

## CAUTION: THE MOVING WALKWAY IS ENDING

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*Brandel France de Bravo*

### I.

My biostatistics professor, Molly Parks, who subscribes to *Hadassah* magazine and remembers doing multiple regressions by hand, is standing in front of 60 of us, waving a small booklet. "This," she says, stabbing *The Vital Statistics of New York City* with her index finger, wig askew, "is better than fiction."

And it was. There was something holy about its unrelenting reckoning: births, marriages, and deaths. Death by borough, by age, by birthplace, race, and cause. Every class, we opened this booklet, with its Years of Potential Life Lost, and learned to quantify the unquantifiable.

### II.

I am sitting beside a floor-to-ceiling window. A heavy curtain covers all but the bottom of it where the bare glass frames a pair of legs. They are my mother's stocking calves, size 5 Ferragamo shoes, with a triple A heel. She is standing at the front door knocking or maybe she's ringing the bell. It isn't my house; it's simply where I happen to be. I don't hear a thing. Next to her, I see a raccoon on his hind legs, also waiting. He turns his masked face to me.

That dream ends, and in the next one I am staring at a computer screen, clicking on an icon labeled "the dream before this one," but nothing opens.

As my mother's weight drops, her balance fails, and the coughing worsens, she becomes increasingly housebound. She spends most of her time in bed, watching television without sound. She doesn't want to disturb her neighbors, or more likely she is trying to teach by example the college kids in the apartment upstairs. Some nights, in spite of the codeine cough syrup, in spite of the prescription sleeping pills, she lies awake staring at the invisible cardiogram of

bass on her ceiling. After an hour, she will knock on it with a broom handle. Then she will climb back into bed, out of breath and wait.

Her appetite is gone, and it hurts to swallow. On TV, she watches the cooks — the barefoot one, the naked one, the 30-minute one, the white one named Brown. And from the 33 square feet of real estate she knows best, she watches the house hunters.

*Homeostasis: The ability of a cell or the body to seek and maintain a condition of equilibrium or stability within its internal environment when dealing with external changes.*

She especially likes the show where the houses being stalked are in foreign countries, locales she might have liked to live in or at least visit. She can see herself in that one bedroom in the 20th-arrondissement, and she can see herself in that cliff-side villa in Agadir. And she watches *Antiques Roadshow* — both the British and American versions — where people present their family heirlooms, flea market finds, attic detritus to experts. A man will find out that the painting his retirement plans hinge on is worthless; the woman will discover that the crudely carved wooden horse she bought on a whim is a first, a one-of-a-kind, a signed, a best example of, a last-remaining. Each will have his at-the-gates-of-St. Peter moment.

All day, the television pantomimes, animated, beckoning while the laptop sleeps on the floor next to her bed. Her interest in the internet has faded. Too many answers lie there, and each sympathetic email (“Are you up for a visit — maybe next week?”) a burden. She has stopped shopping online for gold and gem stones. Her clubbed fingers are unable to set the tourmalines, fire opals, and alexandrites she has spent the last three years collecting, and the growths on her cerebellum make her too unsteady to solder. The tools and filaments that used to cover her dining table have been stored in a trunk. Just for now, I tell her. She makes sketches, which I find on the backs of envelopes,

ATM withdrawal slips, and doctors’ orders for CT scans, PET scans, and MRIs, with and without contrast.

*Quitting smoking reduces the risk of developing and dying from cancer. However, it takes a number of years after quitting for the risk of cancer to start to decline. This benefit increases the longer a person remains smoke-free (she quit 17 years ago at age 57). The risk of premature death and the chance of developing cancer from smoking cigarettes depend on many factors, including the number of years a person smokes (40 years), the number of cigarettes he or she smokes per day (2 packs a day, sometimes more), the age at which he or she began smoking (age 15 — it made her look older), and whether or not he or she was already ill at the time of quitting (one case of pneumonia but otherwise healthy). For people who have already developed cancer, quitting smoking reduces the risk of developing a second cancer (skin cancer — on her face — detected 10 months after being diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer).*

According to one prediction tool, my mother's risk of developing lung cancer is 7%.

III.

#### RETURNS AND EXCHANGES

I've been in and out of stores  
shopping for a metaphor

but can't find what I'm looking for.  
You say: My joints hurt.  
I say: You need a new roof.  
You say: I can't swallow.  
I say: You're behind on your payments.  
You say: I'm out of breath.  
I say: The Bank wants it back.  
You say: I can't feel my toes.  
I say: Let's fill the john  
with cement mix,  
and storm out to the applause  
of the half-hinged screen door.  
It turns out foreclosure  
wasn't what I wanted.

The customer is always.  
With a credit to my account  
I'm driving on an eight-lane highway,  
faster than the speed limit,  
semi's like linebackers on either side.  
You say: My joints hurt.  
I say: None of the stations are coming in.  
You say: I can't swallow.  
I say: Adjust the sun visor.  
You say: I'm out of breath.  
I say: We'll look for a rest stop.  
You say: I can't feel my toes.  
I say: Something's trying to pass us.

We both can sense it:  
how it will overtake us  
once it leaves the blind spot.

While on chemotherapy, my mother develops a fever. We are told to go to the ER, where she spends the night and most of the next day in a hospital bed, on antibiotics, under observation. A few months later, we talk about what we couldn't before: Where she wants to be when it happens. Which pillow, which lamp, which television, which window, which bathrobe, which toilet, which cream of wheat, which birds, which coffee, which bed — a body or nobody beside her. Home, she says.

Get in a bathtub if you want the phone to ring, or as my mother used to say, "Light up a cigarette if you want the bus to come." I contact a hospice nurse — "just so we can learn about our options," and her visit coincides with my mother's recovery. Not a recovery but the abatement of symptoms and a surge of normalcy. *Resurgence*: a rising again into life, activity, or prominence. Like wet wool in a hot dryer, the growths have been shrunk by radiation to her brain and lung. At first she can stand long enough to fix herself a salad with avocado and mandarin orange slices. Then she walks very slowly on the treadmill for ten minutes a day. Then she leaves her apartment by herself to mail a letter, goes to the movies with me to see *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows*.

At Christmas we take a cruise, stroll the decks of the giant moving walkway. Without ever leaving the ship, my mother is able to wake to a new island each morning, study its topography from her balcony, marvel at the dock's flurry and scurry. Christmas Eve, we head to the ship's dining room in our formal attire. There is a photograph of us wearing purple tissue paper crowns and pulling Christmas crackers, which pop and spill out prizes. Wine no longer tastes like the pliers her father used to pull out loose teeth.

The nurse begins to explain, tells us what it takes to live at home while dying: an oxygen tank, a bed that adjusts (if you want it), morphine drops, weekly visits from medical staff, help with bathing, and we'll train your husband or your daughter to care for you. The nurse, this stout Charon, is calm, reassuring. When you have missed every train, plane, and bus, you will sign up for her ferry. She will get us where we need to go. But my mother's 85-year-old boyfriend does not want to go there. He interrupts and interrupts.

*She's doing great now.*

*Look at her.*

*I don't understand what this is about.*

*She's fine now.*

*Aren't you, Ruth?*

*We don't need this.*

*She's doing great.*

*Look at her.*

#### IV.

Sometimes I slip into her bathroom, pretend to wash my hands, and take a swig of her cough syrup. It is a warm blanket that I crawl under where together we can make a tent with our knees, trade memories like ghost stories. My mother is the flashlight and the dark. Under here, the stutter of bat wings is muffled.

When the magic spell was broken, when the radiation's effects had worn off, when we surfaced from the dream about a dream, the tu-

mors woke up, *gnashed* their terrible teeth and *rolled their terrible eyes*.  
*Resurgence: a rising again into life, activity, or prominence.*

“Look at the death rate in Alaska and the death rate in Florida,” says Molly Parks. “If you were old, would you move to Florida?” I have spent much of my life moving away from family, away from languages learned, jobs just barely mastered, away from what is broken, too hard to fix. And now I am here, not in Florida but a place like it, in the city where I was born, the city my mother has never left, living six blocks from her dark apartment, only 12 feet wide and four miles from the tidal basin that she rode past on the roof of a limousine, mink stole around her shoulders, a tiara in her hair, past the cotton candy trees, all the while waving the Cherry Blossom Princess wave of 1953. In one month, the trees will bloom, rising again into life, as they have every spring since the Japanese gave them to the U.S. in 1912. I imagine us walking beneath them, circumambulating the water, like pilgrims in Mecca: my mother light as a fallen flower in her wheelchair, face turned upward, eyes closed to the pink-white arms reaching.

For her, yesterday, this morning, are as muddled as a dream. *Have I taken my nausea pill already?* The memory of what just happened recedes like a wave, the sand forgetting the wet, bleaching into always. But the farther my mother holds the newspaper from her face, the nearer her childhood: the weight of a silver dollar in her palm, scent of Shalimar, her first cigarette, a falcon alighting on her brother’s gloved hand.

At the office, anxious and paralyzed, I Google my name, hoping to find something new, something I don’t already know. I turn every doorknob, and enter and enter until — as if painted in front of a convex mirror — I arrive at my smallest self. When my computer becomes infected, colleagues gaze at the blue screen and ask worriedly where I picked it up. The usual places, nowhere special, I say.

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I work in public health so I know this much: infectious diseases are as easy to sweep away as dirt. But the cleaner we become, the less we die of them, afflicted instead by autoimmune diseases. It’s as though we got in touch with our inner child and found out he was

a murderer. One man suffers from allergies so bad, he flies to Africa to walk barefoot in open latrines. Cured, he returns home to start his own business selling mail-order hookworms.

As for me, I'm just trying to maintain a state of equilibrium, trying to keep still while moving.

V.

#### I REGRET TO INFORM YOU

I regret knowing, the way it changes  
everything and nothing. I regret  
cell death and its absence. I regret I *am*  
the person you think I am. I regret  
the days turned years waiting  
and the luminous arriving  
always eclipsed. I regret having  
no sense of humor, feeling like Haiti  
when I'm Liechtenstein, just as tiny but,  
*thanks for asking*, fine. I regret  
showing you what I am unable to see,  
my wattled profile, baldly appraising gaze.  
I regret leaving the back door open  
and I regret closing it. I regret the odor  
of obligation, being the small hair  
that will not budge and the tongue  
that must protest it. I regret  
the tumor's intelligence, the way  
it dodges the needle, pretends  
to swallow poison. I regret this broken  
mask and I regret your looking.  
I regret waiting until now  
to wait on you, not anointing your feet  
with oil sooner. I regret the raspberries  
I failed to feed you with a spoon.  
I regret that after our meal  
I will be left to clear the table.

It's December 1969 and the boys — men to me — are sitting sweaty on the playground steps, their bragging between games of hoops like a piano out of tune. The lucky ones are quiet and the tall tales, usually about butts so fine, weed so good, are of border crossings. It used to be "When's your birthday?" was just another way of asking "What's your sign?" Now, no one was thinking of the zodiac or pick-up lines. Every one of them up against a deadline. Every one asking, what number did you get — which of the 366? Every day plus leap years. Digits would soon divide them — Brisco, Cap, Moose, and Trey — turning the lined cement, pulse of the bouncing ball, into a jungle. There would be no more free throws.

And here I am, fifty-years-old and about to be drafted. A conscript, I'll leave my job to serve and learn a new one: to lift, to wipe, to prop, to inject. I can't complain about my tour of duty or wear a proud uniform. After all, I'll be stationed only six blocks away and am certain of returning home. Some of the skills I'm going to need, I already know from being a mother, but the skills of being a daughter . . .

A year ago, the diagnosis still fresh and drives to doctors' offices a weekly drill, we took pleasure in words like *hyacinth*, *jonquil*, *forsythia*. Spoken only once a year, they felt strange in our mouths and as summoning as the first words.

It's March, and the earth is bearing down once more. The crocuses are crowning, yellow and purple certainties. Inside, the curtains drawn, my mother is sitting up in bed, bundled in blankets. Surrounded by bills and bank statements, she is preparing her taxes.