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WHAT OUR BODIES DID FOR US

Six months after my easy birth, my body opened up to a virus. It ran giddily through my system and surfaced through small red scabs. The diagnosis was simple—chicken pox—and I weathered through triumphantly. A year later I had my first real spill. I sat calmly in my high chair chewing sausage with spirit, then suddenly tossed myself backwards and the chair let me. When I landed in a pile on the floor, mouth full of blood, my father swore that my tongue was in two pieces. Was he mistaken? After all, a splash of cold water revealed a split lip and a month full of sausage. No. Family lore decided it had been a miracle, brought about by my mother's quick and fervent prayers.

My father made a living off of the lame, those who were born into twisted shapes or were broken midway through. His clients' bodies stalled in mysterious places, their thin legs looked like my own legs, but refused to bend or move. He came to their rescue, manipulating their furniture to new lows and installing magic moving stairs so that they could glide with ease from floor to floor. I badly wanted a stair climber of our own, and my father entertained the thought until my mother called it bad luck to put something like that in the house.

I was four when my father, drilling through a table, ducked underneath to gauge when the bit would pass through. The drill leapt through the pine plank and into his left eye. When we went to visit him at the hospital, I was speechless with terror at the sight of all the wheelchairs, all the glass walls separating the sick from the well. I steered clear of both my father's arms and the donut that my mother bought me in the hospital cafeteria. When I got home I washed my hands of invisible germs until they grew rough and red.

My brother Obere was born yellow and small. My parents had no insurance, so my mother delivered him in two fitful hours and they checked out shortly after. The next day my mother laid him on clean white diapers on a sunny window seat. His eyes screwed up in indignation at the light, and I looked on, horrified at the scrawny specimen. As he grew, his adventurous spirit brought new calamities: his fat hands sought out the orange coil of the stove and closed around poisonous leaves, the tails of ornery dogs, and shelving units that were easy to topple.

Shortly after Obere's fifth birthday, a smarmy televangelist healed him from several states away, divining that somewhere was a little blond-headed boy with a dark red rash on his cheeks, which could be repaired by a commitment to forsake citrus and pray hard for healing. Years later, that same televangelist urged the assassination of a certain South American leader, claimed an impossible ability to bench-press two thousand pounds, and was indicted for running a shady gold-mining operation in Liberia. Even so, my family remembered him for the good he had done for us rather than his more recent indiscretions.

Splinters, poison ivy, near-drownings, and sunburns—those were our summer ailments. Winter brought burns from the propane heater, propensities toward frostbite, lingering coughs, and inexplicable sadness on the part of my mother. There were miniature fevers throughout our childhoods, and colds which drew on longer than they should of due

to my mother's sympathetic nature. She prepared soups and bland foods for us, served them up on special gold-rimmed plates with one bright flower in a fragile vase, and a bell in case we needed to call on her. I enjoyed this attention more than my brothers, who ached to get out of the house again and back into adventures that ended badly in nests of Lyme ticks, dog bites, and sprains.

The outdoors was a dangerous place for us, but so were kitchen tables, as my brother Sam learned when my father cut into a hot pepper and squirted the juice into his eye. Even a soft bed could not be entirely trusted as we learned when the new baby let out a howl in the night and quickly became inconsolable, refusing to nurse or burp. My mother fussed with him and undid his diaper to see if it was too tight, and a cricket the size of his palm jumped out, having spent his fury on the soft canvas of the baby's thigh.

Major illnesses were peripheral to us. We thanked God for sparing us while mourning those who weren't so blessed. Our heathen relatives seemed to suffer more than others, which didn't surprise me as they swore often and smoked. My cousin, captain of the football team, crashed into a car a mile from his house, crushing his hip and canceling out his football scholarship. The police told him that if he hadn't had only a gallon of gas in the car, he would have been blown up.

Obere sliced his palm with a knife, Sam developed asthma, I broke the middle finger of my right hand, jamming it against a sled pulled along by my father's pick-up truck at the end of a long rope. Boring ailments like constipation were followed by the sudden appearance of a genetic skin condition in which my skin forgot itself and grew too fast in little red patches. My elbows and knees became pocked again by small red sores which peeled off white. My scalp reluctantly let go of itself and flaked in patches. Oatmeal baths and Egyptian honey balm had no effect, nor did the steroids from the doctor. My history teacher told me that his father suffered from psoriasis, too. His skin cleared up when he went into a coma, but he never woke up to see his new body.

Meanwhile, the baby, newly walking, turned fitful and whiny, refusing to lay his left foot down on the wooden floors. We hauled him in to the doctor to find that his foot had somehow broken. In his new yellow cast he quickly matched the pace he had before.

I gulped down Hydrogen Peroxide, mistaking it for soda. Our neighbor's Rottweiler jumped on my mother, pushing her back and leaving her in a neckbrace. Obere threw himself off the sandy cliff over the beach, expecting to splash into the deep water, but instead hit a sandbar and broke his leg. His best friend paddled him to shore on a big log, and the vacationing doctor sunning on the beach took one look at him and pronounced him "screwed." My father, coaching my brother's soccer league, heard a loud snap, like a huge rubber band breaking, and looked around curiously just before his torn Achilles tendon gave out and he dropped—a grizzly bear, a bulldozer—to the soft green grass.

Larger accidents were thankfully averted; by what means, we never knew. The neighbor kid threw a brick into Obere's back to no ill effect, then fell through the attic into the stairwell of the second floor a few days later and didn't even bruise. My father and brother were hit from behind by a drunk driver, but walked away laughing. (When the insurance money came through my father left the back of the truck bashed in and bought a boat instead.) We came upon copperheads regularly but my father was deft with a shovel head. Much to my mother's surprise we were never afflicted by salmonella, though all we did was lick cake batter surreptitiously.

When I left for college I missed my father's bout with prostate cancer and the subsequent infection, my mother's speech therapy for her stutter, Joshua's first outbreak of psoriasis. But I would have my own problems: first an eating disorder, then a kidney stone. My friends' ailments were usually harvested from close contact with those with less hygienic than themselves: scabies, athlete's foot, TB. For our minor colds, the college nurse handed over a little brown bag with a sad face crayoned onto it, tied with a green ribbon. The treats within included a tea bag, disposable thermometers, a generous handful of lozenges, and inexplicably, a condom. There was also a list of ways of avoid exhaustion.

When my brothers were old enough to get their own meals my mother joined the workforce. My family began indulging in preventive care, wearing through specialist after specialist with their suspicious moles and endless queries. Personally, I had preferred the *Home Health Index*, a reference book with page after page of complicated charts. In it we could follow seemingly minor symptoms through strange twists and turns until they become life-threatening. It was thrilling to see that at a temperature of 101 degrees, only swollen lymph nodes and mania separated one from African Sleeping Sickness. But too often, the trajectory of symptoms would end with the disheartening words *Common Cold* (see page 352).

If one charts our history of genetic predispositions and bad habits, the future is not bright for any one of us. But then again, my grandmother (a hard-drinking woman who delighted in stealing my cousins' rent money in poker matches) smoked two packs a day until for most of her life and still thrived.

When she ended up at a nursing home with pancreatic cancer, we tearfully surrounded her, eating fried chicken and gossiping over the hospital bed. The doctor gave her a generous two weeks, but she lasted a whole summer, through four roommates and several visits from a patient priest.

One night my father was on duty, sitting beside her, and found her sniffing into the covers. "I just don't think this old body's going to make it," she whispered. My father, never comfortable with the metaphysical, lightened the moment. "Make it where?" he asked. "To the end!" my grandmother said. My father gazed at his mother with tender, sleepy eyes as he shifted in his chair to relieve his bad back. "Oh, ma," he sighed, "I hear we all make it there."