

Race This Race

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We are racing toward the airport. The rising sun glints off every stalk in the cornfield and makes an ocean foam out of the tassels. My partner, Doreen, is driving and I am sipping on tea, thinking of how the sluicing movements of life—getting ready at the crack of dawn, loading the car with luggage, staring for miles at that hazy space where gravel meets cornfield—nearly escaped from me. I go through security at the South Bend airport and I already know that this is my moment, my call to attention. I flash my driver's license to the security agent; she cannot know I was nearly denied these mundane acts and mild thrills. But there is something there between us, or I want to believe that there is always something between me and the strangers I casually meet. She nods, we make eye contact. I am alive, with a heightened sense that that alone is remarkable.

It is a bright Sunday afternoon and we are heading for Denver, then to Vail, where my brother is training for a bike race. He and his wife are there waiting for us. He did his research on breast cancer and called me one day: he had made his calculations, his dollar would have the most effect in preventative care, he wanted to fund mammograms and early detection efforts. I agreed to do this fund-raiser with him. It was a race, a difficult mountain bike race up and down three Colorado mountain peaks. Yes, I said, you bet, I'll be there. I told him this as if this were now my race to win for others. I did not say that sometimes the race to fit more into life seemed exhausting and quantitative to me; the completion of a day, an abstract point.

When I first was diagnosed, my breast cancer pathology report was not good: it was rated a number nine and when I looked it up, I found that as pathology reports go, ten is the worst one can do. Many have spoken of a war against

cancer, but I did not go to war; my mind could not have placed me on that battlefield. I looked up the stats on cancer as if doing research for a friend. My mind—the part of me able to feel the loss of luck, the looming battle, the enveloping black hole—this mind was not with me. I was not very good at the race against time. I felt my cancer had gotten comfortable; perhaps it would vacate its hold on me, perhaps not. In the afternoons, after chemo, I took short walks, stopping in the street to stare at the berries on the trees. I'm not sure I understood then, nor now, the difference in effect between being able to study the shape of these berries and being able to complete some greater, more complex task—for instance, writing that essay on Fitzgerald and Kierkegaard, on the way they both allude to the ability of the mind to accept paradox, the desire we have to hold and balance two opposing ideas at the same time.

My brother and I spent a childhood of Sunday afternoons walking our dog to the park and back, talking about everything. We liked trying to size up life, to contain it somehow: we liked to talk of which next-door neighbor played guitar better, Billy or Charley. We liked hypothesizing a god and seeing the thread of god everywhere we looked: there was a god in the blades of grass along the cement curb, and maybe the cement curb itself, and the guy riding by on a bike. We liked trying to bottle our lives by talking of odds, the odds that the little store would stay open on our street, the odds a teenager could get rich delivering pizzas, the odds that Hawkeye would quit *M*A*S*H*, the odds that one of the movies we liked, *Mister Roberts* or *Ninotchka*, would be on the movie channel that week.

When we were not wandering down to the lake and talking odds, we swept out basements of every building that our parents had purchased in hopes of selling at a profit and making it big someday. My parents believed in *going after your dream*. They uttered phrases to us like *always dream big*. To them, dreaming big meant buying land and buying buildings, maybe buying an entire block of landscape. They thought they could succeed this way.

My brother does that now. He is a businessman now, and he'll get a good idea and he'll run the numbers and run the odds. He'll purchase a corner building that he can lease out to an oil and lube place, or a bagel chain, and he'll run the numbers on it. Will they make enough oil changes or sell enough bagels to make payment on the lease? He's intense about running numbers: he's way off in space laying ratios on top of ratios—how many bagels versus

how many oil and lubes—and how much money *would* it take to find a cure for cancer?

I wanted to get to Denver to see him race for cancer. I told myself this. I told myself I wanted to fight cancer. I also wanted to see the aspen groves. The largest organism in the world is an aspen grove. I had read that recently. It reminded me of the *Guinness Book of World Records* that my brother and I used to comb through. The outer reaches of life would fascinate us—like who held the record for playing the piano for the longest time underwater.

I'm giving security my license, throwing my shoes in the white plastic bin, and rolling it onto the security conveyor—and now I'm shuffling along the center aisle of the plane, nodding to strangers on my way to seats D3 and D4. We find our seats. We paid 20 dollars extra for priority seating and treated ourselves to row D. We find that the passenger next to us in D3 is an eight-year-old. She has blond hair cut like a bowl. It's her first trip on an airplane. She's visiting cousins in the state of Washington and will change planes in Denver. She tells me this, along with a story about a big dog. The dog sat on her this morning; he does that when he doesn't want you to go anywhere.

"Oh," I say conversationally—I have missed such simple conversations during the past six months of chemo—"Oh, so who's taking care of your dog?" I ask, just to get things rolling. I used to do that. I always considered myself a small talk aficionado. I like to talk to the plumber about how water heaters are not made like they used to be, and I like to talk to the electrician about the best housing for dimmer switches and the cost to a small town of keeping its water tower lit.

I find out that the little girl has a very big dog—she enunciates "very big"—a Great Dane. Her mother calls the dog "the cow." That's because the children can sit on *the cow*, and *the cow* can sit on them. She has a sister, four, a brother, one and a half. Her favorite character in *SpongeBob* is Patrick. She would love to have a horse. She is reading the Bible, the book of Genesis; she has not gotten to the flood yet, but she will soon. She is not the smartest in her class—she tells me this in answer to my question—she is the fourth smartest and good friends with the second smartest. Her brother likes to tear the pages out of her books. This drives her crazy, really nuts, just *crazy*. And her mother won't do anything since he's only one and a half. Her grandmother is traveling with her. She is seated at the back of the plane, which is now taking off.

We point to the houses, now the size of her fingernail. We try, and fail, to find the grammar school that she attends *where she is not the smartest, but the fourth smartest*. She holds her hands up to the clouds to measure them. Maybe she could hold a cloud in her hand if they were inside the plane. She says this as she holds her hand up to the window to measure. “We’ll have to ask the flight attendant about that,” I say to Doreen. “How to get a cloud in here.”

Later, I get up and walk through the plane. I need to experience it, to say I am here. It seems I am unhinged and yet hinged to the world. Somewhere in my body it had stormed, and now I stand here on the plane with the sun slanting through windows that are about the size of an astronaut’s helmet. The after-surgery biopsy on my lymph nodes came back *node negative*, which means, technically, I am cancer free. My cancer therapist, whom I speak with sometimes when I go in for chemo, says that all cancer patients believe that as soon as you say you’re cancer free, the world will turn, you’ll be on the other side, and get the bad bargain again. Better to be watchful. I can look in each seat and see empty cans of Minute Maids, airplane wine bottles, peanut wrappers, and crackers. I move slowly down the aisle with odd wonder at the world: we are travelers with plans for all that will happen after the plane. And I know I shouldn’t feel it an *odd wonder* but instead something truly wonderful.

Back in my seat the little girl tells me she will be swimming in the ocean tomorrow for the first time ever. “You see,” I say to myself, “you see how it’s done.” The little girl goes on with her talk of the ocean. It’s black rock and cliff, but her cousins know of a cove. Do I know what that is? Yes, yes, of course. I try to think of a good cove story but cannot.

Doreen and I miss the little girl when we are off the plane. I turn to Doreen. “You’re doing ok,” she says. And I’m glad that she is there to shepherd me through this, to say the right things when I have nothing to say.

It is easier when my brother and his wife greet our airport van at the transportation center in Vail. My brother has spent the summer here in this ski resort. He has been riding his bike up and down the mountain paths and acclimating to the altitude for his big race. My brother and his wife both wear shorts, long-sleeved Lycra, and flip-flops. The sun is intense. Everyone in Vail wears sunglasses and looks wonderful. We put on ours and join them.

He points to some of the peaks nearby where he has been training—gigantic shoulders of rock. One looks like an arrowhead piercing the clouds. The course does not loop but drops down and goes straight up along the same route so that bikers tend to slam into each other as they ascend and descend the same skinny path. I've researched the riders and the history of the course, and most mention proudly that the main reason they do it is because they're crazy. The other reason is the cause. Every rider hooks up with an organization, a cause. My brother has raised a large sum of money for me, that is to say the cancer organization, the one that prevents disease through cancer screenings and education, the one that has featured me on their blog, along with him.

In the condo, we peel the curtains back. My brother and his wife check the cancer blog. They are proud to be among the top five fund-raisers. The cancer organization has sent us T-shirts and coffee mugs, which are strewn around the condo. They've interviewed my brother again for a blog update. He said he wanted to do something in the battle against cancer, that his sister didn't have a choice, but he had a choice, and it's this battle, this bike race. It will be tough, but his sister has been tougher.

It is hard to grasp this concept of toughness, this warrior metaphor. I have thought of it more as a transformation, sliding out of cancer cells, slipping into newer, more stable cells, the noncancerous ones, the ones with tightly formed nuclei that won't collapse or go dark. I feel at times like an impostor, someone who slinks through airports, who has two skins, who has just shed an oversized pearl-gray skin and is slinking toward that tighter, light-of-day skin.

My brother and I had entertained ourselves not long ago by talking again about numbers: what are the chances of his Japanese car making it past 100,000 miles, the chances that he could build an ice rink in the warehouse that he just purchased and lure hockey teams to practice there, the chances of another record-setting snow in the Midwest, his chances of completing this bike race in Colorado. In the past, 30 percent have dropped out along the route. Then we turned more serious, more sober: while we're at it, what are the chances that four women in our family would be diagnosed with breast cancer. He calls me one day to say that he has been looking up things, like the chances of success for the latest studies on genomic drugs. We both agree this

is the future of cancer research, perhaps *my* future. “I wake up at night,” he says, “thinking of numbers.”

Before I came to Vail, I looked it up so I could tell my brother: the largest single organism in the world is a grove of aspen named Pando. This particular grove lies somewhere south of Salt Lake City, has been in existence for more than 80,000 years, and covers 107 acres. Aspens propagate through tubers as well as seeds. For this reason, all trees in an aspen grove are related. The unity of the aspen grove is assured by the spread of the underground root system. The aspen grove succeeds by numbers and by luck. It’s somewhat dumb luck. It has survived because it exists in the deep earth of the mountainsides that no one wants to cultivate. There is a grove on the mountainside near Vail. It’s one-third the size of Utah’s giant Pando—a mini-Pando. I am determined to visit it, I want to know what it is like to spread in this way, what it’s like to both let go and push on. A mountainside can be covered for thousands of years through the will of one tree.

My brother has been working with a trainer who says he should taper his training now, that his largest block of down time should come just before the race. Training is practically over, nothing to do until race time. We can walk, or bike, or take leisurely hikes.

It is midmorning, our second day on the mountain, and we all decide to hike up to the mini-Pando. For the first quarter-mile we walk right under the gondola. Gondolas filled with sightseers rise above the slant of trees; they wave to us below. About 200 feet farther, we can see the white tree trunks begin to appear, clustered on the sides of the bike trails, which in the winter are ski trails. The sun sifts through the leaves, and we slip in. There’s a brook, there’s moss, there’s the filtering sun and the slashes of white, the slender giants, the towering aspens. We cross a stream by gaining quick footholds on slippery rocks. We can see our breath hanging and mingling in the mountain mist.

It’s quiet among the white trunks of the aspen grove, but others have been here. As proof, they’ve carved their initials into the bark of the trees. There are hundreds of trunks marked by those passing through: *Mom, 1994*, and *Dad & Boo 2001*, and *Hen 1965*, and *E.K. + Tom 4ever*. It reminds me of the friends who kept calling, who kept parking in my drive, who kept appearing at twilight with plastic containers full of soup.

Here among the aspens, we say the things people say to fix this moment in time, one we may remember. “Amazing,” my brother says. “Awesome,” says his wife. Doreen takes my hand and squeezes it. We are silent when we leave the aspen grove. We sit around the condo that evening—water bottles all over, camelpacks on the couches, a bicycle in the living room, another in the bedroom. There are weights and jump ropes. A jar of peanut butter is sitting open on the counter. We are all talking at once and I tell them of my plans: someday I will visit big Pando.

The next day we get in the our rented SUV and drive through narrow slips of road laid on the edge of misting mountains. Small corrals and tiny plots of land that hold horses behind log fencing are carved out of the mountain edge. The valley swales in blue sage and black-eyed Susans. Houses are rimmed with tiny bright flower heads in broken pots. We wind uphill, a dozen hairpin turns, and are nearing the town where the bike race will take place, the air damp and cold in the draft and shadow of the iced peaks.

Streets are filled with bikers and cars are parked bumper to bumper, each with an empty bike rack. The town still has the wooden plank sidewalk from its Victorian era, when there was copper, and copper barons, and wagon trains of dynamite, and men and women who owned the earth long enough to gut its copper veins.

There's a large vacant lot set up with tables of juice and apples and power bars, and behind that there's a large field house that holds a gymnasium. The meeting for the race is held there. Everyone who rides the race must attend. Early comers have already situated themselves in the middle of the gym and along the walls. I am sitting on a polished wood floor with my partner, my brother, and his wife. We sit in front of the knees of others, and others will sit at our knees. This race bills itself as *the race of all races*. There are thousands packed into the field house. There's a plywood box up front to form a make-shift stage, with just a microphone and a card table, and on the card table are belt buckles that are the medals for everyone who finishes the race.

Everyone in the room is a warrior: that's what the man at the microphone says, the founder of the race. Everyone in this old mining town, he tells us, has had a tough life. He's balding with long stiff hair covering his collar in back. You dig deep, he tells us. We are in the West now. We are in *his* West. These mountains, he tells us, are now our home. The people who died trying

to settle these mountains are now our history. The toughness it takes to survive here is now ours. Don't let him down, don't we dare let him down. Finish this race. You dig deep, you finish this race. Don't you dare quit, don't you dare. Not today, not on this path. You dig deep. You defend my house, you meet my mountains. And know that you did not quit.

"These men didn't quit on you," he shouts, then calls for the front row of men, arranged in folding chairs around the small stage and who I now realize are all veterans of war, to stand. One of them—the man in the wheelchair—cannot. The others, standing in front of their folding chairs, have come to bike this race for their friend who was in Iraq, who has sweatpants draped over his missing legs. "They did not quit, no they did not quit on you," the mountain man says. There is a roar and applause for those who did not quit.

We position ourselves along the route to volunteer aid to my brother and his warrior friends. The sun is brilliant blue after days of mountain mist. The riders are dazzling—jerseys of silk orange and yellow, biking gloves of red and black, white and silver helmets. Clearly, they are blessed, the demigods of the mountain bike path. They are whizzing by, grabbing the food and drinks we offer. They pedal and pedal, outracing each other and the clock. They have less than 12 hours to finish the race, up and down three mountain peaks. They have to outwit the path, outwit time. Of the 5,000 who apply, only 2,000 are accepted based on scores from other races. Only 70 percent of the riders are able to finish, my brother had said, trying to explain to me why the race was so popular. Fourteen hundred finish the race. They are known as *the fourteen hundred*.

There's not much else to do on chemo days but sleep. There is part of your cerebral cortex that wants to throw up, but you don't, because according to the UK cancer sites, which have fancy names for bodily functions, *the vomiting center is blocked*. You get an IV bag full of beta blockers and *the vomiting center* goes out of business. Old friends and new kept calling and I told them about the closed-down *vomiting center*. They picked up on it, joking back, *unbelievable, really, a vomiting center!* We kept going like that, because it was the thing to do.

He will not *not* be one of the fourteen hundred, though my brother seems to get progressively weaker. We are at each of the five checkpoints, and at the last checkpoint his body is closing down. His hands seem floppy. We are handing him watermelon because he needs the sugar and juice to keep

standing. You can quit, I want to tell him, but don't. He shoves the melon in his mouth, and when he realizes he can't eat the green rinds, he throws them off toward the trees, then points to the ground to ask about them. "What is that," he asks, staring at the soil encrusted with green rinds from many riders. The volunteer slaps him on the back and tells him 12 more miles. His wife stands and straddles his bike, stares him directly in the eyes and implores him to listen to her, he can do this. But I don't know. I didn't know until he crossed the finish line that he could do it.

That night at a private gathering of my brother's bike club, the men and women riders are freshly showered, with hair wet and parted and a fresh set of bike clothes. The leader among them gets up in front of the room of cyclists. He congratulates them. Their numbers were outstanding. Ninety percent of the club finished the race. This includes my brother, who has not left the side of the man who rode the last few miles with him. They sit at the table together, smiling at each other, listening to their leader. "How many of you cried today?" the leader asks them. My brother stares at his hands and I'm not sure if he cried today or not. I'm not sure that it matters. Before anyone can answer, the leader tells them quietly, "that's what it takes."

And I suppose it's that. Perhaps they now know what I know: you do not cry in the thickest of times but in the thinnest. You do not cry about that strangely curious thing that has taken residence, transformed your healthy cells into replicating stealth cells. You do your research. Cancer cells, it turns out, are our naive, best-cell selves, supreme idiots making war on anything, bent on survival, a mutating warrior with one goal—to consume. It is the metaphor for our age, and you cannot cry in the face of that irony. Your body has not betrayed you, it has only misunderstood. It is strange to think of yourself as a warrior when every day it is just you trying to acquaint yourself with a different order of the day: different body, different food, different phone calls to different doctors. Though you might cry, you *did* cry. Later. There are fissures, and some days, late in the afternoons usually, you might find yourself standing and crying as you stare at the dog leash in your hand when you meant to be putting the leash on the dog for a walk.

Perhaps on some level I know what they did today. They hit it hard, they exhausted their bodies and then their minds, which left them only with an inexplicable resource—like maybe the human heart or maybe the human will. They pedaled and pedaled and pedaled again. I am reminded of this



back in the condo as I pack my bag and stop to look out toward the peaks. I must have done something like this myself.

I keep thinking of my brother, not today but when he was 12 and I was 16. We went out on our first century ride, our first 100 together. By noon everyone had passed us. The suburbs gave way to cornfields. We rode for hours through canyons of corn and turned around at a stop sign. Alone, we rode back through the graying day, the roads blending with sky, and wheeled to the finish line late in the evening, met by quiet and darkness, and never got off our bikes. We continued to ride because we had to get home. We had to get home to the hall light left on for us, the black iron horses that screened the front doors of our house. We knew that dinner would still be on the table, that our parents would act as audience and listen to our story. We walked through the door like heroes, carrying our bicycles. We could feel ourselves move to the center, breathing deeply as we raced to tell it.

