NONFICTION

IN THE BLOOD

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The honeybees that live in the walls of our house never did seem to like my sister. When she was six, one flew into her right ear and left its stinger there. She's been half afraid of them, half resentful ever since. It's the smell, my Mama says. Some molecule, some pheromone stuck down in her skin that irritates them. Makes them think that she's a threat. The hive has been here, in the walls, in the ceiling, between the floors of our worn-out house since long before I, before Mama, before Pa, before his Papa lived here. Stayed here through snowstorms and hurricanes, through violent summers that scorched

half of the earth, that burned all of the flowers. The bees are in the bones of this house. This house is in Mama's bones and in my sister's and in mine. The bees don't bother me. I can stand next to them as they swarm, feel their humming in my ribs, watch as they fly from bud to bloom to home. I don't get stung. They land in my hair, on my shoulders, on my scar. We must smell different, my sister and I, though the parts that made us are the same.

When I was younger I was convinced that I looked like no one else. I was all angles and elbows, taller than every girl in my class but one. I had big feet, skinny legs, big gums, small teeth: a patchwork of mismatched body parts. My cousins were flowers in a meadow: each face a variation on a theme. My sister looked like all of them and like Mama and like Daddy and like whoever happened to be standing close by her at the time. Some trick of genetics turned her into a chameleon, put pieces of our ancestors in her eyes, her smile, her hair. My sister and I look alike, Mama says, but only when we are sleeping.

Taxonomy was my favorite part of the grade-school sciences. I liked to know the order of things, liked to classify and name. I wandered through our yard after class and matched flora and fauna to genus and family. Latin rolled across my tongue like strawberry candy. I was Adam with encyclopedias and gumball barrettes in my hair. I named dogs and kittens, the bees, the stars, and each rock that I tripped over in the driveway. I picked nicknames for my favorites: sobriquets borrowed from the books that I liked best. Frances and Dicey and Sarah. My sister picked the name for Mama's car. She called it Jennifer and called her baby doll and stuffed cheetah the same thing. She picked the name just because she thought it was pretty and nothing more than that. I scowled. I renamed the car Beatrice in my mind.

I got older, got to college, studied zoology and physiology and anatomy. I could hardly stand the dissections. I named the frogs and the baby pigs. I could not bear to name the calico that looked like the kittens in our barn. I made up stories for her instead: some that did not end on the blade of my scalpel. I pictured her curled up on our porch, saw the sunlight in her fur as I sliced through her skin, and imagined her ears flicking flies as she slept. I opened her belly and found a nest of tumors there but imagined they were marbles that she'd swallowed instead. Bits of her hair and the stink of formaldehyde hitched a ride home on my skin. The bees avoided me for a while after that. My sister just wrinkled her nose.

I got older still. I found that every disease had a hundred different names. The names that had been borrowed from somewhere else were the easiest to learn. I looked at stellate irises and thought of constellations, saw Orion above my head on frozen midnights. The honey crust of impetigo stuck itself to yellow wax and hexagons in my memory. Hypertension called up my grandmother's face, my uncle's, my aunt's. Some things run in families. Our glaucoma, our anxiety, all passed down through the generations like

baby quilts. Mama's arteries learned to harden like her Mama's did. Daddy gave my sister his sour stomach and bad eyes. I thought that I had been skipped over. But the die had been cast when I was just a few cells settling in Mama's belly. Some things don't show until they're ready.

My tumor was a pea buried in muscle, blanketed by tissue. I got older and it was a cat's-eye marble, just like those that my grandfather had given me. I got older and it was a quail's egg, the freckles that I inherited from Mama splashed across the skin that covered it. I don't know how long it was there. I got older. I went to the doctor when it was a pea, a marble, a quail's egg. It was a plum by the time he paid attention. *Paraganglioma*. It was large and white and unmistakable on my radiographs. It was pictures of pink and purple nested cells in my pathology textbooks. I got older and carried it with me unwittingly: a piece of me that learned to make too much of itself and couldn't stop and wouldn't stop until the surgeon opened me up and carved it out. I told my sister first. Then Mama, my grandparents. Mama has sixty-three first cousins. The news metastasized within the week and then they were upon me. They called, they sent get well cards, they made more casseroles than a body could stand. Said too much, didn't say enough, didn't know what to say about a cancer that none of us had ever had before.

There is a reason for everything. A name. The buzzing in my wrist, in my palm, in my fingers that are shaped like mama's—*paresthesia*—sparked to life within days of the stroke. My neurons died—*cerebral infarction*—when my artery choked on the clots that developed after the surgery. The *radical neck dissection* where the surgeon sliced fat and tissue and lymph nodes away from the tumor's hiding place. *Paraganglioma*. A rare tumor that is never, ever malignant. Unless.

They sent me to a geneticist. They wanted to find a reason. My tumor wasn't supposed to be malignant. I wasn't supposed to have cancer. I wasn't supposed to have a stroke but I did. I did. The geneticist was a small woman—fine boned, pale haired—and looked like my sister with her colors inverted. "The good thing," she said, after she told me about the mutation, "is that the person in the family who comes to light first is the one who is the most affected." "The good thing," I repeated. I scratched at the stinging in my hand. "Yes," she said. I smelled honey perfume and antiseptic. "Your family may carry it," she said, "but they would never know." She drew a pedigree—my family tree—and filled in my circle with ink.

I read article after article, searched for myself between Figure 1 and the bibliography. Each case report was composed of terms that I'd learned as I'd transitioned from student to patient. Syllables that were familiar yet foreign, like my CT scan, like images of patients with faces blurred and identifying information blacked out. I figured that my pictures were in a PowerPoint presentation too somewhere. The surgeons were all abuzz. My tumor was so unusual, my complications unexpected.

I was my own textbook. A very interesting case. The resident grinned, teeth shining, and told me so.

My surgeon recommended that I see a therapist. The therapist recommended that I go to a support group. Both said, "It is not good to go through this alone." I thought of my cousins, my mother, my sister, of the forest of cards on my mantle, of my grandmother saying "She won't ever be right" when she thought that I was far out of earshot. I went to one support group for people who'd had strokes. A room filled with bodies with paralysis and paresthesia. Bodies like my body minus the cancer, my inheritance. The geneticist asked if I'd met anyone else with my cancer. The internist said that she'd never heard of my cancer. I thought of my uncle's diabetes, my cousin's gout, and the migraines that were passed from my great-grandmother to me. The geneticist said that my tumor was rare. Did I know anyone else who had it? No. I answered honestly.

I told my sister first. There are protocols that start and end with blood. A little poke and then we'd know just how much alike we really were. I read articles. I revisited Mendel and his peas and Punnett squares, thought of fruit flies and June bugs and honeybees. Remembered a picture that I'd drawn as a child: Mama, my sister, and me, and the house and the bees flying out from between cracks in the walls, in the ceiling. I remembered my sister crying, a bee falling from her ear. Her ears are shaped like our grandfather's: other pieces, body parts that look nothing like mine. There is a picture of us in matching nightgowns. There is a picture of us standing in an empty road. There is a picture of us in Sunday school dresses and patent leather shoes. These pictures are my favorites. In them, we look so much alike. My sister went to see the geneticist, had her turn in the phlebotomy chair, and we waited. Just six weeks. Then we knew. She called to tell me first. She says some things just like Mama. Her eyes crinkle like our grandfather's when she smiles. I could see it through the phone. "I don't have it," my sister said. I felt something close enough to relief.

I got older. I had a meticulous doctor. He killed what was left of the tumor. I could learn to live with the stroke. I got used to the numbness in my hand and the weakness of my arm. I got used to the taste of nutrition supplements and honey—thick liquids. It barely hurt to swallow. Mama watched me carefully. I could barely stand the looks. My cousins handled me gently, as if I was some delicate, foreign, ruined thing. My sister watched me curiously, took hold of the meat of my arm, put her nails against my skin and pinched hard. I yelped. "You feel that?" she asked. I cursed. She smiled. She thumbed circles around the welt and I just focused on the sting.

There is a picture of us in our Sunday school dresses, me in blue and her in white, my arm in a pink plaster cast. We'd been arguing, running, when I tripped and fell on a root. That's how she tells it. I still say that I was pushed. She never apologized. I never apologized for the fights that I'd started, for the scars that I left upon her skin.

Brought her honey vanilla ice cream and Nehi soda as penance. She sat at my side decades later, after the stroke. Me in a blue hospital gown. Her in a white collared shirt. My arm limp and purple and red. She thumbed circles around the welt until it faded away, said, "You know I would take it for you if I could."

Nerves take a long time to heal. Regeneration happens a millimeter at a time. I got older. My fingers began to twitch. My sister got older. My mother, my cousins. Their tests, my radiographs were all the same. No evidence of disease. My hand began to move but the paresthesia remained. Drowning out all other feeling except for pain. I did my physical therapy every day until the flowers bloomed again in spring, until the bees began to venture far from their hive and return with yellow pollen stuck to their legs. They swarm in early May. Every May, despite the ice storm three Decembers back, despite the drought that lasted through July, despite the creek drying up, leaving red clay stained with chemicals behind. The bees come back. Their buzzing is loud enough to hear all through the house. My sister pressed her ear to the wall and said, "You feel that?" I pressed my hand to the wall. I said that I could.