

**F**orty years after his death I dream my brother and I are walking arm in arm down a country lane in the late afternoon sun. He's close to twenty in my dream and heavier, taller. I can't stop crying.

"Hughie, I've missed you so much. I just love you so much."

He looks down, squeezes me tight.

"I know, Cath. I know."

**E**very day I sit with my mother and watch the sea.

There's a row of birds perched on an errant log—  
cormorant, cormorant, seagull, heron. Crow.

"Cathie, sometimes I drift off for ten minutes and I don't  
know where I've gone."

"Does that bother you, Mum?"

"No, it doesn't. Are you my daughter?"

We watch frantic wing-flitting at her bird feeder. Chicka-  
dees, starlings, sparrows. A house finch, brown-striped.

"Cath, I think it's a finch, it's only . . . oh—a finch a finch  
a finch! Are they trying to tell you they aren't in there? What  
are they trying to say?"

"To say . . . ? I don't know."

"I think there's something, they're trying to get some-  
thing across, aren't they, love?"

Bird-pecking at the feeder. I tap on the window.

“Chick-a-dee-dee-dee, chick-a-dee-dee-dee. How do you think birds get their names?”

“I don’t know.”

“What shall I call myself? What name?”

“Don’t you know?”

“Yes, but I’d like a different name.”

“Well, I like Hugh or Cath but I think Hugh is better. More suitable.”

“But you won’t ever forget me, will you?”

“As if I ever could.”

Starlings replace chickadees. The seed is getting low.

“What do you think is the most important thing, Mum? I mean, a good thing?”

“Understanding.”

“And what about the rest of your life? What’s your thinking on the rest of your life?”

“Oh gosh, there can’t be much left of it can there, Cath? What will I be, sixty-six?”

"You're going to be eighty-six."

"Oh yeah, eighty-six."

"How old am I?"

"Oh about sixty, sixty and the pen you're holding. I'm sixty-two or -three, the age I quickly got to."

"How would you like to live out the remainder of your days?"

"I don't know, it fills me with horror. The same as what I'm doing over there only I'll be better. I'll be flying down the hill in my jacket!"

We listen to Bach.

"Did someone take the place of A-flat minor? You know, I think about the radio, listen to the radio, and I wonder if Cath is listening, too."

"You mean . . . you wonder about me when you're listening to the radio?"

"Yes. It's the only time."

Prelude no. 1 in C Major. My mother sighs, closes her eyes.

"What was he thinking? What was Bach thinking?"

"What's the nicest thing about you?"

"Nothing."

“Okay, what’s the second-nicest thing about you?”

“My love of music, my love of good music. In fact it might be the first thing. Do you know what I had last night?”

“What?”

“Two lots of the London Conservatory taken away.”

“What do you like least about yourself?”

“All the things I could do and wanted to do and didn’t do because I couldn’t be bothered.”

“You always loved music, didn’t you?”

“It was Mother who made me compete. Once, when I was six, at that big hotel downtown, a man lifted me up onto the piano stool and I was so mad because I could have got up by myself. Mother never forgave me for quitting, but I was just so nervous. I hated it. After I left, my piano teacher told Mother that the German adjudicator asked her where the little golden-haired girl was, the one with music in her ears.”

June. A clear hot day noisy with shrieks, barking, and the cracking pop of a starting gun. My right leg is tied to my mum's left leg with strips of old fabric, our arms wrapped tightly around each other's waists. We scuttle over to the edge of the lime-white starting line.

"Take your marks—get set—go!"

We've signed up for the three-legged race, signed up for all the races. During morning assembly our headmistress lectures us on the meaning of Sports Day.

"Now just remember, girls, today is all about doing your very best, being good sports, and having fun."

We want to win.

We've been practicing for weeks in my grandparents' backyard. My mother outlines our race strategy.

"Now remember, the first step is the most important. We have to get into rhythm right from the start, darling, or it will be too late."

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As soon as the pistol fires we trot forward. Mum whispers in my ear—

“One-two, one-two, one-two.”

We’re surefooted, in perfect time. The judge points at us, “First!” We each have a blue ribbon pinned on our shirts.

Next we line up for the egg and spoon race.

“Cath, you must stay calm. If you get too excited you’ll drop the egg. Don’t look at the ground and don’t pay attention to anyone else around you.”

Another blue ribbon for my mother and me.

I enter every track-and-field race. Left-foot, right-foot, left-foot—jump! Left-foot, right-foot, left-foot—jump! Sometimes I knock a hurdle down and have cuts and scrapes all over my legs. One of the other mothers is horrified.

“Just look at your legs! What a tomboy you are.”

My mother is on the sidelines watching me in all the races.

“That was quite a day, love! I’m so proud of you.”

“I’m not like a boy, am I? Sylvia’s mum says I’m a tomboy.”

I want to keep the words of my new poet-mother.  
“I’m taping our conversations, Mum.”  
“Is the machine recording everything now?”  
“Yes.”  
“That’s kind of silly, isn’t it?”  
“No, I like listening to what you have to say.”  
“It’s not very much, is it?”  
“I think it is. Your opinions are very important to me.”  
“I’d have to hear them and find out how important they were.”

I anchor the tape recorder between pillows on her lap.

“Why do people smoke?”  
“To cast off pain and loneliness.”  
“Why do people drink too much?”  
“Because they know it’s such a relief.”  
“And how are you enjoying your mind these days?”  
“Oh, very much, very much. I wake up in the morning and the first thing I think of is myself and then next I think of myself again and the third thing is I get my breakfast.”

"In the meantime do you want to tell me how you're feeling today?"

"In the meantime, no, I don't really want to, thank you."

"You sound a little down."

"A little, maybe."

"What does sorrow look like?"

"It's a form of sadness brought about on a gray and heavy day. I've reached the ultimate of the intimate and that's the end of it."

"Oh dear . . . Let me ask you, what do you think is the ugliest thing in the world?"

"A lack of dignity. Is that the right answer?"

"Yes. Okay, what about this one: what's the worst thing a person could do to another person?"

"They could throw their sublime into the ridiculous."

"What is so scary about dying?"

"Have you ever tried it?"

"Good point."

"You know, things are going the way they're going now but you don't seem to mind."

"I love it."

"You didn't like it before very much."

"No, I guess I didn't. What is the meaning of life?"

"I don't know, I haven't seen it. What are you writing down all the time?"

“I’m writing about you and all the interesting things you say.”

“But do they match?”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t think for a moment any of it’s foolproof.”

When I'm not with my mother, I stay in bed for long solitary hours dreaming of the past.

My mind turns to snow and ice and the frozen stark North where nothing blocks the view. My wind-borne tears form miniature icicles, like stalactites. I let my eyelashes freeze together and pretend I live in an ice castle. Wet Arctic air inhales exhaust from chimneys, cars, lung-breath . . . exhales clouds of tiny ice crystals that hover in midair. I hike alone across frozen lakes at dusky noon in the middle of a minus-forty-degree Sunday and look out on nothing. As far as my eye can see, nothing. Everywhere.

The land is white-full.

Someone has draped white bed sheets mile after mile across the frozen lake. Houses, snowmobiles, landlocked boats form sooty punctuation marks against the blank canvas, suspending white.

There's no end point for my vision—I cannot stop the seeing. Unbearable, all this white beauty. I have to look away.

**M**y mother and I sit side by side on her couch and watch the November wind whip leaves off the trees. We watch the sea as the days grow darker. Shorter.

“I wouldn’t be alive if it wasn’t for you.”

“Don’t remind me, Mum!”

“Aren’t we amusing today.”

“Tell me about the sky.”

“Oh, I don’t know about the sky. It’s pretty beautiful . . . but you have to wear gloves because it puts fingerprints on it and you don’t want that.”

The sea is pewter-punched. Moody. I straighten her blanket.

“Is your pillow comfortable?”

“Yes, it’s six-eighths comfortable.”

We listen to the radio.

“Is that Beethoven, Mum?”

“No.”

“Could it be Chopin?”

“No.”

“Because?”

“He’s dead.”

“Clever.”

The announcer introduces Glenn Gould and the *Goldberg Variations*.

“Oh, love, listen . . .”

“Do you like how he plays, Mum?”

“He was a genius.”

I bring out her old piano music and open Bach’s *Schafe können sicher weiden*. She places her hands lightly on the dining room table and mimes the melody.

“La, la la la, la la la, la la la . . .”

“Lovely. Oh my, here’s ‘Moon River.’”

She peers at the notes and I sing along with her playing.

*“Moon River, wider than a mile,*

*I’m crossing you in style some day.*

*Oh, dream maker, you heart breaker,*

*Wherever you’re going I’m going your way . . .”*

I open a pack of chocolate-covered digestive cookies.

“What do you think of Bach?”

“I don’t know if he was nutty but he was obviously odd.”

“Mozart?”

"I think he should have his tonsils taken out and looked at."

"Beethoven?"

"Oh wonderful, but some parts of it were roaming off to different stages."

"Chopin?"

*"Heaven can wait, this is paradise! La . . . la la, off to see the world, there's such a lot of world to see . . ."*

"You have perfect pitch."

"I know."

"Which do you like better, the dark or the light?"

"Darkness."

"Because?"

"I don't show up. Darkness—and the light."

"Because?"

"Because I'm nervous."

"Nervous of?"

"Men."

"All men?"

"Amen! There were all these men around earlier."

"Really? Do you like having men around?"

"Yes."

"Because?"

"They look nice in their jockey shorts."