

She would have nothing to do with traditional treatment this time, she said. No chemotherapy, nothing. Despite the time it might buy her. No more battling the cells exploding everywhere inside her, growing fast and furious—her own internal suburban sprawl.

“There are too many toxins inside me already,” she said, her voice clear and steady as a bell, that day in her oncologist’s office eight months ago. “I’m finished.” And with that she stood and walked out the door, leaving Tom and Scarlet to thank the good doctor for his suggestion of another round of full-scale chemotherapy and shake their heads no. No, no—they wouldn’t be trying to persuade her. Not this time. No.

Thirteen years before, they’d sat together in the same office, between the rounds of chemotherapy and the radiation. Addie—pale and slim and bald, looking younger than her forty-five years—was a striking presence; it shocked Scarlet to realize that the oncologist seemed almost afraid of her.

Addie’s dark eyes flashed, but that time she said nothing as the doctor urged her to “cover all the bases”—radiation next, followed by hormone therapy: a daily tamoxifen pill for the next five years.

Tom took her hand and kissed both her cheeks. “I know you hate this, Addie. But please, love, let’s try it. Please.”

“*Let’s?*?” she snapped. “*Let us try it?*? Who exactly is *us*?”

And then, Scarlet couldn’t help herself: She started to cry. No, to sob. The chemotherapy had already made Addie so sick. Scarlet and Tom had insisted on that, refusing to listen when Addie had proposed looking into alternative therapies first. But what were they supposed to do, Scarlet had asked herself then. Sit back and watch her *die*?

Addie could never bear to see Scarlet cry. Past the age of four or five, she’d seldom done it in her mother’s presence.

“I’m sorry,” Scarlet whimpered, reaching into her bag for tissues. “I’m sorry, Addie.” She couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Addie looked at Scarlet and opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it again.

“All right,” she said, her voice hoarse. Tired. “Yes, all right.” She started gathering her things—her bag, the book she was reading, her jacket. “I’ll do whatever you say. We’ll call to schedule it. Right now I’m tired. I need to go home.”

And Scarlet and Tom walked out behind her, after wordless handshakes with the doctor.

And she had the radiation therapy, and took the tamoxifen.

And now they all know that in some cases additional hormones—so-called adjuvant therapy—eventually lead to changes in the uterine wall. The place where Addie’s cancer showed up next.

Oh, but Addie, Scarlet imagined saying to her, so many times: We were only doing what we thought was right. Just a few big bombs to blast that overdevelopment in your tissues. Then a pill a day to stanch those strip malls and Wal-Marts and drive-through pharmacies in your lymph nodes. It all seemed so sensible at the time.

And then she imagined Addie’s response: Right. Kind of like Hiroshima.

They did talk briefly about the tamoxifen two weeks ago, the last time Scarlet visited before these last few days of gathering again in Cider Cove for Addie’s imminent death. “I don’t blame you for that,” Addie said to Scarlet and Tom then. “I’ve made my own decisions, all along. I took the damn pill each morning. No one held a gun to my head. I just filled a god-damn glass of water and swallowed the stupid thing. Of course I wanted to fight it then, of course I was going to do what they told me to do. It’s all as simple as that, isn’t it? You can’t think of anything else to do. You assume they know what’s best. You follow instructions.”

“And then you die,” Tom said. And they all laughed.

“Right. No surprises there,” Addie said through her laughter. And then she coughed, painfully.

IN HOVERING FLIGHT

“And now I’ve made this choice,” she went on when the coughing subsided. “And I ask you, please, to honor it. And not out of guilt. Simply out of your love for me.” That was when she told them where she wanted to be buried.

*But guilt and love aren’t so easily separated, Addie.* Another thing Scarlet considered saying, but didn’t.