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Patience

THE WAVES ARE ROLLICKING and cold. All year I have been waiting to be in this water, waiting for these two weeks at the Connecticut shore. Don't go too far my mother has warned, and now I can barely see her, kneeling in the sand, helping my brother build a castle. Without my noticing, my little blow-up raft has drifted into deep water. The muscular tide is dragging me away. My mother, a speck, waves to me: come back or farewell. I am being towed to the place where ocean meets Sound; I will never see her again. A wave breaks over me, salt filling my mouth, and I wake to the sound of glasses clinking in cupboards, CDs rattling on shelves, the world gone all shaky, the mattress rippling. I am in my bed, in my apartment in New York, it's a summer afternoon, and I have no idea what's going on.

EARTHQUAKE, JEFF SAYS, responding to my cries of alarm. These days he moves slowly, and by the time he makes it to the bedroom, one room away from where he's been watching TV, the tremors have stopped.

Jeff's lived on the west coast, he knows about earthquakes, but the closest I've come to experiencing one is a B-movie from my childhood—*Earthquake in 'Sensurround'*!—Charlton Heston and Ava Gardner scrabbling through rubble in the twilight of their careers. Here in New York we do not have earthquakes. We have blizzards, heat waves. We have blackouts and ice storms and transit strikes, all sorts of challenges large and small. But we do not have earthquakes.

Jeff and I turn on the news. A 5.8 on the Richter scale, the earthquake, which was centered near Richmond, VA, has damaged the National Cathedral and cracked the Washington Monument. The White House has been evacuated as has New York's City Hall. The likelihood of aftershocks is "strong."

My mother and brother, both of whom live nearby, call to make certain we're all right. Crazy! my brother says. In L.A. we had them all the time. You'd feel it coming and get under a doorway. Once I even slept through one. But this was just weird.

After a while we switch back to TCM. Since he contracted pneu-

monia Jeff's been spending most days watching old movies, whatever's on, he's not picky. Sometimes I join him but today I'm exhausted from another night of interrupted sleep, Jeff waking drenched and clammy, the towels he'd been lying on soaked through with sweat. Today it took an earthquake to raise me; I was that tired.



JEFF'S PNEUMONIA CAME out of nowhere, surprising us. Five years since his diagnosis, and for the most part he'd been doing fine. We were told this would be so. Chronic lymphocytic leukemia can remain indolent (his doctor's word) for years. Or not. It's difficult to predict and because this type of cancer is incurable, standard procedure is to delay treatment until the patient becomes symptomatic. Watchful waiting it's called. For five years Jeff has been going to the oncologist every three months to have his blood drawn and his lymph nodes examined. Steadily his white blood cell count has been rising, from 19,900 white blood cells per microliter at his diagnosis to 146,000 by the time of the earthquake. By way of comparison, a normal white blood cell count, I've learned, is between 4,500 and 10,000 cells per microliter.

For five years we've been living our lives in these three-month increments between oncology appointments. We try not to think about what's ahead. We've gone to Tuscany and Barcelona; we've swum in the Bay of Biscay and danced in a plaza in the little French town of St. Jean de Luz to a cover band called The Closh that played heavily accented songs by The Clash and The Ramones. Always we knew the sword was there, just above our heads, though we did our best to ignore it. Every three months Jeff would get his numbers, which were invariably worse, but never bad enough to require treatment.

At first the changes were small. Cold sores that lingered. Dark bruises on his upper arms. Lymph nodes so swollen Jeff could no longer fasten the collars of his dress shirts. One afternoon, when we were supposed to be getting ready for an out-of-town trip, Jeff struggled to get up from the couch. I feel dizzy, he said, and like that our time of watching ended. Now all we were doing was waiting, waiting for the pneumonia to end so that we could sit in waiting rooms waiting for the chemo drugs to drip into his veins, a process we were told would take the better part of a year.

FOUR DAYS AFTER the earthquake I am staring at an online evacuation map of New York City, trying to discover what zone we live in

and whether it's likely we'll need to flee in advance of Hurricane Irene. Already the subway has been shut down, and the mayor has issued an evacuation order for Zone One, Lower Manhattan, which on the map is color-coded red. Central Harlem, I'm relieved to discover, is in Zone Five, a relatively safe-looking chartreuse swath, the second highest zone on the map.

In preparation for the hurricane I've stocked up on groceries, waiting in the longest line I've ever seen at Fairway, including the day before Thanksgiving. There were no batteries left at the CVS on my block, but they still had water, so I bought two gallons, lugged them home, then went across the street to the bodega where the cashier told me she'd heard a rumor, false it turned out, that the dollar store still had batteries. I've located the transistor radio, filled the hurricane lamp with oil, ground coffee in case we lose power, filled empty jars with water.

Residents in Zone One have been warned that it's dangerous to stay behind. According to the *New York Times*, over 350,000 people have been ordered to leave home. The city's shelters can accommodate 71,000 people, but that does not translate into 71,000 beds. "We'll make do," the mayor has said.

Jeff's temperature is 102. He's stopped shaving and he looks uncannily like William Tecumseh Sherman in that famous photo from the end of the Civil War—hollowed out, scruffy, haunted. In two weeks the only time he's left the apartment is to go to the hospital. He's had a CT-scan, chest X-rays, and so many vials of blood drawn that I worry he'll need a transfusion. It takes all of his energy just to get out of bed.

Earlier in the week the management office of my co-op issued an Emergency Guide for Tenants. It says to "Assemble a Disaster Supplies Kit with items you may need in an evacuation." Such items include: a three-day supply of water, one change of clothing and blanket per person, a first-aid kit, battery-powered flashlight and radio, cash, credit cards, identification, eyeglasses, and "sanitation supplies." Whoever wrote it suggests this kit be kept "in the trunk of your car," forgetting perhaps that the building in question—my building—is located in Manhattan and that many of the residents, ourselves included, do not have cars.

In the unlikely event of an evacuation, where would we go? The shelters are no place for a man with pneumonia. My mother lives in Beacon, New York, an hour away by train, but Metro-North has stopped running. And even if it hadn't, how would I get Jeff out the door, let alone onto a train?

I close the computer, let it charge. Then I fill the bathtub because at some point in my life someone has told me that's what you're supposed to do in a hurricane. After that there's nothing left to be done.

My brother calls to say he is coming over to help empty our basement storage space. If the electricity goes out, he explains, the sump pump will stop working and the basement could flood. This is something that would never occur to me. We spend all afternoon dragging things upstairs—Christmas ornaments, winter clothes and boots, tax returns, luggage, tapes and records, bottles of wine; I'm astonished at all we've managed to acquire. The living room is a maze of boxes. Through all of this Jeff stays on the couch. At one point he apologizes for not being able to help, and Chipper gives me a sidelong glance. He knows Jeff's been sick; still, he's shocked by his appearance, I can tell.

After Chipper leaves, Jeff and I sit in the living room with the boxes, watching TCM. Linda Darnell, in *Star Dust* is a small-town waitress on her way to Hollywood fame. The rains have started, stopped, resumed; now they're torrential and the wind has picked up. The branches of the oak tree at our living-room window nearly scrape the sidewalk. Some teenagers are shrieking; empty soda cans and boxes of Popeye's Chicken whirl about like deranged urban birds. The air feels electric. I'm on edge, wanting something to happen. Anything, I think, then. . . no.

The most prominent aspect of being a caretaker is the constant monotony. Subsumed by the illness of a loved one, the caretaker becomes a kind of patient by proxy, sitting in waiting rooms, monitoring temperatures, filling prescriptions, sticking close to home. On the few nights I've gone out, I've felt relieved to be somewhere lively and loud, knocking back a martini, eating sushi or raw oysters, things Jeff is forbidden. And, of course, I've felt guilty at this, though Jeff makes a point of saying go out and have fun. Fun, under the circumstances, is a vexed proposition. We are only at the beginning of what I know will be a long bout of illness and treatment and recovery, but already the tedium is getting to me. I'm tired of being indoors, tired of being a caretaker, tired of being tired.

My ex-boyfriend used to tell me, "Patti, you have the patience of a flea." And it's true, patience is not one of my virtues. I mutter in grocery lines, get annoyed at people who fumble for their MetroCards in the subway turnstile or chat on their phones at the ATM.

"Jesus, will you just?" Jeff will say, exasperated by my exasperation. Tonight, though, he's too ill too object to my antsiness, the way I keep checking the computer. The hurricane is in Maryland, it's in Philadel-

phia, it's headed to southern New Jersey. It will make landfall in Brooklyn or maybe Long Island. We do not know where, precisely, it will hit, nor how bad it will be. All we can do is wait.

LINDA DARNELL HAS ACED her Hollywood screen test. She's on her way, and the movie could not be more dull. Her rise is inevitable—the title says as much—which more or less kills any possibility of suspense. The rain's so thick I can't see across the street. It's like being inside a box. I go to the bathroom, splash cold water on my face. The tub has drained out so I fill it again, recognizing as I do so the pointlessness of this task. Then I go to bed.

When I wake late Sunday morning the hurricane has passed. The sun is a smudge in a chalky sky and the birds have returned to the oak. The city has not lost power, lower Manhattan did not flood. The subway is still closed but the mayor claims it will be running in time for the Monday morning commute. I make coffee and read the Times. For once, the street is quiet. The storm has headed inland and north. The paper says we've been spared. One man, interviewed by a reporter, calls the hurricane "nature at its best," and says, "You may not see this again in your lifetime." Barely a year from now though there will be another storm, far stronger, a storm that will wash away the Atlantic City boardwalk, leave lower Manhattan without power for five days, shut the trains and busses for nearly a week. It will kill over one hundred people and leave tens of thousands homeless. But this, of course, is something we cannot yet know.