

n i n e t e e n



THE MYTH

Geoff, I've never seen the medical and police records from the accident, and I've been thinking of writing for them. I think it's time. After all, it's been many years. And I think I could read them now, the vital signs of our family's accident. Tell me if you're ready. I'll write York Hospital and the Kittery Police in Maine. And we'll see what comes.

I'm full of questions I wish I could ask you. In the Emergency Room, were you dead? All the time? And how close did Teddy come to slipping over the edge? And why wasn't I the one to die? Why wasn't I the one to be scraped off the pavement like Chubb Chubb, our Persian cat, his yellow bulging eyes still beautifully intact, but his luxurious fur-coated ribcage crushed, cracked, tire-treaded? Why me with the shovel, the cardboard box, and duct tape preparing a body for burial? Tell me, why were you fried on a steel railing and not me shattered against a concrete abutment?

I still ask those questions while I lie on the edge of my mattress balancing myself on this side of safety, of sanity. I'm afraid that if I move, I may fall. I'm a woman with an emotional thermometer always in her mouth.

And so, Geoff, I'm asking for a consultation with a ghost. Isn't it time? Can I request the records now? Can I read them

with the objectivity of a clinician, someone like a medical social worker, like me in my job turning the pages of patients' charts? Can I be ordinary again like one of the picnickers at Fort Foster on Gerrish Island in July of 1994 who abandoned a hamburger and potato chips to perform CPR on you and on Teddy?

Can I move from the intimate inside of our unfolding tragedy to the outside? Can I pass through a curtain like the white cotton one around Teddy? Let me set down my cup of cold tea and escape the shadowy intensive care unit; let me wander down the hospital corridors to the cafeteria and lift a plastic cup of pale tapioca in one hand, a plastic spoon in the other and then abandon them both. Let me flow like lukewarm tears past alcoves of grieving friends and relatives, and finally, make it to the emergency room exit. Let me reach the automatic doors that open in response to body weight, the doors that one can only move through if one survives. Have you watched me journey through the unpredictable stages of grief—a step forward, several steps backward, and then a stumble forward? Do you watch me now?

Will you allow me to move into the bright outdoors? Because I know I will shed memory, lose connection to the events. I'll find myself in the parking lot of York Hospital, and breathe in the warm steam of a July morning. Even in the shocked aftermath of sudden death, I'll stand beside the police detective and notice his attractive mustache. He'll open his wallet, expose his badge from the Town of Kittery, and I'll take notice of him as he extends a clipboard to me, as I grasp the pen he presses into my hand. But what if this time when I see the police report with the drawing of your body's awkward shape, what if it's just ink on paper?

Geoff, after this trip through the ER exit door, I'll be changed. No longer with every breath in and breath out will I

see your hazel eyes peering out at the storm through the slit in the concrete bunker. I won't wonder if you saw the lightning as it streaked overhead, skipped other islands, other kayakers, and zipped and zapped its way to you. I won't see your hands grip the steel railing to ensure a completed electrical circuit.

On every sunny June/July/August day, I won't look up at the Maine sky and see the orange-red arrow that pierced the gravel gray sky and struck you. I won't hear the ping and pong of hailstones overhead on the metal roof or see the hundred thousand splashes off the pier. But instead I'll hold an armful of daisies, your favorite flowers, and toss them onto the surface of Kittery Bay and watch them float past me. I'll see only daisies falling in homage of love risked and ripped away—he loves me, he loves me not, he loves me. . . . He's dead.

Geoff, see me standing on the asphalt parking lot beside the courteous detective who is explaining to me that all accidents are initially considered crime scenes. It's just crazy; they just are.

I'm zoning out, escaping his words. I'm already busy converting the event, rewriting our family's tragedy. I'm looking at the smudged sketches of the bunker's concrete floor, blocking out images of splattered blood, and imagining/inventing/creating the myth that you had a second to face the rain and wind and that in that moment, you decided to take the first blast of lightning on yourself. As a widow, a mother, a writer, I want to believe in the myth and in you, that you were the hero who turned toward the east. I believe that it was not an accident that the first force of the bolt hit you.

I see the lightning finish with you before it passes to Teddy, our son who was turned away, who didn't see the streak of heat and sorrow. But what was unseen by Teddy was seen by you. That will be the lasting frame of memory for me: in a flash of fatherly impulse, you consciously took the heat for

him. And when the crippled arrow entered the back of Teddy's head, before it randomly wriggled inside his body, it was partially spent. And by the time it skidded onto the cement floor beside his sneakered heels, it could only skitter. The lightning was powerless to kill Teddy because of you.

So when the EMTs arrived, took over CPR from the weary picnickers who were cramped up and exhausted pumping away at your heart, I understand that your vital organs except for your heart were utterly destroyed. In the ER, the IVs were useless, had nowhere to go. And your heart, your runner's heart, had nothing to spark and inevitably would run out of beats.

And later when your body lay upon the gurney, when I kissed your swollen cheek, you had been unconscious all the time after the accident. Isn't that right?

But even before arriving at the hospital, I was creating the story, the myth. On my way to the emergency room in the back seat of a speeding car at three in the morning, I developed the plot. If you died and Teddy survived, it would not be by chance or because of my prayers. Teddy would survive because you were a hero.

And when I read the medical and the police records, I'll be professional, I'll be detached. And I'll try to stick with the facts. But by then instead of a red arrow of lightning or scarlet splatters of blood, I'll see a red grosgrain ribbon like the page marker in a family Bible. It's that ribbon of love, not always just for you, but also for life itself that has inspired me while I've struggled with our family tragedy. I know the great Myth, but in my story, a father's instinct will be to sacrifice himself. Otherwise, I think the world would be upside down. Geoff, I'll bind our story with love and with courage; I'll lay a red ribbon on the title page. And in our myth, in our myth, the father will save his son.