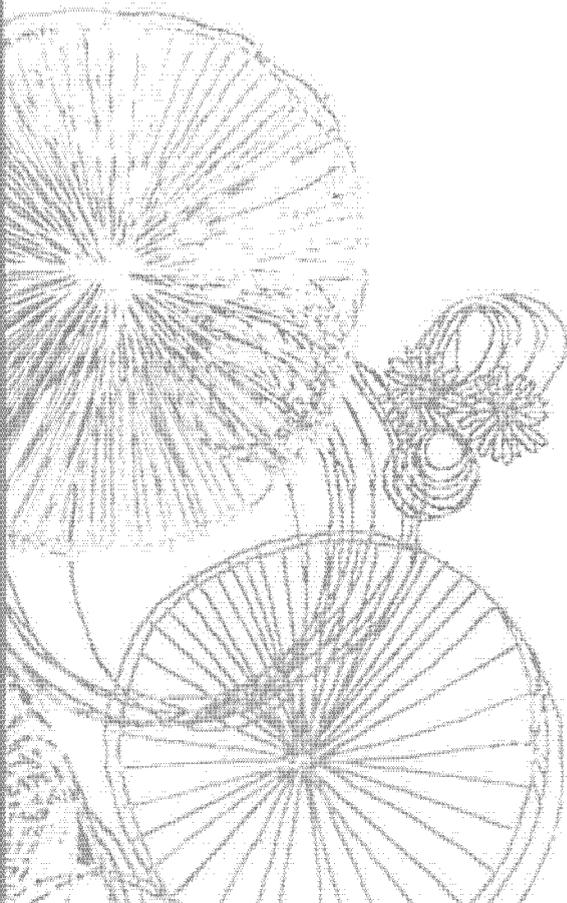


NATALIE

GAIL RITCHIE



My wife is busy, picking away chunks of stray wool from the yellow blanket spread over her lap. She plucks each piece one-by-one with the precise, calculated finesse of a surgeon, then rolls the lint into a ball between her bony fingers and drops it listlessly into the ever-growing pile on the tiled floor. From time to time, she bends forward in the hospital bed to examine the pile's progress. The root beer-colored crystal hanging from a gold chain around her neck swings forward and back again with a hollow thump against her chest. I bought that necklace from a New Age healer named Omeed at his shop down in Cannon Beach. He swore by the healing powers of crystals. He promised this particular one would save my wife. He promised that if she never took it off, she would not die.

“You are going to die,” I tell her matter-of-factly. And yet I am hoping she will disagree with me, much in the same way that women will tell their friends, “I’m thinking about going on a diet,” and expect their obligatory rebuttal: “What?! You’re crazy! You are soooooo *skinny!*”

But Natalie just says, “Yes.” She keeps picking at the blanket. I can see the veins running through her fingers, purple and pronounced through her translucent skin. Her scalp is smooth and shiny, sporting the occasional chunk of peach-fuzz just below her left ear or above the empty arch of her eyebrows.

Sometimes, when the nurses come in to take Natalie’s vitals, I want to ask them if they know that cancer smells like vomit. Like rubbing alcohol and shit and something else that is nameless but still present, something wild and desperate, something akin to fear. These are hospital smells. I want to ask them if they know this because my own knowledge, at times, is too much for me to bear on my own.

I can request clean pillows, and extra grape Jell-O, and morphine-drip increases to help my wife when she is writhing in pain and smashing her face in the pillow to keep from crying out. The nurses and the occasional doctor enter her squalid little room periodically, their white Keds squeaking. They check Natalie’s bags of crystal-colored saline and yellowish-red blood. They deliver mind-numbing drugs mercifully via syringes and intravenous drips in Natalie’s thin white hands; they replace bedpans without wrinkling their noses. I help them strip Natalie’s sheets and change her into fresh nightgowns. I wipe off her chin when she vomits, which is often, even though we gave up chemo weeks ago. Her body is still too weak to handle the necessary medication.

The cancer is centered inside the core of her bones. It eats up the gritty yellow marrow, day after day after day, always hungry for more. Natalie curls her legs up to her chest and locks them with her arms, and I count the minutes with her until the next morphine injection. She grinds her teeth and does not scream. Not once. Not ever. In the beginning I asked her what color the pain was. Blue, she said. Blue sparks, sometimes mixed with a little red. The same color as when you shut your eyes too tight for too long and your brain starts to spin a kaleidoscope of colors.

Sometimes I watch her in her pain, the pain I cannot lessen or take away or even share, and I think of the birth of our first daughter, Katarine. From Natalie’s very first contraction all the way to the sound of Katarine’s first shriek, Natalie never screamed. The only sound I heard was Natalie’s own rhythmic breathing through her teeth; she wanted to get through her first delivery without uttering a peep.

“Don’t worry, Alek. I’m not going to be one of *those* women,” she scoffed as we left for the hospital. “You know, the kind who scream and throw things at their husbands: ‘You did this to

me, you bastard! I hate you!” She laughed hysterically in the passenger seat, burying her face in her right hand, her left positioned on her belly, just above the wet stain on the crotch of her maternity jeans.

“Cuss me out, if it helps,” I suggested.

She didn’t. I watched her face turn a most disturbing eggplant color in her valiant effort not to make a sound, and true to her word, the only screaming we heard was Katarine’s when she came gushing from between Natalie’s legs in a rush of blood and clear, yellowish fluid. Later, I looked at the hand I had offered my wife throughout her delivery, and I could still see the half-moons of her fingernails imprinted into my palm.

I know what cancer sounds like, too, because I can actually hear it feed on her sometimes, at night, when I’m not supposed to be listening. It slurps greedily at her blood and muscles and cells, devouring the marrow in her brittle bones like a plague of starving locusts that munch lazily on a field of wheat, leaving it empty, hollow, porous. How many times since she got sick, I wonder, have I reached for my wife in the middle of the night—out of habit—and gently slipped my hand between her legs to wake her, and felt the sandpaper coldness of her skin? Natalie knows to lessen the embarrassment that inevitably follows by pretending to be asleep. She’ll groggily murmur something I can’t understand and roll away from me so that the moonlight caresses her pale face. All I can do is lie there beside her and wait because she doesn’t want to talk to me about her leaving. It’s then that I feel, quite distinctly, I am already sharing a bed with her ghost.



I met Natalie when I was fifteen. Dad was stationed at the naval base in Nassau County on Long Island, and I wound up working the stockroom with her at the Navy Exchange. I was stacking flats of warm Tab, one on top of the other, in the stockroom when in she came—this rangy, lean girl with chestnut hair down to her butt and the longest legs I had ever seen. A festival of dark brown freckles were splashed haphazardly across her nose and cheeks, and her green eyes, set deep into her olive skin, shimmered with gold flecks. Initially, though, it was her butt that got me. Natalie always wore miniskirts so short that whenever she bent over, I’d catch an eyeful of at least half a cheek.

I professed my love to her in the supply room after work one day as we sat on boxes of Fritos and cotton socks, drinking warm Cokes swiped from the dusty cases. It was mid-summer, and her bangs stuck sweatily to her flushed forehead.

“Natalie,” I said, flustered. “I love you.” She smiled.

“You’re so sweet, Alek,” she said insouciantly, hopping down from her tower of boxes. She tugged her skirt down to mid-thigh and planted a kiss on the top of my head before passing out of the room in a breeze of perfume. I wandered halfway home in a love-struck daze before realizing that I had been dismissed. I got promoted to cashier at the Exchange and ignored her for the rest of the summer, until one day that fall when I came home from school to find her drinking tea with my mother in the kitchen. Natalie was sitting in my chair and drinking out of my favorite yellow mug. She married me in the garden at my father’s house when I was twenty. My mother was present to add her signature beneath my own on the marriage license when we applied at city hall. I was still too young, by Oregon’s standards, to give my own consent.



“You’re going to die,” I say again, and I know now that I am screaming. I am screaming at a dying wife, whose bones are less substantial than sugar crusting on the inside of a glass.

When she fell in the cherry orchard, her hip snapped. I wasn’t paying attention. I was in the kitchen making tuna casserole, and watching the girls out the side window as they took turns on the tire swing. She had wanted to go for a walk, she said, after I heard her screaming and went to scoop her up off the ground. I wrapped her up in a dog blanket along with some dead twigs and bits of moss. She was tired of staying in bed, Natalie said. Tired of the wheelchair. Tired of waiting to die. After that, I made a cane for her out of a branch from her favorite cherry tree, the one with the curved limb that made the perfect handle.

“If you die,” I say, bordering pathetically close to a whine, “I will be all alone.”

“You will not be alone,” Natalie says, and she looks more tired than I have ever seen her. “You will have the girls.”

She is wearing her peach silk pajamas today, a long-sleeved henley jersey and pants, the shade juicy and golden-ripe. The jersey has a tiny stain just below the third button, clear and stiff, a spill from a hot glue gun the day she made a Christmas wreath for our front door. I want to tell her that I know I will have the girls, that no matter what happens, they will be alright. This is the very least I can do for her—make the cane, pretend not to notice when her hair falls out, cook tuna casseroles. Take care of the girls. The real question here is, *How the fuck am I supposed to do this without you?* I cannot say this to her. I cannot burden her with my fear that without her, *I am nothing.*



I always knew I was going to marry Natalie, even though our marriage turned out to be, by anyone's definition, imperfect. When I was eighteen, Mom and Dad decided to leave New York and retire to Salem, Oregon, so I registered for fall classes at Oregon State. I asked Natalie to come with me. She said yes.

When we told her parents, her father made it clear that he was anything but pleased. Otomars Zundulis was never a man of many words, but I heard him speak more that night at dinner than I had ever before.

"Leave New York?" he spat. "*Leave New York?* What about your job? What about the bookkeeping classes?" He started swearing in Latvian, then reverted back to his heavily accented English. "You're going to leave your *whole* family"—at this, he motioned to his wife and Natalie's younger sister—"and your home and move to the west coast? To Oregon? Where in the hell is Oregon?" He glowered at Natalie before switching his glare to me. I looked helplessly at Natalie. She had told me earlier that at all costs I must stay out of it.

"Dad," she said, "I love Alek." She reached over and took my hand. "I want to go with him."

"Why do you have to go with him? Why doesn't he stay here with you?"

"Dad, either way, one of us loses. Either Alek gives up his family, or I give up mine. And I've never been anywhere besides New York."

Otomars started sputtering again, but was silenced when his wife, Hilde, placed a cool, freckled hand over his.

"Otto," she said. "They are in love. Let her go."

Natalie told me later that her own mother had left Germany, her home country, behind for Otto when he wanted to immigrate to the United States in 1958.

"She didn't want to go," Natalie said, fitting herself up against my back as we drifted off to sleep. "She had a whole life there, you know? Us kids, and this new apartment that she practically had to kill someone to get, and nice new furniture. Her whole family—and friends—she left it all."

"Why?" I felt Natalie shrug in the dark.

"Dad hated Germany. Latvia was destroyed during the war. I think he had a twin that disappeared to England or someplace. There just wasn't anything left for him in Europe. His friends told him the streets here were paved with gold. Mom saw how excited he was about it, so she caved." Natalie giggled. "Can you imagine how pissed she must have been? All that new furniture! Probably no sex for a month!" Natalie sighed and snuggled closer. "So, you see? He couldn't bitch me out for going with you. He made my mom do the same thing. It was a done deal."

Natalie's parents threw a going away party for us in their backyard in Levittown the evening before we left New York. It was June and sweltering hot. Hilde ordered a huge vanilla sheet cake from the corner bakery and decorated it with the words "Bon Voyage, Alek and Natalie!" in huge, pink cursive lettering. The thick white butter cream icing melted in clumps in the humid summer heat, plopping languidly onto the steaming patio. No one cared. Natalie dyed her dark hair platinum blonde for the occasion; she said she wanted to look like a "west coast girl."

We covered the distance from New York to Oregon in just under a week in my rusty yellow Plymouth Valiant, and Natalie sent postcards home to New York from every gas station. Otto told me one Christmas, before Natalie got sick, that he still has them, a whole box of them somewhere in the attic.

"It took me ten years to forgive you for taking my oldest daughter three thousand miles away from me," Otto told me over a beer. He looked me straight in the eye. We were sitting in front of the Christmas tree, waiting for Hilde and Natalie to finish cooking dinner. Otto was holding dark-haired Katarine, who was just under a year old, on his knee.

"That long, huh?" I said, trying to keep it light.

"I forgave you," Otto said, "when Katarine was born. I said, 'Look, Hilde! Look what I got out of that bastard who took our Natalie away!'" Grinning, he held Katarine high up in the air with both arms and tossed her gently. She squealed with delight. And for the first time, I swear to God, I heard my father-in-law laugh out loud.



Our eyes lock now in the stuffy confines of the hospital room, hers warm green and fringed with a curly shock of black lash, mine a deep, panicked blue, as I struggle to remember everything. Her favorite food is lasagna, her favorite color is red, her favorite sweater is the teal chenille with faux pearl buttons. She has a palette of fifty-six different shades of eye shadow and would always sneak chocolate into bed. When I hauled lumber at night and she worked days as a bookkeeper, she would leave hundreds of little notes scribbled on the backs of napkins or scraps of paper bags telling me to heat up the casserole at three-hundred-fifty degrees or that my clothes were in the dryer or reminding me to feed our beagle. She listened to James Taylor and The Beatles on vinyl even after I started buying tapes. She made bulletin boards from the corks we collected at the wineries we visited during the summer. She never let me make love to her unless I told her "I love you" first.

"I am scared I will forget everything about you," I tell her. I don't know whether she is even

awake. Her eyes are tightly shut, her mouth drawn in a pencil-thin grimace. I can practically feel the pain ripping through her skin. I imagine its color and this time I see lightning.

She opens her mouth and takes a greedy breath. The air rattles inside her lungs. *Jesus*, I think. *It's like a fucking movie.*

“Everyone dies, Alek,” she says.



I found her on the kitchen floor of our apartment in Vancouver one day after work. She was just crumpled there, curled up in a fetal position on the grungy orange tile that she scrubbed so incessantly but never could get quite clean. She was sobbing.

I was tired from my job moving lumber all day at a site more than forty minutes from our apartment and, frankly, didn't feel like dealing with any shit. I had quit Oregon State University less than a year into it after I decided I just wasn't smart enough to hack college. Natalie argued with me about it, but I told her I'd be better off working full-time. Natalie, of course, had found work right away as a bookkeeper in a doctor's office. She was likable and pretty, and had always been good with numbers. With our combined incomes, after paying rent, utilities and buying groceries for the month, we were left with a whopping total of about twenty dollars a month with which to do whatever we wanted.

Things weren't great. I knew that Natalie was unhappy about spending the evenings in our apartment alone, as I usually worked late into the night and left early in the morning. Since our wedding six years ago, Natalie had taken to crying jags for apparently no reason at all. When I asked her what was wrong, she always told me that she was just homesick and that it would pass. I didn't really believe her; I had never seen her like this.

I sat down next to her on the floor and leaned back against the oven. “You okay?”

“Yes.” More sobs.

“You want to tell me what's going on?”

Natalie lifted her face from the floor and looked at me with a kind of contempt I had never seen before. “What the fuck are we doing, Alek?” she demanded. “Here I am in this shitty apartment cooking and cleaning and working full-time while you're out there hauling trees around just to make a living and you're never home and here we are so poor I can't stand it! We can't even afford to go see a movie once a month!”

“Okay,” I said.

“Is this what I left New York for? I had a life in New York, Alek! I had a job and friends...

and...and family." At this point she started crying so hard she couldn't speak.

"What are you trying to say, Natalie? That you're unhappy? Okay, yeah. This apartment sucks, fine. We're saving for a nicer one. Why do you think that I get up at five a.m. every morning? I work my ass off 'cause I'm trying to get us something better." But my valiant gesture at consoling my wife only made her cry harder.

"Alek," she sobbed. "Why did you have to quit school? If you had just stuck with it, you'd have a degree by now, and you'd be earning three times as much at a job where you'd be working half as hard. We could have so much more than this. I gave up so much to be with you, to have the perfect life. But instead we have," she gestured to the apartment's grimy walls, "this."

I bristled. "I thought you left New York to be with me," I said coldly. "I am who I am, Natalie. I'm the same person you left New York with."

"I know, Alek. I guess I just always thought, I thought you would make more of yourself. You have the potential to be so much more than a lumberyard worker."

I was speechless. It had never occurred to me that Natalie blamed me for our financial shortcomings. I had always assumed that whatever happened, we were in it together. A wave of guilt washed over me, an unspeakable shame for not being smart enough to finish college, not being good enough to provide my wife with what she needed.

"I'm sorry," I said stiffly. "I'm sorry that I failed you, Natalie."

I hoisted myself up from the floor and left the room.

We never mentioned that conversation again. The next morning Natalie was her same old self, chipper and optimistic. She shoved my coffee thermos into my hand and planted a kiss on my lips as I headed off to work. I eventually left the job at the lumber mill and started working as an attendant at a local psychiatric hospital. It was cleaner, albeit more stressful, work that paid more and allowed for more regular hours. We kept saving money and eventually moved into a nicer apartment. And at least once a month I made sure to take Natalie out to the movies.

It is difficult to wake up next to a wife each morning who you know loves you but thinks you are a failure. I have often wondered how it is possible to love someone who has disappointed you so bitterly. I won't get to know what that's like, though, since Natalie never let me down.



She is breathing more rapidly now, the air whistling in and out of her lungs. I watch her chest rise and fall with each breath, and marvel at how large her collarbones appear to be beneath her pajama top.

She is thirty-eight, I think to myself. I married her when she was twenty-four. I was so stupid to think then that I had plenty of time to find out all of the things I don't know about her.



There was one winter in Vancouver when it was particularly cold. It snowed steadily one Sunday morning and the drifts were knee-deep outside of the house. Natalie and I both had the day off from work, and she had already done the crossword and read the comics in the Sunday paper twice. The apartment was spotless, the breakfast dishes washed and put away. Natalie was sprawled on the couch idly clicking through each of the three grainy channels we got free on our television.

I wandered into the kitchen and, on a whim, threw open Natalie's cookbook. I flipped through, not really sure what I was looking for, until the pages fell open to a recipe for French hot chocolate. It called for heavy cream cut with one part water, chunks of chocolate, orange slices and a splash of rum. Quietly, I reached under the kitchen counter and pulled out a saucepan to heat the cream that we had leftover from the chocolate mousse Natalie had experimented with last weekend. I heated the cream, cut it with water and poured it into a thermos along with the remaining ingredients. I twisted the cap onto the thermos, went into the bedroom to grab a blanket off the bed, and carried them out to Natalie on the couch.

"Let's go," I said.

"Go where?"

"You'll see. Get dressed and let's go."

Bewildered, Natalie went into the bedroom and emerged two minutes later in her maroon snowsuit and hat. I laughed, then grabbed her hand and pulled her out the door.

My plan was to drive us up to Mt. Hood, pull off alongside the road somewhere, drink the hot chocolate with my wife and watch the snow. I thought it would be romantic, a nice change of pace. However, I hadn't banked on there being nowhere to pull off. The snow on either side of the road was piled so high that there was nowhere to go but up. So we just kept driving, climbing higher and higher up the mountain, until we were parked outside of the mountain lodge at the summit.

"Alek," said Natalie, who by this point was cold and extremely annoyed. "What are we doing? I'm freezing."

We had the station wagon's heater on full-blast, but it wasn't enough to combat the truly wretched cold.

"Oh, quit your bitching," I told her. "Here, this will warm you up." I poured her a mug of

the hot chocolate. We both drank in silence—a comfortable silence—and watched the snow as it drifted over the hood of the car. My wife shivered with cold.

Suddenly Natalie turned to me, lips blue, teeth chattering, and smiled.

“I love you,” she said. “Thanks for making me do this.”

I don’t remember what I said.



I remember everything else, though, exactly how it happened. How Natalie slipped away so fast and yet at the same time fought so hard that you couldn’t understand why she didn’t just win. I remember the doctor who cried when he gave us Natalie’s test results. Dr. Wright—God, I remember him. How he gave Natalie three months and here she is, a year and a half later, hanging on by a thread but somehow still there. How he told us, “Chemo and radiation are options, Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, but in your wife’s condition and at her stage of illness, I simply don’t think...” The complete, utter, sheer misery of not knowing. The forgetting of the simple things from before. The despair of nothing mattering anymore, not when you stacked it against the blood draws and the X-rays and the bone scans, and the violent vomiting that lasted for days. Not when compared to her beautiful chestnut ponytail releasing itself in clumps from her scalp, her brittle bones and the wheelchair and the ramp I built for her that leads from the driveway to the porch.

We both have done our damndest to hide it from the girls.

“I don’t want them to remember me like this, Alek,” Natalie warned me. “I don’t ever want you to bring them to the hospital.” Even in the last weeks, when Natalie was still living at home, she’d let the girls crawl all over her in bed, gritting her teeth against the pain as they unknowingly placed excruciating pressure on her aching bones. She would cry out when her own father tried to touch her, but never the girls. They can’t know.

What the hell am I supposed to tell them when you go?



When Lynn and Katarine were born, eighteen months apart, I watched Natalie transform. You would have thought she had been waiting for them her whole life. I never saw anything else like it. By this time, we could finally afford to rent a country house from my sister Annie and her husband in Amity, Oregon—a tiny town with one stoplight and exactly one general store that charges an arm and a leg for a quart of milk. We loved it there. As the girls got older, Natalie lived to push them in the tire swing on the side lawn and take them looking for lilacs. She cut up cucumbers and

sprinkled them with rock salt for Lynn, who seemed to have developed an insatiable penchant for anything salty. She took walks with the girls to the main road to collect the mail and through the orchard to gather walnuts and cherry blossoms that fell from the trees. On weekends, the three of them watched me crush the grapes I picked from our tiny vineyard, and they helped me haul sawdust and set mousetraps in the cellar. We always made pancakes on Saturday mornings and let the girls have the run of the orchard property in the summer.

As for Natalie and I, all of our old arguments seemed to have completely disappeared. I was no longer the disappointment or the failure. I had now reached the exalted status of Father, the one who had given Natalie the girls. My wife looked at me now with such love and gratitude that I often did not recognize her. The girls changed everything. Both of our lives had a brand new purpose. At night, sleeping next to my wife with the girls in the next room, I felt a kind of completeness I could not name.

This is what I want to remember.



Dawn is throwing itself against the windows now, warming up the curtains, the cool floor tiles and the yellow lint pile. Natalie stirs next to me in the hospital bed; she has been sleeping fitfully since her last morphine injection at 3 a.m. Suddenly, her eyes fly open and she looks at me with that something takes me a moment to recognize: fear.

She opens her mouth but no sound comes out except a dry, cracked “Accchhhhh. Accchhh-ahhhh.”

I can feel what is coming and I am not anywhere close to being ready to face it. This last night has been the worst one I have ever experienced with Natalie. Her heart rate had dropped to dangerously low levels three times, then rocketed back up. I scoot my chair closer and take her hand.

“Natalie? What?” I ask her. “Tell me. I’m here.”

She swallows, which I can tell is painful, and takes a minute before she tries to speak again. Her mouth is dry and cracked from the morphine, so I drip some water from the Dixie cup on the night stand onto her lips. She swallows again. Speaks.

“Alek.”

“No. Come on, Natalie. Don’t.”

“Alek, I am so tired.”

She is silent again for a long while. Finally, I venture to speak.

“Natalie, you have to help me with the girls.”

She nods, and immediately I feel incredibly guilty. I am the lowest of the low. My wife is on the edge of death and I am burdening her. I hate myself, but I can't help it.

When she leaves me, it is so slight and delicate that I almost wouldn't have known if I hadn't been pressing on her hand. I feel her heartbeat slow to a flutter, and finally peter out like a broken wing. I sit there for a full ten minutes watching her eyes, which are still open, memorizing their gold-flecked green, before a nurse comes in and buzzes the doctor. I leave the room before I see them start to unplug her IVs and pull the sheet up. I don't want to remember this. I can have just this one little thing.

