

Still Wearing Her Brightly Colored Hat

Somewhere on the Oregon coast, a woman sits on a log. She is looking out at the ocean. It is a warm summer day, but the wind is up. She wears sweats, a light jacket over her tank top and a red and orange knit hat. She is not a young woman and her skin hangs loose on her tall frame. Her eyes, sunken in dark circles, are the grey green of the water under the overcast sky.

She watches as over and over the surf rises in the distance, a gentle bump in the water at first, swelling as it approaches until it pours, booming, onto the shore. When it recedes it leaves a lacy edge of white froth on the sand. Now the wind lifts a snippet of the froth and sends it sliding across the beach--like the locks of her hair floating to the floor when she cut it off this time.

Last time she waited until there were only a few strands left before she shaved her head. Her hair was straight then but came back, amazingly, in curls. This time, as soon as she saw the first clump in her brush, she trimmed it short, almost to her skull.

Last time there was hope. This time there is none. She is dying, will be dead within weeks. She wonders why they say "dying," as though it were something you do instead of something that happens to you.

She is afraid, but not so much as you would think. At times she is also curious. Is death a passage or an end? Will she see Blake, her husband, again? Or will there be

nothing? But mainly she sees her death as something that can't be helped and sees no reason to dwell on it. Her life has been good and she is close to being ready to let it go. She has raised two beautiful, healthy children and has known the marvel of four grandchildren. The loss of Blake twelve years ago brought a time of darkness, but at least the children were grown. She was only five when her own father died. She is grateful that her children were spared the pain of growing up without a father. And they had not had to experience anything like the bad years with Virgil, her stepfather. She is grateful for that, too.

She pulls her jacket closer against the wind and hunches into her shoulders.

They were at the lake, right after Virgil came into their life. "Almost seven and you can't swim," he said. He grabbed her with his big hands and tossed her through the air into the water. She can feel the panic even now, how weak her arms felt as she flailed, water in her nose, in her mouth. Somehow her feet found ground and she righted herself. She stood coughing and crying, his hairy legs occupying her whole field of vision. He laughed. "What a baby. Water's barely up to your waist." Her mother, on the shore behind him, was silent, ignoring her need. She did not want to be that kind of mother, and she wasn't. Her children had known gentleness and safety.

She is grateful for that, and grateful, too, that this thing she is no longer able to battle is not in her lungs. They say it is like drowning, and she closes her arms tight around herself as she imagines that panicked fight for breath.

You would have to do it if you had no choice, of course. And this is something she is learning about. Having to do things she has not chosen. You would just have to tell

yourself that no matter how terrifying, it wouldn't last long. But she can think of few things more terrifying and is glad that this will not be imposed on her.

The sun breaks through a patch of clouds, turning the ocean a moonlike silver where it strikes. She breathes in the smell of salt and iodine and of things belonging to the shore, both those living and not living.

She never got over an edge of fear, but she learned to swim, became a strong swimmer, in fact, and loves the ocean. And so it is here she has come, where, with the murmur of the surf around her, the touch of the sun on her face, no one she knows in sight, she hopes to reclaim something of herself.

This thing that has occupied her organs has also taken over her life. Her doctors and children and friends have conspired with it in their attempt to care for her. You are too sick to drive to the coast, they said. But she did it, she drove here, leaving no address for them to chase her down with their needles and pills and hushed voices and tears. She has turned her phone off. This is her time.

The long drive left her drained, but she is glad she came. Here by the ocean, its water softened by the same salt that flavors her own blood, its tides answering to the moon like her own body once did, she feels the comfort of a kinship she cannot name and begins to find the clarity she came here to seek.

What haunts her is that by being able to do so little, she has become so little. She does not want to go back and be nothing but a wrecked body, ministered to by doctors and nurses, caught in the web of her children's solicitude, enduring the increasingly confused faces of her grandchildren.

She considers staying here in a motel until she dies. She has money and painkillers. She tries to imagine it. If only she were sure it would come soon, but she has heard stories of terrible lingering. She recoils at the thought of reaching a point where she can't even make it to the bathroom. She has enough painkillers to end it now, but suicide in a motel room is not what she is looking for.

She wants to find some part of herself that is not defined by this disease, and she knows she has little time to do it. As she carefully takes a reckoning of those things she can still do, she finds very few choices and only one that frees her. She almost laughs when it hits her, and, even as her stomach tightens with fear, she sees how perfect a solution it is. If she must die, this disease will not rob her of who she is. She will go facing the thing she has feared all her life. She feels more alive than she has in months.

The wind dies down and the ocean settles into a gentle breathing. She reaches in her pocket for her phone, turns it on, leaves a message for her family and turns it back off. She sits a while longer and then stands up and inhales deeply. There is no point in waiting. Tomorrow she might be too weak. She takes her jacket off, folds it, lays it on the log and then slips out of her sweats. She wears black underwear and hopes that under her tank top they look like a bathing suit, but knows that it doesn't matter. She walks across the wet, gritty sand and steps into the water, her brightly colored hat still on. She can do this. When the panic arrives at the end, she will remind herself that it won't last long. That will be her mantra. It will be over soon.