

At The Gates of Despair, The Beginning of Hope

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I dedicate this book to all cancer patients and their loved ones,

With courage and hope,

Florica Batu Ichim

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“And the last enemy to be defeated is death.”
1 Corinthians 15:26

The Sentence

In the beginning came the fatigue.
And the sleep.

Like all mothers, I was used to fatigue. No matter how much I wished to rest, the children had to be fed, the dishes needed to be washed, clothes changed, blisters treated; ice placed on wounds and to wake up in the middle of the night when one of them had an earache. I got used to it all, after all I had six children; the oldest one, Thomas, was eleven years old, the youngest one, Matthew, was eleven months old and the other four in between: Christine, Julian, Gloria and Christopher.

But still, now it was too much. One day I realized, ‘yesterday I slept 8 hours, 8 hours interrupted hours, but it was still 8 hours. The night before I slept 8 hours...

Then there came the dizziness.

I went to the doctor, he sent me to have a blood test.

“There’s something wrong with your blood” he said when he received the results. “The number of white blood cells is too high. I think it is leukemia. I booked an appointment for you in 10 days with a specialist.”

“And in the meantime what should I do?”

“You’ll be okay.”

I had no idea what “leukemia” means. I was feeling bad. He continued to speak but I do not remember what he was saying. I remember only the last sentence:

“I had a younger brother who died of leukemia, but that was long ago, medicine has since progressed.”

I said “thank you” and physically removed myself from his office. Yet my mind was still there. I was walking on the street and I kept on repeating the doctor’s words in my head. “Leukemia” did not sound too scary because it sounded like “anemia,” something I used to have from malnutrition, long ago in my native, communist country Romania. I was trying to convince myself that it was not important, but something in my mind set off an alarm. It was uneasiness, an instinctual fear, perhaps similar to what animals feel before an earthquake.

And like them I was feeling the need to escape, to run and run and run. After some time, I walked into a store. It was before Christmas, full of holiday spirit, everywhere white, blue, yellow ornaments, and sparkling, tinsel, toys. I smiled thinking about my children and I bought a plastic Christmas tree in a big box that I could hardly carry.

When I got home I was in good spirits, happy that I had bought a Christmas tree. Tom, Christine and Julian had just come home from school.

“Why are you so late?” Dumitru asked me as he was helping the kids take off their snow covered boots.

“The doctor said I have leukemia.”

“So what?”

He didn’t know either. We began our lunch hour routine. At noon our house is like a hurricane. The “older kids” come home from school at 11:45. Pick up the children from school, be careful how they cross the street, walk home hastily, take off their heavy winter jackets and

boots, put the food on the table. “Who wants more?” “Wipe your mouth.” “Are you ready?” “Quickly, go to the washroom.” “Put your snow pants on over your normal pants.” “Put on your winter coat, the hat, the mittens, the boots.” “Be careful how you cross the street.” “Behave at school and goodbye.” At one o’clock the school bell rings because according to the Canadian system the children are going to school two times a day with a break for lunch.

We were going back to the whirlwind of daily chores without having time to think of leukemia. Whatever this is.

However, something was bothering me. One evening when the kids had just fallen asleep and Dumitru was still at work, I pulled out the Medical Encyclopedia from the bookshelf. Finally, I had the opportunity to put to rest any lingering fears.

If a sick person looks for comfort in technical books, they are making a great mistake. When Dumitru came home I was crying.

“What’s going on?”

“I read in the book...”

“You misunderstood”

We looked at it together. There were several types of leukemias with anticipated survival ranging from years to months. I did not even remember whether I had chronic or acute. We tried to lie to ourselves finding the form that would be most advantageous but we were both horrified.

Dumitru was overwhelmed. He burst into tears. I did not know what to do. I took his head in my arms. I caressed him like a child. My words could not reach him. He was drowning in despair. He was wailing and I could not help him. I was overcome by tears. We both cried feeling sorry for our children. We cried for ourselves. We cried because there wasn’t anything else left to do.

I was overcome with fatigue. I got into bed and fell asleep instantly. In the morning Dumitru had red eyes, he had been crying all night.

“If we only knew what type of leukemia it was”

“Let’s ask the doctor”

It was Saturday; the doctor was not working but knowing that he is a good man we dared to call him at home.

“It’s the chronic form” he said. “This can take years, don’t listen too much to what they say in books. The books are out of date. Science is progressing fast.”

I had won a little bit of time; at least I will not die in months.

Our eldest child had heard us crying in the kitchen the night before. I told him in vague terms that I had a serious disease.

That night Tom dreamt that I had died.

The following night Tom dreamt again that I died.

I took Tom with me to the specialist. He waited, frightened, in the waiting room. With Matthew in my arms, I went in to see the doctor. The doctor suggested that I let the receptionist take care of Matthew. The baby was spoiled, he was crying for me so I had to take him back in my arms.

“Poor child” said doctor Dang, and instantly I knew why he called my child ‘poor,’ he was referring to the baby’s future.

“When will I die?” I asked.

“You will not die. You will live”

“Can you tell this to my child, he is in the waiting room?”

“How long will I live?”

“In your case the average survival rate is four years, but more than half live longer than this.”

Unfortunately, I had taken statistics in school and I knew that if half live longer then four years, the other half will live shorter than four years.”

“How much longer will I be able to take care of my children?”

“Three years.”

He asked me how many siblings I have.

“Why?”

“A routine question. We have to know how many siblings you have, in case we need a donor for a bone marrow transplant at a later date.”

I don't know what he said or what he did not say. He scheduled me to return in a couple of days to take a bone marrow sample to confirm the diagnosis. He calmed Tom down saying “Your mother will not die.”

Was it a lie? Was it the truth? It did not matter. The kid could sleep without nightmares.

The third day of Christmas I was scheduled have a bone marrow biopsy.

“Do it after the holidays,” my mother said.

“That is not possible.”

My mother did not realize how ill I was feeling.

I went to the hospital. I repeated the blood tests and had bone marrow taken. When at last I got home, I threw myself into bed. I was feeling worse. I was very tired, and I was in pain. Before I could have a chance to fall asleep, the telephone rang.

“This is Dr. Dang. The blood work has confirmed my fears. We do not have time to await the results of the bone marrow. Stop breast-feeding and start the chemo. Okay?”

“Yes”

“From what pharmacy should I prescribe the medication?”

It was the beginning.

Many years ago I almost drowned.

It was the morning after a storm, the waves of the Black Sea were filled with rage.

“Doesn't it look enticing? Should we jump in the water?” someone asked.

“I don't know how to swim,” a boy answered.

I don't remember how many of us entered the water and how many didn't. I saw a woman fighting with the waves and I jumped in to help her. The first thing she did was to grab onto me. We both sank under the water, only then did she let me go. When I was able to get my head out of the water to take a breath, a wave crashed over me. When I finally got my head out of the water, the woman grabbed onto me again. Again, she pushed me to the bottom. Again the wave came.

It was impossible to breathe. I panicked. I felt the hand of the boy who could not swim. He had jumped in to help. For some time all three of us were fighting for our lives; the boy was pulling on my arm to bring me to shore (but the boy could not swim), I was gripped by fear and the women, who every time she saw me above the water would grab me and pull me under.... The water, the waves, were breaking on top of us.

We cried “Help! Help!”

The coastguard came on a boat and threw us a ring buoy. We all grabbed hold of it. The ring buoy began to sink. We were too heavy.

I do not know whether I did it out of heroism or sheer stupidity. I left the two others to hold onto the ring buoy and I started to swim. I was exhausted but at least I did not have the woman pulling me under the water. The people on the shore seemed very far away, in a world that I did not belong to and could not understand any longer. I was fighting with the waves, with death.

I was swimming the breaststroke, more with my mind than with my body. I was telling myself that I have to breathe regularly, and to coordinate inhaling and exhaling with the strokes of my arms, with the rhythm of the waves. I would throw my arms forward, then rest several seconds before pulling them back. My whole body was tired; I was throwing my arms forward without knowing if I had the energy to pull them back.

“No! No! Not over there!” The people on shore shouted, realizing that I was swimming towards the closest piece of dry land, a cliff of jagged boulders. The fury of the waves was going to smash me against the stones. I did not care. I wanted to get out, it was a struggle between life and death. Wounds would not matter.

A wave pushed me towards a boulder. I touched it with my fingers. I tried to grab it but the waves pulled me back. A moment of fear and despair. Will I live? Will I die? Another wave smashed me against the boulders, I clenched it with all my strength and I held on to it. I rested for a second and dragged myself out before another wave could pull me back. My knees were full of blood but it made no difference.

I was alive!

The oncologist’s office. Standing face to face, between us his desk, sitting under his fingers the results of the tests. Exchanges of meaningful glances. We both *knew*. Still, I tried.

“Maybe there is a mistake?”

“No.”

Silence.

Glances.

And yet, I tried again.

“What if I go on diets? Or if I rest a lot?”

“No.”

“If I drink teas? Swallow medications?”

“No.”

“Maybe there is yet some hope?”

“No. There is no hope.”

“At least 1 in 100, 1 in 1000, 1 in a 1000000, show me one person, at least one person that survived”

The doctor said

“Not a chance. It is fatal.”

Suddenly, my world seems far away. Everyone is so very, very far away. Over there on the shore. And I, alone on the tempestuous sea, am struggling not to drown.

“Don’t swim towards this shore. You will get hurt, you will be covered in blood!”

“Where is the cliff? Either way I will be hurt. Either way I will bleed. But where is the hope? Where are the boulders that I could grab onto?”

Back then, I had a chance. The boulders could have hurt me, they could have made me bleed, but they could still save me.
Now I have nothing, not even a chance.

The doctor looks at the clock.

My allotted time has passed. The waiting room is full; there are others waiting to receive their own bad news.

“Live a normal life,” said the doctor.

I looked at him. He had no idea what he was talking about.

How could I live a *normal* life when I was thrown into an un-normal world? Into the world of those sentenced to die, those who knew they will die. And this will be soon, very soon. I panicked. Nothing could make me happy, and nothing made any sense.
There was only fear.

I don't remember how, I just remember finding myself in a bookstore, in the section of books about cancer. I was like a robot. I don't remember intending to go there. I had started reading. Studies about cancer patients, pages written by cancer patients.

The world was now divided in two: People with cancer and people without it. I completely forgot that beside cancer there were other diseases, equally horrifying. I could see only these two worlds and myself being hurled from one world to the other. The healthy group had expelled me. The people with cancer...

“No, I don't want to enter their world! I will never be a ‘cancer patient’!”

I was scared. I wanted to feel free. The label “cancer patient” was like a straitjacket forced upon me and I was struggling to break it.

“How did your tests go?” my sister asked. “How many red blood cells? How many white cells?”

“I have no idea and I don't care! Do you think this a soccer game to watch and to cheer for one team or another?”

The truth is that I was scared. I was scared that the results were bad and that the treatment was not working. If I knew for certain what the results were I would panic. I was pretending that I did not care. The doctor would get the results and he would determine the treatment.

I was fighting hard to not lose my mind.

I was ready to accept any treatment. Absolutely anything. We were not talking about a cure. The sentence had been given. I was trying to delay the inevitable as much as possible. Not for me. For my children. They were yet so young...

The doctors were not giving me any hope.

“In your case, your bone marrow contains Philadelphia cells. In these cells a chromosome breaks and the broken piece jumps onto another chromosome.”

I had no idea what a chromosome was, I understood nothing. All I wanted was to stay alive.

“As long as these cells are under control you are okay, but one day they will explode and then...”

He didn't finish, we both *knew* the ending.

“And when will this be?”

“Nobody knows, it could be in 7 years, it could be next week.”

I had an obsessive thought that was breaking my heart: I would imagine my stiff body laid out in a casket at the funeral home and my children, around me, crying. And Matthew, the baby, would be tugging at my hand: “Wake up mommy! Wake up!”

The doctors decided that I needed a bone marrow transplant.

“I don't want it,” I said to somebody.

“They will convince you.”

“No, not me.”

And yet they were able to convince me. Without a transplant my future was black. My life expectancy was very short, the period of time that I would be able to take care of my children limited to one to two years.

But how could I leave six children at home to be admitted into the hospital without knowing whether I would ever return? I was not yet bedridden, how could I willingly leave my children? Each case is different. In my case, the chances were 45%, but I did not know whether this was the chance of surviving the transplant or the chance of being cured.

“After the transplant the body can reject the foreign bone marrow. We have drugs to control this,” a doctor told me. “The problem is that infections might arise.”

“Can I die?”

“Yes, your immune system will be very weak until the new bone marrow begins to produce blood cells. You might die of pneumonia, but you will not die of leukemia.”

I did not care whether I would die of leukemia or pneumonia. The name of the disease is not important. I did not want to die. At that time, bone marrow transplants were still experimental, the doctor's goal were that I did not die of leukemia. But I was a mother and I could not afford to die, yet.

“If you get a transplant you will have a chance to be with your children for the rest of your life. They don’t need you only for a year or two.”

Oh, how many thoughts tortured me at the time! Sometimes my brain tried to protect me. I pretended that I did not know, it never happened.

At the doctor’s insistence Dumitru, my mother, my two sisters, my brother, and one of the children were tested for compatibility. When I saw how much blood they were suppose to collected, ten test tubes per person, I wanted to call off the testing. The head nurse of the laboratory said:

“That is not very much blood. It seems like a lot but it’s not. By tomorrow the body will have already replenished it.”

The first one who volunteered to give blood and was determined to give bone marrow was my oldest son Tom. I still remember his slender arm with the needle piercing his vein. He was looking at me smiling...

When the results came back my sister began to cry. For me a burden was lifted off of my heart. Nobody was compatible.

“There are international lists of bone marrow donors. The donors on the lists are matched with those waiting for a transplant. Sometimes matches are found. Would you like to be put on the waiting list?”

I had just freed myself of a worry. Besides, I knew that if the donor was not related to me then the likelihood of success would be reduced.

“I have to think about it, I will tell you next time”

Next time there was another doctor. He did not ask me about the transplant and I pretended I forget. As for compatibility, I thank God that he had decided for me.

Sometimes when I look back I think to myself:

‘If I would have had a transplant I would have been dead a long time ago.’

‘Or maybe I would have been cured?’

I cannot imagine this. I am so used to having this illness that I can not see myself without leukemia.

We are ready to go to sleep; Matthew puts his head on the pillow and pulls the blanket over his eyes.

“Did you say your prayers Matthew?”

“I didn’t”

“Will you say your prayers?”

“Yes, I’ll say my prayers”

Matthew kneels:

“Father in Heaven, help me! Mother in Heaven, help me!”

...he threw himself into bed smiling...

“Oh dear, look how skinny you’ve become!”

This is nothing new, my loose-fitting clothes tell me this everyday. But people around me are quick to observe this in a loud voice. They repeat it. And repeat it. I feel like hiding myself somewhere so that I would no longer have to hear anybody anymore...

The reverse situation. An acquaintance, that I have not seen in a long time, rushes towards me, kisses me, and with visible astonishment exclaims:

“Oh dear, but don’t you ever look good!”

...As if she were taken aback that I am still alive...

I meet an old friend, his wife had died several years ago from a brain tumor. She left him with two small children that he raised which ever way he could manage. He hugs me and smiles:

“And how are you?”

“Well, I have leukemia!”

He takes a step back and his face changes:

“Oh. I heard. I had a good friend with leukemia. He was such a good man!”

...and he begins to tell me of all the good qualities of his friend who died from an illness exactly like mine.

...how happily die those who do not know that they are dying...

I have never ever prayed to be healed. But I prayed to God to give me more time with my children:

“God, if I can raise Matthew to be five I will be the happiest mother in the world.” I once said in my prayer.

It’s difficult to talk about Medjugordje in a few words. One night I was with Vicka, one of the visionaries, and their prayer group on the Mountain of Apparitions. The next day I was delivered from fear. I still have doubts. I have questions. And I still have uncertainties. But the maddening fear is no longer there. The fear that almost drove me to madness when I realized what awaited for me and my children. God does not give a person more than they can handle. He probably took pity on me and reduced my burden.

I asked Vicka to say something to the cancer patients and she wrote ‘Let God bless you with the light of love, let him give power so you’ll be able to bear your illness with your heart and with your love. Many greetings! I am praying with all my heart for you. Vicka.’

On the last day of our stay, my son Tom and I saw the big 15 tone Cross, on the Mountain of the Cross, spinning. The boy had prayed to God for a sign. When I told this story to a theologian he said:

“There is a saying: God gives miracles for hard headed people.”

I replied:

“I admit. I am one of them!”

After a few months, I went to Medjugordje again, this time with my entire family.

I will not get into details but if we had not gone to Medjugordje I think neither myself, nor Dumitru, nor the kids would have remained of sound mind. I, for certain, would have died a long time ago. Not so much from the illness but from *the fear*.

What Time Is It Mr. Wolf?

For a while, it was like this: every Monday I would have my blood test. If I did not receive a phone call by Thursday, I presumed that everything was okay, and I could remain calm until the next Monday when I would again go for a blood test.

One day the telephone rang.

“Dr. Dang wants to see you.”

I knew that when a doctor “wants to see you” something is wrong.

“Your number of red blood cells is low,” he said. “You need a transfusion.”

I accepted. Anyway, I did not have a choice. I remembered what my neighbour, whose sister died of leukemia said:

“They gave her many transfusions, but they were futile.”

I became scared but I was somehow prepared. I was living in a state of continuous uneasiness.

In the morning, I went to the hospital. In a large white rectangular room there were six stretchers placed close to one another. The nurse showed me to a stretcher and began to prepare the equipment. On my right, an old lady had fallen asleep with a needle in her vein.

“Do I have to sleep?” I asked the nurse.

“Some patients are tired. Besides, a little sleep is good for you.”

The nurses here have a particular way of talking to patients: they do everything possible to converse with their brains and not with their hearts. Psychologists tell them that getting emotionally involved with cancer patients would be detrimental to their mental health. Whatever!

“I have never had a transfusion before. Could there be any side effects?”

“Very rarely. Some patients start shivering, but this is not a problem. We have medication to deal with that.”

I lay down on the stretcher. The needle was inserted in my vein, the pace of the blood drops was adjusted, and the nurse left.

I started reading. I had brought with me a book that was fashionable with cancer nurses and doctors about death and moribund patients. I did not want to read the book at home because my family would be worried if they saw me reading these sort of books.

“How is the book?” A nurse asks.

“Awful.”

She started laughing.

The book angered me. It said that a caretaker should encourage dying persons to express their fury against God. How can this be? Is it not bad enough that we have no hope left in this world, but now we are suppose to give up our hope for the next world?

I gave up reading. I hurled the book in my bag and wondered what else I could do to deal with the inevitable boredom. My whole life I have had trouble staying still for more than a moment, but now I had no choice. The little old lady on my right was still asleep. On the stretcher to my left, they brought in an elderly man. He had a tired face. I presumed he was retired. The nurse inserted the needle in his vein, adjusted what there was to adjust and then left.

We began making small talk.

He was telling me about his first home, which he bought forty years ago for a very low price. Presently, the same house would cost several times more: inflation. We talked about

various things. He told me that he is suffering from an acute anemia and has very bad arthritis with terrible pain in his legs.

“I don’t believe in God,” he said. “If God exists, why does He let me suffer so much?”

He was talking more to himself, not waiting for an answer. I recalled the silly book that I had just read and I got upset:

“I believe in God. I’m sure He does exist and He takes care of us. Doesn’t the simple fact that you are alive tell you anything?”

“Drop it!” he answered with a resigned voice. “I do not believe and you can not convince me. God does not exist.”

“God does exist. Prove to me that He does not exist.”

We had both raised our voices. I was angry at the stupid book, he was angry at his painful legs.

“Hey. Guys. Take it easy!” a nurse admonished us.

We both fell silent, uncomfortable with such an intrusion. What did she understand? She was part of another world, the world of normal people. She did not have a needle in her vein...

“For five years I have been coming here for transfusions.”

“I would be happy to come here five years to receive transfusions.”

“Happy? Why?”

“That would mean that I would be alive for another five years,” I answer, casually, as though I were saying “good morning.”

“You are not saying that you will die?”

“That is what the doctors have said.”

He paused. I knew he felt sorry for me.

“Do you have six children?”

“I have six children.”

Silence

“You know what?” he said after some time. “Twenty years ago, the doctor said my mother-in-law has cancer, with no chance of survival. They did not tell her, but we all knew. And you know what? My mother in law is still alive.”

“But each day...” After a moment he continued “and every day, she says those prayers, the one with string and beads on it.”

We both became silent.

“I’m cold” I said.

“Okay,” replied a nurse as she left to do some work.

After a while, I stated shivering, so much that the stretcher was shaking with me. My teeth were chattering in my mouth. I wondered where all the cold had come from at once.

“Nurse!” cried my neighbor. “Don’t you see how badly she is shivering? Do something!”

She placed a warm blanket on top of me and gave me something to swallow. If I recall well, it was some white pills, one or two.

When all the blood intended to enter my vein had dripped down from the plastic bag, I was allowed to leave. My nails were redder. Life seemed more acceptable.

‘For a while I will be okay,’ I told myself. ‘How long? Who knows? It did not matter. Right now I am going home, the children are coming from school, and I have to feed them.’

...And because it would take me a while to get home, from my pocket I pulled out that string, with the many beads on it, starting and ending with a Cross...

“Has he ever seen a funeral?” asked the pediatrician. I had asked his advice regarding one of the children who seemed to particularly affected by my illness.

“No.”

“An uncle, an aunt?”

“No.”

“A friend?”

“No.”

“At least a dog, a cat?”

“No.”

“He must attend a funeral!”

I remembered the doctor’s words and searched for an opportunity.

The first funeral was for a butterfly. The children were somber, ready to cry. We made eulogies, each of us; we even sang a funeral march.

Everything was good until we had the pomana. In Romanian Orthodox tradition, after someone dies a meal is shared called pomana in order for God to forgive some of the deceased’s sins.

In this case the pomana consisted of sour cherries gathered from the cherry tree in the backyard of the condominium building in which we lived in.

“This cherry is mine!”

“No, it is mine!”

“Tom took more than me!”

“I’ll show you!”

A great rumble followed. In the end everyone was throwing cherry pits at each other, giggling and laughing. It didn’t look like the end of a real funeral, but the children said that it was beautiful and even placed wild flowers on the poor butterfly’s grave.

The second time we buried a bumblebee. We had moved into our new house. I don’t remember the details well; I just remember that another bumblebee was flying in circles around the dead one’s body as if it had wanted to wake her up. It made me think of my husband and my children.

The kids had put flowers on her grave as well. Christopher placed a small statuette of St Francis of Assisi there. The statue in which the saint had a dish in his hand and had birds drinking from the dish.

Fall came, winter came, and we took the statuette in the house.

The third time we buried a bird. The cat dragged it in front of the door and left its body there, maybe to share it with us. I wasn’t able to dispose of it before the children caught me.

“Mom,” cried Christopher as he started running to school, “don’t bury it without me!”

I had no choice. I had to wait. I had a vague feeling that they had started enjoying funerals, especially the pomana. We buried it with great pomp, even though I was beginning to find it a little boring. Christopher made a beautiful, hand-carved cross out of wood. When I say beautiful, I mean a cross, not too big, not too small, up to the child’s chest, made of two boards ripped from the old fence with several nails in the middle. He placed it in the ground a little tilted, and since it was the same sizes as the wild flowers, it was impressive in its simplicity. It

was their world, the bird's, the plant's, the child's, and the Cross. The funeral was almost over. I was in a hurry to go inside the house, so I could sweep the floor and do the dishes. To finish faster I said a short eulogy, concluding with:

“.....and we will never forget you.”

“Liars!” Gloria yelled.

“Why do you call us liars?” I ask offended.

“This is what you also said to the bumblebee. And look what you have done!”

“What have we done?”

“You planted potatoes!”

She was right. On top of the old grave we had planted potatoes. We had completely forgotten about the bumblebee. And even if we had remembered, would anybody have cared? It makes for good fertilizer I think I would have said.

What did we say at the bumblebee's funeral? Can anyone remember? How many people remember what they have said at funerals? When everything is over, you go home and you try to forget. “The living with the living, the dead with the dead,” is an old saying.

The girl was right. Maybe I said “we will never forget you” but it is customary to say this at funerals, is it not?

I did the most minimal amount of house work, and yet I am wrecked with tiredness. If I were to tell this to the doctor, he might reply:

“That is very good, the medication is working”

Sometimes, I ask myself: ‘will I still be alive next year.’

All the doctors have the need to touch my spleen. Does this mean that if I meet a doctor on the street he will instantly grab my spleen? No. But if a doctor catches me in his office, he will not let me go until he palpates my spleen and liver. The most meticulous doctors pull out a measuring tape, similar to the one that tailors use before cutting cloth, and they measure according to their own rules. The only exception was the homeopathic doctor who resembled a donkey. He preferred to take my blood pressure, listen to my lungs, and look in my throat.

“Mom! Mom! Come quickly! The cat caught a bird.”

“Where is the cat?”

“I don’t know. It ran to the neighbor’s backyard.”

“Can I go get it?”

“No, you are not allowed!”

“Mom, look at the cat!”

The cat was clenching in its mouth a large bird. It looked like a pigeon.

“Look! The cat is back in our yard.”

“Go towards the fence so that it can not go to the neighbor’s yard again. Make a circle around the cat.”

The cat, cornered, afraid that we might steal its prey, was looking for a way to escape.

“Now!”

We all ran towards the cat. We caught it. I put my hand around its neck and started to squeeze. Not too hard because I didn’t want to kill the cat, but hard enough to make it open its mouth. The cat released its prey, and we released the cat, that ran away shaken with spite.

“Take the bird!” I told one of the kids.

“Is it alive?”

I looked at it closer.

“It is alive.”

She had her eyes closed but was breathing, she was missing some feathers. She was wounded, but was not bleeding too much.

“Let’s take it to Christine’s room,” I told the children.

In Christine’s room we set up the hospital.

“Beep... the ambulance is coming,” the kids were screaming, running with the bird to the older sister.

There was not too much to be done. Christine placed the bird in a cardboard box; the children put an upside down lid with water and some bread crumbs, and let time do the healing. A little bit later, the tiny beak of the bird started to move.

I look at her tiny head and slender neck. There was still blood on the neck. If the cat clenched its mouth only a little bit harder, the bird’s fragile bones would have been broken. And how much larger was the cat’s mouth compared to the frail neck of the bird.

Was she scared?

No. I do not think so. She hadn’t read anywhere what some sharp teeth are capable of. She hadn’t read anywhere about death. How could she be afraid of death if nobody told her about it?

And yet, caught in the cat’s fangs she was very frightened; not being able to fly, with pain screaming through her body. She was scared, an intense fear, like the fear of the cancer patient *who knows...*

In the next room I hear bangs and yelling. When the clatter becomes too much I intervene:

“What’s going on?”

“Mom!” yells Matthew, “Christopher won’t let me bite him.”

The need for medical staff to follow protocol sometimes has strange outcomes. I remember a nurse at one point shaking my hospital roommate:

“Wake up. It’s time to take your sleeping pills”

“Mom, they’re cutting down the tree!”

“Let them cut it down. It has cancer,” someone replied.

I hurry to the window, in front of the house I saw trucks, chainsaws, and men with safety hats.

It was an old maple tree. Tall. Very tall. It had a wound on its trunk. Since the tree belonged to the city, City Hall gave orders to cut it down so that it would not collapse under the strong Canadian winds. If it fell and injured someone, the city would be liable for a large amount of money. I look at the tree. It’s not enough that it has to die, but it has to die nicely without hurting anyone.

“How will they cut it? It is so tall.”

“They know what they are doing,” I hear a reply, “with a crane.”

I don’t understand what the tree has to do with the crane so I wait.

A crane lifts up its arm. At the end of the arm there is a plastic basket, inside it there are two workers with yellow safety hats and chainsaws in their hands. The crane moves closer to the top, the workers start the chainsaws, and the metal cuts, cuts into the flesh of the tree.

An immense branch crashes down from above... from the sea of the heavens, hurled down, and smashes into the pavement...

Two workers run to it. Drag it after them. Push it into a machine. And from the other end emerges sawdust. That is all that is left from the strong branch that had so many times fought the storms.

The basket approaches another branch, I hear the chainsaw cutting, I see the branch fall, I hear the crash against the pavement, the dragging to the machine, and again the sawdust...

The workers approach the branches, one by one, the chainsaw cuts, and the branches crash against the pavement, the branches are pushed into the machine. From the heavens, into the machine, into sawdust.

I thought that tree were cut down with a single blow. I thought that one hits it close to its root, and it falls to the ground and dies whole and beautiful.

“No!” I feel like yelling. “No, it is not fair!”

They first cut the top, the dreams, the hopes, the expectations, and the attempt to reach the heavens.

...Like the cancer patient. We have the same illness...

The tree will be disfigured.

‘Stop it! Stop it!’ I feel like yelling. ‘You don’t have the right to do this! Let him die un mutilated. If you want to get rid of him, cut him from the bottom, once. Not like this.’

The workers have earmuffs: the blare of the chainsaw had to be stopped from reaching their ears, from reaching their souls.

I couldn’t take it any longer:

‘I’ll leave the window. I won’t look. I won’t see. When I come back it will all be over. Why do I have to see his agony?’

Like the cancer patient....It is so hard to look at them....

‘Escape tree!’ I wanted to yell. ‘Escape!’

The tree did not want to run away. I would have wanted for the tree to run, to yank its roots from the ground, like gigantic legs, and to run, to run, to run!

The tree cannot escape. It simply cannot. It is fixed here. Like me, like you, like us....And the chainsaw is approaching. I hear the blaring, which has already begun....

Trees can feel. I remembered reading someplace that trees make fear signals.

I go closer to the window. My glances caress him:

‘I love you, tree! I love you! I love you!’

That is all I want to hear when my turn will come:

“I love you! I love you!”

The workers left. They took with them the trucks, the chainsaws, and the immense branches, now sawdust.

They left just the wounded trunk saying something about coming back later to cut it or to clean up the remains of their work.

Now I could approach the tree. I look at its vertical wound, on the vertical of the trunk: a streak of rotten wood.

‘What will happen to his trunk,’ I ask myself, “will it grow new branches or will they come back tomorrow to cut the rest?”

I was standing near the trunk of the tree. The tree beside it was extending its leaves up towards to heavens. It was scared. He had stood beside the ailing maple the whole time as it was being cut down. Does he know how to cry?

Night is falling. In the arms of the uncut tree, first the darkness lowers itself, then the stars come to play amongst its leaves. It sends its branches higher and higher, reaching towards the heavens like the hopes of my husband...

After some time they cut the trunk. All that remained were the roots and a little stump over the ground.

I wanted to touch what could still be touched. My fingers caressed the markings of the chainsaws on the flesh of the tree. But could these remains still be called a tree?

‘Does it hurt?’ I wanted to ask him. ‘I am so sorry. What hurts the most: The cut itself? The part that remains? Or the vertical part that is no more?’

Spring came: an intense spring, as intense as my desire to live. From the tree’s stump branches had sprung. I could see them growing before my eyes, rushing to reach the sky. Faster, and faster, they were dashing towards the heavens above, higher above, following the footsteps of the branches before, but reaching higher, and higher.

The trunk followed its own path. Cut up, minced by the teeth of machines, re-processed, and then strapped with nails, it has finally found rest. Only sometimes, after darkness tiptoes into the room, the wood whispers stories of dreams, of past events.

They are tales of birds gliding through the skies, of floating white clouds, of yellow leaves descending from the heavens, of flying itself and of the will to fly, and the desire to go higher and higher...

And the baby, snuggled in the wooden crib, bubbling happily, moving its arms, like the offspring of a bird trying to fly...

Statistics say: One in three Canadians will suffer from cancer during their lifetimes and two out of three Canadians will have a family member suffer from this disease.

I don't know what the statistics are for other geographical regions but I do not think that they are any better.

Me:

"Did you sleep well?"

Matthew:

"Yes."

"Did you dream of something beautiful?"

"Yes."

"What did you dream?"

"Something beautiful."

"Will you tell me about you dream?"

"I will not."

"Why not?"

"I forgot...."

The cardinal is a beautiful red bird. We saw one in our garden. Now we do not see it anymore: we see just the cat....

We had another funeral. The cat caught a bird, killed it and left it in the backyard.

"Where will we bury it?"

"Beside the other bird."

We buried it in a hurry. I, for one, was beginning to get bored with funerals, but the children were all sad. Christopher was saddest one of all. He brought with him a glass full of oil.

“What? Do you want to fry it?” I said, not being able to abstain myself.

I was itching to say something funny, I was in no mood to be somber. The kids gave me a look of disapproval: it was still a funeral...

Disregarding my sarcasm, Christopher dipped a Q-tip into the oil and anointed the bird.

“This is what they do at funerals,” he said.

“Any eulogy?” I asked. Personally, I had no desire to hear a eulogy, so I tried to ask it as fast as possible, but Julian started:

“Birdie, you are so sweet.”

“Don’t say that too loud, the cat might hear you,” I said.

Julian gave me a hurt look. I had ruined the whole funeral service. To amend my sins, I fixed the wooden cross that happened to be lying in another part of the garden, and I brought it over to place on the grave.

“That cross belonged to the other bird!” Gloria screamed.

“Don’t worry, they can share the cross. Look at how nice the flowers on the cross are....”

Chris nevertheless made another small cross from two twigs. And quickly saying “that’s very nice,” I left the funeral as quickly as possible.

I think this is the last funeral that I will ever attend. I cannot stand funerals, even if it is only for just a bird.

About jokes...

My son once told the school psychologist that feels like laughing when he talks about cancer.

She adjusted her glasses on her nose, she frowned, and with the voice of a person trying to explain to a simpler person something extremely difficult to understand, she told him

“This is because the part of the brain responsible for crying is located close to the part of the brain responsible for laughter.”

In other words, if those around you expect you to start crying, but instead of crying you start laughing, this is because “the part of your brain that is responsible for crying is close to the part of your brain that is responsible for laughter.”

No comment.

I cannot stand psychologists.

Again they took my bone marrow.

“How was it?” the nurse asked when it was all over.

“Okay,” I answer.

This “okay” multiple meanings. She knew this and did not insist.

“Do you know what part was the worst?” I ask.

“When they drilled into your bone?”

“No, a little bit earlier when I was waiting. I was looking in another direction, pretending that I could not see, but the human being inside of me knew that the doctor was preparing the

instruments. I was trying to think of something else but my brain was not listening. It was imagining the next actions of the doctor, the intensity of the pain to follow.”

Fear.

The anticipated fear was worse than the pain itself. And the pain is sharp. I usually scream when the drill penetrates my bone.

I wish that up to the final moment I will have the freedom to be any way I wish to be. This seems very difficult because the illness tries to humiliate us. To make of us what it wants us to be. It changes our body, tires our soul, and “freedom” begins to seem like more of a joke.

And yet

I have to inject myself. No one does it to me; I do it with my own hands. I have the “freedom” to choose: do I inject myself in the leg, or in the arm? The degree of “freedom” expands if I ask myself: in the right leg or the left leg.

Have I made my point?

Also, I can inject myself in the stomach, having the “freedom” to choose between the right and the left side of my navel. I am lucky. One woman fainted after her first injection in the abdomen.

“Big deal,” someone said, “why does it matter that she cannot inject herself in the abdomen?”

If you are not the one effected, then it might not seem like a big deal to not be able to inject yourself in the abdomen, but to me it mattered greatly:

“The more places I have to inject myself, the lower the probability that I will develop bruises. If I had nothing better to do, I would write a thesis about “the joy of being able to inject yourself in the belly.” But I have things to do. I have to pick sour cherries for my son... (I can still do this. Am I not a “free person”?)

“Mr. Blair,” I asked my son’s teacher, “do you have any books for us?”

“Pardon?”

“For Tom. He asks all kinds of questions for which I don’t have the answers.”

“You can not do everything for him; he has to learn to find his own answers.”

Each individual has to learn to find their own answers...why had I not thought of this before?

My friends only think of death when they talk to me. And then they are scared. They avoid the subject or they avoid me.

But honestly speaking, who likes to talk about death?

I have never imagined that there could be a state of such exhaustion.

And yet, I am luck. Others say:

“I have never imagine there could exist so much pain.”

“We need to re-paint the apartment,” says Dumitru one day.

He was right. The white walls had a yellow tinge. Also, the children had displayed their “artistic talents” on the walls. On top of all that we were expecting guests from far away.

I bought what we needed and we began painting. It was going well, and yet not going very well, but still, we were making progress. We finished one room and then started the second one. Wearing old clothe splattered with paint, we worked and joked, happy that we did not have to pay for it. Just as we were asking ourselves whether we could finish the entire apartment before the guests would arrive, the phone rang:

“Mrs. Ichim?”

“Yes.”

“Dr. Dang would like to see you.”

“When?”

“As soon as possible.”

“This afternoon?”

“At 2:00 pm?”

“Okay.”

This was the last thing I needed. I dropped everything, took a bath, and changed my clothes.

“You must not go,” my mother instructed. “Can’t you see how many more things must be done?”

I would have been glad not to have went, but I knew what I knew.

“You need a transfusion.” He said “the red blood cells...”

“Very well,” I said.

I knew the drill.

I repeated the blood tests. When she finished with the needle, the nurse placed on my arm a blue wristband that said "Blood Bank," she wrote a number on it, sent me home and asked me return the next day.

Back at home, I was stirring the beans so that they would not stick to the pan, when the phone rang.

"Mrs. Ichim?"

"Yes."

"Do you have an appointment tomorrow at 9:00 AM for a transfusion?"

"Yes."

"The blood bank has found a problem with blood; you have been rescheduled for Friday."

The next day, the phone rang yet again:

"Dr. Dang wants to see you."

"When?"

"As soon as possible."

And so I went.

"Did you have a transfusion a couple of months ago?"

"Yes."

"The tests revealed a reaction to your previous transfusion. Some antibodies."

"What exactly?"

"I do not know. We need to do some more tests, but you can not have anymore transfusions."

I froze. My treatment options were narrowing.

"Please, God, don't let it be AIDS! Let it be tuberculosis. Let it be jaundice. Let it be what it is, as long as it is not AIDS. How happy I was with my cancer. People have treated me kindly and with respect. If it is AIDS, I will die alone, shunned by everybody, not just me but also my family."

Trembling with fear, I did another round of tests.

Thank God it was not AIDS, or even hepatitis. No one bothered to explain to me what the problem was. And even if they would have, I probably would not have understood. Yet, another thing worried me:

"Will I ever be able to have a transfusion again?"

"No," the doctor told me.

"What if an accident happens and I need blood? Will I die because I can not have transfusions?"

"No, in that case they will give you plasma, or blood that was washed very well, but this is very costly."

"And what will we do with the red blood cells?"

"Reduce the dose of chemotherapy."

The medicine that I was taking to kill the leukemia cells was also reducing my red blood ones. The doctor had to juggle: trying to balance between the dose of medication that would destroy what is bad without harming too much what is good.

After two years, I found out that the problems I had with receiving transfusions were only temporary. In the meantime, the doctors had succeeded in guessing the correct dosage of medication. Proof of this is that I am still alive.

Will I ever have another transfusion? Will I never have another transfusion? Who knows? I will think about this when the time comes. What is important is that today the phone did not ring.

Not yet.

When you have cancer it is like driving at 250 kilometers an hour on a road that lacks traffic signs.

You know what is bound to happen: You just don't know where, you just don't know when.

I do not know what to do with our cat. Saturday night it caught a sparrow. I freed it after some struggle; I gave the bird some medication, and set it free in the neighbor's yard. It flew up to the top of the tree.

Yesterday, the cat caught another sparrow, and again we were able to save her.

Now, this morning, on my front porch, I found a dead bird. Its neck was broken neck, and feathers were scattered all around. I threw everything in the garbage can before the children could see. Gloria, previously had disciplined the cat for attempting to take the life of another bird. I am more of a pessimist. According to an old Romanian saying: "What is born of a cat will eat mice," ...or anything the moves and is smaller than her.

The incident depressed me. I am saddened that a bird with powerful wings, that can fly to such heights, can be killed by an animal that has never flown and will never fly.

All the cat knows about wings is that they are very tasty.

I imagine that it must be very boring to be dead. To sit like that for eternity, still, not even being able to look behind your shoulder, or to move an arm, or even your little toe.

I've figured out why the cover must be placed on the casket: so that the person inside does not see what is happening outside, so he is not curious.

How could I live without being curious?

I think I will be an unusual dead person. Especially since, I cannot stand coffins. I final wish will be that the coroner will convey to the gravedigger that I am claustrophobic. Oh what fun that would be! Too bad I will not be around to see it.

...or will I be?

A telephone conversation with a friend from far away:

“Hello, Florica?”

“Yes.”

“How is it going?”

“Good.”

“How is your mother?”

“Good.”

“How is the husband?”

“Good.”

“How are the children?”

“Good.”

Wishing to be polite:

“And yourself, how are you doing?”

“Well... I just attended a funeral and I thought to myself, ‘and what about Florica, I wonder what she is doing?’”

“Gloria darling, what do you want for your birthday?”

“A bunny.”

We have a dog, a cat, and even a guinea pig.

“That is the last thing we need! What would you do with it?”

“I would pet it and play with it.”

“Absolutely not!”

And still I bought her a bunny: small, soft and beige, the kids named him “Fluffy”. He, was in fact a she, but the animal’s gender seemed like such an irrelevant detail.

That fall, the kids went to a picnic. I stayed at home, trying to catch up on my rest.

When I had completely relaxed, and life seemed oh, so beautiful, the phone rang.

“Hello mom? It’s me, Chris, can we bring home a bunny?”

“No!”

“Please mom? It’s so small, and so nice. Please.”

“No! Absolutely not!”

They brought it home anyway. Even though it was mentioned to us that it was a “he”, the bunny was smaller than Fluffy. But he had more experience, he had already been a father.

I placed both animals in the same cage and the children were joking, trying to guess when Fluffy would become a mother.

After a while, we separated the bunnies and the kids brought them to school, in different classrooms. The teachers were happy to have animals, saying that it calms the students and teaches them science.

After studying several books, analyzing and contemplating, the children concluded that Fluffy would give birth on October 14. The countdown began, everyone was excited. October 1st came and went, then October 2nd, October 3rd... , October 11th, October 12th, October 13th, finally October 14th! Nothing. October 15th, October 16th, still no baby bunnies!

Disappointed, the children brought the rabbits home.

“The teachers are too mean,” Gloria accused.

“Mrs. R. punished me because I was petting Sparky,” complained Chris.

I brought the rabbit’s home and without thinking twice, I placed them in the same cage. They got along well and shared their food equally.

We got used to the idea that there would be no baby bunnies.

It was cold, so we kept their cage under the kitchen table. Daily, we would change their litter.

One day took Gloria to the dentist. When I returned the children were screaming:

“Mom! Mom! The bunny was pregnant!”

“She gave birth! She gave birth! She gave birth!”

“Come and see!”

“Hold on. One at a time. What happened?”

“Fluffy gave birth.”

“I was talking on the telephone,” Dumitru said, “then all of a sudden the kids were screaming that the bunny was giving birth. I didn’t understand. I told them to be quiet, but they kept yelling, ‘she’s giving birth, she’s giving birth.’ I told the person on the phone that it was an emergency, that somebody was giving birth, and I hurried under the table to see what was going on. One of the bunnies had delivered, I didn’t know which one, but I knew that the father should not be left in the cage with the newly born. So I put my hand in and pulled out the first rabbit I could catch. I hope that the remaining in the cage is the mother,” Dumitru finished, still in shock.

“The one inside is the mother,” I say, trying to calm him down.

“Are you sure? It looks bigger.”

“They are of different races. Fluffy, theoretically, is a woman. At least that is what they said when we bought her. Let’s hope that they were right.”

The “happy father” was encircling the cage. One day, assuming that he wanted to see his offspring, and out of respect for his paternal sentiments, we allowed him back in that cage. The first thing he did was to go to Fluffy and ... I can not say what he did, but I quickly covered my children’s eyes. We never let him in the cage again. Though we let Fluffy gossip with her husband a few times.

Now we had too many bunnies: The mother, the father, and five children. We could not even take them outdoors because of the cold.

We gave Sparky to the first kid whose parents did not strongly object.

The bunnies started to grow. They had beautiful names: Romeo, Juliet, William, Ice Cube and Snowflake.

Still, there were too many. We gave three of them away. Fluffy remained, as did two of her little ones. Once a day we would let her run freely through the house.

I noticed Fluffy chasing away the cat a few times. I wondered how a tomcat, as solidly built as our cat, could be frightened by such an innocent bunny.

On Saturday morning, as children were happy that they did not have to go to school, Matthew, an explorer in training, exclaimed:

“Mom, we have puppies under the bed!”

“Kids of his age have such a vivid imagination,” I thought to myself.

“Come here mom! Look!”

I follow the voice to the child’s room. Peeking out from beneath the bed, I see the bottom portion of some blue track pants, and Matthew’s little legs.

I lower myself down, peak under the bed, and surprise: bunnies!

“When would she have given birth to these?” I ask myself, after catching my breath.

The kids were jumping up and down with glee:

“Bunnies! More bunnies!”

At that moment, I could understand why the momma rabbit had fought with such aggression against our cat.

Bunnies, bunnies, bunnies...

What will we do with so many bunnies?

“Goulash!” suggested a neighbor.

“I will not eat my friends,” I answered, offended.

They are soft, affectionate, and beautiful. It is a pleasure to watch them play.

“Mom, I never thought such simple creatures could bring such great joy to our family,” said Christine one day.

And it was true, when the kids would pet them, they would get a sparkle in their eyes. And their hearts would begin to understand more.

And yet, what will we do with all of these bunnies?

“After a month, she will give birth again,” Matthew stated philosophically.

The best compliment I ever received in my life came some years ago from Tom:

“Oh mom! You are so beautiful, you look like a crane!”

At the age of four, colossal machines were the premier symbol of earthly beauty.

“Mom, sign this!”

“What is it?”

“It says that I have a detention.”

“But what did you do?”

“We had a supply teacher. In math, geography, and English it went well. In religion class he asked:

“What do you have to do to go to Heaven?”

“I answered: to drink and drive.”

...I remembered, just in time, that in situations like this it is not pedagogic to laugh...

I start to understand the word humility: decisions were made by my cancer, not by me. Energy, to me, is an abstract notion, something that I am lacking.

It is time to administer my injection. I cannot decide what part of my body I should pierce today.

“Where should I inject myself, in the belly or in the arm?” I ask out loud.

“Which is the least painful for you?” answered my eldest child.

“The least painful for me is ... in someone else’s arm.”

March 4, 1992. Highway 401.

The volunteer from the Cancer Society is driving the car, we are surrounded by speeding vehicles. I look at the speedometer, 100 kilometers per hour. I am in the front seat. Two of my children are in the back seats. I do not feel like talking. I am returning from the hospital, gloomy. The leukemia cells have increased, they now comprised 75 percent of my bone marrow. Their numbers were high before. At one point they fell to 50%, I was hoping they would continue to fall. My dream was that they would be eradicated altogether, but I dared not whisper this.

Far away, immense white clouds were floating on the horizon...I look at them and think about my leukemia cells floating in my bone marrow...75%...

I feel a hunted animal with no place to escape.

I put my hand in my pocket, grab the rosary beads with my fingers, close my eyes pretending to be asleep, and I start to pray.

“Hail Mary! Full of grace, the Lord is with Thee, blessed are thou...”

A sharp turn. I open my eyes, the front of another car is rushing towards me. Fear. The black metal racing towards me. Another sharp turn. Whiplash! I escape...

The car speeds on the 401.

My heart beats like crazy. We all had a horrendous fright. We start to recover.

“Idiots!” curses the driver, “Do they do not how to change lanes!?”

“The person at the steering wheel was a woman. Women should not be allowed to drive!” teased Tom from the back seat.

“That is sexist!” protested Christine.

“That’s enough! Keep quiet!” I try to settle them down.

I did not want them to distract the driver. We are still on the highway, and a long way from home.

I relax a little:

“Did you notice? That was a limousine from the funeral home, perhaps business is bad and they want to increase their number of clients.”

I smile.

Afterwards, I close my eyes, pretending to sleep, but I still have some thoughts to finish thinking about.

‘75% cancer cells...’ is not urgent. In my body, I could still feel the horror of the possible accident. If it had hit us, I would have been dead. It was heading towards me; I saw the black hood of the car speeding straight towards me.

‘I am so silly,’ I thought to myself. ‘I worry that I will die some time in the future, when in fact, only a minute ago God saved my life. Why do I forget that God is looking over me?’

Sometimes I wish that there were someone here that I could talk to about my cancer. But there is nobody with whom I can share everything that I am thinking. Dumitru cannot handle it, the kids are too fragile, and the friends....When I try sometimes to unveil some of my thoughts, tears come to their eyes.

I consult with Matthew:

“If God helps us, tomorrow...”

“God will help us” the child interrupts, confidently.

“How do you know?” I ask.

“Because God is good”

I am amazed with the child's wisdom. For a long time, I had forgotten how good God is. I wrote this to my sister-in-law. Tinka read the letter to her mother as she lay on her deathbed tormented by a terrible fear.

"Tinka," she said, "If even that little child says that 'God is good', then maybe He truly is good, and He will have mercy on me too.."

The fear began to dissipate, and she died peacefully because she was a good woman. Poor soul.

"The last time I talked to Areta she was crying on the phone. She was suffering. She said she wanted to see me. I did not have the courage to see her: I was waiting for better times," I fold the letter. I did not feel like reading anymore. Our friend Areta Sandru died before her daughter's eyes, a high school student, who was imploring her:

"Mother, don't die!"

But her mother could not comfort her. Her body wasn't listening. She gave her daughter the only response she could. A tear fell through her eyelashes. It was the end. Or maybe the prelude to the life that lay ahead of the remaining family.

At my deathbed I want my children to tell me:

"Mother, you can leave in peace. We are old enough. We can take care of ourselves, and God will take care of us. We love you mother, we love you a lot."

I want my children to pray for me. They will pray me to sleep, like now when I sometime fall asleep to their young voices reciting "Our Father, who..."

It is not easy to watch a friend die. Neither is it easy to die. If one who suffers wishes to see you, you must go! You will lessen their suffering, as though for the blink of an eye you were taking the weight of his Cross off his shoulder. And in moments like this the Cross is so heavy!

Do not say "I wait for better times." Better times may never come. Do not postpone for tomorrow. For someone who is sick, tomorrow might not exist. You can not imagine how difficult today is for them.

When a sick person calls, go! Add to your Cross a fragment of the weight of their Cross and with tears in the soul, and with tears in eyes, go! Just go!

My entire life, I could not stand funeral processions. These events sadden me so much that I am even thinking of skipping my own funeral.

“Mom!” cries Chris, “Matthew is throwing toys at my head”
Lately, Matthew has started to behave rather naughtily; he throws whatever comes his way at the head of whoever comes his way.
“Don’t throw objects!”
He does not listen; he takes a wooden block and throws it at his brother’s head! I grab him, pretending that I am going to spank him.
“Will you continue to throw objects? Will you?”
“I don’t want to answer!” he screamed, trying to free himself.
I pretend that I cannot hold him under my grip and I let him go. I feel sorry for him; he is so young, he has not yet learned how to lie.

“Mom, you have beautiful hair.”
I am stunned.
“Tom,” I say, trying to control my anger: “Don’t ever make a compliment that doesn’t even hold a grain of truth. My hair is ugly, and gray when it is not blue. Sometimes it itches me as though I had lice. I cut it short since it was falling out because of the chemotherapy and it will continue to fall. I don’t want to even hear the word ‘hair.’”
Tom is embarrassed.
He does not know what hair means to a woman, the beautiful hair I had in my youth.
Black and long...
Or maybe he suspects that and is trying to comfort me?
The child puts his head down:
“I’m sorry mom.”
I caress his face:
“You tried to be nice.”

“Mom, why don’t you dye your hair?”
“Why should I dye it?”
“The kids at school laugh at me, they say your mother is going to die because she has white hair.”

“And what color would you like my hair to be?”

“It doesn’t matter, it can be any color but white.”

If this would diminish the fears of my children, why would I not do it? Still, I had to ask the doctor.

“Can I dye my hair?”

“You can, but because of the chemotherapy, unexpected colors might come out. Ask your hairdresser.”

“I don’t have a hairdresser.”

The doctor looked at me with shock, as though he never heard of a woman who does not go to the hairdresser.

I looked into which hair dyes contained the least number of chemicals. I found a brand that was natural based. The mixture that I was supposed to put on my hair smelled like vegetable stew. For a second I was tempted to taste it, but I was stopped by the warning on the box: “keep out of reach of children.”

I put the mixture on my hair and kept it on for the recommended time. Then I washed it off, dried my hair, and looked in the mirror. My head was full of hairs colored with the strangest shades of blue I had ever seen in my life. I was hoping that it was just the lighting, shining at an off angle, but no matter how I twisted or turned, it was still blue.

“This is it,” I said, consoling myself that at least I am not bald.

“Mom, your hair is blue,” observed each child in turn.

“Didn’t you say that you want it to be any color except white? Is it white? It is not white. Therefore, it is beautiful.”

The kids immediately adopted my logic. The adults pretended not to see. It was an unspoken understanding; nobody would ask a thing. Perhaps, they thought that my hair fell off and I was wearing a wig. But, every time I looked in the mirror, I laughed, as if at a good joke, thinking to myself that no one has yet to see a priest’s wife with blue hair.

I spread the blanket on the grass; I lay on the cloth warmed by the sun, above blue with white clouds.

“It feels like we are underwater,” I remark to the children.

Christopher, also lying on the blanket, raises his arm up:

“Look mom, I can hold a cloud in my hand.”

Looking from below, his small hand seemed immense, the white cloud was sleeping on his fingertips, and the sky was leaning over the roof of our house.

How strange the world seems when viewed from the angle of a blade of grass.

I push a little of the blanket away from under me, I want to feel the earth, the grass. I stretch my body on the ground, the earth is warm. I like this type of warmth.

‘I should get use to it,’ I whisper to myself. ‘I wonder what it is like down there.’

I try the position that I think is correct. Face up...the clouds, the sky, the maple leaves...

‘But it is not good. Then I will not be able to see...’

‘...Not up, I need to find more about the earth.’

I turn myself with my face down.

‘Dust, please, tell me.’

A leaf falls from the maple tree, yellow like a piece of the sun. How graceful the leaf floated through the air before giving itself to the grass. How much light there is in this yellow leave, held on the shoulders of the green blades of grass....

...Like a person held on the shoulders of his friends on the last voyage.

‘She wasn’t scared. Why then should I be afraid?’

My mother is celebrating her birthday. At almost eighty her face is full of wrinkles; her expression is tired, and a little melancholic.

“How old are you grandma?”

“Twenty-five,” somebody joked.

Imagine that! My mother. Young. I never imagined that my mother was once also young. In my childhood, when someone would ask me how old my mother was, I would always say:

“Forty-six.”

I don’t know why I picked that age, it just seemed the most appropriate age for my mother. And mother continued to be 46-years-old for a long time, until one day she actually turned forty-six.

How strange the age of mothers passes.

I am now forty-six years old. When I was a child, mother was younger than what I am now. Me, the one from today, I wish I could speak with my mother from then. She was bothered: to give her advice, to console her. She had hoped: to teach me how to hope.

My mother from now, with her face full of wrinkles, blows into the candles. For every year a candle is blown, she didn’t want to put them all in, or maybe she did? I didn’t count, it didn’t matter.

I shift on my chair. I am tired; I feel the same age as my mother of now, seventy, almost eighty years old.

How many more times will she be able to blow out birthday candles? How many more times will I be able to blow out birthday candles?

I would like to go to her and take her in my arms.

“Mom, I love! Mom, I am scared! Mom, I do not know! I do not know any thing. It is so bad to feel old, and I feel old, old, old. Mom why am I not the kid from back then? Mom why are you not twenty-five?”

I could not say it to her.

Mother blows out her candles. My sisters sing “Happy Birthday” to her and she smiles. I smile with the others. Carefully, my mom takes the candles out of the cake, cutting it and giving us a piece.

“Take some, its food for lent. When I was born it was also lent, it was Holy Week, and my grandmother, God rest her soul, cried.”

“Why did she cry?”

“Because I was a girl ‘you are young’ she told to my parents, ‘you will have a boy, but I will not be alive to see this.’”

Mother with wrinkles on her face...mother a baby girl...my grandparents who died before I could know them were young...the mother of my grandmother old, and was still alive...

Times are getting mixed up. Seasons stratify. Who am I? Where am I? How much longer will I be?

It did not matter.

“There is a time to be born and a time to die, a time to be young and a time to be old.”

“Grandma, give me a piece.”

The little one extends his arm; grandma cuts him a piece of cake. We all eat the birthday cake, made without milk or eggs, because we are in the Holy Week.

“What do you want Santa Claus to bring you?” I make the mistake of asking the kids.

“New skis!”

“A metal detector!”

“Electronic drums!”

Not a chance. I apply my mother’s tactics from my childhood.

“Santa Claus is having money troubles. Can you not see the whole world is in an economic crisis?”

The little ones did not know what an economic crisis was, but the fact that it involved the whole world made them quiet down for a second to contemplate it.

“I hope it will not be like last year,” Gloria said in a melancholic tone.

“What was it like last year?”

“You don’t remember? Santa Claus brought me a naked doll.”

And she starts to scream:

“Naked! Bare naked!”

Last year, when we had even worse finances, I did not realize that the girl did not like dolls, and especially naked dolls! I had taken what I could find at a rummage sale.

“I want to have a Christmas we will never forget,” I said wishfully.

Now I do not know: either God wanted to give me a lesson, or the grade two teacher should have told us in time. The fact was that exactly one week before Christmas Christopher announces:

“Mom, my skin is itchy!”

I take off his little shirt and find exactly what I was hoping not to find. Three small blisters with white heads.

“Chicken pox,” the doctor confirmed.

And so, on Christmas Eve, when his siblings were preparing to go Christmas Caroling, Christopher stayed, in pain, in my arms crying:

“Why can I not go? I want to go too! I wanna! I wanna! I wanna!”

With difficulty, I find a part of skin on the top of his head that had no blisters, and I kiss him.

“Don’t worry my little bird, you will go next year.”

“But I want now!”

“How can you go now? Can you not see that you are full of blisters? Do you want to make everybody sick?”

“I do,” he said with a mischievous smile.

“You are staying home, end of discussion.”

Tears and tears.

“Don’t worry Chris, when I come back I’ll give you half of what I collect,” Tom consoled him.

“And I’ll give you half of what I get,” Christine said.

“And I’ll give you...”

Everyone promised him something.

I don’t know how good Chris is at math, but he understood that by staying at home he would get more than if he went out, so he quieted down.

The kids went caroling and I took my role as guardian angel. Everyone who tried to enter my home I warned:

“Did you have chicken pox? If you did not then you must not enter!”

Most of them preferred to stay outside.

It was a long night, I remember the shocked faces of all those who tried to visit us.

The kids returned from caroling, the goodies were shared with rigorous dialogues:

“What did you take from my bag?”

“No, you took from me. Mrs. X gave you stuff to share but you kept it all for yourself.”

“Mom! Matthew stole my chocolate!”

Finally, everyone fell asleep and it became incredibly quiet. The way it has to be when Santa Claus comes. Trying to make as little noise as possible, I bring out the presents: A flashlight for Chris and one for Gloria, both of them the same so that they will not fight. A car game for Julian. Tom and Christine being older, I suspected preferred cash. And for Matthew, who is crazy about watches, I found him a second-hand clock. It was old and the colors were fading but I told myself that Matthew is too young to notice, especially since the toy had a spring which when wound up would make it to sing.

I counted again, six packages, I did not forget any of the children. There remained me and Dumitru. I had to put something in for us as well so that the kids would not think that Santa Claus had not brought us anything because we were bad.

I placed for Dumitru a pair of socks, and for me a book that nobody had yet read, recommended for children between the ages of four and six, that we received from a charitable organization.

Finally, I could sleep. I was dead tired.

“God, thank you for giving us this Christmas where we can all be together ...”

God, thank you for giving us Christmas...”

I tried to imagine the manger and Our Lady with Jesus in her arms...and the Magi...

I was tired and happy.

Early in the morning the kids rushed toward the Christmas tree.

“These are the nicest presents we ever received!” declared Christopher and Gloria, sending beams of light underneath to bed, looking for I do not know what unseen treasures. The treasures were late showing up; instead, the cat came from under the bed, meowing in terror.

Matthew was running around the house with his toy clock in hand. It had a nice melody, even though every few seconds we heard a tapping noise.

“What is making that noise?” Matthew asked.

“It has a metronome inside,” I answered him with conviction.

“Metronome?” asked Tom in disbelief.

“Shhh,” I whispered to him, “do not let the little one hear you! It had a loose spring that was sticking out and your daddy ripped it so it would not hurt Matthew. I think the little piece left inside...”

Tom started to laugh.

“Matthew, do you like your clock with a metronome?”

“Yes, I like it” Matthew answered with pride.

“Mom, why did Santa Clause bring you that ugly book?” Gloria asked.

“Because no one else would have liked it” I was going to answer her but I stopped in time.

“Because he knew I would enjoy it very much.”

“And do you like it?”

“Yes”

The girl looked at me with disbelief and continued to play.

When everyone left for Church, I remained with my blistered one, to keep him company. It was Christmas, I wanted so much, at least to light a candle, but I could not leave the child by himself at home alone. He had blisters on his face, body, feet, he had blisters on his head, blisters on his mouth, and where did he not have any? I took him in my arms, I nursed him. At one pointed I suspected that he enjoyed the situation. I had never spoiled him so much.

It was truly a Christmas that we would never forget.

And if having a kid with chicken pox on Christmas day is remarkable, how about spending New Year Eve’s with two blistered children?

Exactly when Christopher got better, Matthew and Gloria got sick. Both of them infected with at the same type of virus, both of them had chicken pox.

January 1, 1992. Happy New Year Florica!

When everyone on our Meridian was preparing for celebration, I was patiently spreading ointment on the blisters of my children, hoping to alleviate the itchiness.

I took them on my knees, one on one knee, one on the other, so they would not fight. I kissed them, I caressed their faces.

One day Gloria counted her blisters. I don’t remember the exact number but I know that it was in the order of tens. She stopped counting only when her grandmother, a sagacious women who has seen many things, told her:

“It is bad luck to count your blisters. If you count them you will get more.”

On January 6th, I was scheduled to go to Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto. I went there, my face tired, with dark circles under my eyes from the lack of sleep. The medical staff looked at me with sympathy, thinking that I had partied too much.

“There are many cases of the flu in the city,” said a nurse casually.

Trying to brag, I said, “The flu, eh, at home I have three children with chicken pox.”

“What?!?”

Her face changed as if I had told her that somewhere in the waiting room I had hid a bomb.

I tried to calm her down:

“I had chicken pox when I was little.”

It didn’t work.

She called several people dressed in white, they spoke something in whispers. They took me to a room, absolutely isolated, and somebody posted himself in front of the door. I asked myself whether they did it by accident, or to make sure that I do not escape. After a while when a nurse had the goodwill to see me, I asked her:

“Why is it that when I said ‘chicken pox’ everyone got scared?”

“You see, for this category of population, this type of virus is extremely dangerous.”

I translated to myself the language of the nurse. Through “this category of population” she meant leukemia patients. Through “very dangerous” she means mortal.

She gave me all sorts of scientific explanations, from which I did not understand a thing, neither did I try to understand, retaining only that in my case, although I already have had chicken pox, contact with the virus could be very dangerous.

“If blisters appear call us right away so we can send you medication. But immediately, don’t delay!”

They consulted me in record time and then quickly sent me home for fear of spreading something very dangerous to “this category of patients”.

I was happy to return home quickly, Gloria was waiting for me to take her to the doctor; a red spot appeared on one of her eyes. Chicken pox had gone there.

I did not try to isolate myself from the children. It was too late, anyway. I had already held them in my arms, I kissed them, and I washed their blisters.

I saw about my daily activities, and every time I had the impression that my skin was itchy, I would check to make sure there was nothing there. And my skin was more itchy than ever. Or at least so it seemed because of fear.

When at last the incubation period was over, I made a big Sign of the Cross:

“God, thank you for having saved me this time as well!”

I was lucky. I did not get chicken pox. My husband did!

Sometimes I am so tired I feel like crying. But I have yet to do this. At least not because of the tiredness.

Cancer can be a road towards God. It is hard to make this statement, and even harder to understand it, and yet it is true. Sick people have more time to think, and more time to think about God. When we are doing well, we fill our bellies with food, trouble our minds with finding the best clothes, forgetting to say our prayers because there is a good movie on television. When the fear of death comes, one no longer cares about food, clothes or television. "God, help me! God, help me!" we run towards the God that we never had time for before. We start to say the prayers, that we never had time to say before, and we start to ask ourselves what will be expecting us in the next world, a world until now we pretended we did not know of.

And yet, God still forgives us. He listens to our prayers, He is merciful to us, and on the road of suffering He shows us the way back to Heaven. I do not think there is a sick person who has not felt the caress of God. And I have felt it. So many times. So many times. So many times.

In the grass, I find a dead squirrel. The children become sad all of a sudden. And because I do not like to see them sad, I remind myself out loud "When we were young, if we saw a dead cat we would pull on each other's hair and sing, 'May my hair grow and your hair rot!' And to complete the ritual we would spit on the carcass."

The kids caught on to the idea and start pulling on each other's hair singing and laughing "May my hair grow and your hair rot." They even started to spit, competing for who would spit better.

I marvel to myself how easily the sentiments of children can be swayed. But I don't have too much time to meditate, Gloria, with the most innocent smile in the world asks: "can we do this same thing at human funerals?"

I should write. What should I write? How should I write?

I lie on my back and stare up at the sky: The branches of the trees, the clouds. Everything is so beautiful. A pigeon flies by. I try to imagine skies. Probably there is wind high up there, pieces of clouds moving rapidly, this mixture of grey and blue, and a small little cloud floating on the blue sky, grey on blue, white on blue, branches of the trees dreaming toward the skies, my gazes floating toward the sky, my hopes...

To write. How to write:

It is so beautiful what God made, and me, a miniscule creature on this globe. I give up trying. I stare and fill my soul up with mysteries. Clouds, the skies and the voice inside of me saying, "It is so beautiful."

What is beauty? I think it is when you feel like you are a part of everything around you, and everything around you is part of you, only then do you get that strange sentiment that you can not describe. And not knowing how to describe it, you give it a name. A name, like a flower, but not so perfect, because the flower is made by God, but we are but simple humans. And in our unworthiness we carved out a name, we found a name for something that we can feel but not describe: beauty.

There will come a day when I will be so sick that I will not even be able to pray. This I fear the most.

How happy are those who can still pray. And how foolish are those that do not.

I met Father Don on the street.

"Excuse me," he said, "I'm in a hurry, I have funeral."

"I hate funerals," I told him

"Maybe he is now in a better place."

"Yes maybe he is in a better place."

Later I see the cars in front of the Church. Through the window of the Hearst a corner of the coffin is visible. It was beautiful, with expensive woodcarvings. 'He must be rich,' I thought to myself, 'what a lucky guy.' All of a sudden, I realize: I am jealous of a dead person! The dead person *is* not rich but *was* rich. And the coffin, no matter how expensive, it is still a coffin. A box which you are encased in and can never escape.

He is rich and encased in the box; I am poor but still alive. Who is richer?

"Maybe he is in a better place," Father Don said.

Maybe. In a world where money does not exist. "Where there is no suffering or anguish or torment but only everlasting life."

I shrug my shoulders and continue walking. The answer to this question I will find out later, when my time comes...

Summer. Hot and also not so hot, just right for sitting on the grass in the backyard. For sitting. It is Sunday afternoon and I can permit the luxury of sitting.

Rest. How important rest is for me.

And I am fortunate enough to have a backyard.

"Come and see a little ant," I tell Matthew

"Where?" The child asks and for a second I get the feeling that the fate of the universe lies on the answer I was to give.

The ant was gone so I looked for another one and I showed that to him. The kid does not stay in one place for more than a second, he is busy, he leaves with a shovel looking for sand.

The Church bell starts ringing. The dog is scared and begins to bark. I do not know why every time the church bells ring the dog starts barking. The child went to pet the dog.

A normal Sunday afternoon: the grass, the ants, the child hopping on my back and pulling on my hair.

"Thank you God for the rays of the sun. Thank you God for the grass, for the ants, for this child who is pulling on my hair, for the dog that gets scared when he hears the church bells ring, for this paper on which I am writing on, for the pen that I write with, for my hand that can move, for my body which is still alive.

...And I thank you God for this sickness of mine which has brought me closer to you..."

I saw in a Church an immense Cross and I felt a strong love for it. It seemed like everything around the cross had disappeared and all that was left was the cross.

"How much I would like to always have the cross near me."

I remembered that a cross is placed over the grave. The friends, the relatives, come to the funeral, cry, then it turns late and everyone goes home to their families. The deceased remains, alone, with the Cross.

But how can I say that he is alone as long as he has the Cross with him?

No!

The dead and the Cross see their own way. The soul has stopped for a second on this island called Earth, and then it sees its way, going higher and higher to the Heavenly Father.

What remains behind is that piece of dust, "From earth you were made and to the earth you will return." And to liberated the dead from fear, the people and Jesus have placed the Cross above his head.

Matthew bursts through the door smiling:

"Mom I have a present for you."

In his fist he was clenching a bunch of small white feathers.

"Where did you get them?" I asked

"I followed the cat."

I realize that the doctor made a mistake when he told me I did not have a chance. It seems that through the experimental treatment that I was taking there is a 10% chance. For others, 10% seems like a small chance but for me it is an enormous chance.

I do not insist that I be the one saved. But it is very important to know that there exists a chance...

"Why?"

But who am I to put these questions.

"God thank you that I exist."

A few years have passed since I first got sick. The face is wrinkled, my expression is tired, my hair...

And yet, I am still alive. It does not matter how old or ugly I feel. I am alive!

And my children still have someone to call "mother."

Sometimes I write down sad thoughts. This does not mean that 24 out of 24 hours, I only think about cancer. Usually my questions have answers a little more palpable:

"Who put that slimy frog under your father's pillow?"

Today there is no school. The children and I slept-in to our heart's content. I feel a little better, a little less tired.

"I had a bad dream," Dumitru says.

"So did I," I answered, "I dreamt that we had bugs in our house. They were as big as my palm and brown. In fact, they resembled the chocolate that my sister gave to Matthew yesterday."

The children laugh.

"What did you dream?"

Dumitru shakes his head upset. "How could you do that to me?"

"What did I do?"

"You were with a man. You rested your head on his shoulder..."

'This surpasses Othello,' I think to myself, and yet I am curious.

"What did he look like?"

"It was unclear; like in a dream."

I smiled.

"I dreamed that I lent you \$1000 and you did not return it."

I thought about asking a lawyer, "If my husband dreamt that I cheated on him, could this be grounds for a divorce?" I did not bother asking because I suspect that the answer would be: yes. Lawyers can never refuse a customer.

The car is racing on highway 401. We are approaching the cancer hospital in Toronto. At 9:00 o'clock I have the appointment. I remember the blood lab, the corridors, nurses, and doctors. 'What will they tell me this time?'

It is a fall morning, cloudy and cold. I still had not woken up well, I did not feel like talking. Somewhere far away, a group of birds are floating peacefully over the highway in the shape of a big V.

"How do they fly over the highway?" I ask the volunteer driver. "Are they not afraid of the cars?"

"They don't usually fly by here but sometimes it happens."

"What are they?"

"Canadian Geese."

"How do you know that they are not wild ducks?"

"They have a longer neck."

They are large birds, with their wings and neck beautifully arched, wild birds characteristic of Canadian wildlife.

I remembered from the biology textbook "Canadian Geese in the fall migrate towards warmer locations. If on the way one of the birds becomes sick or is injured, two others fly down with the sick one and stay with it until it dies or is healed. Only then do they commence again, trying to catch up with the pack from behind."

...The V formation slides peacefully under the dark clouds...

Near the hospital in Toronto I discovered a Church. Every time after I finish with the blood tests and consultations, instead of sitting still in the chair and waiting to receive the medicine from the pharmacy, I go and pray. The medications can wait. They are vials, syringes and alcohol, they cost a lot of money, it is a good thing that I can have them. And yet they can wait.

I open the small door of the Church, here is another world. I forget about the hospital, the tests and the doctors.

"Hail Mary Full of Grace."

I feel comforted, like a child in his mother's arms, like a child near his parents.

"Good night, Julian."

"Good night, mom."

"Does your ear still hurt? Do you want me to give you your eardrops?"

"No it's okay, good night."

"Good night."

Like every other night, I cannot wait to go to bed. I am tired. I sleep.

"Mom! My ear hurts!"

"It is difficult to wake up," I answer half asleep.

"Don't worry. It will go away, sleep."

After little while later:

"Mom! My ear hurts!"

The voice is serious, a little bit afraid.

I cannot wake up. The body does not want to, the nervous system is protesting.

Something reminds the rational mind that earaches can be very serious. They can result in a perforated eardrum.

I command my brain to wake up. I command my body to wake up. The body does not want to listen. The brain does not want to listen.

"Mom! My ear hurts!"

I concentrate. I manage to wake up. I manage to get on my feet. And I manage to get the bottle of medicine.

"Which ear?"

"The right one."

I put two drops in the child's ear.

"It is suppose to go away now. If it hurts any more wake me up."

"Yes mom."

"Goodnight, Julian."

"Goodnight, mom."

I throw myself into bed, asking myself why at ten at night, when I was awake his ear did not hurt, but at midnight, when I was having the sweetest sleep it began to hurt him. And I fall asleep, hoping that in another two hours I will not have to take him to the hospital.

I wish that I could be a better patient: one that was "ideal", one that did not get mad, one that did not wonder what tomorrow would bring, one who is not afraid of pain, or of death.

But does such a patient exist?

The tender arms of the child push my bangs off my forehead.

"You look nicer this way."

He caresses my face.

"Look how beautiful you are."

His little fingers play with my hair.
I am ugly: I am old; I have wrinkles on my face and grey hair. It does me good to know that he thinks I am beautiful.

"Am I beautiful?" I ask.

"Yes."

"How beautiful, beautiful like a toy?"

"No, you are beautiful like a mother."

I kiss him. What can be more beautiful than a mother? But does he know the definition of the word "mother"?

"Matthew do know what the word 'mother' means?"

"You."

I embrace my little one and ask myself how much longer I would still be with him.

Without meaning to, I imagine my final moments: Stretched out on a bed, emaciated, my face yellow if they decide to take out my spleen.

'To take out the spleen? This is very bad.'

'To take out the spleen? This is very good; it means that I will not die in the near future.'

Until they decide to operate on me, until they cut me up, until the wounds heal...

Time. I gain time.

What does it matter if the skin is yellow?

I gain time. One day, two days, three... A month, two months, three.... Maybe a year, maybe more. Time gained for the children.

I will try to buy time by paying with my pain. I try to postpone for as long as I can the moment when the adjective "orphan" will be placed beside the names of my children

Night. Matthew wakes up crying:

"Why did you put the mouse under the pillllloowwww?"

I mumble in my sleep:

"What mouse? There is no mouse."

"The mouse... under the pillow."

"You dreamt it."

"The mouse..."

I am now fully awake and realize that Matthew is too young to understand what a dream is. I am sleepy. I do not feel like explaining it to him. I try the quickest solution, the disappearance of the mouse.

"There is no mouse. The cat ate him."

"No he didn't...," Matthew screamed.

The solution was not good. The child was merciful. "No honey, it didn't get eaten. The cat took him to the door and told him 'get lost you donkey!'"

Matthew calmed down. He placed his head on the pillow, closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Sometimes the simple verb "to live" becomes an unbelievable burden.

Nevertheless, I force myself to do it, for the sake of the kids, and with the help of God I carry my body and soul until night, when I can throw myself into bed.

I lay on the bed, but the bed does not bring me rest. The tiredness has embedded itself into every cell of my body and nothing brings rest, and I feel the need to rest and I wish so much to rest, at least for a small period of time.

And nothing brings rest.

Like a hunted hound, pursued and pursued....

Cancer is a life experience. Unwelcome, yes, but it is something from which to learn from: so many questions and answers and sometimes unknowns. Sometimes it is happiness, sometimes it is pain, sometimes it is hope, and many times it is fear. I do not exactly know what it is and what it is not, but one thing is certain: it is never boring.

Did I said it was happiness? Yes, sometimes. When people, through small acts make me feel their love, my soul smiles. Even if the muscles of the face are too tense to express the happiness. Even if the glances are too tired to smile, love has come to me and to my soul, I only know that my heart sketches a smile. These small acts of love help me more than all of the injections in the world. They give me the strength to fight further, to accept what was given to me and to continue forward, regardless of how difficult it will be.

And I know how difficult it will be: Tomorrow more difficult than today, the day after tomorrow more difficult than tomorrow...

There is an old Romanian custom, if you lose something, yell the name of the object throughout the house, like this: "pa-n, pa-n."

It is true, the pan will not respond but at least you will not forget what you were looking for and therefore you will have a better chance of finding the object.

Sometimes I do not care about anything. Other times I am afraid, especially when I hear details.

"When they gave him morphine, he acted as though he had lost his mind. Do you remember what a good person he was? The bread of God! He woke up from the bed and started swearing and yelling. He was not himself anymore, ripping the clothes off himself and screaming. 'What should I do with you?' I asked him and he started to cry.

'Do not give me this medicine anymore. I will ask for it but you should not give it to me again.'"

Will this happen to me as well? Maybe not. Maybe for my disease morphine will not be used, maybe not all patients react in this manner.

Sometimes I wonder how I will die. I imagine. I get scared. I tell the imagination to be quiet. I tell my thoughts to change directions, I pretend I do not know, I pretend I never knew, I erase that part of my memory.

But when I hear about someone else's death I feel a chill. The pulsating thoughts growing restless, their thundering noises ripping the silence, escaping, and taking over my soul. I pretend that I do not know. When I hear news of the death of my friends, I feel like the patient lying on the operating table who hears the rattle of the instruments being prepared by the doctors that will cut his flesh...

The Hamilton bus. A Portuguese woman starts a conversation with me. Talking from one thing to another she asks, "How many children do you have?"

"Six."

"And they are all healthy?"

"Yes."

"My child is sick, he has intestinal cancer."

And then I realized how happy I am: I have six children and they are all healthy. Others have just one, and their only one is dying.

Christopher climbed the cherry tree.

I catch Matthew in a hurry and I place him on the wooden table in front of the sun. Up here I hope he will sit still for a moment so that I can change his little socks. I take off one running shoe, and then another, a wet sock, and then another one.

"Look honey," I try to keep him distracted long enough to place the clean sock on him.

"This scratch looks good; I think it will heal fast..."

Matthew quickly stretches his arm out, grabs a dirty sock, and with the most innocent smile throws it up in the air.

"Mom," the child asks, "why can't socks fly?"

"Because they are heavy," I answer, "There is a force that pulls everything down..." I try to explain to him simple physics. Later, I tell myself that I should bring Christopher into this scientific discussion.

"Chris!"

Chris does not hear. He is counting the number of leaves on the branches of the cherry tree.

"Chris!"

"Yes mom!"

"Chris, why is it that socks cannot fly?"

"Because they don't have wings," he answers philosophically.

Lunch break. The children come in like a storm; they eat, and quickly run out again. I told my friends not to call at this hour; it is like an assembly line.

"Mom, the teacher said..."

I have an idea what kind of things teachers can say, I did not want to hear.

"Tell me later, I'm busy right now."

I stir the potatoes again, take the pile of dishes closer, and start to distribute the food.

"Matthew, look here!"

"Chris, take your plate!"

"Christine, is that enough?"

"Julian..."

When no one is talking, their mouths busy gulping food. I tackle the bull by the horns.

"What did you say the teacher said?"

"The kindergarten teacher said that today Matthew was very good."

I suspect that I did not hear the child correctly.

"Very what...?"

"Very GOOD," Chris said between bites of food. "And the teacher told me to ask you whether Matthew is sick."

I am shocked for a moment and when I recover, I turn to the medicine cabinet to look for the thermometer...

Fluffy, is what the children call our bunny. Everybody loves him. Even Max, our dog, seeing Fluffy, he begins to lick his lips.

Does this mean he wants to kiss him?

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Matthew."

Six colored candles, vertical drops of light, inserted into the chocolate cake.

"Blow!"

Matthew inhales.

"Smile!" Christine says from behind the camera.

"Hold it!" Julian screams, "Bring the bunnies!"

"And the cat!"

"And Max!"

"No, he will bite you!"

"Hey! Don't pull the cat's tail."

"Be careful, it will escape."

Fluffy jumped out of Chris's arms, pushed his ears back, and like a lightning bolt zapped across the room.

"He's under the bed"

"Hold on, I'll catch you! Chris! Get to the other side."

"Get the broom."

"I caught him."

"Don't move. We have to take the pictures!" Christine said.

The candles are half burnt. I hurry before they burn all the way. I do not understand why birthday candles are made to last such a short time.

"Let's sing again!"

"Happy birthday...."

"It bit me!"

"Hold it tight, it will run away!"

"Smile!"

"Happy birthday, dear Matthew."

"Zoom," the camera went.

What was left of the candles was blown out. Only a skinny stream of smoke was left, hovering from the colored candles, white, red, and green.

"Bravo!"

We clap.

"Let the cat go!"

"No, it will attack the rabbits!"

"Let the dog loose so the cat will calm down!"

"Take the bunnies away from here!"

Matthew turned six. How many times I prayed: "God, give me a little more time with my children, if I could only live to see Matthew turn five I would be the happiest creature on earth." Matthew turned six and I do not feel any worse than I did that time, long ago.

The kids laugh, playing with some colorful cars, secondhand toys that someone wanted to throw away.

"The car will run you over!"

"Take the cat away from here!"

"Look, some stamps from Mexico!"

"Mom, when are we getting an elephant?"

It is times like these when you feel God, when the being in us realizes how small we are, and falling on our knees whispers: "God, forgive me that I was afraid. You were always with me but I did not understand."

It should have been different. From the beginning I should have accepted God's will. I should have had more trust in His kindness and mercy. I should have thanked him for the trials he gave me and carried my Cross with love, patience, and the hope of salvation.

I was a person too weak to understand all of these. And on the foundation of spiritual strength, fear was beginning to show its fangs. The intense fear, the fear that devours every cell in your body. 'Oh, maddening fear, happy are those who do not know you.'

Six years have gone by. According to the doctors, I should have been dead long ago. And see, I am not dead, I have three children in high school, and Matthew who was a little baby will now be starting grade one.

Six years have past. It is good and bad. It means it is coming, I passed the mean, and soon it will be my turn.

And I am not afraid. God has given me more than I asked for. The body is tired but the soul is much more powerful. It is Easter Day. I am not afraid.

“Death where is your sting?

Hell where is your victory?

Christ has risen from the dead and to those in the graves offering eternal life.¹”

How real the word *grave* is for me...

"Christ has risen from the dead.

With death trampling down death

And to those in the graves bestowing life.²”

“Christ has risen.”

"Truly, He has!"

Kitchener, Canada, 1993

¹ The Paschal Homily of St. John Chrysostom

² Paschal Troparion

The Hospital

Admission in the Hospital

I feel unwell. I have pain in my lower abdomen, and I am not sure why. Leukemia patients often have enlarged spleens. I need to go to sleep earlier. I do the injections and throw myself into bed.

“Mom, if you die, can you come back?”

“No, I don’t think so, but you have The Mother of God.”

“Mom, please come back” Gloria insists.

“Mom, if you die I will go crazy” whispers Chris.

I cannot handle it anymore so I change the topic.

“Go to bed,” I tell them.

The children give me a goodnight kiss.

“You’re warm,” Chris says.

I am too tired to check my temperature.

Matthew does not want to sleep.

“Christine, please take care of him!”

I close my eyes and sleep. I wake up at 1:00 AM. I am in pain. I try to ignore it, tossing from one side to the other. I am in pain.

‘I hope it’s not my spleen,’ I think to myself.

Until tomorrow there are so many hours, maybe I should go to the hospital.

“Don’t wait up,” I tell Dumitru, “you know how long the wait is in the Emergency ward.

When I come back I’ll just knock on the door and you can let me in.”

I call a cab and leave. After two hours it is my turn to see the doctor.

“You have a fever,” the doctor tells me. “You have a bladder infection. Keeping in mind your condition, I think it is best for you to stay in the hospital.”

“I don’t want to stay in the hospital!”

“Your body is weak; at home it will not be able to fight off the infection. We have to give you antibiotics I.V.”

I choked back my tears. I had no choice. It is better to be away from home for a couple of days, then to go home and to have my family lose me forever. It was a long night, spent on a stretcher in the emergency room because there were no free beds. I did not know what would happen to me. If, with the lack of beds, they still did not let me go home, I reasoned that my condition must be serious.

They examined me, they took my blood, did X-rays of my lungs and put needles in my arms. I was dying for sleep, I was so tired.

“Mom if you die I’ll go crazy,” Chris had told me.

Pushed on the stretcher, sifting from side to side, that night I prayed like I had never prayed before, “Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me a sinner.”

“Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me a sinner.”

“Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me a sinner.”

I was clenching the prayer beads in my hands, feeling the need for touch, every bead a prayer, and the Cross, the Cross from which everything begins and everything ends. “Lord Jesus Christ...”

That night was long, difficult and tiring, but spiritually it was so rich.

Around 7:00 AM, the time that I usually wake up Christine and Tom, I called home.

“Where are you?” Tom asked.

“At the hospital,” and I told him more or less what I had been told.

“Is it because of the leukaemia?”

“And because of the leukaemia.”

“Oh mom, mom,” Tom said. “When the kids woke up and saw that you were not there they started crying: ‘Mom died. Mom died.’ Matthew and Gloria were crying and then Chris joined them.”

“I will come home.”

“When?”

“After a few days.”

“Are you sure you will not die?”

“I will not die, at least not this time.”

And yet I wasn’t sure. At home the kids were crying, I was expecting to be taken somewhere, to a bed, drip, drip, drip, the antibiotic were entering my vein.

All I could do was pray “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”

“Now and at the hour of our death.”

I did not feel alone any more, and by praying I had the power to continue fighting.

The Waiting

“We don’t have any empty beds. You’ll have to wait here until one becomes available.”

‘A bed becomes empty through because somebody dies,’ I thought to myself. ‘No, I do not want this, maybe someone will become healthy.’

Near me, on a metal pole, two plastic bags were hanging, one with saline, one with antibiotics; both of their contents were being pushed into my arm by a small pump.

“I’ll take you to a quieter place,” a nurse said as she pushed my stretcher.

We stopped near a room, cold and dark. The rooms of the patients are on the upper floors, here near the room where I were, I remember...

“Is this the morgue?” I asked.

“No, no it is not the morgue,” the nurse smiled. “It’s true, it is dark and cold but it is not the morgue.”

It was the storage room for linens, blankets, sheets and towels.

“Rest,” she told me and then left.

How can one rest in a state of such uneasiness?

I continued my prayers.

After a while, someone else was brought in, probably a woman, I deduced from the voice and topic of conversation.

“I think it would be more comfortable if you took off my socks.”

When the daylight came I could see my neighbor, an old lady with oxygen at the nose and an I.V. connected to her arm.

‘I am lucky’ I tell myself ‘I do not need oxygen.’

We start talking and she tells me about the house that she bought I do not know when and sold some time afterwards. The house had a nice arrangement of rooms, and doors, sculpted from

an exquisite type of wood whose name I cannot remember. I remembered the old man from when I was getting the transfusion, and I asked myself why in times like these people talk about their homes. I was thinking about my children, my manuscripts.... I was not interested in how well cared for her home or garden had been, but I listen to her anyway to make her happy, and from time to time I would even ask a question.

Lying on the stretcher, with all sort of plastic tubes connected to her, taking out and putting oxygen in her nose, so she could talk, when the subject of homes was finished, she started talking about her stockings

“I think it is time to put on my stockings, they are amazingly expensive. They costed \$120.”

I wondered how magnificent those socks must be, if to her they are as important as a home.

“Look, here they are” she shows me proudly. And with heavy motions she begins to put them on, right there in front of me!

“Why are they so expensive?” I ask.

“Because they were made in Romania.”

“In Romania?” I ask her, with a touch of doubt in my voice.

“Oh no, no, in Austria.”

I did not say a thing.

She is happy, she has put her socks on.

“Where is the bathroom?” she asks after awhile.

“Straight ahead,” I answer in an informative manner.

I did not anticipate that she would spring into action. In her hurry to go, she forgot that she was tied to the oxygen tubes that were connected to the wall. She forgot that she had tubes in her vein. Lowering herself from her bed she pulled on the tubes to which she was attached, something came out from where it was suppose to, a strange sound, of compressed air exiting, was being heard. She stopped, disoriented, realizing that there was something wrong.

“Wait! Don’t move.”

I pressed the buzzer. Luckily, a nurse came right away.

I think it was the oxygen, the nurse fixed what there was to fix.

“Don’t move when you have all these things attached to you.”

“I want to go to the bathroom,” the woman pleaded, almost crying.

The nurse took off her oxygen, showed her how to carry the IV stand with her, and finally let her go to the washroom.

“How happy are those that can go to the bathroom whenever they want....”

After some time, a nurse announced to us that a bed had become free.

“Who will you take,” asked my neighbor?

“You can take her, she was older and in worse condition than I.”

“First come, first serve” the nurse joked as she started pushing me away in the stretcher. I didn’t ask where, I knew, somewhere in the hospital.

5DS#6

Corridors, elevators, and more corridors. Doors opening and closing after us. I lay flat on the stretcher, a nurse pushing me, the plastic bags above my head hung by a metal pole, the plastic tubes through which the liquid flows, the needle in my vein.

Finally, I am pushed into a room. I see some women lying on stretchers. Two nurses help transfer my body onto an ordinary hospital bed. They move my intravenous bags onto a different metal pole. The nurse that brought me, takes the stretcher away, maybe others are waiting for it.

I am too tired to care about my whereabouts. Yet I observe: an ordinary hospital room, four beds, on the ceiling some metal clamps from which yellow curtains hang. When the doctor comes, or when you wash yourself with a cloth moistened in the basin, you pull the curtains and pretend that you are alone.

A nurse puts a white band on my left arm, I read:

Name: Florica

Last name: Ichim

Doctor Dumbright (they didn't even put the name of my real doctor)

And with very large letters: "5DS#6 Bed4"

When I first had to wear a wristband, I thought it was so that if I were to die, they would know whose body it was. Later it was explained to me that this identification helps to avoid errors when they are taking samples and administering medicine. I think, in fact that it was for both reasons, plus the fact that some patients lose their memory and when they are found wandering the corridors the staff will know to which room they belong. From previous experiences I knew how to read the code. 5DS#6 bed four means, fifth floor, wing D, South, room 6, bed number four.

I eat. I nap. I am too tired, and do not feel like talking. I close my eyes, grip the Cross with beads in my hand, I pray in my mind: 'Lord Jesus Christ Son of God have mercy on me a sinner.'

"Ahhhh. Ahhhh" screams the woman from bed number three.

I am scared. I think it is sharp pains. 'How happy I am that I am not like that. That I am not like that yet. Will I have those pains?'

I am scared, I grip the beads in my hand: 'Lord Jesus Christ...'

"Ahhh. Ahhh"

"Mom, where is the pain? Mom"

"Ahhh. Ahhh"

"Tell me mother! Where does it hurt?"

The adults surrounding her are her children. How happy is she that she has grown children.

Bed number three is right beside me.

Across from me is bed number one. "Bed number one" put a dress over her pajamas. I don't remember the design of her dress but it is red. I am shocked at the difference between the way she looks now and the way she looked in the blue hospital gown. She has white hair, I think she is retired.

"Why did you get dressed?" a nurse asks.

"I am leaving," she answers.

"No you are not leaving. Tonight you are sleeping in the hospital. Tomorrow morning you can leave."

"No, I am leaving now."

She is tired, she sat herself on a chair.

Across from her bed is bed number two. "Bed number two" is reading.

I should also be reading. Knowing that a lot of time is wasted in Emergency I brought a Bible with me.

“And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, ‘it is a ghost!’ and they cried out for fear. But immediately He spoke to them, saying ‘Take heart, it is I; have no fear.’ And Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, bid me to come to you on the water.’ He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, ‘Lord, save me.’ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘O man of little faith, why did you doubt?’”

I close my eyes and pray.

I hear voices. It is visiting hours. I don’t bother to pull the curtains around the bed, I am too tired. The visitors smile. The sick ones smile. Jokes are made. People laugh. I tell myself that these people are abnormal. Who can make jokes under such circumstances?

I am astonished: With mischievous smiles Tom and Gloria make their appearances through the door. I am glad to see them.

“How did you find me and what did you tell dad?”

“We told dad that we went to buy books” Tom says.

“Mom, when are you coming home?” asks Gloria.

We also began to joke, to smile. I am happy that I have them here, near me.

“Bed number one” goes to the door. She looks to the left, to the right, then escapes. After a couple of minutes a nurse brings her back.

“Take off your fancy dress, tonight you will sleep here.”

“I am going home! Now! I am going home!”

“Bed number one” is tired. She sits on a chair.

“Mom what is this on your arm?” Gloria asks pointing to a needle.

“They are putting antibiotics in me so that I can return home quickly.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No. It looks ugly but it does not hurt.”

“Look, we brought you chocolates,” Tom says.

I don’t want chocolate.

“Eat it. I know you like it.”

“No, you guys eat it.”

“The shoes, where are my shoes?” Bed number one asks.

“I’ll find them for you” Gloria offers to help.

I catch her, “Don’t get involved. Maybe the nurse hid her shoes so that she could not runaway.”

“Runaway? Why would she runaway?” Gloria asks, amazed.

“Speak Romanian!” I tell the kids, the way I tell them when I don’t want strangers to understand what we are saying. “She doesn’t like it here. Nobody likes it at the hospital. She wants to go home but the doctors don’t want to let her so she is trying to run away.”

Gloria likes the idea and wants to find the woman’s shoes, but I hold her by the arm tightly.

“Ahhh. Ahhhh,” cries bed number three.

Somebody pulled the curtain between us.

“What was that?” The kids asked terrified.

“Nothing, just a sick woman”

“Ahhhhhh! Ahhhhhh!”

“Mother, where does it hurt? Mother?”

“This is enough, Tom, you two go home now. Your father is probably worried about you.”

I kissed them.

“I love you mamma,” Gloria says.

The children have left. It is night. A woman and a man come to bed number one. They are speaking in a foreign language. I do not understand anything, except “momma, mamma.” They are her children. The old woman smiles, laughs, and then changes her facial expression, almost ready to cry. She tells them something, something which must have been very important. I regret that I cannot hear what it is. And again she smiles, again she laughs, and again she seems like she is about to cry.

A nurse appears.

“My mother would like to go home” the daughter says.

“‘Bed number one’ cannot go home. She has to sleep here until tomorrow morning.”

“Is there a particular reason” the daughter asks the nurse coldly, “that my mother cannot go home tonight?”

“The doctor did not sign her release, and on top of that we need to give her copies of her test results.”

“Without the doctor’s signature she cannot leave?”

“Only if she signs the release form herself”

“She will sign herself out. We will sign her out as well.”

After a couple of minutes “bed number one” left with her red dress and her own shoes.

Her daughter had some papers in her hands, probably copies.

I smile as if it were my own victory.

How happy Gloria will be when I tell her that “bed number one” has left.

“Cough, Cough,” I hear from “bed number three.”

“Take a deep breath!”

A harsh sound cut short by a cough, then again a harsh sound.

“Take a deep breath! It’s oxygen, breathe it in!”

I am scared. I start to pray. I hear voices, the nurses surround her.

“Take a deep breath! Take a deep breath!”

I am scared. “Lord Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, please help her. Lord Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, please help her. Lord Jesus Christ, Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, please help her.”

I am scared. I start to pray.

After a while the curtain between us is pulled aside. “Bed number three,” with the needle in her vein, with the oxygen mask on her nose, with her scared children around her, lies flat on the bed. ‘She has the oxygen mask on her nose, therefore she is still alive’ I tell myself.

I close my eyes, I’m tired, very tired.

‘Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with Thee... Holy Mary Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.’

The mind vibrates echoes in the silence of tiredness.

‘...at the hour of our death...’

I make the sign of the Cross. Amen.

The Bible

I had a bad sleep. During the night they brought another woman in bed number one. She also waited in the Emergency room for several hours. I hear her tell the doctor her problem. She came to the hospital to get an injection, a treatment for I do not know what. When everything was over she wanted to go home, and she remembered a long corridor, a door, someone asking her whether she was lost.

“Now came a block of time of which I had no memory, absolutely no recollection.”

“Did you faint?” the doctor asked.

“I don’t know.”

“And after that, what was the first thing you remembered?”

“I remembered that I was in an elevator and that there was a doctor beside me.”

“And before that you did not remember anything?” asked the doctor.

“Nothing, absolutely nothing.”

I felt a bit better. I tried to get to know my neighbors. “Bed number one” is named Lorianne. “Bed number two,” Daisy. “Bed number three,” Melanie. I had bed number four.

“My name is Florica, from flower” I told them. “In my country this is a very common name. When I got married, my parents-in-law had a cow named “Florica.”

The women laughed, and yet it was true.

Boring was the hospital.

Daisy was reading.

“I regret that I did not bring the Bible with me” Lorianne said.

“I brought it” I told her.

“Could I borrow it?”

“I would love to lend it to you but I do not think that you would understand much of it. It is in Romanian.”

Time comes, time comes. Melanie is feeling better. They gave her stronger pain medication. She was no longer screaming in pain.

Lorianne relaxes, trying to recollect something that she cannot remember.

Daisy continues reading.

Pretending that I am asleep, I begin to say my prayers.

The nurses come and go, performing their routine treatments on us.

At night the visitors come. Lorianne has two children that are in high school.

“Guess what my oldest son brought me?” she says after all the visitors had gone.

“What did he bring you?”

“The Bible”

The woman is happy begins to read.

The Intravenous

I did not need to carry the metal stick with the plastic bag around with me any longer. They placed a needle in my vein, the outside part had a seal on it so that the blood would not come out. I could move my arm freely about, as though nothing had happened. I was, nevertheless careful so that I would not touch the needle.

Three times a day, when they had to administer the antibiotic, instead of pushing the needle through my vein, they pushed the syringe inside the plastic piece that was already in my arm, that way they did not need to constantly make new holes in my vein.

First they would infuse it in my left arm, then in my right arm, then they wanted to move it back to my left arm again. In the most appropriate place to do the infusion there was a big bruise from previous punctures, the nurse started to search for a better vein. Puncturing a vein on the back of my palm, the liquid began to enter my body.

It hurt.

“It can hurt for two reasons” the nurse told me, “because the puncture is new, or because the position of the needle is not good. Wait a little bit and we’ll see how it goes.”

I waited.

It hurt. Not a lot, but it was nevertheless painful. I knew that the needles were changed every three days, and I had promised myself that I would avoid all pain that was not absolutely necessary.

“Could you not place the needle in another part of the vein?” I asked the nurse.

“Are you sure that you want this? There are not many patients who like to be punctured again.”

“I’m sure. I would rather feel that pain once again then to have to be in pain for three days in a row.”

“She took the needle out and placed another one in a different part of my hand. It no longer hurt. When I was looking at my arm I felt sorry for myself, but it was psychological because the truth was it did not hurt.

Happenings of the Day

The telephone rings.

“Hello”

“How are you doing?”

“Okay,” I say, saying the only polite response that came to mind.

And I ask myself how anyone could be ‘okay’ when they are in the hospital.

And yet I did not lie. In the hospital it was not great, but I can think of a worse place to be and I thank God that I am not there yet.

A new doctor came to consult Melanie. He starts a new file for her.

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Whaaaaat?”

“How many children did your parents have?” asked the doctor raising his voice.

“Fifteen.”

“Fifteen siblings? I bet you forget the names of your nephews.”

“Oh yes, yes. I remember the names of many of them.”

The doctor wants to find out if genetically there is something wrong in the family.

“What did your parents die of?”

“Whaaaaat?”

“Your parents. What did they die of?”

“Of old age!” answered Melanie.

“And how old were they?”

“Eighty five.”

“To have fifteen children and to live to eighty five years!” the doctor marveled.

It was a new doctor, he didn't have time to find out that in her own right Melanie had given birth to eight children herself who were now adults and who came to see her everyday, help her eat, and make her smile. One of her daughters told me that Melanie, this kind old woman, is going to turn eighty-four this month.

“How is it outside?” I asked a visitor.

“It is raining, it's awful”

“Awful?” I could not help getting upset, “And what if it rains? You do not understand how beautiful it is? It is *outside*. Do you know what *outside* means to us, the ones stuck in the hospital?”

“Mom,” says Tom, “do you know what a girl told me?”

“What?”

“She said that she got a bad mark on the test and that her mom will kill her. And do you know what I told her? ‘At least you have a mother to kill you!’”

An old colleague with whom I worked with many years ago came to see me. “Do you remember me?” she asked.

“Yes” I answer. Her face looked vaguely familiar, many years ago we were pregnant at around the same time.

“What is my name?” she asked.

‘What a question,’ I asked myself. I never had a good memory for names.

“I don't remember” I answered a little embarrassed.

“Roberta!” she answers victoriously.

Roberta. Now I remembered. We began to talk about her kids, about my kids, and how much they have grown.

“And your husband, how is he doing?” she asked.

“Well.”

“It must be difficult for him.”

“Yes, I think it is hard.”

“You know it is always difficult for the husband. Everyone talks about the patient, but for the spouse it is difficult too.”

I think to myself one more time how hard it must be for Dumitru.

“I can’t help him.”

“I know.”

She sighs and looks at her watch.

“It is time for me to go, take care of yourself, goodbye.”

“Mom come home!” Julian tells me on the telephone.

“I cannot. The doctor does not let me.”

“If the doctor will not let you then we will kidnap you. I spoke to a friend, his father has a car. At 5:00 o’clock we can come, hide you in a bag, and take you out. Okay?”

From behind the curtain that surrounds my bed comes a putrid smell. The nurses are changing the underwear of the woman in the bed next to mine.

“It’s soft, Melanie, its very soft. I think you have diarrhea.” I hear the voice of one of the nurses.

“I feel sick.”

I get scared. When Melanie came to the hospital she did not have diarrhea. Will I get it as well?

Daisy is speaking on the phone: “The apartment in Toronto? I don’t remember owning an apartment in Toronto, we’ll talk about it when you come to see me.”

After half an hour her daughter comes through the door.

“Mother, what did you want to say when you said that you don’t remember having an apartment in Toronto?”

“What apartment?”

“The one with the brown furniture.”

Daisy is starting to lose her memory.

A woman in a blue hospital gown enters through the door, goes to the middle of the room and looks around.

“You’re in the wrong room?” Lorianne asks her.

“Me?” the woman replied astonished.

“Which one is your room?”

“This one” says the women who entered the room, surprised that all of the beds are occupied.

“Come with me,” I tell the confused women.

We go into the hallway, I try to take her to the nursing station.

“Are you lost?” I ask her.

“No, this one is my room!” she states, trying to open the fire door.

I knew what was on the other side of the fire door, stairs for evacuation in case of fire. I was trying to figure out how to stop her.

“Listen, do you want to help me find my room?” I asked, trying to keep her in the corridor, hoping that a nurse would appear.

“Yes, I will help you.”

We walk slowly, without any hurry. At last a nurse appeared. I was relieved.

“This women is lost.”

“Who me?” and pointing to me she said “no, this women is lost.”

Dreams in the hospital are strange.

I wake up at 4:00 AM when they are giving me the antibiotics. I fall sleep. I dream that Dr. Pankarician is explaining something medical to me. I don't know what I am dreaming, for a while, but soon enough I see him again telling me something bad about my prognosis. At 6:00 AM the nurse wakes me up to take my temperature.

I am tired and upset. Is it not bad enough that I am in these dreary surroundings all day, but can I not escape, not even in my sleep? To dream of your family doctor two times in two hours is too much. Probably, my subconscious is afraid of him. Only once did I dream of him before, many years ago when the kids had many infections, one after another. He looked at me frowning:

“Leave me alone with all of your children and your pestering.”

One night, before they were going to inject me, I dreamt that the nurse used tomato juice instead of alcohol to disinfect my arm.

“Do you always have these strange dreams?” the nurse asked when I told her about my odd dreams.

And there was the one dream when a person in a white clothe came to me and said “why should I put the needle in your arm, this you can do yourself?”

Where are the “pleasant” dreams of my childhood with teachers asking me the multiplication table?

“We have to put some water in your system, and perform a radiogram.”

I sit myself in a wheelchair, the plastic bags are dangling above me, and they pushed me towards the laboratory. It wasn't a radiography they were doing but an ultrasound. When they finished I sat again on the wheelchair, they tied a yellow tag around my wrist, and they left me in the hallway to wait for the volunteer who was suppose to take me back to my room.

‘Yellow wrist-tag?’ I ask myself. Yellow is the color of the code of missing patients I thought. Have I lost my memory?

I don't remember that happening.

I wanted to ask a nurse but I changed my mind. I was afraid that she might tell me:

"You don't remember losing your memory? This is the best proof that you are beginning to forget things."

The volunteer brings me back to my room. I throw myself into the bed, patiently waiting for water to start entering my veins.

Drop. Drop. Drop.

"Bye mom" Daisy's daughter says.

"Which mother?" she asks confused.

Close your Eyes not to See

Weekend. Less staff. Last night Daisy felt bad. I vaguely remember waking up in the middle of the night and realizing that she was having problems breathing. I ask her without opening my eyes

"Do you want me to call a nurse?"

"No, I'm okay" she said.

I remembered nothing else, I fell into a deep sleep.

In the morning Daisy was sitting in a chair. Her face was tired, she looked bad.

God Almighty, she could have died here without anyone noticing.

"Call a nurse" she said.

I pressed the nurse button. Nothing. Sometimes you have to wait a while until someone bothers to come.

"I'm going to call a nurse" I say as I leave the room.

"Room 6 bed 2 is feeling very bad, she is hardly breathing" I tell a nurse which I find in another room. Later I tell another nurse whom I see in the hallway. Finally, I repeat myself to the nurse at the nursing station. With three medical staff alerted, I imagine that Daisy is in good hands. Us, the patients are not allowed to do anything, luckily they did not get upset that I called them.

I throw myself into bed.

"Air! I don't have air!" Daisy whispers.

"Put the oxygen on properly!"

"The tube is too short. It is choking me."

"Let's put a longer tube" a nurse says.

"We don't have one, we need to order one from the lab."

"Don't worry. It is sufficient" another nurse says.

"Did you take your asthma medication?"

"The sugar, I think the sugar dropped" Daisy whispers.

"I have a candy," I inform them.

"It is not necessary."

A nurse brings her a juice and makes her drink it.

"I am dying! I'm going to die!"

She is hardly breathing. She is trying to raise her head but her chin is falling on her chest. She tries again but it falls again. Her hands are dangling beside her as if they did not belong to her.

"I'm dying! ... I can't breathe! ... I'm dying!"

Here beside me someone is about to die. I am scared, all I can do is pray. I don't even know what prayers to say in this situation. I say in my mind what my heart is whispering, "Lord Jesus Christ, Holy Virgin Mary, St. Joseph help her."

"My insulin injection, the insulin," says Daisy in a low raspy voice.

"You can't, we don't have the results of your tests. Wait," said the nurse.

"I'm going to die" Daisy gasps.

I hear how she is trying to inhale, how she is pushing to exhale, the painful forcing of the lungs is seen. Her weakened body is shaking, tired.

"Wait."

The nurses, all three of them head towards the door. I am afraid, very afraid.

"Stay!" I scream after them. "Someone has to stay with her."

"She is okay" a nurse answers.

I am scared. I am very scared.

"And what do I do if she passes out?" I ask.

"Close your eyes not to see," answers the last nurse who didn't make it out of the door.

She come back from leaving, pulls the curtain around bed #2 so no one could see what was happening, and she leaves.

I feel another kind of fear. The fear of authority impregnated in my soul from my youth being raised behind the iron curtain.

"Close your eyes not to see? How can anyone say this?" Lorianne asks.

I recover my wits, I become enraged.

"Nobody can force me to close my eyes."

I get up from my bed, I go toward Daisy and pull the curtain away so we can see her. If she is to die, then she can die in our company, not isolated behind a curtain.

Daisy is feeling bad.

"I am dying, call my daughter" Daisy whispers to her neighbor.

Lorianne grabs the telephone. Daisy says some numbers, and I am impressed by how Lorianne can retain the numbers so quickly.

Daisy is struggling to breathe. She is trying hard not to lose consciousness.

"I talked to her, your daughter will be here in 15 minutes."

And I am impressed that someone can get here so quickly. It is very early, by the time she wakes up, puts her clothe on, drives to the hospital, takes the elevator....

"I'm dying...I'm going to die."

'Lord Jesus Christ, Holy Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, help her. Lord Jesus Christ, Holy Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, help her. Lord Jesus Christ, Holy Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, help her.'

Her daughter indeed came very soon. She changed the position of the drawer between the beds. She brought the two beds together, and pushed Daisy's chair closer to the oxygen source. The nurses started to appear out of the woodwork, each of them asking how the can be of assistance. One even came with a syringe and gave her an injection in the arm. 'The insulin,' I tell myself.

I don't know with whom her daughter talked to, what she said, or what she did. What ever she did, Daisy had started to recover, so well that near night time she started to read.

At night, when her daughter had to leave, Daisy was okay.

"Goodbye" Daisy said.

"Oh mother, please don't tell me goodbye. I can't handle it when you say goodbye. Say see you later."

“See you later,” the mother said.

“See you later,” the daughter answered.

... A night had to pass. During the night so many things may happen...

Bread and Butter

Breakfast in the hospital. While I was eating the telephone rings. The children want to know if today I will return home.

“Yes, if the results from the test are good.”

“What time will you come home at?”

“In the afternoon, at about two or three.”

“Can I skip school today?” Julian asks.

“No, you cannot. Go to school.”

“Can I skip school today?” Gloria asks.

“No, you cannot.”

“Can I skip school today?” Christopher asks.

“No, you cannot.”

The person beside me begins to vomit.

“Goodbye!” I tell the children and I hang up the phone.

I have to finish eating otherwise the nurse will think that I am full and will take the food away from me.

I spread butter on a piece of bread. I look only at the bread.

I hear my neighbor vomiting. She also has the tray of food in front of her. She tasted a little bit and started to vomit. I pretend that I don't know. It is not related to me. I have to eat. There is no mother in this world that didn't have to wipe off the vomit of their offspring at least once. I have six children. I should be used to it, but I am still repulsed by vomit. But I don't see it. The nurse pulled the curtain. I focus all my attention on the tray of food in front of me. I bite the piece of bread with butter on it.

“Melanie! Melanie! Should I give you some water to rinse your mouth?” I hear the nurse from behind the curtain.

“Ehhhhhhh?”

“Water” the nurse says in a louder voice, “water to rinse your mouth?”

I try to swallow the morsel of food, pretending not to hear.

“Last night she had the same problem” another nurse says. “After she had two bites of food she started vomiting.”

I stare intensely at the tray of food in front of me. If I focus, I will succeed in finishing my portion of food. I have to eat to catch strength so that I can go home sooner.

‘The bread is good and white,’ I tell myself. ‘Bread and butter is good, it is very good. How many people wouldn't wish to eat this food?’ I tell myself.

I bite and tell myself that it is good.

“Stay there one second. I'll come back and wash you.” I hear the nurse from behind the curtain. I stubborn myself so as to eat. I did not see anything, I did not see absolutely anything.

... the bread and the butter is held by my shaking hand...

When The Clouds have Passed

It is sunny but not too hot. The white clouds. Fresh blue sky. A warm wind caresses my face. Matthew is climbing the stairs on the slide. Now he is on top and smiling. Viewed from below he is a silhouette projected onto the blue sky, between the white clouds. It is another world. Their world. A world of infinities.

“Look mom!”

He lets himself fly down the slide, he is laughing, the wind from his speed raises his hair. In these moments eternity is concentrated. The kid and nature are smiling together, oh the moments of childhood when time is infinite, infinite, infinite.

Was I ever in the hospital? Does a woman named “Daisy” exist with oxygen hooked up to her nose? Are there still walls that prevent life from entering within them? Are there still the white gowns who come to inject us?

It is too great a contrast. I cannot comprehend. I try to forget. I try not to know. My child is climbing the steps on the slide. My child projected against the sky is so full of life. He is climbing, climbing, climbing. He has stopped in the center of infinity and it is so beautiful

A young girl starts talking to me.

“Missus. Is it true that you were in the hospital?”

“Yes. It is true.”

“And that you were sick?”

“Yes. I was sick.”

“And what was that like?”

“Bad.”

The girl looks at me.

“Mom and Dad prayed for you. I heard them at night when they were saying their prayers.”

I smile.

“Tell them that I thank them. Do not forget to tell them!”

“I will not forget.”

She runs after her little sister, raising dust with her little sneakers. She doesn't have time to waste with me. Children are always in a hurry.

I run after Matthew and I thank God that there were people who prayed for me.

Again pain, this time on my right side. Again to the hospital. I lay on the stretcher waiting for a doctor to come. I look at the nurse, the walls, the equipment and I ask whether they will keep me or let me go home. I try to imagine an acceptable diagnosis. I think it is the liver but it could only be gas. I know that I have an enlarged spleen, but not the liver. At least not yet.

Nevertheless, I am not afraid.

‘I should be used to this,’ I tell myself. ‘Until now it was a struggle, more spiritual. Now starts the physical part. The fight with infections brought about by the leukaemia, the pains, and who knows what else.’ Going to the emergency room at night will be a regular experience if I am lucky enough that they send me home.

And every time I cannot help but to ask myself:

‘Has the time come? Will it be now, or do I have a couple more days? A couple more months?’

I don’t dare think about years. For patients like me, a year is such a long time.

I close my eyes, I pretend I am sleeping and I say my prayers.

“Our Father who arth in Heaven...” “Hail Mary, Full of Grace...”

At least this is what I have learned in my years with cancer. To pray, to leave myself in God’s hands, in the same way that my parents, my parent’s parents, and my ancestors left themselves in God’s hands.

“Our Father, who arth in Heaven...”

...I knocked on the gates of despair,
and I found the beginning of hope

On the Back Cover:

I wore down my elbows on the desks of classrooms. I learned the Pythagorean Theorem, Logarithms, Integrals, and I learned more, and I learned more...

But nobody ever prepared me for the moment the doctor told me “you have cancer”.

The teachers were right: They were preparing us for life, not death.

But is death not one of the most important moments of life?