Ordinary

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The words don't come easily now. Descriptions do not come to mind when I see a puddle, a child, a cloud. Ideas do not lace themselves together in lines and patterns.

I sit at the keyboard. Open a file, reread the lines. Stare at the screen. Close the file. Open another file. Open a blank file. Stare some more.

I think about it; I don't think about it. I give myself a break; I apply pressure.

I am, I believe, running out of time.

The boat sped through Resurrection Bay, the water deep beneath us, a fjord formed by a glacier now gone. I put on my gloves and knotted my daughter's scarf as the wind, cold for June, sliced through our hair, our new rain jackets. Most passengers sat inside at plastic banquettes, but my daughters stood at the bow, holding on as if flying, so, so alive. I watched the girls and the jagged coast from a perch off to the side, the psalmist's words looping in my mind:

I will lift up my eyes to the mountains;
From where shall my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.

I had brought my two daughters to Alaska because I wanted an adventure, a grand trip with them, for them, for me. I had just finished a year of chemotherapy for recurrent ovarian cancer. My course consisted of two drugs, one of which is known as the Red Devil. I had, I thought, danced with the devil fairly well, my side effects unpleasant but minimal, the drugs sliding past the immune system to the cancer cells. I had kept my hair and inched as close to clear as I'm likely to get. A year of treatment remained, but my numbers looked good. Fantastic, even. The figures my oncologist uttered while leaning cross-armed against the sink in the exam room usually did not qualify as fantastic (cure rate: 0 percent), but I'd been with him long enough to know that with cancer, very little is certain.

I tried to stay still, to steel myself against the chilled metal of the boat and stem the coughing, to allow my lungs to fill completely with air. I had been coughing for four days, two days before we flew to Anchorage and two days after. Each morning I swallowed some antibiotics my mom slipped me before we left for the airport. The cough worsened. The day before our boat trip, we hiked nearly a mile up a mountain path toward the receding Exit Glacier. I propped myself against a boulder and stared out at the perfect peaks of the Kenai Mountains, each iced with snow down to the tree line. Another hiker stopped and asked if I needed a ranger. I shook my head and thanked her. "Bronchitis," I explained as my chest heaved.

At the Safeway in Seward, I bought a bottle of cough syrup and, though the pharmacist told me they were useless, two bags of cherry cough drops. I coughed all night, buttressing myself with pillows and eventually sitting straight up, my head lolling against the wallpaper as I faded between waking and sleep. The cough syrup, dyed an overripe violet, dripped down around the measuring cup and stained a perfect circle into the laminate counter in our hotel room.

I did not consider that I had mistakenly self-diagnosed a bad case of bronchitis once before, some three years earlier, when my abdomen was actually swollen with tumors.

At the mention of puffins, I stood and joined my daughters at the rail. The puffins bobbed, their orange beaks like tiny sails in the wake. I lowered the brim of my baseball cap and tightened my hood. My older daughter straddled the rocking deck as she squinted through the phone, composing the best shot

to send to her friends. Having sabotaged many such encounters by trying to capture and hold onto them, I just gazed the birds as they floated and flew away.

The boat slowed and eased into Spire Cove, where rocks twisted from the bay in turrets topped by needled trees. The water, a striking jade, sloshed over sea stars and into caves. One of the most photographed spots in the world, the captain explained as we maneuvered through the maze. The girls and I huddled, whispering words of wonder to each other.

I had hoped for moments like this when these two girls, now eleven and thirteen, came to live with me a year and a half earlier. I had hoped for theatre tickets and nail-painting sessions, late-night talks on my bed and ice cream from the carton. I had recognized the tangle into which I was walking but still longed for the sweetness of motherhood. There had been some of that, but there had also been a recalibrating of every sort of expectation, of rethinking what it meant to be a parent, what it meant to be their parent. When the cancer returned, and we all decided to go through with the adoption anyway, there had been a rethinking of not just *what* but *how much*. How much could I, fifty, single and sick, reasonably do as a parent of girls who had been raised by a series of people who had failed them?

But here, in Alaska, a child who could barely be bothered to move off the couch at home was turning, wide-eyed, from the rail to tell me, "I've never done anything like this in my whole life." What choice had I but to keep up?

I was raised by those who kept up. My grandmother, married to a dairy farmer for nearly sixty years, fed and housed and worked her back crooked for countless folks who wandered in, drunk or sad or lost, and collections of children whose parents could not care for them. Someone was always sitting at her kitchen table in a medley of mismatched chairs, nibbling at fresh strawberries or homemade potato salad.

My grandparents and my parents, they worked. I knew that my mother had milked cows before the first pimple appeared on her face, that as a teen my father had clocked in at the steel mills with my grandfather. As first-generation college graduates, my parents pushed education and effort. My mom dragged me along when she delivered Meals on Wheels to stale apartments. My dad roused me on Saturday mornings to soap up the car or push the mower in straight lines back and forth across the lawn. Mom ironed on Mondays.

We cleaned on Thursdays. We did not lounge. We did not waste. We were Midwestern stock. We were Methodists. We did not understand mediocre.

I do not remember who taught me to dream, to believe that my A's and my watercolors and my aptitude for just about everything meant that I could change the world. In my white middle-class existence, my suburban schools, that looked like goodness and generosity, yes, but it more closely resembled degrees, advancement, titles, innovation, status. I could do something new, something big, something flashy, just not something ordinary.

I was a darling, for a while. When adolescence ushered in a couple of family moves and larger schools, I fell just enough. Those deemed good but not great vanish into the middle of the bell curve. I spent decades trying to recover. By many standards, I succeeded—advanced degrees, a book, a few awards, a teaching gig—but I measured myself by absences: scholarships not earned, jobs not secured, writing not published, marriages not protected, babies not born. I was not as good as I had been or thought I should be, and I was no longer anyone's darling.

A patchwork of grey lingered over the bay and cloaked the mountaintops. The captain announced that humpback whales had been spotted starboard, so she slowed the engine. The passengers hurried outside, their cameras ready. Soon, funnels of mist appeared, then the smooth, gray masses and fins, one large and one small, gliding through the deep: a mother and her baby. I stood with the girls, speaking softly and pointing, my chin tucked above my daughter's shoulder.

After a few minutes, the whales dove, and we lost them. The captain reported that she had received a dispatch of an orca sighting farther out. She thrust the boat into gear. I had hoped for one thing on this trip: to see an orca in the wild. I let my mind murmur the prayer of a child: *please God please God please God.*

In the midseventies, my parents took my brother and me to SeaWorld. I sat straight-backed in the stands as the suit-slicked trainers commanded Shamu, the killer whale, to race, jump, flip, kiss. He circled the pool, splashing the tourists in the front rows, soaking their shorts and tank tops and sandals. The trainers tossed fish into his open mouth. We all laughed and clapped, amazed. After the show, my parents let us each pick out a stuffed animal from the gift shop. My brother selected a dolphin. I went straight for Shamu.

Years later, I heard on the news that another Shamu seized his trainer during a dinner show. As visitors lifted chicken on forks and sipped from soft drinks, Shamu yanked the trainer into the water, thrashing and dragging her body until it broke and the air left her lungs and she floated limply in the pool. Some experts blamed the incident on captivity. Some blamed the trainer's ponytail. Some denounced the infantile training of magnificent mammals who should be left in the sea.

Left in the sea. That is where I had hoped to see them now. Glimpsing nature that way, the way it was intended, releases something in me. *Please God please God please God.*

The engine quieted. Two other boats had already beaten us to the spot and idled nearby. I scanned the water, watching the waves and whitecaps. My daughter pointed and cried out, "I see them!" I followed her finger to the horizon, to the tips of the long dorsal fins, several, poking up into the air. Then, magic: the sleek black bodies edged up enough to reveal the telltale white eye patches. They arced gracefully, exhaling and inhaling, again, again, a dance, a baptism, a vision.

Orcas, the captain explained, do not swim alone. They swim in pods. This time I tried to take a photo but quickly gave up, contented to stand on a deck with the girls and witness whales doing what they were meant to do, unfettered, free.

The orcas soon disappeared, but like a flash, the image was branded into my brain.

After another night of my relentless coughing, the girls hauled our suitcases down the hotel stairs and into the back of the rental car. I tried to slow my breathing as we drove the Seward Highway back to Anchorage and on to Denali. A sled dog farm awaited us, and a raft trip, and a reindeer ranch, and, we hoped, bears and moose lurking upriver or around the bend in the road. But we didn't make it to Denali. We made it as far as an urgent care facility in Anchorage, where a doctor with a Sam Elliott mustache studied a chest X-ray and told me I was bordering on respiratory failure. I listened, incredulous, sure he was exaggerating, exhibiting a flair for the dramatic. He told me I should go to the hospital. I didn't want to go to the hospital, to let some doctor hijack my trip to Alaska. I had managed this long. I could press on for three more days. I could schedule an appointment back in the Lower Forty-Eight. I could save the trip. I proposed my plan. "It's a free country," the doctor said.

I knew even as I spoke my plan that it amounted to folly, that I couldn't breathe, that my history put me in the red. The doctor brought the girls into the room, and I tearfully explained. They said they understood. I didn't, saying little as I drove us to the hospital.

In the emergency room, I ran out of air. Nurses and techs rushed about my gurney, tying a tourniquet, applying electrodes, smearing gel beneath my breast. A breathing treatment, a clear suction enveloping my mouth and nose, caused me to spit up pink, frothy liquid. I said to everyone, anyone, to take the girls out of there. The doctor told me my heart was failing and he must intubate. As I begged, between gasps, for him to put me out, I caught sight of my daughters in the hall. The younger one stared down at her tablet, lost in a game, not comprehending. Her older sister stared back at me, face shiny with tears. I closed my eyes, hearing one nurse talk on the phone to my mother as another unlaced my sneakers and peeled off my soaked leggings.

A cardio-oncologist would later give me a new number: fewer than 5 percent of patients receiving my chemo cocktail experience congestive heart failure. I would laugh to myself, having finally made it back to the top.

Twelve days before my heart gave out, I climbed three flights of stairs to a treetop office, a converted attic of an old house in Northeast DC. There a therapist met with me, pad in lap, pen in hand. I needed to talk through the mess in my head, the cancer and the adoption and all the striving and the very real possibility of dying before I can get the girls through high school.

But I was not thinking about the girls as I sat there. I was thinking about the things I have not done, about the absences. I was thinking about how, although faith comprises my core, I am not ready to die, how I can't possibly die yet because I haven't done enough. I explained this to the therapist. She asked a single question.

"When will it be enough?"

I surveyed the room for a few seconds: the clock, the window, the wall, the carpet. The answer didn't come.

After I left the office, the question stayed with me and settled in. I thought about the people who have written in their illnesses, in their final days, their pens and keystrokes like frenetic sprinting, words piling up, page after page, a lecture, a letter, a legacy, a last act. Will my life feel complete if I publish the book that has been sitting on my computer for years? If I publish in *The*

New Yorker? Win a particular writing honor? Is it enough to get tenure? Create a successful new program at the college where I teach? Increase my pass rates? Implement new courses? Might the key be overflowing classrooms? A position on a nonprofit board? Will I feel ready if I secure more likes on Facebook? Donate more money? With each answer, I came closer to understanding that I have been sprinting after a shadow, and now, toward the end, I am realizing what I should have seen before: what if I never do any of these things? What if I was destined to be ordinary?

When my grandmother was dying, her heart in the same condition mine is now, she rested her head on a table and wept, confessing to a friend that she was not ready to go. She had too much to do, she said.

From the earliest days, I knew she was the kind of woman I wanted to be. Noble, strong, fearless. I examine her extraordinary life, and I break it down. What did she do each day? She washed clothes and whipped up mashed potatoes and sewed blankets. She swept floors and typed up Sunday-school plays and got after kids for swearing and smoking. She prayed. She canned pickles to give away. She penned her story through the lives of others, through simple acts of love.

For years, I have itemized these deeds. I have thought them admirable for the whole they created. I have judged them enough—for her, for other people. I have like John the Baptist prayed for God to become greater in my life, for myself to become less. I have even prayed to become invisible, a person who serves without spotlight. Then I have turned back to my life and despaired because I was not doing something more significant.

What did my grandmother possibly think she still had to do?

In looking at my life now, having nudged up against death twice, I think about my grandmother, and my mother just like her, and all the people who have cared for me and the girls in my illness and through the adoption and in the hard days that followed. I think about the therapist's question, and I wonder, what if ordinary is enough? What if it's enough to ask after friends who have been ill? To invite a group of bored neighbor kids to come swimming? What if it's enough to pick up discarded water bottles on walks in the park and to sit at Whole Foods strategizing on how to improve my classes? What if it's enough to listen to students whose eyes brim as they relay the pain of their families, their failures, the expectations others have of them? What if it's

enough to donate money to help immigrants and the hungry and the church? What if it's enough to pray and try and vote and work? What if it's enough to share what I have with two girls who have known lifetimes of hurt? What if it's enough to simply reach toward love and, once in a while, to touch it?

When I awoke in the ICU, less than forty-eight hours after we had stood on the deck in Resurrection Bay, my hands were bound, tied to the bed railings. The room, awash in muted grey light, slowly came into focus: a cascade of clear tubing, two ridges beneath the blanket. My lungs filled and emptied, my chest gently moving up, down. I could breathe. A terrible itch on the crown of my head nagged at me.

Someone came in to check on me, and I shook my hands to get him to untie me. One of my bindings loosened, and I reached up to scratch my head. He seemed relieved that I hadn't plotted to remove the breathing tube. I glanced at the wall clock. 2:10. Behind me, the heart monitor beeped steadily.

I moved my hand in a writing motion. The man later told me that I had surprised him, that I had surprised the entire staff by attempting to communicate within hours of being wheeled into the unit. They could remember no one in the ICU making such a request before.

He flicked on the light. Then he placed before me a piece of blank paper and a blue pen, and I began to write.