

One Year

Margaret Munk

THE NEWS

The scene was written
In advance,
Rehearsed as often
As the days of waiting
Would allow.

The curtains of sedation
Would be parted to reveal
My husband's face,
The good news broadcast
From his eyes,
Voice buoyant with the word,
Among the loveliest bequeathed
By Roman tongue to Saxon —

Benign:

Of a kind disposition;
Manifesting gentleness and mildness;
Tending to promote well-being;
Beneficial.

And I would bathe
The hard, brusque pillow
With some grateful tears,
Burrow into healing sleep,
And wake to life resumed.

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Instead,
 Along the timeless, lightless hours
 Spanning days and nights indifferently,
 The sluggish curtain lifted,
 Hesitated,
 Fell,
 And lurched again,
 Three times allowing glimpses
 Of a vision so unwelcome
 That narcosis masqueraded ably
 As a fair seducer,
 Come to lure me back.

The face was right,
 The eyes were there,
 The voice.
 The word was wrong.

Malignant:

Showing great malevolence;
 Actively evil in nature;
 Threatening to life or health;
 Deadly.

The third time,
 The drug had lost its power
 To be kind.
 I knew.
 Each morning I would wake
 And know again,
 And mornings would become a year
 In which this once familiar body,
 Turned traitor
 Only halfway through the course,
 Would be a battleground.

The cue was wrong for tears.
 They waited, prisoners behind
 A hard tube filling up
 The passageway of sound.
 So pain became
 The gaoler of grief,
 And I lay silently,
 Rewriting.

THE REASON

Still pain-weak
From the knife's first battle blow,
I cringed from combat
Yet to come.
"I can't," I told the doctor.

"Shall I tell you
Why you will?
Because I trust you —
And because you have three kids.
You will do it
For them."

He knew the facts,
My mind supplied the details.

Laura,
Self-conscious in her young nubility
And lean, unfinished beauty;
Taller by an inch or two than I,
Pushing hard at childhood's barrier,
Woman-bound
Upon an unfamiliar road;

Danny,
Brown and island-born,
Leavening my life
With limber wit,
Small body housing
An electric mind
Too set upon material things,
In need of tempering
With compassion
Through acquaintance with
Another heritage;

Andrew,
Only recently entrusted
To our care;
Every stranger's friend,
Unable to withhold good will
Or harness love;
Trusting with a terrible totality
The tenderness of life.

All ours by invitation,
Guests of our longing,
Entitled to the full-length, guided tour.

I would.

THE NURSES

I will forget their names,
But not the kind brown hands
Applying dignity
Along with soap and lotion;
The quiet voices of experience,
Soothing shock and terror
With the balm perspective;
The shoulder into which at last,
The night I saw the truth
Inscribed on paper
In the correspondence
Of consoling friends,
I unleashed ten days' hoard
Of tears.

Never mattered less
The color of the hands,
The accent of the voice.
Never had I learned
From solemn ceremony,
Quilting bees,
Or angry feminist crusades
What helplessness and pain
Taught me of sisterhood.

THE HAIR

I always had some,
Even in my youngest picture.

After it had darkened,
My parents told me how
They once could hide a penny
Of new copper there
Among the strands.

It grew prolifically haphazard
Down a shy and conscientious
Schoolchild's back,
And hung below my waist
In auburn ropes
Plaited during every breakfast
By my mother's fingers.
Once,
I purposely released the bands
And let the waves fall free
Until the teacher
Bound them back.

At Easter,
Armed with cotton rags,
Like a determined healer
Binding up some annual wound,
My mother operated on a kitchen stool
Until it hung in shampooed corkscrews,
Ribboned to accentuate
The spring's new dress.

At eleven,
Sharp pain on the right became
Three days of tossing
In a hard hospital bed,
While woven braids dissolved into
A tangled nest I knew to be
Beyond redemption.
A kind nurse found me crying.
Did it hurt so much?
When I confessed
The honest cause,
She sat an hour beside me
With a brush,
And not the scissors I had feared.

That summer
As a sacrifice
To junior high,
I underwent a second surgery,
And had them severed
At the shoulders,
To appear three decades later
In a Christmas box
Sent by my mother
To my daughter.

When we met,
My husband called it red.
I grew it long again
For him.

Today I combed it,
Clipped and brittle and drug-dead,
Into a basket
In the bathroom
Of my mother's home.
And she, who placed the penny,
Wrapped the rags,
Preserved the plaits,
Joined me in mourning.

THE INTERLOPER

When my husband went to bed in summer,
It was with another woman.

I hardly envied her.
She was less
Than I had been in spring.
Lighter by ten pounds,
Thin and scarred and hollowed out,
Not publicly or privately
Definable as female.

This time the doctor
Was a lawyer,
His only remedy
The loving instinct
Of a man two decades married.

His sudden ardor
For his strange new partner
Was transparent, but
Remarkably effective.

CHEMOTHERAPY

I learned trust early.

At five,
Banished at midnight
To a winter bed,
I heard sleigh bells,
Not doubting the capacity
Of narrow chimneys
For portly, fur-clad gentlemen.

At eight,
In white,
I yielded to the water
In my father's hands,
Believing it would mean
Salvation,
As opposed to drowning.

At nine,
Clasping terror tightly
As a life preserver,
I plunged through ominous green waves
Beneath a taut white plastic rope
And found myself astonished —
Standing, living, breathing —
On the other side.

I gave myself,
And then my children,
To the needles
And the cherry-flavored drops
Promising deliverance
From the unseen killers
Of my forebears' children.

Fortunate,
For here I lie,
Connected by a hollow needle
And by thread-like coils of tube
To hanging bottles filled,
From all appearances,
With water,
Red Kool-Aid,
And urine.

Sick with half sleep,
 I watch the measured rhythm
 In the tube,
 And think of Vishnu
 And of Shiva,
 Preserver and Destroyer
 In one essence,
 And trust the droplets
 That could carry death
 Into my waiting vein
 To carry life instead.

EVERY DAY

The grocery lists
 Still gather in my purse;
 We still run out of Kleenex
 And bus change.
 Wrestling matches
 Need a referee
 Before the tears begin.
 Thirteen still needs a reprimand
 For talking back,
 And four can't make it
 Through the night
 Without a diaper.
 Milk spills;
 Shoe laces come untied.
 The phone still rings
 Ten minutes before dinner time
 To say he will be late,
 Or pass on one last bit
 Of junior high school gossip.
 Scout excursions,
 Broken bikes,
 Music lessons
 And a friend across the highway
 Still require
 My hand upon the wheel.

August, as always,
 Is a surfeit of long, sultry days;
 September energizing
 In its crisp relief.
 Bedtime and rising time,
 The yellow bus,

The lunch bags that go with it,
The homework that comes back.
The daily ritual
Of the evening meal;
The tired kiss
Across the pillows.

The only difference is
The value placed on days
And hours
And minutes
By a stern reminder
That supplies are limited.

NEW ENGLAND COUNTRY GRAVEYARD ON AN AUTUMN DAY

How much is spoken
By gray stone
Where time and rain
Have left it still articulate.

Too often,
As I stroll and read
By mellow light
Of mid-October,
The message is
The brevity of life.

This one was someone's wife,
But only long enough
To bear her man one child,
To sleep beside her here.

This one,
Despite the promise
And the strivings of a boy,
Lived long enough to be a soldier —
Never quite a man.

This couple lie
With tiny grass-bound slabs
Strung like a rosary
At the parental feet.
How much life was left
In hearts too often pierced

Before they followed to this place
 The children
 Whom they should have left behind?

God, God!
 Not yet!
 Keep me longer
 From the darkness of those beds.
 And when the colors on these hills
 Are gone, and green,
 And gold again,
 Let me be here to see
 With open eyes
 And well-loved people
 Just a call away.

THE FUTURE

None of us are born
 Believing we will die.
 Belief comes with experience,
 To some, soon;
 To all finally.
 The question is not whether,
 Only when and how.

Faust-like,
 I want to bargain
 For more time,
 Even knowing
 The inevitable end,
 And believing that end to be
 A new beginning.

Time for what?
 For caps and gowns
 And grandchildren?
 Yes, and years together
 With a faithful friend
 With time to talk again,
 And rest,
 And read;
 For seeing parents,
 Who gave me the beginning,
 Safely to the end;
 For weaving words together

In new ways,
 A try for immortality
 On perishable pages;
 For learning to make music
 With a bow;
 For feeding younger minds,
 And being fed by them.

But children traveling
 The rocky road
 From childhood to adulthood
 Can inflict
 The bitterest wounds of all.
 For this?
 Promenades
 Down bleak hospital hallways,
 My awkward iron partner
 On my arm,
 Gave doorway visions of
 Poor heaps of bone
 And rough white hair
 Huddled on hard beds
 Which they would never leave
 Alive.
 For this?

I do not fear
 The gateway or
 What lies beyond;
 Only, at times,
 The pathway leading there,
 And what may lie around
 The blind curves of each year,
 Each day.

But that was understood
 When I applied.

It's a package offer,
 One to a customer,
 Sight unseen,
 Open one compartment daily,
 Take it or leave it.

I'll take it,
 Full size —
 Please.