

CHAPTER 1

WEDNESDAY

There's something oddly comforting about doctor's waiting rooms. The art on the walls is always soothing, the receptionist at the desk is always cheerful, people's voices are hushed and almost reverent, and the air is infused with the promising smell of soap, as if, behind the door, it's not just people's bodies that are being healed, but their lives that are being swept clean of anything that smacks of deficiency or decay. I couldn't in a million years have become a doctor myself, since I lack two essential qualifications – namely a benign attitude toward blood and an ability to drum up compassion for strangers who, more often than not, bring their problems upon themselves. But in a strange way, my chosen field shares some of the same principals with the ancient art of healing. I'm a magazine writer, a freelancer – one of those people who bring you monthly promises of a thin waist, shining hair, fabulous shoes, an effortless vacation, and a husband who happily does the dishes. I, too, operate on a faith that just about anything can be made better.

I shuffled through the magazines on the waiting room table and grabbed a two-year-old *Metropolitan Home*. I recognized it as an issue that contained an article I'd done on the merits of cork flooring, which, I had learned, is actually a renewable resource. It's made from the bark of trees, so during harvest the trees aren't damaged. As a floor, cork is warm and forgiving. It also has the unusual property of being mold resistant, which in the foggy beach cities of Los Angeles is a definite plus.

I read the words I'd written with a cool satisfaction, then tossed *Met Home* back in the pile and picked up the new issue of *Town & Country*. A flock of subscription and perfume cards fluttered onto my lap. I picked them up and had just started scanning the Table of Contents when someone called my name.

“April Newton?” a woman sang, with a slight rise at the end of my last name, as if questioning whether or not I was still there and had not, in fact, given up on getting my turn in the inner sanctum. I smiled to indicate that I was April Newton. I stood and kept the magazine with me as I grabbed my purse and followed the woman down the hall.

I followed her past the large tropical fish tank and noticed that she was wearing soft pink scrubs that matched the soft pink walls. We walked down the hallway, which was hung with large black-and-white close-ups of roses and tulips, and into a dressing room with muted lighting. “Everything off but your panties,” the woman said, “Robe opens to the front. Put your clothes in one of the lockers and keep the key in your robe pocket.”

I fought the urge to interrogate this woman the way I might if I had been sent to interview her on a piece about the new customer-service features of breast care facilities around the country. How many times, I would ask, do you estimate you’ve given those instructions? Do you ever just know, by their eyes or the way they hold their shoulders, that some women already know what to do? That they have, in fact, heard those instructions so many times that it sounds to them now like a poem or the lyrics to an old song? That they would rather dispense with the robe altogether, knowing that what they’ve come here to do is bare their bodies and their souls?

“Thank you,” I said, in response to her speech about clothing protocol.

I went to unzip my jeans and noticed that the zipper was already halfway down. This had been happening with some frequency lately and more than anything else, it surprised me. I had become thick around the middle. After so many years paying so much attention to my body—to how fit it was, how healthy, how resilient, how balanced--I had become thick around the middle without even realizing that it had happened. I pulled off my pants, pulled off my sweater, unhooked my bra—which had turned a kind of murky grey speckled with little balls of pilled elastic --wrapped myself in a thick terrycloth robe and took the *Town & Country* into the inner waiting room.

It was a lounge like a spa. There was a pitcher of ice water and lemon on the side table, along with fresh brewed tea and a tray of shortbread cookies. Norah Jones was being piped in from speakers in

the ceiling. I took a seat in a plush armchair. There was only one other woman in the waiting room with me, a woman about my age with hair even more red than mine and what appeared to be immunity to the charms of women's magazines. She sat in her own armchair on the other side of the low coffee table, with her arms crossed primly in her lap. My guess was that she'd never had a mammogram, and for a split second, I thought about breezily making such a guess. "First time?" I might say, as if coming to an appointment whose sole purpose was to determine whether or not you had cancer was something you could get used to.

I opened the *Town & Country* again. It was a magazine I'd never written for, which presented a kind of puzzle for me to solve. What was their style? How did they structure their pages? I turned to the wedding section and read the names of a couple who frolicked in the water off Martha's Vineyard and another who posed on a wide swath of grass in Ireland, a long-haired setter sitting steadfastly by the groom. I flipped again to a section in the feature well that was entirely about sex. *Town & Country* sex.

The main feature was a long his-and-hers article by a couple who had gone on a \$6,000 sex therapy retreat to the Miraval Spa in Arizona. I immediately wondered how the piece had been assigned. How had the editors known that the writer and her spouse would be game for such an intimate outing? Or had the writers decided to go to the spa, then pitched the piece and gotten their week-long romp in the desert covered as a business expense? I scanned the wife's section. She quoted one of the sex therapists, who explained that their retreat was designed for couples who were in love, but who had, due to time and the pressures of modern life, lost intimacy. In his section, the man talked mostly about the concept of homework. Sex homework. And he was talking about how much fun it was to be told to do – or not to do – various things in bed with his wife. "For homework the first night," he wrote, "we were told that if we had intercourse, we would get an F."

For the past nine months, Rick and I had been sleeping in a small double bed in a rented efficiency apartment while workers tore the roof off our ranch house, ripped out the walls, leveled the beams, and then poured a foundation so they could build it all back again – bigger, better, more sleek and modern. Our fifteen-year-old daughter, Jackie, slept three feet from us on the other side of a paper-thin

wall, and she didn't go to sleep until two or three hours after I did most nights. I could count on one hand the number of times Rick and I had had sex in those nine months, and all of those times were soon after we moved. We had come to some sort of tacit agreement that our kisses would be chaste, our hands would not roam from the cool zones on our bodies, and our eyes would not lock with meaning. It was amazing how much room there could be in a double bed. There was room to roll over, room to spread out, room enough to read and sleep and not once do anything that might be construed as an invitation to intimacy.

I read the words in the article again: "For homework the first night, we were told that if we had intercourse, we would get an F. My naked wife was to sit in my lap and gaze into my eyes, but there was to be no intercourse. The idea was to connect on a deeper level – to feel the sacredness of sharing our bodies."

I looked up, flushed. The woman with red hair was staring at her hands. At any moment, someone could step in the doorway and call my name. I would have to leave the magazine on the table and wouldn't know what happened to the couple in Arizona. I wouldn't know if they had succeeded at their homework assignment and drawn closer in body and soul, or if they had failed miserably and fallen on each other like hungry animals. I could go to the bookstore and buy this issue of *Town & Country*. Within ten minutes of our apartment, there were both a Borders and a Barnes & Noble, each of them featuring hundreds of magazine titles just inside their front doors. I knew my way around the aisles as well as if I had stocked them myself, placing stacks of magazines on the rack every week and every month, breathing in their glossy dust, their glittering promise. I could put my hands on that *Town & Country* issue within seconds. But I knew I wouldn't make a special trip to find out what happened to the couple in Arizona. It would be just one more thing I didn't have time to do.

When a magazine is perfect-bound, like a book, you can rip out pages without a single tear. The trick is to make sure you grab a whole folio – the little bundle of pages that are sewn and bound together. When the woman with red hair turned to look at the photographs on the wall, I paged through the sex feature, grasped the pages near the spine of the magazine, and ripped them out as quickly and as quietly as I could. The sound shattered the quiet of the waiting room like thunder. The woman snapped her head

back and gaped at me, but I pretended as if tearing pages from waiting room magazines was a perfectly acceptable practice. I slipped the pages into my robe pocket and reached for a glass of lemon water.

The red-haired woman cleared her throat. “Those magazines are here for everyone’s pleasure,” she said, not unkindly. I imagined that she was a fourth grade teacher. She probably said words, or words like these, several dozen times a day to hooligan fourth-grade boys in the library.

I smiled at her, as if I was pleased that she had appointed herself citizen-watchdog of the doctor’s waiting room. “Oh,” I said coolly, “It was a subscription ad. I’m going to subscribe. It’s a great magazine, *Town & Country*. I don’t normally think of them as a magazine of much substance, but there’s some solid stuff in there.”

She narrowed her brows slightly. They were red, just like her hair. “I’m sorry,” she said, “It wasn’t my place to say anything. It’s just that the reason I’m here is a magazine article.”

“Breast self exam?” I asked. I’d written a dozen such articles myself – about how you should mark your calendar, set aside a full ten minutes, be absolutely methodical in your circular motions around the breast. I never did any of those things myself and, in fact, my doctor told me that only a tiny percentage of women discover cancer in that way.

“No, actually,” she said, “It was an article on dating. On how you should look for a man the same way you look for a job. I made a list of attributes I was searching for, and good health was at the top of the list.”

“How did that lead you here?” I asked.

“The magazine said that if I wanted to attract someone who made their health a priority, I should make my health a priority, too.”

“Smart,” I said, although the idea of project management for intimate relationships seemed to me pretty creepy. I had met Rick when I was helping to build a playground at the school where I was teaching. He had designed it, and presumably it was his fault that there was a number ten nail lying in the dirt when I climbed off the scaffolding. The nail went through the sole of my shoe, and before I could even scream, he had pulled the nail out, slapped on antiseptic, bandaged my foot and sent one of the other

teachers to take me for a tetanus shot.

“We’ll see,” the red-haired woman said, “I’ve actually never had a mammogram. I’m a little nervous.”

“Ah,” I said.

“Have you?”

A pink-clad assistant appeared in the doorway. “April Newton?” she asked.

I got up and went to the doorway. As I passed the red-haired woman, I leaned toward her and gave her my answer. “I’ve had a few,” I said, “It’s nothing.”

I followed the assistant into the room with the machine. “The technician will be with you shortly,” she said, setting my file down on the counter near the sink.

The moment the door closed, I took out the juicy sex article and carefully read the husband’s part of the story. When I was done, I bit my lip. I looked out the window, where I could see the tops of three palm trees swaying in the wind and five black birds perched on an electrical wire. I sniffed, thinking I could stop the tears from forming, but my throat was already itching; I had no chance. A teardrop splashed on *Town & Country*.

There was a knock on the door, the door flung open, and a third woman in soft pink scrubs came blazing into the room. “How are you today?” she called out, cheerfully, then took one look at my tear-stained face and picked up my chart. She quickly scanned it. She lowered her voice and said, “Five years is always the hardest.”

I shoved the article back into my robe pocket and wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. “No, no,” I said, and shook my head. How could I tell this person that it wasn’t cancer, exactly, that had me crying? It wasn’t the fact that I was moments away from reaching the coveted five-year cancer-free milestone, which, as any good reader of women’s magazines knows, is the point at which you revert to having the same risk as any other female of the species. It was the fact that my husband and I would get an A if we were given a homework assignment that had to do with refraining from intercourse. We would be brought up to the front of the class and held up as a model of restraint. Yet just five years before, when

our lives had been filled with pathology reports and blood counts, the lurching rhythms of chemotherapy and the endless waiting for test results, Rick and I had been closer than we'd ever been in our lives. We couldn't pass each other without hugging, we couldn't look at each other without meaning. We held hands in the car, we sat thigh-to-thigh whenever we went to a restaurant. It was blasphemous to even form the thought, but I missed those days.

I reached up and pressed my hands into my eye sockets to stop the tears. "I'm sorry," I said, gulping air.

"There's no need to be sorry," she said, "But I need you to be able to hold your breath to get a good picture. Shall I give you a little time?"

"That's OK," I said, shaking my head, "I'll be fine." I took a deep breath and willed myself to calm down. I forced the air out of my lungs, stood up and walked over to the Xray machine. I dropped the robe from one shoulder and moved in close to the glass plates. The technician grabbed my left breast, the real one. Her hands were freezing. She asked me to scoot closer, and I leaned toward the machine as if it were a dance partner who would support my weight and whisk me around the room. I leaned toward the machine like I loved it, like it had saved my life.

"Don't move," the technician ordered, as she cranked the plated together, but I tightly curled my toes in a tiny act of defiance.

When she was done taking pictures, the technician asked me to wait in the room while the slides were developed. "At five years, you're still diagnostic," she explained, from the doorway, "The radiologist reads it while you're still in the building. Next year, you'll be screening and you'll have to wait for the mail like everyone else."

As I sat there waiting, I forgot all about the steamy reading material in the pocket of my robe. I imagined what would happen if the technician came back and said she needed to take a few more slides. My heart would start pounding; I'd feel it in my throat. Adrenaline would pump through my body, sending me into a state somewhere oddly close to giddy. She'd take one picture, then two, three and then four. She'd leave for an ominous length of time, then come back and try to tell me the Xrays were fuzzy.

Off-kilter. She needed to do a few more. I'd nod, bare my breast again, hold my breath, knowing without anyone needing to say anything that the cancer was back.

And then what? I'd call Rick. "I'm sorry," I'd say. Sorry that he'd have to go through it again. Sorry that he'd had to go through it before. Sorry that we weren't any better for our brush with mortality—and closer, any happier. Sorry that I'd lost a breast and lost any desire to turn to him in the middle of the night, in the middle of a bed, in an apartment we were renting while we built a house that was supposed to be the place where we'd live for the rest of our lives.

The technician breezed back in and told me everything looked fine. She held my chart in her hands and paused before she slipped out the door again. "Five years," she said, "Congratulations."

"Thank you," I said, and even though she had disappeared from view, I added, "Happy Holidays."



I have a friend who has leukemia who has never once been to any cancer-related event in which you have to wear a hat or T-shirt that identifies you as a survivor. She refuses. "You can't be a survivor if you've still got it," she explains, "And I'll always have it." It, of course, being the insidious cells that move and morph within her blood. It, being a thing that saps energy and demands constant vigilance. She pisses me off. *Go to the damn walk, I want to yell, wear the damn T-shirt.* This woman who takes chemo the way most of us take multi-vitamins, throws up with shocking regularity, and has, of late, started to fall because her feet are numb from pain relievers, also volunteers at her nephew's elementary school, coaches a swim team which demands that she stand on a freezing cold pool deck five out of seven nights every week, and, for a regular job, is in charge of our city's youth sports leagues, which means that she is in constant and intimate contact with the most demanding, irrational, frightened and misguided parents in America. And she's not a survivor?

I have another friend who had ovarian cancer when she was just 20 years old. Her father was a surgeon and he stood over her in the operating room when they cut her open and removed her uterus and

ovaries. He stood there, inspecting ever bit of tissue, making them take their time, making them take each cell. She's nearing 60 years old, and when people who know anything about ovarian cancer hear that she has lived as long as she has as well as she has, they practically fall to their knees in awe. But there are no special hats for her to wear, with special pins and special slogans. There are no T-shirts and marches, no lunches in hotel ballrooms with gift bags and speeches. She shrugs when I ask her if she resents it. "I'm alive," she says, "I have no reason to resent anything."

I got in my car and made myself sit there and look at the sunlight and the red Volvo next to me and the old couple making their way across the parking lot – he with a walker, she with a cane. I took a deep breath and thought about giving thanks, but it was exactly like trying to remember a word you know you know but can't bring to mind. I just couldn't do it, anymore. God didn't make sense anymore. There were people in the Middle East who were blowing themselves up in the name of one God, whom they claimed to be almighty. We had a president who was retaliating in the name of another God, whom he claimed to be almighty, too. In my own church -- the church of my childhood, of Sunday mornings and patent leather shoes -- people were locking each other out of sanctuaries over an argument about how much God loved or didn't love gay people, because, I presumed, they wanted God to be almighty for just them alone. The selfish drama of the deity even played itself out in our apartment complex. Most of the residents were homeowners in the middle of remodels, corporate executives in the middle of relocations or first wives in the middle of divorces, but on the floor below ours was a Christian rock musician who spent his days in a studio singing praises to God. At night he would sometimes shout at his wife with such violence that someone would invariably call the police, and when the police came, the Christian rock band singer would yell for the fucking nigger to mind his own business. I believed there was an unseen force of goodness in the world, something at the center that held it all together and made it all come into being in the first place, but claiming a proprietary personal relationship with God – even one in which I could simply give thanks -- had come to seem like an act of folly.

I called Rick on my cell phone. He answered on the first ring. "Hey," he said, his voice as tight as a coiled spring.

“It was all clear,” I said.

“Oh, that’s great, April,” he said, “That’s really great.”

There was an awkward split-second of silence. I leaped into it. “It’s been five years this week,” I said, as if the thought had only just occurred to me, sitting there in the late November sun.

“Has it?” Rick asked, “I guess I’ve always counted from the day of the surgery, not the day of diagnosis.”

This made perfect sense—and if my husband is known for anything, it’s for making perfect sense. You count five years from the day when you could reasonably say the cancer was gone from your body, which in my case was December 10th, 1999. But how can you ever really be sure? None of us can ever really be sure. In my mind, there was a day when cancer was just a word – a word I could write about in a magazine, or talk about at dinner -- and the next day, the day of diagnosis, it was a reality that had the potential of defining my entire life because it had the potential of ending it. That was the day that mattered to me. And now that I had reached five years, maybe I couldn’t say that I had survived, exactly, but maybe I could say that cancer could now be nothing again. Just a word, just something that had once happened to me once upon a time, just a story in the past.

“I was thinking maybe we could have lunch,” I said.

“I’m over at the house with Ruben,” he said, “We’re still wrestling with the backsplash tile. I think we’re going to go ahead and build out the wall behind the stove. It’s a hassle, but it’s the only way to make it plumb. You want to come see if you like the height of the hood?”

The hood that was going over the range in our new house was Italian. It was an arc of glass and steel, a piece of sculpture, really, that would draw the eye from the family room. We had pendant lights to hang over the central island that mimicked the arch of the range hood. The lights would be reflected in the granite of the island – a spectacular slab of terra cotta red. Finding these things – the hood, the lights, the stone, the tile, the flooring, the molding, and the perfect shade of white paint – had consumed our limited leisure time for the past two years. Instead of lunch, we looked at tile. Instead of sex, we searched together for a range hood.

“Sure,” I said, “I could stop and get Subway.”

“Great,” he said, “See you in a few.”



There was no one in line at Subway, though the restaurant was full. A young girl with her hair pulled back in a neat ponytail asked me what I'd like. I scanned the menu, and my eye caught on the descriptions of the platters they offered for holiday catering. You could get a selection of small sandwiches that could feed 20, plus chips and soda. The signs suggested that this would be an easy way to host an office party, or to entertain guests during New Year's football games. I could have a party to celebrate the fact that I had reached my five-year cancer-free anniversary. I could serve all my friends roast beef and turkey to thank them for how much they'd helped me, for how they'd brought lasagna to our house, and picked up Jackie to take her to volleyball practice, and sent flowers and cards and soft slippers for me to wear in the hospital.

“Ma'am?” the girl behind the counter asked. There were now three people in line behind me, looking at their watches, looking at me.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” I said, “I'll take three turkey and cheese on sourdough.”

“Mustard and mayo?” she asked.

“Yes, thanks,” I said.

“Would you like drinks and chips with those?”

“Yes, please,” I said, and as she told me the total, my eyes started to tear up again. I closed my eyes and pressed my hand to my lips to keep from weeping out loud. I would get a turkey on sourdough, a Diet Coke and some Lays potato chips to eat on the gleaming granite counter in the middle of my new kitchen. That's how I would celebrate this milestone – with a fast-food meal in a house that my husband had designed and built after my diagnosis because he thought it was what I wanted.

“Ma'am?” the girl asked. I was now crying. I was standing in line at Subway at lunchtime, and I

was crying.

“Are you OK?” the woman in line behind me asked. She was wearing black pumps. That’s all I could see of her as she grabbed a napkin off the counter and handed it to me. The shoes had pointy toes and a white strap that curved over the top of the foot and ended at a button on the other side. The stitching was black on white and white on black. They were like saddle shoes all grown up and gone to town.

“Why don’t you go ahead,” I said, and stepped aside. I turned to sit down on a red plastic chair by the door. I was like a child who can’t get control of her own body. A minute went by, maybe two. The woman in pumps came over and squatted in front of me. She was wearing a black suit with a pencil skirt with a rim of knife pleats at the hem and a jacket that nipped in at her waist – not the easiest outfit to squat in. She put her hand on my knee, which I thought was incredibly presumptuous and incredibly kind, all at the same time.

“Is there something I can help you with?” she asked.

“Those are great shoes,” I said.

She looked completely unfazed. “They’re Kate Spade,” she said.

I nodded. I’d written a piece for *Inc.* about Kate Spade many years ago, before I had a child and before Kate got into shoes and dinnerware. I’d sat down to lunch with her at Shutters in Santa Monica and we’d had a great conversation about women’s entrepreneurial spirit. We joked about the hippie purse of the woman at the table next to us. I was young, and I was certain that we had bonded in some profound way -- that Kate Spade was going to be my friend. I sent her a thank-you note that referenced the joke we’d shared, included my phone number, and never heard from her again.

I lifted my eyes to look at the woman in the black suit. She looked smart, and possibly Armenian. She was probably a lawyer who came home at the end of the day and threw together fabulous dinners with lamb and mint. “Have you ever left a pair of shoes behind in a store,” I asked, “because you didn’t think you needed them or you thought they were too expensive and then one day, years later, they pop into your head – the exact color and shape and even their price -- and you think, why didn’t I buy those

shoes? Why didn't I bring them home?"

The black-suited woman nodded. "It happened to me with a pair of Frye boots in college. Remember Frye boots?"

"Absolutely," I said, "That's what happened to me today, only it wasn't shoes I left behind." She didn't say anything, just squatted there waiting for me to explain. "What I forgot was how to celebrate that I'm alive."



I drove with my sandwiches along the beach, dipped down into the grove of Eucalyptus that lined the creek near Malaga Cove, and then climbed up into the hills. The whole of the Los Angeles basin opened up in my rearview mirror. On a clear day, you could see each building of downtown and Century City, the Getty Museum on the very far side of the valley, and even the Hollywood sign, if you knew where to look. Our house--which was one of only five houses on the cul-de-sac on the ridge--had a view that looked out the opposite direction, south toward Catalina Island. We could stand in our master bedroom and watch the giant car carriers steaming toward Long Beach Harbor. We could see the sailboats as they made their way up and down the channel. And with a telescope, in winter, we could spot grey whales migrating south to the warm waters of Mexico. It was all water all the time from almost every room of the house. It astonished me every time I saw it.

I pulled into the driveway, got out of the car, walked past the Port-a-Potty, up the front path--and suddenly felt as if I'd run into a wall of ice. I could hear hammering inside, could see a guy on a ladder fiddling with the outdoor lights, but I couldn't move. Someone yelled something in Spanish, and Rick came to the front door.

"Hey!" he said. He leaped down the front steps, took the Subway bags out of my hands, and kissed me on the cheek. "Are you OK?" He asked, stepping back from me, "You look like you've seen a ghost."

A ghost of the woman I wanted to be was just inside that door. Her spirit was there, enjoying the view. Her husband's spirit was there, too--the spirit of the man who designed and built this house for a wife he hoped wouldn't die. I'd always believed that houses could be haunted. I swore to my mother when I was four years old that there was a ghost who lived in my closet – a friendly ghost who kept the monsters away – but she told me to stop making things up and just go to sleep. Every time I tried to tell her about this wonderful thing, this thing that kept me safe and made me happy, that's what she said – stop making things up and just go to sleep. We only lived in that house a couple years, but I never forgot the feeling of that ghost.

After my grandmother died, I looked forward to returning to her lakeside cottage in New Hampshire to see if she'd haunt it in the same way. She'd been such a comfort in real life—a woman who taught me to play the piano, introduced me to Willa Cather and who seemed to understand my mother's sadness in a way I never could. I expected her to be a comfort in death, too. While the adults scurried through her house in a frenzy of sorting and packing, I sat in front of the old stone fireplace, squeezed my eyes shut and convinced myself I could feel my grandmother's presence.

"I feel her here," I said to my mom, but all she said in return was that I should stop daydreaming and help pack up the books.

With so much experience feeling the presence of ghosts who made me feel comfortable, I didn't think much about the other kind until I got to college. There was an old house next to the church where we used to perform choral concerts--a shingled house with gables and a weather vane. All the kids insisted it was haunted by an old president of the college who had been poisoned by his wife. I used to look at the dark windows of that dark house and think--yes, some evil spirit surely resides there. There was something about the house, even from the outside, that gave me the creeps. I never asserted my conviction about the house being haunted, however, for fear that someone would tell me to stop making things up.

I handed Rick the Subway bag. "What would you say if I said I *had* seen a ghost?" I asked.

"Well, that you're nuts," Rick said.



That night, in the apartment, I lay wide awake as Rick snored beside me. I watched the minutes tick by on the clock and listened to the noises of the night. It was 2:00 a.m., but somewhere in the building someone was taking a shower, someone slammed a door, a car started out in the parking lot. It was too late to take Ambien or even Benedryl. I would wake up in the morning as groggy as if I'd been drunk, and I needed to hit the ground running in the morning. I had to pick paint colors for the master bath. I had to research an article on lingerie. At 3:00, Jackie had a volleyball game. It would be better not to sleep than to slog through the day on drugs.

“Rick?” I said. He kept snoring. It sounded exactly like a lawnmower. It was amazing that he didn't wake himself up. Had he stopped snoring and replied, I was going to mention the bottle of champagne that we had on top of the refrigerator. One of his clients had given it to him upon completion of their house six months ago. We both knew better than to store a nice bottle of champagne on top of the refrigerator where it was hot, but there was nowhere else to put it in the tiny apartment kitchen. There were baking pans stored in the oven and cereal lined up on top of the microwave. I had measuring cups in a cardboard box in the bottom of the broom closet, and every time I had to measure something, I had to waltz with the broom and wrestle with the vacuum cleaner.

What I would say to Rick was that I thought we should toast five years. Right then, in the middle of the night. We should pop the cork and drink in bed. I could climb into his lap and take off the men's-style button-down pajamas I'd adopted during the season of surgeries when putting anything on over my head was unthinkable. I would unbutton the buttons slowly, while gazing into his eyes, let the top drop behind me like a stripper, and I would explain that we had a homework assignment.

I looked again at Rick. He was a beautiful man, with a thick head of curly hair, and the compact body of a man who, even at the age of 45, thinks nothing of playing an hour-long game of volleyball in the sand or getting up at dawn to surf the big winter swells. He was lying flat on his back. I slipped my

hands under his shoulder and shoved as hard as I could.

“You’re snoring!” I yelled.

He turned over and kept on sleeping.

I eventually went to sleep, too. I dreamed about being in a house on fire. It was our house--mine and Rick’s and Jackie’s--but it wasn’t any house I actually knew. The fire was going to consume the house--it was big and bad, with thick black smoke, and it had already drawn several screaming fire trucks to the street out front--but I had the sense in my dream the way you sometimes do of time standing still. I had time to collect our wedding photos and time to get Jackie’s entire stuffed animal collection and her Volleyball trophies. I methodically went around to each of the rooms--ours, but not ours--collecting the things that were important to us. Nothing was left behind. There was no rushing or worrying. I got out with everything I needed, and I consciously left everything else to burn.