

My sister Lucy's oncologist had a poster in her office of a bright red lighthouse, its beam of light shining across a fake blue sea. Undereath, it said "success" in bright gold letters. When the doctor leaned across her desk and told us that Lucy's cancer could no longer be treated effectively, Lucy raised her eyebrows, looked at the poster, and said, "Maybe you should rethink that tag line?" Her doctor made a sympathetic face.

"We should talk about what you want to do."

"Die?" Lucy blinked her eyes several times and looked at me. "This part is less funny."

"Yeah," I agreed. I couldn't look at my parents.

"Not unfunny, though."

"No. It's pretty funny about the poster." I rested my hand between her sharp, skinny shoulder blades, and tried not to think about the previous spring, and my graduation. Lucy came the night before, in an old holey T-shirt, and jeans, with a toothbrush in her hand, and a change of underwear in her back pocket.

"Mom and Dad aren't going to let you wear that," I told her.

"I know," she said. "But I really don't have anything nicer."

She looked like Lucy, then, healthy and fearless and inexhaustible. "I'm assuming books are in the bag? Not a change of clothes?"

"Hey," she said. "Not all of us are graduating tomorrow."

"And not all of us are graduating just barely." I'd attended college like I'd attended high school – just barely – and done well enough, considering, for my parents to mutter about my potential, and say, "You're just as smart as your sister."

"The hell she is," Lucy said once. "Let's not just throw around comparisons."

"That's true," I said. "Lucy's the smart one. I'm the pretty one."

"You look exactly the same," my mother said.

"Yeah. But Carrie has seventeen kinds of lotion."

"That you use," I said.

"I use them *ironically*." We both laughed. My parents looked at my transcript, sighed, and left the room. I looked at Lucy. "Thanks."

"No problem."

It was July when she started dying for real, and it was hot. I moved back home, quit my job, and we made lists of all she'd done in her life, to see if the good balanced out the bad.

"I think you're reaching. Telling your friend to stop cuffing her pants does not balance out stealing French bread."

"It's bread! In France! They have a lot of it." She and I spent one summer in France, and we decided to pretend we were destitute, just to see if we could hack it. We ended up spending the week stealing loaves of bread, and sneaking into movie theaters, until we started to feel fairly remorseful. We spent the rest of the summer buying elaborate cuts of meat we'd never eat, just so we could give the supermarket back some money, feeling guilty that our definition of "destitute" apparently meant "criminal."

"Besides," Lucy added. "It's not like you didn't steal the bread, too."

"I'm not dying," I said sternly. "I have plenty of time to move to wherever they have lepers and help them." A nurse did something medical in the kitchen; there was the sound of needles.

"Leprosy," Lucy sighed. "I wish I was dying of that. It might be really amusing to watch your body rot. From the outside in, instead of the other way around."

"Maybe for you. I'd rather not have your body parts dropping off right in front of me. Also, it's very human to rot from the inside out. Peaches rot from the outside in. You don't want to die like a peach, do you?"

She started to laugh. "Maybe I do. Maybe I would love to die like a peach."

We discussed whether or not devils were actually red, and if they'd have pitchforks. We made lists of things she had to do, "limited by your delicate condition," I said.

"Delicate condition is pregnant. I'm the opposite of pregnant."

"The opposite of pregnant. That's funny."

The night before I left for college, Lucy and I sneaked into a nearby golf course, to smoke in the sand traps and talk about what it might be like to be happy.

"I have a happy friend," Lucy said, glaring at her cigarette. "Sometimes I want to ask her. You know, say, 'What is it like? Is your head calm? Do you take life as it is?'" Lucy sighed, and rolled onto her stomach, throwing out her cigarette, elbow raised above her head, instead of just flicking it out.

That was the last night we tried to smoke. We hated smoking, but we looked like girls who chain-smoked; it matched our edginess. We wanted to be edgy. We were afraid we'd fall into the wrong lives without smoking. Lucy and I wanted a future that ended with divorce, screwdrivers for breakfast, drunk in mugs our ex-husbands had

given us, that said things like “#1 Wife,” gifts we received wearily, too contemptuous to say, “Do you know me at all?” That was the life we imagined for ourselves, and it needed cigarettes.

“You only have one happy friend? Jesus. I think all my friends are happy.”

“That’s because all your friends are shallow. They do things like run for prom queen.”

“You’re still mad I ran, aren’t you?”

“No. I’m mad you won.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yeah.” Lucy took another cigarette from the pack. “I just don’t get it. Remember when we went to the beach? And Jason told you not to read, because you’d be ruining a beautiful day? How can you date someone like that?”

I touched my neck and tried to remember exactly how it felt, to stand on a stage, next to my grinning boyfriend, having won nothing other than people’s envy. “You are who you are.”

My parents were in charge of the barrage of visitors: neighbors, friends, relatives. I sat in the kitchen and listened to people tell Lucy that the quality of life was more important than the quantity, and I heard Lucy say, “Oh, really? So life is just like chocolate? And to think, all this time, I thought it meant something more.” Sometimes they’d whisper to me at the door while I tried not to throw them out by their necks. “I don’t think she’s dealing with it well.” A great aunt told her she should have “little goals.”

“For example,” the woman said, “A friend of mine just wants to live until her grandchild is born.”

Lucy looked at her. “Me, too.”

“You’d think people would let me do the talking, since I have so little time left.” We were trying to carve cabbage roses. “But they keep trying to remind me I’m dying.”

“I know.” I looked at the purple vegetable in front of her. “Your rose sucks.”

“It’s the cancer!”

“I’m not sure I remember any doctor saying that your artistic ability is going to be dramatically reduced.”

“I just don’t get it. It’s like everyone wants me to glow with inner peace.” She looked down at her mangled cabbage. “Except you.”

That was all I needed. “I’ve been thinking. We should start doing the opposite of everything that prevents cancer. We could very well take up smoking again. We could drink tons of diet soda, and chew buckets

of sugarless gum. Oh! Your teeth! Lucy, I can't believe we haven't thought of this before. We can totally ruin your teeth. Swill sugar soda around in your mouth, eat Jujyfruits and Sugar Daddies and not brush — ”

“Oh! I should get sunburned!” She grinned. We'd been so good all our lives about sunscreen, even in the winter, and with SPF 45 in the summer, coating it on at the beach, and clucking our tongues at the girls who lay roasting on their towels.

“Definitely. We need to go outside at high noon and sit directly in the sun.”

“Do you think we could find one of those aluminum blankets? Do they still make them?”

And we were off again. I'd have cut off my toes and run into walls if I thought it would entertain her.

She got the flu in February, and sometime in March, she called me. “I might have cancer.” I had never heard her cry over the phone.

“What?”

“I am graduating summa cum laude in two months. I don't have time to die.”

“Lucy?”

“It's probably Acute Mylogeneous Leukemia. I know how to spell it. It's not the kind you want to get. Acute is bad.”

“Did you tell Mom and Dad?”

“Of course not. It's the flu.”

“Are you at school?”

“Yes. I have homework.”

“I'm on my way.”

“Tell Mom and Dad.” She hung up.

I did. They wouldn't let me drive alone, and it all began. Doctors and nurses and specialists bustled around me, and Lucy went in and out of rooms, and I just sat with her, and talked about how maybe the Greeks were right, and we'd get to meet Hermes, who we'd always had a crush on.

Only one week before she died, I cooked rigatoni with pesto, and asked Lucy what shape of pasta she thought would be *de rigueur* in the afterlife.

“Well, it's angel hair, obviously.”

I rolled my eyes. “You get an about-to-die pass for that one. I bet it's wagon wheels.”

“You're insane. If it's not angel hair, it's definitely something simple. Of course, what kind of heaven would it be without the many varieties of pasta?”

“The kind you’ll be in. The kind that’s not heaven.”

She threw a cold piece at me. “What kind would they have in hell?”

And we talked until the moon was high, about heaven and hell and pasta.

I can’t believe I have to keep eating, now that she’s gone. But life is made up of the unimportant. Right after my sister died, while I was still in the hospital, I went to the bathroom to wash my face. It felt greasy. I checked my reflection in the mirror, brushed back my hair, and thought, what am I doing? What is this?

When the funeral was over, I went home and thought I’d never get out of bed again. But then I had to pee, and once I was in the bathroom, it was only a step over to the shower, and my razor and shaving cream were right there. I put lotion on. I ate lunch. In a month, I was driving back to my apartment, leaving my heartbroken parents to their childless home. I stood in my kitchen for three hours, until I went to get a sweater. I was cold.

We used to pass each other in the halls of high school sometimes. I’d have eight friends; she’d have eight books. We’d reach out our hands, my silver rings and her cracked nails, and we’d smile, and go.