

My Life with Medicine · Naomi Shihab Nye

ONCE my mother put me on a horseradish diet for an entire week. I ate nothing but tablespoonfuls of freshly grated horseradish, and drank gallons of water to flush out my system.

After suffering for months from a lingering bronchitis no conventional treatment seemed to cure, I was ready to try anything. Possibly my mother had learned about this treatment in one of those old-time remedy books that lived on our shelves, written by someone named Jethro or Hubert. The delicate tissues of my inner cheeks and throat blazed mightily each time I braved a dose. I squinched my eyes shut and thought about: the lips of my ex-boyfriends, the extravagant view from the South Rim at Big Bend National Park, chocolate cake—to be able to swallow. Till now I have hesitated to mention such details about my past, for fear they might make my mother seem reckless, or myself susceptible in the extreme.

The horseradish did not make me well, but it didn't make me sicker either. I remember the lumpy horseradish-like texture of my off-white ceiling as I lay weakly in bed staring up at it, and the bones in my wrists, which seemed more prominent each morning. I was reading Jack Kerouac at the time and had not eaten meat for years, so I could not imagine whatever meat it was that people liked to eat with horseradish to help it go down easier. My idea of a nightmare was a lamb chop sizzling in a skillet. The Kerouac books I read from then on were marked by a certain tingle that would arise in my tongue upon opening one.

This treatment preceded my personal visit to one of the Filipina faith healers who had come to San Antonio to give presentations on psychic surgery. Their films showed a healer running his or her hands over the troubled region of the patient's body, babbling in some intense, electric vocabulary, and lifting what looked like a bloody kidney or tumor from the body without ever cutting it open.

A few people in the back of the tiny auditorium, where my family liked to sit so as not to be called on to demonstrate anything, murmured that it was a chicken gizzard or pig liver or cow heart, and the so-called "healer" had had it up a sleeve. I listened to each possibility with equal interest. I was not devoted to believing things, but it seemed as foolish to scoff too soon. When the scratchy film showed the previously "sick" patient now well and

smiling widely, it did not even look like the same person to me. And how were we to know? What were we supposed to do about it?

Perhaps the Filipinos hoped for contributions from the audience to allow them to continue their “work.” Undoubtedly we did not give much, if anything. But my mother made an appointment for me to have a “free consultation” regarding my ongoing bronchial condition, which included stabbing pains in the chest and attacks of hyperventilation so profound I would have to pull off the highway if I were driving and breathe into a brown paper bag.

She dropped me off downtown at the David Crockett Hotel/Motel behind the Alamo. I was to visit Room 17 at 2 P.M. My mother had not given our names when she called for the appointment, to insure perfect anonymity; the psychic could not “check up on you” in advance of your visit.

A handsome, strong-boned woman with an upswept hairdo answered the door. She motioned me to be seated on the twin bed opposite her. After staring at me for a brief moment, she looked away toward the ugly dresser with handles impersonating treasure trunks of conquistadores.

Her first words were, “You breathe too much. Why you breathe so much?” I felt astonished. I was not breathing too much at that exact moment, so there was no way she could have known this by looking at me.

She closed her eyes.

“You learned exercises for breathing, is this not right? You went to a—school. They teach you make deep breathing in and out, and you were good with this, no? You show everybody how to do it, no?”

A pack of wild cards shuffled in my head and slammed on the table: the Yoga School, where I’d gone on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for many months, where we ended each session with “deep breathing” cycles and I was able to take in so much air and hold a breath so long that the teacher sometimes made me lie down on a platform at the front of the room to lead everybody.

“So now you need *forget* how to do it a little bit, okay? You do it —*automatica*—now so your blood fill up with too much oxygen and make you dizzy. You feel dizzy when you do it, no? No good to breathe too much. Make your whole—system—lose balance.” She waved her arms and threw her head around dramatically, to demonstrate. “Now you need learn to do—what a dog do.”

I tried to follow. “Bark?”

She shook her head. “No, that other thing,” and demonstrated by hanging her tongue out of her mouth and panting. “Do it with me,” she instructed.

We sat on twin beds at the David Crockett Hotel panting hard at one another, as if we had just jogged up to the South Rim of Big Bend National Park with jugs of horseradish in our packs.

Then she stood and smiled at me. “So there you go,” she said. “Train your breath the other way and you be fine. Each time you feel too big breaths coming, remember the dog.” I tried to hand her \$5 but she wouldn’t take it. “No, no,” she said. “I do this because I like to do it.” She waved me out the door. “Good luck.”

What could anybody say to that?

First she diagnosed me in ten seconds, then she cured me, for free. I was remembering the dog from then on, each time my attacks started. Panting worked far better than the paper bag had, and I didn’t have to carry anything with me. I just turned my head to the side.

My mother, waiting in the steamy car with all the windows rolled down, said, “Well? That was awfully quick.” I could tell her and know she would believe me, but it was certainly going to be hard to tell anyone else. I have suffered no bronchitis or serious hyperventilation since that moment.

I always think people with closed minds must never have had any ineffable experiences in their lives. Otherwise how could they be that way?

Our mother birthed us in the friendly ’50s without drugs, inhalants or spinal numbing. This was not considered “hip” or “intelligent” back then, but radically goofball. More importantly as regards her general character, she birthed us naturally with no moral assistance or support on the part of the nurses at St. Mary’s Hospital in St. Louis, who looked askance at her request. They left her completely alone in the labor room, saying, “You probably won’t be able to do it.” At the last minute she rang a bell or shouted or something, and a doctor appeared. Our father was off feeling faint in a broom closet, a distant corridor. I have a picture of them leaning over the crib my first day home—mother’s sensitive nose, father’s thick, sensational hair.

Our mother took pesticides and toxicity seriously long before many other people did, back in the deluded years when most grown-ups still

smoked. She frequented an organic farm a few blocks from our house, refused to spray our house or yard with poisons, and mulched her peelings and eggshells. She was as skeptical of chemicals as she was of antibiotics. Rather, she walked the line. We *were* vaccinated, and we visited doctors *occasionally*—chicken pox, stitches in a bloody knee—but our mother kept her radar tuned to High for Other Possibilities. Legions of vitamin bottles lined our shelves. We were safe in her interesting hands.

Our fresh, wonderfully dirty-looking yard eggs came from the organic farmer's elderly mother who got mad at my father once and swatted him over the head with a broom. I think he'd asked her too many questions. He refused to pick up our eggs after that. Dazzling waves of heat rose from the pavement late summer afternoons when we trudged with our mother up the hill, pulling the red wagon piled high; summer squash, crisp green beans, flamboyantly fat eggplants. At our house we had little extra money, but terrific cuisine.

In Girl Scouts, the other girls brought frothy cupcakes decorated with pink sugar sprinkles for treats, but I could count on my own mother to supply us with dried apricots and nuts. No one in our chirpy circle ever groaned. They just stared at me silently: "Is this what you have to put up with?" But I knew their bones were more brittle than mine.

I never once, not once, took a white-bread sandwich to school. My friends stared at my authentic, earth-colored lunches with sidelong interest. I think they were afraid they might be contagious. My brother and I had to sit way, way back from the face of the giant television set, if we watched it at all. At night, our windows stayed open so cool exhalations of pine and cherry trees filtered through our screens.

With all this attention to detail, it's amazing we ever got sick. If we had a fever, we fasted a while, then ate a potato. Potatoes were supposed to soak up the heat. If we had a cold, we lay in bed with a giant stack of books and a mound of Kleenexes rising out of the sheets. The daily, domestic world felt farther away—muffled voices, vanished smells, an unfamiliar croaky voice coming from deep in the chest as if we had turned into leprechauns or aliens. There was that awful first moment when you imagine your throat getting sore, then the awful point of no turning back—sore for sure. At least a cold slowed me down, gave me Carl Sandburg, Nancy Drew and *Little Women*. It had its payoffs. Occasionally my family would visit the Unity School of Christianity, an eclectic group of positive thinkers, who said

people only got colds if they invited them. You could deny a cold and it would leave before it ever came. I liked lots of their upbeat beliefs, but this hogwash failed entirely for me.

As a baby, my brother once experienced convulsions and had to be whisked to the hospital in a swirl of panic. We measured all illness by that episode from then on—everything short of eyeballs rolling back in the head was minor. Another time I unwittingly caused him to stumble into the path of an oncoming bicycle. He was rushed, bleeding and dizzy, to an Emergency Clinic where they wrapped a gigantic white turban around his head like a Sikh. He wore it for nearly a month, staring soberly at me from beneath its folds. I said he was getting an accent.

Because I tended toward morning snuffiness and had already displayed dramatic allergies to penicillin and sulfa drugs, confirming my mother's reservations, I had allergy tests—the prickled poke of tiny needles up and down my back. When the specialist announced he had isolated my sensitivity—allergic to dust—it seemed ridiculous. Where could we ever go where there would be no dust?

Our mother vacuumed my walls. She pleaded with me to take the travel posters off my ceiling. I received exemption from various household chores—no shaking rugs, sweeping or vacuuming. There were certain benefits to being allergic. Years later, my brother, who had looked askance at these special considerations, did what he called “the allergy test” on me. He didn't use any needles. I had developed, after consuming six lovely bowls of fresh English strawberries on the great ship Queen Mary, a set of hives and announced I could never eat a strawberry again.

My brother made me a peanut butter sandwich. After finishing it, I heard him remark, “That strawberry jam was great!” Immediately I moaned and felt the skin itching under my shirt, whereupon he leapt to the refrigerator and seized upon a jar of—raspberry. “See!” he said. “It's all in your mind! It's always been in your mind! I knew allergies were a lie.”

Once I went to the doctor with my father after he lost control of our car around the corner from our house and drove into a ditch. I hit my head on the dashboard and he hit his head on the steering wheel. We felt fine, but someone thought we should go to a doctor, to make sure we didn't have any head injuries.

How did the doctor discern this? He made us walk in a straight line. He didn't stare at the wall or close his eyes.

The night before my father drove into the ditch, he dreamed it. Whenever he had a bad dream, he'd take a deep slug of his breakfast coffee and say, "I need to wash that dream right out of my mind." He liked the scene in "South Pacific" where Mitzi Gaynor washes a man out of her hair, over and over again. He was always singing it in between "What kind of fool am I?" and "I love Paris in the springtime."

Our mother said he drove into the ditch just to prove he was a psychic too. We knew a lot of psychics in our family. We knew Swamis and Gurus and theology professors and Dead Sea Scroll scholars and people who were doing new translations of the Bible. This must have made our mother's parents very nervous.

Our mother's parents were God-fearing, doctor-fearing Missouri Synod Lutherans who lived in a gloomy apartment on Union Boulevard and kept their blinds drawn all day long. I thought they liked their rooms to feel more mysterious. Our mother had shaken them up by marrying someone who not only wasn't a Lutheran, but wasn't even a Christian. How could she do this? Our mother had a mysterious smile.

"Tomorrow I'm going in for my knee again," our grandmother would quietly announce, year after year. We never asked much about her knee. I have regretted this. Whether it got better or not after years of a doctor's care was not discussed. The point was: she believed. She believed in going to the doctor. She would no sooner have visited a Filipino faith healer than taken a rocket ship to the moon. Appointments were sacred and paid for by a big Blue Cross or a giant Blue Shield. Years later I was shocked to hear that our German grandfather whose parting words to us were often, "Keep your belt buckled!" frequented a chiropractor on Fridays. It seemed almost—avant-garde.

Our father's family, on the other hand, were Palestinians now living in a small, stony village surrounded by almond and olive orchards, high in the hills of the West Bank. They had lived there since their 1948 ouster from their Jerusalem home. Though Muslim, their village was named for a Christian, St. Giles. They were covering all the bases. My father's family ascribed to watermelon cures ("A watermelon can heal fifty ways," our father would gently remind us, slicing the juicy pulp from the skin and placing the triangle in our open mouths) and an herb called *marimea*, of the

family of sage. *Marimea* was good for stomach ailments, any variety—our father brewed it up in fragrant cups of dark tea. So it made sense that he would not object when our mother began cultivating great plots of comfrey in our yard—the furry, heavily-veined leaves were said to be helpful for everything from canker sores to burns. *O we knew aloe vera before it became a household word!*

Our mother was tender but tough. She stood over me with bottles of pantothenic acid and Vitamin E. “Put the pill on the back of your tongue and swallow!” she directed. “It cannot get stuck!” But of course it could if I thought so. At least Vitamin C’s were suckable. Our tender-hearted father bore the burden of over-empathy. If anyone vomited in his vicinity, he would vomit too. Once, at a Christmas Eve Nativity pageant beside the Mississippi River, he and my brother made quite a spectacle of themselves.

Despite their cultural variations, our parents both placed great stock in the wet rag. Sometimes cold and draped across a throbbing forehead, or wrapped around the stunned knee, sometimes smoky hot and pressed into the small of the back where the bicycle handlebar had poked, our parents’ raggedy washcloths eased, comforted, cajoled. We never doubted they could help us feel better. Sometimes our father had to comfort from the hallway, so our illnesses wouldn’t grip his own psyche, but we knew he cared. We never left the house without a “Be careful” trailing us, like the long fringes of a bedouin scarf. Of course we did not yet realize what a gift this was—parental concern. It was the ground everything else was built on. But we did not know that yet. We expected it.

Then our family sold everything we owned and moved to Jerusalem. We rented the upper floor of a big stone house eight miles north of the city. Gypsies camped in rocky fields nearby, playing wild drums late at night around a fire. Exotica seemed to grow more and more local in our lives.

When busloads of Turkish pilgrims passed through Jerusalem enroute to Mecca, a hysterical typhoid rumor swept the city.

“It always happens,” our father said mildly. “Ever since I was a little boy. The pilgrims come traveling, bearing some great disease.”

But the city health officials took it seriously. At my school deep in the Old City, students were involuntarily inoculated with a community needle—dipped into a small vial of alcohol between arms. I shudder now to think.

The next day a fever so great swept over me that my mother was taking my temperature every ten minutes. I was hauled to a doctor. Two more doctors appeared at the house. I saw them all raising their eyebrows. Everything they suggested felt like an experiment. No medicine helped. My whole body was draped with cool washcloths which my mother dipped into a bowl in her lap. Three or four days blended together. I blazed away. It was also my birthday and I had no interest whatever in looking at my cake.

Then my grandmother, furious because she hadn't been alerted, caught wind of my illness and bustled in from her village by taxi. I recall her high-pitched voice babbling angrily at my father in the hallway. "She says I have insulted her."

She shooed everyone out of my room and stood over me, her long white headdress and the richly embroidered bodice of her dress spinning before my eyes. She closed her eyes and began chanting prayers in Arabic, over and over and over again, like an Islamic rosary, running her hands up and down in the air over my body. She stuck a hundred straight silver pins which she pulled from her bodice into the bedsheet outlining my body, like in *Gulliver's Travels*. I think the pins must have broken the fever's current, for in less than an hour, I was sweating profusely and the fever broke. I sat straight upright, demanding *hummos* and custard and soup. Some might say the illness had simply run its course, but I had no doubt the cure was my grandmother's doing.

After that I looked at her differently.

When I sat at her side, I was secretly sitting at her feet.

I was the only family member who consumed delicious *falafel* sandwiches, replete with casual layers of lettuce and tomato, at a particular Old City lunch stand near my school, and a year later only I entertained a hideous, sizeable member of the parasite family, *ascariasis*. Probably the two items went together. By the time the worms made themselves known to me ("Did you see one?"—"Yes, I saw one"—"More than one?"—"One was enough") we had migrated to San Antonio, Texas, where Botanica drugstores sold magical potion powders called "Jinx Removers" and "Do As I Say." I bought some. I bought all of them. Maybe the trouble was that I kept them in their bottles with the neon labels, lined up gleaming on shelves in the bathroom. Maybe I should have sprinkled the powders across my chest.

My mother checked her herbal handbooks, but the remedies sounded excruciatingly slow. Who wants to fast in order to starve one's worms? It could take days, or weeks. I couldn't entertain them that long. Besides, I wanted to have them precisely identified. Otherwise it was like having a party for strangers.

The doctor we visited for the *ascariasis* had never encountered them before and resorted to his medical text. He prescribed an antidote with a skull and crossbones on the label. I did not feel good about this. With large worms inside one's body, it is hard to feel good about anything at all. He told me to go home, drink the medicine, and lie down. The worms were—ahem—supposed to be expelled some time afterwards.

A few hours after I had downed the foul brew and nothing had been expelled, I could swear I felt worms slithering up my esophagus. I insisted my father call the doctor back and made the mistake of listening in on the extension phone. The doctor resorted to his text again. I thought I heard him chuckle and told my father later I wanted to kill him.

"Looks like—she could be right," he said. "Looks like—they might be expelled through vomit instead of feces. Like I told you, I never dealt with any of these before. I probably should have sent you to someone else."

He also noted, at that happy moment, that he had mistakenly given me nearly twice the dose suitable for my size, so the poison's drama might endure longer than predicted. I writhed on the floor. I called out for my distant grandmother.

No worm ever emerged from my mouth. I don't recall anything else. But when I found myself, nearly twenty years later, with *ascariasis* again, I made sure I found a specialist who had broken bread with them on many occasions. ("Hon, you could just a' easily have picked these up on the streets o' San Antone as in the dark recesses o' Me-hee-co.") Medicine had improved—now I downed two oblong pills and was done with it. "Is it true they could come out of my mouth?"

The specialist laughed openly. "Hon, do you care? You want to get rid of them, right? Does a worm know which end is up and which is down? Your body's like a little hourglass and that sand goes any direction it can."

Doctors seem to be excessively fond of the metaphor. It disturbs me when I imagine they have used the same description to many other people. My body is one in a long line of bodies. It is also an hourglass, a vessel, an ocean, a brewing storm. Doctors also repeat identical stories about other

anonymous patients from one visit to another, forgetting they've told them to me before. I can never connect their stories to mine at all. The other patients seem idiotic, but their lives improved as soon as they took the doctor's advice. Even worse, I wonder if doctors are telling *my* story to them.

Our first years in Texas, my family was living leanly, from paycheck to paycheck, with me on the brink of college, when our father heard of the cheaper dental care available in Nuevo Laredo, a quick pop across the Mexican border. He took us all for a group excursion. I volunteered to be last.

As the *dentista*, exhausted by the tooth problems of the rest of my family, approached me in the chair with a set of supposedly sterilized instruments held upright in his hand (he had no assistant), he tripped on the edge of a rug and stabbed me deeply, right in the knee with a silver pick.

Blood bubbled up through its perfect puncture wound.

I was wearing a dress I had recently finished stitching together in Homemaking Class. My teacher had been horrified when I refused to use matching buttons. The blot of blood grew on its hem, a symmetrical flower. I tipped my head and that room became a movie: *dentista* scrambling apologies, my father flustered, and outside the window, a man passing by with a colorful bouquet of elegantly crafted straw brooms.

Later I bought one. The brooms bore small wrapped swatches of red velvet at the place where the straw joined to the wood. I remember the elegant brooms exactly, but not the rest of the story about my teeth or my leg, which may have required a stitch or two. I like how memories have dissolved parts, neat as Alka-Seltzer in a bubbly glass.

So my father found an Anglo dentist in San Antonio who would swab our teeth with a piece of cotton and say he had cleaned them. Later this casual gentleman was indicted for trafficking cocaine.

Daren, our handsome long-haired neighbor, drove me back and forth to college for a year until he smashed my hand in the door of his van. He didn't mean to. I'd been watching him closely and he showed no particular interest in me of any kind. We were, in fact, on our way to visit a classmate at a hospital together when this happened, so I made a personal stop at the emergency room.

The doctors acted very gloomy. They wrapped my hand up tightly and had me return the following Monday to see an even gloomier group of hand specialists, who left long, doleful pauses between their words. “We will—need to—operate—and the recovery—will be—very—gradual. When—could you stand—to be without—the use of your right hand?” When? As soon as I found the world without dust in it, that was when. A tendon up the center of my hand had snapped, like a popped rubber band, and now made a hard, painful ball at the base of my middle finger.

My mother consulted her Edgar Cayce books (Association for Research and Enlightenment—we were active members in those days) which suggested castor oil compresses applied to the skin for various injuries of tendon and bone and muscle. A small brown bottle cost \$2 at the drugstore.

Why not? The anthem of the alternative. I attended the rest of my college semester with my hand bound tightly in flannel, a wad of cotton drenched in castor oil at the base of my middle finger. I grew used to the subtle, oily smell. And the knot dissolved. Maybe the tendon stretched out again, comfortably. Maybe it stitched itself back into place.

All I know is when I returned to the hand specialists they x-rayed my hand again and stared at me. It hadn’t hurt for some time, but I thought I should see them once more since we had made a vague, future date.

I am positive one of them used the word “miracle” though he might have denied it the following moment.

The very instant I met the man I would marry, I felt I’d been struck hard over the head by a waitress’s tray. We were in a crowded restaurant called “Quinney’s Just Good Food” in downtown San Antonio. It was a chance meeting. We shared a lunch table. I ordered fish and mashed potatoes. Right away I could tell he was a man to whom words like “miracle” would not appeal. This did not dissuade my interest. We get tired of ourselves very quickly.

About eight months after our wedding, we felt we were ready to have a baby. We started “trying.” Since elementary school, the phrase, “try, try again” was a nemesis. What did it insinuate? You failed the first time, right? But people pretend it opens up the world.

Trying to have a baby, my world shrank. I kept my eyes fixed on the pregnant bellies of women at grocery stores. I envied, then hated them. I had nightmares about terry cloth bathrobes and barred slats of wooden cribs

with no one inside. Having imagined conception would occur the very first time we invited it—I gradually realized my naiveté. When it didn't happen again and again for more than two years, my moods became dramatic. My steady friend never lost his faith and hope, but I lost mine on a daily basis.

I could have kept notebooks of the stupid things people say. I wrote to Ann Landers three times, but she never published my letters. A stranger asked, "So why don't you have a family yet? Too busy with your own little lives?"

Finally we visited specialists and had every test they could dream up. I had most of them. The great fear I had of anesthesia—being "put to sleep," being placed temporarily "out of mind"—far outweighed my concern over the laparoscopy I was about to undergo, so I was astonished to find myself happily swimming in rich blue water as the drug fed into my veins. The lap-lapping of waves licked the softened edges of my head as I sank into a warm sea. It was so *easy* to let go.

Perhaps insomniacs appreciate this sense of release more than others might, but one brief flirtation with anesthesia made a fan out of me. So when the next surgery rolled around—what was it they said they were going to do? Uncap my fallopian tubes that were sealed like fountain pens? Pop the tight seed pod off the tangled stalk?—I asked hopefully, "Do I get to go to sleep?"

After the surgery, we "try tried again," with renewed enthusiasm. But four more years passed with no results. I looked at the whole world differently by now. "Frustration" had become a palpable entity. The word "stress" sent me into a spin. I slammed my hand on the fertility expert's table. "Fertility drugs! Everyone else takes them, why can't I? I am not *just stressed out!* I used to be a very relaxed individual!"

His voice always sounded so intellectual, so mild. "They won't help you. You *are* fertile. It's something else in your way and I don't know what. You remain among that small percentage of cases we can't figure out."

He charged a lot not to figure us out, and only prescribed one burst of fertility drugs to shut me up, but he was right—they did nothing. I felt gloomy, chronically bereaved. I scared myself a few times in stores, imagining how easy it would be to grab a distracted mother's crying child and run. I couldn't believe how easily felonies were drifting into my mind.

Finally, far from home, I had tea with a couple whose son had been conceived "naturally" thirteen years after they started "trying." "It's more

than science, dear,” the kind gentleman said, placing his hand over mine on the table. “Trust in this. There are mysterious elements at work here. I just want you to keep believing.”

I can’t say my belief quotient soared after that conversation, but something inside me settled down. I said to myself, “Okay, now what? If not that, what?” I went about my business.

The week I turned thirty-three, a massage therapist offered a “special oil” as a birthday gift. “What particular problem do you have? I’ll give you something for that.”

“Infertility.” After six years I could say the unsavory word without tears welling up. She prescribed rosemary-melissa oil and told me to rub it on my belly before going to sleep.

The next day a friend who ran a natural foods restaurant appeared with a tiny bottle of herbal tincture called “False Unicorn.” It bore a fancy scientific name too, but the unicorn is what I remember. I’ve always been prejudiced against these creatures. I’ve told children in writing classes they could write poems about anything they like except TV or unicorns.

My friend asked, “Do you still want to have a baby? Well, put a few drops of this under your tongue every day. If you can’t stand the taste, put the drops in tea. I just read about it and found some for you. Good luck!”

I can’t say I felt terribly excited. I put the drops under my tongue for six days, and vaguely rubbed my belly. We went off on a trip to Philadelphia and I forgot my little rituals. Then strange things started happening. I ordered coffee in restaurants, but couldn’t drink it when it came. I ran up a flight of stairs and swooned dizzily at the top.

After two more months of peculiarity—floods of compassion in airport lobbies, a sudden distaste for shrimp—I returned to my infertility expert who, for the first time, grew animated. “I think you’re pregnant! And I think you’re almost at the end of the first trimester!”

Hadn’t I noticed my loss of periods? Sort of. Did I tell him about the False Unicorn? No. Did the False Unicorn have anything to do with it? All I can say is—consider six years, then six days.

Pregnancy was terrific. I felt so inhabited and useful. I placed a pillow between my belly and the steering wheel. The world seemed gracious, filled with anticipation. Our son was delivered by an obstetrician so charismatic that if he had told us to wrap the boy in newspapers for the first forty-eight

hours, I would have complied. He was the doctor I had always wanted to believe in. He was the guy who *knew his stuff*.

Later I contemplated why our process had taken so long. If we had had a baby years earlier, we would not have had *the same baby*, right? Even a month earlier, even a day. The one we ended up with, the luminous boy of well-shaped words, gleaming collector of lightbulbs and flashlights, was the one *just perfect for us*. Was his soul on hold? Did that herb simply allow the door hinge to swing open?

Since then, I have delivered little bottles of False Unicorn to other people's doorsteps. While I have not heard of it working so thoroughly or quickly for anyone else I know, one friend swore it erased the PMS symptoms which had been plaguing her for years.

San Antonio abounds with shrines, prayer *nichos*, and *milagros*—little metal charms of arms and legs and eyes and breasts and cars—pinned up by devotees at altars around town. Mother Mary is strung with expired driver's licenses. Little Saint Somebody stares out through a sea of school pictures, bent mug shots. A graffiti artist scrawls "NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE" across the backs of bus benches all over town. I visit the Capilla de los Milagros (Chapel of Miracles) at the exact moment my mother's palm is sliced open for surgery and purchase a charm in the shape of a hand to pin up under the sober-looking Jesus. I touch his head, because I have seen everyone else doing it, and receive a potent electrical jolt. Either they have Him hot-wired or it's a holy zap. At least I can have a sense that I have "done something" which invites the intervention of a power greater than my own.

We are very big on votive candles down here. Good thing there's an old-fashioned candle company selling "seconds" out of barrels right down the block. Sacks of cranberry and vanilla. I make shrines as centerpieces, with photos of friends who need good health. People stick stalks of fresh rosemary into one another's doors. We carry local oddities as gifts when we travel—little pouches, lottery candles in tall glass jars. When we spent a semester in Hawaii recently, I collected superstitions and remedies, just in case. I "never turned my back on the waves."

Immediately after Hawaii, our son and I travel to the West Bank so he can meet his Palestinian great-grandmother for what turns out to be the first

and last time. Talk about startling transitions. One week we're basking on Kailua Beach in our baseball caps and the next we're wearing *keffiyahs* around our necks, skirting Israeli soldiers. "Why," our son asks in an Arab town, "do soldiers always stand with their guns in front of the drugstores? Are they going to fight the pills?" Obviously the drugstore is seen as a center of power. I don't get it.

At age 106, my grandmother has grown weaker. Now we need to cure her instead of the other way around. But our powers are not as specific as hers used to be. One day I come to breakfast and someone remarks on the great red streak down my left cheek. I can feel it—as if I've been burned. It gets worse and worse. We leave her with much weeping as usual and a rare snow on the ground.

Back home I stare into mirrors. What's going on here? I visit a crazed dermatologist, the first of my life, who places me in a small rocket ship in his office and turns hot lights on me. My son, a "Star Trek" fan, is worried. "What is this?" I demand from inside. "I like to know what's being done to me!" The Doctor doesn't answer questions.

The minute I step out of the cockpit, he sticks a giant needle into my left hip—without warning or explanation. "Cortisone," he mutters, when I pressure him. But he's given me such a bad shot I'll have a deep, ugly indentation in my hip for two years. I consider suing him. I forget his name.

The streak disappears for a month, then comes back. I find another dermatologist who seems nervous when I say I would like to plant a fist in my last doctor's face. She says—politely—my skin looks very bad. "Could be skin lupus, need to do a biopsy." She slices into my cheek, removes a layered segment, and stitches it together. I ask, "Could this have been caused by going from a very hot place straight to a very cold place?"

She looks mystified. A week later, her test results are inconclusive. She says a few fancy scientific words to name my streak. "I can't say what caused your problem. And I can't say it will ever be cured. But I think we should do a biopsy every year to check it." I scratch her name out of my book. The streak goes on and on. My friend in a wheelchair has said she gets sick of the question, "What happened to you?"

Then my parents give me a gift certificate to a skin clinic run by an Australian named Montserrat, who takes a quick look at my cheek and in a minute gives me the same fancy name I paid my second dermatologist hundreds of dollars to hear. "Sure, we can fix this," Montserrat says kindly.

“No problem at all.” I spend an hour and a half tipped back in her chair immersed in facial bliss—being cleaned, soothed, oiled, massaged, masked, etc. It’s heaven. I leave with a sack of three special creams. The red streak vanishes immediately after this treatment and does not return.