

GAIL WALDSTEIN

*Singing in the Ear Canal*

I faint at my first everything in medical school.

First cadaver.

First surgery.

First autopsy.

Well not everything, not the first lecture.

I even blow the tour, the first day.

The tour's really a test. We're in, MCAT scores high enough, first semester tuition paid. Our entire freshman class files into the sub-basement, bound together tight as a brownie troop. The space is gigantic, our footsteps echo, and it's so cold we all feel small. We huddle at the edge of an auditorium-sized meat-locker, in one of Philadelphia's five medical schools, in a riot quadrant of the city. Autumn, 1964. We wear short white coats, to advertise we're only students. We all live close to the school, in the ghetto, where police line rooftops with strobe lights and machine guns every night. It is hot, still Indian summer outside, but in the basement, it's so frigid we flap our arms, open and close fists, stamp our feet to beat back the chill. Our teeth chatter so we can hardly hear the instructor.

My classmate's breath forms little white clouds, like thought containers in comic books. It's several minutes before any of us notices the overhead trolley, a sinuous steel ceiling track, like the retrieval runner in an enormous dry-cleaner. The instructor pushes a button, and a ratcheted metallic movement begins, clacking like Dad's "O" gauge trains at Christmas. The air is brittle glass. There are no colorful dresses or navy suits circling; instead, huge, plastic-wrapped mannequins sway in a bizarre dance, with no clear beat. Our breath fogs the amorphous figures who rotate above us. An exceedingly long minute passes.

This is where they store cadavers. Each body is clasped behind the ears by huge, shiny calipers, each skull indented by what could be old fashioned ice tongs, from my childhood, Catskill summers. Mother and I stayed upstate with her parents in the cool mountains during July and August. Dad tutored summer school in the city. My Nana and Pop-Pop rented a small cottage: outhouse, water pump, tin-lined

ice-box. The iceman came Monday and Thursday, his pickup bed covered with a tarp. He moved huge clear blocks from the sawdust into our kitchen. His ice pick punched hard staccato cracks as he split our portion. He carried the ice inside with tongs, his face crimson, making subsonic grunts. His biceps bunched then, almost split his shirt, and stiff dark hair on his forearms stood at attention, like I do, in the doorway. The medical tongs indent skin, but don't pierce it. The bodies are almost silver, rigid glaciers in their transparent comforters. The room is deliberately ill lit. The cadavers continue their waltz, but several of us hear only a few more bars, before we grab the door sill, and "fall out," Philadelphia's euphemism for fainting.

The first surgery I witness is a hysterectomy, months later. My fiancé arranges this extravagant gift for our winter break. We're to watch his uncle-gynecologist operate. Actually, my boyfriend will assist. My classmates are green. I'm in love, in medical school, we're planning our wedding, crocuses are just below ground, waiting for snowmelt. His uncle peels the skin back, ivory, and soft as cream. This is years before music is standard in the OR, so the only sounds are suction, requests for instruments, and the wheeze of the breathing apparatus.

My mother had a hysterectomy when I was a senior in high school. She was pale and sad that whole year, so I had to do house-keeping, everybody's laundry, grocery shopping, make supper. She kept talking about not wanting to live. He cuts a thick yellow layer of fat that has stringy white divisions between the grease. As the peritoneum opens, jellied pink viscera squeeze in front of my eyes, snaky tan-gray intestines, the fuchsia tip of a spleen, an edge of liver, maroon like raw liver, followed by a kaleidoscope of multi-hued dots, then black. Next I know, I'm on my back, braced by an aroma of coffee. A deep voice I don't recognize booms from green scrubs, *That always happens first time out. Here, have some joe.* He hands me a cup, and I ease up on my elbow and sip carefully. I scald my tongue anyway. I feel the pulse in my throat, behind my eyes; my cheeks flush. I apologize, stretch my arms hard overhead, get up, stomp my feet, and insist on returning through the swinging doors. The first hit of aromatic anesthesia brings neon lights and darkness again. This time I regroup longer, walk the halls as instructed, put on a fresh gown and mask, re-enter.

My fiancé doesn't look up. *You're going to have to learn detachment*, he says. He's a junior. I think, *right*. The belly's splayed open, her uterus glistens, the shape of a steer-skull, clamped by instruments. Thin threads string from each end, blooming to anemones in the harsh OR light. She's being eviscerated by my husband-to-be. He tugs retractors and toothed forceps, pulls her organs up and out. All the blood vessels are ligated with black silk, like a belly full of braids. The diseased uterus is not mine, but it could be.

In high school, when I visited mother after surgery, she was barely distinguishable from the sheets. Her lips were parched and white as grade-school paste. My father roamed the halls then, joked with nurses, avoided her room. I wiped her forehead and her eyes followed me, as though she wanted to say something, didn't know where to start. Years before, I'd vowed never to marry anyone who would say, *Over my dead body*, if I wanted to try something new, like Dad had with Mom. *For my birthday I want to apply to college, Milton*. She was turning forty. *I want to teach. I don't think I'm too old, do you? I'm not too old*. He roared through our thin walls, *No wife of mine works outside this house. Not while I breathe*. I put my fingers in my ears then, and later, in the basement, iced and pierced both earlobes. I wanted a reminder to put my own holes in my head.

But this hysterectomy is not my mother's; it's a stranger's. And now I'm in love, a multifaceted emotion, like a diamond. A silly symbol my fiancé cannot afford. I don't want one anyway. We have each other. I'll do anything he wants, and for a few months I believe I understand my father better, sympathize with his demand for respect. It makes sense in a way it never will again. This was a very long time ago; I am twenty-three, I know life, I'm certain about love, clear as glass. Then I hear the smallest of hisses. It's my vaso-vagal reflex again. I go down, separating myself from any future in surgery. This time, even I agree to stay in the doctor's lounge.

I learn later to pump calf muscles, shuffle my feet when standing still. I learn to mask my face, relaxing parents and patients, even though I'm never fully at ease myself. I become familiar with anatomic terms, Latinate shields doctors use to separate us-from-them. I'm never comfortable with this language of disguise, and revert to north Jersey slang every chance I get. This amuses my peers, vexes my professors. Junior year I'm told to read an x-ray, cold, in class, make a diagnosis. I get the disease right, but describe the lung

masses as big balls. The professor is not pleased. *My dear, your father spent good money for your education. Couldn't you exert yourself to learn a little vocabulary?*

*Dad isn't paying*, I say. *I'm on scholarship*. And I am. First woman awarded this stipend; but I have to promise at the interview, I won't marry until I've completed training. Easy to give my word at the time. I couldn't imagine myself married. I'd stopped longing for love after high school. But then he came, out of the blue, cerulean eyes, lashes so long they should be illegal, and a tongue that could sell the Brooklyn Bridge to one hundred women at auction, each woman thinking she was the sole owner. I keep my maiden name until graduation, although we wed the end of my freshman year. I worry a lot about being found out; fear they'll take their money back.

Years after that first surgery, I grow a carapace, enter pediatric pathology. There's little night-call, the schedule's sane, eight to five or six, and I love looking through the microscope. Love it. Also, I can be home nights for my children. In medicine, as in life, there's a but. I have to perform autopsies on babies, teenagers, children, almost daily. I must enter the OR confident, during eye enucleations I get tissue for frozen sections, to confirm tumor. I witness brain surgeries, occasionally open-heart procedures. I dissect limbs, severed legs and arms from car wrecks, from cancer, from the rare instance of physician stupidity. Still, I'm never able to watch someone else perform an autopsy without nausea and vertigo, and that atonal ring in my ear, cramping my heart to flutter. In a way this weakness is a relief, it means some part of me is still human.

Junior and senior years of medical school are more interesting, like my husband promised. But also harder: there's outpatient clinics, rounds on wards, scrubbing for surgeries, writing chart notes, learning new diseases, and days, months, of sleep deprivation. We numb, like we did as children learning scales with the piano teacher, who drummed *every good boy deserves fun* over and over, until auditory circuits closed, and just the silk of ivory slipped beneath fingertips. I always wondered what good girls deserved, but here now, there's neither time nor energy to worry equality. I can't listen long enough to a friend's problem, take a soaking bath, call home on Sunday, or hear Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante all the way through. Solitude,

to repair what's unraveling, is only available in dreams. And nights now are too short for REM patterns to develop.

My graduation ceremony is June, 1968. Philadelphia, ninety-eight degrees, ninety-nine percent humidity. The street shimmers beneath the floor-length, black gabardine gown, further heating my seven-month-distended belly. There are minutes I almost dissolve in the small ancient church. We graduates are stored in the balcony, as deans drone on, and the temperature rises. Our names are called, and I am mid-alphabet today. We descend a skinny, winding staircase which I cannot see. I tap steps with my toe, clasp the shoulder of a friend ahead of me, playing it by ear.

I smell him, my classmate, strong and sturdy, study partner for four years. In many ways I love this man. It's platonic. He and I play hooky together senior year, avoid the drear Philadelphia General neurology rotation, its patients with tertiary syphilis, intractable tremors, brains riddled by metastases. The deposited people who drool, soil themselves, sit swaddled in wheelchairs or beds. We go to the art museum, the zoo, catch a foreign flick, picnic along the Wissahickon, sunny afternoons.

My husband's last name is called. I cross the stage, take my sheepskin in Latin with my married name, assumed now in pride, that someone would actually marry me. I am tone deaf to feminist mantras.

At five p.m. the ceremony's complete. It's hotter. When my tassel's on the left, my parents insist on a photo-shoot. They opposed medicine initially, no career for a woman. Who would marry a girl with that much education? They believed, common for the sixties, that after highschool, but if not then, after college for sure, I should marry. Even my sister, eight years my junior, is raised on Barbie pap. She complains to me now, how desperately she wanted to be a doctor, all her life. *Why didn't you?* I ask once. *Women didn't do that then. Besides, I wanted to marry, have children.* And she did. Her marriage (which I admit, outlasts both of mine, even strung together) is strong and still sings with romance. Highschool sweethearts. *You would have made a great diagnostician,* I add. She says, *There were no role models back then, no good ones.*

But that hot, hot afternoon my parents are mysteriously proud. They pose us in squint-distorted shots until I say, "Shit. It's hot

as friggin' hell in this. Hurry up. I need to take off this fucking gown."

Mother turns to Dad, *I told you we should've insisted on finishing school*, she says, in a stage whisper.

My first child's a daughter; healthy, whole. I have never known such happiness. Mother gives me talcum powder and a book, something for each end. Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *A Gift from the Sea*, where she writes that women are stronger because they have an internal cycle for more than half their lives. I'd think about this, about cyclicity, only I'm back on the medicine merry-go-round, praying the caliope doesn't stop, that it sounds sweet to my babygirl too. My belly collapses in after her birth, literally, and I take off two extra weeks. They "gave" me my vacation to have her. I do not want to return. I'm no longer interested in being a doctor. And, it's not post partum blues. But the interns course through our apartment, bearing gifts, promising a light schedule. My husband urges, reasonably, that I get this year behind me. I return to every-other-night call for the next ten months. That's officially thirty-six of every forty-eight hours, but in reality, it's forty, forty-two hour shifts. I get almost no sleep on-call. This is no different for any other intern. It's the *ten miles of snow in sub-zero, barefoot*, that everyone romances their youth with, when they think back. But it is cruel and stupid and toxic.

I grow thin enough to be diagnosed anorectic, but no one uses that term in '68. I lose my cycles completely. I don't miss a thing. Except laughter.

My medical school study partner has it worse, only I don't learn this for years. No one has time or energy to stay in touch during training, but his marriage fails during residency, a mutual friend confides at a national meeting much later. *One night he just walked off the Golden Gate Bridge.*

For me now, it's the psychedelic seventies; my husband and I are hippies at home, look respectable at work, although there is my underarm hair, and a braid so long it sweeps my butt. I am still expected to defer, to look attractive, and to keep up. Normal wives learn innovative love-making, try new casseroles. My husband and I protest the Vietnam War, sometimes with red-cross armbands, always with the children. They are photographed, in utero, in back-

packs, small hands being held. We are a family striving for peace, in parades.

I also march with the children for the ERA amendment. I wear a white dress like suffragettes fifty years earlier. I think of Mother's frustrations with me, a tomboy climbing trees, coming to dinner muddy, never demure enough; how she wanted me to sing in a high register like she did. Me, a natural alto.

During residency I sometimes write notes on napkins in lectures, slip them into the white pockets of speakers. *Not every patient is female. Not all doctors are men.*

Everyone listens to the Beatles now, smokes dope, strums guitars. We have dinners and jam sessions at our home. My husband plays all string instruments, I can barely read music. He chords John Denver melodies each night after supper, as I get the children ready for bed, clean up the dishes. I try to learn the banjo, half-try, but his playing's far better. His music is very seductive. We couldn't be happier.

After my first baby I bring medical journals home, open them after she's asleep, after supper, fall unconscious in their pages. After the second birth, I still bring things home, pile them bedside, never open them. When our son arrives, I continue the professional charade, carry journals to the car, leave them neatly stacked for the next day.

Three children in four years; I am in trouble. A neurologist I haven't seen since internship, enters a crowded elevator where I'm wedged, late in my third pregnancy, enormous. He raises his eyebrows, and his voice. *Don't you ever watch Carson, on the late show?* Everyone turns.

At work, brains take you only so far, before a small high voice begins, in my head more than my ear, a mosquito before sunrise. It's difficult to distinguish from the chatter of lifesong: childbirth caws, pots banging for dinner, overhead pages, suckling babies, a home of music, and on-call phone messages. Like my partners, I do autopsies; learn to diagnose slides from surgical specimens; write PADS and FADS, preliminary and final diagnoses; describe the histology of the baby's organs, create a little biography. Short lives: prenatal history, what happened during the illness, what the

therapy was, and what I found at post mortem. Then I review the relevant literature.

One day, late in training, I find little corpses of beliefs I treasured, stacked in my lap. I entered medicine to help people, to work in an exciting field, to remain independent. But even this “protected” residency includes some weeks of twelve-hour days. Personal grooming streamlines, kindness pulls away like debriding charred skin. Being patient or polite is as alien as breathing oil.

It’s in my denials, an emotional Braille that my husband, who is not blind, has no incentive to learn. My incessant fatigue wounds both of us. I stay awake to bathe the children, rock them to sleep, read them stories. He’s a grown-up, he should understand. Hell, a few years back, he did the same thing.

At work I stay strong, embrace too many parents as they thunder Nooooo down corridors after the news. It’s this continuous over-exposure to children’s sicknesses and dying schedules that depletes me. Life stretches tight as a tympanic membrane. Pacing for a joke, an afternoon window shopping, a crying jag, all gone. There are no luxuries now beyond time.

Thirty years after graduation, mother’s in a nursing home, disabled with Parkinson’s. She’s frail and dying, fades in and out of lucidity. When I can steal time from my practice, from my second husband, from my children, I visit. In return she musters her mind for the day. The last coherent trip I wheel her out of the home, place her in a rental car, drive to the ocean, thinking to revive, even briefly, some of her early vigor.

I have questions.

*How did you go on after Danny?* I still ache for that baby brother, forty-five years later, only five weeks of him. *Why did you choose Dad against your mother’s objections? Do you have regrets? What would you do differently if you could replay it?*

I want to know how she swallowed her pride at my dismissal, in the heady throes of adolescence, at thirteen, so we might later reconcile. I’m having conflicts with my own daughters now, whose visions wildly differ from mine. *You raised us to think for ourselves*, they chorus. *Now that we do, you can’t even listen.* Does she have suggestions?

She answers so softly I have to lean down to hear. *I made one big mistake, I should’ve had a career.*



Thinking the wind's sifted her words, or she's muddled again, I ask, *What did you say?*

*I should have studied something. I could've earned... a living. Then, when he got mean, so awful.* She shakes her head, or maybe it's the Parkinson's. *You have no idea what it was like, living with him, those years. Your father. No idea.*

I cradle her shoulders, wipe her tears. But I know, I want to say. Husband number two is no improvement over number one. I pray this is not heritable.

Mother flew to Denver after the birth of each baby. Our son was three months old before she came that last time. She said our household was too noisy, and chaotic. She said we needed privacy. I could've used her help. My husband worked late at the lab then, attended anti-war meetings most nights. Our babyboy got sick early in Mother's visit. It began with subtleties, a fussiness, he wouldn't nurse, he smelled funny, a sweet-sick scent I'd memorized on wards during my internship. When I held him normally to nurse or laid him down to change his diaper, he screamed. I could only cuddle him upright, against my chest, where he would quiet to a whimper. We take him to the ER. The on-call pediatrician checks him, twice. My husband and I watch him use his stethoscope, his otoscope. He checks ear canals, drums, heart, lungs, belly. He checks for hernias. *False alarm. Colic.*

By three a.m. a high fever erupts, by five, we're back at the hospital. I'm crazy with fear, meningitis, something about baby boys in my hands. They do a spinal tap, and a nurse, my partner's wife, our friend, walks me around and around while the tap's performed. She waits with us for results from the lab, my lab. I'm so scared, I cannot even hum a lullaby, although he's burning in my arms. I'm as distraught as every parent I've ever consoled, when pink goo leaks from his left ear to his shoulder, then to mine. A perforated eardrum. He recovers with antibiotics. Mother, who was at home with the girls, phones the airport, changes flights, leaves early. She was a superstitious woman.

At thirty, my residency is over. My marriage wobbles like a top at the end of a spin. I have three children, a handsome husband. The future should open like a ripe rose, mulched, petal-years, long

before decay. But instead I crack, a pick fracturing ice. The day I disintegrate is sunny and warm, upstate New York, August. My sister is getting married. The people I see are not her guests. The bugs that crawl on me aren't the mosquitoes everyone else simply swats at dusk. My "people" make fun of my hips and belly, how slowly my mind works. They command me to change diapers. *You get shit patrol, because your eyes are brown. Because you are shit.* They probe me, engage in obscene acts. No one else hears them, luckily. Also, I can predict the future. It isn't pretty.

*You'll lose your children for awhile, then you'll come back, only changed, you know, like throw-away plastic diapers.*

The diagnosis is mumbo jumbo, *paranoid thought disorder, detachment from reality, verb salad, delusions, hallucinations. Schizophrenia.*

During my hospitalization an enormous abdominal hole, a through and through tunnel, burrows low in my belly, where my uterus completed all that begetting. I pass one hand through the front and clasp my other from behind, a secret handshake. This is decades before the cancer, but a strange prescience in the interminable morass of insanity. It takes months to convince them I'm sane, although I'm not. I need to get out, to get back to my children. It takes years to recover.

I bluster through the end of that marriage, the shaming divorce, anchor myself to my small children, to medicine. I puzzle over the microscope with its sea of cells, periwinkle borders, purple nuclei dividing, tumors needing names. I call surgeons, cook for, and read to, my children, teach residents and students, hang macramé on our windows, hang mobiles throughout the house, hug everyone, every chance I get. Like many mothers, I fret over childhood illnesses, behavior problems, their lost dad.

Eventually, I try love again, buttressed by family and work.

Daylight hours are filled, overfilled, with congenital heart diseases, chromosome abnormalities, premature babies, a stream of childhood cancers, placentas. Slides, formaldehyde fumes, midnight frozen sections, speedy decisions race my mind. I run conferences, present papers at international meetings, with occasional applause for a minor point, the way Nana clapped when I made a good French knot, or Dad, when Mother sang pitch-perfect harmony with him.

It's decades and decades later when someone asks, *Would you do it all again?* And like so much after the fact, the answer is half notes, yes and no.

I create a list, my life is littered with lists: x-rays to review, teacher conferences to attend, ballet lessons for my daughters, preparation for grand rounds, groceries, cash for sitters, retrieving the children from soccer. But be warned, Nana said, *Advice is worth what you pay for it.* Here's mine, free, for anyone considering medicine: you will weigh each decision of your private life like a diagnosis, benign or malignant. You will use medical terminology, inappropriately, late at night, in a lover's arms. You will navigate your own emotional bed like a triage unit. You will enter therapy. You will be too busy. You will run eternally late.

You will ruin your easy laughter as you struggle to keep your word. You will quit: a husband, a field, a friend, but if you're very, very lucky, not your children.

In its favor, the title doctor guarantees last minute restaurant reservations. You *will* whittle your student loans down; you can take exotic educational vacations, tax deductible. But everyone will believe you have more money than Midas, and charge accordingly. You can stop at roadside accidents, legitimately, but you may spend precious minutes trying to convince crowds you really are a physician, especially if you're female, young, attractive. This will be exaggerated in foreign countries.

On a vacation in Sicily with my second husband once, a horrible motorcycle crash occurred just ahead of us. I knew no Italian; he cowered just thinking of blood or disease. Traffic was jammed. I jumped from the rental, ran to the scene, as the ambulance arrived. Medics, white-suited dancers, ran between the victim and the ambulance as blood spurted enthusiastically from his head and chest. I shouted *Doctore*, loud as I could, pointed to my chest, uncertain I'd be believed, or heard. Afraid I might be put in charge. I felt the man's wrist, his neck. No pulse. He was pale, young, unhelmeted; his chest did not move. The crowd stopped breathing; everyone froze except the white-clothed acrobats hanging a transfusion, pulling the IV extension higher, shouting orders to one another. They returned to the vehicle again and again, oxygen, a stethoscope, needles, alcohol. I watched for breath, for movement, repalpated his pulse, then left. Back at the Fiat, my husband started. *You didn't have gloves. There's*

*AIDs everywhere today.* Did you even consider me? It's the beginning of our end, this harangue, and some part of me knows that. I sit and listen to him swear, to the sirens recede, impotent as anyone in the face of death. My weeping finally silences him.

Years later, after my radical hysterectomy, I *have* a huge hole in my belly. The cancer's out, but the husband rants in my hospital room, from fear no doubt, but it's so uncontrolled the nurses form an "evac" unit, remove him. I do not cry. I'm glad to be alive; glad to be cured, at least for the moment; glad to be.

So, if you enter medicine, you will fill, and overfill your days, mortgage your children's early years caring for others. You'll meet extraordinary men and women, yoked in service, some with god-complexes, lacking compassion; but the majority are dedicated, an honor to work beside. I know, I was lucky most of my career.

A channeled whelk sits on my desk in honor of Anne Morrow Lindbergh. When the phone rings, I hope it's one of my children, or a close friend. It will not be the OR. If it's someone I don't care for, I hold the cool shell to my other ear. The opening coil emits a sound that might be middle C, if I had perfect pitch.