They knew and wanted the Germans to do the dirty work for them.”

“You mean the Russians deliberately let the Germans kill the Resistance fighters?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Stalin—”

“I know, the Russian dictator.”

“Stalin wanted Poland, so it was convenient to have the Germans and Poles wipe each other out. Then all his army had to do was mop up.”

I remembered a rousing performance on television of the Red Army at the Albert Hall. The soldiers had been so genial. Why hadn't I encountered the story of the Russians at Warsaw in my local library or the one at school? But I'd always complained how few books they had.

"How could they do that?" I said.

Through his dark glasses, Mr. Kaminsky faced the ceiling in silence.

"Bravery has to get rewarded," I persisted.

"I wish it were so."

I conjured up my mental map of Europe and imagined Warsaw as a dim light east of East Germany, just below the Baltic. My mind's eye drew closer, and I was looking out at a narrow cobblestone street and houses whose top floors leaned in toward the street. I didn't know where this image came from and didn't trust it, but it was all I had.

A German tank, with grim black crosses on its turret and making a terrifying din, rolled toward me. There was the big gun in the middle and machine guns on either side. I was aiming a rifle at the hole through which the crew looked out.

No, the present me decided, that would expose me to the machine guns. Okay, now I was crouching in an alley, about to run out and heave a Molotov cocktail between the tank's wheel treads. But I still couldn't work out how to elude the machine guns.

"You've gone quiet," Mr. Kaminsky said.

"I was thinking about what you just said. I could never be brave enough to do what your countrymen did."

"If you believe deeply in something, courage comes to you."

I had no reply. For once Mr. Kaminsky let me off the hook.

When the lights dimmed that night and during the nights that followed, I asked myself how courage could have been rewarded so cruelly. Were there other explanations for what the Russians had done at Warsaw? What about what Britain had done to Poland? I knew the two countries had signed a pact before World War II, but when Germany invaded Poland, Prime Minister Chamberlain sent none of the promised help. Wasn't that a betrayal, too? Yet Mr. Kaminsky didn't seem to harbor the same resentment against Britain.

As the days went by, I came up with other questions and examples, but none contradicted the fact that Mr. Kaminsky's people had been treated unforgivably. The subject must be so painful for him that I didn't return to it.

22

"Last night I went to the Jimi Hendrix concert at the Albert Hall," Pamela said.

"Did they do 'The Wind Cries Mary'?"

"And 'Hey Joe' and things you probably haven't heard on the radio."

"Was it packed?"

"I couldn't hardly breathe, but I forgot when he came on stage." Her crossed leg did a happy bounce.

Swept along by Pamela's exuberance, I felt in reach of a pulsating excitement I hadn't known before; not even known I wanted. Ian also embodied the spirit of this London. As Pamela was a concert goer, he loved films, which seemed fitting for a photographer.

"You know all that publicity Hayley Mills got for a nude scene? The film came out just before they snagged me in here, and I went to see it. I mean, here's this Walt Disney actress, all squeaky clean, and she's taken off her clothes for the camera. Pretty exciting."

“I’d like to see her with no clothes on, too.”

“So I sat through the whole thing, from beginning to end. It was the most boring film I’ve ever seen. What they’re going on about is the scene where you get a peek at her bottom. Who cares about her bottom.”

Ian’s favorite haunt was Hyde Park. I called to mind the Serpentine, the twisting lake that ran through it, and the park’s stone walls and sloping grass lawns, then superimposed an image of Jimmy Saville, the disc jockey with two-toned hair, and Petula Clark singing “Don’t Sleep in the Subway” from a cylindrical dais on “Top of the Pops.” A film played in my mind of Ian jaunting from his photography studio to the park, from park to cinema, cinema to pub. I wished I could have followed him, even for just a day, to experience it all for myself.

Instead, I tried to generate some excitement on the ward.

“I got Cindy to show me her patella,” I bragged to Mr. Kaminsky.

“Her what?” he spluttered.

“Her patella.”

“Her knee cap? How did you accomplish this feat?”

“I was telling her it’s a shame the nurses have to wear such long dresses and asked how long she wore hers outside Moorfields. She said above the knee.”

“I think I can guess the rest.”

“Then you tell me.”

“This is your story.”

“So I said, ‘Show me how short’.”

“I knew it.”

“I can tell you aren’t impressed.”

“Believe me, I’m impressed. The clever part is how you introduced the subject. After that, it was a simple end game. Did you like what you saw?”

“I liked it a lot.”

In truth, I’d hardly seen anything in the ward’s dim evening light. Cindy’s exposure of stocking registered, but I was too unnerved to take in more. Still, getting Cindy to raise her skirt was a coup.

Mr. Kaminsky said, “Not just her knee, but her patella!”

He was mocking me, but I said, “And not just any nurse, but Cindy Denton.”

“Have you ever tasted wine?”

“No.”

“High time. Pour some for yourself from the bottle on my night table. There’s a clean glass there.”

I studied the label on the bottle. “Boucherin Chablis,” I pronounced.

“Your accent is reasonably good.”

“Can I pour you a glass?”

“No, thank you. I keep it for guests.”

I sat down and took a sip. I was surprised and not surprised. Without having thought how wine would taste, I’d anticipated its mix of smoothness and harshness.

“Take only small sips. Do you like it?”

“Very much.”

“Good. Now, down to business.”

I was happy with the business of tasting the wine.

“You don’t talk about your family. I assume your mother’s a kind person. She comes to see you every day without fail. And your father’s in America?”

“With my brother.”

“Your father is what? I mean what does he do?”

“A chartered accountant.”

“Tell me more.”

I told him what I knew of Mum and Dad’s early lives.

Mr. Kaminsky said, “How old were they when they got married?”

“They always say they didn’t get married until Dad passed his exams. Now you make me think about it, that means he must have been twenty-three. Mum would have been twenty-four. She’s a year older.”

“An eight-year courtship. Tell me more.”

I listed Dad’s promotions and our moves.

“Your Dad has a lot weighing on his mind.”

“Because I’m here and he’s in America.”

“Your mother’s here too, don’t forget.”

“And my brother’s over there.”

“It’s hard enough starting a new job.”

I hadn’t realized how difficult I was making life for my parents.

Mr. Kaminsky inferred the reason for my silence. “It isn’t you. It’s your condition.”

I sipped more wine.

“One habit you must acquire,” he said.

I was used to these abrupt shifts of focus when he’d exhausted a subject. “What’s that?”

“A cold shower every morning.”

“Why?”

“To stimulate the blood and clear the head.”

After any sort of physical activity at school, we’d been required to take showers, even though there was no hot water. The older boys took pride in lingering under the shocking jet of pain. I’d dance in and out, then race for my clothes on a bench.

“I don’t like cold showers,” I told Mr. Kaminsky.

“There’s nothing to like except the benefits. Promise me you’ll make it a habit when you go to America.”

“All right.”

“That sounds equivocal.”

“I promise.”

But I wouldn’t. I’d keep no promise I’d been badgered into making.

“Do you still have wine left in your glass?”

“Quite a lot.”

“The first glass is the longest. While you’re imbibing, tell me a ten-minute monologue.”

“On what?”

“That’s up to you.”

“I can’t tell monologues. You and Ian tell fantastic monologues. I’m a listener.”

My spontaneous rejoinder gave me new insight into myself.

“You’re an excellent listener. I want you to become an excellent conversationalist.”

I squirmed on the pew. I didn't have a monologue in me. The best I could do was start to tell a story and be led through the rest by someone asking questions. That was how I'd told him about Cindy's patella and, just now, my parents.

There was no point in apologizing; he wouldn't accept. I finished the wine, returned the glass to the night table, thanked him and wished him goodnight.

"Goodnight," he said. Just when I thought I was off the hook, he added, "Next time have a monologue ready."

23

At lunch a young man complained his operation had left his vision clouded with dots.

"Be thankful it isn't worse," an elderly patient said.

The unhappy patient muttered unintelligibly.

I knew those dots, or floaters. An effect of blood specks in the eye's fluid, they swarmed like house flies. For me they'd been temporary. He'd been told his might stay the rest of his life.

I toyed with telling the elderly man, "Looking at dots all day could drive you out of your mind." But I anticipated him retorting, "Lad, if he had your problems, he'd have reason to complain." So I said nothing.

Each time another patient was to have an operation, I watched the curtains being drawn around the bed and cringed at the smell of the chemicals. Thinking of the injection that preceded the trip to the operating theater, I thought only of the moment and not about the hopes for the surgery. I wanted to give support to my fellow patients, but how?

When a boy my age named Joe was admitted for a short stint, Sister placed him in the bed next to mine. The evening after his operation, I sat in the armchair between our beds and

tried to comfort him with chatter. After a while he said, “Talking’s too hard.” Recalling my father’s visit after my operation in Sheffield, I took Joe’s hand, poking out from under the covers at the edge of his bed, and told him I understood. He squeezed back, and I was left holding his hand.

Just then Cindy, flying through the ward with her usual urgency, came toward us. Abruptly, she stopped at Joe’s bed and flung up the bedcovers. “Holding hands, eh?” She dropped the covers and sped on.

“I’ve never felt so miserable in my life,” Joe whispered.

“It’s awful. But your operation was short, so you should be over it by morning.”

He fell asleep, and I freed my hand.

Confident on my feet now, I was frequently in the vicinity of Mr. Kaminsky’s bed as I passed by to talk to another patient or sat at the dining table. But since no monologue had formed in my mind, I stayed away.

Avoiding him was oppressive. Had he been able to see, he might have signaled a willingness to compromise on his monologue demand. As it was, if I spoke and he didn’t relent, I’d be back to squirming in the pew.

One afternoon I stood at the end of his bed and stared. It bewildered me that he couldn’t know he was being stared at.

Through the bedspread I pressed his toes. He spoke down the length of his bed. “Who is it?” I didn’t answer. He asked again, “Who is it?” Again, I didn’t answer.

I remembered my own struggle before Kate. It occurred to me that she might have been making up for lack of eye contact. Maybe she’d wanted to get through to me in some way for which she thought talk inadequate.

But I wasn't Kate. Pressing Mr. Kaminsky's toes had been a horrible mistake. I walked away without a word.

I learned his operation was set for Monday. After the ward's Sunday prayer service, I finally went to his side. "I hope it goes well for you tomorrow."

"Thank you."

"I prayed for you at the service." He couldn't know it was the first time I'd ever prayed, except when forced to at school assemblies, which meant it wasn't praying anyway.

Without the thin-lipped sarcastic smile I'd feared, he said, "That's very kind of you, my friend. I wish there were someone listening."

Next morning the nurses drew the curtains around his bed. The ward was subdued as he was wheeled away, a narrow island on the trolley. He didn't come back till the late afternoon.

After two days, we learned from whispered nurses' conversations that the operation had failed. A pall of gloom hung over his bed.

24

Emboldened by my success in getting Cindy to show me her knees, I tried to draw out Kate. "Whenever they talk about models in magazines, they give their measurements," I said from my armchair as she poured water into my bedside carafe. "I don't know what they mean."

"They're measurements of the bust, waist and hips." She leaned back against the bed.

"I know, but which is first?"

"The bust."

"They're still just numbers. They mean nothing to me."

"If I told you mine, would that help?"

Though my plan had gone so much better than expected, I was ashamed of myself. “You really don’t have to.”

“I’m 34, 23, 36.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t look at her.

“Does that help?”

“Er, yes.” I stole a glance at her face. She was grinning.

At dinner that night I imparted my findings.

“How do you get these women to tell so much about themselves?” a man said.

“She volunteered. I didn’t even ask.”

“Volunteered,” the man muttered.

I set about obtaining the measurements of all the nurses. The first few didn’t hesitate to answer, perhaps because I’d caught them by surprise. At dinner I circulated the data among the patients. By the second day, word of my project had reached the other nurses.

“Which number am I?” asked a new nurse named Steph Bennett.

“What do you mean?”

“I know you’ve been asking the other nurses. I want to know where I am on your list.”

“I don’t keep a list.”

“In your head you do.”

“That would be offensive.”

“Oh.”

“So what are they?”

After she left, I counted how many nurses I’d asked so far. Steph was the seventh.

But then another new nurse, Jenny Foster, refused. “Why should I tell you?”

I was already battling her over the duration of my baths. Like the other ambulatory patients, I bathed in the tub in a room behind the ward. A nurse would periodically knock on the door to make sure all was well. By the first knock, I'd be drying myself and the nurse would come in to offer assistance. When that job fell to Nurse Foster, she'd ask, "How can you get clean so quickly?" I hated to displease her, but long baths bored me. Now I worried that my lightning baths unmasked me for the foul person I was.

There were still one or two nurses to go, but I decided to stop.

Next day Nurse Foster sat in my armchair. "I thought about your question as I was taking my bath last night. I don't know why I wouldn't tell you. Everyone else did, right?"

"I shouldn't have asked."

"But since you did, they're 35, 25, 37. Is that in line with your other results?"

I paused to make sure the information lodged in my memory. "Quite favorable." Then I asked, "How long was this bath you took?"

"Forty minutes, give or take."

"Now I know why you get cross with me. You don't want to be the only one who takes long baths."

Staring at the windows she said, "A hot bath is the most sensual experience in the world."

25

Ten days before Christmas, operations were postponed and most patients sent home. Those of us who remained were transferred to a dozen-bed ward. In the smaller room with few windows, discs of ceiling and bedside light jumbled in my eye. My mental map disrupted, I'd catch myself turning at the wrong bed when I went to talk to another patient. That I hadn't done

so back in the main ward suggested I confused sight with memory. I realized I'd located patients by counting off bed frames.

Hating to look clumsy, I grew wary of doing my usual rounds among the patients. So I was secretly pleased when a new patient mentioned he hadn't been introduced to Mr. Kaminsky. I offered to do the honors and, as if to be polite, told the man to lead the way.

As we approached Mr. Kaminsky's bed, the new patient whispered, "Keep going."

"Why?"

"Keep going."

I squinted in Mr. Kaminsky's direction and made out a nurse standing on a chair, presumably fixing the light over his bed. A white line snaked out from the still form in the bed to the nurse's dark-stockinged leg.

"Who's the nurse?" I asked.

"Kate."

We continued to the exit, then parted ways.

Here was something else Mr. Kaminsky didn't know I knew about him. But when I went to talk to another patient, it was to shake off not a sense of unfairness, but jealousy.

The day came for Mr. Kaminsky's discharge from hospital. We'd spoken so seldom recently that I felt a stranger in the pew. "I'm sorry the operation didn't succeed," I said.

To the ceiling he said, "So am I."

"What will you do now?"

"Go to the next surgeon."

"Where?"

"Boston."

I braced myself. “What if that doesn’t work out?”

“I’ll go to the surgeon after that, wherever that might be.”

I fell silent. There was no surgeon after Mr. Hudson. Why couldn’t Mr. Kaminsky, who carried the story of wartime Warsaw in his bones and who had the self-discipline to take a cold shower every day outside Moorfields, accept he’d lost his vision?

“Goodbye, then,” I said. “And thank you for all you’ve taught me.”

“Goodbye, my friend.” His form stayed arrow-straight under the covers. When I’d met him, he’d told me to shake hands. No such gesture at parting.

I sloped off to my bed, hands deep in the pockets of the oversized dressing gown, and mulled over Mr. Kaminsky’s going to Boston when I’d be living near New York. The two cities weren’t far apart, as I recalled from my Rand McNally atlas. I wished he’d suggested we meet in America. Then again, I couldn’t imagine what it would be like for us to be together outside the ward.

I remembered a story that Ian, long since gone back to strolling through Hyde Park, had told me.

“Last year there was a Post Office man who had some degenerative eye disease. He’d been in and out for years. He kept losing his sight. Each time they operated and were able to fix him up. But it was getting worse, to the point where he couldn’t do his job.”

“Poor man.”

“He was one tough gent. They told him permanent loss was imminent. They could operate again, and maybe again after that, but one day he’d wake up and wouldn’t see any more. Meanwhile he was missing his last chance to see the world because he had to use up holiday time for his operations. So he told them forget the op and checked himself out.”

“And he lost his vision?”

“I never saw him again. It’s not as if I spend all my spare time in here.”

From having known no one who was blind, I’d now met Eric and Mr. Kaminsky and had the stories of the blind mother with her three blind children and the Post Office man. Sister’s husband didn’t count because I knew nothing about him. Eric had proven blindness could be tolerated. Not just tolerated, but accepted with grace. If I ever did lose my vision, I hoped I’d carry it off half as well. Mr. Kaminsky might still be fighting it, but he was held in awe and affection on the ward. Blindness didn’t have to turn you into an object of horror to be avoided on the street.

26

“We never hear you talk about Kate Larkin anymore,” a man said to me over lunch.

“She’s back today, you know,” another said.

Kate had been absent since the day I’d passed her fixing Mr. Kaminsky’s light. It had been even longer since we’d spoken. “I hardly remember what she looks like,” I mused aloud.

“How could anyone forget?” the first man said.

We were speaking lightly, but for me the question was serious. Suppose I lost my vision. How would I bring a familiar face to mind? How would I make my own judgments about new faces? The answer to that last question was simple: I wouldn’t be able to.

“Kate,” the first man called out. She’d just walked into the ward. “Over here. The lad has something to ask you.”

She came toward the table and said, “What is it?”

“They’re teasing me,” I said, reduced to the blushing rubble I’d become on first seeing her.

“He says he’s forgotten what you look like,” the second man said.

She walked around the table and, like the first time, rested on her haunches before me.

“Can you see me now?”

“That’s it, Kate,” the first man said.

She offered her unwavering gaze, and once more I was unsettled. But though she was just inches away, I felt the distance between us. She’d been fond of me. What had changed? I had no idea, any more than I understood why she was willing to hold her face so near.

“Had enough?” she said.

Realizing I must have been frowning, I said, “I hadn’t forgotten.”

She stood, and the second man said, “Nicely done, Kate.” The others chimed in as she walked back to the bed she’d been changing.

The next I knew, she was assigned to another ward in a routine staff rotation. Cindy, the disciplinarian, and Jenny, the keeper of the bath, had already moved on. Because there was no secretary’s desk on the small ward, Pamela had also gone to another part of Moorfields.

27

Mum was about to visit in the evening. She’d always come in the afternoon, with tomato soup and the newspaper, along with the card games and dominoes I could now play. As I waited, I sat on the side of my bed with the pillow radio at my ear. Glancing toward the entrance, I saw two shapes pushing through the interlocking halos of light at that end of the ward. The shapes

moved closer. They came still closer. Maybe ... One appeared the same degree taller than the other as my father was than my mother. Closer still and I was sure.

“Hello, Dad,” I said, staying seated and keeping my head still.

“Hi, tiger.” Dad ruffled my hair.

“How did you know?” Mum said.

“Know what?”

“That your Dad was coming back for Christmas. We told no one.”

“I didn’t.”

“But you’re not surprised.”

“I’m very surprised.”

Anticipation had built up in me as I’d watched Dad materialize from the glare, but I’d mastered joy the way I had fear.

“We were afraid you might jolt your head if we called and asked the nurses to pass on our message,” Dad said.

Was I more likely to have jolted my head if a nurse had told me or on seeing Dad without warning? Mr. Kaminsky would have had a field-day with the logic.

On Thursday Mr. Hudson made his rounds. Balloon bubbles, their rims overlapping each other, had grown where the latest shadow had appeared.

He stood back. “Yes, I think you can join your Mum and Dad for Christmas.” He spoke as if I’d asked. “But you must return the day after New Year’s. I’ll need to operate again.”

I fought down distress and asked, “Why?”

“The silicon band needs stabilizing.”

“Is there any risk?”

“None whatsoever. It’s maintenance. Your sight will be neither worse nor better. Under no circumstances lean forward, and avoid any sharp movements. Happy Christmas to you.”

28

Looking out from the car Mum and Dad had rented, I reveled in the streets of London. With my new grasp of perspective, I took in the passing Georgian and Victorian buildings, the double-decker buses with their side-long advertisements, the street signs, the gradations of gray on a cloudy day, the gleam of winter light on the body work of vehicles, people rushing, loping, stopping at shop windows. After the somnolent interior of the ward, it all looked so fresh.

Then a red film spread through my vision. It reminded me of an afternoon years before when I’d put on rose colored glasses and gone for a long walk. Stopping before a house whose look I’d always liked, I’d been enchanted by its pink-tinged gray under a reddish sky. I chose now to enjoy the effect and not worry.

We drove on to suburban Essex, where our relatives lived, and I thought how Mum never complained about the even longer trip by Underground. At his home Uncle Frank gave me a tour that he concluded by throwing open the back door onto a tiny garden and announcing, “I present the estate.” I laughed, delighted at the Moorfields-like self-deprecating humor.

In the living room I recovered from the trip as my cousin played “Sergeant Pepper’s” for me and Tim, who had come back with Dad for Christmas. I’d heard about it in the hospital, but the ward radio didn’t pick up the only station that played it. Gazing at the fireplace through rose-colored aqueous humor, I heard for the first time words that captured the new exoticism of my vision:

Picture yourself in a boat on a river
With tangerine trees and marmalade skies.

The two families played card games late into the night. The redness had dissipated, but I had to hold the cards up to my face and organize them in ways obvious, even from the back, to someone of Dad's card-playing prowess. The atmosphere was merry. Mum tittered and muttered until her face turned purple and she whooped for gasps of air. Tears of laughter streamed from the other faces, except Uncle Frank, who kept a straight man's blank expression.

On Christmas morning I unwrapped a box to find a silk dressing gown. "Thanks, Mum. That will put an end to the jokes."

To Dad, Mum said, "I bought it when I came down in November."

"You mean you've had it for two months?" I exclaimed. "Everyone's been telling me how embarrassed I should be wearing that big red thing on the ward."

"It was a Christmas present."

Dad mumbled something I couldn't hear, Uncle Frank mumbled something to Mum, and everyone returned to opening presents. I saw they were making allowances for me, as people did for invalids.

After the presents ceremony, everyone scattered to different rooms. I stood alone in the vestibule and looked down the hallway, past the living and dining room doors, to the kitchen. I longed to talk about my discovery of perspective, but no one else could possibly feel the same wonder. Even Dad might only say something distracted. Wonder became loneliness, and I found I missed the patients and nurses at Moorfields.

But Moorfields wasn't the answer. These few days outside had broken the spell. Back in the hospital, there'd be no gleeful card games, no record player or "Sergeant Pepper's" to play on it. I wished I weren't returning to the dim rooms, fixed routine and empty hours.

The two families spent New Year's Day touring London. As evening approached and as if the idea had just occurred to him, Dad proposed dropping me off at the hospital.

"But I'm not due to return until tomorrow."

"Let's see what they have to say."

It would save Mum and him a second trip into and back from London, but I felt tricked.

No bed was available in the main ward, where the men had returned. However, the staff gave me a private room. I spent the night alone, seething.

29

Three days later and after a two-hour operation, I returned to the main ward. I was again under orders to stay still and lie flat on my back, but post-operative nausea made me desperate to curl into a ball. I couldn't find a comfortable position within the range permitted me. I complained volubly, which amused the nurses. As the man with the dots in his vision had found, lesser woes got no sympathy on the ward.

When Mr. Hudson removed the patch and my sight was the same as before, neither he nor I was surprised.

Up and about in my smart silk dressing gown, I learned that the current group of ambulatory patients spent their day at the dining table, where a Greek Cypriot in his thirties named Nikos held court. Although I hadn't known about Mr. Kaminsky's Warsaw, I had watched film of the fighting between Greeks and Turks on Cyprus. I was curious if Nikos had been involved, but he never volunteered and I wouldn't ask.

At lunch one day an elderly gentleman named Mr. Mott, two chairs down to my left, said, "I suppose it means I won't be able to drive anymore."

“That’s a shame,” Nikos said. He was sitting across from me, both of us at the table’s midpoint.

“The silver lining,” Mr. Mott said, “is the wife’s been nagging me about my driving for years. Now I get to nag her back.”

I glanced across at Nikos, whose black eyebrows rose and fell.

“From what I’ve seen, you’ll learn you deserved all that nagging and more,” said an even older man named Mr. Stilwater, to Nikos’s right. He chuckled at the shocked glances the men gave him.

“I hope I never end up where I can’t drive,” said a younger man to my left whom everyone called Tanner.

“What makes you even speculate?” Nikos asked, eyebrows expressionless.

“Hudson said something about possible deterioration down the road.”

“How far down the road?”

“Ten years, maybe twenty.”

“Once you get out of here, you won’t think about it.”

“It’s like having that rusty old sword swinging over my head,” Tanner persisted.

Nikos looked across at me. “How do you deal with an uncertain future?”

The other men looked away.

“Everyone’s different,” I said.

“Granted,” Nikos said.

“If you have to lose your sight, thirteen may be the best age. You’re young enough, you can still learn new things, but you’ve also seen a lot.”

“Ugh, I put too much milk in my tea,” Mr. Mott said. “Why do I do such wooly-headed things?”

“At least,” Mr. Stilwater assailed him, “nothing will change when you go blind.”

Ignoring the banter, Nikos said to me, “I admire your courage.”

I slunk back to my bed feeling mortified. My pompous pronouncement had had nothing to do with Tanner. It was a theory I’d been developing for a while, but about my own situation. How could I have blurted it out like that?

In his kindly way, Nikos was wrong. My complaining and twitching during the bout of nausea after the last operation proved I wasn’t brave. Was courage a myth others created about you?

My problems were insignificant compared to the suffering people had endured in Warsaw, and as they were now in Cyprus, Africa and lots of other places. If I lost my vision, I had a feeling I’d deal with it. Was that courage? Wasn’t it, instead, the passage of time? Hadn’t it come from the need I felt to redeem myself? Wasn’t it, above all, the fortitude given to me by Eric, Mr. Kaminsky, Meg, Kathy, Nurse Reynolds, Kate, Pamela, Ian, Cindy, Miss Watkins, Mr. Hudson, now Nikos, and of course Mum and Dad? If that was courage, it had, as Mr. Kaminsky said, come to me.

30

Nurses who had been transferred to other wards came to see me during evening visiting hours. They were striking in their soft-fabric clothes, freed from the hospital’s stiff uniforms. Steph Bennett, number seven on the measurements list, came with Dora Parker.

“So are you wearing one of those miniskirts you told me about?” I said to Dora.

“I knew you’d be disappointed if I didn’t.” She stood up, unbuttoned her coat and held it apart. As with Cindy’s patella, I couldn’t make out her legs because of the poor night lighting, but she was definitely wearing a miniskirt.

Both nurses had been assigned to the main ward for brief stints in early December. Some patients teased Dora as “fat.” She didn’t have the figure of other nurses and I was glad she’d come too late for the measurement survey.

“Steph?” Dora said.

“What?”

“Open up your coat.”

“Oh, Dora.”

“He’s only interested in you for your legs.”

“Not true,” I protested.

“Okay,” Steph said.

Steph visited again on her own. The night before, she’d returned to the nurses’ quarters after curfew. Locked out, she’d climbed through the window into the room of another nurse, who let her stay the night. In the morning they were found. Steph was reprimanded and the other nurse dismissed.

“Why do they lock you out if you don’t get back by midnight?” I said.

“It’s a rule. You know, keep us on best behavior.”

“They want you to spend the night in the street?”

“They want you back by midnight.”

What was wrong with someone Steph’s age being out late? And why would they make a rule that might do more harm than the harm it was supposed to prevent?

She said, “But the really awful thing is what they did to my friend. I feel so bad about her. I’m trying to decide what to do.”

I went over the story in my mind. I understood the part about being locked out and why Steph had smuggled herself in. But why hadn’t she gone on to her own room? Did guards patrol the halls, or did the building have separate sections closed off from each other? I was missing something. But it was all right. She seemed glad to have someone to say it all to, and I was content to enjoy the way she spoke, her perfume, the expressions I dimly perceived on her face, my awareness of her long legs crossing and uncrossing under her short skirt.

“Thanks for listening,” she said. “Not many people understand.”

31

Mr. Hudson pronounced my eye stable enough for the trans-Atlantic flight.

“What if the plane bumps in an air pocket?” I’d never flown but heard they could take sudden dives.

“There’s always a risk. Anything you do after you leave here is going to have an element of risk. However, I feel confident.”

And, therefore, so did I.

My discharge was set for January 23rd, and Mum made flight reservations for the 26th. Anxious to keep in touch with my remaining Moorfields friends, I set about drawing up a list of the names and addresses of nurses and patients. It was the first time I’d used a pen since September. I had to write big to see my notes. Formerly, my handwriting had been tiny. I’d disliked people who wrote big. Would I become like one of those people?

With my best friends among the patients gone, the list was dominated by nurses. It took on a life of its own, growing to more than twenty names and addresses. Dora, Steph and others told me to put their names down before I asked. Some gave their addresses with a social laugh that reminded me of the worst moments of the measurements survey.

I casually tossed the list on top of my night table. I realized my error when Sister stopped by. In mid-sentence, she glanced down at the night table and frowned. Without another word, she walked away.

I spent anxious hours trying to fathom her reaction. I guessed it had to do with the large number of nurses' names. But what was the harm? Why, all of a sudden, did I feel ashamed?

Dora and Steph visited together for the last time. Dora brought a portrait photograph that conveyed her amiability. In a photograph taken by her mother, Steph lounged on a bed in a brief night dress that displayed the length of her slim legs. I studied the two women in the pictures, then in the armchairs before me. I was pleased to have the photographs, and Steph's excited me. But they were separate from my feelings for the women. Again I looked at the pictures, then at the women. I'd be taking the pictures with me, but leaving behind two friends I'd miss terribly. I tucked the photographs away in the night table drawer, where I'd also taken the belated precaution of concealing the list.

Appraising the photographs in daylight next morning, I identified aperture setting and lighting problems that had bedeviled my own camera work. I couldn't see with the same clarity, but I was examining them pretty much as I'd looked at photographs before September. I was reassured. Even if I did write big, maybe I'd return to the person I'd been when I got back to normal life.

For the last time Mr. Hudson came with his trainees to peer at my eye with their instruments. He departed abruptly, leading the crocodile past the foot of my bed to the next patient. Pillows packed behind me, I sat back in frustration at my failure to express gratitude.

Then, as the crocodile wound to a patient two beds down, Mr. Hudson detached himself and walked back to my side. He leaned forward. "You've been a wonderful patient."

I stammered, "Thank you."

"And set a fine example to the staff."

"Thank you."

"And to me."

"Thank you."

"I want to wish you the very best in America." He seized my hand. Then he strode away, giving me no chance to say what I couldn't anyway.

When Mum came to get me during the quiet time after lunch, I gathered my pajamas, my silk dressing gown, the letters I'd received, the list and the two photographs. Everything fit in a small bag. Nikos wished me luck but said nothing about my vision. I'd remember his careful farewell in springtime Connecticut.