

# The Stage

by Julie Aigner Clark

You are walking along. You are buying shoes. You are picking your kids up from carpool. You are unpacking groceries.

You have cancer, he says. It is like a fingernail bent back. That sudden.

The sky is blue and the grass is dry under your feet. It hasn't rained in weeks. Geese are flying south, noisy birds announcing their plans, silver wings shuddering. You lay clothes for your daughter's recital on her white eyelet bedspread.

Your friends say, We are here for you. Call anytime. If you need to cry or scream, if you need to talk, we are here for you. They do not call you.

A room, the color of pabulum. Eight vinyl chairs recline for those who want to relax. Take a load off. Beside each chair, a skeletal pole on wheels holds bags of candy-colored liquid that *drip drip* into tubes attached to skeletal arms. You settle in to your own personal easy chair and breathe and make light conversation with the nurse pushing a shiny silver needle into your arm. She has bright blue eyes and a pretty, fleshy face with too much rouge, you think. You settle in. Your baggie is filled with licorice-red fluid and you focus on your book. *Drip, drip.*

Across from you, two women discuss the price of gas. They, too, are plugged in and dripping. One wears a black wig askew, too long for her age. The other, the one with the scarf, turns to you and you see all the lines in her face, the sagging skin, the mouth that droops at the corners like your mother's. There is something about the face that is jarring and it is a moment before you realize that it has no eyebrows or lashes to rim the large, cool eyes. "You look too young to be here," she croaks at you, and you are left with only a small amount of air in your space and a nervous laugh that is inappropriate and hollow. You have nothing to fill that space.

On the phone the doctor gives you the news. It's stage four, he says. As if you were an actor at a theatre, waiting to perform. *Now appearing on Stage 4, ladies and gentlemen... You!*" Take a bow.

And it is a performance, the one you create. Think positive. Look at the bright side. Buck up. Educate yourself. You haven't had biology since tenth grade and now you're reading terminology you can't understand, using words like *metastasis* and *investigational treatment*. You make dinner. Walk the dog. Open the mail. Read Dr. Seuss stories to the kids.

Your hair falls out the day before Thanksgiving, great hunks that have grown brittle over the past three weeks, and you feel nothing as you drop it into the trashcan in your bathroom. It's a vivid dream, a sort of out-of-body experience, the hand moving from head to trash, back and forth until there's nothing left up there. The mild antiseptic smell of the room makes you nauseous but you were told to expect that, the nausea, and you lie on the cold tile floor and look at the ceiling. You think to pray but you've never asked for something so big as *My Life* and it unnerves you.

You can't eat the turkey but you've cooked it anyway and at the table, when each person recites what he/she is thankful for, everyone says you. There is such awkwardness and your dad's voice catches and you think of what it must have been like for him to lose a mother to this disease and now,

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maybe, a daughter. You feel like you've let him down, as if you are wearing this disease like the Playboy bunny costume you wore for Halloween when you were sixteen. You smile anyway.

Every conversation you overhear, news story you read, celebrity death: cancer. You know what day of the week it is by the pill vial in your bathroom. Though you've finished the bags of poison (Good girl!), you will never be Cured. You've changed doctors like others change hairdressers, but none have the answers you want. You are alive. *It could be worse*, you think, *It could be one of my children*.

You can't believe it, really, that this is your life. You write about it, but only in the second person. You are well, but not really. Treatment is over.

Aren't you happy? your friends ask when you tell them.