

INTERLUDE

When my mother began speaking to me at the retreat house of Paul's death, her voice grew flatter than it had been when speaking of Mary-Louise. She recited dully the sparse facts and as much of our family's feeling world which she had ever dared remember: almost nothing. In 1959, she told me, history simply repeated itself. Oh, technically, new variations on a theme, but the same theme. Paul was sick with a bronchial condition for a long time the winter of 1957–1958, but it cleared up. In May he and Betsy got their tonsils out. Paul's platelets were found to be low, and he developed a hematoma on his leg that made him limp all summer. I could not gauge from her words how deeply these strange warning signals reawakened her dread during those busy months when she was engrossed in my school. I know from the old letters that I read in our attic that Père was worried from the moment he laid eyes on Paul at Mary-Louise's funeral that this little boy too was not thriving, but what good would anyone's premonitions do? My mother was not the type to entertain intolerable thoughts. She did not acknowledge the stranglehold of unvoiced fears on the soul, on a family's soul.

On January 6, 1959, Paul came into my parents' bedroom to show them a swelling on the left side of his face, neck, jaw, and eye. Dr. Miller had him get his sinuses washed out, not realizing the swelling was lymphatic. "Of course nothing

changed. Paul was admitted to Children's Hospital in late January," Mom told me.

Wait! What happened in between? Did we get up and go to school every morning, come home and play? Was that the period when I remembered walking in on her reading *Bambi* to Paul on his bed, and feeling wistful about the endless attention he was receiving? Was she still running the school every morning, teaching us French, singing with us on the classroom floor, "Savez-Vous Planter les Choux?" while we all planted our cabbages with our small noses to the linoleum? Was that her?

Soon after Paul went to Children's, she and Daddy put that same foam-rubber mattress Mary-Louise had used in the back of our station wagon, the mattress we'd bounced around on during so many long summer trips, bickering and singing, and drove Paul directly from Children's to St. Luke's in Chicago, without any of us ever seeing him to say good-bye.

She recalled no details of her vigil with Paul, no words exchanged during those days that led up to his death. It was not like Mary-Louise's story. With Paul, it was mostly a blank where memory should have been. When I asked Mom if he was in pain, she had to think about it slowly, as if drawing up a consciousness she had not been able to draw up in over thirty years.

"Yes," she decided, "though he never said so. I only knew he was in pain when he arrived at the hospital because I remember the doctor remarking on it and prescribing medication." She remembered no expressions of fear on his part nor any details of conversation with him. He kept his teddy bear close by, the one he'd started sleeping with. "Come to think of it now, he just had started sleeping with it after

Mary-Louise's death. We didn't think much about things like that in those days."

"Were you able to hold his hands or stroke his face or anything in the hospital bed?" I asked, feeling awkward with the intimacy of this question.

"We talked with him through the oxygen tent, and read to him all day, and went back to the hotel at night to sleep. Paul liked the oxygen tent because he could breathe."

February 5, after days of familiar nightmare, Daddy in his mounting terror was given false hope by a wrongly identified medical report. He rushed to tell Mom in the hotel room the news that night that Paul's agranular count was way up. "We're going to take this little boy home!" he exclaimed, jubilant. Mom got up early in the morning while Daddy was still asleep and dressed quickly, all excited to see Paul in his sudden recovery. But the boy she walked in on that morning was struggling fiercely to breathe. "I was alone with him when his breathing stopped. I rang for the nurse. They declared a code blue, but it was useless. He died at 7:30 AM."

Funny, I had the date wrong all those years, even though I read it on his marker all those frigid Christmases we trooped to their graves, hardly bothering anymore the rest of the year, for as Mom told me, even that place was filled with painful memories of Paul when he was alive, and Mom knew he wasn't really there anyway, just his dead body. I never had realized it was February 6. Why did I always think it was February 8? I couldn't believe my ears when she told me! What made my memory so perverse?

And most of those years I had had the wrong diagnosis, as did the doctors themselves, right up close to the end. They thought it was pneumonia. I had always heard leukemia. No, no, that was closer to Mary-Louise's truth. Did Mom never

tell us the same thing twice? Were we not able to take it in? The true diagnosis, she told me now, and I wrote it down for safe keeping, was sarcoma of the connective tissues. It was cancer that choked my brother's lungs.

But what I needed most to know lay in the conversations between my parents on that unimaginable trip the two of them took home from Chicago, alone again in our station wagon.

Out of the long silence Daddy spoke to Mom, saying, "I'll never believe in anything anymore."

She was stunned, devastated, betrayed to the depths of her soul. She told me this as if she'd thought about it a million times, though the story was new to me. She asked Daddy, "You mean you believe our little Paul has ceased to exist?"

Daddy never answered her question. Never, in all the decades to follow, did he ever answer that question, she told me now. No, it just asked itself over and over again, begging for resolution, curled up in the silence between them, creeping silently into my heart too, tugging me eternally in two directions: faith and despair.

A few minutes later Dad spoke again, this time oh so practically, and still not at all gently:

"What are we going to do with that little school?"

"It will be our salvation," Mom declared.

Perhaps. So much of the gulf between my mother and me lay in how we saw salvation. For me, it was the opening up of what had been closed. For her, it was the going on with life.

When they arrived at home, Mom's mother opened the door to them. While Mom had cried in the arms of a nurse at the hospital, she could not cry with her own mother, who greeted her with words better rung out with a fist in the air than uttered dry-eyed with such stoic reserve: "Some things

are beyond tears.” Mom stepped across her own threshold deep into numbness.

For who could survive what my mother was forced to survive? She told me during those four meetings the same truth she had murmured to my aunt Anne after my father’s death, my own father’s death where neither she nor I nor most of my six sisters could find any real outpouring of tears: that she had blocked her tears all those thirty years, and that she had paid an awful price: no acute emotions of any sort—certainly no joy. I told her eagerly that I had been feeling more alive as I’d stopped blocking it all. She said she was glad to help me with that, but she could not do it herself. “Do not try and force me,” I heard in her words.

In the end she stated without any emotion what I had known in the cells of my body, in the trembling depths of my being for a long, long time. How much less confused I might have been if she had stated it many years ago! She said calmly, “I really died when Paul died.” Yes, and who could blame her for that choice? Yet I always had. Did she understand what this truth meant? That despite, or because of, all her dogged determination to put the past behind her, we were all left orphans?

CHAPTER 8

Haze

Summer 1960

Age Seven and a Half: Looking Back

Mommy always tells time by the day Paul died. She says, “Oh yes, that happened the summer after Paul died,” or, “Let’s see, that would have been nine months after Paul died.” I do the same thing. At first I didn’t notice that day pulling farther and farther away from me. That’s because I kept thinking all that time he would come back. I didn’t even store that day away so I could remember it right, because I thought I wouldn’t need to since he was coming back. After a while I knew I wasn’t in first grade anymore, but I kept forgetting that being in second grade meant that Paul had been dead a very long time. Mommy gave away Paul’s baseball mitt to Clay Ward after Clay’s house burned down, and then I should have known, but I didn’t. Then one morning this summer, already done with second grade, I lay awake in my bed, and this thought popped into my brain: “Paul can’t come back anymore because Kate’s clothes are filling up his bureau drawers, and anyway, he would stink.” Then I began to race around in my mind trying to think up a way we could move our lives over if Paul resurrected, but I couldn’t

find any way to do it. When he stopped being alive, it was like water whooshing in and filling up all the corners where he used to be. And then I thought about what a stupid girl I was all this time, thinking he could come back. Everything got all filled in, no one leaving any space for him.

It leaves me feeling funny because the day when Paul died is just like a little ripply shadow. No one can hold it out to me and say, "Here! This is what happened, then this, then this." I go back looking for it in my thoughts, and I can't find most of it at all, and I can't find most of the time that came after it, but then it starts playing in my head sometimes when I'm thinking about something completely different.

I've got two pictures in my brain. One is the taxi time. It's all soft and hazy like it happened a million years ago to someone else. But the other one, Mrs. Baker and all the grown-ups, is clear and sharp and whispers close up to my face. I don't know why they're so different. They have to be that same day. I never asked my mom about them.



There's two people huge in big dark wool coats, two grown-ups in the back of a taxi, come to pick me up at school, come to take me home to see Mommy and Daddy, who have been away for maybe a whole week at the hospital in Chicago where Paul couldn't breathe right. One grown-up comes in to get me, and the other one waits in the back seat of the cab with Betsy. I snuggle down tight next to Betsy, so little her feet stick out in front of her like her stubby blond braids. I'm all wrapped up there with her between the great big bundled grown-ups, like we are all teddy bears stuffed in that taxi. I can just see out one corner of the window the dirty snow piled

high everywhere and the old dead snowmen in the front yards of all the kids' houses. We're dark inside a nest. I just sink down soft, muffled in all the wet-smelling wool coats and I think about seeing Mommy and Daddy again, but not Paul because one of these grown-ups has told me he is in heaven. Here in this dark place the grown-up has spoken grown-up words to me, but I don't know when or how. The grown-ups speak now with each other in soft, calm faraway voices, and Betsy and I sit swallowed up in quiet.

Whenever I'm back in that taxi picture, I think it's got to be my grandma and grandpa with me, but I can't see their faces or hear their voices. Wouldn't it be my grandma and grandpa? But why don't these grown-ups have faces?



The second picture in my head just stays clear and without time passing. I might as well be back there. I can't understand how I was just a little six-year-old when it happened, and now I'm seven and a half, and I don't know what happened to me all in between. Here I am walking into the living room of our house. I guess I'm still with the two grown-ups. What I see surprises me. I step back with a little silent gasp. Lined up in chairs used for bridge parties around all the walls of our living room are more grown-ups, sitting there staring straight ahead or talking quietly to each other, maybe twenty of them, maybe a thousand, grown-ups I know from Mommy's bridge club, grown-ups from church, from parties at our house, from picnics, from Daddy's work, from Mommy's meetings.

Mommy and Daddy aren't there in that room. Where are they? Still not home yet from the hospital in Chicago? They've been gone so long. Don't they want to see me at all?

Gone away longer than I ever remember them gone away, together, with just Paul on the foam rubber mattress, leaving us when it was still dark outside one morning and not even telling us for how long or when they would come back or if they ever would.

All these people are here instead waiting for them in their own house, drinking coffee, mumbling. No one speaks to me. I don't think they can even see me there right in front of their eyes. It must be one of those times when grown-ups can't see kids. None of the grown-ups sitting in those chairs like stone comes alive to me except one. She is sitting to the left of the front door, in her folding chair. I turn around to stare at her while me and Betsy are crossing the room to go upstairs. She is Mrs. Baker, a member of Mom's bridge club I only know a little. She's wearing pants the way she always does, not like the other mothers, and her hair isn't like theirs either; it's short and straight. She is sitting there with her long legs sticking straight out so they could trip anyone who passes her, and above the quiet talk of all the grown-ups in that room, her sobbing comes out of her throat in sharp, fierce jerks. She is sobbing like I have never seen a grown-up cry, loud and pure. I stare at her, and I wonder and wonder. I feel an invisible rope pulling me towards her while I stare. Her sobs are talking to me in my stomach, about something I have forgotten that is very sad. I want to go back to her and get inside the sharp forgotten thing that's cutting into her and make it cut me too. No no, she is very strange. Grown-ups are not supposed to cry out loud like that. Do you see one single other grown-up crying like that in this whole room? I keep walking up those stairs because I can't stop, have to keep going up those stairs because the grown-ups tell me to.

Upstairs we have to comb our hair and wash our faces and hands. Somebody's forgotten I have braids and can't comb my hair. Will anyone do it for me? A big dresser. Peggy's dresser, with her First Communion statue of the Virgin Mary smiling there in the dust. I'm holding a hairbrush in my hand, brushing the long strands of hair that have fallen out of my braids into my eyes back out of my eyes. What good? Someone comes, snaps my barrettes out of my hair, and back in, so that this time they catch all the fallen hairs. I put a dress on, a crisp, pretty Sunday dress. I am ready.