PART ONE

If I flew to the point of sunrise,
or westward across the sea
your hand would still be guiding me
your right hand holding me.

If I asked darkness to cover me
and light to become night around me,
that darkness would not be dark to you,
night would be as light as day.

It was you who created my inmost self
and put me together in my mother's womb
for all these mysteries I thank you
for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works.

You know me through and through,
from having watched my bones take shape
when I was being formed in secret,
knitted together in the limbo of the womb.

--from Psalm 139

PART ONE

-1-

In Room 604 at University Hospital, Merrill Huntley's voice bounced against the clear curtain that walled her off from the staff. With one hand she smoothed the rough cotton of the hospital gown, which reached barely to her knees as she lay flat. With her other hand, she groped for the buzzer that might bring her company.

"Where's my mother?" she cried when she heard the toe-heel, toe-heel leather-on-tile sound of someone approaching. How like her mother to be late, even today.

"Did you need something, dear?" a young woman asked from the door.

Like a magnifying glass, the thick plastic blurred the nurse's features, but in white polyester slacks and a loose, short-sleeved pink top, she appeared to be about Merrill's age, mid-thirties, trim and athletic, how Merrill used to look, before her dentist spotted her tell-tale gums.

Bad gums. Spongy and prone, recently, to eruptions of bright red blood when she brushed her teeth. Her father had often joked that Merrill's "bad" traits--a large nose, teeth susceptible to decay, skin that sunburned in the dead of winter--had been inherited from him, and that her virtues and talents--blue eyes, high cheekbones, good hand-eye coordination--came from her mother. As a youngster, Merrill believed this because her father, a physician, had told her it was so, and she adored him. Over the past few weeks, every time a new doctor came to look, talk or prescribed, she'd thought of him, gone five years now, and she'd cried.

He would not have been late to her bone marrow transplant! He would have been there, drawing pictures of her organs on the back of an enveloped, and sketching fine-lined, Hirschfield-esque caricatures of the grumpiest nurses. It was her mother, almost seventy, but in good health, who was late, already half an hour, as if this were an ordinary day. *Where was she?*

Patricia Huntley had been camped since last week in a near-by Michigan Avenue hotel. Merrill's brother Andy, who was to be Merrill's donor, had checked into the hospital yesterday. Two days ago, Merrill had been given her second round of chemotherapy--the "conditioning round." All three of them had been waiting for this day for eight months, since they'd first heard the words, "acute myelogenous leukemia." Now, with her son about to be knocked out cold, and her daughter's all-or-nothing bet on the table, how could she be late? *What was she doing?* Touching up her manicure?

More so than ever, she wished her father had survived the car accident, like the other driver, whose fault--if not the blinding sleet--it was. A week ago, on her way into the hospital for the transplant, she'd found a penny on the sidewalk, and remembering the folklore, picked it up and chose him as her guardian angel. They'd taken the found penny away from her when they'd sterilized her room, but she felt he was still there, watching out for her.

Now, an errant tear dropped from Merrill's right eye. What if she were getting married? Would her mother be late for that, too? Expect them to keep the whole thing waiting, not for the bride, but for the *mother* of the bride? She felt sorry that, at thirty-five, she hadn't married, but she'd thought there was no hurry. Maybe she had been, like

Andy always said, too picky. Surely any husband, even a less than perfect one, could be counted on to be on time.

But a mother, also, could be expected to be on time, couldn't she? Except *her* mother, who seemed to come and go on her own time, like on Merrill's first day of kindergarten, when she'd been late to pick her up. Mrs. McCray, who was probably all of twenty-three at the time, had stayed with Merrill on the school's steps and held her damp hand while she shook with the fear that her mother wasn't coming. Mrs. Huntley arrived fifteen minutes late, unalarmed. It had been a beautiful fall day, and she'd decided to walk.

Now, too weak to lift her hairless head from the pillow, Merrill rolled it from side to side, like a nervous tapping of the foot, but much, much slower. She told herself this was no time to feel sorry for herself. Andy had been a match--not a perfect match, but close enough. And he'd been willing to donate. He wasn't a brave man, but he was a man of integrity, one who would do his duty, and do it to the best of his ability.

"No," Merrill mumbled to the nurse's question. "I don't need anything. How's Andy doing? Have you seen my mother?"

"Andy's fine, honey. I'll check on your mother. Dr. Ambrose wants to start any minute now." The woman paused, and ran her fingers through her short, golden hair. "It's a big day,' she added, then hurried out.

A big day. Merrill closed her eyes and imagined what it might be like to be dead.

It was not as quiet in the hospital as she imagined dead to be. Two pages for doctors collided over the public address system, a cart with meds rattled down the hall, a

nurse shrieked a high-pitched laugh over something "he said" that was particularly outrageous.

About a month ago, she'd signed all the consent forms that reminder her, over and over, how likely it was she would die. She'd chosen three hymns and five readings for her funeral service, but she hadn't quite grasped the idea that she wouldn't be there to hear them. Last week, a young nurse had reached in through the gloves molded into the curtain, and, while fluffing her pillow, had mused, "The last six in this bed didn't go home."

Thinking they'd gone to a rehab or nursing facility, Merrill asked where they'd gone.

The nurse yanked her thin hands out of the stiff molded gloves and ran from the room. Merrill hadn't seen her again. Probably she'd asked to be reassigned, or had decided to go to law school. Merrill felt responsible: her question had been as naïve as the nurse's comment.

Sandy Browne, the chaplain, came in carrying a small black book, and in a blue face mask, a blue shower-cap and a blue paper hospital gown, stood up close against the curtain. Merrill couldn't see them, but she knew she wore blue paper booties, too.

"What'll it be?" Sandy asked in the cadence of a dinner waitress. She and Merrill had developed a rapport during Merrill's first hospital stay six months ago, and Merrill knew her choices: Prayers for the dead, for the dying, or for the grieving.

"What'cha got for fear?" Merrill tried to laugh.

"Faith," Sandy replied promptly.

"What else?" Merrill snickered. "Something with a guarantee?' She wanted nothing more than to reach out and squeeze Sandy's hand, but she could not. Germs. Possible infection, In preparation for the transplant, they'd killed her immune system with intense chemotherapy. They'd made her allergic to people.

"Are you trying to put me out of business?" Sandy asked. "We wouldn't need faith if there were guarantees."

"It would be an easier sell," Merrill said. "I'm scared to death."

Sandy smiled, but not too broadly. "Bad word choice."

"Two out of three." Merrill said. "Die of graft-versus-host-disease. Die of fear. Live with fear of relapse." She rolled her head back and forth, as if in seizure.

"We're way ahead of ourselves, Merrill." She stuck her hands in the molded gloves and gave the bed a pat. Then she opened her book. "How about Matthew?"

"What about him?"

"'Ask and it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives; the one who searches always finds; the one who knocks will always have the door opened to him'--in this case, her."

"Pretty proud of yourself for that one, are you?" With her free hand, the one without the catheter, Merrill wiped away her tears. "Thank you."

Unlike some of the nurses, Sandy, as she insisted on being called, wasn't preachy. Through professionally sympathetic, the nurses often talked as if Merrill could put on hope the same way they donned their blue booties. "You're *so lucky* to have a match!" some would coo, just when Merrill was feeling *so unlucky* to need one. Sandy, on the

other hand, tread a fine line between encouraging Merrill's gratitude and sharing her exasperated, "why-me?" It was uncanny how well Sandy on any day could read which side of the line Merrill was on, and how easily she could make her laugh. Merrill determined that they would be life-long friends, if she lived that long.

"Gallows humor," Sandy said. "It saves us mortals from dying of the fright."

Merrill thought that if she survived, she might consider becoming a chaplain herself. What would her mother think of that? Too manly, she'd say. That's what she thought about Merrill's varsity letters for ice hockey. Andy, a banker and not much of a jock, would back his mother up. He'd say the pay was bad.

Merrill didn't care about the money. As it was, she was a communications consultant who specialized in writing grants and developing fund-raising programs for not-for-profit arts and social services agencies, so it wasn't as if she'd be giving up a terribly lucrative career. Six months ago, after she'd decided on the treatment for her leukemia, she'd written her will and been startled, even ashamed, when she saw how little she had to leave behind. When her mother had been her age, she'd had a son, a new daughter, and her precious principal, a nest egg from her grandmother that she'd vowed never to touch. Merrill only had a pearl choker that her parents had given her for her twenty-first birthday, and a matching bracelet, from her mother on her thirtieth. Both had been her mother's mother's. She didn't consider herself the cashmere sweater and strand of pearls type—she felt a little flat-chested to pull that off—but she treasured these items for their sentimental value. In her will, she'd left them to her brother's daughter.

"Well, this is it," Merrill sighed. "Tomorrow at this time, we'll be in the thick of it. Will you come cheer for the good guys?"

“Of course,” Sandy said. She gave the air a punch. “It’ll be like going to a Black Hawks game. People throwing up, thrashing about, shaking with fever. Add a little rash, a little infection, hey, maybe some diarrhea. Wouldn’t miss it, my friend. Are you ready?” Despite her bravado, Sandy’s eyes watered. “I don’t know which is worse, spectating or going through it.”

“At the moment, I’d trade,” Merrill said.

“We don’t get to choose,” Sandy said, her voice sad and firm. “But I will be here for you. More importantly, He will be here for you.” She pointed upwards and winked.

“That’s more than we can say for my mother,” Merrill said.

“Can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” Sandy said, without reproach. “She’ll be along.”